

1 In 4 Recently Discharged Vets Suffers From Depression, PTSD, Survey Says



Army veteran Patrick Donohue is a veterans attorney and advocate for Islip-based nonprofit Project9Line. Donohue, also of Islip, says a more holistic approach to physical and mental wellness, including physical activities and meditation, is key. Credit: Newsday / John Paraskevas

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More than 60% of New York State veterans who recently left the military suffered a physical or mental disability while serving, and 1 in 4 were experiencing depression or post-traumatic stress disorder, a statewide survey found.

The report also found rates of suicidal thoughts were twice as high among those veterans surveyed as in the general population.

Among the 1,122 veterans discharged or separated from the military between January 2018 and January 2023, polled in the statewide report, 25% also said they dealt with food insecurity in the past year — approximately twice the national average — despite their high levels of employment and education.

The [report](#) was commissioned by the nonprofit New York Health Foundation and conducted by RAND, a nonpartisan research institution. Among those polled, 62% were under age 45; about 15% were women, and nearly 40% were nonwhite.

WHAT TO KNOW

- **A survey of more than 1,100 vets** recently discharged or separated from the military found that more than 60% returned home with a service-connected disability, more than twice than in 2010.

- **The poll, commissioned by the** New York Health Foundation and conducted by RAND, a research group, found that about 25% of veterans are dealing with depression or PTSD.
- **Experts said while the trends are troubling,** it's encouraging that a greater number of veterans is coming forward and seeking treatment for mental health issues.

Greater willingness to seek help

David Sandman, chief executive and president of the New York Health Foundation, said that while the mental health trends among veterans are troubling, there is a silver lining.

"There's a much greater awareness than there used to be of these conditions," Sandman said. "And there's ... been a decrease in the stigma associated with receiving mental health services, which remains a barrier, especially in the military community. There's more of a willingness to seek help."

The survey, which recommended expanding access to veteran mental health services and suicide prevention programs, shows New York service members are struggling with a variety of ailments after returning to civilian life.

For example, almost 63% of recent vets reported a service-connected mental or physical disability compared with 30% during [RAND's 2010 report](#) on New York veterans.

Long Island is home to the largest proportion of veterans in the state, with about 64,000 current or former active military in Suffolk County and roughly 45,000 in Nassau, according to a [2021 report](#) from the New York Health Foundation.

Robert Novotny, 37, of Mastic Beach, served in the Marines from 2005 through 2013, including tours of Japan and a combat mission in Iraq.



Marine Robert Novotny, of Mastic Beach, in Haditha, Iraq. Credit: Robert Novotny

While in uniform, he was stabbed in his left hand, broke his right hand, fractured his left hip and now deals with insomnia, or periods of broken sleep, that he attributes to the "hypervigilance" of military service. All of the ailments are classified by the Department of Veterans Affairs as service-connected disabilities.

"If I get two solid hours straight in a [sleep] session, that's mint," said Novotny, who now works in private wealth management. "But typically every hour or hour-and-a-half I am up for at least 10 minutes."

Mental health needs 'as high as ever'

The survey asked veterans about their mental and physical health needs, access to care, and other factors that can affect their well-being, including food instability.

In total, 25% of vets polled said they had probable depression, 26% were dealing with likely PTSD, and 9% had thoughts of suicide in the previous year, the report shows. In RAND's 2010 report, 1 in 6 said they were experiencing depression or PTSD. Survey figures specifically for Long Island vets were not available.

Nationwide, roughly 7,000 veterans died by suicide in 2021, including about 140 in New York, according to a [2023 report](#) from the VA.

Meanwhile, nearly 30% of veterans surveyed said they had at least one binge drinking episode in the previous 30 days, with 10% reporting frequent binge drinking.

Amy Williams, chief clinical officer of the Queens-based Headstrong Project, a nonprofit mental health organization that provides PTSD treatment to active and former service members, said the organization served about 250 clients last year — about six times more than a decade earlier.

"The demand [for mental health services] is as high as ever," Williams said, adding that many vets suffering with depression and PTSD also deal with alcohol abuse and are at higher risk of suicide. "And the need for these services is as high as ever."

But Novotny sees the increase in self-reported cases of depression and PTSD as a positive step.

"It's great that vets are being open and honest and going to find help," he said. "I remember in 2010 getting therapy and people calling me a weakling. But, well, I'm alive."

Northport VA spokesman Fernando Burgos Ortiz said the medical centers "offers a comprehensive array of mental health services tailored to meet the unique needs of veterans," including a dedicated PTSD clinic and substance use disorder treatment.

Struggling with food insecurity

In total, approximately 20% of veterans polled in the study rated their health as "fair" or "poor," while 15% said they had unmet physical health care needs, and 21% said they had unmet mental health care needs.

Patrick Donohue, of Islip, spent six months with the Army's 101st Airborne Division near a burn pit in Afghanistan, inhaling pollutants from plastics and human and medical waste that he said caused a noncancerous brain tumor

Donohue, now a veterans attorney and advocate with Islip-based Project9Line, which helps former military members transition back to civilian life, said the poll results are not surprising, but a potential solution might be somewhat unconventional.



Patrick Donohue, of Islip, is seen at a burn pit in Afghanistan in 2011. He now helps former military members transition back to civilian life. Credit: Patrick Donohue

Too many doctors, he said, push a standard medication regimen on vets with mental health issues that often create their own set of new symptoms and side effects.

"There needs to be a more holistic approach in terms of eating better, more exercise, yoga and meditation," Donohue said. "Even martial arts and pickleball... These are things that are going to give veterans prolonged wellness. These are more helpful in the short term and in the long term."

The issues extend beyond physical and mental health.

Roughly 1 in 4 poll respondents said they worried about not having enough money for food during the past year, RAND found.

Island Harvest, a Melville-based food bank, launched Operation: HOPE — a program to assist veterans and the families of active-duty personnel deployed overseas in need of food assistance — in 2012.

The group provides assistance to about 1,000 veterans per month, a higher level than before the pandemic because of greater outreach to that population, according to Randi Shubin Dresner, president and chief executive of the nonprofit.

"We have a high level of veterans living on Long Island," she said. "It costs a lot to live here and buy groceries. We have a story of a veteran that we helped who was eating a can of corn every day because that's all he could afford. ... We have countless stories of veterans here who are struggling."