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Mental Health Stigma busting goes International—Deployed Soldiers in Iraq help NAMI San Diego

SAN DIEGO— While the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) in San Diego will be holding their annual fundraising walk on April 17 in Balboa Park, a dedicated platoon in Iraq will be doing the same thing—military style.

Forward Operating Base Echo, Iraq will be holding their own version of the NAMI Walk at the same time NAMI San Diego begins their 5K—that's 8 a.m. San Diego time, 1900 hours in Iraq. While most San Diego walkers will be strolling through Balboa Park at a leisurely pace, the military version will be running their own course in full body armor.

To give you some background on this, NAMI is a grassroots organization that supports people who experience mental illnesses, and their family and friends, in their struggle towards improved mental health. The annual San Diego County NAMI Walks for the Mind of America is the organization's biggest fundraiser. Financial support that NAMI receives from the Walk is used for its programs that increase mental health recovery and reduce stigma.

In 2009 NAMI walkers helped raise money to augment NAMI San Diego County's family, teen and corporate outreach services and programs. These include support groups, educational classes, newsletters, and the helpline. With the recession deepening, mental illness symptoms are on the rise and the no-cost services of NAMI San Diego are needed more than ever before. The goal for the 2010 walk is 3,000 walkers, 100 teams and \$250,000 raised for programs geared towards servicing the San Diego community.

NAMI San Diego Development and Events Manager, Annie Dunlop, has told her friend, John Bell, who is in the U.S. Military, about the NAMI Walk for years. For the past two years, John has been deployed in Iraq and unable to attend the San Diego County NAMI Walk. This year, however, John decided he wasn't going to miss out, so he has organized a 5K run to be held in honor of NAMI San Diego and the NAMI programs designed to help veterans such as the Veterans Resource Center, an online portal to mental health resources for America's veterans, active duty service members, and their families.

“As the US Army has taught me, not all wounds are visible,” said John. “As tough as a U.S. Service Member may be, many still suffer the effects of having endured life in a combat zone. The most prominent effect is Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Not every combat-deployed soldier has been in a firefight, or had their vehicle struck by an IED, or even lost a friend by an enemy engagement. But the trauma they endure is nonetheless significant to them.”

Consider these grim statistics:

- Almost **1 in 3** veterans returning from Afghanistan and Iraq confront mental health problems.
- Recently, the suicide rate in the Army reached its **highest level** in 26 years.
- Approximately 30% of veterans treated in the Veterans health system suffer from depressive symptoms, **two to three times** the rate of the general population.
- More Vietnam veterans have now **died from suicide** than were killed directly during the war in the 1960s and 70s.
- Approximately **40%** of homeless veterans have mental illnesses. Approximately 57% of this group are African American or Hispanic veterans.

The online Veterans Resource Center offers valuable information and connections to services specifically designed to help veterans and their families. It is accessible on the national NAMI website at www.nami.org. “Education is the first step, and NAMI has decades of experience and is truly a subject-matter expert,” said John. “I've experienced PTSD myself, so I know how many service members feel and can help soldiers in need. NAMI is now assisting the civilian sector (veterans, retirees, etc) in a field that they know best.”

This is why John and his platoon will be running in full gear on April 17, 2010—to support an organization that can help soldiers with mental health issues when they return home. NAMI San Diego is grateful for the troops' support of their walk and will certainly be thinking of these men and women while hitting the pavement on home turf at Balboa Park that morning.

If you would like more information on how to join the NAMI Walk in San Diego, simply go to www.namiwalksandiego.org or call (619) 398-9854. Or if you are interested in supporting the NAMI run in Iraq, please log onto www.nami.org/namiwalks10/SDC/JohnBell

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