



The Vets Prevail Program

**Providing a safety net for our returning
Service Members**

A White Paper by: Prevail Health Solutions and Give an Hour

Spring, 2011

Commit...Connect...Prevail!

Executive Summary

This paper details a novel technology-based solution to address what a recent Pentagon study called the “daunting and growing mental health problems” among our nation’s returning Service Members.¹¹

The Vets Prevail/ Give an Hour Program will provide a full-spectrum mental health solution wholly outside of the formal VA and DoD systems, bringing an easily accessible, stigma-free option to those falling through the cracks in the current system. The Program represents a scalable, cost-effective way to prevent mental health disorders among our returning Service and ensure those with a disorder get help faster.

37% of returning service members suffer from mental health problems post-deployment²⁰



THE PROBLEM

Mental health issues among veterans and service members

Of approximately two million Service Members who have recently returned from deployment in support of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan (OEF/OIF), an estimated 600,000 will develop mental health issues, primarily posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression.¹ Of these, less than 25% will get effective support or treatment.² There is a progressive set of consequences when deployment-related mental disorders go unaddressed. PTSD and depression can lead to unemployment, substance abuse, homelessness and even suicide. In fact, of the more than 30,000 suicides in the US each year, fully 20 percent are veterans.³

The military mental health epidemic has proven extremely difficult to address. "It's frankly frustrating that with the level of effort that we've put out there, that we haven't stemmed the [suicide] tide," said General George Casey, the Army's top officer.⁴ All the key stakeholders agree that more work needs to be done and new tools applied. "It's an area that can't get enough focus right now," said Admiral Mullen, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. "When we're losing as many lives as we are, it is a crisis we have to continue to address . . . A significant amount of work needs to be done on the prevention aspect of [suicide] so we don't get to the point where men and women would consider doing this."⁵

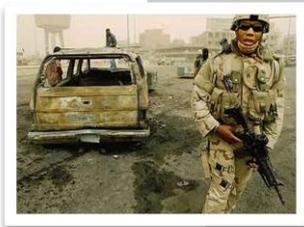
Current barriers to treatment

The low percentage of Service Members receiving mental health support does not have anything to do with the lack of effective treatment options; there are many evidence-based treatments proven to help with deployment-related disorders. The Department of Defense (DoD) Task Force on Mental Health recently reported that several major roadblocks stand in the way of providing sufficient mental health care to those military personnel returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.⁶ The most significant of these barriers is the stigma surrounding mental health care among military Service Members. Military respondents, in a study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, reported that receiving mental health services would be embarrassing, could harm their career, might make members of their unit have less confidence in them, cause leadership

to treat them differently and cause them to be seen as weak (See Table 1 below).⁷

Table 1: Barriers to Seeking Mental Health Care

Perceived Barrier (Professional)	Ranking of Perceived Barrier	% of Respondents who Answered Agreed or Strongly Agreed to this Item
I would be seen as weak	1	65%
My unit leadership might treat me differently	2	63%
Members of my unit might have less confidence in me	3	59%
There would be difficulty getting time off work for treatment	4	55%



Another major barrier to returning Service Members receiving effective mental health care within the military and Veterans Administration (VA) health systems is the lack of accessibility driven by budget and staff constraints. Data from the academic community suggests that to have adequately provided a single year of care to the Veterans that returned from OEF/OIF in 2009 would have required about \$4 billion. This number does not include any of the Veterans who returned in the previous seven years and still required care.^{8,9} The budget shortfall becomes obvious when considering that the *entire* VA mental health care budget in 2009 was about \$4 Billion. Related to the shortfall in funding is the shortage of qualified mental health professionals within the VA, creating wait times of 4-6 weeks or more.¹⁰

The final major barrier to care is the general distrust that many Service Members and Veterans have of DoD and VA programs. Therefore, even if the DoD or VA were able to establish a program that solved the stigma and accessibility issues, a large portion of current and former Service Members would still not use that program because of the simple fact that it was run by the DoD or VA. This suggests that only a solution coming from the private sector stands a chance of fully engaging this group of reluctant care seekers.

“In everything we do, we must remember that every Soldier, Sailor, Airman or Marine is part not just of the military, but also of a larger community...their families, their hometowns, their civilian employers...all must be involved in the solution”.

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THE SOLUTION

A partnership for full-spectrum care

Give an Hour™ (GAH) and Prevail Health Solutions (Prevail or PHS) are teaming up for a national launch of a program that overcomes the barriers mentioned above and that will make a significant impact on the epidemic of military mental health issues. This launch will combine Vets PrevailSM, a free online program featuring dynamic, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)-based e-Learning lessons and peer-to-peer support, with free face-to-face counseling provided by GAH’s network of over 5,000 mental health professionals. The purpose of this program will be to provide a full-spectrum mental health solution wholly outside of the formal VA and DoD systems, bringing an easily accessible, stigma free option to those falling through the cracks in the current system. The goal is to serve over 15,000 returning Service Members and Veterans with this program over a 12-month period.

About Give an Hour

Give an Hour is a nonprofit 501(c) (3), founded in September 2005 by Dr. Barbara Van Dahlen, a psychologist in the Washington, D.C. area. The organization’s mission is to develop national networks of volunteers capable of responding to both acute and chronic mental health conditions that arise within our society. To date, GAH has developed a network of over 5,000 mental health professionals willing to donate at least an hour of their time each week to provide free mental health services to military Service Members and Veterans. This represents the world’s premier network of volunteer mental health providers. GAH’s professionals provide counseling to individuals, couples and families, and children and adolescents, offering treatment for anxiety, depression, substance abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injuries, sexual health and intimacy concerns, and loss and grieving.



Figure 1: Go to www.giveanhour.org to learn more



Figure 2: Go to www.vetsprevail.org to learn more

About Vets Prevail

Vets Prevail is an innovative new online mental health tool that was developed and tested with the backing of the National Science Foundation and The McCormick Foundation and the collaboration of mental health researchers and clinicians at top universities and hospitals. It incorporates dynamic multimedia content, a personalized but scalable peer support model, diagnostic self-assessments, and proprietary software for scheduling and tracking user activities, thoughts, and feelings. The content is rooted in CBT

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Less than 25% of the estimated 600,000 service members who will develop mental health issues will get effective support or treatment^{1,2}



Figure 3: **“It’s beyond medication and therapy,”** said Cpl. Danielson, now 29 and living in Arizona. **“It’s accepting what happened. If it wasn’t for Vets Prevail, I’d have ended up in prison.”²²**

(see Appendix C for details), the standard of care for treatment of symptoms related to PTSD and depression.

The most difficult and critical component of providing mental health services, in both the military and civilian spaces, is getting people who would benefit from care to engage with and adhere to that care. At the most basic level, this has always been the driving principle behind Vets Prevail. With an aggressive outreach campaign centered on social media, Vets Prevail reaches those reluctant care seekers and provides them an anonymous first step they can take in their homes, 24/7. The program helps prevent those who are experiencing the normal reactions to the stresses of deployment and combat from developing a disorder. For those with a more advanced condition, it can help reduce the severity of symptoms and serve as a conduit to formal treatment.

Since Veterans Day, November 2009, Prevail has enrolled over 1,500 Veterans and Service Members into Vets Prevail and conducted numerous studies, culminating in an Institutional Review Board-approved clinical trial indicating the program mitigates symptoms of PTSD and depression, improves functional status, and improves attitudes toward seeking mental health care (see appendix B for an abstract).

Details of the combined Vets Prevail and GAH program

GAH and Prevail intend to launch a program integrating the online Vets Prevail application with the GAH provider network (“the Vets Prevail Program” or “the Program”) in 2012. Following a three-month preparation and planning phase, The Vets Prevail Program will be made available nationwide for a period of 12 months. Any US Veteran or Service Member will be able to navigate to www.vetsprevail.org, and in less than five minutes, enroll in the Program anonymously and free of charge.

Once enrolled, participants will have 24/7 access to the Vets Prevail community and resources, peer support network, and interactive mental resilience training. Equally important, all site visitors (both enrolled in the Program as well as those just exploring the website) will have easy access to the GAH network of licensed mental health professionals. Program participants identified as being at high risk of clinical disorder (as evidenced via self-assessments or comments during peer support chats) will be actively encouraged to connect with a GAH provider in their area.

This Program will allow reluctant care seekers to take an anonymous first step, receive online peer support and preventative care, and flow

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directly through to formal treatment as necessary. It represents a scalable, cost-effective way for our nation deal with what a recent Pentagon study called the “daunting and growing mental health problems” among our nation’s returning Service Members and Veterans.¹¹

Financial Goals

Funding target

Our target is to raise \$3 Million to provide the Vets Prevail Program to 15,000 Veterans and Service Members over the 12-month Program period. As part of a Phase II Small Business Innovation Grant Program, the National Science Foundation has pledged to grant \$500,000 to Prevail in the form of a match on the first \$1 million raised to this effort. This \$1.5 million represents the minimum funding needed to start and sustain the Vets Prevail Program at a minimal level for one year. Therefore, the Program will launch (following the 3-month planning phase) once the \$1 million fundraising milestone is reached. After program launch, we will continue to fundraise and increase capacity until we reach our goal of \$3 Million and 15,000 users.

*According to Rand Corporation, each **untreated** individual averages **\$16,000 in short-term costs**, not including the costs of domestic violence, homelessness and substance abuse²³*

Financial Impact

By preventing mental health disorders and getting those with a disorder into treatment sooner, the Program will reduce substance abuse, domestic violence, unemployment, homelessness and suicide, among other bad outcomes. The impact on the quality of life of our Nation’s current and former Service Members and their families will be staggering. Holding these difficult to quantify benefits aside, this effort is easily justified in terms of its financial impact on productivity and medical spend. A study by the RAND Corporation concludes that each case of untreated deployment-related mental health disorder results in short-term direct costs of \$16,000.

Sustainability

It is the hope and contention of GAH and Prevail that yearly philanthropic support for the Vets Prevail Program will not be necessary. We are confident that the positive results from a project of this scale will convince the DoD and/or VA to financially support The Program moving forward. Therefore, there is a strong possibility that the social and economic impact on our country of a small contribution now to launch this Program, which is more than

justified in short-term benefit, could be multiplied many times over into the future.

Conclusion

The Vets Prevail/ Give an Hour Program will provide a full-spectrum mental health solution wholly outside of the formal VA and DoD systems, bringing an easily accessible, stigma-free option to those currently falling through the cracks. By preventing mental health disorders and getting those with a disorder into treatment sooner, the Program will prevent bad outcomes while at the same time saving costs. Facing the military mental health crisis head-on with this scalable, cost-effective Program will ensure that we do not repeat the mistakes made in past conflicts.

Appendix A: Works Cited

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Appendix B: Abstract of Vets Prevail Clinical Trial

Pilot Study of an Internet-Based Early Intervention for Combat Related Mental Distress, by:

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Background: The VETS PREVAIL intervention is an Internet-based early intervention intended to promote mental health and wellbeing among post-deployment war veterans. The intervention combines online cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) based coping skills lessons with electronic peer-to-peer support via instant messaging.

Methods: We conducted a pilot study/phase 1 clinical trial of 50 OEF/OIF veterans using a pre/post single arm design. We evaluated feasibility (adherence and socio-cultural relevance/satisfaction), as well as changes in mental health symptoms (depression, posttraumatic stress disorder), functional status and attitudes toward treatment seeking at baseline and at 4, 8, and 12 weeks.

Results: A diverse group of participants (26% ethnic minority, 90% male, 66% with income < 30,000/year, 88% no prior treatment of depression) demonstrated substantial adherence to the intervention, completing a mean of 4 of 6 lessons. Socio-cultural relevance ratings were in the 'agree' to 'strongly agree' range. From baseline to 12 weeks (using intention to treat analyses), there was a significant decline in both depressive symptoms: Center for Epidemiologic Studies – Depression ("CES-D 10", M=8.9 (SD=4.0) versus M=7.1 (SD=4.8), p-value=0.04); and posttraumatic stress symptoms: Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Check List – Military (M=35.0 (SD=10.9) versus M=31.4 (SD=13), p-value=0.01). There were no significant differences in functional status as measured by the Medical Outcomes Study Short Form 12. There were significant improvements in

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attitudes toward treatment seeking in the areas of intention to seek treatment and perceived social norms/stigma.

Conclusions: An Internet-based program combining CBT-based coping skills training and peer-to-peer support and counseling demonstrated both potential feasibility and evidence for benefit in symptom remediation for symptoms of depression and posttraumatic stress disorder.



Appendix C: Details on Vets Prevail Program

Vets Prevail is rooted in two types of evidence-based care: CBT, considered to be the standard of care for PTSD and depression by the VA and DoD, and “Mental Health Recovery,” a manualized peer support program developed by the Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance and certified by the Office of the Surgeon General and various US Government Agencies. The program includes up to seven online sessions or “Chapters,” each with 30-45 minutes of rich media content, meant to be viewed over a three to seven-week period. The Chapters are the primary mechanism for delivery of the CBT component of the program. However, they are also complemented by integrated software applications that help users schedule, complete and reflect on healthy activities, thoughts, and emotions – a critical component of CBT.

Recent studies have shown internet-based CBT to offer a solution to the high demand for efficient, effective, low-cost, and low-stigma interventions for traumatic stress and depression, especially in the military^{12,13}. Internet-based CBT has a number of advantages over traditional face-to-face psychotherapy for both clients and health care providers. Its accessibility makes it suitable for offering and providing help for psychological problems remotely and privately^{14,15}. Clients treated on the internet can avoid stigma incurred by seeing a therapist, and can obtain treatment at any time and place, work at their own pace, and review material as often as desired¹⁶. As a result, internet-based treatment has been shown to potentially reduce therapist time commitment while maintaining efficacy¹⁷. The internet provides practitioners an additional vehicle to promote mental health, and the use of this modality as an adjunct or standalone treatment has gained acceptance^{18,19}.

The Mental Health Recovery peer support element of the program is delivered via Instant Message (IM) chats, wherein participants interact with veteran “Peers” employed by Prevail. The primary goal of the Peer chats is to create a personal connection with the participants, increasing the perceived relevance of the program content and promoting greater adherence. Prevail has built a proprietary interface called the Trainer Dashboard that allows our Peers to achieve this goal while ensuring the chats remain scalable and high quality.



Figure 5: Go to:
www.prevailhs.com
to learn more

About the Author

Prevail Health Solutions is a Veteran-owned and -operated health care technology company that builds award-winning, Web-based behavioral health and wellness programs. Prevail was founded to help address deployment-related mental health issues in the Veteran and military populations. With the support of the National Science Foundation, Prevail has developed a novel technology platform and content rooted in evidence-based practices to meet some of the most pressing health promotion needs of the US Department of Defense and US Department of Veterans Affairs.