

Profiles in Advocacy: Kathie DiCesare

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Kathie DiCesare

After nearly 30 years of advocating for war veterans, Kathie DiCesare still proudly displays a poster in her bedroom dating back to the Vietnam War. She said it serves as a reminder of why she first became involved with veterans' organizations.

As the wife of a Vietnam veteran who battled with post-traumatic stress disorder, the poster, which lists statistics and effects of PTSD, motivates DiCesare to continue to spread awareness about the lesser-known psychological effects that war can cause for service men and women as well as their families.

In addition to serving as senior chaplain for the International Fellowship of Chaplains, DiCesare also owns several Web sites that discuss veterans' affairs issues, including Nam Guardian Angel, devoted to informing the public of the psychological effects veterans experience after their service.

"I knew things weren't right with my husband's behavior, but it wasn't until I did research that I was able to cope with what he was experiencing," DiCesare said.

She eventually wrote a book, "For the Love of Jack," about the challenges she and her husband faced after his return from the Vietnam War.

"Knowing and understanding what exactly PTSD is cannot only save lives, but it also saves marriages. It can prevent issues of domestic violence and it saves the children involved from doing something wrong when they witness their parent reacting in an odd way as a result of their trauma," DiCesare said.

Veterans who suffer from PTSD can experience a number of behavioral symptoms ranging from nightmares, feelings of distress and flashbacks, during which the victim often feels that he has returned to the battlefield, according to DiCesare.

The Department of Veterans' Affairs reports that up to 20 percent of Iraq war veterans and 11 percent of Afghanistan war veterans will suffer the effects of depression or PTSD, while less than half of those inflicted will receive medical treatment.

DiCesare said despite the Obama administration's efforts to reform the Department of Veterans Affairs and the health claim process to better address veterans' psychological needs, many of the administration's proposed measures have not adapted to the lifestyle needs of veterans.

"While advocates push for PTSD treatment and suicide prevention, there are measures out there ... that have actually kept many veterans from seeking help for their symptoms," DiCesare said.

The Joshua Omvig Veterans Suicide Prevention Act, adopted in 2007, pushes for measures to prevent veteran suicide, and restricts many veterans from having access to firearms.

"Many veterans were policemen before they entered the service, and they return to the states only to be told that they can't go back to their job because they can't bear arms," DiCesare said. "As a result, many don't seek the help they need because they don't want to risk their livelihood."

While advocates for veterans' affairs, like DiCesare, have addressed how issues such as PTSD are a greater concern for veterans and their families, there has also been more cases of PTSD among the general population, according to Vietnam veteran and clinical psychologist, Dr. Kenneth Manges.

"In the general public, PTSD has occurred more frequently in women than men, and any person who has had traumatic experiences, such as those involving physical abuse, sexual abuse, or even the observation of such abuses being done to others, has an increased likelihood for developing PTSD," Manges said.

Although proper recognition and treatment of PTSD has become a prominent issue among veterans' organizations, knowledge of the effects of PTSD and similar illnesses among the general population can help victims receive proper treatment, Manges said.

"Had I never met my husband, I would have never heard of PTSD or have been able to recognize its effects," DiCesare said. "It wasn't until after I did my own research that we were able to realize that he could receive treatment for what he was going through. It's never too late to seek help."

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