

## ***Greater outreach to vets promoted***

*Chris Swingle, Staff Writer    Democrat and Chronicle    December 11, 2008*

### **Report says families aren't aware of help.**

Many veterans returning from Afghanistan and Iraq, and their families, struggle needlessly because they aren't aware of benefits and services available or don't think they need them, according to a Rochester-area study released Wednesday.

"The fact is, a veteran's problems are a community's problem," said Ellen Warren, vice president of development at the Veterans Outreach Center, 459 South Ave., which commissioned the study through the Center for Governmental Research.

The resulting report offers a roadmap for improving reintegration policies and services at both the local and national levels. Some proposals require money; the outreach center is contacting private foundations to seek funding.

The \$40,000 study, funded by the New York State Health Foundation and the Bob Woodruff Family Fund, included more than 140 recently returned veterans, family members and service providers in the Rochester/Finger Lakes region.

The focus groups, held in September in Pittsford, Canandaigua and Batavia, brought together people who don't usually interact and enabled them to discover problems and propose solutions, said Donald Pryor, project director at CGR.

The first result: Two spouses of military personnel, who didn't know each other but met after participating in two different focus groups, have formed a new support group for military children in the Hilton-Parma-Hamlin area, working with local schools.

Another mom told a focus group that her preschooler started hiding photographs of his dad while the father was deployed, said Jocene Preston, director of Operation Welcome Home at the Veterans Outreach Center. The boy's mother asked why and the boy said, "It makes me too sad."

Other families expressed despair at being unprepared for their loved one's post-war mental health problems.

The report says soldiers and families need honest information about the pitfalls of reintegration, signs to look for, strategies for coping and the fact that it's common to struggle.

The Veterans Outreach Center - a free, independent agency that helps returning veterans identify their needs and points them in the right directions - is also working with Nazareth College's social work program, St. Joseph's Villa, Crestwood Children's Center and Camp Good Days and Special Times to find other ways to support children.

The existing patchwork of services needs to be stitched together so that more help is available locally, and that the help is easily navigated, well-publicized and connected, the report says. A buddy system of veterans supporting each other also would help, the report says.

Veterans were trained for their mission but not for their readjustment to civilian life, said Keith Robinson, a veterans' counselor with the state Division of Veterans' Affairs who participated in a focus group.

The report calls for reintegration efforts to start before the veteran returns home, transition planning to become mandatory and service members and their families to get information and support throughout.

The full [Voices Together Summit Report](#) is online at [www.cgr.org](http://www.cgr.org) and available from Veterans Outreach Center, [www.veteransoutreachcenter.org](http://www.veteransoutreachcenter.org) or (585) 546-1081.