Families of Rural OEF/OIF Veterans with Traumatic Brain Injury: Concerns and Issues

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Ridgewood: Ingenious Communication Strategies for Arizona Governor’s Council on Spinal and Head Injuries

3rd Annual Trauma Spectrum Conference
Emerging Research on Trauma Recovery & Reintegration For Servicemembers, Veterans and Families

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TBI / Polytrauma

BLAST INJURIES
TBI / Polytrauma

- Traumatic Brain Injury
- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
- Substance Use Disorders
- Suicide Risk
- Depression
- Anxiety

Other Physical Injuries
Arizona’s Military / Veteran Families

- 20,000+ Active Duty with 27,000 Dependents
  - Almost half are based in rural areas

- 13,000 Guard & Reservists
  - 1,746 have deployed from rural counties

- 600,000+ Veterans
  - (10% of AZ population)
  - 1 in 4 AZ Veterans live in rural communities
Effects on Families

**Financial:** high care costs

**Employment:** quit or lose job over care issues

**Relationships:** loss of partnership
   high percentage of divorce

**Children:** needs may become secondary

**Social:** isolation

**Geographic:** fewer, less specialized services available in rural areas
Changes in Family Interactions

As brain injury changes the way the individual thinks, acts, and feels, it changes the way the individual interacts with family members.

The dynamics of the family change:
- Relationships change
- Family structure and functioning changes
Changes in Family Interactions

“We are not the same people we were”

GRIEF and LOSS

“Our relationship doesn’t work the same way anymore”

LONELINESS

A NEW BURDEN OF RESPONSIBILITY
Capacity for Support: Implications

Military and VA Treatment Facilities
- Multidisciplinary team?
- Links to TBI-expert community resources?

Rural Communities
- Often generalists who wear many hats
- Gaps in necessary specialties

Family Systems
New Expectations for the Family

- Accessing treatment, follow-up, and advocacy often falls to the family.
- Assuming this responsibility is a significant stressor in addition to the “normal” stressors of deployment on the family.
Having limited understanding of the challenges the person with TBI may be having can have a serious negative impact on family dynamics and erode the family system—absent information about:

- What is causing the changes in the individual
- How to understand the changes
- Are the changes permanent
- Can they be fixed
- How to deal with the changes
- Resources and support…
Implications

The family is often overwhelmed.

They don’t know:
- Where to turn for help
- What to do
- If / where there are resources available

The family may become more and more dysfunctional—and the behavior changes in the individual with TBI may become more extreme.
Thinking Beyond the Clinical Environment

- Life after TBI is a journey
- Providers engage with the client at particular points on the journey
- It is important for providers to direct the client/family to a larger array of resources over the course of time
The client/family needs direction to resources over the lifetime journey:

- Clinical
- Independent Living
- Vocational
- Information and Education
- Access to additional referrals
- Links to the community of people living with brain injury
Resources

- BrainLine.org
- Defense & Veterans Brain Injury Center: DVBIC.org
- TraumaticBrainInjuryAtoZ.org
- BrainTrauma.org
Resources

AZ Coalition for Military Families: arizonacoalition.org

Brain Injury Association of Arizona: BIAAZ.org
Resources

- Military/Veteran Employment Portal
- Brain Injury Information & Referral
- Family Peer Mentor Program
- “A Warrior’s Journey” Conferences for Service Members, Veterans, & Families
- Social/Recreational Activities
- TBI Ombudsman
Questions?

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