

New iPhone app would aim to help military veterans readjust to civilian life

August 20 2014, by Rebecca Bratek, Tribune Washington Bureau

Dave Smith hit his lowest low in March 2012. The retired Marine and Iraq combat veteran separated from his family and friends, broke up with his girlfriend and spent nights drinking himself into oblivion.

One afternoon, he put a loaded shotgun in his mouth and stared down the barrel. Then he remembered his best friend, Clay Hunt, another Iraq war veteran, who had killed himself a year prior. Smith put the weapon down and locked it away.

Later, Smith posted an anguished status to Facebook, confessing he was on a "downward spiral" and needed help. Within 20 minutes, his phone rang. Will McNulty, a friend in Los Angeles, had seen the post and asked if he was OK.

At first, "I couldn't even get out words to speak to him," recalled Smith, now 29. But the two soon talked.

A week later, McNulty and his business partners showed Smith their plan for POS REP, short for Position Report, a free iPhone [app](#) designed to help military [veterans](#) who are in distress or need help adjusting to civilian life.

With military and veterans' suicides near record levels in recent years, the app is designed to help vets find each other, as well as nearby health centers, emergency care and other critical services. Still in the testing mode, it chiefly focuses on Los Angeles for now.

The developers have partnered with the Los Angeles chapter of Volunteers of America, and the National Center for Veterans Studies at the University of Utah. They also will launch a crowd-funding campaign to raise \$500,000 to create an Android version and ultimately expand the app's coverage to other cities.

Anthony Allman, who heads the app's backers, says the idea emerged after Smith's friend, Hunt, a nationally known veterans' advocate, shot himself in 2011 after battling depression and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Hunt's death "really sent a shock wave through the veteran advocacy community because Clay was not hiding in his room," Allman said. "And we thought, 'Well, how can we prevent that from happening again?'" "

Department of Veterans Affairs data indicate up to 30 percent of [military veterans](#) who served in Iraq and Afghanistan suffer some sort of post-traumatic stress. Researchers are wary of the data, however, because it includes only veterans who have utilized VA health care facilities and the disorder is difficult to diagnose.

The new app isn't connected to the VA, but it aims to help military retirees access VA services and other useful links. GPS-linked maps will give directions to nearby health clinics, job fairs and local chapters of service organizations.

"We can make sure they have access to the support that they need to succeed to prevent things like chronic homelessness and suicide down the road," Allman said.

VA officials say the app could promote wellness when paired with mental health treatments or interventions.

"The basic justification of the app is absolutely sound in that social support, and especially ongoing social support, plays a key role in aiding those who are suffering," said Dr. Julia Hoffman, the VA's national director of mobile health, which includes smartphone apps.

Dr. Craig Bryan, a clinical psychologist who heads the veterans studies center in Utah, will study how people use the app over the next year. He hopes the results can provide warning signs to specific problems, such as insomnia, depression or thoughts of suicide.

"What we know from quite a bit of research is that social connectedness and a sense of belonging can actually be a very important protective factor," Bryan said.

The Los Angeles chapter of Volunteers of America, a nonprofit human services organization, is teaming up with POS REP to expand its "Battle Buddies" program, which matches trained mentors with troubled veterans.

Veterans "are trained to be an army of one," said Dr. Jon Sherin, executive vice president and chief medical officer. "They don't want to be perceived as weak."

The group wants to train 100 military retirees to assist the app's users in Los Angeles, Sherin said. Veterans can reach out to the mentors for help if they're wary of VA health care officials.

Smith, the retired Marine who nearly shot himself, hid his illness until crisis struck. After his friend's intervention, he began keeping VA appointments and seeing a veterans' counselor. He stopped drinking and started taking medication for depression and anxiety.

He also has joined POS REP's ranks as a mentor. He reaches out to

others just as McNulty reached out to him.

"You're bound to hit a pretty rocky patch at some point," Smith said. "If you have the strength in your little finger to pull a trigger, you have the strength to push an app button."

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Citation: New iPhone app would aim to help military veterans readjust to civilian life (2014, August 20) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-08-iphone-app-aim-military-veterans.html>

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