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## Support homecoming soldiers

By Vic DiGravio and Kristen Lawlor

Deployments are a challenging time for service members and their families.

The American public recently observed the 10th anniversary of the attacks on New York City and the Pentagon — events that changed our nation in profound ways.

But it is also the 10th anniversary of the Middle East conflicts that have brought hundreds of thousands of young men and women in the armed forces into war zones. Together, Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom represent the longest running active military effort conducted by U.S. armed forces. Ten years of warfare have taken a tremendous toll on soldiers and their families, physically, psychologically and emotionally.

Deployments are a challenging time for service members and their families. Many soldiers have seen multiple deployments in recent years to meet the nation's commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan. Upon return, navigating the changed dynamics of family life and employment prospects during difficult economic times can upset the well-being of individuals and families.

In response, the Army launched Army OneSource (AOS), a Secretary of the Army initiative to provide comprehensive community support and service delivery for soldiers and their families regardless of component or geographic location.

AOS is raising awareness and generating support among the private sector to effectively serve the unique challenges of military life, including the growing demand for behavioral health.

Recently, AOS launched the Army OneSource Building Awareness Campaign; Behavioral Health Focus Area (BH) to help service members and their families receive behavioral health care regardless of their geographic location. This assistance includes outreach to behavioral health professionals who can provide these important services.

AOS is enlisting the support of partners in Massachusetts and other states to broaden access to vital behavioral health services. In Massachusetts, the Association for Behavioral Healthcare (ABH) is working with AOS to identify programs, services and supports that can help soldiers and their families. ABH, a statewide organization, has more than 80 members who provide community-based behavioral health services.

The BH Focus Area also involves training for behavioral health professionals in the United States. A 2007 report issued by a presidential task force on military deployment found a shortage of social workers and health professionals trained in the nuances of military life.

In Massachusetts alone, more than 47,000 military and family members are qualified for behavioral health services.

Members of the military face unique challenges in seeking behavioral health care. In some cases, there is a lack of collaboration between service providers in assisting service members and their families to successfully seek help. There is also a need to combat the existing stigma

on behalf of soldiers and their families in asking for help for behavioral health issues.

As a member of the behavioral health task force, ABH is working with AOS to link veterans and their families to quality behavioral health services.

Specifically, the partnership between AOS and ABH will help implement several important programs:

- Create a statewide information portal for service providers and veterans and their families to help mobilize resources;
- Create an annual training program for service providers through the military's Tri-Care insurance provider;
- Create and administer a survey to recruit providers; determine insurance that providers accept, assess current providers working with the military and prospective providers that have a desire to work with the military.

Massachusetts has historically been a national leader in providing high quality, community-based behavioral health service, many of whom are ABH members. AOS and ABH are working together to make our state a leader in providing support services, resources and providers knowledgeable about military culture, to assist past or present service members, their families and caregivers, without fear of stigmatization for those accessing assistance.

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