

Better Understanding the Needs of Veterans in New York State

Many studies document the post-deployment health problems in national samples of service members from Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF)/Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), but almost no state or local studies assess the broad array of challenges that returning veterans face. Also, studies of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans have systematically excluded a large proportion of community-dwelling veterans who have left military service but not sought treatment in the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) health care system. In addition, national-level studies do not necessarily represent the particular types of veterans who live in states or communities and, thus, might not accurately estimate their problems and needs. Finally, research on veterans' needs has focused mostly on mental health, with much less information on other services (e.g., other health, occupational, or educational benefits) that states and communities might provide.

This study addresses these shortcomings, interviewing OIF/OEF veterans who returned to New York state and their family members, quantitatively assessing the needs of veterans and their spouses from a broadly representative sample, and reviewing available services in New York for them.

Key study highlights include the following:

- Twenty-two percent of veterans have a probable mental health diagnosis based on symptoms over the prior 30 days, with about equal numbers (16 percent) screening positive for major depression and post-traumatic stress disorder.
- Veterans have much worse overall physical functioning scores than similar individuals in the general population and are unemployed at a much higher rate than the overall New York unemployment rate.
- Veterans and family members reported a range of mental health concerns for returning veterans, difficulties reconnecting with friends and family, and problems finding jobs commensurate with their skills.
- Veterans reported that it was difficult to navigate the existing system of benefits and services across both VA and non-VA providers.
- Despite the wide range of services and programs available, veterans' perceptions of accessibility and quality of services varied greatly across the state.
- Veterans generally agreed on suggestions for improvement, including improving military out-processing and subsequent outreach efforts to better explain the benefits and services available, expanding the availability and improving the quality of VA services, and expanding programs to help veterans' families.

The study found that addressing veterans' health and well-being is the responsibility of more than just the VA and that the health care systems that serve veterans are extremely complicated. Addressing veterans' mental health needs will require a multipronged approach: reducing barriers to seeking treatment, improving the sustainment of—and adherence to—treatment, and improving the quality of the care being delivered.

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