

**Welcoming Veterans and Military Families in Our Congregations and Community**  
*A Resource from the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations*  
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## **Opening Statement**

The purpose of this document is to encourage greater support and understanding among Unitarian Universalists for members of the U.S. armed services. November 11, 2007 is the fourth Veterans Day since the invasion of Iraq. Veterans Day was originally called Armistice Day and recognized the end of the Great War in 1918 (World War I). It also falls in the middle of a dozen ceasefires and resolutions of international conflicts. More and more Americans are tired of this war and dread what could be the invasion of Iran. However, the situation in Iraq is complicated and confusing. There are no easy answers. And many feel stuck. There are many congregants who have ties to the military and the situation in Iraq. And others who believe it is our responsibility to stay the course until the job is complete.

Whether our political and moral views lead us to support or oppose the war, as Unitarian Universalists, it is important that we give our care and respect to those who have risked their lives—and their families. We owe them no less. It is unfortunate that early in the war, the soldiers were used as a political football. Many were given a choice, either support the troops or oppose the war. But we know that is not true. It is never too late to support the troops while opposing the war. We can begin by learning more about what these families have or will go through. Then we can determine how we might be helpful as individuals and congregations.

## **Know what people are going through**

**Facing deployment, service members, spouses and family.** As a family waits for news of deployment, an emotional cycle begins. At first, for some, there may be a short period of fear and anger as the news is received. As departure moves closer, a period of withdrawal may occur, as separation is anticipated. Sadness and loneliness are usually followed by some adjustment. Roles in the family will change, as the remaining spouse takes on full responsibility for the family. There is ongoing fear about the safety of the deployed service member. Today, many more women are being deployed which may have significant challenges for families.

**Extended deployment.** In the current conflict, deployments are being extended beyond original expectations. This has had a serious impact on many reservists and National Guard members who may be facing significant job and income loss. Uncertainty about length of deployment is adding significantly to the stress on active duty soldiers.

**Re-entry.** While a large percentage, more than 85%, of veterans return home without serious physical injury, re-entry to civilian life can be very difficult. Family roles need to be renegotiated. Reunion with ones spouse and children can be complicated. Traumatic stress, depression and emotional withdrawal can complicate the adjustment. There may be problems related to employment and finances.

## **Types of injuries**

**PTSD.** It has been reported that between 15% (NEJM) and 30% (NCPTSD) of those who have spent time in war zones have post traumatic stress disorder. The diagnosis can be complicated by

personal history. Symptoms include, nightmares, flashbacks, difficulty sleeping, distressing memories, anxiety, panic, anger, emotional numbing. Secondary symptoms include abuse of drugs or alcohol, isolation, shame, guilt, and depression. Part of the problem for some is accepting the diagnosis. It is important to understand that this illness is not an indication of weakness or a personal failing. Treatments include group therapy, which tends to be effective, and use of some antidepressants. Veterans' Affairs (VA) clinicians now have considerable experience in diagnosing and treating PTSD. Milder stress reactions are more common than PTSD.

**Physical injuries are especially significant in the Iraq war.** Many people who would have died in previous wars are being saved, but remain very seriously disabled. While the survival rate for a serious injury in Korea or Vietnam was 3 to 1, in Iraq and Afghanistan it is 16 to 1 (Jeff Donn and Kimberly Hefling, AP 9/29/07). The need for long term rehabilitation far outstrips the current availability resources. It is predicted that there will be a deluge of disabled veterans coming out of this war. (Scott Shane, NYT 12/16/04). Most injuries faced in the war are not the physical amputees we have grown accustomed to but invisible brain injuries. These injuries can cause erratic and sometimes confusing behavior.

### **Other issues**

Addictions, employment and benefits are all areas where many returning vets need support and referral. The legacy of Viet Nam haunts us, with homeless and unemployed vets who might have done better with a more caring society and community. Already, over 600 Iraq and Afghan war vets have sought homeless care from Veterans' Affairs (Fairweather, Iraq Veterans Project, 12/06). Reintegration holds many challenges. Perhaps as citizens and people of faith we can be more involved in both volunteering and advocating for funds for the needs many vets face.

### **Spirituality**

Most of us, thankfully, are never confronted with having to shoot or be shot at, kill or be killed. Such an experience is bound to have repercussions in ones spiritual life: understanding of oneself, the limits of what one can endure. If God is important in ones life, what does this mean? How does someone understand such experiences ethically? Perhaps people who have had to face such ultimate situations can teach the rest of us about humility, survival, and compassion.

### **What we can do**

Those who serve us in the military deserve gratitude, honor and respect. While there may be problems associated with being a veteran, there should also be a sense of welcome and support for them in the home community. Here are some tips for reaching out; but please know that the needs of veterans and military families will vary considerably. Some will want to talk about the experience and want support; some will not. The important thing is to make the offer and be willing to follow through. Veterans may tend to isolate themselves as they are struggling with re-entry, our task is to reach out and make them welcome. Here are some tips for reaching out:

- Thank veterans for their service. Ask them how they are doing (i.e., a simple question that can lead to a either a short response or a long one).
- Ask military families in your congregation what support they need.
- If you have had arguments with friends or family in the military, reach out to them. Ask them if there's a way to support them.

- If there is a member of your community who is being deployed, create a support team for their family as well as the soldier before, during and after deployment. Care packages of food, toiletries, books and DVDs are a great way to support your soldier.
- Many UU military members have blogs with touching and insightful entries from the front and home.
- The UUA has established a Committee on Military Ministry with policies on chaplaincy and support, they may be able to help.
- Reach out to local chapters of Veterans Against the Iraq War (<http://www.vaiw.org/vet/index.php>) and Military Families Speak Out (<http://www.mfso.org/>)

In the end, we are really just talking about hospitality and support. Veterans and their families are, in the end, just people. The best way to support is to be open, responsive and accountable. Enter relationships and conversations in a spirit of curiosity. Sensitivity and respect is crucial, but does not require censoring the actions or beliefs of the congregation.

### **Sources and resources**

Local vet centers (see [www.va.gov](http://www.va.gov)) would be a place to begin for information about support services of all kinds. Much of the information here was gathered from the National Center for PTSD ([www.ncptsd.org](http://www.ncptsd.org)), which is a link on the VA website. The local chapters of the American Legion, American Red Cross, Boys & Girls Clubs of America, BPO Elks of the USA, Camp Fire USA, National 4-H Council, National Fraternal Congress of America, The Salvation Army, U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and YMCA of the USA are among leading community service organizations providing ways for volunteers to help local military families.

This document was created by the UUA Washington Office for Advocacy on behalf of the Unitarian Universalist Association. It utilizes research gathered in 2004, 2005 and 2007. Information, including statistics and web addresses are subject to change.