

Give an Hour

Contributed by Mila Ruiz Tecala

"The wounds of war are not always easy to see." That statement is on Give an Hour's brochures and Web site. Dr. Barbara Romberg, a clinical psychologist in Washington, D.C., is the founder of Give an Hour. She founded this organization in 2005, and I joined as Director of Recruitment in 2006. Our volunteer therapists started seeing veterans and their families officially in June 2007. {mosgoogle right}

Give an Hour is a national nonprofit organization whose mission is to develop a national network of volunteer therapists capable of responding to both acute and chronic conditions that arise within our society. Our first target population is the U.S. troops and their families who are being affected by the current military conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. We are now creating a national network of mental health professionals who are literally giving an hour of their time each week to provide pro bono mental health services to military personnel and their families. By providing critical psychological help, we are supporting the sacrifices they are making and ameliorate the difficulties they face.

Currently, we have 2,243 volunteer therapists from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. About 27% are clinical social workers. Other professions represented are psychologists, LPCs, LMFTs, and pastoral counselors. We have numerous contacts with state and mental health organizations, many of whom are endorsing GAH and encouraging their members to join us. NASW and the American Psychiatric Association have endorsed Give an Hour. Our volunteers have begun to deliver services through face-to-face counseling, phone support, and facilitation of support groups. As of a month ago, we have served about 1,415 hours of face-to-face counseling, phone support, outreach to military communities to mental health communities, support to Veterans' organizations, and educational outreach. The Eli Lilly Foundation, in partnership with the American Psychiatric Foundation, awarded a \$1 million grant to Give an Hour to assist us in our public education efforts. In June 2008, we co-sponsored a 3-day seminar on combat stress with Smith College School of Social Work. It was a sold-out event.

According to the RAND report in April 2008, more than 18 percent of troops who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan—that's almost 300,000 people—have symptoms of PTSD and depression and/or major depression. Additionally, RAND reports that only 53% of service members with PTSD or depression sought help over the past year. A major barrier preventing military personnel from seeking appropriate treatment is the perception of stigma associated with mental health care. Many fear that seeking mental health services will jeopardize their careers or standing in the community. Others are reluctant to expose their vulnerabilities to counselors, given the military culture's emphasis on strength, confidence, and bravery.

In spite of the fact that we have almost 2,300 volunteer therapists all over the country, we are still in need of more, especially in West Virginia, Alaska, Hawaii, and the Western States. To volunteer, go to <http://www.giveanhour.org> and register.