

TOPIC: U.S. CHILDREN OF VETERAN PARENTS WITH PTSD
JANUARY, 2023

Introduction

We know negative consequences can often occur as a result of military service, including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). In this paper, we will look at the effect of PTSD on veterans' children. Our goal is to understand the scale and impact of children of veterans with PTSD and the responses led by the government and the nonprofit sector. Additionally, we want to understand where success has occurred in creating positive support and where the opportunities remain to further impact.

Scale of issue

According to the U.S. Census in 2018, there are 18 million veterans in the United States. Among veterans, the frequency of PTSD is not uncommon. Research shows that in a given year, the occurrence of PTSD is as follows (by conflict):

- Operations Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Enduring Freedom (OEF): About 11-20 out of every 100 Veterans (or approximately 2 million to 3.6 million veterans)
- Gulf War (Desert Storm): About 12 out of every 100 Gulf War Veterans (or 2 million veterans),
- Vietnam War: About 15 out of every 100 Vietnam Veterans (or 2.7 million veterans) were currently diagnosed with PTSD at the time of the most recent study in the late 1980s.¹

Additionally, about 1.7 million or nine percent of veterans are women. By 2040, it is projected that number will jump to 17 percent.² Military Sexual Trauma (MST) is approximal to PTSD and occurs often. The frequency of MST among Veterans who use VA health care is as follows:

- 23 out of 100 women (or 391,000 female veterans) reported sexual assault when in the military.
- 55 out of 100 women (or 935,000 female veterans) and 38 out of 100 men (or 6.2 million male veterans) have experienced sexual harassment when in the military.

While the effects of PTSD have been studied for more than four decades, the effects on children have become more recently studied and more research is underway. Research has shown that families in which a parent has PTSD are characterized by more anxiety, unhappiness, marital problems and behavioral problems among children in the family as compared to families where a parent does not have PTSD.³ According to the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA), early research showed that Vietnam Veterans have more marital problems and family violence. Consequently, their children have more behavior problems than those of Veterans without PTSD. Veterans with the most severe symptoms had families with worsening behavioral issues. The most common negative responses by children of veterans

¹ [How Common is PTSD in Veterans? - PTSD: National Center for PTSD \(va.gov\)](#)

² [Who Are the Nation's Veterans? \(census.gov\)](#)

³ Christie H, Hamilton-Giachritsis C, Alves-Costa F, Tomlinson M, Halligan SL. [The impact of parental posttraumatic stress disorder on parenting: a systematic review.](#) *Eur J Psychotraumatol.* 2019;10(1):1550345. doi:10.1080/20008198.2018.1550345

with PTSD range from sympathy, feeling negative emotions such as lack of security or belief that the parent cannot provide safety, avoidance, depression from the parent's detachment mechanism, guilt or fear in response to random acts of anger expressed by a parent, behavioral mirroring of the parent, and health issues such as heightened drinking or drug use.⁴

Research from the International Handbook of Traumatic Stress Syndromes identified three modes of negative behavior among children of veterans with PTSD. These include:

- 1) the Over-Identified Child: the child experiences secondary traumatization and comes to experience many of the symptoms the parent with PTSD is having;
- 2) the Rescuer: the child takes on parental roles and responsibilities to compensate for the parent's difficulties; and
- 3) the Emotionally Uninvolved Child: this child receives little emotional support, which results in problems at school, depression and anxiety, and relational problems later in life.⁵

There are approximately 2.3 million children under the age of 18 living with a disabled veteran.⁶ This is the first-ever statistical analysis of the likely number of children of veterans with PTSD. While this data is imperfect, it demonstrates just how much information gathering there is to do in this area. As long as PTSD occurs, support services will be needed to serve partners (known as informal caregivers) and children of survivors to prevent these coping mechanisms from developing.

Responding to the need- Government

The government has undertaken a large-scale effort to understand and provide services for veterans with PTSD, many of which offer support services to the family members of the survivors of PTSD. Family therapy is more effective if the veteran with PTSD has first received some type of trauma therapy.

While there are many programs focused on healing survivors of PTSD, focus and service to the children of survivors are still burgeoning. PTSD treatment programs exist across the country serving veterans and, in some cases, the families. Each medical center within a VA has PTSD specialists who provide treatment for veterans with PTSD. There exist nearly 200 specialized PTSD treatment programs throughout the country. Some large Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs) also offer PTSD care. [Here](#) you can find a PTSD program locator across the country. These programs are offered to veterans who completed duty under all but dishonorable discharge. As we know, PTSD can result in dishonorable discharge. The government programs focused on this issue are missing a significant number of PTSD survivors and thereby, their children, as well.

In 2021, the White House convened a Children in Caregiving Families cross-agency working group to explore existing data and programs to support children of injured veterans. Additionally, the

⁴[When a Child's Parent has PTSD - PTSD: National Center for PTSD \(va.gov\)](#)

⁵[Children of Veterans and Adults with PTSD \(aaets.org\)](#)

⁶[EDF-HiddenHelpers-Commitments.pdf \(hiddenheroes.org\)](#)

Department of Defense, the VA and Department of Health and Education are devoting new resources to better understand and respond to children in these veteran households.⁷

Responding to the need – Nonprofit sector

General programs-

The nonprofit sector has responded to fill the gap in social services offered by the government.

Examples of nonprofits offering a variety of services for children of parents with PTSD include:

- [MilitaryKidsConnect](#) (MKC) is an online community for military children (ages 6-17) with resources for children to give support before, during, and after a parent's deployment.
- [Sesame Street for Military Families](#) offers resources to help with deployments, military transitions, relocations, injuries and more.
- "[Finding My Way: A Teen's Guide to Living with a Parent Who has Experienced Trauma](#)" is an interactive workbook for teens to teach how a parent's PTSD symptoms are not their fault.⁸

Retreats-

Various nonprofit organizations have developed retreats or camps to serve veterans, many of which include programs specific to families and children. In addition to [Project Sanctuary](#), examples include:

- [Gratitude America](#) (FL)– provides healing retreats for veterans and their families focused on post-traumatic growth, regardless of discharge status.
- [The Independence Fund](#) (NC) – provides individually customized art and outdoor experiences for the whole family based on the trauma experience of the physically and mentally wounded.
- [No Barriers](#) (CO) – provides adventure-based trips for veterans and a separate camp experience for youth to overcome the obstacles they have experienced by overcoming obstacles in the wild.
- [Travis Mills Foundation](#) (ME) – offers several retreats, including family camps, for veterans and their families who have experienced military trauma in an oceanside environment.
- [Wounded Warrior](#) (US)- a pilot program this year called Project Odyssey, consisting of a 12-week mental health program using adventure-based learning that includes all members of the family.

The most well-known and successful organization offering retreats focused solely on children of veteran families is [Camp Corral](#). Camp Corral has established retreat experiences across the country with a singular focus on transforming the lives of children of wounded, ill, and fallen military by providing camp, advocacy, and enrichment programs. Its Impact Report states that 70 percent of parents saw an immediate and sustained improvement in their child's mental health after returning from camp.⁹

Research, funding and coalition building-

⁷ [EDF-HiddenHelpers-Commitments.pdf \(hiddenheroes.org\)](#)

⁸ [Help for Family and Friends - PTSD: National Center for PTSD \(va.gov\)](#)

⁹ [Summer-Camp-Outcomes-Research-Report.pdf \(campcorral.org\)](#)

Recently, funders have become acutely aware of the need to serve children and informal caregivers (often the spouse) of veterans with PTSD. The most prominent philanthropist working to create more understanding and impact in this area is the [Elizabeth Dole Foundation](#). The Foundation focuses exclusively on the military informal caregiver and the impact this role has on the children, referred to as [Hidden Helpers](#). This focus on Hidden Helpers has reinvented the work and conversation regarding how the philanthropic community can serve children of veterans with PTSD.

Some of the Foundation's achievements include a commissioned study to explore the impact and opportunities of children of informal caregivers in military families. This [study](#) raised nationwide attention and garnered resources to increase support for children of veteran families. By far, the most interesting source is this comprehensive summary of outcomes from the research found [here](#). This summary consists of a list of commitments made as a result of the Elizabeth Dole Foundation including resources and nonprofit organizations that have increased their funding, programs and research. The innovative influence of the Foundation is tremendous and illustrates just how powerful philanthropy can be in raising awareness and creating strides toward inspiring change.

Conclusion

Historically, the focus on children of veterans with PTSD has not been widely researched and supported. Presently, there are key actors in this space such as Camp Coral and the Elizabeth Dole Foundation.

In recent years the funding and focus have shifted thanks to the initial efforts of the Elizabeth Dole Foundation. Now, widely adopted as an area of importance among dozens of organizations, the U.S. will likely see a high level of activity from the government and the social sector in the coming years. Some recognizable names that are leaning into this area include the YMCA, the Red Cross, USAA Foundation, the Wounded Warrior Project, and the Bob and Dolores Hope Foundation, among others.

This is an area of significant need and, while momentum is building, the scope of the problem is not fully known or served. This is an area prime for significant impact.