



Veteran Mona Dudley participates in a painting class sponsored by Soldier On's Resiliency Program.

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PRIVATE GRASSROOTS GROUPS [**FILL VA GAPS**]

The needs of war veterans suffering from mental health conditions often surpass VA resources. Here are four non-profit organizations that have taken notice, and strive to fill in wherever possible.

[BY NICOLE SLAUGHTER-GRAHAM]

In 13 regional VA health care systems, 40% to 64% of psychologist positions are vacant. Nationally, about 21% of such positions are vacant,” reported *USA Today* last August.

VA realizes that veterans seeking

psychological counseling should have access to such care when needed, even if unable to provide the services directly.

“VA collaborates with non-profits (as we do with all community providers) to ensure that veterans have access to high-quality care whenever and wher-

ever they seek it,” according to VA Media Relations Representative Monica Smith.

Fortunately, grassroots organizations around the country have found ways to offer just such assistance.

Chris Bergin, 33, ran into trouble when he returned from his second tour in Iraq in 2005. The Marine veteran tried his best to readjust to civilian life, but problems with PTSD, insomnia, depression and anxiety crippled his efforts. He sought the assistance of VA, where he was given a plethora of pain and antianxiety medications.

Not long after, Bergin found himself addicted to the medications and trouble soon followed. After nearly nine years and a couple of problems with the law,



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Resiliency Program participant Marvin Henry is now employed as a driver for the transportation program at Soldier On.

he decided to participate in VA's PTSD program. It helped, but he felt as though it wasn't quite enough. Upon completion of the program, Bergin requested an extension, but VA didn't offer extensions. "The whole time you're in there," he said, "they tell you to stay connected, but they don't offer anything for you when you leave."

That's when Bergin found *Soldier On's Resiliency Program*.

A SECOND CHANCE

Soldier On, a non-profit located in Leeds, Mass., and funded mostly by government monies, worked with Dr. Steven Zodkoy to create the *Resiliency Program*.

Zodkoy, DC, and *Soldier On's* CEO, Jack Downing, spent two years creating the *Resiliency Program*. "Eighty-four percent of veterans in my care have a mental health diagnosis, and they aren't improving despite access to psychiatrists and psychologists," Zokoy explained.

"The program is designed to help veterans overcome mind-body issues that stop them from succeeding and being happy in life."

The *Resiliency Program* uses a combination of nutritional support and Neuro Emotional Technique (NET), to help veterans overcome the debilitating symptoms associated with PTSD and other mental health ailments.

The belief behind the *Resiliency Program* is that the mind and body must be balanced in order to apply the benefits of mental health care. "We are trying to say that the mind-body relationship is really one system, which is why supplements provide strength to the body and the NET therapy provides ease to the

mind," Zokoy stated.

As a veteran who has personally benefited from the *Resiliency Program*, Bergin believes the idea of mind-body connectedness rings true. "I knew that I had been feeling better, but I was still skeptical," Bergin recalls, "but when I got my test results and they showed my body improving, it was just an affirmation that the program was working."

Bergin thought that he'd never be truly happy again or be able to get a good night's sleep, but today he lives a full life. He's able to get proper sleep at night, and the memories of the past do not haunt him. He's attending college, engaged to be married and bought a house with the help of *Soldier On* and the *Resiliency Program*.

RESCUED BY A K9

Service dogs have long been known to assist the blind or otherwise disabled, but what about veterans? After doing extensive research, founder and president of *K9s for Warriors* Shari Duval

discovered records of experimental use with service dogs for PTSD and traumatic brain injury. "There wasn't a lot of data," she says, "but there were some promising results."

She decided to take the chance, and in 2011 *K9s for Warriors*—funded completely by private donations—opened its doors in Ponte Verda Beach, Fla.

Of the dogs trained, 95% are rescues. Once a veteran is matched to a dog, training between the two is scheduled. The veteran stays on property at *K9s for Warriors* for three weeks. While there, they are tethered to their dog to promote a bonding experience.

Jim Kuiken served from 1973 through 2002 in the Marines, including a tour in Afghanistan. He retreated more and more into himself after each deployment. In 2012 and 2013, his situation became grave: "I spent my time sitting in the house doing nothing. I didn't turn the TV on. I didn't get up and get out or interact."

One thing he did do was fill out a survey on PTSD that came through the mail. The director of that survey was so concerned that he called Kuiken direct-

[K9s FOR WARRIORS]



Marine vet Jim Kuiken poses with his service K9, Freedom. Thanks to K9s for Warriors, Kuiken was able to reconnect with family and start to get out more in public.



How to Contact

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K9s for Warriors: Ponte Verda Beach,
Fla., (904) 686-1956,
www.k9sforwarriors.org

**Veterans Empowerment
Organization (VEO):** Atlanta, Ga.,
404-889-8710,
www.veteransempowerment.org,
support@veohero.org

Operation Second Chance:
Germantown, Md., (888) 672-4838,
www.operationsecondchance.org

VEO

Homeless veterans have the opportunity to gain much-needed documentation and job placement through the Veterans Empowerment Organization. Its transitional housing also is available to vets until they are fully capable of living on their own.

“WE WOULD NEVER

want to force a veteran to leave before he was ready and fully capable.” —VEO TRANSITIONAL HOUSING CASE MANAGER JULIANNE GREEN

ly and suggested he look into K9 services for veterans. Kuiken found *K9s for Warriors* and began the lengthy application. “They want to make sure the dog can be cared for, and you can manage yourself,” Kuiken explained of the screening process.

Within six months, Kuiken arrived at *K9s for Warrior’s* property ready to meet his K9 match, Freedom. Through the training, Freedom learned how Kuiken reacted to PTSD triggers. In doing so, Freedom has the ability to prevent Kuiken from experiencing full-blown PTSD episodes.

Freedom also helps Kuiken with his physical ailments. “I got blown up in the 1991 Persian Gulf War,” he said. “Freedom lets me lean on him sometimes when I need help with my balance issues.”

Kuiken and Freedom have been together since January 2015, and already Kuiken has noticed a difference.

“I was completely withdrawn from the family and couldn’t do much. Once

[Freedom] came into my life, I was able to reconnect and get out again,” he said. “And I started writing again.”

Though *K9s for Warriors* has helped many veterans, Duval knows there’s much more work to be done. “We have a year-long waiting list, and unfortunately, we can only accommodate post-9/11 veterans. Our hope is to open up our care to *Desert Storm* and Vietnam vets, but we can’t right now.”

K9s for Warriors recently moved into a new, larger facility in the hope of serving more veterans.

RESTORATION THROUGH EMPOWERMENT

One of the most prominent issues many homeless veterans face is the inability to produce paperwork like proof of service (*DD-214*) or even proof of identification. Many organizations require identification and a *DD-214* before the veteran can have access to services.

The *Veterans Empowerment Organization (VEO)* in Atlanta, Ga.,

which is funded primarily through United Way, is a little different.

“VEO is unique,” Transitional Housing Case Manager Julianne Green said, “in the sense that we are one of the only transitional housing programs that does not require veterans to have any identification or a *DD-214*.” Instead, VEO accepts veterans into its program on good faith, and then they help their clients obtain documentation. “We know what a barrier it can be not to have the documentation,” Green emphasized.

VEO also offers an unrestricted timeframe for transitional housing. By definition, transitional housing generally spans 90 days to one year. VEO has no time limit. Green stresses, “We would never want to force a veteran to leave before he was ready and fully capable.”

Thanks to a partnership with Defense Logistics Healthcare (DLH), VEO is able to offer mental health care and job placement services to its clients. DLH provides a full mental health screening to clients twice a month.

The mental health screening is essential in helping homeless veterans obtain mental health care and find a job. Green recalls one specific case in which a VEO veteran, after his health screening, was connected with the proper mental health care services to help him.

The client was diagnosed with PTSD and depression, but the health care screening made a difference. “Sometimes mental health diagnoses are seen as an end all, but our partnership

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with DLH has helped people reach independence and self-sufficiency despite their diagnosis,” she says.

A CHANCE TO MOVE FORWARD

Established in 2004, *Operation Second Chance* (OSC)—supported generally by fundraisers—sought to provide veterans a new opportunity at life.

Founding President Cindy McGrew took great interest in what she could do to help veterans returning home from war because of her personal connection to the military. Her brothers and a close friend all enlisted in various services.

That June, McGrew’s close friend was deployed to Iraq. Concerned for his safety, she wanted to know more about where he would be located. In doing her research, she found that many wounded soldiers were coming home to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center—a hospital she’s since established a partnership with.

“In 2004, when I began my visits at Walter Reed, I thought it was only

PHOTO COURTESY OPERATION SECOND CHANCE



OPERATION SECOND CHANCE

Veterans compete in *Operation Second Chance*'s annual veteran's SUP & RUN (stand-up paddleboard and run) event held in Sarasota, Fla.

going to be for the year my friend was deployed. But seeing the many struggles that families were facing convinced me that I needed to do more,” McGrew said.

In conjunction with Walter Reed, the Germantown, Md.-based OSC makes sure veterans get the mental health care they need. “We go to [the medical center] and visit with injured and ill veterans, as well as [maintaining] close relationships with the case workers there,” McGrew explains.

In addition to its partnership, OSC also has a counselor on staff. Shelly Harbow has 20 years of experience in the mental health field. She specializes in many aspects relevant to vets, including combat-induced PTSD.

Veterans across the country have clearly benefited from non-profit organizations that provide mental health care. *K9s for Warriors* CEO, Shari Duval, echoed the thoughts of many when she said, “Thank God there are grassroots organizations that are willing to help our veterans.”

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