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Navy Program Cuts Stress for Military Families

Judith Snyderman | Emerging Media, Defense Media Activity

April 29, 2010

A program that started three years ago to help Navy and Marine Corps families cope with stress from multiple deployments and other types of pressure has proven so successful it has become a model for the Defense Department.

Kirsten Woodward directs family programs at the Bureau of Navy Medicine and Surgery. She developed the multifaceted approach in partnership with the UCLA Health Services Research Center in 2007.

During a recent "DoD Live" bloggers roundtable, Woodward said a gap existed in the past between family social service programs and medical mental health care services.

"There really wasn't anything in the middle, addressing both prevention and intervention," she said.

The program Woodward created -- called FOCUS, short for Families Overcoming Under Stress -- aims to fill that gap. The licensed clinical social worker said the goal is to offer practical help in situations where symptoms may be mild, acute or anywhere in between, and it aims to remove the stigma from seeking assistance.

FOCUS uses a color code to help families pinpoint current stress levels. Woodward explained the colors range from "green being 'good to go' and through the continuum to red being 'hot' or 'not good to go.'"

That baseline, she said, guides the entry tier of service best suited for clients. Woodward said the tiers range from education and guidance on stress prevention to skills-based peer learning groups geared to children, adolescents and adults.

The "bull's eye," or most intense treatment, she said, is multi-session resilience training. That course runs from eight to 10 weeks.

So far, about 97,000 people have tried it out at 10 Marine Corps and eight Navy locations. The staff at each site includes psychologists, social workers, licensed marriage family therapists and resilience trainers.

A year ago, Woodward said, the officials at the Pentagon's military community and family policy office independently reviewed the program and cited it as a best-practice program. As a result, plans are under way to expand FOCUS to other branches of the military. So far, four Air Force and four Army locations are running pilot programs.

All members of the military community are eligible to tap into FOCUS services at any location where it's offered, Woodward said, noting there's no need to wait for stress to build to high levels before seeking help.

While she is pleased by studies that have proven the effectiveness of the program, Woodward said, she is most gratified by the good word-of-mouth referrals the program has garnered.

"It's the actual families who've worked through the program who found it beneficial [who] were able to then share that information with their friends and colleagues and suggest that they may benefit from the program," she said.