

Ric.edu: "Addiction recovery brings hope to struggling veterans"

By Andrew Westlake '13, Staff Writer

February 18, 2011

http://www.ric.edu/whatsnews/details.php?News_ID=1220

Addiction recovery brings hope to struggling veterans

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Peter Benson, a service veteran of the Afghanistan war and police officer, is one of many American veterans who have found themselves at the mercy of substance abuse. Their plight – and the community support they need – was the focus of the forum "Veterans, Military Persons and their Families: A Call to Addiction Recovery" which took place in RIC's Student Union Ballroom on Jan. 14.

The forum, hosted by the RIC department of psychology's Chemical Dependency and Addiction Studies Program, was organized to provide an opportunity for behavioral healthcare practitioners, students and other interested community members to learn about effective service provision for returning military members, veterans and their families.



Peter Benson fell into a two-year depression when the worst of his post-traumatic stress came about. After three suicide attempts, he entered recovery and has since been alcohol- and drug-free for the past three years. His return to sobriety is evidence that the recovery effort does produce tangible results.

Exhibits were featured to help participants network with existing community resources, local experts and veterans' service organizations. Over 200 attended, representing faculty, students, former students, providers, state agencies and the military and legislature.

Craig Stenning, director of the Rhode Island Department of Behavioral Healthcare, Developmental Disabilities and Hospitals, stressed the importance of a strong community response to the addiction recovery effort. "For those facing a constant struggle against addiction and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), the battle

isn't really over," he said. "Very few people can do it alone."

“Recovery is not monolithic,” added Stephen Gumbley, chairman of the Institute for Addiction Recovery steering committee at Rhode Island College. “It comes to everyone differently.”

Benson’s story emulates that of so many other veterans returning from the battlefield. He spent most of the past decade as a self-described “full-blown addict and alcoholic,” heavily using drink, cocaine and other opiates. He attributes his self-destructive behavior to the deep depression he found himself in, haunted by the atrocities he witnessed while fighting overseas.

An estimated 40 million Americans have currently been affected by recent wars, both soldiers and their families included. Soldiers that return to America from the battlefield frequently have emotional issues, mental trauma or any other one of a myriad of problems.



Major General Robert T. Bray, of the Rhode Island National Guard, helped put the recovery effort into a local context. “5,400 Rhode Islanders have been deployed during the course of this war, many of them having been deployed multiple times,” he said.

Bray touched upon some of the positives of serving, including the military’s Yellow Ribbon program. This service entitles certain veterans to have most of their tuition – if not all of it – covered, should they decide to pursue a college education.

The presentation by keynote speaker Robert Swift, professor of psychiatry and human behavior at Brown University, focused on the reasons behind many veterans’ struggle with substance abuse and addiction.

Stress was a major component in the formula. “Stress is psychologically detrimental as well as physically detrimental,” Swift noted. He went on to cover the basics of post-traumatic stress disorder, brain injury, substance abuse and amputation as the foundations for many veterans’ struggles with addiction.



Swift voiced his hopes for the revised treatment of veterans. “Substance cessation methods must be integrated into PTSD treatments, and vice-versa,” he said.

“A lot of the people that come back suffer from a lesser form of combat stress,” Benson warned.

Even these veterans – the ones that are not medically diagnosed with any lasting trauma – must be wary of

war's impact on their lives, Swift added. However, Benson closed his presentation optimistically. "As a society, we are gradually de-stigmatizing substance abuse disorders. There is hope." *The forum's planning committee, composed of persons from the Rhode Island Department of Behavioral Health, Developmental Disabilities and Hospitals, RIC faculty and the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, is planning a series of trainings for the provider community on how to respond effectively to the needs of veterans, military persona and their families.*