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NARHA Establishes Horses for Heroes

The North American Riding for the Handicapped Association plans to develop a program for America's wounded service personnel and veterans.

April 10, 2007 -- The North American Riding for the Handicapped Association, Inc. (NARHA) announced April 5 that it plans to develop a nationwide program for America's wounded service personnel and veterans. NARHA promotes equine assisted activities at more than 700 member centers in the U.S. and Canada, helping individuals with special needs gain greater independence through their involvement with horses.

"Appreciating the power of the horse to change lives is our goal," said NARHA President Dr. Paul Spiers, "and NARHA wants to provide positive change for these very special lives. Our service personnel have fought to preserve our freedom, and, for many, at a very dear cost. We must be certain that if our wounded service personnel and veterans need and want this kind of help, they will get the best NARHA has to offer."

Over the March 31-April 1 weekend, at a meeting of the organization's board of trustees, committees and membership representatives, NARHA established Horses for Heroes. A task force was formed to develop the program, pilot the methods to be used, educate member instructors and monitor any services provided through NARHA's nationwide centers.

Based on the success of recent pilot programs at Ft. Hood in Texas, and [Ft. Myer in Virginia](#) where the United State Army's 3rd Infantry Regiment Caisson Platoon is headquartered, NARHA wants to use the lessons learned to prepare local centers for these service personnel as they return to their home communities. The Horses for Heroes task force will oversee and facilitate the orderly development of appropriate equine assisted activities, such as therapeutic riding and driving, as well as equine facilitated psychotherapy, tailored specifically to the needs of service personnel and veterans.

NARHA's Chief Executive Officer, Sheila Kemper Dietrich, said that, "This is a population that only a few of our centers have tried to serve in the past, but it is clear how helpful Equine Assisted Activities can be for our wounded service personnel and veterans, and we need to provide these opportunities, and approach this in a systematic fashion." Kemper Dietrich met recently with many program heads at the Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) in Washington, D.C., after Secretary R. James Nicholson personally visited with the program conducted with the Caisson Platoon.

NARHA's national leadership in Horses for Heroes will create a primary point of contact for therapeutic riding centers, potential veteran or service personnel clients, interested health service providers, and for developing the financial resources to support the program. Kemper Dietrich is already negotiating with the DVA to create a Memorandum of Understanding between the two organizations. Despite the overwhelming desire of many NARHA centers to

help, Horses for Heroes will need to be properly funded, and it is hoped that it will ultimately be furnished with a DVA reimbursement code, just as for other forms of treatment.

The six-member Task Force will be led by Spiers personally, and includes NARHA board member Nelson Cole, whose son is a West Point graduate, currently serving his third tour of duty in Iraq. Joining them will be retired Navy Commander Mary Jo Beckman, a NARHA Advanced Instructor who ran the Caisson Platoon pilot, and NARHA Region Representative Ross Braun who, with Beckman, imagined and helped create the program. A fifth NARHA task force member is Amanda Carey Hogan, a NARHA Advanced Instructor and the director of Windrush Farm Therapeutic Equitation Inc. in Boxford, Mass.

Another important member of the task force will be Command Sergeant Major Larry Pence, U.S. Army retired, the former senior NCO of the Army National Guard. Once he was introduced to therapeutic riding by Beckman, Pence briefed key Pentagon and Military District of Washington personnel about a pilot program at the Caisson Platoon. With the success of the pilot and continuation of that program, Pence has briefed senior leaders of the Office of The Secretary of Defense, the Army and Army National Guard, as well as assisting Beckman with a presentation at the NARHA Region 3 conference about the benefits of therapeutic riding, in hopes of offering equine assisted activities to wounded personnel and veterans.

NARHA, located in Denver, Colo., was formed in 1969 to promote equine assisted activities for individuals with special needs. At over 700 member centers, a total of 36,000 children and adults find a sense of independence through involvement with horses. For more information visit www.narha.org.

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