



Welcoming service members home and helping them thrive

by rhea maze

An average of 20 veterans a day die by suicide in the United States, according to recent data from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Many military men and women struggle with chronic pain when they get home, but one local program helps them relieve some symptoms and work toward restored health.

“Many of our service members return from deployment with injuries, mental health issues, traumatic brain injuries, post-traumatic stress, and sleep problems,” says Ana Yelen, co-founder and executive director of the Healing Warriors Program.

The nonprofit program, which opened in July 2013, provides anyone who has served in the military, as well as their significant others and parents, with acupuncture, craniosacral therapy, and Healing Touch therapy at the Fort Collins office, at regular pop-up clinics in Longmont, Denver, and Colorado Springs, and at various military events.

These non-narcotic, integrative care therapies aim to supplement service members’ standard medical care to help them achieve their personal health goals and improve their quality of life. Clients receive their first three sessions free and additional appointments are offered at a nominal fee.

“We decided to take a multimodal and integrated approach,” Yelen says. “We work with our clients’ primary care physicians and aren’t telling anyone to stop taking their medications. Instead, we ask our clients what problems they are looking to address and then provide a treatment plan to help them achieve their health-care goals.”

Acupuncture is a form of Chinese medicine in which very fine needles are inserted through the skin at specific points in the body. Research suggests that acupuncture can help alleviate chronic pain, and scientists are only just beginning to study its potential to help with various other health issues. Craniosacral therapy is a technique where a very light touch is used to help release tension in areas surrounding the brain and spinal cord. Healing Touch therapy utilizes specific sequencing of light touch in various places along the body.

According to the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, the government’s lead agency for scientific research on complementary and integrative health approaches, these kinds of techniques may be helpful in managing a variety of health conditions in conjunction with conventional medicine. A notable 2012 study at Marine Corps Base Camp



Karen Orlosky does craniosacral therapy to release tension around the head and spinal cord. The program performed its 10,000th therapy treatment in October.

Pendleton, led by the Scripps Center for Integrative Medicine, showed that Healing Touch therapy combined with guided imagery significantly reduced symptoms of post-traumatic stress in combat-exposed, active duty military personnel. In light of such findings, agencies are calling for more research on how these practices can benefit service member populations.

Healing Warriors, a registered Veterans Administration vendor, celebrated its 10,000th treatment milestone in October 2017 and continues to be amazed by the client feedback they receive.

Megan Harms, an acupuncturist at Healing Warriors and co-founder of Love Co Acupuncture, has witnessed many success stories since joining the program. One of her clients, an 80-year-old veteran who had been dealing with pain for over 40 years, rated his pain as an eight before his first session. (The pain scale is 1 – no pain, 10 – the worst possible pain.) After a single treatment, it was down to a four. “Since then, we’ve been able to consistently keep it down to a two or three,” she says. “He says he wishes someone would have suggested acupuncture years ago.”

Bert, another client who asked to use only his first name, is a Vietnam veteran who served in the Army’s Military Intelligence Corps. He receives weekly craniosacral treatments for his neck and back problems, which include four bulging discs, five bone spurs, and an inverted lumbar spine. These problems first crept up during his time in the service and continued to worsen for decades. His neurosurgeon agrees with and supports the proactive approach he’s taking to avoid major surgery, which includes utilizing massage and other therapies in addition to the craniosacral treatments. “The Healing Warriors Program has kept me operating,” he says. “My neck and back problems have the potential to cripple me, but I’m now able to exercise and stay ahead of that happening.”

Bert not only found physical relief through Healing Warriors, he also discovered a new sense of purpose and community through becoming a program volunteer and connecting with other veterans organizations. “I’ve been able to help out and give back which means a lot to me because I struggled with survivor’s guilt,” he says. “I had to come to the realization that there’s no cure for what I have, but what I can do is continue to live a productive life, be helpful to others, and strengthen my physical and mental health.”



To set up a therapy session with Healing Warriors:

healingwarriorsprogram.org
970-776-VETS (8387)
info@healingwarriorsprogram.org

Northern Colorado Clinic
1136 E. Stuart St., Ste. 4202
Fort Collins, Colo.
Monday-Friday, 9 a.m. - 5 p.m.

Monthly Pop-Up Clinics held one Saturday a month in Longmont, Denver, and Colorado Springs. Free for all service members, spouses/partners, and parents, with proof of military service. Go to the website or call the number at left for dates, times, and locations.

For more information on complementary health options: nccih.nih.gov/

Photos by Julie Eslick