



ACTION BRIEF

ENHANCING THE WELL-BEING OF AMERICA'S VETERANS AND THEIR FAMILIES:

A Call to Action for a National Veterans Policy

June 12–13, 2013

> OVERVIEW

The National Association of Social Workers' (NASW) Social Work Policy Institute (SWPI) in collaboration with supporting partner, the University of Southern California School of Social Work (USC) and the USC Center for Innovation and Research on Veterans and Military Families (CIR), convened a think tank in June 2013, to create an action agenda for improving both policies and practices for veterans and their families at the federal, state, and community levels, and to explore the feasibility of promoting a national veterans policy. The more than 50 participants represented national organizations, government agencies, community service providers, foundations and universities, and had expertise in health, behavioral health and human service delivery systems. Many were also veterans, family members of veterans, or both. The think tank built on an earlier USC CIR initiative that resulted in the Field Note, *A National Veteran's Covenant: Community as the Catalyst and Resource* (<http://cir.usc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/Vet-Covenant-Full.pdf>).

> SYMPOSIUM FOCUS

Policy and practice issues related to veterans in the context of their families and communities were explored. There was a focus on the changing demographics of our nation's veterans and the impact that the decade of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have had not only on veterans and their families, but also on our social, health, mental health, employment, housing and educational institutions, and service systems.

Using a psychosocial lens, presenters explored issues related to mental and physical health, early childhood development and care, community engagement, education (at all levels), as well as jobs and housing.

The presentations examined potential roles and responsibilities of federal agencies as well as communities, covering research and data, and descriptions of practice innovations, along with identification of gaps in policy.

QUICK FACTS

- > The faces of the average veteran are changing—**younger, more diverse, more women, more parents with young children.**
- > **The number of veterans is decreasing while the budget of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is increasing.**
- > **By 2040 Gulf War Veterans will be over 50% of the total veteran population.**
- > **The VA is the second largest cabinet agency with a \$152.7 billion budget and 280,000 employees.**
- > **High rates of Military Sexual Trauma (MST), suicide, and physical and psychological wounds, including Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) experienced by Gulf War veterans demand comprehensive solutions.**
- > **Thirteen percent of homeless adults are veterans; Gulf War veterans who are homeless tend to be younger and to experience PTSD.**
- > **Although overall unemployment rates for veterans are lower than civilian populations; the unemployment rates for Gulf War veterans are higher than civilian rates.**

PRESENTERS

- > Philip Carter, Center for a New American Security
- > Dorinda Williams, Zero to Three
- > Christopher Ford, Joint Chiefs of Staff's Office of Warrior Support
- > Diane Elmore, National Center for Child Traumatic Stress
- > Marleen Wong, USC School of Social Work
- > Lisa Colpe, National Institute of Mental Health
- > Christopher Del Beccaro, Office of Congressman Jeffrey Denham
- > Anthony Hassan, USC Center for Innovation and Research on Veterans and Military Families

15 KEY THEMES

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| Collaborate Among Multiple Federal Agencies | Promote Vertical Integration across Levels of Government | Facilitate Successful and Seamless Transitions from Military to Veteran Status |
| Focus on VETERANS AND THEIR FAMILIES | Develop a Long-Term Strategy to Ensure Veterans' Services after the "Era of Good Will" Has Ended | Develop Policies and Programs to Support Veterans at Highest Risk |
| Recognize Differential Needs and Diversity of Veterans | Anticipate the Need for Top-Down and Bottom-Up Solutions | Promote Community Involvement & Leadership |
| Engage Communities and Leverage their Strengths & Resources | Engage Diverse Stakeholders in Advocacy and Policy Implementation | Engage Universities and Leverage their Multiple Roles and Resources |
| Ensure Engagement of Veterans and their Families in All Aspects of Policy, Programs and Research | Ensure Support for Robust Research, Data Collection and Analysis | Create Effective and Multi-Dimensional Communication Structures and Tools |

> KEY THEMES

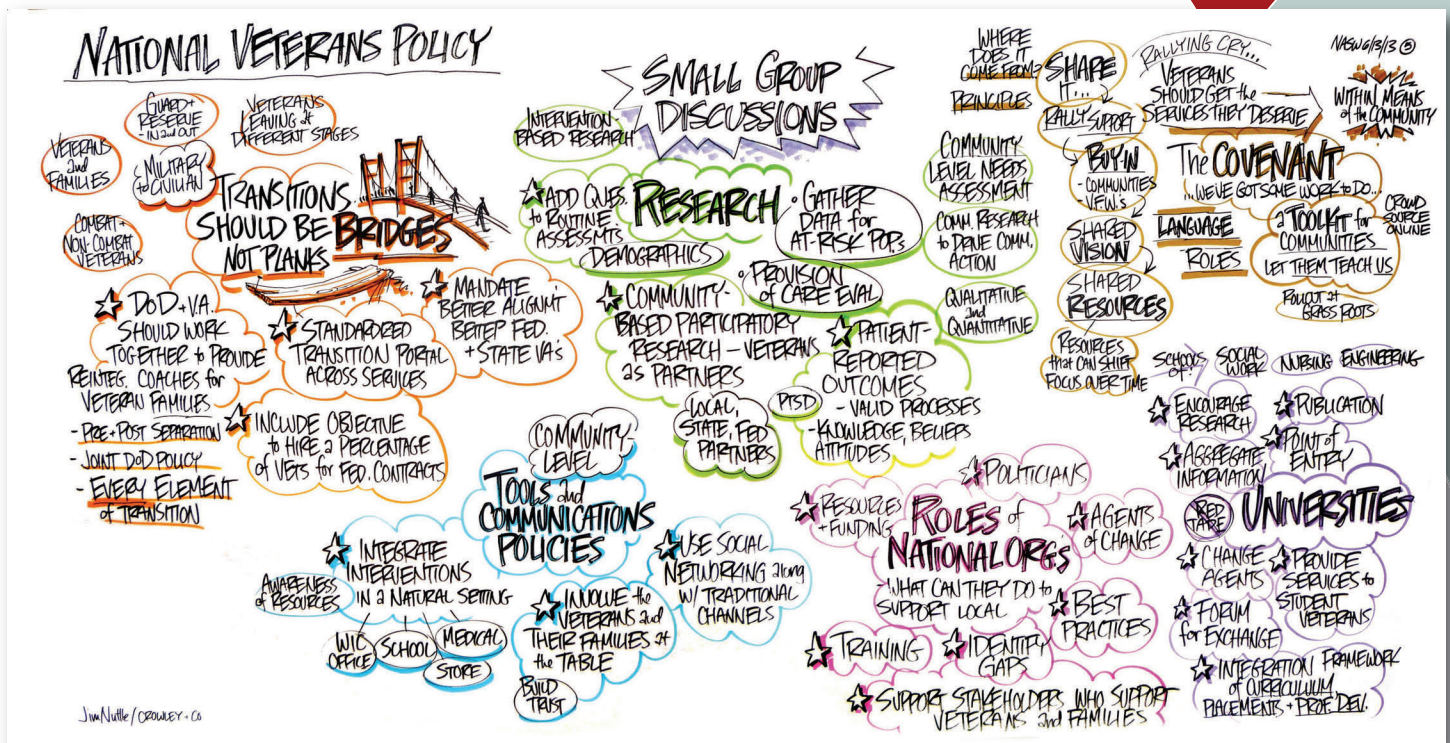
The think tank participants highlighted 15 themes, indicating that multiple actions are required to enhance outcomes for today's veterans and their families. The focus must be on:

- > The critical role of governments across levels, with recognition that federal leadership — from Congress, and from the VA, Department of Defense (DoD) and the White House working together and with other agencies and collaborating with state agencies is essential;

- > The imperative of engaging veterans and their families in programs, policy and research – from the beginning;
- > The importance of community involvement and community-level services and solutions, including engagement of non-veterans or military specific organizations and agencies;
- > The recognition that the needs of veterans and their families impact multiple service systems and that multiple institutions have the capacity to develop programs and policies that will support veterans and their families over the long-term.

To further flesh out actions, the participants deliberated in small groups focused on *policy*, *communication*, *research*, the *role of universities*, the *role of national organizations* and next steps in *creation of a national covenant*. Each group identified an action agenda. Implementing the agenda for action will require involvement of key stakeholders, the creation of the political will to ensure a policy safety net; and the readiness at the federal, state and local levels of government, and numerous private sector entities to work together.

> RECOMMENDATIONS



> CONCLUSIONS

The key points of a National Covenant for Veterans and their Families were reinforced by this think tank, but just stating “what should be” is not a sufficient response. There must be many action steps taken by multiple stakeholders to bring it to reality. Over the next 30 years our mental image of veterans in the United States will change dramatically, and the veterans of the Gulf Wars will be the faces of the veterans of the future. While the Department of Veterans Affairs has many major roles and responsibilities to address the health and well-being of veterans, it cannot be wholly responsible and responsive to the extremely heterogeneous needs of our large and increasingly diverse veterans. We should expect the following to occur:

- > Hold key federal agencies accountable and encourage the White House, DoD and the Department of Veterans Affairs to collaborate and communicate.
- > Encourage and expect multiple federal agencies to develop programs and services targeted to veterans and their families and communicate the availability of those programs through multiple means including use of social media.
- > Foster and facilitate communications among veterans and their families; and between veterans and their families and service providers and policy-makers.
- > Engage federal, state and local policy-makers in the development and sustainment of programs and services targeting the health and well-being of veterans, including strategies to engage and collaborate with the private sectors (e.g., employers, foundations, universities).
- > Coordinate services and policies across levels of government.
- > Develop and implement community-led and veteran-led solutions.
- > Make special efforts to address the needs of veterans and their families as they transition between military and civilian life, including breaking down barriers to employment in the civilian workforce.
- > Recognize the rights of veterans and their families to access to high quality services and supports.
- > Ensure that services are available to address the health, mental health, employment, training, housing, and education needs of veterans and their families in communities across the United States, including addressing

the needs of children of veterans through early childhood and school-based supports and services.

- > Develop a robust research program that will ensure development of effective and evidence-based programs and that will follow the career and life trajectory of members of the military as they transition in and out of the Armed Forces.
- > Create high quality professional development to ensure that social workers, psychologists, teachers, physicians, nurses and other professionals are well-prepared to serve the needs of tomorrow's veterans' populations.

Enhancing the Well-Being of America's Veterans and their Families can serve as a call to action. To accomplish the action agenda we will need to engage numerous stakeholders. This includes the United States Congress, the White House, the DoD and the VA, as well as

other government agencies. They will need to work with professional associations and organizations that represent the military and veterans and their families, and national organizations and community service providers like Easter Seals, Volunteers of America and Head Start along with universities and community health, behavioral health, school and social service providers.

There are no easy answers, especially when addressing complex and potentially long-term issues for those with injuries and disabilities. Our work cannot wait—we need to work together with veterans and their families and with the institutions that can, and do, provide services. We need to know where the gaps are, then we need to use multiple tools and strategies to ensure the needs of every veteran and their family members are well met in a timely and quality fashion.

For the full report, Power Point presentations and graphic recording, please visit:

SocialWorkPolicy.org/news-events/swpi-convenes-veterans-policy-symposium.html

For More Information

NASW Military & Veterans Resources:
SocialWorkers.org/military.asp

USC Center for Innovation and Research on Veterans and Military Families: <http://cir.usc.edu/>



ABOUT THE SOCIAL WORK POLICY INSTITUTE

The Social Work Policy Institute was established in 2009 and is a division of the NASW Foundation. Its mission is:

- > To strengthen social work's voice in public policy deliberations.
- > To inform policy-makers through the collection and dissemination of information on social work effectiveness.
- > To create a forum to examine current and future issues in health care and social service delivery.

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