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State vets mental health symposium Thursday in Opelika

By Drew Taylor

The well-being of the state's veterans and their families will be the focal point of an all-day symposium Thursday at the Event Center in Opelika.

The event is sponsored by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Policy Academy.

Acquanetta Knight, chairman of the Academy, said the symposium is part of a statewide effort to address the needs of soldiers returning from duty.

"Alabama ranks very high in terms of the number of soldiers that have been deployed over the last several years," Knight said. "It is important for all agencies that have the ability to support our returning soldiers and their families to come together to address the needs of those that have served so well for so long."

Topics to be discussed include suicide rates, how families deal with soldiers returning home and how to maintain the well-being of a soldier returning from the field.

The Academy has hosted the symposium in many parts of Alabama since 2008 and has received positive feedback for the informative sessions.

"People have indicated that they welcome the opportunity to share resources and network on a quarterly basis," Knight said.

Toby Warren, a volunteer with the group, said the event is intended to bring multiple influences together that can better serve our state, its veterans and their children.

"That agenda has been crafted the way it is for a very specific reason: to attempt to convey and to make a collective impact with multiple organizations coming together, rather than working independently of one another," Warren said.

Opelika Mayor Gary Fuller said the city is thrilled to be hosting the symposium.

"No question, this meeting could have been in Huntsville, Birmingham or Montgomery. With our history of strong support for the military and veterans, I appreciate (event organizers) choosing Opelika," Fuller said.

In addition, two representatives for Gen. Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, will be present at the symposium. They include Col. Steve West, who serves as deputy chaplain for the JCOS, and Col. Dennis Hart with the Warrior and Family Support Group.

The free event starts at 8:30 a.m. and ends at 3 p.m.

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