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# Returning Vets *face challenges*

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enerally when Americans return from overseas travel, their greatest challenge is readjusting to a different time zone. But what is it like for soldiers? For them, the challenges, both mental and physical, may be complex. And it is not always clear to them where to find help.

by Amy Wyeth

As the country draws down Iraq operations, six years' worth of men and women deployed into combat—some of them several times—are settling back into life in the States. So far there are no firm numbers on exactly how many are returning to New England because discharge papers may get sent to the

state from which service members deployed or the state to which they are returning or both. In Massachusetts, the Department of Veterans Services makes an informed guess that about 19,000 soldiers, sailors, and Marines from Iraq and Afghanistan are either back in the Commonwealth or will be soon.

### Multiple Concerns

Returning veterans face multiple challenges. Many have permanent physical injuries. Others struggle emotionally. The emotional issues are not just about what they saw in combat but also the painful disconnect with civilian perceptions. Having witnessed the good that U.S. military men and women can do overseas, they feel that only the bad things get discussed among civilians and in the media.

Emotional issues are among the less visible symptoms of war's aftermath. According to a 2008 study by the Virginia-based nonprofit Rand Corporation, at least 230,000 of the 1.64 million U.S. troops deployed overseas are dealing with injuries such as traumatic brain injury, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In Rand's "Invisible Wounds of War" study, based on a survey of 1,965 War on Terror veterans nationwide, 14 percent screened positive for major depression, 19 percent for probable traumatic brain injury, and 14 percent for PTSD. The latter can manifest itself in episodes like traffic incidents, domestic violence, broken relationships, or a struggle to stay employed.

The Massachusetts Department of Veterans' Services has developed programs to reach potentially vulnerable veterans. One is SAVE (Statewide Advocacy for Veterans' Empowerment), which helps veterans get their benefits and works to prevent suicide. SAVE also offers training for first-responders to incidents that might appear to be straightforward law-breaking but, if a traumatized veteran is involved, could be more complicated.

Outreach coordinator Sam Hamm, who developed the training, says of motor vehicle incidents, "In Iraq, you drive very aggressively and you don't stop. You are always on the lookout for improvised explosive devices. Coming back to the U.S., that may translate to reckless driving." One recent returnee, he says, drove through a Massachusetts Turnpike Fast Lane toll booth without the transponder that bills an account. "He wasn't trying to scam the sys-

tem; he was ... afraid of stopping."

Many veterans also have a simple but often unmet need: someone to talk to who understands their experience. Consider Dominick Sondrini, a veteran from Dalton, Massachusetts, who has had numerous family members in the military. He entered Marine officer training six months out of college and did two Iraq tours between 2006 and 2008. He says now, "The hardest thing for me is that I got out ... and most of my friends are still there."

### Admitting Need

To stay involved, Sondrini got a job at Soldier On, a private, nonprofit organization housed on the grounds of the Veterans Administration hospital in Leeds, Massachusetts. Soldier On serves 250 veterans of all wars (including approximately 30 men and 10 women from Iraq and Afghanistan) who might otherwise be homeless.

Sondrini manages 42 cases. One client is Army veteran Dominic T. Dominic T. says he saw the Army as an escape from his uncle's construction business, which didn't click for him even though it paid better than the military. When he signed up in March 2003, the possibility of his actually fighting a war seemed remote.

"I thought, 'What are the odds of me, Dominic from Revere, going to Iraq?' " exclaims Dominic T., now 27. Six months later he was facing mortar attacks. His new and unanticipated experiences ranged from quirky (camel spiders "are fast and they jump") to terrifying (climbing out of a fighting vehicle in Al-Qaeda-controlled Tal'Afar not knowing what was there).

Dominic T. had two deployments in Iraq. Along the way, he started to display

of his 21-year-old lieutenant. The stresses piled up. Dominic T. knew enough to seek out a military psychologist, but he traveled to a neighboring base so it wouldn't be known.

"If you go for any kind of mental health assistance, you risk your military career," and many soldiers resist it, says Soldier On director Jack Downing.

Soldier On staff believe returning veterans should have monetary "carrots" encouraging them to contact a stateside mental health agency upon returning. "They should get \$1,000 loaded on a card. By simply checking in with a [local mental health professional], you'd get \$250. The second time, you'd get \$250 more, and the third, you'd get \$500," Downing says. That way, veterans would, without any stigma, get to know professionals they could call if they need help. "Merely checking in doesn't mean you have a disorder."

In Dominic T.'s case, when he returned home in 2006, he thought his life was returning to normal as he started a job with the state's Department of Workforce Development and attended classes at Salem State College. But the stress was relentless, to the point of his taking heroin. "I didn't feel guilty," he recalls. "I could eat and I could sleep." But his job and home life suffered, so eventually he checked himself into a Veterans Administration hospital. He discovered Soldier On in April 2008 and is making progress.

### Veterans Helping Veterans

Part of the readjustment involves finding a job or reacclimating to one that a former employer has kept open. According to Carl Waal, veterans program man-

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posttraumatic stress symptoms, including being unable to sleep and jumping in fear at loud noises. He couldn't get certain memories out of his head, like entering Tal'Afar in the tank-like vehicle that prevented him from seeing what was outside, and the death

ager for the Massachusetts Department of Labor and Workforce Development's Division of Career Services, veterans have some advantage when they're seeking work, even in today's economy. At the state's Career Centers, one officer is assigned specifically



to help veterans. (See “Assistance for New England Veterans.”)

“It is much easier for a veteran to get a job than a nonvet,” says Waal, a Vietnam-era veteran. That’s because government employers, hiring managers in civil service such as fire or police—and any business or university that gets government grants or contracts—must give veterans preference if they meet the job’s basic qualifications.

“What we try to do is fast-track them toward getting a license or certification they might need, or making sure they get to the right source,” Waal says. About 12,000 Massachusetts veterans of all wars make use of the Career Centers annually.

However, some veterans need more support before feeling ready to work. Fortunately, the ones from Iraq and Afghanistan are talking more about their experiences than veterans of past wars, and that bodes well for their eventual readjustment. As Hamm says, “It’s more accepted now.”

SAVE’s family outreach coordinator, Cayenne Isaksen, adds, “Shell-shock discussions used to be held only in military and veterans’ circles. Today, people are simply talking about it more.” And moving on.

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Marine Dominick Sondrini (right), now a case manager at Soldier On in Leeds, Massachusetts, is shown in Iraq with a local police officer.

Photograph: Courtesy of Dominick Sondrini

## Assistance for New England Veterans: A Sampling

**Give an Hour** is a network of mental health professionals who donate an hour each week to help a veteran or family member affected by the Iraq or Afghanistan conflicts, [www.giveanhour.org](http://www.giveanhour.org).

**Veteran Victory Farm**, Fitzwilliam, New Hampshire, is an organic farm for homeless veterans. Founder Leslie Lightfoot has established several related facilities, including a veterans’ hospice, <http://veteranhomestead.org>.

**Acupuncturists Without Borders/Veterans Community Acupuncture Project** offers free acupuncture to Iraq and Afghanistan veterans and their families, [www.acuwithoutborders.org](http://www.acuwithoutborders.org).

**SAVE** focuses on preventing suicide and helping Massachusetts veterans get their benefits. E-mail [save@massmail.state.ma.us](mailto:save@massmail.state.ma.us).

**Massachusetts benefits** include tuition waivers at state colleges and universities on a space-available basis; partial property tax exemptions for disabled veterans and spouses; public housing preference for veterans, spouses, and certain other relatives displaced from other housing.

**Vet Centers** offer free confidential readjustment counseling and services to veterans who served in a combat zone and to family members, [www.vetcenter.va.gov](http://www.vetcenter.va.gov).

**American Red Cross** provides “Coping with Deployments: Psychological First Aid for Military Families.” The free course, currently offered in New Hampshire, will soon to be available elsewhere in New England, <http://nashua.redcross.org>.

**Northeastern University** offers a new “Yellow Ribbon” program to help post-9/11 veterans attend the college at little-to-no cost, <http://www.northeastern.edu/veterans>. Twenty-three Boston-area colleges are participating in a federal matching program for Iraq and Afghanistan veterans that covers up to \$46,000.

**Patriot Express Loan** offers to veterans and other members of the military community business loans of up to \$500,000 through the federal Small Business Administration’s network at 2.25 percent to 4.75 percent rates, [www.sba.gov/patriotexpress](http://www.sba.gov/patriotexpress).