

VET Connection



Winter 2013

VALOR HOUSE

Moving Veterans from Homeless to Hopeful



Your Link to the VA Salt Lake City Health Care System

Valor House: Moving Veterans from Homeless to Hopeful

The VA Salt Lake City Health Care System continues to move toward Secretary Eric Shinseki's goal of eliminating Veteran homelessness by 2015. Valor House gives us 72 more beds to treat and care for our Veterans, and we are excited to be involved in such an innovative and effective project. Valor House is a partnership between VA and the Salt Lake City Housing Authority. Many of our Veterans see light at the end of a long, dark tunnel thanks to our extraordinary community partnerships. Valor House will allow our Veterans to live right on campus and be close to essential medical care, coupled with the facility's in-house supportive services. There are also several alternative medicine options to help them battle mental health or substance abuse issues such as: yoga, acupuncture, and recreation therapy. They will receive the treatment and tools needed as they journey toward self-sufficiency and permanent housing.

Veterans can call Valor House home for up to two years. The building's central core is shaped like a pentagon with four wings off the main section. One of those wings will be specifically dedicated to female Veterans.

Housing First

"Housing First" is a new core strategy adopted by VA and inspired by the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH). It is a model being used to end homelessness across America. The model is based on patient choice and individualized treatment. The initial emphasis is on housing; after housing is obtained, the focus then shifts to treatment. The methodology is premised on the belief that vulnerable and at-risk homeless Veterans are more responsive to interventions and social services support after they are in their own housing, rather than while living in temporary/transitional facilities or housing programs. With permanent housing, these Veterans can begin to regain the self-confidence and control over their lives which was lost when they became homeless.



2012 Homeless Point-In-Time Counts

In 2012, on any given night 330 Veterans were homeless. Below are some number comparisons for previous years along with Idaho and Nevada Veteran homeless counts.

Utah: 330 Veterans on any given night were homeless.

- 297 considered sheltered homeless (In 2011 295 out of 333 were considered sheltered homeless)
- 33 considered unsheltered homeless
- The above numbers were the same for 2011

South Eastern Idaho: 28 Veterans on any given night were homeless.

- 9 considered sheltered homeless
- 9 considered unsheltered homeless
- Veteran homelessness decreased by 18 percent in south eastern Idaho from 2011 to 2012

East Central Nevada: One Veteran on any given night was homeless.

- That Veteran was sheltered
- Veteran homelessness decreased by 75 percent in east central Nevada from 2011 to 2012

Alternative Treatments for our Veterans

Veterans with Traumatic Brain Injury report relief with Acupuncture.

The movie *The Hurt Locker*, which received best picture of the year in 2008, helps to portray what our Veterans are being exposed to during war time. It is easy to see through the lens of a camera, why we see Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) occurring at such high rates. TBI is defined as a non-degenerative, non-congenital insult to the brain from an external mechanical force, leading to possible concussion, skull fractures, internal hemorrhage, or other internal injuries. This may result in permanent or temporary impairment of cognitive, physical, and psychosocial functions, with an associated diminished or altered state of consciousness.

Veterans are at high risk for TBI and blast related concussions because of the frequent exposure to improvised explosive devices, suicide bombers, land mines, mortar rounds, and rocket propelled grenades. These types of injuries account for upwards of 65% of combat injuries among Veterans, and of these, 60% have symptoms of TBI.

Symptoms range from mild to severe. Mild symptoms include headaches, dizziness, and fatigue, lack of concentration, irritability, sleep problems, balance issues, and ringing in the ears. More severe symptoms include being easily confused, forgetful, and troubled with constant and intense headaches. Difficulty with speech and difficulty with decision making are also common symptoms that require ongoing rehabilitation. Many of these symptoms are debilitating. Too often, these returning Veterans are unemployable, and unable to attend school for re-training. This presents a tough challenge for a young Veteran who has his or her whole life ahead of them upon returning.



Medical treatment often consists of rehabilitation, mental health counseling, vocational rehabilitation, and group therapy. Patients are often on a long list of medications to treat the various symptoms. Common medications are antidepressants, sleep aides, migraine medications, anti-seizure medications, and narcotics.

We are using acupuncture to provide some relief to these patients. Acupuncture has become one component of the Integrative Medicine program being offered, under the umbrella of Holistic Medicine. Patients are seen on an outpatient basis, where they are being treated for a variety of health issues that include chronic pain, post traumatic stress disorder and TBI.

With the use of even a few basic points, patients are reporting a decrease in the intensity of their headaches, better sleep, and an ability to cope on a daily basis. One of our patients “Jim” came to the Acupuncture clinic for treatment of his severe headaches, and his sleeplessness. Jim, a 27-year old male, and Iraq war Veteran got caught in a cross fire in 2003. A bullet entered his helmet, but did not penetrate his skull. The blast resulted in a blood clot located in the parietal area of his brain. For the first year, his words were slurred and his concentration and short term memory adversely affected. He reports developing severe, debilitating headaches, which he describes “helmet-like.” He is haunted by nightmares. This combination causes him to lose a lot of time at work, with resulting depression and worry over financial issues.

After working with Jim over several weeks, I found that he began to respond positively. He reported a decrease in his headaches, better sleep, relaxation, and an ability to cope better with his chronic pain. Jim was also taught to do several of these points for himself while at home, and finds this helpful in diminishing his headaches before they get too severe.

Acupuncture will not be able to provide a cure for these Veterans with TBI, but it will give them some relief that they greatly deserve when used in conjunction with other medical treatments. Although the issue of war is forever controversial, we should not deny the Veterans themselves the best possible medical care the country can provide, and that includes the use of Acupuncture.



Integrative Health at VA Salt Lake City Health Care System

In general, the principals behind an integrative approach are to treat the whole self; mind, body, and spirit. To approach health from a wellness model, not an illness model. The belief that each individual is in control of their own health, thus must do the work to change their lifestyle, beliefs, and old habits in order to facilitate healing.

Classes and services that are available to Veterans within Integrative Health include the following:

- **Mind Body Bridging:** This is an 8 week training course. The group learns simple skills that allow one to deal with issues related to PTSD using a mind-body approach. This class needs a consult.
- **Choose To Heal:** This is an 8 week course that teaches stress reduction techniques. It provides information on alternative and complimentary modalities that help activate our natural healing abilities. This class needs a consult.
- **Qi Gong:** This class is a combination of breathing, meditation, and slow even movements to influence the flow of your personal Qi (your own energy). Qigong taught at the VA is a medical form focused on balancing energy and promoting healing. This class needs a consult
- **Visualization And Meditation:** This class is composed of the body's energy sense, major chakra's, and how they influence every aspect of our lives. Also teaches deep diaphragmatic breathing and positive visualization.
- **Hypnosis:** A mental state of focused concentration during which a person is guided into a relaxed state. Hypnosis can cause a deep sense of relaxation, and may be associated with changes in brain wave activity. Hypnosis may be used for pain management, anxiety, depression, PTSD, and other health issues. This appointment needs a consult.
- **Yoga:** This class concentrates on the conscious breath, movements, meditation and sequencing of body poses. This class needs a consult.
- **Acupuncture:** A Chinese medicine treatment which includes the insertion of tiny needles, used to treat many health issues, both emotional and physical. Restores and balances the body's flow of Qi, or vital life energy. Commonly used here at the VA for the treatment of pain, traumatic brain injury, and post traumatic stress disorder for our Veterans. This appointment needs a consult.

Veterans must discuss these options with their primary care providers prior to beginning any of the above, as some do have certain criteria. A consult needs to be placed for many of these services.

Integrative medicine is not meant as a replacement for primary care, but when used in combination, can be a wonderful asset to conventional medicine, and a way to learn about your body's own innate ability for of healing.

“Warrior One”

Yoga pose takes on whole new meaning at VA Salt Lake City Health Care System.

They don't look the part: Tats, ball cap, scruffy beard. The room is silent except for the occasional clank of two dog tags banging together. The quest for inner peace is palpable and until now has eluded them.

“My body is different; there is an absence of tension, I'm not walking around anymore with my fists clenched.” Mhikal Munny, Marine Corp Veteran.

It's called “trauma sensitive” yoga, but these Veterans don't care what you call it, they just say it works. The hour long sessions of stretching and meditation are easing the minds of those struggling with moral injury.

“It allows me to redirect my energies from thoughts to feelings. The PTSD I started with is not the PTSD I have today. This practice enables me to slow down and to see what my issues are with combat. You get so bogged down with emotions and thoughts all day long and yoga allows me to transcend that.” Ezekiel Madden, Marine Corp Veteran.

Chaos in their personal lives due to physical injuries, post traumatic stress or military sexual trauma brings these brave Veterans together twice a week. The hour is spent literally soul searching. They want to feel whole again and acknowledge the journey begins within.

“Offering trauma sensitive yoga to help people heal from trauma is the most rewarding teaching that I do.” says instructor Yael Calhoun. I have observed that yoga classes not only help people feel their bodies and learn to self-regulate, but they give people a social connection and a voice. Most Veterans freely offer comments after a class: what felt good, what they experienced, why they want to come back. The word 'feel' is used – “I felt my muscles working,” or “I finally felt my breath” which makes me know that the class was a success.

Yoga rules don't apply in this classroom. Eyes open or closed there is no expectation here. It is a safe place to release and regain what was once lost.

“I focus on the moment and it instantly relieves my anxiety.” Ginger Mercer, Army Veteran.

“It's been a privilege to see the transformation take place in our Veterans lives; the physical, emotional and spiritual improvements. It's been inspiring for the Women Veterans Program to support and be directly involved with bringing this innovative program to life!” says Gina Painter, Women Veteran Program Manager.

Veterans are also reporting significant physical improvements after just a few classes to include lower blood pressure and less aches and pains.

For many the long road back to what they once were is just beginning, one stretch, one pose, one breath at a time.

Yael Calhoun is a registered yoga teacher through Yoga Alliance and is certified in Trauma-sensitive yoga through the Trauma Center and the Justice Resources Institute. The program is based on David Emerson's book “Overcoming Trauma Through Yoga: Reclaiming your Body.”



Retreats Revive Veterans Spirit

There is nothing quite like watching a Veteran rediscover the world around him. Those who come to VA are struggling with physical or emotional injuries and sometimes it takes a lot more than just therapy in an office to fully heal what's hurting them. One Veteran told us, *"I felt alive doing these things. My heart was beating again, but this time not out of fear."*

The VA Salt Lake City Health Care System, in partnership with Wasatch Adaptive Sports, Snowbird Ski and Summer Resort and the Sierra Club, has come up with a way to combine treatment with nature's own healing power. Veterans are responding.

I realized these are the things I need to be doing every day, this is healing and these are the people I should be surrounding myself with...I felt cared about."

The outdoor retreats include skiing in the winter and hiking, cycling, rafting and fishing in the summer. The air, the snow, the mountains and most certainly the adrenaline seem to reignite a fire that was extinguished long ago inside many of these Veterans. Men and Women who had stopped enjoying what they once loved find themselves laughing like kids again and connecting with those who understand exactly what they've been through.

"There is much satisfaction in watching a Veteran who was ambivalent about seeking treatment at the VA, get to know VA therapists in a different venue like these retreats, and make a strong therapeutic connection" says Dr. Jennifer Romesser, VASLCHCS Psychologist.

There are activities and equipment for everyone. Veterans with an amputation or a Traumatic Brain Injury can participate right alongside a Veteran with post traumatic stress or normal readjustment issues. Specialized equipment and specialized experience from a team of experts makes the impossible....very possible.



"I like spending time with people who seem to understand and care about us...being treated with respect," says another Veteran.

The transformation from scared and anxious to confident and relaxed is extraordinary and exactly why many of our Veterans come back for more. Sometimes fireside chats and mountain air are just what the doctor ordered.

"It's very much like physical therapy for the soul."

Our Progress:

- **Parking Garage:** We are just finishing up some final details to include an elevator and a covered walkway; 350 patient/visitor parking spaces should be open by late spring!



- **Patient Rehabilitation and Prosthetics Expansion:** The new wing located in Building 1, first floor, will consolidate almost all of our outpatient Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation services. We will also provide more Occupational Therapy activities of daily living and enjoy more Hand clinic space. It will also provide greater privacy in our Physical Therapy clinic as well as create more gym space. Construction continues with an expected opening in 2014.
- **Addition to Radiology area of Building 1:** We are adding a bigger, better MRI scanner which will help us meet the growing demand for MRI's at the medical center. The Siemens 3 Tesla Skyra MRI scanner is a large bone scanner with a 70 cm internal diameter as compared to our current scanner which is only 60 cm. With the addition of the bigger scanner we will now be able to accommodate most of our patients right here on the VA campus. The higher field strength of this magnet will also allow for prostate MRI's. In addition, many patients get claustrophobic when placed in the narrow confines of an MRI scanner and have to be sedated to complete the exam. The larger internal diameter will help relieve that problem and allow for a more pleasant experience. We also plan to use the new scanner for research in patients struggling with Traumatic Brain Injury.

VA Salt Lake City Fisher House Celebrates 1st Year Anniversary!

Can you believe it's been a year already!?? January marked the opening of this magnificent home of hope and healing. In the last 12 months we welcomed over 740 families and we have had guests from all over the nation. Just in the month of January we had people from South Dakota, Tennessee, Idaho and Montana.



Outreach Events and Celebrations:

February 10-17, 2013:

National Salute to Veteran Patients

March 13, 2013:

VHA/VBA Benefits Presentation at the Salt Lake City Library: 6:30 PM – 9:00 PM

April 10, 2013:

VHA/VBA Benefits Presentation at the Golden Hours Senior Center: 6:00 PM – 9:00 PM

April 17, 2013:

Generations Governors Military and Family Summit, Salt Palace: 8:00 AM – 5:00 PM

May 13-17, 2013:

VA National Research Week

May 18, 2013:

Armed Forces Day, Gallivan Center, 4:00 PM – 11:00 PM



VA HEALTH CARE | Defining **EXCELLENCE** in the 21st Century

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