

## **WV Veteran's Survey - 04/01/08**

By Emily Corio

**Anchor:** Last year West Virginia lawmakers wanted to know how veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan were adjusting to life at home. They commissioned a study to survey these veterans about their mental health, home-life and work. So far, the results show a troubling trend. Emily Corio reports.

**Corio:** For twenty-five years WV University psychology professor Joseph Scotti has studied the psychological effects of trauma. So, he's not shocked to see veterans with PTSD, but it's the number of people affected that surprises him.

**Scotti:** The impact on veteran's male and female has, I think, been ... I think devastating would be a good work to describe.

**Corio:** Nearly half the veterans surveyed have symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or depression and sometimes both. Thirty six percent of those surveyed show signs of PTSD; 44% show signs of clinical depression and 48% have symptoms of PTSD and/or Depression. PTSD involves flashbacks, nightmares, avoidance and being on-guard or easily startled. And it doesn't matter how many deployments---one episode of being under fire is enough to cause PTSD.

**Scotti:** The impact of combat on veterans is just astounding, and we're still dealing with Vietnam veterans. Vietnam veterans and even World War II veterans, and Korea, who are still coming out of the wood-work as you would say, or perhaps out of the woods in some cases, to be newly diagnosed and get help and we're talking 20, 30, 40, 50 years now. So one of the intents of this survey is make sure that that doesn't happen to current veterans.

**Corio:** Veterans returned 1000 surveys, and almost 500 have been analyzed so far. The survey also included questions about mental health care services. Ninety percent of those who filled out the survey say they are aware of services available. But less are actually using a service and even fewer found the service they used helpful. This is where Hilda Heady plays a role in the study. Heady is associate vice president of rural health at WVU and leads the school's rural health training program. She says health problems may go untreated if health care workers are not properly trained.

**Heady:** Unless the primary care doctor, let's say five years out, thinks to ask 'Hey, did you, are you a veteran? Were you in Iraq? Did you see combat?' Until we can understand all of those kinds of features and make sure that people are trained for that---to ask for it, to look for it, then that gives us a whole other picture to know what this, how to advise this person, how to help them, where to refer them, all of those kinds of things.

**Corio:** As a result of the survey, the legislature added a \$100K to the rural rotation program that operates at the state's three medical schools. The money will help schools send more psychology and social work students into rural areas to learn about treating people with PTSD. Del. Barbara Evans Fleischauer is on the committee that requested the study.

**Fleischauer:** You know, I don't think we're done just because we got the results of the survey. The survey provokes more questions. Do we have the professionals with the expertise to deal with PTSD and depression? We think we don't in a lot of rural areas.

**Corio:** Future work may also involve continuing education for current psychologists and social workers. WVU Researchers say one of the best ways to treat PTSD is called exposure therapy. In this treatment, the veteran recounts their traumatic experience---it's tough for the veteran and the therapist, and it's a long way from how soldiers of previous wars dealt with trauma.

**Heady:** What happened with my generation is we were all very confused about what was going on. We were very bewildered. There was no connection there, and you know, at that point in time, society was basically saying don't even talk about it; let's pretend this didn't happen. Well, it did happen, and it

happened to a lot of people. I just hope that we can learn from those experiences and do a better job now.

**Corio:** The WVU researchers hope to take their study to the national level and include several other rural states in a future survey. Scotti wants to study recent veterans and their families over several years. For West Virginia Public Broadcasting, I'm Emily Corio in Morgantown.