



Sun Valley Adaptive Sports

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Features

Who do they talk to?

Executive director of SVAS to head national initiative for wounded warriors

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A consortium of high-ranking officials from all four military branches has asked Tom Iselin, executive director of Sun Valley Adaptive Sports (SVAS), to help create a comprehensive national program for reintegrating wounded war veterans into society. SVAS has been at the forefront of serving wounded service members from Iraq and Afghanistan.

"After serving all these service members in our community, I really feel compelled to use my gifts and skills to serve as many as I can," Iselin said.

Iselin cites three main components for the health of wounded service members: recovery, rehabilitation, and reintegration. Recovery involves the initial stages of stabilization, when the wounded service member is brought from the field to a major medical center for treatment. Rehabilitation occurs when the patient receives physical therapy, occupational therapy, mental therapy and recreational therapy. Reintegration, the final step, is achieved when the wounded soldier leaves the hospital and returns to military duty or civilian life.

Iselin's contribution focuses on the final step of reintegration.

The national reintegration plan calls for the coordination of national, state and local organizations to direct resources, from mental health to vocational training to job placement, to the service members' communities.

"We will need the community to be a part of that transition and reintegration," Iselin said. "So what I am doing is making a visual model that will show how these organizations are working together and connected with the circle," providing education, training, vocation, health, family support, faith and recreation.



Tom Iselin and George Schaefer, former director of the Department of Defense Military Severely Injured Center, stand in the Medal of Honor Room, celebrating SVAS' partnership with the Military Severely Injured Center.



"I'm answering this question: 'When they get home, who do they talk to?' Iselin said. "Because in the end these young men and women are going to come back home, and when they do they need to get into this circle of care in order to thrive and to have long-term sustainable health and wellness."

The idea is to get a local organization to be the liaison between the wounded warrior and the community. The organization will then fold in locals like a business owner who offers a job, a mental health provider that offers family therapy, or a nonprofit like SVAS that offers recreational recovery.

"It would be like a clearing house," Iselin said. "Someone will have to take the initiative and have the passion to help manage this stuff, because it cannot be done in Washington. To me, the most logical organization that exists in each city would be Rotary Club or American Legion."

The goal of the program is to create a dependable, long-term holistic approach to restore wounded warriors and their families to the highest possible level of functioning.

"We want them not just to live, but to thrive," Iselin said. "This is the goal that is coming from Washington. Historically, the government has provided health, education and training, but now they want people to do more, to give them the tools and opportunities they need to be the people they have always wanted to be."

"Of all the people I have ever worked with, Tom [Iselin] is just really fabulous," said George Schaefer, a 40-year veteran of the federal government who retired from the office of the Under Secretary of Defense in December 2007 and now sits on the SVAS board.

"He has the niche of SVAS, which is excellent, but he also sees the bigger view, the bigger picture of what is really needed. The DoD has recognized this, that the DoD alone cannot solve the problem. It needs a total American support system that is not just VA, but includes the states and the local communities, because when [the veterans] go back to their communities, that is when they really need the help. We've learned of the consequences of not taking care of our people who come back from fighting regardless of why we went in there."

Since October 2001, about 1.6 million U.S. troops have been deployed to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. According to a report from the Department of Defense, as of June 24, 2008, 4,105 American soldiers have died in Operation Iraqi Freedom and 30,275 have been wounded.

But a recent study jointly conducted by RAND Health and the RAND National Security Research Division, titled "Invisible Wounds of War: Psychological and Cognitive Injuries, Their Consequences, and Services to Assist Recovery" believes those numbers will only grow exponentially over time.

The study cited two particular types of injury that are becoming more and more common: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injuries (TBI). PTSD is a psychological trauma that if untreated can lead to depression, substance abuse and even suicide. TBI is a term used to describe a range of injuries from mild concussions to severe head wounds.

The RAND report estimates that 300,000 service members may suffer some form of PTSD while 19 percent or 320,000 service members may have experienced TBI during deployment. Original estimates for TBI were between 50,000-70,000.



TBI are the most common injuries of the current war. SVAS will focus its programs solely on service members who have suffered TBI or visual impairment, which according to Iselin and Tom Zampieri of the Blind Veterans Association, is another fairly common but overlooked injury associated with TBI.

Iselin's work with the federal government and its reintegration plan, however, will not be limited to just TBI and visual impairment.

