## **OPINION**

## PFC Dwyer program: helping our veterans

## **Your turn**



BY LEE ZELDIN

The images that flash across our TVs of war-torn countries and populations in strife are rampant and inescapable in today's society. Whether it is ISIS, al-Qaida, or any other foreign enemy that seeks to kill innocent people, it takes a well-equipped and strong-willed force to fight back. Our nation has always been blessed with brave men and women who have answered the call to service; willingly and selflessly putting their lives on the line while defending our great country.

However, while overseas, our service members are exposed to unimaginable horror and suffering, sometimes leaving them both physically and mentally scarred. While we can determine many of the appropriate remedies, utilizing modern medicine and science to treat their physical wounds, it is the mental damage that leaves us often ill-prepared and without a proper plan of action to effectively deal with their suffering.

For many of our service members returning from overseas, their hardships and trauma corrupt their psyches and follow them from the battlegrounds to the safety and comfort of their homes. The months and years of training they received to fight the enemy on the front lines is not sufficient to help them deal with their problems on the home front. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Traumatic Brain Injury are ravaging our veterans and their loved ones at a truly staggering rate. It is estimated that 11-20 out of every 100 veterans who served in Operation Iraqi Freedom or Operation Enduring Freedom, have PTSD. In addition, the research and studies available now to help understand these problems were non-existent in previous decades; leaving generations of veterans from conflicts like Vietnam and the Gulf War continually discovering that they may be experiencing symptoms of PTSD or TBI.

Perhaps the single most alarming statistic is the suicide rate amongst our veterans. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, it is estimated that 22 veterans a day commit suicide. Without the proper resources or care of mental health professionals, they simply cannot cope with the horrific flashbacks or relentless anxiety that plagues and quashes any sort of normalcy they would hope to experience upon



Photo from Jennifer DiSiena

Above, local politicians come together in support of the PFC Joseph P. Dwyer peer program. Dwyer, from Mount Sinai, served in Iraq and received nationwide recognition for a photograph that went viral of him cradling a wounded Iraqi boy.

return. Seemingly routine, everyday occurrences can serve as triggers that cripple these veterans' lives and leave them without any sort of relief in sight.

One of the most difficult obstacles in trying to help treat our veterans is the trouble they have opening up to strangers or people who have not endured the same tribulations as them. While there is no uniform prescription or exact methodology of how to solve the various crises our veterans live through, peer-to-peer support programs are vital to ensuring our veterans have not only an outlet to express their sentiments, but the encouragement of those who have

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experienced similar struggles standing with them, every step of the way. These support programs create a safe place for veterans to share what they're going through and learn about ways they can help cope with their debilitating symptoms.

Army Pfc. Joseph P. Dwyer, from Mount Sinai, was one of the countless brave and courageous veterans who served overseas to protect our great nation. Dwyer served as an Army medic during the Iraq War and received nationwide recognition for a photograph that went viral—showing him cradling a wounded Iraqi boy, while his unit was fighting its way up to the capital city of Baghdad. Sadly, PFC Dwyer passed away from complications due to his struggles with PTSD, leaving behind a young widow, Matina, and two-year-old daughter, Meagan. Not even the unconditional love and support of his family and members of his community were enough to save PFC Dwyer.

Created and dedicated in his honor,

the PFC Joseph P. Dwyer veterans peer project is a peer-to-peer support program that I created in the New York State Senate as part of the 2012-13 New York State budget. The program provides a safe, confidential, and educational platform where all veterans are welcome to meet with other veterans in support of each other's successful transition to postservice life. The Dwyer program seeks to build vet-to-vet relationships that enhance positive change through common experiences, learning and personal growth. According to the Suffolk County Veterans Service Agency, there are 83,254 veterans in Suffolk County. With

the highest population of veterans by county in New York State, and one of the highest in the entire country, the need for a program like the Dwyer project was long overdue. Suffolk County served as one of four test counties in New York in 2013,

the first year of the program. Remarkably, we were able to conduct 148 group sessions, serving 450 veterans within Suffolk that first year. Since 2013, the program has successfully expanded to over a dozen counties across New York, assisting over 1,500 veterans battling PTSD and TBI. The staff and volunteers who work here in Suffolk County to keep the services of this program running are growing every year. We are continually expanding our counselors and mental health professionals to combat the hardships of veterans all over New York.

As a proud United States veteran who served in Iraq, I know firsthand the horror and chaos that one experiences while protecting their country. While I am pleased with what we've managed to

achieve in New York with regard to the Dwyer project, we can and should still be doing more to help the brave men and women who put everything on the line for us. That is why I am introducing legislation in Congress that will expand the PFC Joseph Dwyer veteran peer program on a national level. I want to ensure all veterans across this great nation receive the proper treatment and care they deserve. We must take what we've accomplished here in New York and build from it so that someday we can have a peer-topeer support group help veterans in every county across America. I know the Dwyer program will help bring much-needed support and assistance to thousands, and someday millions, of veterans and their families across the United States. No longer should a veteran feel shame or guilt in seeking help for him or herself. He or she should be able to utilize the services of their local vet-to-vet support group to help them effectively deal with whatever stress is bothering them.

That is the goal and it is time we come together as citizens of the United States to fulfill our obligations and do more to help our veterans lead happy and meaningful lives. It is a long and arduous road to recovery for some, but I am convinced that the willpower and solidarity of this nation behind a common cause can help ameliorate the transition to post-service life for our veterans. It is vital we keep ever-present that our veterans have been willing to make the greatest sacrifice any one individual can give to another their life. The Dwyer program is an important way for Americans to give back and say thank you.

Congressman Lee Zeldin, an Army veteran who continues to serve today as a major in the Army Reserves, represents the 1st Congressional District of New York. In Congress, two of Lee Zeldin's committee assignments are Veterans' Affairs and Foreign Affairs.