

Guest Column: Supporting our Veterans at home this Memorial Day

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Memorial Day is much more than a chance to kick off the summer months. At its heart is a day to honor the men and women who have died in U.S. military service.

Unfortunately, millions of service members who made it home to their families struggle with substance or mental health disorders or suicidal ideation. California is home to over 1.8 million veterans. The state also has the largest number of homeless veterans in the country.

According to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 3.8 million veterans have a substance use disorder or mental illness. Roughly 12% of these veterans had serious thoughts of suicide.

It is a harsh reality for many veterans. Substance use disorders in veteran populations are linked to homelessness and suicide.

“It’s vital to recognize this problem and not overlook the countless veterans struggling in silence. There are supports available, but it often goes overlooked,” said Michael Leach of Addicted.org.

Generally, there are many related factors and causes, such as trauma or stress due to service. Many veterans struggle with re-integrating into civilian life. Mental health disorders and injury or chronic pain can lead to addiction.

It’s also common for veterans to experience financial hardship, struggle to find employment or have difficulty accessing benefits. Physical, emotional, and mental health concerns are significant. Untreated trauma, for example, directly impacts all areas of life. This can also lead to using drugs or alcohol.

Additionally, many veterans face barriers when accessing treatment. This can include cost and insurance gaps. Communities may face inadequate funding, while veterans have limited access to treatment in rural areas. The stigma surrounding addiction and mental health is also significant and has not necessarily gone away.

Fortunately, there are resources and ways that families and communities can help; consider the following options:

- CalVet Veteran Services provides extensive resources for veterans.
- Helpful hotlines include the Veterans Crisis Line, 1-800-273-8255, and the Lifeline for Vets, 1-888-777-4443.
- SAMHSA has a facility treatment locator for substance use and mental health treatment resources with specific options for veterans.
- The Department of Veterans Affairs has a VA-Facility locator and services for homeless veterans.
- Telehealth has become common practice, involving attending treatment through web-based video calls.

Families can explore different financial options, such as combining VA benefits with other health insurance, such as Medicare, Medicaid, or private health insurance, to reduce costs.

Families and communities also play a significant role in supporting veterans. Families should speak openly and honestly with their loved ones about their addiction and express concern. Help them find treatment. Be patient and show compassion for what they are going through.

Memorial Day commemorates all men and women who have died in U.S. military service. We must not also forget those who have died because of substance use or suicide after returning home and the millions more who struggle with substance use disorders, mental health issues, or suicide ideation.

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