Addressing the Nursing Workforce Shortage
Veterans as Mental Health Nurses

At the end of 2012, the number of veterans ages 18 and older in the United States was more than 21 million (Debt.org, 2013). After years at war, U.S. soldiers are returning from the frontlines to fight the battle of unemployment, finding themselves without the income needed to support their families. In December 2012, the unemployment rate for post-9/11 veterans was 10.8%, 3% higher than the overall U.S. population rate (Debt.org, 2013). A recent report issued by the U.S. Army shows that the impact of high unemployment on returning soldiers has been devastating, particularly for 18- to 24-year-olds (Debt.org, 2013). In March 2012, post-9/11 veterans ages 20 to 24 were at an unemployment rate of 36% (Debt.org, 2013). Being removed from the civilian world for long periods of time, often deployed during the traditional age of attending college, can leave veterans without the college degrees or business experience needed to enter the civilian workforce. Fortunately, a collaborative effort of several federal organizations exists to create innovative programs to assist veterans to transition into nursing careers.

To help veterans make the transition from military service to nursing careers, several initiatives have surfaced from a variety of organizations. Establishing a partnership with the U.S. Army, Navy, and Air Force, the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA, 2013) is working to align accreditation requirements for nursing programs with enlisted medical training. Veterans with health care training, such as medics and corpsmen, will be able to receive academic credit for their military health care service. Efforts of the Nursing Education Practice Quality and Retention Program (HRSA, 2013) are to ultimately provide schools of nursing with the tools needed to:

- foster operational academic pathways for veterans,
- bring nursing education opportunities to experienced and interested veterans,
- recruit and enroll veterans in nursing programs,
- engage and support veterans in nursing school, and
- increase diversity in the nursing workforce.

Furthermore, many governors and state legislators recently passed laws to assist veterans in obtaining credit for training in the military to receive licenses for qualified jobs (The White House, 2012). Opportunities to take advantage of the skills and talents of veterans in the nursing workforce are steadily forthcoming.

Recently, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) (2012) has committed to expanding mental health care. Plans are to hire 1,600 more psychiatric-mental health (PMH) professionals to assist in meeting the increasing demand for services (VA, 2012). Many veterans have turned to psychology to become PMH professionals, and they are fill-
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Several colleges of nursing across the nation are weighing in on the chance to become pioneers in assisting veterans with health care training enter the nursing workforce. Funding through a federal grant has been provided to a nursing school in Texas to work with key military leadership and training staff to identify strategies to align the health care training of veterans and nursing academic credit (Marسيل, 2011). Furthermore, the Obama Administration is providing funding priority to nursing schools that offer veteran-friendly learning environments, enlist and encourage veterans interested in pursuing nursing careers, and enable academic credit for health care training received while enlisted in the military (Wakefield, 2011); consequently, several schools of nursing have creative, innovative pathways for veterans. In addition, many private colleges have entered into a Yellow Ribbon Agreement with the VA, making additional funds available for the veteran’s education program without an additional charge to his or her GI Bill entitlement (VA, 2013). By way of the Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges (2013) Consortium, approximately 1,900 universities and colleges have created programs that afford veterans, whom relocate often, a variety of options to enroll in courses and complete degrees. The effort of several universities and colleges to assist veterans not only builds health care career opportunities, but also aids in meeting the needs of the nursing workforce.

Being that many returning veterans have trained skills related to health care that can lead to a career as an RN and an inherited yearning to support each other emotionally, it appears that a further transition into a specialty such as psychiatric-mental health nursing (PMHN) is an ideal situation. As the military culture is built on camaraderie, the desire to help fellow veterans is instinctive and influential. Increasing the number of veterans in professional careers, such as PMHN, will afford other veterans the opportunity to have emotional issues treated by someone who understands the culture. Therefore, the provision of care by fellow veterans seems to be an excellent method of acclimating this population back to civilian culture. The combination of the nation’s need for nurses and the government’s need for mental health professionals makes PMHN an appealing career choice for veterans seeking employment in the civilian world.

Limited instruction on PMHN occurs in undergraduate programs. Furthermore, a lack of role modeling is present, as there is a deficiency in the number of nurses with formal training in selected specialties such as PMHN (World Health Organization, 2007). Therefore, little incentive exists for undergraduate students studying nursing to consider PMHN as a career option. Consequently, there is a critical shortage of PMH nurses. With the current piqued interest in mental health professions by many veterans, perhaps the time is now for practicing PHM nurses to lead the way for innovative programs in nursing to ensure growth in the future PMHN workforce.

REFERENCES

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