

Young vets' needs met at grassroots level

Forsaking the VA, local Iraq and Afghanistan vets now help themselves and others

By **BRANDON SMITH**
News Journal intern

A Clinton County man returns home to his family from two back-to-back tours of duty in Iraq, and wonders how he can fit back into the swing of things after having been at war.

He had heard it isn't always easy, but he soon begins to realize just how hard it will be.

Some people treat him differently than they had before; others treat him like he had never left, but neither feels right. He definitely knows that he has changed.

No one at work or around town, it would seem, has seen the horror that he has seen. Can anyone identify with his experience? With him?

Routine trips to the grocery store or bank have now become stressful for some reason. Places he used to like to go for fun — concerts, movies, sporting events — aren't so fun anymore. Home is the only solace but even it isn't like it used to be.

His family: glad to see him but strangely distant, or scared

of him, or something he can't put his finger on.

And loud noises. Man, he wishes people would quit making those.

He feels like he needs someone to talk to. But the closest Veterans Administration (VA) medical facility, where free treatment is available, is 37 miles away, in Dayton or Youngstown. Other facilities are in Middletown, Cincinnati, Chillicothe and Springfield, but those are further away.

After some calls and mental calculation, he quickly discovers that a trip to Cincinnati for a session with a counselor could take five hours. And his family needs his income, so traveling during the work week isn't feasible.

As such, he decides to forgo treatment. He is tough — after all, didn't he fight in a war? But this new battle requires different tactics than those used to avoid roadside bombs or pinpoint an airstrike target.

Are you waiting for identification of this mystery man? He is not one single person, but a good representation of a fifth or



Contributed photo

Shortly after this picture of Roy was snapped, a gunshot fired from a car nearly struck his head. Roy was working an entry control point at Camp Anaconda. Roy is a member of the newly formed Veterans Wellness Community that meets in Wilmington.

more of the veterans who return from Iraq and Afghanistan. So far, 1.6 million have returned, according to the Center for Military Health Policy

Research.

Clinton County veterans not exempt from health woes

At least several Clinton County veterans could assign

their own name to this general profile.

Granted, most would have to change one or two details. Roy, who lives in Wilmington, suf-

fered a traumatic brain injury in Iraq that prevented him from working at his old job, and his

See **VETS**, Page 3B

VA still distant; steps away from a mental health stigma

By **BRANDON SMITH**
News Journal intern

Many in this area, with the support of Congressman Mike Turner, have been trying to convince the VA that an outpatient clinic should be established in Clinton County.

According to Ray Souder, director of the Clinton County Veterans Service Commission, similar outpatient clinics are already located in Eastgate and Hamilton.

But the VA has issued no strong indication that a clinic will be coming here.

There used to be a VA clinic in Hillsboro that was a branch of the Chillicothe VA hospital, but it closed in May 2007.

Cynthia Hannah, a Clinton County native familiar with symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), can't predict how many people will start attending meetings of Veterans Wellness Community

once the word gets out.

"There's only so many veterans who will come and get help for mental health," she said, "because there's a stigma associated with it. Those who do set an example for other vets, that toughing it out in isolation is not the only option."

On May 1, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates announced that the Department of Defense will now be more lenient toward granting security

clearances to individuals who sought mental health assistance in the past. The Department of Defense's plan encourages lower-level personnel to seek help by first telling the stories of high-ranking officials who did the same.

Why do so many combat veterans have a form of post-traumatic stress?

Roy, Chris Bussler and Malachi Fields, all former soldiers in the war in Iraq, agree

that the transition from a combat zone to Wilmington couldn't be more drastic.

Bussler said: "Over there, you count your hours, because you actually expect to die, every day. ... You see the sun coming up, and you can only hope to see the moon come up that night."

He described that in a combat zone, to preserve your own life,

you have to constantly be aware that other people near you want to kill you.

He said that the habit of having that mindset is hard to kick after returning home.

There's something else members of Veterans Wellness Community agree on: having friends who can relate to your combat stories and problems really helps.

About the group, Fields said, "I related instantly."

How much a former soldier can relate to a VA psychologist has yet to be analyzed.

VETS

Continued from Page 2B

family struggled long and hard against various bureaucracies to attain financial assistance.

Not to mention that when he got home, his children didn't call him "Daddy" because he had been gone so long.

"That's crushing to a parent," said Roy's wife, Kelly.

Roy and Kelly's last name has been withheld to protect their privacy.

Chris Bussler, of Harveysburg, does make the regular trek to a VA facility after being injured on his third tour of duty in Iraq. But he still feels a sense of guilt that he's not there beside the men he trained.

"They're still hackin' it," he said. "It's like, 'Why can't I hack it again?'"

Malachai Fields, of Wilmington, doesn't have a family to worry about — only a girlfriend. But sometimes he feels spontaneously angry: whether at himself or just angry in general. You'd never suspect it if you knew him or saw him in person, but it's there.

"Lots of veterans experience this," said Cynthia Hannah, a Clinton County native familiar with symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). "It's just hidden."

The VA is an option for Fields, but he says it doesn't provide a sense of closeness, of friendship — a sense that there are others going through the same things you are. This seems to be a common perception of veterans of recent wars.

Roy said it best: "At the VA, they're going through the people so fast. Just one after another. They don't necessarily focus on the individual."

In other words, they don't truly get to know you.

Maybe it's the long lines or loads of paperwork, or the clinical setting, or the focus on medication. Or the fact that they reportedly aren't too interested in helping your family understand what you are going through.

Many veterans would agree that the VA is a great idea, and that it serves numerous necessary roles. But a few people in Clinton County — including Roy and Kelly, Bussler, Fields and Hannah — have come to realize that a small, local group can do what the VA can't — or doesn't.

A grassroots solution

The group calls itself the Veterans Wellness Community, and they meet in Wilmington every other week, in the evenings. They often bring their families, although the group therapy portion of the meeting is spent without the family in the room. Maybe most important of all, they have a lot of fun. And they're changing the face of psychological treatment for a few younger veterans here.

They get top-notch advice and counseling from an experienced professional social worker, but even the word "treatment" is too cold, really, to describe what they do.

The bottom line is this: if you're a veteran of operations Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan) or Iraqi Freedom, these people sincerely want to get to know you and help you and your family, in every aspect of life for which you might need help. Chances are, someone in the group has already dealt with the problems you're dealing with, and is more than willing to share their advice. While meetings are yet closed only to veterans and their families, anyone in the community can show their support. The tiny organization is a registered non-profit looking for donations, and especially looking for the community to rally behind them. The lack of public support took a heavy toll on Vietnam vets immediately



Contributed photos



Kateri Koverman, center, does social work with veterans across the U.S. in addition to working with the Veterans Wellness Community in Wilmington. Left, Camp Anaconda was nicknamed "Mortartaville" because it would get hit with mortar rounds three to five times per day. This hole is the result of one of those rounds.

following that war, said Denver Combs, a Vietnam vet who has himself worked serving veterans for 28 years. How much people appreciate veterans has risen since then, he said. But as the popularity of the Iraq war has plummeted, public support for its veterans may have waned a little.

Bussler said: "After my first tour, everyone came up to me and said 'great job,' and gave me hugs. ... After my third tour, people were like, 'Oh, I'm so sorry.' Like, 'How do you feel about all the people dying over there?' And I wasn't trying to say anything political — I was just trying to say, 'Hey, I'm back.'"

Veterans Wellness Community had been meeting at Hannah's family business, a construction and engineering firm called Mosaco, but they just secured a permanent, dedicated location to meet in, on the Laurel Oaks campus. Each meeting lasts about two hours, from 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. Because down-to-business interaction has time

and budgetary constraints, the group is — at least so far — concentrating its efforts on vets of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"Initially we're focusing on these younger vets, but we recognize that all vets in the community deserve our support and our commitment to their wellness," said Hannah. "Right now, we're dealing with an acute need."

"None of this goes away," she said. "Age is not an issue and the particular conflict doesn't matter — but we had to start somewhere."

As their experience and budget allows, said Hannah, they will likely expand to help all veterans and their families.

Activities other than regular meetings, such as cookouts at a horse farm or hiking trips, are frequent and take place outside the regular meeting time.

"We're trying to think outside the box," said Kelly. "We're trying to find new ways for [veterans] to enjoy old pastimes" that they sometimes have the tenden-



Contributed photo

Chris Bussler, top, and other members of his unit, after constructing some stairs to better reach the flag poles on top of their bunker in Al Taqaddum, Iraq.

cy to abandon, she said.

For example, her husband used to work on cars with loud engines, but now can't bear the noise. The group may soon get to use a private box for an evening at a Cincinnati Reds game.

"It's nice not having to watch

every movement of everyone around you," said Kelly.

Look for the group at the Banana Split Festival, June 13 and 14, at J.W. Denver Williams Jr. Memorial Park in Wilmington. Donations to Veterans Wellness Community may be sent to: Clinton County

Veterans Wellness Community, PO Box 21, Wilmington, OH 45177.

Online updates are available at www.veteranswellnesscommunity.com.

The group can be reached at info@veteranswellnesscommunity.com and 937-728-4807.

The battle's not always over after the war is done

Post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, can be a serious problem for vets after seeing combat, according to the professional counselor who conducts portions of the Veterans Wellness Community's meetings.

Kateri Koverman is her name, and she's affectionately known as "The Sister," because she's a nun.

She's done social work in war zones around the world for 30 years, including places like Sierra Leone and Armenia, according to her Web site. She worked in Vietnam before the fall of Saigon.

Now she lives in Cincinnati and is a consultant with groups like Veterans Wellness Community as well as Reserve and National Guard groups throughout the country.

Koverman is executive director of Them Bones Veteran Community in Cincinnati. According to their Web site, thembonesveteran.org, post-traumatic stress can take on any number of forms:

- Having the same bad memories over and over
- Not wanting to get close to anyone; numbing out
- Wanting to be alone
- Becoming angry and full of rage easily
- Having trouble sleeping
- Muscles being tight, tense and having a sense of panic
- Difficulty concentrating and feeling confused
- Feeling sad, frightened, listless, depressed
- Mistrusting others and frequently looking over your shoulder
- Having guilt about surviving the war when so many comrades were lost

If you are a veteran and experiencing any of these symptoms, know that you are not alone and help is available. Or if you have a family member or friend that you think would benefit from some extra support, please let them know about the Veterans Wellness Community.

Kelly and Hannah's long-term goals for the local group are broader than just helping with PTSD, though. They eventually want to provide assistance for reducing veterans' stress and social needs—the members already go out to eat together occasionally—and different services for veterans' families.

"Especially the wives and girlfriends. It's hard when they realize that the people who are coming back aren't the people who left. They might be angry or agitated or can't be with the kids, and that's a real problem," said Hannah.

We Proudly Support Our Veterans

ACE
The helpful place.

1268 Rombach Ave. 88 Washington Sq.
Wilmington Washington CH, Oh
937-382-1459 740-335-3883



Thank You All Veterans!

FORD
LINCOLN
MERCURY

Bill Marine

CHRYSLER
JEEP
DODGE

1182 W. Main St., Wilmington • (937) 382-3858 • www.billmarineford.com