

# AHECs Impacting the Wellness of Military Families

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Date: January 24, 2012

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The nation's AHECs (Area Health Education Centers) are mobilizing their network to educate civilian health professionals about deployment-related mental and behavioral health issues of service members, veterans, and their families.

More than two million U.S. service men and women have been deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan since September 11, 2001, according to the "Strengthening Our Military Families" report issued by the White House last year. Of those, 55% are married, 40% have two children, and 63% live in over 4,000 communities nationwide.

Several studies have found that the impact on the psychological health of soldiers, veterans, and their families is one of the most pervasive and potentially disabling consequences of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Data reported in 2007 by a Department of Defense Task Force on Mental Health indicate that 38% of Soldiers and 31% of Marines report psychological symptoms after returning from deployment. Among members of the National Guard, the figure rises to 49%.

Further, psychological concerns are significantly higher among those with repeated deployments, a rapidly growing cohort.

As stated in the White House report, "multiple deployments, combat injuries, and the challenges of reintegration can have far-reaching effects on not only the troops and their families, but also upon America's communities as well."

"This is where AHECs fit in," said National AHEC Organization (NAO) Executive Director Robert Trachtenberg. "Building healthcare resources in America's communities is what AHECs are all about."

AHECs cover 48 states, three U.S. territories, and the District of Columbia. With 253 community-based regional centers serving rural and medically underserved communities nationwide, AHECs can rapidly train health professionals across the country.

This network of health education centers was created by Congress in 1971 to link the resources of academic medicine to local community health needs.

AHEC staff members nationwide are being trained to coordinate continuing education for health professionals in local communities that will impact the mental and behavioral health services provided to veterans and increase their access to culturally competent care.

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## AHECs IMPACT 2

The Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) awarded NAO a \$500,000 contract to provide this training.

The goal of the AHEC Project for the Behavioral/Mental Health of Veterans/Service Members & Families is to train 200 staff who will in turn provide continuing education to 10,000 civilian health professionals by the end of September 2013.

While this project is being funded by HRSA, the NAO is also participating in the broader Joining Forces initiative chaired by First Lady Michelle Obama and Dr. Jill Biden.

Trachtenberg and Carol Giffin-Jeansonne, executive director of the Western Colorado AHEC, were invited to a meeting at the White House convened by Mrs. Obama on January 11. Leaders of national healthcare association organizations were assembled to hear from representatives of the Department of Defense, the Veterans Affairs system, the Uniformed Services University, and members of the Joint Chief of Staff on their roles in Joining Forces.

In turn, participants were asked to make organizational commitments to addressing veterans' health issues, particularly regarding traumatic brain injury, post-traumatic stress disorder, and other behavioral and mental health issues.

This meeting emphasized that these challenges should be at the forefront of the nation's discourse.

NAO was one of the few organizations at the table with a program already underway.

As NAO trains AHEC trainers in the next few months and rolls out this national effort to train civilian health professionals about deployment-related mental and behavioral health issues, NAO will continue to explore additional ways for AHECS to serve.

The Joining Forces initiative aligns perfectly with AHEC's mission: improving the health of individuals and communities by transforming health care through education. For more information about NAO, AHECS, and their program to help veterans, go to [www.nationalahec.org](http://www.nationalahec.org).

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