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## BRONX BORO NEWS

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**BE OUR GUEST: ALICE PSIRAKIS, social worker**

## Here to help our soldiers adjust from the combat zone

**A**s a social worker and a former captain in the U.S. Army, I am well aware of the readjustments a soldier must make when he or she returns home from war after long months of separation from family.

Mobilizing a community response to assist with this transition is our societal responsibility.

With 30,000 to 50,000 veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan to New York State, and one in five showing symptoms of combat-related stress, according to a recent report by the RAND Corp. The Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services, a beneficiary of UJA-Federation of New York, recognizes the need for mental health services to address these concerns.

To that end, it has created a free counseling program called Home Again: Veterans and Families Initiative, designed to help veterans and their families readjust to life at home.

Home Again, a program within the JBFCS Center for Trauma Program Innovation, is actively engaged in a network of collaborations with local and national agencies.

Many veterans who return home strug-

gle to make the transition from the combat zone back to civilian life.

Oftentimes they are unprepared for the emotional battle that ensues upon return home. While not every soldier suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder, almost all of them will experience readjustment and reintegration issues, either at home with loved ones, or in their workplaces.

Making the psychological switch from the combat zone to the home front means learning to let go of wartime tactics. Anger and rage are useful techniques in conquering your enemies, but veterans quickly learn that these are not too popular when dealing with their families and co-workers.

Behavioral changes including short-temperedness and irritability compounded by nightmares, familial tensions and possible spiritual crises can make the transition even more challenging.

Though most of the veterans I work with tell me that that they want to erase what happened, unfortunately, they must deal with the reality that they can never forget what transpired in the combat zone.

The healing actually begins when they learn to co-exist with their painful memories, reducing their suffering over time.

The JBFCS, along with the New York State Health Foundation, which provided the funding, has set up program locations in Pelham and Riverdale, although services are available to any returning Iraq or Afghanistan veteran living in the five boroughs and Westchester County.

**H**ome Again is also there to support military families while their loved ones are deployed.

In addition to being free of charge, the confidential program has no insurance requirements and welcomes not only spouses, but anyone with whom the veterans are in a significant relationship — unmarried companions, children, parents, siblings and relatives.

One of the things I hear repeatedly is how returning veterans feel like "outsiders" upon returning home.

They don't anticipate homecoming being a difficult process, and the Home Again program is here to help make that transition a bit easier.

*Alice Psirakis, a licensed clinical social worker, is the director of Home Again. She also supervised the U.S. Army's Behavioral Health Services Clinic at Fort Dix, N.J., from 2004 to 2007. She can be reached at (646) 957-0853.*

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