

preventing violence in the homes of military families

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom (OIF/OEF), have demanded unprecedented service from all branches of the armed services and at every level of the military. More than any time during United States military history, servicemembers have engaged in multiple, lengthy combat tours with limited family “dwell” time between deployments. These servicemembers and their families have made tremendous sacrifices for the good of our country, and they deserve strong community support when returning home from long deployments.

Support is needed because these deployments are impacting the stability of military families. Of the more than two million Americans who have served our country, 53 percent are married and one-third of these servicemembers have children. Many military servicemembers come home with serious mental health injuries, making them and their families vulnerable to relationship stress, marital strain, and family violence.

Blue Shield of California Foundation is dedicated to ending domestic violence in California, and is the state's largest private funder of domestic violence services and prevention. Alongside its work supporting more than 100 shelters and service providers comprising California's domestic violence safety net, Blue Shield of California Foundation (the Foundation) supports innovative prevention solutions with populations that are disproportionately affected by domestic violence and are frequently underserved. The Foundation began supporting work to prevent violence in the homes of military families because of concern that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan create conditions that could foster an increase in domestic violence in their homes. This effort was grounded in the realities of veterans by involving knowledgeable stakeholders, research, and an Advisory Group. With this guidance, the Foundation invested more than \$1.6 million in:

- Research to better document and understand domestic violence in the context of post-combat trauma;
- Prevention strategies that can be applied widely to mitigate the high rates of domestic violence anticipated in the homes of veteran and military families;
- Policy and advocacy to bring the issue of domestic violence among military families to the attention of leaders who can make wide-scale changes; and
- New partnerships between the veteran service and domestic violence sectors.

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What follows is a summary of the Foundation's investments, lessons learned, and future opportunities for parties interested in impacting this critical issue.

Research Shows

Blue Shield of California Foundation made some of the earliest research investments to document and understand domestic violence related to post-combat trauma among OIF/OEF veterans. Assessing domestic violence among this generation of veterans is extremely complex, given the sensitivity of the issue as well as stigma around seeking help. These studies begin to paint a picture of the issues faced by today's returning veterans.

Northern California Institute for Research and Education (housed in the San Francisco Veterans Affairs Medical Center) conducted the first large-scale, scientifically rigorous study of its kind to examine the prevalence of domestic violence among a random sample of recent veterans and to test the effectiveness of new services to prevent violence. Overall, the study found that as a result of prolonged combat exposure, veterans had:

- High rates of mental health issues including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, hazardous drinking, anxiety, and drug use;
- High rates of psychological aggression with partners;
- Higher rates of aggression and impulsivity than those with no mental health diagnoses; and
- Elevated physical aggression in those with PTSD compared to veterans with other mental health diagnoses or no mental health diagnoses.

Many OIF/OEF veterans return to college for additional education to help them find employment after their military service. Therefore, the Foundation supported researchers at **San Jose State University** to look at domestic violence among veterans returning to college campuses. The study found family violence to be an issue, with 20 to 30 percent of California college veterans depressed and/or anxious, and psychological distress positively correlated with alcohol use, hypermasculinity, and aggressive behavior. Psychological distress was negatively correlated with social support and negotiation tactics.

Promising Practices

Foundation investments also unearthed two evidence-based models to support healthy reintegration between combat veterans and their families. These models are designed to complement existing government services, and apply best practices in preventing domestic violence among veterans.

The **National Center on Family Homelessness** (NCFH) is piloting, evaluating, and documenting "Strength at Home," a community-based domestic violence prevention model for OIF/OEF veterans and their partners to improve their relationships. Strength at Home is a skills-based program that helps veterans with PTSD improve their interpersonal relationships with family and friends, reduce relational difficulties, and mitigate the risk for interpersonal violence. The 10-week program is delivered in a group setting by trained clinicians at local community-based organizations. Alongside a rigorous evaluation, NCFH has prepared a toolkit to disseminate the model and provide best practices and how-to information to other providers implementing the model in their communities.

Based on findings from the **San Jose State University** study on veterans on college campuses, the researchers developed a prevention model for veterans and their partners that can be implemented on college campuses. Two workshops, "Warriors at Home" and "Loving a Veteran," are currently being piloted at 15 campuses across California with cohorts of veterans participating in the eight session intervention, which aims to improve veterans' personal relationships, thereby mitigating domestic violence. The researchers are using a train-the-trainer conference to train college and university representatives to implement and evaluate the workshops at more college campuses in California. Toolkits on how to deliver the model will be disseminated to 125 California colleges and universities for replication once the workshops have been implemented, evaluated, and refined.

Building Connections

Veterans receive services from agencies in multiple sectors, some of which know little to nothing about the special circumstances veterans face in the transition from combat to community. Because of this, the Foundation made several grants to build connections between the siloed sectors, and encourage sensitivity to both veteran and domestic violence issues.

A grant to **Swords to Plowshares** exemplifies this effort. The grant developed and implemented training modules for police officers and domestic violence service providers to educate first responders on how to identify and work with veterans and their families. Veterans can easily be triggered in conflict due to a traumatic stress response, and their partners are invested in protecting the veteran. Educating first responders, like police, can help them recognize a veteran

in a violent condition and give them skills to de-escalate the situation. In addition, Swords to Plowshares has been convening a group of veterans', domestic violence, mental health, and justice services providers – from both the government and non-governmental organizations – to discuss the confluence of domestic violence and veteran issues, identify gaps in service, and address those gaps.

Likewise, **Alternatives to Domestic Violence** is building a model civilian partnership with March Air Reserve Base in Riverside, California to provide services to military personnel, veterans, guard, reserve, and their families. Their model creates a mechanism for families to be immediately and easily referred to off-base counseling services, where there may be less stigma associated with seeking help. The partnership will be documented and evaluated as a model for replication.

Impacting Policy

Until the past decade, domestic violence among military veterans was an under-investigated issue. In 2000, Congress directed the Department of Defense (DoD) to create a Defense Task Force on domestic Violence to assist the Secretary of Defense in identifying ways to prevent domestic violence in the military and to respond more effectively when domestic violence occurs. The task force's report was issued in 2003 and made more than 200 recommendations, most of which the DoD accepted. However, many have remained unaddressed in the face of the lengthy wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The two wars have created such overwhelming need among veterans that more visible issues like unemployment, suicide, homelessness, and mental health have overshadowed domestic violence.

To educate policymakers and legislators about domestic violence among military families, the

Foundation invested in **Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA)**. IAVA brought attention to the issue by integrating family violence prevention materials on their website and leading national advocacy efforts. IAVA's 2011 report, "Unsung Heroes: Military Families After Ten Years of War," discussed domestic violence as a potential risk factor for veterans returning home. IAVA's legislative agenda for 2012 includes recommendations from this report, and their agenda was given to every member of Congress, the Veterans Administration, the Department of Defense, the Department of Labor, and their non-profit and for-profit partners.

Blue Shield of California Foundation also invested in **Blue Star Families** to elevate domestic violence by including it in a discussion of military family issues by high-level military leaders, White House representatives, and key policymakers at two roundtable conferences. These conversations ensured that domestic violence is among the issues policymakers consider when addressing challenges facing military families.

What We've Learned

Make improvements to the infrastructure of communities to support and respond to the needs of veterans and their families

Many veterans and their families do not live on active duty military bases, and instead reside in civilian neighborhoods. Those who live on bases have access to Family Advocacy Programs, many of which have the tools and resources to prevent and address family violence. In contrast, veterans and their families who live outside the base have significantly fewer resources available to them. While many communities have organizations that focus on serving the needs of targeted populations ranging from at-risk youth to low-income families, there is a lack of focus and attention toward having models of care that are specifically aimed at helping veterans and their families. There is great value in working not only with the veteran, but also with his/her family as part of successful efforts to strengthen the support systems.

Encourage and support cultural competency around military culture

Among active-duty military and veterans, there is a stigma that those who seek help for trauma-related problems are "weak." And when it comes to domestic violence, in particular, partners and family members are often reluctant to seek assistance. Some grantees struggled to attract veterans to their programs until they were able to develop language and outreach materials that were culturally appropriate for veterans, and empowered veterans to view this type of support as acceptable. It is critical that all efforts to work with military veterans, particularly around the confluence of mental health and domestic violence issues, be culturally sensitive and aware of the stigma of seeking help.

Emphasize and highlight the veterans' transition home rather than specific issues

It is critical that sensitive issues like domestic violence be considered in the context of the broader challenges that veterans face when transitioning from the battlefield to home. Domestic violence is highly stigmatized, so addressing it as one of many challenges that can result from combat stress, rather than as a stand-alone issue, prevents unnecessary pathologizing of the veteran.

Elevate domestic violence by making grants to organizations that can amplify the issue among a variety of veteran stakeholders

When the Foundation made its first grants in this area, few of the government entities and veteran service organizations were addressing the issue. Providing resources to organizations around domestic violence ensured that the issue was amplified both within and across service sectors.

The Window of Opportunity

Since beginning this work in 2009, there has been a drawdown of troops in Iraq and Afghanistan and political attention has refocused on the economy. The policy context has allowed for an increased awareness of the need for government assistance for veterans' services, but the economy has left government less equipped to do so than ever before.

Private funding has improved incrementally since Blue Shield of California Foundation began this work, but not rapidly enough to meet the dramatic and increasing needs of this population. The "Joining Forces" initiative was launched by First Lady Michelle Obama and Dr. Jill Biden as part of government's commitment to give servicemembers and their families the opportunities and support they have earned, but more work remains.

Today, most Americans are aware of the PTSD and mental health issues among military veterans, yet they still assume that government systems are meeting the needs of veterans and their families, when in fact, they are not. Beyond a one-time \$250 million privately funded initiative to fund veterans service organizations across the country (Iraq Afghanistan Deployment Impact Fund), there remains little private funding dedicated to this population, and existing funding streams are scattershot.

Now that the war in Iraq has ended and there is a drawdown of troops in Afghanistan underway, an enormous number of veterans are returning home. Their communities must meet service needs where government cannot, and most communities are ill-equipped to do so. Blue Shield of California Foundation believes that funders and policymakers can and must support innovative, effective, culturally competent community-based programs for military and veteran families, stepping in to complement essential services provided by the Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs.

We believe that nearly every foundation and funder can identify ways to support military families while advancing their organizational missions and priorities; it is a matter of identifying the right entry point.



Join Us

There is an opportunity for every foundation and funder to identify ways to support military families while advancing their existing organizational missions and priorities; it is a matter of identifying the right entry point for investment. Blue Shield of California Foundation funds domestic violence services and prevention, and within that framework recognizes the importance of supporting military and veteran families to leave behind the violence they have experienced abroad. For example, many foundations seek to improve the lives of children and families, or have place-based efforts that focus on specific communities for support. Other obvious entry points include homelessness, workforce development, child care, and education. Supporting military families does not require a completely separate grantmaking approach – it can be embedded in the current work and efforts that are underway by funders.

Coordinate to support veterans service organizations

Many veterans service organizations, like other non-profit organizations, invest a great deal of time applying for small grants from multiple funding sources, and may not be coordinating their efforts across communities. Private sector funders and community advocates can coordinate and share information to facilitate resource provision and promote organizations that have a track record of success in meeting the needs of veterans in their communities.

Dedicate resources to build infrastructure across the field of veterans service organizations

This generation of OIF/OEF veterans and their families has needs that some of the more established veterans service organizations – those with a track record of working with previous generations of veterans – may not have the cultural competency to adequately meet. Funders shouldn't be afraid to invest in newer organizations, which may have the cultural competency but not the infrastructure, and then help them build that infrastructure. Conversely, investing in more established organizations may require an investment in strengthening cultural competency so they can adequately serve an OIF/OEF population.

Blue Shield of California Foundation is dedicated to sharing the lessons learned throughout our grantmaking efforts. Every funder can identify ways to support military families while continuing to advance their organizational missions and priorities. By identifying the right entry point, we collectively have the capacity to ensure that servicemembers and their families, who have sacrificed so much to protect our country, will make no more sacrifices when they return home from war.

To learn more about Blue Shield of California Foundation's efforts to prevent violence in the homes of military families, visit Blue Shield Against Violence's page at www.blueshieldcafoundation.org.