



Operation Not Forgotten Helping Veterans Address Mental Health

By Melanie Dallas, LPC

Veterans hold a special place in America's heart. We salute those men and women who have fought for our country and our values, and honor those who have paid the ultimate price. We respect all those who wore the uniform – and those who currently do – who may not have served in combat, but are always ready to protect us when called. Without our veterans, America would be a different country, or perhaps not exist at all.

But as the U.S. remains engaged in its longest-ever war operation, we as a nation have learned a great deal about veterans' experiences in war – and their needs when returning stateside. While many veterans have experienced traumatic physical injuries, we know that perhaps many more have experienced traumatic psychological injuries – injuries that can lead to mental illness, substance use and, too often, suicide.

According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, veteran deaths from suicide continue to be higher than in the population as a whole. A report issued by the agency in June found that in 2015 veterans accounted for 14.3 percent of U.S. suicide deaths, even though veterans make up only 8.3 percent of the adult U.S. population. The same year, the rate of suicide was 2.1 times higher among veterans than non-veterans.

(This year's report also clarified previous reports which said 20 veterans were taking their lives each day in the U.S. In fact, that number included veterans, active-duty and reserve military personnel. Nonetheless, in 2015, there were nearly 17 veterans dying by suicide each day in the U.S. Many agencies who work directly with veterans and service members feel the data is consistently under reporting the suicide rates of this population, and that the actual rate of suicide is much higher.)



As one of the largest providers of mental health and substance use treatment and recovery services in the state – serving veterans and residents across northwest Georgia – Highland Rivers Health knows (and years of research have found) timely treatment for mental health and substance use issues can reduce the risk of suicide.

Our services for veterans include outpatient mental health and substance use treatment, intensive outpatient and residential substance use treatment, supported employment and supportive housing, among others. We also have begun peer support services for veterans, in

which veterans meet regularly in a group facilitated by a therapist to share thoughts, challenges, strategies and solutions.

That's why Highland Rivers is proud to partner with Operation Not Forgotten (ONF), a non-profit veterans assistance organization headquartered in metro Atlanta, whose mission is to provide programs that develop mental, emotional, spiritual and social well-being for veterans.

Part of a larger initiative called Life Renewed, Operation Not Forgotten developed an outstanding veteran peer group curriculum that includes tools for addressing issues such as PTSD and suicidal ideation, to help veterans and their families transition to life outside the military.

After evaluating the ONF materials thoroughly, our therapists found them to be an excellent complement to our veteran peer groups. We began piloting ONF with our veteran peer group in Paulding County and are working to expand it to all of our veterans' groups.

As we work never to forget our debt of gratitude to those who have served our country, we must also never forget that those men and women sometimes suffer with wounds we cannot see. While we may seek to provide top-rate medical care to those whose military service has resulted in physical injury, we must never forget that mental health is a critical part of overall health and well-being.

Highland Rivers Health is proud to partner with Operation Not Forgotten to ensure the mental health of our veterans is not forgotten, but is respected, treated, supported and remains a priority – for our communities, our families and our nation.

For more information about Operation Not Forgotten, visit www.operationnotforgotten.com. For more information about Highland Rivers' veteran's mental health and substance use treatment and recovery services, and veterans peer groups, call us at (800) 729-5700.

Melanie Dallas is a licensed professional counselor and CEO of Highland Rivers Health, which provides treatment and recovery services for individuals with mental illness, substance use disorders, and intellectual and developmental disabilities in a 12-county region of northwest Georgia that includes Bartow, Cherokee, Floyd, Fannin, Gilmer, Gordon, Haralson, Murray, Paulding, Pickens, Polk and Whitfield counties.

