



Mainland BC

Military Family Resource Centre

News release

Nov. 5, 2019

Military vet uses mental health first aid training in civilian career

Vancouver, BC – Retired Capt. Jim Billinger, BEM, a North Vancouver resident, served in the British Army for more than two decades, including in Northern Ireland during the height of conflict also known as the Troubles. It comes as no surprise that, throughout his career, he witnessed his fellow soldiers struggling with the stress of deployments and the mental health issues that arise from them.

“Northern Ireland was a stressful time for most of us involved. There were deaths and serious injuries of soldiers, which impacted families with whom I would be involved in offering support. However, I was not trained nor did I receive any instruction on how to go about offering counselling at that time,” says Billinger.

However, his participation in a course presented by Mainland BC Military Family Resource Centre (BCMFRC), Mental Health First Aid - Veteran Community, changed all that. It finally gave him the background and understanding of the role he was to play in his second career as commissioner ambassador with Commissionaires BC - a private, not-for-profit organization whose mandate is to create meaningful employment for former military and RCMP members.

Mental Health First Aid - Veteran Community is a component of the Veteran Family Program launched in April 2018, which BCMFRC delivers on behalf of Veteran Affairs Canada (VAC). Accessible through all 32 Military Family Resource Centres (MFRCs) in Canada, the Veteran Family Program supports the health and well-being of families as they transition from military to post-service life.

Billinger says mental health issues are common among medically released veterans and their families, and that it’s not easy to integrate into civilian life without some support or outside help at the very minimum. The Mental Health First Aid - Veteran Community course enabled him to learn successful communication methods for opening conversations with individuals who may be suffering in any number of ways.

“I already have empathy for mentally unwell veterans, having experienced serving military and families in high stress situations, such as deployments. The course confirmed that mental health problems are often a hidden disability that needs careful and conscientious handling by all who are part of the support network,” says Billinger. “Reducing the stigma and assuring those suffering that help is available are key.”

In his role as commissioner ambassador, Billinger is able to take the caring attitude from the classroom into the Commissionaires BC family and offer practical solutions to issues that the individual or her or his family members may consider insurmountable. He adds that he would have been happy to refer several of his peers to a course like this had it been available during his service. He believes that anyone whose job it

is to care for and about veterans should be encouraged to attend it.

Although designed for medically released veterans and RCMP and their family members, the two-day course is free and open to anyone, and grants certification in Mental Health First Aid - Veteran Community to those who complete it. It takes place Nov. 21 and 22, 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., at the Holiday Inn & Suites North Vancouver, 700 Old Lillooet Road. Space is limited with priority given to medically released/releasing veterans and RCMP, and families. Register by Nov. 18 by contacting veterans@bcmfrc.com.

To find out more, go to: <https://www.cafconnection.ca/Mainland-BC/Adults/Wellness/Mental-Health-First-Aid.aspx>.

Additional sessions are planned for other BC locations in the months ahead.

Canadian Armed Forces families face a unique intersection of challenges: extended separations from loved ones; frequent relocation; and the elevated risk associated with the military member's occupation. The Mainland BC Military Family Resource Centre (BCMFRFC) is a registered charitable organization (Reg. No. 1387 24430 RR0001) that supports more than 1,600 military and veteran families in British Columbia, offering resources and services to help address these challenges.

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