

VETERANS

Promoting services for former soldiers

HopeHealth program urges acknowledgement of needs arising from illness

By Johanna Crosby

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Soldiers are trained to be brave and protect others.

But the military training that helps them to be strong in combat may make it harder for them to deal with serious illness later in life.

"The world is difficult for people who sacrificed so much," said Ellen McCabe, a registered nurse and director of professional education for HopeHealth in Hyannis, a nonprofit organization that delivers medical care and support services to people experiencing serious illness in Eastern Massachusetts, including Barnstable County.

The supportive services and community resources available to help them were discussed during a special program, "Caring for Veterans Experiencing the Impact of Serious Illness," hosted by HopeHealth on May 11 at the Plymouth Senior Center.

HopeHealth has developed a special connection with veterans and their families through the We Honor Veterans program, a partnership between the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization and the Department of Veterans Affairs.

"We feel it's important to acknowledge your needs," Melissa Weidman, director of Community Relations and Outreach for HopeHealth, told a small group of veterans, family members, caregivers

and professionals during the presentation.

"We have a huge amount of veterans in our midst," said McCabe. Today, one in four dying Americans is a veteran. McCabe discussed the emotional issues that may affect seriously ill veterans, including anxiety, depression, anger, social isolation, alcohol or substance abuse, and suicide.

But older veterans, especially combat veterans, often experience factors that prevent them from getting the help and support they need when they are facing serious illness or end-of-life issues. While military service can promote many positive traits such as personal strength, resilience and camaraderie, it can also produce an attitude of stoicism. Acknowledging pain, fear or sadness might be seen as a sign of weakness.

"Soldiers don't cry," McCabe said.

Veterans who get a serious diagnosis often feel they are going to fight this, said Ann Geagan, director of bereavement for Hope Community Care. "They're trained to be brave and soldier through." But stoicism can work against them, she said, when treatments are no longer effective or complications set in. It can also prevent them from talking about what they are feeling during their illness with their families or caregivers.

"It's OK to say I'm scared and talk about what is happening inside," Geagan said. Without such communication, the sick individual tends

to become isolated even up until the end.

Some combat veterans, who have coped well throughout their lives, might experience increased combat-related memories and distressing emotions during their end-of-life journey, according to Hospice literature. Exposure to traumatic events might also affect their physical health later in life.

HopeHealth and Hope Hospice provide personalized care delivered by a team of physicians, nurses, social workers, bereavement counselors and volunteers. It also has veteran volunteers who are "very powerful" in helping veteran patients "open up and share," McCabe said. They dissolve the barriers of stoicism and secrecy often found among combat veterans.

They also share a bond that opens up doors of trust, speak a common language, and offer opportunities to support healing.

"I feel a special camaraderie with veterans," said Steven Morrissey, of Orleans, a Hospice volunteer who served in the U.S. Navy during the Vietnam War. Morrissey drives patients to doctors and VA appointments and stays with them when they are home alone. He's also conducted "pinnings" -- informal ceremonies in which a veteran is presented with a small American flag pin and a certificate in appreciation for service rendered.

"It means a lot to the veterans," Morrissey said.

McCabe encouraged veterans and their families to seek help and support from the community when they are in need. She also offered suggestions for caring for veterans.

"When veterans can speak



about their military experience, it's important to listen carefully," she said. "Invite them to tell their stories, express appreciation for their service to our country and celebrate their accomplishments."