Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation Awards $2 Million in New Grants to Help Veterans and their Families Transition from Military to Civilian Life

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Sesame Workshop, The Mission Continues and Tragedy Assistance Programs for Survivors receive support to provide innovative community-based solutions for veterans, military families and caregivers

NEW YORK--(BUSINESS WIRE)--As America prepares to salute the nation’s military veterans for their service and sacrifice, the Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation today marked Veterans Day by announcing more than $2 million in new grants to support three leading programs that help post-9/11 veterans and their families transition from military to civilian life.

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs estimates that 1 million service members will leave the military between 2011 and 2016, nearly half of them with children under 20 years old. One in two service families will find this transition “difficult,” according to a survey by Blue Star Families.

“For many soldiers and their families, the transition to and from military life can be challenging due to significant changes in their circumstances, which often includes disconnection from existing support networks such as family and friends,” says John Damonti, president, Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation. “The needs of military families range from finding ways for veterans to employ their skills at home to ensuring someone is caring for the caregivers of wounded warriors and helping children deal with the absence of a mother or father. The Foundation is working with leading national organizations to address each of these needs.”

Since its launch in 2011, the Foundation’s Mental Health & Well-Being initiative has supported and advocated for community-based solutions to address the mental health and community integration needs of U.S. military service personnel returning from active duty, their families and the families of the fallen.

Sesame Workshop, the nonprofit organization behind Sesame Street, will receive $750,000 over two years to establish and evaluate the effectiveness of a new initiative - Sesame Street for Families Transitioning from Military to Civilian Life – to support the stability and well-being of transitioning families with children ages 2-8. The initiative, an extension of the Workshop’s ongoing work for military families, will help military families in service and veteran families in the community make an easier transition to civilian life. In addition, the initiative will support activities to engage communities with large veteran populations and the general public to better understand and recognize the service and sacrifice of all veteran family members, especially children.

Sesame Workshop will create multimedia resources featuring the Sesame Street Muppets and will conduct an initial targeted distribution and evaluation in as many as three states with significant military populations. These resources will provide critically needed, research-based messages and strategies via a wide variety of media platforms, including an adaptive web platform and mobile application that can facilitate personalized delivery of content based on a family’s technology and scheduling preferences. The Workshop’s work for military families is a natural extension of Sesame Street’s longstanding efforts to help all children grow up smarter, stronger and kinder.

“For more than 45 years, the Workshop has been focused on building resiliency skills in children to help them achieve their highest potential,” said Dr. Jeanette Betancourt, senior vice president for Community and Family Engagement at Sesame Workshop. “We’ve tackled tough subjects like incarceration and divorce. Today we continue our efforts by providing resources that can help military families transition into civilian life. These new resources not only help children to learn and grow from these situations; they also provide the adults in their lives with strategies and tips to help young children during this challenging time in a way that only Sesame Workshop can – with the help of the Muppets.”

The Mission Continues will receive $705,375 over 18 months to expand its Service Platoon program, which helps veterans who are facing the challenge of adjusting to life at home find new missions in their local communities. The grant also will help The Mission Continues evaluate the Service Platoon program’s efficacy in improving the overall well-being of veterans, including their mental health.

According to a 2011 study by the Pew Research Center, four in 10 post-9/11 veterans struggle with the transition to civilian life. Volunteer service can help veterans more effectively make that transition by providing them a new mission as
community service volunteers, helping them set and achieve new goals, and by helping them to build a new network.

The Mission Continues has two core programs: a Fellowship program where veterans volunteer with local nonprofit organizations for six months to address key challenges in their communities, and the Service Platoons, groups of 30-50 veterans who perform ongoing service missions and projects around an area of need in the local communities.

"We believe this generation of veterans will be remembered not just for the challenges they've faced, but for the impact they will make in their communities when they come home," said Spencer Kympton, president, The Mission Continues. "The Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation is helping us to build evidence of the positive impact of veterans' continued service in their local communities – both on the veteran and on community needs. We are fortunate to have an experienced research partner in the Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation investing in the mental health initiative and enabling us to scale our programs to positively demonstrate the effects of continued service on veterans' reintegration."

For the wounded warriors who are unable to continue their service on the home front, caregivers – often spouses or other family members – play a critical role. However, these caregivers often suffer from declining health, strains in family relationships and difficulties at work due to a lack of support themselves, according to a study published in April 2014 by the RAND Corporation.

Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS) will receive $552,500 to develop and launch the Online Peer Support Community Program, part of the Military and Veteran Caregiver Network. The program will provide a structured, digital, social support environment for caregivers to help increase their sense of connectedness, engagement and hopefulness while reducing their reported feelings of isolation.

The Online Peer Support Community will mature to offer more than 5,000 hours of programming and will offer more than 50,000 caregivers the opportunity to connect to others with similar life experiences for support, information and resources during its first year of operations. Caregivers will benefit as both recipients and providers of peer support, sharing their experiences through social platforms such as online chats, bulletin boards and webinars.

The TAPS project supported by the Foundation is part of a comprehensive, three-pronged approach to help military and veteran caregiving families via a structured social support network that includes a Peer Mentor Support Program and a Community-Based Peer Support Group Program.

"TAPS is honored to be able to disseminate our 20 years of best practices in the delivery of peer-based emotional support to military family survivors to caregivers of the wounded, ill and injured who support those who have given so much in service to this country," said TAPS President and Founder Bonnie Carroll.

Dr. Lynda Davis, director of the TAPS Caregiver Network, added: “These caregivers, America’s hidden heroes, far too often find themselves isolated and alone in their caregiving duties, creating negative consequences for themselves and their families. With the generous grant from the Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation, TAPS will be able to connect thousands of these caregivers, without regard to location or time, to the proven benefits of peer support.”

About the Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation

The mission of the Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation is to promote health equity and improve the health outcomes of populations disproportionately affected by serious diseases and health conditions. The Foundation’s Mental Health & Well-Being initiative in the U.S. focuses funding on addressing the mental health and reintegration needs of returning service members, veterans and their families. For more information about the Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation, please visit www.bms.com/foundation or follow us on Twitter at http://twitter.com/bmsnews.