



## Why is the Issue of Arts in Health, Healing and Wellness Important to the Military?

- More than **two million U.S. troops** have been deployed in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF, War in Afghanistan), Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation New Dawn (OND) since 2001. There have been **6,644 US fatalities** and more than **48,000 US wounded** in recent conflicts.
- The nature of these conflicts is historically unprecedented—America's all-volunteer force has endured **extended and multiple deployments, exposure to nontraditional combat** (e.g., use of improvised explosive devices) and **shortened time at home between deployments**.
- While the combat death rate has decreased overall, there has been an **increase in the number of service members returning home who suffer from both physical and psychological traumas**, including post-traumatic stress, loss of a limb, brain injuries and depression.
- There are over **22 million veterans in the U.S. today**.
- The challenges facing military servicemembers, veterans and their families require more than medical treatment to resolve.

*“With the varied operational demands of these missions, it is crucial that the military develop, maintain and promote the health and wellness of the total force (service members, their families, civilians and support staff) to sustain force readiness and preservation.”*

--Defense Centers of Excellence

## How Can the Arts Help?

**The Arts play a role in helping the military sustain and promote troop force and family *readiness, resilience, retention, and for veterans, the successful reintegration into family and community life.***

### READINESS

**National security**—Stress adversely affects readiness, and military readiness is a critical issue with implications for national security.

- Stress is not an issue that affects servicemembers only after they have experienced a trauma. From enlistment onward, stress is a daily part of military life.
- How servicemembers deal with stress before trauma determines outcomes after a traumatic event.
- Arts interventions offer powerful tools for coping with stress and can help build coping mechanisms to benefit individuals throughout their lifetime.

**Navigating common transitions**—A variety of common transitions, such as enlistment, training, or deployment, have an impact on individuals' cognitive and behavioral outcomes.

- The arts can help build resiliency pre-deployment and for the deployed, including strengthening family bonds.
- Family members who participate in arts activities in a group session with other family members feel less isolated and receive the extra benefit of informal support from others in a similar situation.

### RESILIENCE

**Combating psychological and physical trauma**—Servicemembers returning from conflicts often experience psychological and physical traumas, including post-traumatic stress (PTS), traumatic brain injuries (TBI), and depression.

- A growing body of evidence indicates that providing service members and veterans with opportunities to express themselves and share their stories can help them cope with PTS, TBI and depression.
- Expressive arts therapies can help individuals sleep better, lessen their depression and anxiety, improve their impulse control and concentration, and can serve as a protective factor in suicide prevention.
- Arts interventions as part of *Environmental Enrichment (EE) therapy*, encourage visuo-spatial, cognitive, social, and skilled motor exploration which enhances neuroplasticity; improves recovery of function; increases brain resilience to injury; and reduces stress and anxiety.



## RETENTION

**Encouraging treatment when needed**—About half of service members or veterans who need treatment for mental health conditions hesitate to seek it.

- Servicemembers may fear the stigma associated with mental health issues or believe that receiving mental health treatment might jeopardize their careers, especially for those concerned with obtaining or maintaining a security clearance. In a RAND Corporation study of returning service members from Iraq and Afghanistan, more than one-third reported that they believed their coworkers would have less confidence in them if they found out they had sought help.
- Individuals also may avoid seeking treatment because of the treatment itself. Some may worry about the side effects of medication. For others, the exposure-based therapies typically used to treat PTSD operate in stark contrast to the individual's desire to avoid circumstances that might trigger the trauma.
- The arts can address one of the reasons a service member or veteran might avoid seeking treatment. Unlike exposure-based therapies, when using the arts, individuals can experience and/or express their thoughts and feelings without necessarily having to talk about or directly confront the trauma, if they are not ready.

## REINTEGRATION

**Aiding in the transition from military to civilian life**—One of the most difficult experiences is the transition from military to civilian life.

- Approximately 14 percent of service members returning from Iraq or Afghanistan meet criteria for depression. Yet, depression is often not considered a combat-related injury.
- Left untreated, depression can increase the chance of risky behaviors (such as drug or alcohol abuse or addiction), damage relationships, cause problems on the job, make it difficult to overcome serious illnesses, or can even lead to suicide.
- The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs reports that while the relative number of veterans who die by suicide has decreased slightly since 1999, the absolute number of veterans who have taken their lives continues to increase. Two-thirds of veterans who take their lives are 50 years or older. According to the U.S. Department of Defense, as many as 349 active service members committed suicide in 2012, compared to 301 in 2011 and 298 the year before.
- Arts interventions can be a form of *behavioral activation (BA)*—the systematic scheduling and monitoring of pleasurable or reinforcing activities—which can have significant antidepressant effect. Dopamine, the body's feel-good chemical, is released when an individual is engaged in active or passive pleasurable activities (e.g., painting, listening to music). BA has been found to be at least as effective as pharmacotherapy when treating severely depressed patients.



**For a full list of citations and references, download *Arts, Health and Well-Being—White Paper and Framing a National Plan for Action* at:**

**[www.ArtsAcrossTheMilitary.org](http://www.ArtsAcrossTheMilitary.org)**

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**NATIONAL INITIATIVE FOR  
ARTS & HEALTH IN THE MILITARY**



## What Can Be Done? Framing a National Plan for Action

The seminal report from the **National Initiative for Arts & Health in the Military**, *Arts, Health and Well-Being across the Military Continuum—White Paper and Framing a National Plan for Action* (October, 2013) recommends several strategies in the areas of **research**, **practice** and **policy** of specific interest to military, veterans and family support groups that, when undertaken in collaboration with the civilian sector, can improve access to the arts as tools for health, healing and wellness across the military continuum. Summarized below, these actions include:

### Research

Researchers can be encouraged and supported to investigate the many ways arts programming and creative arts therapies can have an impact—physically, emotionally, economically, educationally—on the lives of service members, veterans, families, healthcare providers, and the community.

- **Support a broad research agenda.** Current federal interagency efforts to invest in and broaden the arts and health research agenda in the military should be expanded. Both quantitative and qualitative research methods should be supported and expanded to include military families and caregivers.
- **Conduct a needs assessment and benchmark research.** A comprehensive needs assessment can determine and address needs, or “gaps,” between current conditions and desired conditions, or “wants.” Identifying best practice will help both old and new programs and services determine what and where improvements are needed.
- **Promote linkages and information sharing.** Researchers need to share what they are doing with others and create linkages in their areas of expertise. Military researchers would benefit from collaborations with creative arts therapists, artists in healthcare and arts groups to measure the impact of arts participation and engagement.

### Practice

Arts and health programs and services are thriving in military treatment facilities, veterans hospitals, and communities across the nation, yet many servicemembers, veterans, their families, and caregivers who could benefit from such services are not receiving them.

- **Person and family-centered for life.** Arts and health experiences in the military are most effective when they are person-centered, family-centered, and cover the entire lifespan.
- **Arts at every stage—from healing to wellness.** Artists and performers, artists in healthcare, and creative arts therapists can be employed to offer multiple kinds of experiences at varying levels of engagement along a healing continuum—from distraction to stress reduction to pain relief to remembering a sense of self to regaining hope.
- **Access for all.** Members of the National Guard and the Reserves and their families have special challenges as they lack the support structure that living on or near a military base can provide. The arts can be valuable in bridging issues of isolation. With its close ties to the community, the Guard is often more accessible to collaborations.

### Policy

Military and veterans policies must reflect arts programming and creative arts therapies services for the true integration of arts and health programming to occur across the military continuum.

- **Formal recognition.** Arts should be formally recognized as part of military and veteran healthcare systems. Comprehensive policies for the arts and creative arts therapies can be put in place to promote the physical, emotional, and overall health of the force as early as in enlistment to help assure military readiness.
- **Strategically placed.** Policies should position arts and health programs and services advantageously within the system in order to support patient- and family-centered care, staff well-being, and transitioning the patient to post-medical center lives. Locating creative arts therapists within physical therapy, occupational therapy, rehabilitation medicine, or behavioral health departments would allow them to be able to plan thoughtful interventions based on assessment that would be part of treatment plans.
- **Adequately resourced.** Congressional backing and legislative action can provide a federal mandate for the development and implementation of arts initiatives, e.g. designating funding through the **Department of Defense**, **TRICARE**, and the **U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs** for demonstration projects for veterans and active military to access cost-effective creative arts in healthcare treatment and programming.