



EDITORIAL

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Celebrating Federal Social Work!

March is National Professional Social Work Month, so it is an apt time to celebrate social workers' contributions to our respective health care organizations. Military social workers are members of all 3 major federal practice organizations—DoD, VA, and the PHS—and fill a plethora of roles and positions, including active duty in all military branches and civilian social work. They operate in a variety of settings to provide counseling and case management among other services.

We all intuitively grasp that military service places immense stress and strain not only on soldiers, airmen, sailors, and marines, but also on their spouses and children. This is especially true during times of conflict and in theaters of combat. Social workers in the DoD provide consolation and consultation to the family unit of those who have been wounded in body or mind in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other war-torn areas.

In an article describing military social work, Nikki R. Wooten, PhD, offers this description of the profession: "Military social work is a specialized practice area that differs from generalized practice with civilians in that military personnel, veterans, and their families live, work, and receive health care and social benefits in a hierarchical, sociopolitical environment within a structured military organization."¹

Unfortunately, as with other mental health specialties in federal practice, a shortage of social workers exists. In order to publicize the need and promote the education and training of

social workers who specialize in the care of military members, their families, and veterans, Former First Lady Michelle Obama and former Second Lady Jill Biden, PhD, created Joining Forces. The program is a national effort to galvanize public support for all aspects of social and economic life for military service members and veterans. The National Association of Social Workers has been part of Joining Forces since 2011.

The VA employs more than 12,000 social workers, making the agency the largest employer of social workers in the U.S. Last year, the VA commemorated 90 years of social work excellence. Social workers are the front line for many of the most innovative social programs in the VA, such as the outreach to homeless veterans to locate and support housing; the medical foster home program for veterans who need assistance with activities of daily living that enables them to live with families in their home; the caregiver support program that assists friends and family to provide care for veterans who might otherwise not be able to live outside a facility; and the mental health intensive case management program that empowers veterans with serious mental illness to function as independently as possible and reduce the need for hospitalization.

Social workers also are part of the USPHS Commissioned Corps as allied health professionals. As crucial participants in multidisciplinary teams, social workers in the PHS respond to fill basic needs of people who are displaced by national disasters. They also

provide mental health and clinical social work care in the clinics and hospitals of the IHS and other facilities that offer medical treatment and psychosocial intervention to disadvantaged populations and underserved regions. Social workers also offer public health education, social services, and administrative leadership.

Another vital function that social workers perform in federal health care is facilitating the difficult transition of men and women from uniform to civilian life. A young person leaving the services needs the help of military social workers to negotiate the complexities of the VA health and education benefits application processes. Like runners in a relay, military and attached civilian social workers coordinate with VA social workers toward a smooth transition from one organization and way of life to another.

Social workers inhabit almost every corner of the federal health care world. Here are just a few examples from my own experience:

- The social worker is the first professional encounter for a service member returning from deployment and having difficulty adjusting, resulting in family dysfunction. Whether it is substance use treatment, marital counseling, or intimate partner violence, the social worker will be integral in coordinating the care of the service member and family.
- The social worker is the professional who will arrange the discharge plan for an elderly veteran who has been hospitalized for cardiac surgery in a VAMC and requires a brief stay in a rehabilitation facility and then aid

and assistance to return home to his wife of 40 years.

- The social worker is the professional at a vet center who provides confidential counseling to a veteran with posttraumatic stress disorder who does not feel safe or comfortable at a VAMC but who needs a therapist who has knowledge of the military and specialized trauma skills to help and heal.

I suspect that if most readers of this column reflect on their federal career, they will remember an action of a social worker who smoothed their life path at a rough spot. Take a mo-

ment in this month to thank a social worker for giving help and hope to service members, veterans, and their families. ●

For more information

You can learn more about federal social workers by visiting the following organizations: National Association of Social Workers (<https://www.socialworkers.org/military.asp>), VA Social Work (<http://www.socialwork.va.gov>), Joining Forces (<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/joiningforces>), and Social Work Today (<http://www.socialworktoday.com/archive/031513p12.shtml>).

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REFERENCE

1. Wooten NR. Military social work: opportunities and challenges for social work education. *J Soc Work Educ.* 2015;51(suppl 1):S6-S25.