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Greater Partnerships With Universities, Other Community Resources Needed to Help Veterans

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Exactly 50 years ago this autumn, just weeks before John F. Kennedy was tragically taken from us, one of his final acts as president was signing the Community Mental Health Act into law. This landmark legislation sought a comprehensive, community-based approach to helping those with mental illness, freeing them from institutions so they could benefit from community-based facilities.

In "a nation as rich in human and material resources as ours," he said, those individuals "need no longer be alien to our affections or beyond the help of our communities."

Today, however, our nation has failed to live up to that vision, particularly as it relates to those most deserving of our gratitude: America's veterans.

Too often, by caring for them primarily at large facilities run by the Department of Veterans Affairs, we aren't able to connect them with existing community resources that may better serve members of our military and reintegrate those returning from service into society. A report issued last year by the VA in fact estimated that 22 veterans committed suicide every day in 2010. These tragic suicides typically result from post-traumatic stress, traumatic brain injuries and any number of other mental ailments we failed to diagnose and properly treat.

As Americans, we have a duty to provide our nation's heroes with the care and resources they need. Health care reform provides an historic opportunity to find new, collaborative approaches that could better serve them.

This can only work if we draw on existing brainpower and resources, forming partnerships with centers of knowledge and research. In his 1963 message to Congress on mental health issues, President Kennedy, in fact, mentioned the importance of increasing "the role of highly qualified universities in the improvement and provision of [these] services."

Southern California is blessed with some of the nation's premier research institutions. UCLA, for example, has many resources for veterans, including the Brain Injury Resource Center -- honored by the U.S. Army -- where breakthrough research led to improvements in the ability to diagnose traumatic brain injury on the battlefield and recover from it, as well as the creation of a national institute dedicated to advancing understanding of the invisible wounds veterans suffer.

Such partnerships are the reason we established One Mind for Research, a non-profit dedicated to raising awareness of these issues and finding solutions. Too often, homelessness -- particularly by veterans -- is a direct result of untreated illness and a lack of proper care. Left to linger, homelessness devolves into crime or much worse.

The very institutionalization President Kennedy sought to end 50 years ago in fact lives on. In Los Angeles, Sheriff Lee Baca just this past summer openly called his county jail "the nation's largest mental hospital," which has about 15,000 inmates.

By failing them, we also fail the families destroyed by these issues and, on an even larger scale, our society. The solution truly requires a holistic approach, so that we as a community can heal their mind, body and spirit.

The solution, locally and nationally, lies in building bridges between veterans and existing community resources -- not constructing walls that separate our veterans from the communities that can embrace them.

As we celebrate this Veteran's Day, we must remember that merely waving the flag and throwing money at the VA simply will not help our veterans. Money is never enough. This can only come from first promoting greater understanding of all they've truly lost.

Far too little progress has been made since President Kennedy laid out his vision 50 years ago. Now is the time for us to come together to find the causes and cures for brain disorders that ail so many. Our veterans and their needs -- like the needs of all those suffering from mental illness -- can no longer be alien to our affections.

This post is part of a special Huffington Post series, "Invisible Casualties," in which we shine a spotlight on suicide-prevention efforts within the military. To see all the posts in the series, click [here](#).

If you or someone you know would like to contribute to our series, send an email to impactblogs@huffingtonpost.com.

And please, if you or someone you know needs help, call the national crisis line for the military and veterans, 1-800-273-8255, or send a text to 838255.