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DEFEND

# Cohen Veterans Network

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# Caring for the Caregivers:

Providing high-quality mental health care to the entire military family is a foundational element at the Cohen Veterans Network

by

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**Caregivers** are the backbone of our wounded, ill and injured servicemembers and veterans. These spouses, parents, siblings, and buddies spend enormous amounts of time and energy ensuring the person they are caring for lives their fullest and most meaningful life. But caregiving frequently comes at a cost. Hidden Heroes, the most comprehensive body of research on today's military caregivers commissioned by the Elizabeth Dole Foundation and conducted by the RAND Corporation, documented the many challenges caregivers face. It highlighted threats to caregivers' own mental health, often due to the physical and emotional strain required of them. Spurred by the Elizabeth Dole Foundation's leadership and RAND's research, the Cohen Veterans Network has joined other organizations to serve military and veteran caregivers. Caregivers are eligible to receive no- or low-cost behavioral health care at each of our Steven A. Cohen Military Family Clinics, and have been eligible to receive this care from the day our first clinic door opened.

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Melinda is one of the many caregivers who has visited a Cohen Clinic and has bravely agreed to share her story. When her husband returned from deployment with PTSD and TBI, Melinda was unprepared. Her life as a caregiver entailed "giving and giving and giving," and she felt guilty every time she wanted to do anything for herself. But after six years of caregiving for her husband and her children, Melinda finally realized that she was stretched too thin.

*I knew, and I've always known, that I should take care of myself, but I didn't. And I just got to a place where I was very isolated. I didn't want to reach out because I just didn't want to burden anyone else, but eventually I found the clinic.*

Melinda started using the counseling services at her local Cohen Clinic. She also attended a caregiver support group at the clinic.

*Since I started coming to the clinic I have started to get back to being myself and finding myself...although I'm a caregiver, I'm still an individual.*

*"I knew, and I've always known, that I should take care of myself, but I didn't. And I just got to a place where I was very isolated. I didn't want to reach out because I just didn't want to burden anyone else, but eventually I found the clinic."*

*Melinda, Caregiver*





After she made the decision to prioritize self-care, Melinda says she felt like a weight had been lifted. Then, she began to see the ripple effects her decision had on her family.

*I am doing things for myself that in turn affect my family... they see me doing things for myself that I wasn't doing before, and I want them to be able to see that and say, "Hey, my mom's a great role model, and she's an advocate in taking care of yourself."*

Melinda's outlook on seeking help and caring for herself have changed significantly. Now, she describes her new self-care regimen with a simple metaphor that we hear often:

*It is that oxygen mask they tell you to put on before you can help anybody else. It's important.*

At CVN, we hear stories like Melinda's a lot. According to the Director of the Cohen clinic where Melinda was a client, the caregivers we see often adopt the culture of the military: sacrifice, selflessness, mission first, family first, country above all. No one can deny the nobility in this outlook, but it can hinder health-seeking behaviors that, as Melinda said, can make a big difference for the whole family.

CVN is working to do its part to bring our nation's military and veteran caregivers out of the shadows and to empower and support them for years to come. It is our hope that through stories like Melinda's, we can encourage our nation's Hidden Heroes to come forward early and unapologetically and get the help they need. Our nation's reliance on military and veteran caregivers cannot be overstated, and we at CVN are proud to support and serve them with the care we provide.



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