

Military Social Work

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Introductory Guide to Military Social Work

By Kaitlin Louie

Military social workers work with active military service members and veterans to help them address and manage the social, emotional, psychological, and familial challenges they may face as a result of their job. Military social workers also provide counseling and support to the families of current and former service members, and can work in a wide array of settings ranging from military bases and medical facilities to VA Centers.

Active and former military personnel can face unique psychological and emotional challenges due to their profession, including but not limited to isolation, anxiety, insomnia, post-traumatic stress disorder, and depression. They may also experience socioeconomic, familial, and/or behavioral problems such as unemployment and financial hardship, marital conflicts, isolation from social circles, and substance abuse. Military social workers help their clients address these issues through a combination of individual and/or family counseling, resource navigation services, education, and the development of programs and initiatives aimed specifically at serving military professionals and their families.

Military social workers can work as embedded social workers within active military units, and can even serve as Active or Reserve Duty personnel within a unit. They can also work in civilian settings with military members who are off duty or veterans who are coping with the trauma of their past work. Typically, military social workers begin their career working closely with individuals and families, and as they gain more experience, they can progress to leadership and administrative positions, such as program managers and directors of psychological health.

Types of Military Social Workers

Military social workers work in settings where current and former military personnel require or seek support and counseling. “Active duty and civilian military social workers are needed all over the world in a variety of capacities in every branch of service and government organization,” Jaclyn Fischer-Urmei, MSW, DCSW, who works as the Director of Psychological Health for the 514th Air Mobility Wing at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst in New Jersey, said in an interview with OnlineMSWPrograms.com.

The United States Department of Defense (DoD) has developed numerous emotional and mental health support services for active and off-duty military personnel, while the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) employs social workers nationwide to assist

veterans through several different programs. The many types of government-funded military support programs mean that military social workers are employed in a wide and diverse range of work environments, and can take on many different roles during their career. Environments where military social workers work include but are not limited to military bases and units, medical facilities, military support centers, VA health centers, community service organizations, and even private practices. While their work setting may vary, the core mission of military social workers remains the same: to help active military service members fulfill their professional responsibilities while maintaining healthy personal lives, and/or to support veterans in transitioning to civilian life and coping with the emotional ramifications of their past experiences. “Civilian and active duty social workers all serve the same population: military members and their families, no matter where they are assigned,” Ms. Fischer-Urmev explained.

While specific job titles may vary across different military divisions, government departments, and other organizations in which military social workers work, types of military social workers may be generally categorized into the following:

Embedded and Active Duty Military Social Workers

All branches of the U.S. Armed Forces, which includes the U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and National Guard,

provide mental and emotional health services to their active personnel. Military social workers play an important role in these services, and can be found at military bases, often within medical and mental health departments. While some of these social workers are civilians, in that they do not serve in the military, others complete training and serve alongside other military service members.

Social workers who work at military bases typically provide targeted counseling and emotional support, as well as resource connections and education, to help their clients function optimally at their job. Military social workers can serve and travel with one unit specifically, which is known as being “embedded” to a particular unit. Donna Maglio, LCSW, who is an embedded civilian military social worker for the U.S. Marine Corps at Camp Lejeune, explained in an interview with OnlineMSWPrograms.com, “My role as an embedded military social worker is to provide brief, solution-focused, non-medical counseling to service members and their families. [...The] approach I use with active duty is generally a [...] skill-building approach since my main role is to help keep them functioning in their jobs.”

Military social workers can also serve personnel from multiple battalions if they work at military medical centers or other facilities that serve several units. “The Marines, Sailors and families [I work

with] at Camp Lejeune are fortunate to have several other options for counseling outside of the battalion,” Ms. Maglio told OnlineMSWPrograms.com, “There are active duty social workers, psychologists and psychiatrists located at the Naval hospital and clinics on base and there are also several behavioral health programs staffed by civilian therapists that can provide various types of support and counseling as well.”

Due to the intense and stressful demands of their job, military service members tend to experience mental, emotional, and relationship challenges that both result from and negatively impact their work. “Typical issues [that my clients face] include relationships, job-related stress, communication, financial stress, sleep disturbance, combat reintegration, transitioning out of the military, anger management and lack of healthy coping skills,” Ms. Maglio explained. Military social workers also generally work as part of a larger team of medical and mental health professionals, such as the on-base chaplain, physician, medical officer, and psychiatrist.

Military support programs, such as the Family Advocacy Program, the Navy’s Substance Abuse Rehabilitation Program, and the Air Force’s Alcohol and Drug Abuse Prevention and Treatment Program can also employ social workers and other mental and medical care professionals to provide classes and workshops on topics such as emotional regulation, conflict resolution, stress

management, and substance addictions. Ms. Maglio described how, in addition to the counseling she provides clients, she engages in educational programming. “I also give briefings and teach educational classes on specific topics, such as grief and reintegrating home from combat,” she told OnlineMSWPrograms.com.

As military social workers gain more experience in the challenges that active personnel face and how to address them, they may be able to take on leadership roles, such as a position as Director of Psychological Health (DPH) within a given military base or division. Directors of Psychological Health and other leadership roles within military social work can involve a combination of administrative/supervisory responsibilities and clinical work with military personnel.

In her interview with OnlineMSWPrograms.com, Ms. Fischer-Urmev described how her main responsibilities as DPH for the 514th Air Mobility Wing combined leadership and administrative work with one-on-one clinical counseling. “My responsibilities include serving as the Air Force Reserve liaison with military and non-military agencies to promote timely information exchange, coordinate collaborative prevention efforts, and establish and maintain an extensive array of resources, associations, and community partnerships [...My role also] includes designing, developing, coordinating, and implementing prevention and

community outreach and prevention efforts,” she said. “I [also] provide psycho-diagnostic assessments and short-term, brief solution-focused counseling services to military and civilian personnel.”

Civilian Military Social Workers

Different military branches, from the U.S. Army to the Marine Corps, have resources in place to support their personnel in civilian environments when they return from deployment. Such resources include personnel support centers specific to each military branch, community service organizations, government programs that serve all military branches, such as [Military OneSource External link](#) (a 24/7 support service that connects military service members and their families to phone-based and in-person counseling and support on issues such as spousal conflict, personal health, education, and financial literacy) . Civilian based support centers that serve military personnel and their families include:

- [Fleet and Family Support Centers \(FFSC\) External link](#) : Fleet and Family Support Centers provide services such as individual and family counseling, career guidance, relocation assistance, and financial management counseling to members of the Navy and their families.

- [The Marine Corps Community Services \(MCCS\) External link](#) : The Marine Corps Community Services develops and implements Behavioral Health, Family Readiness, Personal and Professional

Development, and Military Personnel services to support the well-being and quality of life of Marine Corps members and their loved ones.

- [Airman and Family Readiness Centers \(AFRC\) External link](#) : AFRCs offer programs such as Deployment Support, Military Child Education, Family Support, Employment Assistance, Financial Readiness, Relocation Assistance, Transition Assistance, and Personal and Work Life Education to members of the U.S. Air Force and their families.

- [Army Community Service Centers \(ACSC\) External link](#) : ACSCs provide members of the U.S. Army with pre- and post-deployment planning services, family advocacy and support (including domestic violence prevention), new parent support, re-entry seminars and workshops, career counseling and employment assistance, financial readiness programs, and family assistance centers.

The above military support organizations employ people in helping professions such as social workers, psychologists, and other human services specialists to both counsel and guide clients as needed through the process of applying for relevant benefits and managing the challenges they encounter in their work and personal life. Civilian military social workers can also work in private practice with military personnel who have returned from deployment and who need help with the transition to civilian life.

Veteran Social Workers

Another important role that military social workers can play is counseling and supporting veterans who are struggling with reintegrating into society and/or managing the mental, emotional, and familial challenges they might encounter as a result of their past experiences. “The VA employs over 11,000 social workers nationwide. It is recognized as the single largest employer of social workers by the NASW,” noted Zander Keig, LCSW, who works as a homeless outreach social worker for the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), in an interview with OnlineMSWPrograms.com.

The VA funds many different departments, facilities, and programs to address the complex and sometimes severe challenges that veterans face. Social workers are an essential part of many of these programs, and can be found at VA Medical Centers, Community Based Clinics, and Veterans Centers. “The majority of social workers work in two distinct settings: primary medical care and homeless programs,” Mr. Keig explained, “Primary care social workers generally work in inpatient and outpatient medical units at VA medical centers and at community-based outpatient clinics. Homeless program social workers work in the same settings, yet focus on providing veterans with resources and referrals to VA and community programs serving the homeless.”

Veteran social workers often fulfill a wide variety of tasks to support veterans and their families. Mr. Keig explained how his role at the VHA includes a combination of care coordination and resource navigation services at the individual level, and more administrative work aimed at developing better services for homeless veterans. “As a homeless outreach social worker in Oakland, CA, I am liaison to a community-based, VA contract, homeless shelter with 15 beds reserved for male veterans. [...] I facilitate the process for securing a VHA primary care provider [for my clients...] and work with the shelter case manager to identify and resolve barriers to transitional or permanent housing, gainful employment and sobriety (financial, mental illness, physical disability, etc).”

Military social workers can also work with veterans at private clinics and practices. In addition to being an embedded military social worker, Ms. Maglio works closely with veterans in her private practice, Trinity Psychotherapy, LLC. She described how her work with veterans differs significantly from her targeted, skills-oriented approach with active military service members. “[My work with veterans is] typically longer-term and [on] a more regular schedule, usually once a week for an hour-long appointment, during which we go more in-depth into the issues,” she said, “Since the veteran population is either in the process of transitioning or has already transitioned to civilian life, we can start

to unpack the stress and trauma that they have piled up over the years in a safe environment.”

What Military Social Workers Do

As mentioned previously, military social workers typically combine counseling and guidance of individuals and families with development of and engagement in programs aimed at assisting military and veteran populations on a larger scale. Below is a more detailed description of the methods that military social workers use to help their clients.

Mental Health Counseling and Therapy

Military social workers can use a combination of [clinical social work methods](#) to assess, diagnose, prevent, and address their clients’ mental, emotional, behavioral, and relationship challenges. These methods include but are not limited to psychosocial and risk assessments, cognitive behavioral therapy and dialectical behavioral therapy, mindfulness based stress reduction, supportive psychotherapy, motivational interviewing, harm reduction techniques, and experiential therapeutic modalities such as equine-assisted psychotherapy, music therapy, art therapy, and role-playing.

Resource Navigation

As mentioned previously, there are a wide array of resources and programs that are available to members of all branches of the

military. Knowing about and properly taking advantage of these programs, however, can be overwhelming or difficult for military personnel, who have busy and stressful schedules and who also must balance work with family life. Military social workers help military personnel, veterans and their families access the government and community resources that are available to them by educating their clients about the benefits they qualify for, guiding them through the process of applying for these benefits (ex. financial aid for school, free career counseling, medical benefits, etc.), and connecting them with other people and organizations that can help.

Crisis Intervention

For military personnel and families who are experiencing acute trauma or struggling with severe psychological, emotional, and/or behavioral challenges (for example, post-traumatic stress disorder, domestic and other types of violence, severe substance abuse, suicidal tendencies, etc.), social workers collaborate with a larger team of medical and/or mental health care professionals to intervene and treat the individuals involved in the crisis (including the spouses, children, relatives, and friends of military service members and/or veterans, if they are directly impacted by the crisis).

Advocacy

Social workers can serve as advocates for disadvantaged military personnel and their families. Active military service members who struggle with depression, sleep disorders, and/or substance abuse, veterans coping with physical disabilities, and spouses of military personnel who are experiencing financial hardships are just a few examples of demographics that could benefit from social work advocacy. Military social workers can engage with non-profit groups and advocacy organizations, and contact local, state, and national governments about issues that military populations face, in order to help ensure vulnerable military populations and their families receive the government and community support they need.

Program Development

Military social workers can also help develop, implement, and evaluate local, state, and national programs that aim to improve the well-being and opportunities for military populations and their loved ones. Such programs include but are not limited to family support programs, scholarships and other types of education support, employment assistance programs, and suicide awareness and prevention initiatives. Program development typically involves such responsibilities as researching target populations' needs, applying for and receiving funding, and building staffing and processes around certain objectives (for example, applying for

funding and developing a team around an outreach program to help veterans address substance abuse).

Challenges Military Social Workers Face

Military social workers face numerous challenges on the job, including the complexity and severity of clients' challenges, the exposure to trauma vicariously through their clients' experiences, and limitations on resources available to optimally serve their target populations.

“[T]his population typically has a multitude of major issues they are dealing with, such as anxiety/depression, chronic sleep disturbance, substance abuse, traumatic brain injury (TBI), and family issues, in addition to having been exposed to events that most of us can't even imagine,” Ms. Maglio told OnlineMSWPrograms.com of her work at Camp Lejeune, “So you need to figure out where the best place is to start with these very complex cases.”

Military social workers may also encounter the frustration of being unable to optimally assist or support their clients, due to limited resources and staffing. “There is a growing population of elderly homeless low-income veterans, dealing with illness and sometimes substance use disorders, presenting to our clinic requesting referrals to housing programs,” Mr. Keig said, “Unfortunately, because of their ADL (activities of daily living)

limitations, they are ineligible for placement.” In instances of limited resources and urgent and overwhelming client needs, some social workers may feel compelled to work very long hours in order to help as many people as possible, which can lead to overwork and eventual burnout.

Military social workers who are embedded to military units or who select to be active members of the military on top of their social work duties encounter an additional set of challenges, one of which is adjusting to the culture and the fast pace of military life. “Working with the military takes a certain mindset and understanding of the culture of the military,” Ms. Fischer-Urmev said of her years working as an officer and as a social worker in the Navy and the Air Force. “My first great challenge was transitioning from civilian mindset to a military mindset. [...] Going from the civilian mindset of relative stability, control, and safety, to the military mindset of constant transition, little control, and unguaranteed safety took a few years.”

Donna Maglio also spoke to the fast pace of military life, and the need to be constantly ready to assist clients. “I never really know who’s going to walk through my door each day,” she said, “Because I make myself visible, there are times I might be walking along the sidewalk and someone will grab me for a few minutes to talk about an issue. You really have to be on your toes at all times

here because you just never know when an issue is going to come up or when someone is going to approach you for counseling.”

The challenges that military social workers encounter as a result of their jobs can lead to significant stress and eventual burnout if clinicians are not careful. Helping their clients process extremely difficult or disturbing experiences can also negatively impact military social workers’ mental and emotional health. Conscious and consistent self-care practices, seeking a strong support network of family, friends, and fellow professionals, and even engaging in their own therapy can help military social workers stay energized and engaged in their work long-term.

Advice for Social Workers Interested in Military Social Work

Social work students and practicing social workers who are interested in helping military populations have a wealth of resources available to them to learn more about this important area of work.

Social work students and professionals can find information about military social work careers from the [National Association of Social Workers External link](#), which has publications, tutorials, and seminars specifically for social workers serving military populations. “[Taking] coursework focused on military and/or taking advantage of the National Association of Social Workers’

(NASW) five free two-hour military social work webinars is a great way to start to learn about military culture, challenges, issues prevalent in military families, and how to support them,” Ms. Fischer-Urmey advised, “These webinars can be found at <http://www.naswweb.org/> [External link](#).”

Information about military social work careers is also available through organizations that serve the military and their families, including [Military OneSource External link](#), [Defense Centers of Excellence External link](#), [TRICARE External link](#), the [Center for Deployment Psychology External link](#), and the [U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs External link](#). Some of these organizations, such as the Center for Deployment Psychology and the Defense Centers of Excellence, have online tutorials, workshops, and materials that can help civilians get a sense of the types of challenges that military populations face, and the roles that social workers and people in helping professions have in assisting them. Hospitals and medical centers, community service organizations, and mental health centers may also have resources for mental health and human services professionals regarding helping military populations. “Massachusetts General Hospital (<http://mghcme.org>) offers an online training series called From the War Zone to the Home Front: Supporting the Mental Health of Veterans and Families. And the National Center for PTSD

(<http://www.ptsd.va.gov> External link) is another useful site to visit,” Ms. Maglio advised.

Obtaining relevant training through one’s undergraduate and graduate coursework is important, noted Ms. Fischer-Urmev. “Most military social work positions, such as those in the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Departments of the Army/Navy/Air Force/Interior, to name a few, require a master’s degree from an accredited institution. That is where I advise most people to begin,” she told OnlineMSWPrograms.com.

Even at undergraduate and graduate social work programs that do not have military social work concentrations, students can build the skills necessary to work with military personnel by focusing on classes that discuss how to address trauma, substance abuse, severe stress, anxiety, and other specific challenges that this population faces. Ms. Fischer-Urmev also advised social work students to actively seek out internships that would allow them to work closely with veterans, active military personnel, and/or the children and spouses of military service members.

Zander Keig, LCSW also suggests students seek out internships at organizations that assist military populations. “There are many community-based agencies around the country that have been awarded grants from the VA to provide services to veterans and their families, such as Supportive Services for Veterans Families (SSVF),” he said.

Volunteering is also an excellent way to gain first-hand experience helping military personnel and veterans, and to build professional skills applicable to this area of work. Mr. Keig advised, “[Volunteering] for a Veteran Service Organization (VSO), such as Disabled American Veterans (DAV), AmVets and Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) would provide a social work student with access to the veteran’s claim filing process through the Veterans Benefits Administration. [...] Knowing how to navigate the VA claim process is a beneficial skill when working with veterans experiencing homelessness.”

To supplement their coursework, internships, and volunteer work, social work students interested in helping military populations can also learn a great deal from reading books that discuss the issues that the military encounters both during and upon returning from deployment, and by speaking with friends and family who are involved in military work.

“Books that I often recommend are *Rule Number Two: Lessons I Learned in a Combat Hospital* by Heidi Squier Kraft, *War* by Sebastian Junger and *On Killing* by Lt Col Dave Grossman, but there are so many books out there on all kinds of military-related topics that would be useful in understanding more about this population,” Ms. Maglio noted. She also explained how her personal connections within the military helped motivate her to become a military social worker. “My father is a Vietnam veteran

of the United States Marine Corps and I have other family members and friends who have served or are currently serving our country,” she told OnlineMSWPrograms.com, “A close friend of mine was killed in Iraq in 2004 and that experience definitely got me more involved with this population. It’s been an honor to work with this community and to help them feel more comfortable with the therapeutic process.”

Why People Become Military Social Workers

Despite the many difficulties of their line of work, military social workers can derive a great deal of gratification from helping military populations and their loved ones. “Once they get past the initial stigma of engaging in therapy, I’ve found my military clients to be extremely motivated and willing to do the work it takes to make positive changes in their lives,” Ms. Maglio said. Ms. Fischer-Urmev also described the deep gratitude she often received from past and current clients. “During my years working with military and their families, I’ve had many encounters with grateful clients, several of whom I’ve had the opportunity to run into over the years at other bases and in different countries,” she told OnlineMSWPrograms.com.

Being a part of a close-knit military community can also have deep rewards, as Ms. Maglio described to

OnlineMSWPrograms.com. “I really am treated as part of ‘the family’ here at the battalion,” she said, “I attend all of their special events, such as formations for awards and promotions, retirement ceremonies and holiday parties. I also attend outings and dinners with the spouses and children.”

Zander Keig cited witnessing the positive growth his clients experience as a reason he finds his work gratifying and sustaining. “The most rewarding aspect of my current position is seeing the transformation so many of the veterans go through: from homeless, penniless and filled with despair to housed, working or collecting pension and/or disability compensation and feeling hopeful about their future,” he said, “I intend to remain working for the federal government as a social worker until I retire.”

Ms. Fischer-Urmev told OnlineMSWPrograms.com about the how her work in suicide prevention, and the knowledge that she has helped save lives and improve her clients’ quality of life, has proven deeply rewarding for her. “[Each] location to which I’ve been assigned, with the exception of my deployment, I have been the suicide prevention program manager,” she said, “I have many rewarding experiences of working with military and families, to include seeing relationships restored, substance abusers recover, mental health symptoms under control, acceptance of being separated from service through medical board, administrative separation, or retirement, grievors heal, stressors managed and

eliminated, and careers saved, [but] the greatest reward of all is not losing a single life on my watch. The best reward of working with the military is helping save lives. Every one matters.”

Military social workers provide compassion, guidance, and essential support services to individuals who have devoted their lives to protecting their country. Through a combination of careful preparation, commitment to helping others, and adequate self-care, military social workers can create a deeply rewarding and impactful career that not only benefits military populations and their families, but also strengthens the national community.

About the Author: Kaitlin Louie is a content writer and editor who writes articles for OnlineMSWPrograms.com. She received her bachelor's and master's degrees in English from Stanford University, and aspires to be an author of fiction and creative non-fiction.

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