



Understanding Our Limitations: Knowing When to Refer

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As chaplains in the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), we are entrusted with a solemn and sacred responsibility: to offer spiritual care, comfort, and counsel to veterans in their times of need. Our role is both deeply rewarding and occasionally challenging, as we serve as a trusted source of guidance and support within the veteran community. In many ways, our position mirrors that of a general practitioner in the medical field—someone who assesses and provides initial care, but recognizes when a more specialized approach is required.

Our position as Post chaplains places us in a unique and trusted relationship with the veterans we serve. Many of our comrades come to us with a range of needs— from emotional distress and spiritual questions to personal struggles and crises. Most of the time, we are able to provide the support they need; However, much like a doctor who conducts an initial diagnosis and then refers a patient to a specialist, we too must learn to assess the situation, determine whether we are the right person to offer help, and know when to refer individuals to an appropriate expert.

The Importance of Recognizing Our Boundaries

As much as we may want to help, there are times when the challenges our comrades face require expertise beyond what we can provide. Mental health crises, substance abuse issues, legal matters, or complex medical concerns are a few examples of areas where professional intervention is necessary.

Recognizing our limitations is not a sign of weakness or failure, but rather a demonstration of wisdom and humility. Just as a general practitioner knows when to refer a patient to a specialist, we must recognize when someone's needs go beyond the scope of our spiritual care or counseling. By doing so, we ensure that our fellow veterans receive the most appropriate and effective care available.

The Power of Referrals

Referring a veteran to a mental health counselor, a substance abuse specialist, a social worker, or any other professional can cause us to feel like we are stepping back from a situation and abandoning our comrade; However, we must keep in mind we are doing what is best for the person in need. A referral is not a failure on our

part—it is taking responsibility, and using good judgment, to get the best care for the individual.

As VFW chaplains, we are not alone in this mission. There are numerous organizations, both within and outside the veterans' community, that specialize in mental health, addiction recovery, and legal support, to name just a few. Cultivating a network of trusted professionals and organizations allows us to make informed referrals, ensuring that our comrades are connected with the right resources to get the help they need. I remember early in my ministry creating a "Resource File" filled with contact information for local specialists and services. Today, with the internet, we have easy access to a wealth of resources and services that are available in a specific geographical area for any need that may arise.

Additionally, many veterans' organizations and local veterans' services provide training or resources that can help us better understand how to make appropriate referrals and how to support our fellow veterans when they are referred to outside services. Staying informed and connected with these resources is part of our responsibility as chaplains and helps us fulfill our role more effectively.

Critical Situations That Require Referral

Here are several critical situations when we must refer a veteran to a specialist:

1. **When someone is endangering themselves or others:** This includes situations where there is an imminent risk of harm, whether through self-destructive behaviors or violent tendencies toward others.
2. **When someone expresses suicidal thoughts or intentions:** Suicide threats or actions require immediate professional intervention from a counselor or crisis hotline.
3. **When someone expresses homicidal thoughts:** A threat of harm to others must be taken seriously, and the individual should be referred to the proper authorities or a mental health professional right away.
4. **When there are signs of extreme psychological distress:** Severe psychological issues such as psychosis, delusions, or debilitating depression require a trained mental health professional to assess and provide care.
5. **When you feel unsure or overwhelmed:** If you find yourself in doubt about how to proceed, or if the situation feels beyond your expertise, it's crucial to seek guidance from someone who is equipped to handle it.

In each of these cases, a referral is a responsible and compassionate response to a situation that requires more specialized intervention. By recognizing when a situation is beyond our capacity, we ensure that our comrades get the appropriate care they deserve.

Blessings as you serve,



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