

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
June 15, 2021

Media Advisory
FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:
Dustin Senger, Deputy Public Affairs Officer
719-227-4552
vhaechcommunications@va.gov

VA Resource Fair Scheduled as Caregiver Support Expands for Veterans

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. – The VA is expanding its caregiver support to cover Veterans of all eras. Expecting a 10-fold increase in applications this year, the VA Eastern Colorado Health Care System caregiver support team is providing a resource fair June 18 in El Paso County.

In May 2011, Post-9/11 Veterans began applying for the VA Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers. As part of the VA MISSION Act, eligibility expanded last fall to Veterans who served on or before May 7, 1975. Those with service between May 8, 1975, and Sept. 10, 2001, can start applying in October 2022.

The VA program will offer education, training, support, resources and referrals—sometimes a financial stipend and health insurance—to the caregivers of eligible Veterans with a serious illness or injury and a 70-percent or higher service-connected disability rating.

“We’re here to support the caregivers who support our Veterans at home,” says Kimberly Torrey, a licensed social worker and VA ECHCS caregiver support program manager. While Torrey had previously received a few hundred applications per year, she now expects more than 2,000.

“Many of our enrolled Veterans would not be able to live outside an institutional setting without their caregivers being there every day, taking care of them,” she said. Enrolled Veterans had been mostly under 40 years old but nearly half of the applications this year are associated with Veterans over 70.

Once a four-person team, VA ECHCS caregiver support now involves more than 20 professionals, including social workers, occupational therapists, registered nurses and a physician assistant. They held drive thru and virtual outreach efforts last year amid the COVID-19 pandemic. They enlisted horses in December.

While exploring opportunities, the team partnered with Air Force Veteran Cindy Rau-Sobotka, founder of Holistic Therapeutic Equine Center, to pilot a therapy class at a 41-acre ranch in northern El Paso County.

“The change you see in the Veterans is astounding, from the moment they walk into a class to the moment they leave,” said Torrey, crediting how the horses reflected human emotions during grooming and games. Where caregivers had stood with reluctant Veterans, she observed smiling and laughing, then relaxation and connection.

Torrey shared the results of equine therapy with Bowlers to Veterans Link, then received a grant to continue it. Since 1942, the national nonprofit organization has raised more than \$50 million to boost

spirits, speed recuperation and improve morale for Veterans and servicemembers, according to an official factsheet.

The Holistic Therapeutic Equine Center will host the VA ECHCS Caregiver Support Program Resource Fair at Split Pine Ranch in the Black Forest area of El Paso County. More than 20 organizations will offer resources and opportunities, starting with an equine therapy demonstration.

'Healing with Horses'

"People with chronic diseases and disabilities frequently shrink inward and avoid new opportunities—depression and anxiety often follow," says Philip Horton, an Air Force Veteran with Parkinson's disease. Holding hiking sticks for balance, he visited the Holistic Therapeutic Equine Center in May.

"When my wife and care partner suggested spending two or three hours together with a horse, I was more than skeptical," said Horton, 78, who had never visited horses on a ranch. "My Parkinson's symptoms and a program called 'Healing with Horses' sounded like a giant oxymoron."

Surrounded by eight horses and their trainers, about a dozen volunteers and three other Veterans and their caregivers, Horton's skepticism was steeped in anxiety. It eased while brushing a paint horse's brown coat and seeing how much the stallion appreciated a scratch behind his ear. The two found ways to communicate.

Leaving his hiking sticks behind, Horton walked with the horse's lead rope in his hands. Focusing on body language, he mitigated misunderstandings from his hand tremors, so they kept moving forward together.

"Working with the trainers and horses reminded us that those with a chronic disease or disability and their caregivers should take advantage of every opportunity to safely engage in new experiences that put us in new social situations, engage the mind and challenge the body."

Melissa Stadtherr, who cares for a post 9/11 Army Veteran with post-traumatic stress disorder, said the equine therapy builds self-confidence and pride as Veterans overcome obstacles with their caregivers.

"We felt strongly that our communication skills were improved since our experience required us to work through basic problem-solving with our nonjudgmental horse partners," said Stadtherr.

To learn more about the VA ECHCS caregiver support program, contact the team at 720-723-3013 or echcsCaregiverSupport@va.gov. For more information about the VA Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers, including how to apply and the eligibility expansion phases, visit <https://www.caregiver.va.gov>.

###

VA ECHCS Caregiver Support Program Resource Fair

The VA ECHCS Caregiver Support Program Resource Fair takes place June 18 at Holistic Therapeutic Equine Center in El Paso County. The event is open to Veterans and caregivers from 12:30-3:30 p.m. To RSVP, call the VA ECHCS caregiver support team at 720-723-3013. Walk-ins also welcomed.

WHO: Veterans with a serious illness or injury and their caregivers

WHAT: More than 20 community organizations will join VA ECHCS in sharing resources for Veterans and their caregivers. After a caregiver support program overview, participants will watch an equine therapy demonstration then tour the Holistic Therapeutic Equine Center. Culminating breakout sessions will focus on traumatic brain injury, horticulture therapy, home safety and advance care planning.

WHEN: Friday, June 18, from 12:30 to 3:30 p.m.

WHERE: Holistic Therapeutic Equine Center in Split Pine Ranch at 15385 Black Forest Road in El Paso County

WHY: With the VA Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers expanding to cover Veterans of all eras, VA ECHCS is committed to sharing VA and community resources.

For additional information, contact vhaechcommunications@va.gov.

Attached Photo



210529-CP001 – Justin Cobler, a registered nurse with the VA Eastern Colorado Health Care System caregiver support team, watches Air Force Veteran Philip Horton, 78, lead “Roy” during an equine therapy class May 29 at Holistic Therapeutic Equine Center in El Paso County. The team offered the class in partnership with the Holistic Therapeutic Equine Center. “Those with a chronic disease or disability and their caregivers should take advantage of every opportunity to safely engage in new experiences that put us in new social situations, engage the mind and challenge the body,” said Horton, who has Parkinson’s disease. (Courtesy Photo/Judy Horton)