

Families struggling to care for wounded veterans, says University of Alberta study

As Canada engages in overseas military action and severely wounded soldiers are sent home, more needs to be done to help their struggling families, according to a new report released today by the University of Alberta.

The families of young wounded veterans released from active duty with severe disabilities are suffering poorer financial, social and health outcomes than any other group of caregivers studied by their team, said Norah Keating and Janet Fast, authors of the study, and professors in the Department of Human Ecology at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Canada.

“These young veterans present a whole new phenomenon. There haven’t been many since the Second World War or the Korean War, and we need to address their needs,” Keating said. While government agencies have traditionally focused on helping caregivers of frail, aging veterans, “now we’ve got disabilities happening much earlier in life. Families have to cope for 20 or more years,” said Keating.

The report, titled *Wounded Veterans, Wounded Families*, revealed high levels of need for these severely disabled veterans and their families, many of whom are also trying to earn a living and raise young children. “These are families that have been dealt a real blow. Most of the men aren’t going to be in the labour force anymore.”

A Canada-wide survey of 142 wounded soldiers and 115 of their main caregivers conducted by the University of Alberta in partnership with Veterans Affairs Canada, revealed that they and their families often suffer acute, long-term financial losses, a lack of public support services and emotional stresses.

The soldiers surveyed were aged 25 to 65, suffered 78 to 100 per cent full body impairment, and most (85 per cent) also battled lasting emotional, psychiatric or psychological conditions. Almost 55 per cent of their spouses reported spending five or more hours each day helping the veterans and almost 40 per cent of spouses had been providing support for 10 to 19 years.

As well, family finances were hurt by the cumulative effect of lost wages and benefits and extra expenses. More than 40 per cent of spouses said they were earning less money and experiencing financial hardship and 35 per cent worried about providing for their families’ financial futures. Medications, travel and transportation for the veteran were extra expenses also borne by 60 per cent of the caregivers, and 16 per cent of them had spent more than \$5,000 on those expenses in the past year.

The situation also took a toll on spouses’ health; the respondents reported that they were exhausted, sleep-deprived and lacked time for personal activities. Fifty-three per cent of caregivers said they had less time for other family members and that these relationships were strained.

The study, funded by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, has been presented to Veterans Affairs Canada with recommendations on how to increase service for severely disabled veterans and their families. The suggestions include:

- Compensation and benefits that flow directly and immediately to caregivers
- Focusing on the needs of the family as well as the veteran
- Developing ways to help with caregiving so that the spouse can enter the workforce

The University of Alberta in Edmonton is one of the top 100 teaching and research universities in the world serving some 37,000 students with more than 11,000 faculty and staff. Founded a century ago, the university has an annual budget in excess of \$1 billion and attracts more than \$480 million in external research funding. It offers close to 400 undergraduate, graduate and professional programs in 18 faculties.

For more information on *Wounded Veterans, Wounded Families* report, contact:

Link to the *Wounded Veterans, Wounded Families* report:

<http://www.ales2.ualberta.ca/hecol/hcic/>

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