

SUPPORTING OUR VETERANS – A COMMUNITY RESPONSIBILITY

By Barbara Bartle, Lincoln Community Foundation

This week our nation takes time to remember the thousands of military men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice to protect our freedom. Memorial Day is a very somber and special day, filled with emotion and gratitude for the members of our armed forces. However, it is just one day. The reality is, serving in the military is a 24/7 job, raising the question – “What can we as citizens and communities do to support our troops throughout the year?”

The Lincoln Community Foundation was extremely fortunate to recently host someone with an answer. Colonel David Sutherland is a highly-decorated military soldier who now serves as special assistant to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The Colonel has been traveling the country as part of a 50 States in 50 Weeks campaign. He reconnects with men and women in uniform to see how they are doing, and meets with community leaders to discuss how every citizen can help returning service members and their families.

Colonel Sutherland knows first-hand how important this is, having suffered post-traumatic stress disorder following several tours of duty in Iraq. He reminded us that since 9/11 our military has been at war for 10 straight years. This affects not just active military troops, but tens of thousands of National Guard and Reservists called to active duty multiple times.

He said the signature wounds of Iraq and Afghanistan are post-traumatic stress or traumatic brain injuries, which often manifest themselves in unexpected ways. Many families struggle to return to what would be considered a “normal home life.” Communities must help develop meaningful and holistic connections for service members to achieve effective reintegration into civilian society. Addressing the epidemic of disconnectedness requires the creation of significant human connections. Both peer-to-peer and mentorship relationships can be critical models for successfully creating long-lasting and meaningful connections.

While government programs are tasked with meeting the needs of current and former service members, government agencies cannot and should not be the only answer. For many veterans of combat the best treatment is understanding and support within their local communities. And that is where all of us can play an important role.

Colonel Sutherland spent most of the day talking with religious, civic and not-for-profit leaders, sharing a number of great ideas on what Lincoln area organizations and residents can do to help veterans and their families. Community-based strategies should focus on providing access to education, meaningful employment, physical and mental health care and reintegration skills. Participants were asked to think about what the community could be doing in terms of communication, collaboration and coordination to help meet these needs.

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Colonel Sutherland noted that many challenges for veterans can be due to, or exacerbated by, policy-related barriers at multiple levels and sectors. But when action is initiated at the local level by citizens committed to making a difference, community-based programs can be identified and created quickly to help veterans become positive, contributing members of society.

To honor Colonel Sutherland's visit, the Lincoln Community Foundation established a new Military Support Fund. Grants will be made to not-for-profit organizations in the community to support areas of unmet need for our service members, veterans and their families such as counseling, physical and mental health services, employment and education opportunities.

It is our hope that citizens in Lincoln and throughout our state agree that we can and should do more for our service members and military families. There is immeasurable potential for returning soldiers to become productive leaders and contributors to our state. Veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts live in dozens of Nebraska communities, and I encourage local civic leaders to come together, ask how you can help, and then take action. Together we will build a Nebraska legacy, our promise to our service members, veterans and their families.

How can you help? Employ a veteran. "Adopt" a military family in your neighborhood, church or school. Make a gift to the new Military Support Fund or create one in your community.

For more information contact the Lincoln Community Foundation, 402-474-2345 or www.lcf.org.