

**Transcript of
National Catholic Partnership on Disability
How Can We Help? Parish Support for
Veterans and Their Families
October 18, 2011**

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Participants

Peg Kolm, Coordinator in the Department of Special Needs Ministries at the Archdiocese of Washington
Fr. Rick Curry, Founder of the Academy for Veterans at Georgetown University
Dr. Jim Boehnlein, Associate Director for Education at the Veterans Affairs Northwest Network Mental Illness Research, Education, & Clinical Center, Portland, OR

Presentation

Operator

Greetings and welcome to "How can we help? Parish Support for Veterans and Their Families." A brief question and answer will follow the formal presentation. As a reminder, this conference is being recorded. It is now my pleasure to introduce your moderator for today, Peg Kolm. You may begin.

Peg Kolm

We welcome you to the webinar, "How Can We Help? Parish Support for Veterans and their Families" presented by the National Catholic Partnership on Disability (NCPD). We thank our partners in this webinar, The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development; the Knights of Columbus; the Order of Malta, Federal Association; and Catholic Charities USA. This webinar has been prepared in consultation with a number of Catholic ministries, including the NCPD Council on Mental Illness, the Archdiocese for the Military Services USA, the National Catholic Office for the Deaf, the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, Justice and Peace, and the National Apostolate for Inclusion Ministry. My name is Peg Kolm, and I will be your moderator today. I am the Coordinator in the Department of Special Needs Ministries at the Archdiocese of Washington.

With me here at the NCPD offices is Father Rick Curry, a Jesuit priest based here in Washington, DC. Father Curry is on the faculty at Georgetown University, teaching Catholic Studies-Theater, and is the founder of the Academy for Veterans at Georgetown University. Father Curry has a passion for working with vets, which he'll share later in the webinar.

Also with us today, webcasting from Oregon, is Dr. Jim Boehnlein, a psychiatrist and a professor of psychiatry at Oregon Health and Science University. He is also the Associate Director for Education, at the Veterans Affairs Northwest Network Mental Illness Research, Education, and Clinical Center in Portland, Oregon. Dr. Boehnlein is a Catholic and the Editor of Psychiatry and Religion, The Convergence of Mind and Spirit, a book on aspects of mental health that have spiritual components, including a chapter on healing from trauma.



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We regret that Father Rick Sirriani, Pastor of St. Thomas More Parish in Portland, Oregon, could not be with us today. Father Sirriani, who was a Chaplain with the Oregon Air National Guard, was to consider how parishes can welcome and support veterans. To address this parish component, NCPD has spoken with clergy, and diocesan and parish staff from around the country, asking about programs and best practices. We will be presenting their ideas to you throughout the program. For our participants today from all across the country, from Hawaii to New York, you should know that there are helpful resources in a ministry toolkit that can be found at the NCPD website, www.ncpd.org. These are provided especially for use in in your parish and diocesan pastoral and social ministries.

Three times during this webinar you'll be invited to respond to a poll. Please complete the poll by clicking your responses to true/false and multiple choice questions as soon as they appear on the screen. And if you're watching this with a group, which we hope you are, have the person closest to the computer complete the survey but please do so quickly. As to questions for our presenters, anyone can type a question directly to the presenters at any time in the space provided at the bottom of your screen. Mention which presenter you wish to provide an answer to your question and be sure to click submit. We'll address your questions in the final part of the program. Now, let us remind ourselves that we gather in the holy presence of God. Father Curry, would you lead us in prayer?

Fr. Rick Curry

My pleasure, Peg. We begin as we Catholics always do, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Let us pray. Help us, dear God, to see your face in every veteran and family member we encounter. Guide us as we imagine new ways to support veterans and their families in our parishes. Bring healing and peace to all who have been wounded physically, mentally and spiritually during wartime. Awaken the desire in priests to serve in active duty or veterans administration chaplaincy, through the sacrifice and consent of their bishops or religious superiors, to share their vocations with active duty men and women, and bring the good news of our faith in Jesus Christ to those who serve our country. We ask this in Jesus' holy name. Amen.

Peg Kolm

Thank you, Father Curry. Now, don't forget that you can type your questions in the space provided and be sure to click submit. Let's get started with some background and context. Who are veterans today and what are their challenges? We know that since the Gulf War, 3.2 million service personnel have been deployed to the war zone; many with multiple and longer term deployments. Advances in medical technology and body armor have resulted in more service members surviving experiences that would have led to death in prior wars. Some invisible wounds, such as mental health conditions and even cognitive impairments have increased. Traumatic Brain Injury, TBI, has been estimated in 20-25% of the returning veterans and there are some estimates of 15-30% have Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. We know that rates of unemployment, divorce, substance abuse, depression, and suicide exceed those of the non-military population. Perhaps then it's not surprising that about 70-90% of veteran's self-medicate with alcohol or drugs, which can then lead to problems with law enforcement. The Pentagon Mental Health Task Force reported to Congress that between 300,000 and 400,000 U.S. troops may have suffered mild, moderate or even severe brain injuries in Iraq and Afghanistan and an estimated 100,000 of these are Catholic.

Another piece of the picture. Suicide rates exceed those of combat deaths, with the

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highest rates among members of the National Guard. Guard members experience the return from combat differently from full-time military, perhaps because they have limited access to bases and little contact with those who have shared similar experiences. By definition, we know that Post Traumatic Stress Disorder follows an event that involved the threat of injury or death. PTSD changes stress hormones and chemicals that carry information between the nerves in the body.

One final part of this profile is this. Returning veterans constitute a vast untapped resource for our country and for our parishes. These are men and women with education, expertise and tremendous gifts. In order to reach vets, we need to better understand their lives.

So here's our first poll question. Do you think the following statement is true or false? Everyone who returns from war has PTSD. Look at your screen and please mark true or false. And we'll see your answers right away.

That's right. Not everyone coming back from our two current wars has PTSD. Researchers have not yet identified why traumatic events cause PTSD in some people but not others. Dr. Boehnlein, you have worked with veterans for some 30 years now. How did you get started?

Dr. James Boehnlein

Well, Peg you might say that my Catholic education prepared me for this work. While at St. Ignatius High School in Cleveland, I was introduced in my theology class to an important book, Viktor Frankl's, "Man's Search for Meaning," about the author's experiences while confined to a concentration camp in World War II. This search for meaning is foundational to all my work, especially in working with veterans. For the last 23 years I have coordinated a group who were prisoners of war from World War II and the Korean War. These men are now between the ages of 80 and 92 and had productive lives.

Peg Kolm

I'm sure Father Curry is happy to hear about the good outcome of a Jesuit education! Dr. Boehnlein, describe the vets you see in your practice.

Dr. James Boehnlein

Well, the majority of the veterans coming home do well, especially if they are connected to a loving family and welcoming community, including the community of a parish. These are men and women who have core values tied to lives of service and a deep connection to their units. Some have a few months of mild symptoms. However, in my experience about 15-20 percent end up having post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD.

Peg Kolm

What are some common issues facing some vets when they return home?

Dr. James Boehnlein

Well, Peg the symptoms that we see are often ones that may not be observed by other people. They are more internal. People who return from a war zone often have trouble sleeping. Some of this is just basic insomnia. Others times the insomnia is related to nightmares of the trauma. These contribute not only to poor sleep but also fatigue and sleep deprivation the following day. Panic attacks and startle reactions that may be caused by environmental triggers that all of us take for granted such as noises or smells, can lead to irritability and to social isolation. Some vets also have other issues, such as an underlying mood disorder like depression, or substance

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abuse, or reacting impulsively and without intention to violence, including domestic abuse of a spouse. Vets coming back from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq also may have had a traumatic brain injury ranging from a very mild traumatic brain injury such as a concussion to a full-blown head trauma. And these need to be diagnosed and treated. Symptoms such as intense headaches, dizziness, and extreme sensitivity to light or noise can occur with these brain injuries. And then transitioning to civilian life and transitioning to life as a spouse and father or mother again can be more or less of an issue for a specific veteran. And this can also lead to difficulties in dealing with communication, relationships and unfortunately sometimes domestic violence.

For those who have physical trauma such as amputation or polytrauma in multiple areas of their body, the effects of the psychological issues are increased.

Peg Kolm

Well, that's quite a list Dr. Boehnlein. What do we, as pastoral workers, need to know about veterans, some of whom may have PTSD, in order to help them in our parishes or determine if we should refer them to outside resources?

Dr. James Boehnlein

Well, as a pastoral care worker or clergy, you might be hearing from parents or a spouse rather than from the veteran him or herself with concerns because the veteran may or may not think that he or she has a problem. The veteran may not even realize it, even though they are irritable or may have significant personality change since returning from their deployment. Clergy and Parish staff have a lot of experience in listening, and that is very, very valuable. It's important to listen in a non-judgmental way. Vets are often likely to be experiencing guilt, so the first step is to provide a safe place to talk, perhaps about a personal search for meaning that the person is going through and of course to reflect on their relationship with Jesus Christ.

It's also a good idea to be well-prepared to refer to outside resources if necessary, and to have those resources on hand. Contact your local VA hospital for more information, and don't forget to reach out to the Catholic priest or deacon in the VA chaplain's office as well. The local Catholic Charities Office can also be of assistance. Catholic Charities USA is developing an initiative on providing support for returning veterans and their families.

In some cases, these men and women have thoughts of suicide. Of course, if you work with anyone who says they are thinking of killing themselves, take them seriously but also don't panic. Find out the basics: how strong is their feeling, how imminent is their plan, or do they have a plan? How despairing are they? It's important to note that many people from time to time have these thoughts, not just veterans. Get help for the person if they seem to be in imminent danger, and also seek to remove any weapons from their home. Again, having a list of resources and contact numbers is vital.

Peg Kolm

Those are some important points. Thank you for giving us that guidance, doctor. I'd like to share that there is information in the ministry toolkit about NCPD's extensive resources on a Catholic perspective on the issue of suicide.

Dr. Boehnlein, I also like hearing you say we should connect with the Catholic VA chaplains. Our Washington VA chaplaincy has been a great help to the Archdiocese of Washington in our efforts to serve veterans in parishes.

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Dr. James Boehnlein

And Peg, VA chaplains are also encouraged to interact with community clergy and to facilitate collaboration with them for local training, appropriate referral and coordination of services. This handbook is found in our ministry toolkit and you will find this reference on page 10. Also, another helpful resource listed in the toolkit is the White House's effort called Joining Forces which is found at www.joiningforces.gov.

Peg Kolm

Dr. Boehnlein, what are some other symptoms and needs you see in vets who come to you?

Dr. James Boehnlein

Well, I am keenly aware of the secondary reactions veterans have to post traumatic stress symptoms such as avoiding crowds, avoiding public places, even church because of overstimulation of sight and sound. All of this leads to increased isolation unfortunately. Veterans say they have a hard time trusting people, having warm feelings even for their own families, spouses and children. And they feel guilty about this. There is a sense of social isolation caused by these often involuntary defensive reactions and they – the veteran is often in a survival mode and not even aware of it.

Spouses, the veteran, and other family members need to adjust to the veteran being back home. For example, family life has continued while the veteran has been overseas, and the spouse at home has had to take on the roles of both parents for a year or more. There has to be a renegotiation of family roles and responsibilities, along with the ways spouses and children communicate with each other and solve daily challenges that all families deal with.

Of course, in Church, we become united in the community of believers, so anything a parish can do to connect veterans and their families with the Mass and the Sacraments is of great value. I know Father Curry will talk more about this later. Healing can occur if connected to activities in a group setting like those found at parishes.

Peg Kolm

I like that reminder, Dr. Boehnlein, that parishes are safe havens for all of us. I've heard about the concept of moral injury in veterans. Can you tell me more about this?

Dr. James Boehnlein

Peg, moral injury refers to the inner conflict based on inflicting harm on the enemy. For example, having to kill for the first time in one's life, reconciling those normally forbidden actions with what we were taught growing up can result in moral injury, especially when one's lived experience is in opposition to a previous moral code. Moral injury also may include acts of omission, where the person is in conflict with what he or she did not do in an emergent situation. For example, an action that might have saved a life. The veteran unfortunately often is the sole judge of their own actions, playing over and over again the scenario in which they did not act, and this can trigger great doubt and guilt.

Peg Kolm

And I understand that a current trauma can be a trigger to symptoms of moral injury experienced years earlier, creating something that is almost a flashback to the original event. Is that so?

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Dr. James Boehnlein

Yes, that's right. I've been treating one veteran for a large number of years who suffered a moral injury in Vietnam. Suddenly, quite recently actually without warning, his wife died of a heart attack. He felt that he should have been able to save her. This triggered memories and dreams of his combat experiences in Vietnam when he lost members of his unit. And he said to himself, did I do everything I could have done to save a mortally wounded buddy at that time? So current loss and trauma in the present brought back memories and similar intense feelings that occurred several decades ago.

Peg Kolm

I'm really glad that this vet was in contact with you, Dr. Boehnlein, and receiving treatment and support. But just like the rest of us not every vet who needs help will seek it out, either from the VA or from a parish. What gets in their way?

Dr. James Boehnlein

Well, there's a number of barriers, many of them internal barriers to treatment that vary from one vet to another. There's often avoidance of talking with other people in revealing private thoughts and feelings.

Veterans also have a great pride in self-reliance and independence. They also often have preconditioned ideas that treatment is for those who are weak or "crazy." This certainly is not confined just to veterans but exists also in society. People also who have served in a war zone and have seen some terrible things often believe that people will not understand or believe their accounts of their traumatic experience. And they are often fearful of being rejected by others. Not only their own family but also society at large. That's where a parish can do the most good to support the person and offer that sense of belonging. Some parishes I know have a health ministry. I would hope that even parish nurses can be trained in PTSD and brain injury issues, along with other physical injuries and amputation issues that veterans face and give training to others in the parish.

The good news is that during the last ten years or so, much greater acceptance of veterans in society has grown, and greater appreciation for their psychological and spiritual needs has come to be understood. This is in contrast to the unfortunate experience of many Vietnam veterans, who when they came back had to deal often with great rejection and many of whom still experience the effects of PTSD and other mental illnesses decades later.

Peg Kolm

Thank you for that. We want to emphasize today that recovery from mental illness is possible. It's a process that involves recognizing the impact of biology, psychology, social connectedness and, yes, spirituality. NCPD has a video and resource manual called, "Welcomed and Valued" that would be a good first step for parishes to review. The information is in the veterans' webinar toolkit.

Dr. Boehnlein, tell us about the healing process for these vets with PTSD.

Dr. James Boehnlein

Well, Peg, education is critical. Assuring the veteran they're not losing their mind, that sleep problems, dreams, difficulty concentrating, and startling easily with minor noises are normal reactions to traumatic situations and memories.

Relief of symptoms and the reduction of environmental triggers are also very important. They can be controlled with medication that can be used on a short-term

basis to get better sleep, improve concentration, and to gain control over those, what we call, hyper-arousal symptoms. Psychotherapy of course with a counselor or another mental health professional can also be helpful.

And then reduction of other stresses commonly experienced by veterans augments healing. For example, the unemployment rate in veterans is higher than the norm. Employment can lead not only to a feeling of financial and personal mastery, but can also contribute to diminishing the veterans' social isolation. Employment also can of course reduce stresses in family life. The National Center for PTSD Website, which is in the packet, is a very helpful resource to families. The site features not only print and downloadable resources but includes short video clips and longer coverage in streamed video on a wide variety of topics on PTSD, veteran, and family support. And also healing also comes from connecting to a higher order. As Catholics, we believe in God's mercy and redemption. As Pope Benedict said, the person who has hope lives differently. We must bring veterans to that place of hope. Sometimes healing can take a long time, but it really can happen.

I worked once with a veteran who had a great deal of conflict about moral injury and moral issues that he had encountered in Vietnam. He had accidentally killed a civilian and he couldn't forgive himself. In time, with church attendance and contact with his church community, he believed that God did forgive him. He had always avoided anything to do with Vietnam. At some point, however, he was able to befriend a Vietnamese restaurant owner in his town and a lot of the hate he had began to melt away. Being active, being part of the social context of church and community helped. His wife and adult daughter really noted the change that occurred over time in his ability to tolerate social relationships and relationships with the family. He became much easier to live with.

Peg Kolm

Thank you, Dr. Boehnlein, for closing your presentation with that uplifting success story and for all the insights you shared.

Now before we go to Father Rick Curry, I am going to ask a poll question of the audience. Please answer this question on your screen: What percentage of the U.S. population is directly involved in the Iraq war and the Afghan war? Five percent? Ten percent? One percent? Or twenty percent? And you can put your answers on your computer.

Father Curry, what do you think of these answers? Which one is right?

Fr. Rick Curry

Shockingly, 1% is right. 1% of the United States citizens are directly involved in these wars. Peg, that means that 99% aren't. Another statistic that might come as a surprise: 20% of returning veterans are out of work, which is a much higher rate than the national average. These two statistics I hope challenge us, and alert us to the fact that we're at war, and war has residual costs.

Peg Kolm

Those are some compelling statistics. Tell us more about the veterans you work with.

Fr. Rick Curry

Well, first of all, I think they are the best. Veterans represent what is best in our country. These men and women have a spirit of service. Service is something that they all identify with. In parishes, I think one way to connect to veterans is to ask

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them to serve, serve in liturgy, in religious ed programs, at parish events. It's actually an easy way to get to know them better. Of course, as pastoral ministers, you should also be thinking about the needs of the spouse too and the children and family members of these men and women, active duty personnel as well as veterans.

I see the parish as the natural place where Catholic vets and their families can go to get support and services, because that's what parishes already do. What may end up in your parish is a sort of informal military and veterans ministry, run by volunteers, some of whom I hope would be the military, with your pastor's blessing, of course. In some parishes, the staff hold kind of mini ministry fairs just for vets, to show them what is available for them, such as adult formation, religious ed for their children, and what ministries need volunteers. This worked very well as a way to show vets that the parish cares about them. Once you've connected to them, you can begin to engage them directly and find out what their needs are, and their needs are extensive. This war is so intense and it is difficult to maintain yourself 24/7. War. Constant war. War 24/7. There is constant agony, a constant pressure, and the vets come back with that pressure so ingrained that it has become their new norm. These men and women who might look able bodied, like Dr. Boehnlein just said, they come back and within a few months begin to show signs of post-traumatic stress if it's not relieved and that leads to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder full blown. This can be true even for those who seem to go back to regular lives. Peg, I often hear spouses say, "Well he's back, he's working, but something has changed." Their experiences are life changing, especially in these current conflicts.

I think the first step to healing is to help them become more independent and I think that means employment. I like to give this example: when a single women wakes up from being wounded; her first question is: Will I bear children? Can I become a mother? Single guys wake up from being wounded their first question is: Can I go to a singles bars? Will any girl ever look at me? But the very next question that both of them share is: will I ever work? We have to get them to work.

Peg Kolm

I couldn't agree more, Father Curry. I just want to remind our participants today that they can ask a question and submit it in the question bar and we'll answer it at the end of the program. So, Father Curry, what do you do to help veterans get employment?

Fr. Rick Curry

I think it's important that we recognize that there are transitional programs that are really needed to get the veterans back to full-blown participation in society. We started the Georgetown Academy for Veterans, based at Georgetown University. Here the vets can learn how to build their resume, get financial management skills, learn more about legal issues, get wellness and health care. I think that it is important that there be programs for them. We can't just expect veterans to shake the dust off their feet of war and move forward.

We're also opening up a bakery in Washington, DC, where veterans will learn not only skills in baking, but in marketing, distribution, budgeting, personnel management. Veterans need jobs. They need jobs to get their lives back on track. Before we can begin to address the other issues, spiritual, emotional, we must do everything we can to hire vets. Parishes could start by hiring a vet, letting parishioners know they need jobs even part time, even for a three month project.

Peg Kolm

I like that idea Father Curry. Father, I know you didn't start your ministry working with veterans. How did that happen?

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Fr. Rick Curry

Well, I had been working with adults with physical disabilities for many years, with the National Theater Workshop for the Handicapped that I founded in 1977. I was drawn to this because I was born with a physical disability. I was born without a right forearm. A few years ago, I was invited to meet some Iraq war veterans who were recent leg amputees who were training for the New York City Marathon. At this meeting, I met a soldier who was clearly having an anxiety attack. He grabbed my one arm and would not let it go. He kept saying, I don't know where I am. I don't know where I am. He was worried he could no longer be an employee, a husband, a father. I asked him about his faith. He looked at me startled. That encounter led me to working with vets in a number of ways.

Peg Kolm

I guess we all should be grateful to that vet because I know that when that vet grabbed your arm, he grabbed your religious vocation too, didn't he Father?

Fr. Rick Curry

Yes, Peg, that's right. For the past 47 years, I have been a Jesuit brother and a very happy Jesuit brother. But so many of the vets wanted confession. They wanted that Sacrament of Reconciliation. They didn't understand that I could not provide this. That troubled me, deeply troubled me. That led me to reconsider my vocation, and eventually I took the necessary coursework and in September 2009, I was ordained a Jesuit priest.

Peg Kolm

That's a remarkable story, Father Curry. Tell us, why is the Sacrament of Reconciliation so important to veterans? What do you say to vets about it?

Fr. Rick Curry

Well, this exactly goes to the heart of what Dr. Boehnlein just said about moral injury. Military men and women are very anxious to rid themselves of the enormous residual guilt that they come back from these wars. Not just what they have done, but what they have they have seen and experienced. It's a loss of innocence, if you will. And Catholic military men and women trust their priests and understand the confidentiality of the confessional. So you see the Sacrament of Reconciliation can begin to restore those healings of the Lord and trust in other human beings. And of course, the parish is the center for the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Peg Kolm

I understand that the Archdiocese of the Military Services USA asked you to speak to all their chaplains all over the world. What did you say to them?

Fr. Rick Curry

Well, first of all, these are remarkable men. And you must know that our Catholic military chaplains are themselves overworked and exhausted. We need priests who are willing to serve in active duty or the reserves, with the approval of their bishop or religious order superior. You know, this can be a tremendous sacrifice for a diocese or an order who may already be short of priests but boy is it critical. It is critically essential so that Catholic military men and women and their families who are away from their home parishes while the military man is serving on the field or on bases, during peacetime and war, can have access to the Sacraments, have access to pastoral ministries, actually have access to faith formation and more importantly have access to the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

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When I met with chaplains one of the things that I said to them, I recommended that they use the Ignatian Examen as a resource and treat them like the 12 step programs. These men are living in a dream world that requires them to get their feet back down on earth. And as a result a daily check can really help. It requires a strict moral daily inventory. Tests tell me that following the Examen has reduced the effects of PTS or even full blown PTSD. The Ignatian Examen is a great tool.

Another tool that I recommended to the chaplains is a book I think everyone should read. It's called, "The Sacrament of the Present Moment." It's also known as the Abandonment to the Divine Providence and is by Jean-Pierre de Caussade. A Jesuit who really understands the struggles of daily life.

Peg Kolm

I just bought that book Father so thank you for that recommendation. I want to remind participants that they can ask a question, they can type in the question at the bottom of your screen and please click submit.

Father Curry, I first met you when we worked on a retreat for veterans attached to the Walter Reed Army Hospital. Tell us about that retreat experience and give us some ideas how a parish could give a retreat like this.

Fr. Rick Curry

You know, Peg, I think we learned a lot from the experience with the Walter Reed vets. Like all retreats sponsored by parishes, we were able to give vets a little time out, a time away. For them it was a time when the veterans could step outside their daily lives and reflect quietly on their life of the spirit. Like any retreat, we also provided an opportunity for these men and women to have conversations about their faith in Jesus Christ with one another. It's important that the military be comfortable talking to other military. And we were delighted to see the enthusiasm with which the veterans surprised us by wanting so badly to participate in the liturgy. Never before had any of them been asked to serve or to participate as lectors and gift bearers, etc. They also prepared for the liturgy in advance by reading the scriptures and reflecting on them at a session before the Mass.

And lastly, because it was a Jesuit-run retreat, there was a review of the Ignatian Examen which really helps them root themselves in reality and the sacredness of the present moment. All things which PTS and PTSD can rob them. Parishes know how to run retreats. So I hope all of you listening right now will think about this as a way to engage veterans.

Peg Kolm

Certainly, parishes know how to give retreats. It's just a matter of crafting one for veterans and their families. Father Curry, we have a number of priests and pastors with us on the webinar today. What would you say to them?

Fr. Rick Curry

First of all, I really want to say thank you. But at the same time I challenge them to see their parishes as probably already providing most things the veterans and their families need. The challenge is to make contact with those veterans, to help them recognize what the parish holds for them and their family, and to let it that parish become a safe haven. Sometimes it is very helpful to call on older vets to join this effort. Begin maybe by convening a group to discuss the needs of vets with them and other interested parishioners. Good solid listening sessions. And have an open house for vets just to show what is in the parish for them. Adult formation, religious ed for their kids, service opportunities, and of course the Sacraments and liturgy. But it is

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important to remember that it is not just about programs and not just about services; it is about welcome, it's about friendship, it's about Christian hospitality.

Peg Kolm

I love that word hospitality. That's important concept. Father, you get asked by parishioners all the time, "What can I do?" What do you say to them?

Fr. Rick Curry

Well, the mood of the country is supportive of veterans right now and people filled with good will come to me and say, "what can I do?" I say, I don't know. What do you do? It's simple but effective. Like the program of babysitting so vets and their spouses or a group of vets can go out to dinner and share the experience of transition with peers who understand. This is especially helpful for reservists who are commonly isolated from other returning vets, or a military base where others leaving active duty and having a similar experience. Look at your gifts. How can you provide those in your good will to the veterans' needs today? And I think it's important to target the need carefully. Get to know the family. Get to know the family so that the response can meet actual needs. I think it's more important to set up a tutoring program through a vet's son rather than just take them to a theme park. Fold them in, because each and every parish is a vast service and spiritual support organization. In our own pews, we have resources in psychology, medical, dental, accountants, lawyers, so many services which can render them all things vets need during the time of transition in their lives.

Peg Kolm

Thank you, Father Curry, for your efforts to help veterans transition to civilian life, and especially your work in guiding them on their path of holiness as well. Remember to submit your questions in the bar at the bottom of your screen.

I have been asked to share briefly what a diocese can do to support their parishes' outreach to veterans and their families. Your diocese's approach may differ from ours in the Archdiocese of Washington, but we found that collaborating internally with other diocesan departments was an important first step. By working together with, say your Family Life Office and Social Concerns staff, we can reach more parishes and so more vets. It's just a matter of folding in that Father Curry mentioned. Folding in those particular issues and approaches into existing efforts and programs. This is one of those times that you will want to connect with a secular organization such as the Veterans Administration and the local VA hospital. They can provide important resources that will be helpful to your veterans. Remember, part of their mission is to collaborate, so expect a spirit of partnership when you connect to the VA, the VA hospital, or the VA Catholic chaplains.

One way to get all this started is to host a town hall meeting and invite veterans, as we did earlier this year in Washington. Hear from vets directly so you can put together a plan of action that meets their own specific needs. A town hall meeting can also help you identify potential leaders who can then be invited to serve on a diocesan advisory group. In fact, a group of our veterans who went to that town hall meeting are participating together today in today's webinar, in a collaboration of another sort, with the Archdiocese for the Military Services USA. We thank the military archdiocese for being a host site for the webinar and welcoming our vets today.

Here in the Archdiocese of Washington we are reaching out to veterans to advise us in our local and regional efforts, including our homeless veteran's project called Redeemer House. And a plan to connect regional parishes near the expanded

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Bethesda Naval Medical Center to the patients, families, and staff there by providing meals at Christmas and we will have a workshop on veterans' issues at our annual Conference on Faith, Deafness and Disabilities next spring.

One motto of mine is to never swim alone, and that's especially true in ministry. Another partner in this work could be your local Catholic Charities. Catholic Charities can be a tremendous force for good in supporting veterans through their own existing programs dealing with counseling, housing, family support, and employment training. Of course, housing is a critical issue for vets. We've learned about an exciting program that is the gold standard in veterans' housing, Chicago's, St. Leo's Campus for Veterans. Developed by the Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Chicago, the St. Leo's program has apartments for vets, the John Paul II residence for vets with disabilities, and even an onsite VA clinic. More information about the good work of the St. Leo's Campus for Veterans is in the ministry toolkit.

We thank Catholic Charities USA for supporting this webinar, and welcome Catholic Charities staffers from around the country who are participating today.

Now let's get to your questions. One question I had was will we have access to the PowerPoint slides after the presentation? And the answer is yes.

I have one question for Father Rick. Where are the vets? We offered programs at our parishes said one person but no vets show up.

Fr. Rick Curry

I always think of the line, build it and they will come. I think it's extraordinary to realize that there are vets all over the place. I think the best way of getting to vets is from the pulpit of announcing to maybe the non-veteran parishioners that vets are welcome in your parish. Go and knock on their doors and invite them to come in. Veterans don't live in isolated areas. They are amongst us. They are us. And so we just have to be attentive to who is our neighbor.

Peg Kolm

Thank you. This is a question for Dr. Boehnlein. How can parishes help active duty military and their families during deployment?

Dr. James Boehnlein

Well, there is a number of ways that can be done and as Father Curry had mentioned, some of this can be very practical things. Such as -- first of all, recognizing that the family has a deployed spouse or parent, and offering practical assistance with such things, such as meals, volunteers within the parish community to help with babysitting, simple home maintenance projects, especially the deployed spouse was the one who sort of kept up the physical aspects of the house and property. So those kinds of very practical things can be helpful. And also I think being aware, especially if there is a parish school, to inform the principal and the teachers that one or more of the children have had a deployed parent so that they're aware of some of the special challenges that the child may have due to separation from the parent.

Peg Kolm

Thank you, Dr. Boehnlein. This is a question for Father Rick. What about a penance service for soldiers and families?

Dr. James Boehnlein

I think we have to ease the military quietly back into our parishes. I think that kind of initiative would be terrific if it came from the vets themselves. I like any little portal that

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we can have the parish welcome. I think it's more important that we offer a welcome more than just programs. I like to just pick up something Dr. Boehnlein just said. I think when we're still anxious to help; I think we sometimes forget that practicality is what's absolutely needed. There are really some very simple things we can do to make veterans feel at home and also help the family while the veteran is not there.

Peg Kolm

Thank you, Father. Here is a question I think for Dr. Boehnlein. How does one alleviate the veterans' guilt without disregarding or disrespecting their experience?

Dr. James Boehnlein

That -- that's a very, very good question. And something that we actually even as mental health professionals and clergy struggle with. Because it's important to obviously listen carefully and respect the person that we're trying to help.

I think one of the first things I would say, don't feel you have to have an immediate answer for the person. Just having you sit and listen to things the person may have difficulty talking about with anyone, much less even a spouse or a trusted family member, can be very helpful for that person just to know you're listening in a non-judgmental way. And as a trained mental health professional, I would, for example, not immediately say, well, you did the right thing or you didn't do the wrong thing. I think people that have been through terrible experiences where they had to make split-second judgments under great duress, don't find it helpful if people give them answers right away. And they realize themselves that it's a terrible struggle. Instead I would have a conversation with the person. And even like a good teacher or a good coach, I would gently challenge them and say, well, why are you so hard on yourself? Why would you say that, that you are responsible for this or that? And to get into a conversation with the person.

Peg Kolm

That's very important. Father Curry, here is a question for you. You mentioned the 99%, the rest of us not engaged in the wars going on right now. How can the 99% connect with veterans before they come back -- before they become veterans, to create a bridge during active duty?

Fr. Rick Curry

That's a very good question. The difficulty is that the military can be so isolated from regular civilian life. The challenge that we feel right now is to get the vets, who are coming back into civilian life, to be welcomed into a full range of employment and participate fully in our lives. I think that when we hear of a young man or woman going into the military, the parish should have a going away party. They should announce to them that they are absolutely behind them and that they will take care of their families while they're gone.

Peg Kolm

That's wonderful. Dr. Boehnlein, do you have any thoughts on that?

Dr. James Boehnlein

I think Father Curry really actually explained it very well. I think he really had some good points.

Peg Kolm

Thank you. Here is a question for you Dr. Boehnlein. How can we support the chronically homeless vets? What are the resources that are available?

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Dr. James Boehnlein

Well, actually it's interesting that this question came up because it is now, if not the most important question that's being emphasized by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, it's right near the top. So it's a huge priority in the Veterans Administration right now and it's a primary goal for the Veterans Administration to reduce homelessness. There is a homelessness coordinator at each VA medical center, who is responsible for the paying attention within the specific community to homeless resources and to connect veterans with proper and humane housing. And so I would really recommend that, if people have challenges within their parish community in meeting this particular issue for veterans, that they contact their local VA and ask to talk with the homelessness coordinator.

Peg Kolm

I didn't know that. That's really important to know that there's a coordinator at every hospital.

Dr. James Boehnlein

Right.

Peg Kolm

We have time for a few more questions. So if you have a question for one of the presenters or any question about this webinar, please type it in and click submit.

Here is a question probably for both of you. How do we identify and reach out to families and spouses? How do you do the fine line between reaching out to them and respecting their privacy?

Dr. James Boehnlein

Well, I think that one of the ways that parishes can do that is to be aware that there are going to be veterans within their parish and to be able to actually listen to parishioners if they have, for instance, offhandedly they say, my son or my husband is being deployed, and to be aware that that family may face special challenges because of that deployment. So there's a number of informal ways that people can have their eyes and ears open without impacting on confidentiality or privacy.

Peg Kolm

Father Curry.

Fr. Rick Curry

I think every parish loves a party. And I would throw parties and would invite the veteran's families to come, even if they're not Roman Catholic, just to come in and get to know them and find out what their real needs are. It doesn't have to be all that formal. It can be tremendously informal. It could be a picnic, but it is saying that our parish cares and that we pray for them. We pray for them in our partitions and now we would like to get to know them personally.

Peg Kolm

Wonderful. This is a question for you, Father Rick. Are there opportunities for Deacons to be chaplains?

Fr. Rick Curry

Oh, Deacons are the bullwork of the church right now. Many -- some of the Deacons have been in the military. They have an amazing sense of responsibility for what the military needs and also they can work in the hospital chaplaincy, but it's interesting because many of the Deacons are married and have families and can really address

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and are more sensitive to the needs of the veteran returning than a celibate priest might be.

Peg Kolm

Interesting. We have time for a few more questions if you have any. This is a question for both Dr. Boehnlein and Father Rick. Have you read "War and the Soul?" How much do you think PTSD is a soul injury?

Dr. James Boehnlein

It's interesting. I will be the first one to speak. It's interesting the timing of this particular question because coincidentally one of my veteran patients, this summer in fact recommended the book to me. He said it had been a very important book for him and it helped him a lot. So I haven't had a chance to read it yet. And -- but I think that PTSD is partially a soul and moral injury. It's actually multi-factorial. It's not only spiritual, but also psychological and there's also, as I mentioned a little earlier, a prominent biological component. So as human beings, we're -- we function as a compilation of all different types of systems, and we connect socially with other people. So spiritual, biological, psychological and social factors influence post-traumatic stress.

Fr. Rick Curry

I couldn't agree more with you Doctor. And it's imperative that we also remind ourselves constantly that the spiritual is just recently being talked about. I think that's what we're doing here today is really trying to emphasize the life of the human spirit and the spirituality of our belief in god.

Peg Kolm

Thank you, both. I want to remind our participants today that all the PowerPoint and the transcripts plus all the resources we had mentioned including titles of the books that we have mentioned will be available online at NCPD.org. in our ministry toolkit for the veterans' webinar. The full webinar will be archived shortly and will be available free to anyone for the next 365 days. Check back to the toolkit at ncpd.org in the weeks ahead as we continue to post more information and resources in the ministry toolkit. If you have some resources that you would like NCPD to consider, send them to ncpd@ncpd.org with Veterans Toolkit in the subject line.

Now it is time for our last poll. Look at the list of ideas provided for actions you could take in your parish or diocese in the next 6 months to support veterans and their families, and check as many as you plan to begin or implement. So what are we going to do in the next 6 months? Set a date and plan a retreat. Hold a parish town hall meeting. Form a diocesan advisory council. Study resources at the NCPD.org toolkit. Contact local VA chaplain. Develop a referral list of outside professionals and resources or other. So click on as many as you think you might do and let us know what your plan is. I'm curious to see what the winners are going to be.

And we're waiting for responses from all over the country including Hawaii, New York, VA hospitals and parishes from all over the country. Here we go. We have -- what do you think of these numbers, Dr. Boehnlein and Father Curry? Look at that.

Dr. James Boehnlein

That's great. I like all the above.
[laughing]

Fr. Rick Curry

Right.

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Dr. James Boehnlein

Yeah, the resources in the NCPD ministry toolkit are terrific. And as a mental health professor, I can really -- I really like them.

Peg Kolm

I'm so glad that we got some responses from you. We have one question that we might have time for. The question is, how do we gear our ministry to vets of varying ages or what should we focus on for veterans? Dr. Boehnlein, you want to start with that?

Dr. James Boehnlein

Well, I think it's probably more likely in the current environment, particularly in a parish setting, that one may more likely encounter younger veterans, especially if there's a parish school with a lot of young families. The -- of course, the VA hospital, we encounter veterans from all different wars, dating back to World War II and there are some differences in how veterans of various ages respond, but I would say in general, the older veterans are probably much -- even more quiet about the kinds of experiences that they had. And many have really reintegrated over time in their communities.

Fr. Rick Curry

I think it's important though that we ask the older vets to act as mentors for younger vets.

Peg Kolm

Amen to that. Well, we're almost out of time. So I want to thank all of you very much for your involvement. Programs such as this webinar would not be possible without the generosity of many people. We are particularly grateful for the financial support of our donors you see listed here. NCPD needs your personal help as well. If you would like to grow this ministry, go to ncpd.org and click on the button, donate now. Every donation is an investment in trainings like these, resources like the veterans' ministry toolkit, the welcomed and valued mental illness resource materials, the NCPD website itself and the NCPD National Autism Task Force, all providing access to faith for Catholics with disabilities.

Thank you again for participating today, and especially to Dr. Jim Boehnlein and Father Rick Curry for showing parishes how they can help veterans and their families. Father Curry, can you provide a closing blessing?

Fr. Rick Curry

Almighty God, have mercy on us. Forgive us our sins and bring us to participation of loving one another by washing each other's feet. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Peg Kolm

Thank you, Father Curry. You can help us all now by completing the online evaluation before you close down and log out. All you have to is click on that URL. Thank you and please complete the evaluation.

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