West Texas
VA Health Care System

HealthTrends

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Homeless veterans in Big Spring, Texas

Who are the homeless veterans the WTVAHCS assists? They are the mentally ill and those with substance abuse problems. They are the unemployed, those looking for work, and those—young and old—who have not worked since military action. And, they are working veterans precipitously impoverished by a sudden financial crisis. Although stereotyped, the homeless veteran population exhibits a variety of characteristics different from the disheveled panhandler. Lack of education, unemployment, inadequate incomes, rising rents and severe shortages of low-cost housing are trends in both rural and urban areas. But, wherever it occurs, homelessness is usually linked to poverty.

The struggle of homeless veterans in rural communities is hidden from public view. Some live in makeshift shelters far from developed areas—in forests, desert canyons and fields. A lack of a permanent address complicates their access to entitlements. A "blame the victim" mentality may be more prevalent in small towns, where residents place a high value on self-sufficiency and equate homelessness with individual failure rather than structural problems.

The WTVAHCS has a Health Care for Homeless Veterans (HCHV) coordinator—Marge Salhus, L.M.S.W.—a social worker who uses strategy to combat the homeless veteran problem in our rural community. WTVAHCS and the HCHV program give homeless veterans the resources to help them become self-sufficient. This includes community partnerships linking veterans into many different programs. The Texas Rehabilitation Commission, Texas Workforce Commission, Department of Health and Human Services, Housing Authority, Crossroads Housing Development Corporation, DAV, Salvation Army and local churches are some of the partnerships that have been established. Here is a closer look at some specific programs that help the homeless veteran.

House of Hope

Education is a key element in the transition from homelessness to a career and the income to afford housing. WTVAHCS has joined with the HCHV coordinator and the Church of Nazarene to provide housing for homeless veterans who enter school to earn certification towards a career.

180 House

WTVAHCS provides funds for this contract facility where homeless veterans are placed. The focus is on substance abuse recovery and homeless veterans must attend AA or NA meetings daily.

Non-service connected pension and/or service connected compensation

All homeless veterans who qualify are encouraged to apply for their benefits. The HCHV office and DAV work closely together.

Fresh Start

This program, dedicated to revitalizing neighborhoods, creates opportunities for home ownership. Boarded-up homes are refurbished and then sold. The HCHV Coordinator helps homeless veterans develop the capacity and avenues to purchase these homes.

Housing Authority and Canterbury Apartments

These facilities provide vouchers that give homeless veterans access to apartments at a reduced monthly rent. DAV supplies funds to veterans to buy household items and pay security deposits. Donated items are collected and given to the veterans.

Get active to ease osteoarthritis

If you have osteoarthritis, take a walk—or a swim or a bike ride. In fact, a variety of aerobic exercises will help to relieve pain, improve flexibility and maybe even decrease the need for painkillers.

That's good news for more than 21 million Americans who suffer from osteoarthritis, or degenerative joint disease that affects the hands, feet, knees and hips.

Osteoarthritis occurs when cartilage (tissue that connects bones at joints) wears, frays, ulcerates and, in some cases, disappears completely, leaving bare joints. Symptoms include morning stiffness, tenderness, loss of mobility and function, and creaking and cracking of joints—a term referred to as crepitus.

Although the causes of osteoarthritis are unknown, age, genetics and a lifetime of wear and tear are thought to be culprits. Although no cure exists, much can be done to ease aches and improve movement.

If you have osteoarthritis, you already know how painful it can be just to tie a shoelace or bend down. It is possible to feel better by improving your diet, adding the right medications and supplements and starting an exercise program.

Begin by walking

You don't have to be a world-class athlete to benefit from exercise. Most people begin by putting on a good pair of sneakers and heading outdoors. Walking is one of the simplest, safest and cheapest ways to alleviate the symptoms of osteoarthritis. Take your time. Start slowly and increase your speed and distance to keep the exercise challenging, without being grueling. Try to make a schedule and stick to it.

If walking becomes boring, try swimming. This is another excellent choice, whether you do pool laps or take up aquatic exercise—stretching, walking and other workouts done in water.

Thanks to the buoyancy of water, it's much easier to move around. Hydrotherapy is also wonderfully soothing to sore and tired joints.

Ride your pain away

Another form of exercise to consider is bike riding, which will help to strengthen thighs and reduce the risk of knee injuries. If you're not up to riding on busy city streets, consider buying a stationary bike for your home or joining a health club. Spinning® classes have become the latest fitness craze and may just be the answer to pedal away your chronic pain.

Of course, it's always important to check with your doctor before you start exercising and to keep your physician informed of your progress.

If you have advanced osteoarthritis, consider working with a physical therapist. That person can show you proper exercise techniques to avoid further injury. Occupational therapists can also help you remain as mobile and independent as possible.

Walking is a step toward better health

Walking is the ultimate exercise. It's something you already know how to do. It's not overly demanding physically. It requires very little equipment. It can be done almost anywhere, anytime. And it can help prevent or reduce the risk of various health problems, including high blood pressure, coronary heart disease and osteoporosis.

To reap the health rewards of walking, you don't even have to walk at top speed. In fact, regular strolls at a pace of three miles per hour can reduce the risk of heart disease by raising levels of HDL (good) cholesterol, according to the Cooper Institute for Aerobics Research.

The problem with most exercise programs is the high drop-out rate. Following are tips for fitting walking into your everyday schedule and keeping your motivation level high.

■ Recruit a friend to walk with you. Companionship will make your walks more enjoyable and help both of you stick to your program.

■ When taking a bus, get off a few blocks before your stop.

■ Listen to music or audio books to help pass the time.

■ Start a lunchtime walking program at work.

■ Pick a time of day and stick to it.

■ When driving, park some blocks from your destination.

■ For a change of pace or when the weather isn't ideal, head to a nearby mall.

■ Walk in a scenic place, such as a park or other area that's pleasing to the eye and the spirit.

■ Ask members of your women's group, bridge club or other social organization to join you on a walk before or after meetings.

■ Challenge yourself to come up with new ways to make walking a part of your daily life.

Walking 101

Even though you've been walking almost all your life, you may benefit from a brushup on technique and shoe-buying. Walking the wrong way or in the wrong shoes can cause fatigue, muscle strain or injury.

- Keep your head straight (not tilted to either side) and chin parallel to the ground, shoulders level and loose, upper back erect, stomach in, and hips level and directly under your shoulders.
- Don't overstride; take natural steps.
- Swing your arms freely from the shoulders and slightly across your body.
- Buy your walking shoes in the afternoon. Why? Your feet can swell by half a size over the course of a day.
- Look for a shoe with moderate cushioning.
- Make sure the sole of the shoe bends easily at the ball of the foot.
- Look for a shoe with a rigid heel that doesn't bend when you press on it.

When you have to leave home

Admissions and appointments at other VA medical centers

If you are admitted to a VA medical center and require special treatment not available at your local hospital, you may be transferred to another VA. If you have private insurance, let staff know; it might be possible to get care locally. This is especially important if you are getting a long course of treatment like radiation or chemotherapy and will be away from your family.

If you are transferred to another VA hospital, a Patient Transfer Coordinator will make arrangements as soon as a bed is available. The Transfer Coordinator will make sure your medical records are available, get transportation and communicate your medical condition to the receiving team. You will be asked to sign a consent for the transfer. If possible, ask family or friends to bring these things before you are transferred:

- personal hygiene items
- slippers or shoes and socks
- clothing for when you are discharged
- a small amount of money

Important documents to bring with you:

- advance directives (living will or durable power of attorney for healthcare)
- a list of family or friends who can be reached if you need assistance
- your insurance cards, Medicare, Medicaid, VA

When your specialized treatment is complete, you will be transferred back to your local VA if you still need hospitalization. If you are well enough to be discharged and you cannot arrange transportation, the VA will help transport you back to the city where you started. Before you are discharged, make sure you understand your discharge instructions, how to take any new medication and where your next appointment will be.

The VA Southwest Health Care Network is working hard to provide outstanding care to our veterans. If you have a problem or concern, don't hesitate to ask for help or contact the patient representative to assist you.

We value your input. During the month of September, our Network will be participating in a nationwide survey of enrollees. This survey, being conducted by VA, will help us garner information about the veterans enrolled in our Network. This data will help us with our future planning efforts to best meet your healthcare needs. So, during the month of September, if you receive a phone call from VA asking you to participate in a survey about VA enrollees, we hope you will take a few minutes to answer the survey. We thank you for your support of this effort!

Visit our Web site to get information on health and medication questions at http://www.va.gov/visn18/HI/Health_Informatics.htm

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For newsletter information, contact:
West Texas VA Health Care System
300 Veterans Blvd.
Big Spring, TX 79720

For patient concerns or issues, contact our patient representatives at **(915) 264-4839.**

If you would like information on how to quit smoking, call Lori Gonzales at **(915) 263-7361 ext. 5373** or **1-800-472-1365.**

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