



# COLLATERAL DAMAGE:

## Floridians Coping with the Aftermath of War

A summary of findings and recommendations from the Florida BRAIVE Fund. View the full report at [GulfCoastCF.org](http://GulfCoastCF.org).

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# Executive Summary

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**Floridians honor the service of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans and want them and their families to receive assistance as they deploy and later come home. But veterans are not receiving the benefits they need and deserve, and charitable organizations are rising to the challenge to provide vital assistance to fill gaps in government programs.**

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Gulf Coast Community Foundation of Venice sponsored research to identify the major challenges that Florida's returning service members and their families say they face. There are significant obstacles to getting treatment for mental-health issues, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression. This stems from an institutional belief that military personnel should be capable of solving their own problems and that admitting they need treatment can damage their careers.

Difficulties with paperwork and bureaucracy at the Department of Veterans Affairs make many veterans reluctant to register for its services. If problems develop, many do not know where to turn for help, nor understand the benefits to which they are entitled. Keeping families together during and after deployment is another serious concern. Reestablishing ties with spouses and children often requires counseling or vacation getaways. Finding a job is extremely difficult and frustrating—and worsened by the recession and Florida's higher-than-the-national-average unemployment rate. Unemployment amplifies any problems with family reintegration.

Nonprofit organizations have stepped in to help, but veterans' exposure to charities is limited. They are aware

of care packages sent while they are deployed; they appreciate personal messages from civilian adults and schoolchildren. But service members are largely unaware of not-for-profit support agencies and their services; few can name any nonprofit other than the American Red Cross.

Nonprofit leaders face the constant challenge of high demand for their help, difficulty in working with government agencies, and limits to their resources. They see unmet needs in counseling, housing, and care-giving, and fear they will lose funding for their services. At a time when government's abilities are limited, it is imperative that local nonprofits' services reach those in need and that local residents increase their support for such efforts. Success depends on finding more effective ways to inform communities about available services.

Gulf Coast's statewide survey found that 92 percent of Florida residents believe assistance for Iraq and Afghanistan veterans is "very important," and most believe that federal and state agencies, county and city governments, and the media need to do more to help returning veterans. Floridians hope our service members and their families can reestablish peaceful, productive lives during and after wartime. This report recommends ways we can help.



# What You Can Do

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- Organize community “Welcome Home” and “Send Off” teams to honor troops as they come home or deploy to active duty.
- Identify and organize local nonprofit services into one-stop shops for our service members and their families to access health care, education, and employment assistance.
- Donate time and money to legitimate national and local nonprofits that assist our troops and their families, such as the USO and the American Red Cross.
- Learn about the issues that affect our troops and their families at Web sites like [iava.org](http://iava.org).
  - Red Tape: Veterans Fight New Battles for Care and Benefits  
IAVA Issue Report (February 2010), [iava.org](http://iava.org)
  - Invisible Wounds of War: Psychological and Cognitive Injuries, Their Consequences, and Services to Assist Recovery  
RAND Corporation, [rand.org](http://rand.org)
  - Careers After Combat: Employment and Education Challenges for Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans  
IAVA Issue Report (January 2009), [iava.org](http://iava.org)
- Reach out to national and local leaders for better government services.
  - Modernize Veterans Administration claims processing systems
  - Provide better health care for our female service members and veterans
  - Streamline and simplify the post-9/11 GI Bill



## What We Did

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With \$15 million in seed funding from the California Community Foundation's Iraq Afghanistan Deployment Impact Fund, three community foundations in Florida established the Florida BRAIVE Fund—Gulf Coast Community Foundation, the Miami Foundation, and The Community Foundation in Jacksonville. Since 2008, the BRAIVE Fund supported Florida families whose fathers, sons, mothers, and daughters are serving our nation in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom.

Each Florida community foundation funded local, regional, and statewide nonprofit organizations to provide essential counseling, emergency financial assistance, employment assistance, legal help, and education opportunities to these families and their service members.

Gulf Coast, the largest community foundation in Florida, also commissioned this novel research to examine the

experiences of both families and local nonprofits that had benefited from the BRAIVE Fund. The purpose was to learn how to best serve the troops and their families during war. The project included the first-ever statewide telephone survey of Florida residents on this issue, focus groups, and interviews with troops, family members, and nonprofit service providers.

This fresh report outlines the unique and unexpected challenges that service members and their families face, and it illuminates the role that local communities and nonprofits play in helping them. It offers five key findings on how war affects Florida's families. Most importantly, it provides resources and recommendations on how we can help our servicemen and servicewomen gain back peaceful and productive lives.



# Findings & Select Recommendations

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## Keep Healthy Relationships

Veterans and their families report stresses when the service member returns home. But a stigma attached to mental health care makes most veterans reluctant to seek help; when they do, counseling and other services can be difficult to access.

- Psychological evaluations should be mandatory for all personnel before separation from the service.
- Mental health evaluations of active-duty personnel between deployments should be conducted by private, independent providers or community-based groups.
- Military units should foster local support groups and use mentors to help returned soldiers transition home.

## Create Job Opportunities

Returning service members face major difficulties finding post-military employment and obtaining services despite a new GI Bill.

- Government should encourage employers to hire recent veterans and provide retraining and fair wages for Reservists by extending tax-credit programs.
- Military branches should devote a portion of their advertising and outreach to promote the hiring of veterans.
- National Guard and Reserve members who own businesses need access to funding to hire replacement staff while deployed and to expand upon return.



*In Bradenton, Florida, a single mother who drove convoys in Iraq while deployed as an Army Reservist hoped to serve her hometown as a sheriff's deputy, but she couldn't pay for training. Financial assistance from a local nonprofit helped cover her admission expenses for a training academy and move her family into a less-expensive home. But acceptance to the academy came with a new cost: more money for a required uniform. Pride set in and she refused to ask for additional help, until her Veterans Services case worker contacted the nonprofit directly and they convinced her to accept their additional check as an investment in her future.*

*Deployment can leave a spouse back home with mounting financial and emotional burdens—home and car repairs, childcare, concerns about the safety of the deployed loved one and about providing for the family while he or she is overseas. Joyful reunions, meanwhile, can soon give way to new stresses, from lost salaries to new responsibilities for which the recent combat veteran isn't ready.*



## Connect Veterans to Services

Veterans go without the help they need because they lack confidence in government agencies, are unaware of services, and come from a culture that emphasizes self-reliance.

- Military branches should automatically enroll troops in Department of Veterans Affairs health care as they leave active-duty service, with the choice to opt out later.
- Florida needs more than one VA regional office to allow reasonable travel times and more face-to-face assistance for veterans.



*Today's veterans return with needs not seen after previous U.S. wars. They have served more and longer deployments, and many survive grievous injuries that would have been fatal just a decade ago. Yet troops who are trained in boot camp to perform their combat duties receive no training—no "de-boot" camp—to readjust to civilian life. Meeting their unique needs requires new approaches, from innovative physical therapies to recreational opportunities for reestablishing family bonds.*

## Nonprofits Fill Gaps

Private, local nonprofit agencies provide services that governments cannot or do not perform. Veterans find those services valuable, but often go unaware of them because of limited communication between nonprofits and government agencies. Nonprofits are concerned about their ability to provide veterans services long-term.

- Nonprofits need to build relationships locally with media and opinion leaders, business owners, and college graduates.
- Nonprofits respond more quickly than government agencies, but they need to be even more streamlined, as military personnel and veterans often need help within days.
- VA needs a top-down program to train and encourage staff to work with state and local charities that offer services valuable to veterans.

## Act Locally

Family members, employers, and the general public can provide valuable perspectives on veterans' needs, the shortcomings of programs designed to help them, and ideas for reform.

- Create a well-publicized Web site that serves as a "one-stop shop" for services for veterans reintegrating into their local communities.
- Create a database of local veterans who volunteer to serve as mentors and create a local support-group system like those on military installations.
- Make better use of local media and businesses to spread the word about services available to veterans.



# Who Is Helping?

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## National

### **Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America**

Web site and online community designed as a resource for our nation's newest veterans.

[iava.org](http://iava.org)

### **Coalition for Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans**

Nonpartisan partnership of organizations committed to strengthening the system of care and support for those affected by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

[coalitionforveterans.org](http://coalitionforveterans.org)

### **My Reboot Camp**

Web site to help service members and their families successfully transition from active duty to civilian life.

[MyRebootCamp.com](http://MyRebootCamp.com)

### **USO**

Programs and services to support the morale, welfare, social, and entertainment needs of military personnel and their families.

[uso.org](http://uso.org)

## Florida Regional/Local

### **Florida Gulf Coast Paralyzed Veterans of America**

Services for veterans who have experienced spinal cord injury or dysfunction.

[floridagulfcoastpva.org](http://floridagulfcoastpva.org)

### **Haley House Fund**

Temporary lodging for families of veterans treated at James A. Haley Veterans' Hospital.

[haleyhousefund.com](http://haleyhousefund.com)

### **Manasota Operation Troop Support**

Individualized support for OIF/OEF troops and their families while they are overseas and when they return home.

[motsonline.org](http://motsonline.org)

### **Military Spouse Corporate Career Network**

Employment referral and job placement solutions for military spouses, war wounded and caregivers of war wounded, and veterans and transitioning military.

[msccn.org](http://msccn.org)

### **Quantum Leap Farm**

Equine-assisted therapy and recreational horse riding for injured veterans and active-duty personnel and their families.

[quantumleapfarm.org](http://quantumleapfarm.org)

### **Welcome Home Vets**

Assistance for returning military veterans and their families and education of the public about the needs of veterans.

[whvets.org](http://whvets.org)

### **Operation Helping Hand – Tampa Chapter**

Assistance and support for families of active-duty injured and wounded.

[operationhelpinghandtampa.com](http://operationhelpinghandtampa.com)

### **Veterans Plus**

Financial education seminars to improve the quality of life of veterans and their families.

[veteransplus.org](http://veteransplus.org)

A complete list of Florida BRAIVE Fund grantee organizations appears in the full research and policy report.

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*The full report, "Collateral Damage: Floridians Coping with the Aftermath of War," is available online at [GulfCoastCF.org](http://GulfCoastCF.org) and [jamesmadison.org](http://jamesmadison.org).*



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