

THE MINNESOTA DAILY

Veterans support center falls in at the University

Students returning to school from military service can seek help and share experiences.

By Emily Kaiser

After serving in Iraq and Afghanistan with the U.S. Army, coming back to campus isn't easy, said Andy Davis.

"If you are in the streets of Baghdad being shot at and then come back and have to study for a test, it doesn't feel worth it anymore," said Davis, a political science junior and co-founder of Comfort for Courage.

Comfort for Courage, a non-profit, non-partisan and student-led group, will open the Veterans Transition Center next week to support troops returning to school, Davis said.

The center, which will be staffed by volunteers, is one of the first centers of its kind to reappear on college campuses since the Vietnam War, said Jerry Rinehart, associate vice provost for Student Affairs.

"Before the Vietnam War, centers like this were mandatory on campuses," Davis said.

The center is meant to be a central point for veterans on campus to get assistance with benefits, receive counseling support and have a place to connect with others, he said.

There are more than 400 veterans on campus, but that number could double or triple in coming years as more return from overseas, Davis said.

"We are trying to prepare for problems before they occur," he said.

Civil engineering sophomore John Schmidt served four years in the Marine Corps and said the center will be ideal for veterans.

"The transition from a full-time Marine to a full-time student is very difficult," he said. "It's hard to fit in when you are 22 and in freshman and sophomore classes."

Schmidt said figuring out how to get veterans benefits and finding other veterans on campus was a challenge.

“When you are in the military, you have a huge support group, and you come to campus and lose that support,” he said.

The University announced Sept. 16 that it would sponsor the center and provided the students with a location in Eddy Hall, Rinehart said.

Rinehart said the veterans retention rates were the same as other students in 2001, but after Sept. 11, 2001, officials noticed a small decrease which indicated a trend.

“The experience can be so stress-inducing for students and it’s helpful to provide a place for them to socialize with others who have similar experiences,” he said.

The center is near the University Consulting and Counseling Services office in Eddy Hall, which is important, said Harriett Copher Haynes, director of the counseling services.

Haynes said her staff does not deal with many veterans, but they have dealt with family members of those serving.

“With this center, we can do a better job of reaching out,” she said.

Haynes said the counseling services will provide another opportunity to keep students from feeling isolated.

“We have to be committed to helping these students and put in the extra effort for them,” Haynes said.

Finance junior Tony Richter, a co-founder of Comfort for Courage, said many veterans can’t find their place at the University.

“We are helping them find a way to become a part of the community and share experiences so they know they are not alone,” he said.

The 200-square-foot room is now bare, but the group plans to go shopping Thursday for furniture, said English junior and group volunteer Raya Voth.

An e-mail was sent to group members asking for “ ‘Trading Spaces’ junkies” to help arrange and decorate the room, Voth said.

“We want to make it a comfortable atmosphere, very non-abrasive,” Voth said.