

USC School of Social Work

Military Social Work

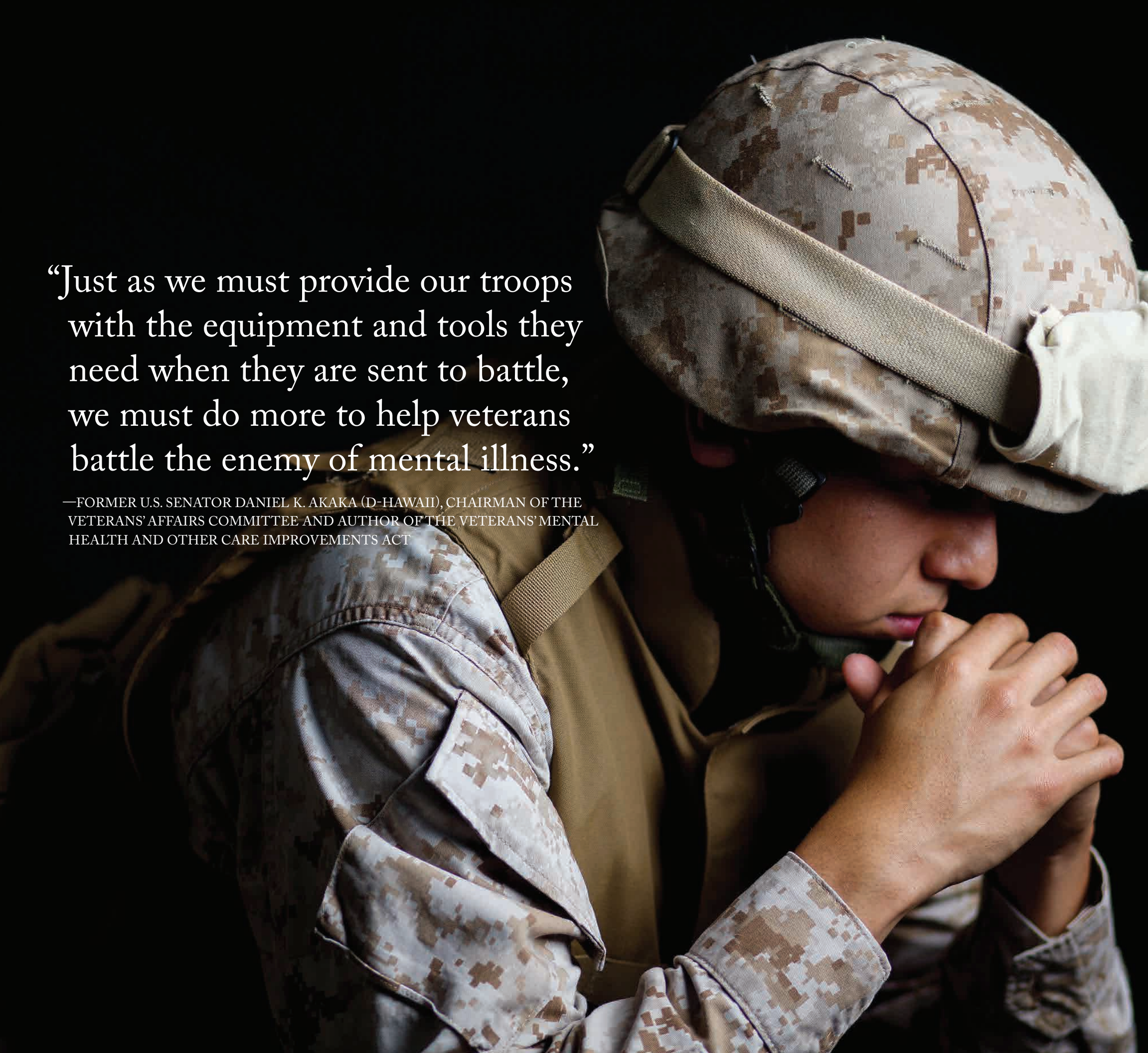


Invisible Wounds of War

The trauma of war is hardly new. But the harrowing after-effects are often greater than many of us can imagine. Prosthetics and scars are physical reminders of the sacrifices service members have made. But what can't be seen—the mental and emotional wounds—are as debilitating as a missing limb. Yet, they often go unrecognized and undiagnosed. While difficult to detect and negatively stigmatized, these invisible injuries—such as post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injury—have life-altering consequences not just for the veteran, but his entire family, often extending into his community and workplace. Left untreated, they can lead to substance use and suicide, as well as increased marital problems, unemployment and homelessness.

FACING THE FACTS

- **Veterans kill themselves** at a rate of one every 80 minutes.
VETERANS ADMINISTRATION
- **One in three veterans** of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars is diagnosed with post-traumatic stress symptoms. Only half will seek help.
RAND CORPORATION
- **About 31 percent** of men and 27 percent of women had suffered from PTSD at some point after their return from Vietnam. In 2004, 161,000 veterans were still receiving disability compensation for PTSD.
VETERANS ADMINISTRATION
- **Drug or alcohol use** was involved in 30 percent of the Army's suicide deaths from 2003 to 2009 and in more than 45 percent of non-fatal suicide attempts from 2005 to 2009.
NATIONAL INSTITUTE ON DRUG ABUSE
- **One in every 27** married troops got a divorce in 2011, reaching a new high.
DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE
- **More than 15 percent** of returning veterans are unemployed, far higher than the national jobless rate and the highest since the government began collecting data on veterans in 2005. Among these veterans, males ages 18-24 had a 29 percent jobless rate.
BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS
- **On any given night**, 200,000 veterans are homeless, and 400,000 veterans will experience homelessness during the course of a year.
NATIONAL COALITION FOR HOMELESS VETERANS



“Just as we must provide our troops with the equipment and tools they need when they are sent to battle, we must do more to help veterans battle the enemy of mental illness.”

—FORMER U.S. SENATOR DANIEL K. AKAKA (D-HAWAII), CHAIRMAN OF THE VETERANS' AFFAIRS COMMITTEE AND AUTHOR OF THE VETERANS' MENTAL HEALTH AND OTHER CARE IMPROVEMENTS ACT

“The demand for psychological help is so great and the system so overburdened that soldiers often wait months to be seen. When they are finally seen, the clinical social workers who treat them are often overwhelmed and lack specialized training to be effective.”

— VETERANS FOR AMERICA



MILITARY SOCIAL WORK

A Deficit of Care

The nation faces a critical shortage of social workers, especially those qualified to care for our armed forces members, veterans and military families. Increasingly, social workers are the ones who diagnose and treat combat stress disorders or other life challenges that come with transitioning from military to civilian life, yet many are inadequately trained and prepared to understand the nuances of military life. When veterans seek treatment, they want a professional who can relate to soldiers, and that usually means someone who has military experience or advanced training in military social work. Without such empathy, therapy often is doomed.

Post-traumatic stress has become a very significant public health problem – for veterans of both current and past conflicts. Even after wars end, the problems do not disappear. PTSD can develop at any time after exposure to trauma. It also can manifest as a relapsing condition or flare up after being suppressed and undiagnosed. Combat exposure is not the only potential trigger for PTSD among service members. Aging, loss of mental acuity, the death of friends or spouses, and even sexual assault can trigger or exacerbate symptoms as well.

The need for more and specialized behavioral health support is clear and compelling. Changes in the conditions of warfare, multiple and longer-term deployments and the sheer numbers of veterans have combined to create an unprecedented need for highly trained clinical social workers and behavioral health professionals.

MILITARY SOCIAL WORK

A Call to Action

Recognizing the unique role social work could play in helping service members, veterans and military families receive the psychological and social support they deserve, the University of Southern California School of Social Work established the first of its kind military social work program in 2009. What started out as a graduate-level curriculum focused on evidence-based clinical practices and military culture has quickly expanded to innovative online education and training using advanced virtual reality technology, along with promising research-based mental health interventions.

Graduates with this specialized training go on to fulfill a variety of responsibilities including counseling deploying or returning soldiers; helping individuals cope with post-traumatic stress and disabilities; enhancing life skills related to parenting, stress management, conflict resolution and suicide prevention; connecting military families with vital community resources such as childcare, transportation and finances; and advocating for and developing programs that influence military policy. In the field, social workers can help soldiers maintain the morale of combat units and more effectively cope with traumatic battlefield experiences.

To marshal its considerable education and research talents, the school launched the Center for Innovation and Research on Veterans and Military Families led by Anthony Hassan, a licensed clinical social worker and retired Air Force officer, to help veterans and their families successfully transition back into civilian life. Its primary purpose is to enhance the visibility and impact of the school's strengths in research, education and outreach to inform decision-makers on policy issues affecting veterans and their families. Among those issues is a focus on rapidly increasing the number of clinical social workers and behavioral health providers trained to treat the challenges troops, veterans and their families face, as well as mental health research that can be directly and quickly translated into clinical practice.



The Motivational Interviewing Learning Environment and Simulation (MILES) is a virtual reality project developed by the USC Center for Innovation and Research on Veterans and Military Families (CIR), in partnership with the USC Institute for Creative Technologies (ICT).



“Working alongside knowledgeable professionals has given me the confidence to move forward in my professional journey well prepared.”

—MAX MOLINA, MSW '13, HOUSING NAVIGATOR, PEOPLE ASSISTING THE HOMELESS (PATH)

Called to Serve: Educating a New Generation of Social Workers

The current social work workforce, in almost all areas of practice, including work with veterans, cannot keep pace with demand. Our engagement in wars – past, present and future – will continue to create a need for a more robust workforce that is ready and able to tackle new challenges. Social workers offer a particular skill set and knowledge base that is beneficial, if not indispensable, to service members, veterans and their loved ones. The USC School of Social Work is committed to expanding the pipeline of educated and trained social workers utilizing a variety of learning opportunities and instructional methods.

MILITARY SOCIAL WORK SPECIALIZATION

All USC Master of Social Work students, including those enrolled in the school's web-based Virtual Academic Center, may choose the Military Social Work and Veteran Services emphasis. The specialized curriculum helps students understand military culture; facilitate service members dealing with a range of physical, mental and psychosocial issues; and explore the impact of military service on families.



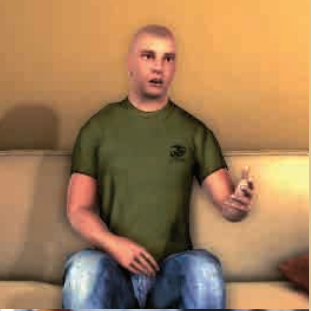
LEARNING ABROAD

A military-focused global immersion program helps students gain a deeper understanding of the critical need for culturally competent behavioral health care providers who work with military veterans, increase military fluency and learn about the systems of care in place for military personnel before and during deployments and the transition back home.



VIRTUAL REALITY TRAINING

The Virtual Patient–Staff Sergeant Alamar Castilla—is an avatar-based simulation trainer designed to replicate the behavior of veterans exposed to combat stress and to help prepare students to interact with real clients. Castilla emulates the symptoms of clinical conditions, including post-traumatic stress, and responds to a student's open-ended questions that might be used in therapy.



MILITARY CLINICAL SKILLS ASSESSMENT TOOL

Students participate in a computer-administered evaluation that asks them to respond to video clips of interactions between veterans and therapists to assess and ultimately enhance their military-relevant clinical practice skills. Responses are scored in the areas of rapport building, appropriate communication and cultural awareness, and issues relevant to military populations.



Operation Research: Generating New Knowledge to Serve Our Veterans and Families

The school conducts and disseminates academic research relevant to the long-term health and well-being of service members, veterans and their families. Our approach includes identifying critical and emerging issues, and fostering collaboration among our faculty and other experts who share a commitment to improving programs and policies that serve those who have served us.



BUILDING CAPACITY IN MILITARY-CONNECTED SCHOOLS

The school has partnered with eight San Diego-area school districts on an initiative funded by the Department of Defense Education Activity to create a more welcoming and supportive school environment for children from military families by helping public school educators recognize and respond to the military child's unique challenges compared to his civilian classmates.



REINTEGRATION PARTNERSHIP PROJECT

This initiative offers reintegration skills training for National Guard members and their families, helping them receive the mental health services that research suggests they need upon returning to civilian life. Participants are surveyed five times throughout the year to identify their challenges and whether the training is effective, with the results used to develop more advanced support programs.



TELEHEALTH FOR CLINICAL SERVICES

The school is testing the effectiveness of "telehealth," a completely virtual counseling and therapy clinic that uses online and video technologies. Clients can consult with a mental health professional via the web for one-on-one counseling from the privacy of their own home, which for military clients provides greater privacy and removes the stigma of seeking help.



MILITARY BEHAVIORAL HEALTH ACADEMIC JOURNAL

The first peer-reviewed journal on the biopsychosocial health and well-being of service members, veterans and families enables international civilian and multidisciplinary professional communities to share their scholarly contributions to advance education and treatment.

The "Pride Board" at Wolf Canyon Elementary School in Chula Vista, Calif., showcases family photos and handmade flags enabling military students to express pride in their parents' service to the country.





Admiral Michael Mullen, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, addresses a crowd of more than 450 students, faculty and community members.

Course of Action: Advancing Policy Through Research, Partnership and Education

The school leverages the experience, expertise and networks of scholars, government, industry, and community partners to produce actionable research that informs the social, economic, education and policy issues impacting veterans and their families. Its goal is to accelerate systems of change and reform, and improve the quality and reach of information that can help policymakers achieve deeper and more far-reaching outcomes.

ISSUE BRIEFS

The Center for Innovation and Research on Veterans and Military Families promotes informed policies, programs and practices that support service members and their families by publishing policy briefs for more than 1,500 service providers and community partners, including key congressional staff of the U.S. House and Senate and the Department of Defense.



CONFERENCES, COLLOQUIA AND CONVERSATIONS

The center convenes events in which experts discuss current policy issues facing our veterans, including the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” community reintegration, mental health care access and homelessness. Additionally, representatives from the school are regularly asked to visit Capitol Hill to discuss how best to serve the needs of a growing veteran population.



LOS ANGELES VETERANS COLLABORATIVE

The center administers the Los Angeles Veterans Collaborative, which comprises more than 200 organizations serving veterans and military families in greater Los Angeles that seek to identify where resources are needed most for veterans and their families and how best to serve them.





MILITARY SOCIAL WORK

Marching Forward

As we have learned, no one comes home from war unchanged. For some, leaving the combat zone marks the beginning of a new battle – to reconcile the emotional changes that have resulted from their experiences, to smoothly reunite with their families, to put the stresses of combat behind them, and to find employment that fulfills them and utilizes the skills they have gained. Many veterans and their family members need military social workers to assist them in rebuilding their lives, and it is our responsibility to support them. In order to adequately respond to the needs of veterans and their families and strengthen their reintegration into the community, we must all join together and operate as a single unit—a collection of capable organizations and individuals, each with specific focus areas and tasks. Only together, and with each other’s help, will we accomplish this important mission.

www.usc.edu/socialwork

