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She Sought Volunteer Clinicians, and Hundreds Answered the Call

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Psychiatrists are needed to donate their time and skills to help soldiers piece their lives back together upon returning to the United States from Iraq and Afghanistan.

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Help

Eight years ago, Los Angeles–area psychiatrist Judith Broder, M.D., had stopped taking new patients into her private practice in anticipation of retirement. She'd had a satisfying career practicing psychotherapy with adults for more than 30 years and was ready to spend her retirement traveling with her husband, Donald. At around that time, two seminal events—a leisurely stroll along the beach and a play at a theater in Hollywood—convinced her that some of her life's most important work still lay ahead.

As Broder and her husband walked along the Santa Barbara beach, they spied hundreds of tiny crosses lined up, row by row, in the sand. The crosses, it turned out, were memorials to U.S. soldiers who had died in Iraq and Afghanistan. Broder was taken aback by the staggering numbers of losses, made plain to passersby on the California coastline.

Shortly thereafter, she attended a play titled "Sandstorm: Stories From the Front" written by first-time playwright and U.S. Marine Sean Huze. The play featured 10 monologues of soldiers who had served in Iraq describing how they felt about themselves. Using harsh and often ugly words, the monologues had a common theme, which was that the soldiers felt disgusted with themselves. "These men had sacrificed their lives for this country and now felt as if they didn't belong here anymore—they didn't feel as if they could fit back into civilian society," Broder told *Psychiatric News*.

She left the theater that evening with a "heart-wrenching" feeling, she said, but not a helpless one. "I felt like I didn't have a choice. I had a moral imperative to give back [to the soldiers] what I could. As a psychiatrist, I knew I had ways to understand and relieve the psychological agony being experienced by these young men."

By the next morning, Broder had worked out a plan for what was to become The Soldiers Project, a nonprofit organization through which service members returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as their families and loved ones, would receive free, confidential mental health services from a network of licensed mental health professionals.

Working to Heal Invisible Wound

Broder spoke to a small group of her colleagues in Southern California including psychologists, social workers, and marriage and family therapists who volunteered to provide therapy to veterans and their families. The therapy would be provided in the privacy of their offices, with no bureaucracy to limit the frequency or scheduling of the sessions. As a result, the first chapter of The Soldiers Project was established in Los Angeles in 2005.

Since then, chapters have been established in Sacramento, Seattle, Chicago, New York City, Long Island, and Philadelphia. Broder has served as chair of the board of The Soldiers Project since the organization began. In the past year, she has also mentored the organization's first president, Curtis Mack, to ensure that his transition would be a smooth one. Mack is a U.S. Air Force veteran and served for 23 years as president of the Los Angeles World Affairs Council.



AP Photo/Charles Dharapak

President Obama presents psychiatrist Judith Broder, M.D., with the President's Citizens Medal at the White House in October 2011 in honor of her work in founding The Soldiers Project. Broder was one of 13 civilians presented with the award that year.

The network of mental health professionals has grown to more than 400 volunteers. Five of them are psychiatrists. This growth is no doubt due in part to Broder's tireless work speaking to a variety of audiences about the project over the years. She emphasized that mental health services offered through The Soldiers Project are confidential, and there is no limit on the number of sessions that a veteran or family members can receive.

To ensure that veterans and their families get the best care possible, volunteers are required to take three courses—two online and one in person—related to military culture and the unique mental health issues facing soldiers in combat.

The Soldiers Project also has a component built in to protect the mental health professionals caring for the soldiers, noted Broder. "I realized that therapists who would be sitting with so much trauma week and after week and month after month would require their own support," she said. This support comes in the form of peer consultation groups, in which project therapists meet and talk about their feelings in relation to the issues with which their patients are struggling.

Many of the soldiers come to the therapists exhibiting classic signs of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), according to Broder, and their spouses and children may be dealing with secondary effects of PTSD. In

addition, a significant number of the veterans have mild traumatic brain injuries, which may profoundly affect the veterans' everyday functioning—their ability to perform at work, for instance.

Here is how the project works: Potential clients—veterans or their family members—contact The Soldiers Project through its website (www.thesoldiersproject.org) or through the toll-free number listed on the site, and they are connected with a project therapist within two to three days of the first contact.

When veterans receiving services through The Soldiers Project need psychiatric medications, they are referred to the local Veterans Administration facility for medications and return back to The Soldiers Project for psychotherapy.

Thousands Have Benefited

Thus far, Broder estimates that more than 1,000 returning soldiers have been seen through The Soldiers Project in Southern California alone, which translates to many thousands benefiting nationwide.

Broder noted that veterans are not the only beneficiaries of The Soldiers Project. Many of those who volunteer to work with the veterans have found it to be a rewarding and fulfilling experience.

"Whatever their reasons for agreeing to serve, they did serve," psychiatrist Robert Fajardo, M.D., told *Psychiatric News*. "But the depth and extent of their trauma were unanticipated."

Fajardo, who works with the Chicago chapter, said that he considers it "an honor and a privilege to respond to their requests for assistance."

Those wishing to donate their time and services to The Soldiers Project can complete an application form at http://www.thesoldiersproject.org and then select the "how to help" tab or call The Soldiers Project at (877) 576-5343.

The project operates on a small budget that is supported by charitable foundations and individual donations, Broder said.

Aside from more psychiatrist participation in The Soldiers Project, Broder, when asked what would most benefit the mental health of service men and women, responded, "no more war." ■

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