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Memorial Day 2011 Fundraising Letter

Dear Supporter,

You are one of the people who “gets it” about veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Unfortunately, most people in the U.S. do not.

By most estimates, the war directly affects only about one family in a hundred.

But, boy, does it affect that one in a hundred!

Of the 2.2 million who have deployed to Iraq and/or Afghanistan, 800,000 have deployed more than once. Five hundred and fifty thousand have deployed more than three times.

Those deployed more than once are three times more likely to experience severe mental health problems.

Vets4Vets, the peer support community for returning veterans which I set up five years ago, continues to provide the crucial resource of peer support, most would say, the single most important resource to these returning vets and their families.

In the last couple of months we have been invited to the White House (a picture with First Lady Michelle Obama attached), cited by the Defense Center of Excellence (DCoE) as one of the “Best Practices” for returning vets and evaluated positively in a before-and-after study by Arizona State University on “11 out of 12 outcome measures,” an unusually positive evaluation.

On this Memorial Day, when most people are planning a picnic or a weekend get-away, would you consider continuing your track record for “getting it” about the needs of returning veterans and their families and make a tax-deductible contribution of \$100 to “Vets4Vets?”

Those figures I cited are all taken from an important new policy paper from the Center for New American Security written by Nancy Berglass. She brings together a number of studies on the needs of this new generation of veterans and points out the importance of non-profit organizations like Vets4Vets to supplement the role of government agencies in meeting those needs. Her study is available online at (<http://www.cnas.org/node/5297>).

This is the same Nancy Berglass, who, after a careful review process with her staff at the Iraq-Afghanistan Deployment Impact Fund, selected Vets4Vets as one of the top fifty nonprofits in the U.S. helping returning veterans.

The statistics on returning veterans are not good—and getting worse. Already 7,000 returning veterans have become homeless—joining the army of as many as 250,000 veterans from all our wars who are already homeless each night. Tragically, 89% of these homeless veterans were discharged honorably from their military service.

One in three returning veteran reports “problematic drinking”.

Their suicide rate is a national tragedy.

Outgoing Secretary of Defense Robert Gates calls these the “dilemmas and consequences that go with having so FEW (emphasis added) fight our wars for so long.”

So what should we do for these returning veterans?

According to leading military and veterans’ psychiatrists and psychologists on the Vets4Vets Advisory Committee, the single most important resource we can make available to these returning veterans is “peer support.”

And that is what Vets4Vets does. Already, we have trained over 2,000 returning veterans in one of our 76 free, residential weekend workshops. They learn to listen to each other without interrupting, even when they express strong emotions. They enjoy the camaraderie and respect of other veterans which so many of them miss so deeply. They find out that they are not “crazy,” that they “are not the only one,” that many of their symptoms are what our experts call “the normal reactions to the abnormal situation of combat.” Hyper-vigilance, distrust and violence are required in combat, but they do fit well with civilian society.

Most veterans stay in touch with their “workshop buddies” from our Vets4Vets workshops and continue to do these “listening turns.” Many continue to meet face-to-face in one of our over forty local support groups across the country. At each workshop, they set personal goals for themselves and share them with a “reference person,” another returning veteran with more experience in Vets4Vets, who, like a “sponsor” in other peer support programs, will hold them accountable to these goals and give them the encouragement they need.

The results of participation in Vets4Vets have by now been widely recognized.

In February, the Defense Center of Excellence (DCOE), the Pentagon’s agency in charge of identifying and spreading the best ways for the nation's military communities, warriors and families to deal with the stress of war featured Vets4Vets as one of three organizations as “Best Practices in Peer Support Groups, as resources that effectively encourage veterans to share experiences with each other, manage psychological challenges, and ease reintegration.”

Just this month, researchers at Arizona State University completed a year-long assessment of Vets4Vets. They examined surveys from over 200 returning veterans taken before and after each of a dozen peer support workshops we offered during 2010. These surveys utilized standard measures of psychological functioning and dysfunction from the professional literature,

including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). These measures are both reliable and valid from a variety of other studies.

Their conclusion: “In sum, 11 of 12 outcome expectations were observed: lessening PTSD intensity and of 2 of 3 Negative Thoughts, increasing Resiliency, Social Connectedness, Expression of Feelings, Optimism, Progress on Goals, Optimism about Potential and further involvement with Vets4Vets.” According to the researchers, this is an unusually high percentage of positive outcomes for a program evaluation. The full report is available on our website at www.Vets4Vets.US.

Last month, we were invited to the White House by First Lady Michelle Obama and Jill Biden, the wife of Vice President Joe Biden, the parents of an Iraq veteran. We were asked to join them in the launch of their new initiative, “Joining Forces,” to help military families.

Indeed, thanks to funding from the State of Texas (their lottery funding Fund for Veterans Assistance in the Texas Veterans Commission), Vets4Vets is expanding our programs to include not just peer support for the returning veterans, but for the partners and spouses of these veterans, especially those who are parents. Just as the veterans need to talk with “somebody who has been there,” their partners need the same—someone else who knows what it means to run the family for a year, not once but several times, someone else who knows what those “normal reactions to combat” look like--in the living room!

We at Vets4Vets are proud of what we have done for these returning veterans. We have spearheaded this movement of peer support for returning veterans—and now their families.

However, we can only do it with your help.

It costs us about \$250 to send a veteran or family member to one of those “free” weekend workshops.

It costs \$12,000 in total for each of those workshops.

It costs us \$100,000 to add a new metropolitan area to the eight where we now have staff. We hire a local returning veteran for a year, train him or her in peer support and local project leadership, hold two of those \$12,000 workshops and set up several ongoing local groups. The difference one veteran working full time to build these peer support communities makes is enormous. Sometimes we are lucky and find a retiree who can make a large time commitment, like Tim Bahr up in Wisconsin or Duane Haney in Chicago. These local staff--or volunteers able to work like staff--go at this job 24/7—reaching out to returning veterans wherever they gather, on campuses, at veterans’ agencies, in the Guard and Reserve units which lack the same access to services as do those veterans on active duty who return to a supportive military base environment. Our staff members find places for our workshops, run the workshops, find places for ongoing local groups to meet, lead the groups, at least at the beginning, train their replacements in those groups, suggest other services as needed and, again and again, just listen to another returning vet—as only another returning veteran can.

Will you help us keep expanding this crucial resource? Will you reach out to your family and friends and ask them to help you help us help these veterans and their families?

On this Memorial Day, we honor men and women who have made the ultimate sacrifice--and these brave men and women who were willing to do the same. Those who return deserve help in dealing with the stresses of their war experiences and fitting back into civilian society. Thank you for supporting them.

Sincerely,

Jim Driscoll, Vietnam Vet and Founder, Vets4Vets

P.S. We will send you a Vets4Vets "Honor Coin" if you contribute \$250 or more to help these veterans.