Collaboration - working together toward a common goal - is the only way to adequately meet the needs of the military’s wounded, ill and injured, their families and caregivers. That was an overarching sentiment echoed by attendees at a roundtable discussion, jointly sponsored by the Military Officers Association of America (MOAA) and Zeiders Enterprises, Inc. and hosted by The Chicago School of Professional Psychology on January 12, 2011. Leaders from the Department of Defense (DoD) and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) led the first panel discussion on DoD/VA Collaboration and representatives from the USO, Fisher House and Warrior Gateway followed in a second panel discussion on public-private partnerships.

Presentations and follow-on dialog led many participants to voice agreement that while much has been done, there still are a number of the existing challenges to effective lifecycle care for the nation’s wounded warriors and their families, requiring significant changes to policy, case/record management, cultures, and interagency/program communications and outreach.

The DoD, VA and Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) highlighted a number of best practices pointing to examples of successful cooperation; however, there remain technical, legislative, and systemic barriers to full collaboration on all sides. Some in attendance suggested that issues of jurisdictional boundaries, legal and contractual considerations and the Congressional process itself will continue to hinder some efforts. However, some in the DoD see the current levels of commitment by both the public and government leaders as a rare opportunity. One attendee said, “…the window is open now and we need to galvanize resources for a sense of urgency…and move from a static paper-based system to a life-cycle approach.” One such move towards that...

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**Warrior Family Roundtable Highlights**

- Communication is key to establishing effective partnerships and transforming institutional cultures to institutions of cooperation
- Complement existing efforts and facilitate information—at the end of the day the focus must be on wounded warriors and their caregivers-families
- Build a common understanding of the burdens of military service
- Approach issues with a deep understanding of military culture
- Accept that the challenges to care are difficult to identify/address/assess
- Expand definitions of care to be more inclusive of families and caregivers who often are the implementers of care regimens
- Find innovative ways to span silos of information/bureaucracies to facilitate collaboration, understanding, and lifecycle approach
- Collaborative efforts must take into consideration that organizations have different cultures, missions, structures, and requirements
- Web presence/technology is no substitute for person-to-person help
- Develop a ‘requirements’ process to better identify warrior and caregiver needs and metrics to evaluate support
- Define ‘transitions’ to include all aspects of the warrior/veteran’s journey, including caregivers
- Improve medical/personnel record transparency and portability
- Measure policy implementation and effectiveness
goal could be implementation of the suggestion to have all new recruits register with the VA - something not currently required. Other suggestions included combining the DoD and VA medical record systems to improve interoperability and transparency, aligning and improving personnel processes like disability evaluation systems, uniformity of policies, practices and paperwork, and improving all facets of interpersonal and organizational communications.

Developing the Virtual Lifetime Record is still a long-term goal, but overcoming issues like the difference between VISTA, the facility-based VA medical records system and the DoD ALTA medical records system continue to vex efforts. Even verifying identity can be problematic. While some progress has been made, ensuring that health care providers get the information they need continues to be a focus. One attendee cautioned against “…an overreliance on electronic communication and suggested doing what had to be done, even if it means using less sophisticated but still effective techniques like …using telephones and hand carrying records.”

The key point was that the lack of a common automated system should not prevent necessary interpersonal communications. Attendees said that transitioning care, whether because of changes in duty status, moving and/or rotation of care providers, often exacerbates family and caregiver frustrations. Family caregivers emphasized that navigating privacy rules, resistance of providers to communicate with anyone but the injured member, or a lack of adequate care plans create major challenges for family caregivers. Communication with family or other caregivers, one attendee said, is essential because they often are the ones who implement doctors’ recovery plans.

Cautioning that restrictive definitions and classifications can be counter effective, one attendee suggested, “…don’t differentiate between wounded warriors and other sick and injured service members – these families are just as much in crisis and in need.”

One family member asked that officials adopt a federal Power of Attorney, recognized by all agencies, to prevent difficulties associated with conflicting agency requirements and ensure more effective transition care plans. Another attendee summarized the role of family members by saying, “The care system could view the wounded warrior as the patient and the family caregiver as the client”.

Delivering the best care possible in the future will require a combination of determining what programs are effective, what policies are currently enacted and then using the requirements processes to shape services that will effectively help families, patients and caregivers.

However, ensuring changes translate into seamless transitions will require cooperation of all parties involved. That will require leveraging partner-relationships and best practices to meet needs and fill gaps in care and services. Meeting organizers thanked attendees for their commitment and leadership and for their common understanding of the burdens of service.

Sponsors expressed a hope that this first of three planned meetings scheduled this year would deliver “solutions that will equal the sacrifices” of those who have served during the last nine years of continuous deployments and extended conflict. The MOAA-Zeiders Warrior Family Roundtable is an outgrowth of the 4th Annual Defense Forum (DFW) that examined the transformational effects of extended war on military forces and their families.