

Advocating for affordable and accessible mental health services for members of the active military, veterans, and their families.

Background and Concerns

One in five Canadians suffer from a mental illness and/or an addiction. Veterans and active duty members of the military and their family members experience exposures that make them highly vulnerable to post-traumatic stress injuries and other mental illnesses and addictions. It is estimated that over 8,000 soldiers returning from Afghanistan will require ongoing mental healthcare. Recently, a number of highly publicized suicides among active duty members of the military and veterans have led to extensive media coverage in the past few months focusing on military mental health, suicide prevention, and access to treatment services for PTSD and other mental illnesses and addictions. As the Honourable Michael Kirby noted, “Public attitudes are not determined by the media, but the media has a very big impact on public attitudes and on the ability to change public attitudes for the better or worse.” It is obvious that the media has alerted the public to the need to provide high quality mental health care to veterans, military personnel and their family members. Given such heightened awareness and abject need, now is the time to take action.

Psychology and the Military

Psychologists*, with the highest education and training of all mental health providers, play an integral role in the assessment, diagnosis and treatment of the psychological impact of serving in the armed forces and in the reintegration of soldiers into society and family life after their tours of duty. In collaboration with the government, Psychologists can do so much more to address the burden of PTSD and other mental illnesses and addictions amongst the military, past and present.

The OPA’s Recommendations to Ontario’s Government

While Operational Stress Injury (OSI) Clinics provide mental health services, there are access issues with respect to wait times, geographical location, and stigma. In addition to expanding the number of Psychologists working in OSI Clinics, provision of funding for active military and veterans to access community-based psychological supports would ensure timely intervention, reduce stigma and are particularly needed in areas without an OSI Clinic. It is essential for Psychologists to be both clinically and “culturally” competent (i.e., to have expert knowledge of best practices in PTSD and other mental illnesses and addictions, and to understand the military chain of command, demands, and exposures). The OPA is, therefore, engaged in the development of an educational program to train Psychologists to further develop their skills and cultural competencies to provide for a cadre of Psychologists uniquely trained to address the needs of the military. With government support, this program could be spread across the country.

The impact of deployment on spouses and children can result in anxiety, depression and PTSD. While federal funding for psychological treatment is available to the families of veterans, inexplicably the families of active Canadian Forces members are not directly eligible. Military life is a family affair. What impacts on the individual member of the armed forces impacts on their family members and vice versa. This omission needs to be addressed.

When individuals cannot afford to pay out-of-pocket for psychological services, a greater burden is placed on family physicians or other providers that may not have any specialized training in mental health, psychotherapy, or pharmacotherapy to manage care. Ineffective care only compounds already difficult situations. The public is not only demanding access to care for those who serve so well but also access to high quality care anchored in best practices with known positive outcomes. It is time for the government to address these needs. And Psychologists are the answer.

Summary

The OPA is recommending the following be considered as a positive response that will increase access to evidence-based psychotherapeutic services for veterans, active military personnel and their family members to address identified needs and public concerns:

1. Ensure that all active military, veterans, and family members with PTSD have access to a minimum of six sessions of psychological intervention to ensure timely intervention and maximize treatment outcomes;
2. Fund investments in a demonstration of the effectiveness of a tool and training for the early identification of PTSD, and a tool to assist in the monitoring of the effectiveness of the therapeutic interventions and to strengthen the effectiveness of assessments for readiness to return to active duty;
3. Fund an educational program to provide Psychologists with enhanced clinical skills in the treatment of PTSD and in cultural competency to meet the unique needs of the armed forces; and,
4. Support increased levels of funding for Psychologists to practice in OSI Clinics and in the community.

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*The term “Psychologist” in this document refers both to doctoral-level Psychologists and masters-level “Psychological Associates”. For information on the extensive training required to become a registered Psychologist or Psychological Associate, please see: www.cpo.on.ca