

Local veterans become big brothers, sisters

BY MEGHAN RUSSELL
Staff writer

Many local U.S. military veterans and their families have mourned the lack of resources available to returning veterans in rural communities, but one newly formed organization hopes to start changing that.

Much like the group Big Brothers, Big Sisters, Southern Maryland Battle Buddies hopes to provide one-on-one peer support. The non-partisan, nonprofit, veteran volunteer-led program is dedicated to helping veterans of military service, their families and significant others heal, according to an SMBB press release. It will provide confidential peer support, informed advocacy and expert referral to help veterans overcome barriers to health care, access work and educational opportunities and reintegrate into civilian society.

Beginning on June 1, SMBB will open a drop-in vet center at Trinity United Methodist Church in Prince Frederick, which will be staffed from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Mondays and Thursdays. Veterans are welcome to come by and get connected with resources, or they may enlist to become volunteer Battle Buddies.

"We'll be able to put them in touch with Veterans Affairs counselors, the center at Charlotte Hall and different types of resources that are available for veterans," said retired Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Al Brewster, whose primary function with SMBB will be to provide training and supervision for volunteers selected to become Battle Buddies.

While it is not a professional counseling organization, seeks no compensation and is not connected to any

To learn more

To learn more about Southern Maryland Battle Buddies or to volunteer, contact the organization at 443-975-5262 or docbrewster@comcast.net.

For more information on local veterans services, go online at <http://www.co.cal.md.us/Newsp/NewsHighlight4.asp>.

higher authority, its organizers and two principal veteran volunteers currently offer a wealth of experience and training, the press release states.

Brewster is a Vietnam Marine vet who was decorated for life-saving heroism for a fire off the coast of Vietnam, in which 134 sailors died. He later earned degrees in psychology and American studies and a master's degree in clinical social work before returning to active duty in the Air Force. After that, he obtained a doctorate in social work and has served in a variety of mental health research programs, taught counseling skills to military physicians and published in the area of the military family. He currently practices at Chesapeake Christian Counseling Center in Sunderland and has served as a member of the Southern Maryland Tri-County Veterans Advisory Committee since 2008.

Gill Rivera, who will staff the drop-in center and provide outreach to veterans, is also a Vietnam vet and earned a Purple Heart for wounds suffered in the 196th Light Infantry Brigade. He spent time learning healing techniques from various Native American tribes and completed his master's degree in clinical social work.

"Gill and I got this idea going a few months ago,"

Brewster said of SMBB. "We just want to be sure these young people have a resource. What we know is that 40 percent of people in the military come from rural areas," according to the Department of Defense statistics. "That's a huge number, and when they leave, where do you think they go? Back home. The [Veterans Affairs Department] ... can't meet the needs because they can't put a center in every small area that needs one."

For some individuals in Southern Maryland it is an hour and a half hike to get to a VA hospital, he said. "Once you've gone there and back, you've burned up a half day of work, and a lot of times their families can't get to them when they need to," he said.

"I think it's a wonderful gift, and it's very needed," Calvert County Commissioners' President Susan Shaw (R) said. Shaw is the chair of the SMTCVAC. Just this month she said she has heard of a veteran committing suicide because he lost his job and a marriage breaking up because the returning vet "was not the same person he used to be, and I don't doubt that."

Shaw said she hopes SMBB can collect data for the tri-county area to demonstrate to the VA that services are needed. "We don't have the services, but it's very difficult to prove you need them," she said.

The region recently obtained a mobile vet center that comes to Charlotte Hall for two days at the end of each month, Shaw said. "The first time they came, over 40 people showed up, and then last month, in addition to the two days, they were in Waldorf for one day and 17 people showed up," she said, "and I don't even think that was advertised."