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My Word: Help vets with mental issues

By Candice Crawford

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People have been understandably enraged recently over the baggage fees airlines were charging U.S. troops returning from war.

But if you read Thursday's Sentinel editorial about the lack of preparedness by the Department of Veterans Affairs in dealing with returning troops ("Vets need the cavalry"), you know there are much bigger issues we should be appalled about. If we're committed to helping our veterans, we should speak out to ensure they get the help they need.

Many veterans will return to no jobs, a poor economy, homes lost to foreclosure; a heartbreaking number already live on the streets they fought to protect. This is a reality we accept for those who fought in incredibly difficult circumstances. Multiple deployments, an enemy without uniforms, the presence of improvised explosive devices, women veterans who have been sexually assaulted — all contribute to an epidemic of post-traumatic stress disorder.

PTSD, a result of trauma, usually includes acute anxiety and depression. For the fortunate uninitiated, imagine feeling soul-crushing depression with the constant fear of imminent death, often exacerbated by survivors' guilt. While usually treatable with therapy and medication, it does not go away on its own. One can't snap out of it, or "man up." PTSD is unbearable, and many have taken their own lives under its weight. Some have taken others with them.

Here are things we all can do to help:

- Community-based agencies can take on services the federal government isn't providing.
- Local governments and corporations can give financial assistance to these agencies.
- Domestic and sexual violence centers must find ways to reach out to military personnel and their families.
- Those who provide mental-health care need experts in combat-related PTSD.
- Employers need to have employee-assistance programs in place.

We have to get it into our minds, and our hearts, that mental-health conditions are illnesses, and not something to be ashamed of. We need to learn that, while most conditions are treatable or manageable, sufferers need professional help and should be encouraged to get it.

We must remember that depression is, all too often, unnecessarily fatal. And we need to remember that our military men and women and their families have already given enough.

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