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VA ensures access to health care as 9/11 anniversary nears

WASHINGTON — As the 20th anniversary of 9/11 approaches, the Department of Veterans Affairs is providing those who served awareness of and access to all their health care services, specifically in areas of mental health and post-traumatic stress care.

VA Mental Health officials said there has been an uptick in Veterans seeking help, which could increase more as they come to terms with their service and as the Afghanistan withdrawal comes to completion.

“Our nation is indebted to the men and women who served in Afghanistan and Iraq, because they made our world infinitely safer,” said VA Secretary Denis McDonough. “Their service did not come without sacrifice as some carry physical and emotional wounds. We must ensure they get the world-class care they’ve earned and deserve.”

[VA’s Vantage Point blog](#) is running a four-part series on Afghanistan featuring Veterans’ thoughts and perspectives on their time there and the drawdown. The series will run each Tuesday until completed.

The series focuses on:

- Recognizing warning signs of posttraumatic stress.
- How spouses, family members and friends can respond to and assist someone with PTSD.
- Where and how to get help within VA.
- Mobile apps and tips for recovery.

“Our purpose for being there was to prevent further attacks on the homeland,” said Chief Master Sgt. Ramón Colón-López. Colón-López is an Air Force pararescue man who served in Afghanistan and is currently the senior enlisted adviser to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

He adds his fellow service members should be proud of their actions over the last 20 years but also be cognizant of any mental health difficulties.

Colón-López spent years hiding and ignoring his PTSD, which led to heavy drinking and reckless behavior. It wasn’t until he had a mountain biking accident that his wife gave him an ultimatum to get help.

“Veterans should be on the lookout for red flags if news of Afghanistan starts changing behavior,” said the Director of the [National Center for PTSD](#) Consultation Program Sonya Norman, Ph.D. “These include isolating, using alcohol and drugs or any increase in unhealthy behaviors compared to normal.”

Norman points out excessive working or video game playing could be signs someone is struggling and needs help.

The series provides information on [Vet Centers](#) which started after the Vietnam War and addresses the parallels between conflicts and how they can help through readjustment counseling.

“I’ve got Vietnam Veterans who are still coming here, not because we failed to resolve any issue in their life, but because they found a home in the community,” said Director of the Las Vegas Vet Center Joe Lasky. “They found friendships and a way to come talk and deal with issues that may have started in Vietnam, but now affect their current health.”

Lasky added he’s seen a willingness among Vietnam Veterans to mentor more recent Veterans. Decades removed from their own service; many will offer advice to younger Veterans to not repeat mistakes they might have made.

About 1.9 million post-9/11 era Veterans are enrolled for care.

The full four-part series on Afghanistan is available the [VA Vantage Point blog](#).

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