

BOARD OF DIRECTORS, MAY 2006
NEEDS OF MEN AND WOMEN IN THE UNITED STATES AND CANADIAN
ARMED FORCES

All Jews are responsible for one another.
Babylonian Talmud, *Sh'vuot* 39a

Issue

Needs of men and women in the United States and Canadian armed forces at home and abroad during and following their terms of active service.

Background

Press accounts from Iraq and Afghanistan and complaints by some members of the military and their families have reported a lack of adequate training before initial deployment and insufficient resources for well being and protection once in the war zone. In addition there is a need for a stronger Jewish chaplaincy presence for United States military personnel.

Training and Equipment- Reports from the General Accountability Office together with the assessments by the Department of Defense revealed that the deterioration and lack of modernization of training ranges has jeopardized the safety of military personnel. Numerous stories in the United States and Canada have indicated insufficient as well as inadequate armored equipment for the troops in the front lines. Some local communities as well as the families of those serving have supplied their troops with equipment such as bulletproof vests and clothing. Controversy regarding the adequacy of protective covering continues, although the United States Army no longer permits the use of gear not issued by the military. Initially, Canadian troops deployed to Afghanistan for peacekeeping and other UN operations were equipped with green camouflage uniforms, making them obvious to snipers in the desert environment. The color of the uniforms was subsequently changed.

Mental Health - On May 14, 2006 the *Hartford Courant* broke a story based on its investigation and analysis of military recruitment, screening, and treatment of United States troops with serious mental illness. Twenty-two soldiers serving in Iraq committed suicide, many of whom had long-standing histories of psychological disorders. The article notes that a mental health assessment of all deploying troops was ordered by Congress in 1997. Nonetheless, fewer than 1 in 300 deploying soldiers were seen by a mental health professional. In addition some troops who had developed Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder following service in Iraq are being redeployed to the war zone. Lastly, the *Courant's* investigation also revealed that, contrary to military regulations, some seriously depressed or anxious troops in the war zone are being put on powerful drugs with little or no medical monitoring or counseling. Nor are they being evacuated. Treatment of troops returning from Afghanistan with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder has also been an issue in Canada.

Support for Families - To address the issues of jobs for returning guardsmen and reservists the Military Officers Association of America is working with the National Committee for Employer Support of the Guard and Reserves to inform them of their rights under the Uniformed Services Employment and Re-employment Rights Act. The US Congress enacted a substantial increase in the cash lump-sum death benefit available to survivors of military personnel killed in Iraq or Afghanistan. The benefit on the Servicemembers Group Life Insurance was also raised. In Canada, concerns regarding pensions are being considered by members of Parliament at this time.

Pastoral Support for Jewish Troops in the Field - Reports from Jewish and military personnel and from families have highlighted the need for a stronger Jewish pastoral presence for the Jewish men and women in the military, at home, and abroad. The Jewish War Veterans of the USA. claims that Jewish participation in the military is higher than the two percent of Jews in the American population at large. Currently in the three branches of the military there are only twenty-nine active duty Jewish chaplains, about one percent of the total number of chaplains from all religions. For example, at the present time there are neither rabbis nor rabbinic students among the 120 new members of the Army's chaplain training program. There is also a need of resources for celebrating Jewish holidays. Some sisterhoods and congregations have sent items but there is need for greater support.

Veterans' Needs - Reports indicate that veterans are increasingly losing benefits because the Veterans Administration (VA) is under-funded and they must fight dispiriting bureaucratic battles to get their care and benefits. The VA is being challenged to improve access to health care to its enrolled populations, including a growing elderly veteran population and a population of new veterans. The VA needs to ensure that its enrolled veteran population has access to quality health care that is both timely and convenient. There is also a need to make rehabilitation of the visually impaired and services for those needing mental health care more widely available.

Resolution

In response to the call for assistance by the members of the Armed Forces and their families, Women of Reform Judaism calls on its United States and Canadian affiliates to:

1. Urge their senators and representatives or members of Parliament to support efforts to ensure that the men and women in the US Armed Forces, including the National Guard and Reserves, or Canadian military and reserves have adequate training and the proper equipment for their deployment in all war and peacekeeping zones; job security or pension benefits upon completion of their service; and death gratuity and life insurance benefits at least at current levels;
2. Alert their members and congregants to military noncompliance with congressional orders and military regulations regarding recruitment, screening and treatment of military personnel with mental illness. Urge Congress and

Pentagon leaders to monitor United States military practices and require compliance with existing orders and regulations;

3. Alert their members and their congregations and communities to the shortage of Jewish chaplains in the US Armed Forces and the special needs of Jewish service members at home and abroad and encourage them to undertake programs of personal connections through letter writing, Uniongrams, and emails; sending individual packages overseas through the Jewish Community Centers Association of North America Jewish Chaplains Council; and even the adoption of a base or unit so Jewish servicemen and servicewomen receive packages and greetings throughout the year, but particularly during the Jewish holidays wherever in the world they may be;
4. Encourage Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion and the Central Conference of American Rabbis to inform students and clergy of the need for more Jewish military chaplains;
5. Encourage rabbis, cantors and educators to explore the pastoral needs of Jewish military personnel and their families located in the vicinity of the congregation and to follow the protocol to provide the necessary assistance; and
6. Advocate with their elected officials at the local, state, provincial and federal levels to ensure the availability of adequate funding and health services for all servicemen, servicewomen and veterans, to provide:
 - a. acute care and rehabilitative services, including services for mental disabilities, such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder for returnees from all conflicts;
 - b. testing and tracking of veterans for physical and mental health problems, including those related to their exposure to depleted uranium;
 - c. long term care, both institutional and non-institutional;
 - d. meaningful, timely and continuing support for veterans with disabilities; and
 - e. sufficient numbers of health care providers at all levels to insure acceptable standards of care.