

## **Past Panel: Veteran-Specific Mental Health Services**

**Reflections:** *On July 19<sup>th</sup>, 2018 NAMI Multnomah held an Evening with the Experts panel discussion on Veteran-specific mental health services. The panel featured a variety of perspectives: many of the speakers were Veterans themselves, while others were family members of Veterans, and some were involved in Veteran support or healthcare organizations. Many fell into multiple categories.*

*The panelists spoke to the differences between Veteran and civilian mental health. They noted that many Veterans' mental health challenges and their reactions to those challenges stem from being immersed in a military culture. Military culture, many explained, changes not only a person's behavior but their mental processes on a near-constant level. It is difficult for civilians to grasp this ingrained way of thinking and therefore to completely understand the mental health struggle a Vet might be going through, so communication can be a barrier to effective treatment. Because of this divide, it is often comforting for a Vet to receive mental healthcare from a practitioner who is very familiar with Veterans' mental health. Dealing with chronic pain, having to return to a family from which one has been absent, and recovering from moral injury (a phenomenon in which an active duty service member must violate their own moral code) were all listed as Veteran-specific mental health challenges. Finally, many panelists emphasized that the invisibility of being—and struggling as—a Veteran is a difficult challenge. As with any category of healthcare, there are successes and failures in Veteran mental healthcare. Panelists seemed to agree that on the whole, Portland is very lucky to have its VA—perhaps its most-lauded attribute is that it skillfully provides comprehensive physical and mental healthcare in one location.*

*On the other hand, some panelists have found culturally-specific treatment and alternative medicine, such as acupuncture and equine psychotherapy, to be especially effective. While many treatment options exist, panelists find that some services are still missing. Portland does without specific programs, such as Military Sexual Trauma treatment or an inpatient PTSD unit. Some existing services, such as medication management and emergency care, are not adequately but not maximally effective.*

*Though the VA provides a lot, it could not possibly provide everything—and patients and their families would prefer to have more varied options in their community for quality Vet mental healthcare. If the panelists were united on one message, it was*

*that Veteran-specific mental healthcare is extremely important and must be individualized for the highest quality—and, thankfully, that most providers are well-intentioned, and that things seem to be moving in the right direction.*