

Oklahoma faith groups reach out to military and their families

Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Oklahoma is among faith groups aiming to help members of the military and their families.

By Carla Hinton | Published: May 26, 2012

The Rev. Tim Fuller knows full well the needs of returning military veterans and their families.

Fuller, a Roman Catholic priest, said he served in the U.S. Air Force from 1977 to 1991 and has served as a wing chaplain for Air National Guard 137 for several years.

The pastor of St. Philip Neri Catholic Church in Midwest City just returned from a six-month deployment in Landstuhl, Germany.

The priest is part of a new Archdiocese of Oklahoma initiative that seeks to aid members of the military and their families.

"We've got all kinds of resources to help returning vets, but we can always use more, especially in outlying areas," Fuller said.

"Sometimes with our vets, they don't want to reach out for anything, so the challenge for parishes is to be welcoming and making people aware of this."

As part of the initiative, which kicked off in April, archdiocesan parishes received informational packets designed for Memorial Day weekend and beyond.

Mary Diane Steltenkamp, who is coordinating the program through Catholic Charities, said the packets also were distributed in recognition of May as Military Appreciation Month. She said the material sent out this week encourage parishes to come alongside military members as they rejoin their families and the community at large.

Steltenkamp said the archdiocese's initiative brings parishes together with Army OneSource to try to connect congregations with military members in need of assistance. Steltenkamp said the archdiocese held a one-day seminar in April to discuss the issue with priests such as Fuller and other parish leaders.

Steltenkamp said the packets were sent out because Memorial Day weekend seemed to be a great time to touch base with parishes again.

She said each packet includes a Memorial Day prayer that can be said at Mass, along with other helpful information.

Support for 'silent' sufferers

Paula McBride, community support coordinator with Oklahoma and Arkansas Army OneSource, said the aid and support from the faith community is vital. She said Army OneSource is a U.S. Secretary of the Army initiative designed to provide comprehensive community support and service for soldiers and their families.

She said many returning soldiers come back with physical injuries, but there are other injuries — "silent injuries" — that often manifest themselves in changes in behavior that can include substance abuse, self-destructive or violent behavior, social withdrawal, unexplained anger and an inability to maintain close relationships.

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McBride said family members, in turn, often feel a sense of insecurity, loss, ineffectiveness and confusion about the changes in their loved one.

"Soldiers are returning home with emotional and spiritual wounds that are harder to identify and more difficult to treat," McBride said.

She said both the soldier and his or her family members may also suffer what she calls spiritual injuries such as questioning their faith, hopelessness and guilt.

McBride said faith-based organizations can play an important role in the spiritual and emotional healing of these military members and their families.

She said churches can hold a ministry event to educate the congregation about the needs of the military, and they can welcome and embrace military members and their families in the congregation. She said other ideas to provide support include hosting a welcome home event for soldiers and their families, coordinating a group to make special items for deploying soldiers and adopting a unit and donating items for deploying soldiers.

Another faith-based initiative

The archdiocese is not alone in reaching out to military members and their families.

Robin Jones, director of the state Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, said her office also has teamed with Army OneSource, along with the Oklahoma National Guard, to recruit people in the community to help military families. She said the project is particularly seeking people from churches.

Jones said the individuals will be placed on regional resource teams that will be formed to provide resources and community connections to help veterans, military members and their families access services in their area.

"Our office is helping them connect with who is out there — sort of casting the net," she said.

Jones said out of nine states with soldiers returning from deployment, more than 3,300 are returning to Oklahoma.

"That's nearly as many returning to Oklahoma as the other eight states combined," she said.

"Our citizens have the privilege and responsibility to help honor and serve these returning soldiers and their families. These regional resource teams offer a great opportunity to help in a community setting."

Read more: <http://newsok.com/oklahoma-faith-groups-reach-out-to-military-and-their-families/article/3678652#ixzz1xVsMpTMZ>