

Family Safety: A Significant Concern for Returning Veterans and Their Families
National survey results released at federal issue briefing

Washington, DC, October 24, 2008 - If the experience of war weren't difficult enough, many OIF/OEF veterans return home to struggle with the impact of combat stress and trauma and how this plays out in the family. Witness Justice and the Veterans Initiative Center and Research Institute (VICTRI), in collaboration with bipartisan U.S. House Caucuses (Addiction, Treatment and Recovery, Mental Health, Veteran's Mental Health, and Victim's Rights), hosted an issue briefing on Capitol Hill today to discuss this issue and the results of a new national survey of veterans.

As the "silent wounds" of PTSD and traumatic brain injury (TBI) continue to receive national attention, the war continues to impact veterans returning with heightened levels of adrenaline, increased contextual anxieties, and strong trauma-triggers. These post-war responses have a direct impact on safety in the home and communication between family members.

Briefing testimony was given by Dr. Thomas Berger from the Vietnam Veterans of America, A. Kathryn Power, Director of the Center for Mental Health Services, DHHS, John Baker from the Veterans' Initiative Center and Research Institute, Retired Brigadier General Stephen Xenakis, as well as OIF/OEF veterans and family members that have first-hand experience with this issue.

In addition to the briefing, the groups initiated a national survey in September. The results were released at the briefing and offer insight into what families are experiencing from the veteran's perspective.

Key national survey findings include:

- The majority of OIF/OEF veterans have witnessed or experienced violence while deployed (88%).
- Most understand the traumatic effect of combat violence: 66% indicated the experience of combat (in general) is traumatizing and 64% felt that some of their experiences during deployment were personally traumatizing.
- Despite the need for support, 39% said they would be reluctant to use military or veteran-specific services.
- 60% said family relationships changed after deployment (i.e. breakdowns in communication (29%), frequent arguments and conflicts (24%), lack of sexual intimacy (21%)).
- Nearly half experienced an increase in conflicts and arguments (verbal and/or physical) at home after reintegration.
- 55% found family life challenging or very challenging after war.

- Changes in relationships may result from the top three reported post-deployment emotions: mood swings (11%), hostility (10%) and/or emotional numbness and withdraw (10%).

"We're seeing significant rates of substance abuse, domestic violence, child abuse, and divorce" commented Helga West, President and CEO of Witness Justice. "These are signs of the impact of war on the family and we are committed to taking action on this issue in an effort to better support veterans and their families." The group's focus on psychological trauma and trauma-informed care is what led to the new partnership with VICTRI.

"Bringing together Witness Justice and VICTRI marks an important progression in the analysis of the effects that deployment overseas has on our nation's Service Members and, more importantly, on their family," said Jack Scharrett, VICTRI's President and CEO. "This issue has brought together a wide group of organizations of varying expertise and perspectives which, we hope, has started a national conversation that will help our nation's heroes to serve their families and communities as honorably as they have their country."

"We're hopeful that the survey and briefing will have a significant impact in preventing violence in military families" commented Cindy Waitt of the Waitt Institute for Violence Prevention whose group has funded this effort. "When we can look not only at what is happening within families but why, we can think about ways to provide support that not only prevent violence, but promote healing as well."

The federal issue briefing also covered why families are struggling and what can be done to promote safety at home and keep the lines of communication open.

In addition to the four U.S. House Caucuses, Congressional Supporters Included: Rep. Filner (D-CA), Chairman of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee; Rep. Corrine Brown (D-FL); Rep. Phil Hare (D-IL); and Rep. Michaud (D-ME), Chairman of the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Health.

Organizational Supporters of the Briefing Included:

American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy; American Institute on Domestic Violence; American Mental Health Counselors Association; American Probation and Parole Association; American Psychoanalytic Association; Andrus Children's Center; Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law; Campaign for Mental Health Reform; Citizens United for Rehabilitation of Errants; Council on Crime and Justice; Domestic Abuse Helpline for Men and Women; Durham Police Department Victim Services Unit; Family Nonviolence, Inc.; Gift from Within; Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America; Kent Center for Human and Organizational Development; Men Can Stop Rape; Men Stopping Violence; Mental Health

America; Mental Health Liaison Group; National Association for Children's Behavioral Health; National Association of Social Workers; National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors; National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence; National Center on Family Homelessness; National Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare; National Veterans Foundation; Sacred Circle: National Resource Center to End Violence Against Native Women; Stop the Silence: Stop Child Sexual Abuse, Inc.; Therapeutic Communities of America; Veteran's Health Council; Veterans' Initiative Center and Research Institute; Vietnam Veterans of America; and Witness Justice.

Witness Justice is a national