

OPERATION COMPASSIONATE CARE

AS THE TRAUMA OF WAR TAKES ITS TOLL, SOCIAL WORKERS STAND AT THE FOREFRONT OF HELPING SOLDIERS, VETERANS, AND THEIR FAMILIES OVERCOME DIFFICULT CHALLENGES

BY CHRISTINE YACKEL

BETSY FERNER '12 WAS HESITANT when her advisor at the School of Social Work suggested she intern at the VA Medical Center in Syracuse. She was anti-war, had no experience with the military, and knew little about the conflicts in the Middle East. "I saw the VA as a big scary place, but I soon overcame my apprehension when I realized each vet is an individual with immediate needs," says Ferner, who spent a year interning in the Syracuse VA's diagnostics and therapeutics department. "The School of Social Work provided me with a great skill set that enabled me to respond to veterans' needs with professionalism and compassion. I was surprised by how much I liked working with the vets—they stretched me personally."

Ferner was one of eight master of social work (MSW) degree students in the School of Social Work in the Falk College of Sport and Human Dynamics to intern at the VA Medical Center during the 2011-12 academic year. Next year, the number will increase to 14. "There's a growing awareness that soldiers returning from conflicts in the Middle East have been affected profoundly by their experiences—psychologically, physically, and spiritually—and there's a great need and desire to care for the people who have sacrificed so much for us," says Professor Carrie Jefferson Smith, director of the School of Social Work. "Social workers are trained to respond to all people

in need, including veterans, in a number of different areas—medical crises, behavioral health, sexual trauma, domestic violence, substance abuse, homelessness, and grief and loss—in a continuum from childhood to old age."

WOUNDS OF WAR

According to the Council on Social Work Education, as early as 1918, clinical social workers were trained to work with soldiers returning from World War I suffering from "shell shock." By the outbreak of World War II, military social work had become a recognized specialization created to meet the needs of soldiers coming home with "battle fatigue," and later on, "post-Vietnam syndrome," and "post-traumatic stress disorder" (PTSD), as combat stress is commonly known today. But it wasn't until 1989, when Congress authorized the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to offer special PTSD programs, that outpatient services became widely available to treat vets afflicted with the psychological trauma of war. "Our society believes in the American ideal of rugged individualism and self-reliance, so if you can't take it, there must be something inherently wrong with you," Smith says. "But in reality, we see now that PTSD is a normal human reaction to extraordinary situ-







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Lt. Col. Eric Ehrmann G'11

ations and circumstances—reactions that can have a ripple effect on families and communities at large.”

Kathleen Glow-Morgan '90, G'97, social work executive at the Syracuse VA, says in the aftermath of more than a decade of war there has been a huge influx of veterans and their families facing all kinds of challenges that demand the expertise of social workers. For example, *The Army Times* reports there are 18 suicides per day among Iraq and Afghanistan veterans—a rate exceeding that of the general population and the number of combat deaths in Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation New Dawn combined. Many vets are homeless within six months of returning from combat operations,

Lt. Col. Eric Ehrmann G'11, deputy of force integration at Fort Drum, and Professor Peg Miller G'87, director of field instruction at the School of Social Work, meet to discuss possible internship sites for students interested in military social work.

including women, who are now the fastest growing segment of the homeless veteran population.

National Guardsmen and Reservists often feel adrift after their units disperse and have a difficult time transitioning back to civilian life. There are thousands of young veterans suffering from PTSD or traumatic brain injury in jails across America who need treatment, not incarceration. And there is an increased awareness and reporting of sexual trauma among both men and women in uniform. “Social workers are uniquely poised to not only address the needs of the soldier or veteran, but also to look at the larger system and the negative impact that soldiers coming back and leaving again is having on them and their families,” Glow-Morgan says. “There’s now recognition that social workers have the skill and training that uniquely prepares them to intervene on behalf of veterans.”

In the last three years alone, the number of social workers in the VA’s 153 medical centers nationwide has grown from 6,000 to more than 9,000 strong—an increase of 30 percent. And

the Department of Veterans Affairs recently announced it will be adding 1,900 mental health professionals—including social workers—to its existing 29,500 behavioral health care staff due to a 35 percent increase in the number of veterans seeking mental health services. “I think what’s different now is the increased visibility of women in the military,” says Professor Peg Miller G’87, director of field instruction in the School of Social Work. “There is a greater sense of urgency when we send daughters, wives, and mothers to war.”

DIRECT PRACTICE

In the past, student interns placed at the Syracuse VA were exposed mainly to gerontology patients. Today, however, they work with veterans of all ages from all branches of the military. The Syracuse VA employs 70 social workers, many of whom are SU alumni, and offers primary medical and acute care services to vets living within a 13-county area of Central New York, including seven community-based outpatient clinics, the 174th Air National Guard in Syracuse, and the 10th Mountain Division stationed at Fort Drum in Northern New York. The VA also supports Vet Centers, which were created as independent units because Vietnam veterans—most of whom were drafted—didn’t want to have anything to do with the government. Many of the Vet Centers, which are physically separate from main VA buildings so veterans can walk in off the street without an appointment, are coordinated by social workers.



Throughout their yearlong internships at the VA, students are familiarized with evidence-based practice in four care lines—medical services, diagnostics and therapeutics, behavioral health, and geriatrics and extended care. “It’s an internship where someone can go into providing mental health intensive case management, but also see how a medical, geriatric, or home-based care social worker may function,” Glow-Morgan says. “Interns have an opportunity to learn about all aspects of social work at the VA as well as in the community that I don’t think they’ll be exposed to in other settings.”

On her very first day at the VA, Ferner was assigned to help a veteran and his family cope with an acute medical crisis, months of rehabilitation, and eventual discharge, which included arranging disability benefits, housing accommodations, and home health care. “Betsy saw the different styles of social workers, inpatient work, outpatient work, case management, and therapeutic interventions,” says Sara Bush G’00, spinal cord injury coordinator and Ferner’s primary supervisor at the VA. “We took her everywhere we went, including the acute care wards and the psychiatric unit. Patients walk or roll into the VA and you never know what the day will bring.”

READY TO SERVE

Men and women of all ages—either civilian or military—are drawn to a career in military social work because they have family members in the service, feel compelled to help those who have answered the call to protect and defend, or are members of the military themselves. Lt. Col. Eric Ehrmann G’11 was stationed in Wiesbaden, Germany, when his division was deployed to Iraq in 2003. He was selected to be the rear detachment commander, leaving him responsible for the social welfare of more than 2,000 spouses who remained in Germany during deployment. “My focus was on taking care of them through family readiness, so I developed a chain of command, mutual support, assistance, and a network of communications to keep the spouses informed,” says Ehrmann, who will retire in September after 21 years in the Army. “We had several situations where some of the spouses became depressed and needed professional help, so I started work-

Intern Betsy Ferner G’12 (left) discusses a discharge plan with Sara Bush G’00, her primary supervisor at the VA Medical Center.



VETERANS BUREAU

GENERAL ORDER dated June 16, 1926, established the Social Work program in the Veterans Bureau, outlining its organization and functions. The first year staffing consisted of 36 social workers.

REACHING OUT TO SOLDIERS AND VETERANS

From admitting thousands of returning soldiers under the GI Bill following World War II to launching the new Institute for Veterans and Military Families, Syracuse University's commitment to veterans and active duty personnel is steadfast. Along with training social workers to work with veterans and the military, here are some of the programs and resources SU provides to those who answered the nation's call.



Institute for Veterans and Military Families is the first national center in higher education focused on the social, economic, education, and policy issues impacting veterans and their families post-service (vets.syr.edu).

Entrepreneurship Boot-camp for Veterans with Disabilities is a nationally recognized, experiential training program that provides post-9/11 veterans with service-related disabilities the tools they need to achieve the American dream of owning a business (whitman.syr.edu/ebv).

Student Veterans Club provides a library of resources on internships and job placement opportunities and a network of support to student veterans.

Yellow Ribbon Education Enhancement Program is a partnership between Syracuse University and the U.S. Department of Veterans

Affairs that covers tuition costs for post-9/11 servicemen and -women and their dependents pursuing a degree in higher education (veterans.syr.edu).

SALUTE: Syracuse University Veterans' Resource Center provides academic and financial aid assistance to student veterans who are eligible for the Yellow Ribbon program (veterans.syr.edu), and partners with the Workkeys Center to provide skills assessment, instructional support, and training to prepare veterans for the workplace (workkeys@uc.syr.edu).

Veterans Technology Program is a collaborative initiative between the School of Information Studies and JPMorgan Chase that helps veterans transition from military service to careers in global technology and service corporations (get-vet.syr.edu).

SU Department of Athletics maintains a strong Orange connection with soldiers at Fort Drum. Last year, Coach

Jim Boenheim '66, G'73 and the men's basketball team spent a day at Fort Drum as guests of the 10th Mountain Division, and soldiers have been invited to attend SU practices and games. In August, the football team held its preseason camp at Fort Drum. In 2011, the department sent a football and basketball to members of the division stationed in Afghanistan. The balls, which were taken on combat operations, were signed and returned to the SU football and men's basketball squads.

Syracuse Area Intergenerational Veterans' Writing Group, led by Professor Eileen Schell, chair of SU's writing program, focuses on nonfiction accounts of life in and out of the military written by veterans of all ages, military branches, and conflicts (eeschell@syr.edu).

James Lyons '03 Memorial Scholarship Fund was created to honor the sacrifice of an alumnus killed in Iraq by helping the children of fallen soldiers and veterans with disabilities attend SU.



ing with the civilian social workers on base. All of a sudden a bell went off inside my head that I needed to take a closer look at a career in social work."

Back in the States, Ehrmann looked for an Army installation within close proximity to a reputable school of social work. Fort Drum and Syracuse University's School of Social Work fit the bill. He was accepted into the MSW program in 2006, but it took him five years to complete the two-year course of study because he was deployed twice to the Middle East and stationed once in South Korea while studying for his degree. "I did my first field placement in Kuwait under the supervision of a Navy social worker, and I took one class via video teleconferencing while I was there," says Ehrmann, who serves as deputy of force integration at Fort Drum. "After I retire from active duty, I hope to work at an organization where I can assist veterans and their families to get their lives together and successfully reintegrate into society."

Ehrmann believes all social workers, not just those planning to work with veterans and the military, would benefit from taking at least one specialized course in military culture that focuses on jargon, rank structure, benefits, the deployment cycle, and the difference between the Department of Veter-

ans Affairs and the Department of Defense. "It would be helpful for any social worker to take this course because there are thousands of veterans of all ages out in the community," he says. "Vets are everywhere and not just at the VA, so there's a 100 percent chance social workers will encounter veterans throughout their careers, and they need to be familiar with veterans' benefits and the military's culture of service and pride."

During her time at the VA, Ferner says she learned professionalism and a heightened level of respect for individuals. She was also impressed by how firmly the VA adheres to the social work code of ethics. "Despite my initial reluctance, I would love to work with veterans again," she says. And as Ehrmann prepares to transition from military service to social service, he says he would wholeheartedly recommend the School of Social Work for anyone interested in pursuing a military social work career. "My courses fully prepared me to assess, advocate, and intervene on behalf of soldiers, veterans, and their families, and everyone at the school bent over backwards to ensure I reached my goal," he says. "I can't wait to get out there and give something back to a deserving group of individuals who put their lives on the line to defend our country—I'm really looking forward to it." «

Social work interns created the VA's 2012 Clothesline Project to raise awareness about military sexual trauma. The initiative was based on the concept of the national Clothesline Project, which addresses the issue of domestic violence. Pictured (left to right) are Pertrina Works G'12, Kaitlin Reeder G'12, Janice Creamer '79, G'85, G'95 (outpatient mental health social worker and military sexual trauma program coordinator), and Britney Parente '10, G'12.