VFW Announces New Mental Wellness Campaign

Largest war veterans' organization builds coalition with Give An Hour, One Mind, PatientsLikeMe

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WASHINGTON – The Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S. is launching a new nationwide campaign to focus on mental wellness within the military and veterans' communities. Joined by three high-profile national partners, Give an Hour, One Mind, and PatientsLikeMe, the campaign kicks off during a joint press event inside the National Press Club's Lisagor Room at 2 p.m., Tuesday.

The VFW Mental Wellness Campaign, commissioned by VFW National Commander Brian Duffy and VFW Auxiliary National President Colette Bishop, leverages the power, influence and reach of nearly 1.7 million members in more than 6,600 VFW Posts around the world with the nation's leaders in mental health care, research, and peer-to-peer support. The campaign's goal is to raise awareness, foster community engagement, improve research, and provide intervention for veterans, service members, and their loved ones who may be suffering from invisible injuries or emotional stress.

"We are proud to be joined by the nation's leading mental health organizations to help change the veteran's narrative — the veteran's brand — which right now has America regarding us more as individual heroes instead of strategic assets in every community," said Duffy, who is the first Operation Desert Storm veteran to lead the 117-year-old VFW.

Bishop, who leads the 102-year-old VFW Auxiliary, echoed the VFW national commander's sentiment, and said "the community is where our troops come from and where our veterans return, so it benefits everyone to know what resources are available and where to turn to for help."

The VFW is already working closely with Give an Hour to train VFW-accredited service officers and state leadership to "Know the Five Signs" of emotional suffering as a way to better serve clients coping with invisible injuries, and to help change the narrative on

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mental health in America through its Change Direction campaign.

Give an Hour Founder and President Dr. Barbara Van Dahlen said, “We are honored to join the VFW in this historic effort. VFW Posts can serve as important anchors in communities across the country – and around the world – to engage, educate and inspire veterans from all eras to learn the Five Signs and to reach out to those who are suffering." Dr. Van Dahlen added, "Our veterans are assets in our communities and they can help lead the way as we change the culture so that those in need receive the care and support they deserve.”

In addition to the upcoming press event, the VFW and Give an Hour are hosting a “Day to Change Direction” on Saturday, Oct. 8. Individual VFW Posts and state departments will work hand-in-hand with Give an Hour’s nationwide network of mental health providers and volunteers, as well as the Department of Veterans Affairs, to help facilitate peer-to-peer discussions on mental wellness, as well as participate in a community action or event designed to empower Americans to “Change Direction” on mental health and well-being.

Over the coming months, the VFW will also work closely with Seattle-based One Mind to encourage VFW members to participate in online communities to better understand and improve their own brain health. They can also volunteer patient and caregiver input to research aimed at developing new evidence-based diagnostic and treatment options.

According to One Mind’s CEO, retired Army Gen. Peter Chiarelli, “It is imperative for us to find better and lasting treatments for our veterans, their families, and caregivers who are affected and suffering from brain injuries and illness. We have an amazing ability to save soldiers on the battlefield, but we must extend that support beyond active duty and aggressively address their invisible wounds. We are honored to be part of this new and sustainable VFW Mental Wellness Campaign.”

The inclusion of the peer-to-peer perspective via PatientsLikeMe is equally important to the VFW’s campaign. The online network helps people living with any one of 2,500 conditions, including post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injury, to compare treatments, symptoms, and experiences; connect with others like them for support; track and learn what impacts their health; and give data for research. The tools and support provided by PatientsLikeMe are invaluable to patients, potential patients, and their families.

Though this is a joint campaign commissioned during the one-year leadership terms of Duffy and Bishop, the VFW’s goal is to build a sustainable program through which all levels of the organization can remain proactive advocates for those coping with emotional stress, which will build upon the VFW’s century-plus legacy of veterans’ advocacy, service and assistance to others.

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About Give an Hour: Give an Hour, a nonprofit 501(c)(3) providing free mental health services to military members, veterans, and their families, was founded in September 2005 by Dr. Barbara Van Dahlen, a psychologist in the Washington, D.C., area. Give an Hour has been instrumental in the development of the community-based approach to addressing the challenges that face our nation's military community, having created a successful model for harnessing skill-based volunteers eager to offer their services. Thus far, the network of nearly 7,000 licensed mental health professionals has provided more than 200,000 hours of care and support to those in need. To learn more, visit www.giveanhour.org.

About Change Direction: The Campaign to Change Direction, a national initiative to change the culture of mental health in America, encourages Americans to care for their mental well-being just as they do their physical well-being. The Campaign is led by Give an Hour, a national nonprofit organization providing free mental health services to the military and veteran community. Change Direction addresses common barriers to understanding mental health and raises awareness about Five Signs that may indicate someone is suffering emotionally and needs help: change in personality, agitation, withdrawal, decline in personal care, and hopelessness. Over 240 partner organizations are using their unique skills and opportunities to spread awareness. Organizations and individuals who are interested in learning more or making a pledge can visit www.changedirection.org.

About One Mind: One Mind is an independent 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to benefiting all affected by brain illness and injury through fostering fundamental changes that will radically accelerate the development and implementation of improved diagnostics, treatments, and cures; while eliminating the stigma. One Mind believes in open science principles and creates global public-private partnerships between governmental, corporate, scientific, and philanthropic communities. Visit us at www.onemind.org or follow us via Twitter or Facebook.

About PatientsLikeMe: PatientsLikeMe is a patient network that improves lives and a real-time research platform that advances medicine. Through the network, patients connect with others who have the same disease or condition and track and share their own experiences. In the process, they generate data about the real-world nature of disease that help researchers, pharmaceutical companies, regulators, providers, and nonprofits develop more effective products, services, and care. With more than 400,000 members, PatientsLikeMe is a trusted source for real-world disease information and a clinically robust resource that has published more than 80 research studies. Visit us at www.patientslikeme.com or follow us via our blog, Twitter or Facebook.