If the estimates by clinical people are correct, then about 800,000 of those who have served in support of OIF/OEF are suffering from PTSD, anxiety and/or depression. Deputy Director Sergio Rodriguez continues his series of articles on mental health issues related to our military personnel and veterans of all wars. On March 25, I participated in a forum at Daemen College with the Department of Social Work on the issues facing returning veterans and how the educational institutions and citizens can assist.

Senator Chuck Schumer has stepped up to champion our efforts for a National Veterans Cemetery in WNY and we urge everyone to call their Federal Officials and tell them to support this initiative. If you would like more information on how to help call our office; 716.858.6349 or email me; Patrick.welch@erie.gov

We also pay tribute to a member of VVA Chapter 77, who did two tours in Vietnam and just returned from a tour in Iraq, Sgt. First Class David Dispenza, what a man. Dave thank you for your many, many years of service to our country.

June 24 marks the arrival of the American Veterans Travelling Tribute exhibit to East Aurora, NY. This display honors all who have served from World War II to the current war and the public is invited to the Knox Farm State Park June 25 to 29, see story.

Semper Fi

Please distribute this newsletter to your email distribution list. Anyone who would like to receive this each month can email me at patrick.welch@erie.gov

Remember my mantra: “If you do NOTHING, then someday when you need the VA, then NOTHING is just what you may get.” ©
or drug abuses which many tragically take.

Entering military service as a recent High School graduate, I was a porous sponge ready to absorb all that was impressed upon me. My core values were forged in the Marines and I, like most of my fellow recruits, embraced the distinguished culture of the U.S.M.C. Though I participated in support of Operation Enduring Freedom, I was never exposed to direct conflict. Although prepared, I never once had to aim my M16 A2 Service Riffle at an enemy. It is difficult to understand what a combat soldier is going through when you yourself haven’t. Yet, by conducting interviews with professionals in the field and with those who are living with this condition, I will make a humble attempt to at least try to understand what PTSD means to the individuals who are living with it. One of our aims at the Erie County Veterans Service Agency is to empower those who touch the lives of the veterans in our community by providing a better understanding of the issues they currently face. During this process, perhaps we can even make a positive and everlasting impact on the lives of these anonymous and silent heroes.

Thus, the Erie County Veterans Service Agency embarked on a quest to learn more about PTSD, an issue that is currently affecting many of our local veterans. If left untreated, the consequences can be tragic. Our interviews with the staff of the Buffalo Vet Center, an organization that offers readjustment counseling services to war zone veterans and their families, Doctor Terry Julian of the PTSD Clinic in Batavia, and Chris, a brave and courageous Iraq Combat Veteran suffering with PTSD, will attempt to shed light on this dark and obscure topic. In the process, we can learn about how we can help our veterans seek the treatment they need, while paving the way to a road that leads to their successful recovery.

First, let us begin by addressing some of the common facts about PTSD. Just what is PTSD and how prevalent is it amongst the veteran population? Simply put, PTSD is an emotional response resulting from having experienced some form of trauma. Common symptoms amongst the veteran population can stem from being exposed to combat incidents or from having experienced some form of military sexual trauma. According to the National Center for PTSD, a department within the Veterans Affairs, only about 8% of the general population in the United States will develop some form of PTSD. The figure jumps to a staggering 30% amongst Vietnam veterans and between 12% to 20% for those who served in the Iraq War. The rate can be as high as 11% for Afghanistan war veterans and 10% for those who served during operation Desert Storm. Women veteran are more likely to develop PTSD due to a traumatic experience. Additionally, this group is also more likely to experience military sexual trauma.

Furthermore, the Center has conducted research which indicates that there is a correlation between PTSD and suicides amongst the nation’s veterans. The research concluded that “there is evidence that traumatic events such as sexual abuse, combat trauma, rape, and domestic violence generally increase a person’s suicide risk.” For those seeking treatment, there are options available.

Meeting with the Buffalo Vet Center

Our quest towards attaining a better understanding of the treatments and solutions available to veterans who suffer from PTSD began at the Buffalo Vet Center. The center provides readjustment counseling services for war zone veterans and their families. It has 185 active clients – about 20% of which served during the Global War on Terrorism. When we arrived at the building located at 564 Franklin Street in Buffalo, NY, we were warmly greeted by Heather Tighe, who is one of the center’s readjustment counseling therapists. She introduced us to Richard Jones who is also one of the center’s readjustment counseling therapists and to Houston Crum, their team leader. This team of counselors all share one thing in common: they’re all veterans. This is an important element that can also help break the ice with some of the veterans who often seek assistance from someone that they can relate with.

There are 232 Vet Centers throughout the country. Other than having served in a war zone, there are no co-pays or eligibility requirements for veterans to receive the free services that the Buffalo Vet Center provides. Although Vet Centers are funded by the VA, they remain mostly independent and also provide a secure level of privacy. In fact, the reason why Vet Centers were created is because at the time veterans did not want to go to the VA to seek treatment. Counseling sessions are confidential. This encourages veterans to more easily divulge some of the feelings that they otherwise would have kept inside. One of the primary concerns in the minds of many veterans who serve combat duty while in the National Guard or Reserves is the fear that their units will find out that they are seeking mental health treatment. This could hurt their chances of being promoted. Thus, many veterans who need help often do not seek it. This is where the Buffalo Vet Center’s confidentiality becomes beneficial.

The center maintains files on each individual veteran, but it does not share them with other agencies unless the veteran signs a written consent with a request to release this information. The Buffalo Vet Center prides itself on protecting a veteran’s confidentiality. This promise is particularly important to Vietnam veterans and
Guard unit veterans. Though Vietnam veterans were justified in having a mistrust towards, not only the VA, but also to the country that turned its back on them when they needed them most, newer veterans have less of a reason to do so.

The culture of the military also lends itself towards a veteran becoming hesitant about seeking mental health counseling. To some, acknowledging that you need help can be misconstrued as a sign of weakness or failure. The feeling of “somehow, I’m flawed” enters their mind. As a result, many veterans go undiagnosed. But as new veterans develop more trust in the system, they are more likely to seek the services that Houston, Heather and Richard provide.

The Buffalo Vet Center holds individual and group therapy sessions every day. There are also cohorts of veterans that provide mutual support for those who feel isolated and alienated. For the most part, groups are intermingled. For women veterans, there are also groups comprised of just females. Houston Crumb and his staff also develop relationships with local family readiness groups comprised of active duty military families. Local Guard and Reserve units are now being briefed about the services that the Buffalo Vet Center provides.

Houston Crumb asks us not to look at PTSD as a mental health problem. He wants veterans to know that “you’re not different, you’re not weaker, you’re not the only one” to have these symptoms. “Counseling is tough at first” says Houston “…but it takes a lot of courage to sit down and talk about what’s upsetting you, especially since talking about it sometimes makes you more upset”. The first session is always terrifying, since veterans often don’t know what it is they’re having problems with or why it’s happening. Yet, not everyone having readjustment issues necessarily has PTSD. Houston and his staff prefer to see individuals before it turns into PTSD. Though, a lot of young vets do not seek help.

It’s important to know that the Buffalo Vet Center does not prescribe any medications - rather it is through therapeutic treatment that the counselors are able to assist. Through verbalization, group therapy and symptom management, these readjustment counselors are able to help veterans manage their troubles. So, just how can we help bring younger and older vets away from the isolation, withdrawal or disconnection from society? Houston encourages these veterans engage in activities that will help them shift focus away from some areas and onto social activities that will promote productivity in their lives. Examples of these include exercising, yoga, fishing, tai chi, martial arts and even participating in picnics with other group members. Strong family participation also helps. “It is important to engage family in treatment – if family members aren’t supportive, treatment takes longer” says Houston. Oftentimes, it is the family members who initiate the counseling. For that, Houston is very thankful. He advises those who are in position to do so, to “Just listen…you don’t have to fix it, just be a listening ear and become educated about the services you can tell veterans about”. Indeed there are more services to learn about. One of those services lies at the VA Western New York Health Care System in Batavia, NY. [... continued next month in Part II of our PTSD story]

**IN OUR NEXT INSTALLMENT......**

The Abandoned Heroes Series continues with Part II of our PTSD story. Join us next month, as we introduce you to Dr. Terri Julian, Program Manager at the PTSD Clinic in Batavia, NY and Chris, an Iraq War Veteran diagnosed with PTSD.

Preview: “… Bullets flying in his direction made for an intense period that led Chris to experience a surreal state of mind – at times not realizing what was happening or what to make of it…. He recounts the first day he came back home from the military: when the house dog barked, Chris rolled to the floor instinctively as if he was being ambushed. His dad witnessed this reaction and knew in an instant that his son was showing signs of PTSD. …”

By Sergio R. Rodriguez  
Deputy Director  
Erie County Veterans Service Agency  
Email: sergio.rodriguez@erie.gov

(Continued from page 2)
The House Education and Labor Committee has passed the Veterans Engaged for Tomorrow (VET) Corps Act, coauthored by Congressman Phil Hare (D-IL) and Congressman John Sarbanes (D-MD). It was included as part of the Generations Invigorating Volunteerism and Education (GIVE) Act. It would establish an organization for veterans by veterans, similar to AmeriCorps or Senior Corps.

The primary mission of the Veterans’ Corps will be to recruit and mobilize veterans to serve the needs of their fellow servicemen and women. It will collaborate with Veterans Service Organizations, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and other groups to provide education, job training, and mentoring to our nation’s veterans.

The Veterans’ Corps will be overseen by the Corporation of National and Community Service. It would be the first of its kind.

The bill: [http://thomas.loc.gov/home/gpoxmlc111/h1401_ih.xml](http://thomas.loc.gov/home/gpoxmlc111/h1401_ih.xml)

“President Obama has called for a renewed commitment to national service,” Congressman Phil Hare (D-IL) said. “A Veterans’ Corps can be one of the great pillars in that effort.”

“The House Education and Labor Committee has passed the Veterans Engaged for Tomorrow (VET) Corps Act, coauthored by Congressman Phil Hare (D-IL) and Congressman John Sarbanes (D-MD). It was included as part of the Generations Invigorating Volunteerism and Education (GIVE) Act. It would establish an organization for veterans by veterans, similar to AmeriCorps or Senior Corps.

“Vet Corps provides veterans an opportunity to continue their tremendous service to our nation,” said Sarbanes. “It will also help mitigate the disproportionately high levels of unemployment in the veteran population and provide tangible benefits for disabled or older veterans, as well as the greater community. It is only natural that veterans would be the first to answer President Obama’s call to community service. Vet Corps will allow them to participate in a meaningful way and help smooth their transition back to civilian life.”
The Greater East Aurora Chamber of Commerce, in partnership with the East Aurora American Legion Post 362, the Aurora Vietnam Veterans, and title sponsors Tops Friendly Markets, the Erie County Veterans Service Agency and Knox Farm State Park, will be bringing the American Veterans Traveling Tribute (AVTT) to Knox Farm State Park, 437 Buffalo Road, East Aurora, from June 24 to June 29, 2009.

The AVTT travels the USA each year participating in sponsored events with a mission to honor, respect and remember those who served and those who are serving. Our veterans represent freedom and its cost.

The focal point of the tribute is an 80% replica of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C. Other tributes that are also part of the display include WWII, Korea, Iraq, Afghanistan and a 9/11 exhibit. The display will be open to the public to pay their respects 24 hours a day during this period.

The event will kick off on June 24 at Tops Markets located at 4777 Transit Road in Depew, NY and will include a motorcycle escort of Vietnam Veterans and others bringing the AVTT to the Park. The tribute will be open to the public on June 25 with several ceremonies scheduled during the week for various armed forces and emergency service groups to be honored. The highlight of week will be on Saturday, June 27 when the only Medal of Honor recipient living in New York State, Gary Beikirch, as well as other area veterans, will be recognized.

To accommodate the thousands of visitors expected during this time several offsite parking areas have been designated with shuttle transportation to the Park.

For further information on the AVTT, ceremony schedules, parking, and more contact the Greater East Aurora Chamber of Commerce at 652-8444, eanycc@verizon.net or visit:

www.eanycc.com
www.avtt.org
Erie County Veterans Service Agency
Knox Farm State Park
Tops Markets

Coming soon to East Aurora!
American Veterans Traveling Tribute
June 25-29, 2009

Go to www.avtt.org for more details
Western New York Veterans Housing Coalition

In 1987, a group of Vietnam veterans realized many men and women have special needs when they return from military service, so they formed the Western New York Veteran’s Housing Coalition. The non-profit organization gives homeless veterans a place to live, and resources they need get back on their feet. The group operates four apartment complexes, altogether housing 100 low income people who are severely disabled, homeless, or have other special needs.

The Coalition’s Chief Operating Officer, Celia O’Brien, is the widow of a Vietnam veteran. She became involved at the Coalition in 1996, and says, “There is a satisfaction that you get here, that you don’t get out of any other jobs. Every vet that thanks me for helping them out is something I wouldn’t have anywhere else.”

The goal is to get veterans into permanent housing. Tenants meet with a case manager once a month and they’re offered services to help them prevent becoming homeless again. The case workers place a heavy emphasis on stabilizing the vets’ personal situations. They’re given job training and education, and job referrals. Rent is based on a portion of the vets’ monthly income.

The WNY Veteran’s Housing Coalition sets itself apart from other property management organizations by providing this extensive caring component. Veterans facing tough times are given a helping hand in every way possible. O’Brien says, “I’ve had vets come up and thank me for saving their lives.”

All of the work is funded by grants, and the Coalition recently applied for two new grants to extend their efforts to help veterans find jobs.

For more information about the WNY Veterans Housing Coalition, visit: www.veteranslifeops.org

1812 Legacy Council

In 2012, we will mark the 200 year anniversary of the War of 1812, America’s 2nd Revolutionary War. This war also brought about independence for our Canadian friends across the mighty Niagara River.

Plans are being made on both sides of the border to celebrate not war, but 200 years of peace between two nations with the longest contiguous border in the world. I have been designated by County Executive Chris Collins to represent Erie County and join with our Canadian counterparts in the planning for 2 years worth of events and exhibits beginning in 2012. The President & CEO of the 1812 Legacy Council, Mr. Vincent Del Buono has graciously agreed to write an article for each issue of The Erie County Veteran Newsletter to inform all of our readers on how they can participate or just enjoy the events that are planned. This will be 2 plus years of a history buffs dream come true and bring many people to our region for tourism.

http://www.buffalonews.com/cityregion/story/535811.html

Coming home . . . again

At 58, for third time, soldier is back; first, Vietnam — now Iraq

“With a long line of admirers paying tribute, Sgt. 1st Class David Dispenza is given a welcoming hug by his brother Leo upon arrival at Buffalo Niagara International Airport after an unexpected tour of duty in Iraq.”

Read his story in this link to the Buffalo News article: http://www.buffalonews.com/cityregion/story/535811.html
La Societe des Quarante Hommes at Huit Chevaux is an independent, by invitation, honor organization of male and female U. S. veterans, more commonly known as the Forty & Eight.

The Forty & Eight is committed to charitable and patriotic aims. Their purpose is to uphold and defend the United States Constitution, to promote the well being of veterans and their widows and orphans, and to actively participate in selected charitable endeavors, which include programs that promote child welfare and nurse's training.

The titles and symbols of the Forty & Eight reflect its First World War origins. Americans were transported to the battle front on French trains within boxcars stenciled with a “40/8”, denoting its capacity to hold either forty men or eight horses. This uncomfortable mode of transportation was familiar to all who fought in the trenches; a common small misery among American soldiers who thereafter found “40/8” a lighthearted symbol of the deeper service, sacrifice and unspoken horrors of war that bind all who have borne the battle.

The Forty & Eight was founded in 1920 by American veterans returning from France. Originally an arm of The American Legion, the Forty & Eight became an independent and separately incorporated veteran's organization in 1960. Membership is by invitation of honorably discharged veterans and honorably serving members of the United States Armed Forces.

The Erie County Veterans Service Agency would like to recognize Carol Griffith as the April 2009 Veterans Advocate of the Month. Carol has worked in the VA healthcare system for 27 years. Carol always shows passion and dedication to our community's veterans. Currently, Carol is a Veterans Service Center Counselor at the VA Hospital. Carol is attending the University at Buffalo for her Masters degree in Social Work. Upon graduation, she hopes to work in the field of trauma to help veterans.

Carol is an active member of our Veterans Outreach Squad, helping educate veterans of the benefits they have earned. Thank you Carol - for you have truly made an impact on our community and to our team, here at the Erie County Veterans Service Agency.
U.S. Senator Charles E. Schumer, standing with Patrick Welch, Director of Erie County Veterans Service and other local veterans and families, is calling on the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to designate Pine Lawn Cemetery in Cheektowaga a National Veterans Cemetery. Currently the families of Western New York veterans have to travel all the way to Bath, NY, over 100 miles away to bury or visit their loved ones. This has created unnecessary hardship for those who want their family members to be buried with the full honors they deserve.

For many years local veterans have been working towards a national cemetery, and today Schumer is joining their cause. A National Veteran’s Cemetery designation will allow Western New York veterans and their families to receive full benefits without having to travel to Bath, NY. These benefits include opening and closing of the grave, perpetual care, a Government headstone or marker, a burial flag, and a Presidential Memorial Certificate, at no cost to the family.

Schumer has decided to become the champion for our cause,” said Patrick Welch, Director of Erie County Veteran’s Services.

There are currently six National Cemeteries in New York State, but the facility in Bath is the only one in all of Central New York, Western New York, the Southern Tier and the Rochester Finger Lakes Region. Current VA regulations require that a there be more than 170,000 veterans more than 75 miles away from the closest National Cemetery for another one to be created. In Western New York alone there are approximately 125,000 veterans. Add in the Rochester area, which is also more than 75 miles away from Bath, and you have more than 175,000 veterans, more than enough for the area to qualify for an additional National Cemetery, noted Schumer.

Pine Lawn Cemetery is the ideal place for New York’s newest national cemetery, as it has many ties to the military community, according to Schumer and local veterans groups. The existing Veterans Wall commands a prominent place in Pine
Lawn Cemetery and provides a focus for events and celebrations. The cemetery group reaches out to the military community and hosts annual Memorial Day and Veterans Day celebrations. Additionally, Pine Lawn Cemetery was honored to host the "Moving Wall" Vietnam Memorial in 1998, an event that attracted 75,000 visitors to its cemetery. If the VA were to designate another piece of land as a National Cemetery, construction could take between 5 and 7 years. Pine Lawn would be ready immediately.

Pine Lawn is a natural location for a National Cemetery within Erie County, and Erie County is the most suitable location in New York State. Erie County has the highest concentration of veterans in Upstate New York, and the veteran's population is of an advanced age. Forty five percent of New York Veterans are of more than 70 years of age. Now is the time to start planning for the future to ensure that our veterans are treated with the honor they deserve.

Schumer has heard from local veterans groups that Veterans in Western New York desperately want to be buried in a national shrine, but don’t want to force their families to travel long distances, potentially at great hardship to do so.

The quest to make Pine Lawn a National Cemetery has been undertaken by a broad coalition of local groups and lawmakers over the last five years. In 2005 the New York State Cemetery's Commission set out to recommend locations across New York State that would be suitable for a National Veterans Cemetery. In Western New York, Pine Lawn was the only location they selected that could be immediately ready. The effort to make Pine Lawn a National Veteran’s Cemetery has been supported by the Vietnam Veterans of America, Veteran’s of Foreign Wars, The American Legion, American Veterans (AMVETS), Disabled American Veterans, and Veterans of Modern Warfare.

Today, more than 24 million veterans and Reservists and National Guard members with 20 years qualifying service have earned the honor of burial in a National Cemetery. Veterans with discharges other than dishonorable, their spouses and dependent children may be eligible for burial in a VA national cemetery. Those who die on active duty may also be buried in a national cemetery.

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The Western New York Connection...

Frank Gaffney, World War I Hero

Named World War I’s “second greatest hero” by Gen. John J. Pershing, Gaffney was born in Lockport and enlisted in the army in 1917 at the age of 31. He was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for his heroics with the 108th Infantry, 27th Division while in Renssey, France.

The citation that accompanied his Congressional Medal of Honor reported the following extraordinary deed. “In action with the enemy, near Renssey, France, September 29, 1918, Frank Gaffney, an automatic rifleman, pushed forward alone, after the other members of his squad had been killed, discovered several Germans placing a heavy machine gun in position. He killed the crew, captured the gun, bombed several dugouts and after killing four of the enemy with his pistol, held the position until reinforcements came up and 80 prisoners were captured.”

He single-handedly captured an enemy machine gun placement and bombed several positions while waiting for reinforcements to arrive. Just eight days later he would lose his left arm, receiving a Purple Heart for his service.

Gaffney would later move to Niagara Falls where he died in 1948 after a fall almost 30 years later.

Source:
200 Years 200 Faces, A Special Bicentennial Edition; Published by the Lockport Union-Sun & Journal, The Niagara Gazette and the Tonawanda News

Volume 2, Issue 3 9 April 2009
The Veterans Affairs and Defense departments have started work on a uniform registration system that will enroll all service members in the VA upon entry into the military, VA Secretary Eric Shinseki said at a House Veterans Affairs Committee hearing this week.

Shinseki said the system will rely on a single electronic record shared by both departments to handle delivery of benefits and medical care. The collaborative effort, launched with the support of Defense Secretary Robert Gates, is designed to simplify the transition of military personnel to civilian status and ensure the availability of medical data to support the care of patients shared by VA and Defense.

At the hearing, Shinseki conceded that he "has not made much headway" in whittling down VA's claims backlog. In a report last July, the committee estimated the number of disability compensation claims at nearly 630,000, with almost a quarter of these pending for longer than six months. In its 2009 budget request, VA estimated it would have a backlog of 872,000 claims this year. But the committee has concluded that the number could exceed 1 million, due to veterans from Afghanistan and Iraq leaving active duty.

Shinseki said that for now he is taking a "brute force" approach to the backlog by hiring more claims examiners to speed processing. Two hundred have been hired since the start of the year, for a total of 11,300 examiners.

Shinseki said VA has kicked off developing a paperless claims processing system that will go into testing next year. Full deployment is planned for 2012.

President Obama has proposed a 2010 VA budget of $113 billion -- up $15 billion, or 16 percent, from 2009. That's the largest budget increase in the department's history, according to Shinseki.

He said the budget includes funding to support a reliable and accessible IT infrastructure, a high-performing IT workforce, and modernized information systems flexible enough to meet both existing and emerging service delivery requirements. That includes development of an electronic health record system known as HealtheVet.

Shinseki declined to provide details on VA's budget until its official release in April, but Carl Blake, legislative director of Paralyzed Veterans of America told lawmakers that VA needs an IT budget of $2.7 billion in 2010, up $200 million from its 2009 IT budget.

Blake recommended that $130 million of the 2010 VA technology budget be allocated for systems at the Veterans Benefits Administration. Kerry Baker, assistant national legislative director of Disabled American Veterans, blamed Congress in part for the lack of advanced IT systems at VBA. Baker said, "In spite of undeniable needs, Congress has steadily reduced funding for VBA initiatives over the past several years," he testified. "In fiscal year 2001, Congress provided $82 million for VBA-identified IT initiatives. In fiscal 2002, it provided $77 million; in 2003, $71 million; in 2004, $54 million; in 2005, $29 million; and in 2006, $23 million."

Centralization of IT programs under VA's chief information officer also has stifled development of VBA systems, Baker said. He urged legislators to ensure adequate finding for the agency's projects, including paperless processing, online benefits applications, data integration across business lines, quality assurance programs and employee training.

By Bob Brewin 03/11/2009
NextGov - technology and the business of government
http://www.nextgov.com/nextgov/ng_20090311_6489.php
(GovExec.com)
Mission Statement of Erie County Veterans Services

To insure that every veteran in the county is registered in the VA System and is fully aware of all the benefits that they have earned.

To make veterans an economic force in education, employment and business development.

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Erie County Veterans Services
- Patrick Welch
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- Sergio Rodriguez
  Deputy Director
- Alyssa Ersing
  Assistant Service Officer
- Judy Ehman, RSVP Volunteer
  and Newsletter Editor

If you’re in an emotional crisis, call 1-800-273-TALK (Press “1” for Veterans)
www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org