



Breaking through Barriers

with Recreation Therapy

The Palo Alto, Calif., Veterans Affairs (VA) Health Care System is one of the largest and most complex health care systems in the Veterans Administration and in the country. Last year, more than 85,000 veterans enrolled, and more than 60,000 received care, and Palo Alto facilities boast the highest veteran satisfaction scores in the nation. Giving further credence to its achievements, President Barack Obama recently recognized Lisa Freeman, director of the Palo Alto VA Health Care System, with a Distinguished Executive Presidential Rank award for her dedication and service.

“It is nice to personally be associated with the award but I really feel the award more reflects this incredible VA that I have been fortunate enough to be a part of the last 10 years,” says Freeman. “As director, I feel a great sense of responsibility because when you have been given a lot, you need to give a lot back. It really has been a privilege to watch how we have flourished over the past 10 years, and how different programs within the Palo Alto health care system have been recognized and awarded. Many times people get recognized but more often it is the contributions and achievements of the entire health care system.”

Freeman points out that since 1995, Palo Alto has moved from what was once more of an inpatient, institutional focus to one that reaches out into the community. In fact, the VA system has doubled its capacity, and doubled the number of veterans seen in the last ten years.

“That shows we are improving and increasing access to our facilities and programs,” notes Freeman. “We have seven additional outpatient clinics now and we are leading by having the ability to treat the entirety of the patient,” says Freeman. “We will meet the patients where they are, and while they are attached to this system, treat them for life. We also work closely with families, making them aware of what is available, involving them in the treatment, which is a huge part of the recovery process for veterans.”



As the third-largest research program in the Veterans Health administration, behind only San Francisco and San Diego, Palo Alto is at the forefront in new therapies and care.

RECREATION THERAPY

As leaders in the rehabilitation of brain injury, blindness, spinal cord injury and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), Palo Alto VA health care system is successful because of the way the many departments and staff members work in synergy to provide the utmost in therapy, treatment and care.

“We have 45-50 therapists here, ranging from recreation, art, music and massage therapy assigned at our health care center at various divisions, and clinics that are part of the Palo Alto VA health care system,” notes Caroline Wyman, chief, Recreation Therapy Services.

“We are very fortunate here at our health care system because we are the largest recreation-therapy service in the country. We are very progressive in our treatment modalities and very well respected by leadership, which has been great. And we are very supported by volunteer service.”

In the vast Palo Alto VA health care system, there is a multitude of programs that fall under rehab, such as the PTSD program.

“Under the mental healthcare umbrella we have inpatient and outpatient programs and facilities such as the Veteran Recovery Center, addiction programs and the homeless veterans rehab program — a five year initiative to end homelessness — to name just a few,” says Wyman. “We also have a polytrauma system of care where we treat the acute patients, and we have a polytrauma transitional program and the Polytrauma Network

Site (PNS). The other is the longterm care and extended care. We go across the board in these areas and have therapists to cover any type of therapy needed.”

The VA system uses a myriad of modalities for therapy, but cycling is one of the most successful.

“We started cycling as a way to help engage people in the community,” says Melissa Puckett, a recreation therapist who also supervises those participating in the PTSD recovery program. “It is a way to get our patients to address some of what they are dealing with because PTSD is an avoidance/anxiety disorder, and we are looking at activities that may give them exposure to things that can help them work through their anxieties or their tendencies to avoid certain things or situations.”

The trauma recovery program, which is a 60-90 day program for people who are diagnosed with PTSD, is made up of veterans from Vietnam, OEF and OIF, as well as active duty.

“Cycling is just one of those activities that worked well with our population,” notes Puckett. “We started out riding once a week and now we ride eight times a week. We actively participate in local training and ride 100-150 miles a week in preparation for races sponsored by Ride 2 Recovery, which is an incredible organization. We also have participated in the California Challenge for two years. Cycling has been very beneficial.”

Puckett points out that they still battle the stigma that goes with mental health.

“Veterans might be reluctant to come into a clinical setting, but will be more apt to ride with a group,” she says. “One of the great outcomes from the program is the sense of unity and teamwork, of being a part of the community, which is therapeutic.”

“We do have adaptive cycling in the polytrauma unit as well,



where a lot of veterans have head injuries and balance issues,” adds Alisa Krinsky, a supervisor in the rehab section, (including spinal cord injury), and the fitness and wellness clinic.

She notes that they recently ordered new trikes, recumbent bikes, and hand cycles for use in the cycling program, and the tandem program for the visually impaired.

“Cycling is huge,” notes Krinsky. “And we have the duet bike in longterm care as well. Our research has shown that duet cycling helps to relieve depression in older adults.”

Some of the other more popular programs are golf, fly fishing and adaptive bowling, which utilizes an adaptive ramp and hand rails. Recreation Therapy is also in the process of developing a sea kayaking program with an organization called Team River Runner.

“We also work closely with prosthetics to meet specific needs, and veterans can be more independent and participate in programs,” notes Wyman. “All of our programs are clinically driven and we have goals and outcomes that we are striving for and working as a team to achieve.”

Outdoor adventure-based programming is also a therapeutic outlet. The VA attends the Summer Sport Clinic in San Diego, and has a partnership with Disabled Sports USA, which sponsors veterans from Palo Alto so they can go to Sacramento to do some summer outdoor sports. Veterans get exposure to various activities such as cycling, kayaking, rafting, ropes courses, rock climbing, etc.

Art and music therapy are also important modalities in the recreation therapy approach.

“I work with art therapists, and we believe that the art is the gateway or a window into what they are feeling and struggling with,” notes Puckett.

The Palo Alto VA system makes great efforts to reach out to homeless veterans. “Our homeless veterans program has a basketball team and two softball teams,” notes Krinsky.

Animal Assisted therapy, including the Service Dog Train-

ing program — where veterans train a service dog to give to another veteran — has been highly therapeutic for veterans.

“We’ve had some incredible outcomes from the Service Dog Training program,” notes Puckett. “One of the biggest things we’ve seen is how therapeutic the actual training of the dog is for our veterans. It really helps those who are part of this program.”

Puckett was able to share many testimonials from veterans whose lives have been changed as a result of the Service Dog Training program. Here is one veteran’s comment (*see page 7 for more*):

“I would have never imagined by working with these dogs my life would change forever. After over a year with severe sleep, depression and anger issues I found myself able to sleep for longer periods of time during the night, and found myself calm during times where I would have exploded in anger. After analyzing this major change in my behavior, doctors quickly discovered that the common denominator was a service-dog trainee named Verde.”

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

The Palo Alto VA system was awarded a \$100,000 grant this year through the U.S Paralympic Committee Sports Program, a non-profit agency that works with not only VAs but with other nonprofits to help adapt sports programs for veterans and military personnel. “We have developed partnerships with the Riekes Center for Human Enhancement, the Tiffany Center, and the Paralyzed Veterans Association (PVA), which help us develop and provide adaptive sports programs,” notes Krinsky.

She points out that Palo Alto is working closely with the Riekes Center, which is in the process of developing adaptive sports programs and applying to be a paralympic training site for wheelchair athletes. “We are doing train-the-trainer sessions to develop programs in adaptive archery, strength and conditioning, goal ball and volleyball,” she points out.

ALL-ACCESS PAD NEARING COMPLETION

In addition to the presidential award, the Palo Alto VA Health Care System has received some national attention lately for its All-Access Pad — a 40-foot by 80-foot wheelchair-accessible area with fitness equipment designed specifically for veterans in wheelchairs.

“The All Access Pad is an amazing project, and we are the first VA to do something like this,” notes Dr. Wendy Thanassi, chief, Occupational Health Services, who was instrumental in getting the idea off the ground. “Our goal is that this access pad be a model for other VA hospitals, schools, parks and recreation and rehab centers, to think outside the box and allow access to outdoor equipment and exercise.”

Thanassi applied for and got grants to put in some outdoor exer-

cise equipment, and really wanted to find a way to make it accessible for those in wheelchairs.

“We decided that it needed to be a cement exercise pad, but when it came to picking out equipment, we were astonished that there was no outdoor fitness equipment designed specifically to meet the needs of those in

wheelchairs,” she recalls.

Thanassi says that she was fortunate enough to work with TriActive America, a company that specializes in outdoor fitness equipment. “TriActive said they would design and build it for us,” she says. “So we came up with some ideas of what we wanted and needed, and TriActive built us prototypes to try out on the access pad, get feedback and make modifications.”

The prototypes helped Palo Alto and TriActive figure out what worked and what needed to be changed and modified to meet the unique needs of wheelchair-bound veterans. TriActive is currently making the modifications to the equipment, and Thanassi says the one-of-a-kind exercise pad will be ready for action soon.





Part of the grant money also went to the PVA, in an effort to help mostly spinal cord-injured veterans to compete in the national Winter Sports Clinic in Aspen, Colo. “They get lots of exposure to adaptive sports at that clinic as well as at the National Wheelchair Veterans Games,” notes Krinsky.

The third relationship that the VA has cultivated is with the Tiffany Center, where the VA uses the center’s facilities (therapeutic pool and gymnasium), while Palo Alto works on a new Aquatic Therapy Center scheduled to open in the spring of 2012. The aquatic center will have a therapy pool as well as a larger pool for both recreational and therapeutic use. Phase two of the project includes a new fitness center featuring a gymnasium, running track, strength-training room and classroom, as well as a room set up to do yoga, Pilates and Zumba. Phase two is estimated to be completed within five years.

FITNESS AND WELLNESS

The Fitness and Wellness Clinic has about 500 consults a year to address mainly outpatients, but also works closely with inpatients on facility orientations — the strength training equipment, the gymnasium and therapy pool, for instance —

providing guidance and instruction.

“Outpatients are seen by therapists and are put on individualized aquatic-based or land-based programs,” notes Krinsky. “Therapists work with the patients until they are ready to move on and be discharged to a community-based program or a self-directed program. The inpatient rehab is tailored to the specific needs of each patient.”

In the area of fitness programming, the Fitness and Wellness Clinic has done a trial Pilates program, and is currently doing Zumba, as well as adaptive chair yoga.

The Move! program, a mandatory comprehensive wellness program to get veterans active and moving, has been very successful. In addition, the Employee Fitness and Wellness program provides ample opportunities for employees to exercise during the day. Palo Alto VA Health Care System is in the process of purchasing walking/work stations, which allow employees to walk on a treadmill as they work. There are also five employee fitness rooms, indoor and outdoor physical activity and walking courses, as well as an innovative new all-access pad (*see sidebar on page 40*) with fitness equipment designed for those in wheelchairs.

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