On Solid Ground
A Veteran’s Journey

Strong Heart, Strong Home

Vet Centers — Here for You Every Step of the Way
Dear Veterans

A Message from the Network Director

Michael F. Mayo-Smith, M.D., M.P.H.
Network Director

Spring reminds us of renewal and change—the hope for change, a vision for change, and the choice to make a change!

You made a choice to serve in the Armed Forces and made sacrifices to keep our country and everything it represents safe. Today it is our turn to serve you, by providing exceptional health care focused on your individual needs, and your overall well-being. We are here for you every step of the way!

On page 3, “On Solid Ground,” is the poignant story about Veteran Gerry Maguire who, with help from the VA Medical Center in Bedford, arose from physical, mental, emotional, and homeless challenges in his life to begin again and obtain his college degree.

On pages 4 and 5, the article, “Strong Heart, Strong Home,” serves as a reminder that you, as a Veteran, are not alone. Our VA Boston Healthcare System “Strength At Home” programs are there to help you and your spouse or partner enhance relationships, improve anger management skills, and prevent conflict within intimate relationships. The programs were created to target the areas of counseling, training, and support for Veterans.

Page 6, “Vet Centers – Here for You Every Step of the Way,” focuses on our Vet Centers, what they provide and how they work together with our medical centers.

Warming temperatures and blooming flowers and trees tell us change is coming. You may be considering making some changes yourself such as planting a garden and thinking “green.” “A Growth of Opportunities” on page 7 is an article about the VA Medical Center at Leeds, which is well-known and recognized for its horticulture therapy for Veterans. In September, 2011 the VA Central Western Massachusetts Healthcare System held Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Rain Garden training that included the installation of the first rain garden at the VA Medical Center.

Be sure to check out the article on page 7, “Play it Safe with Home Oxygen Use” and read about important tips and reminders on oxygen safety in the home.

Thank you for your service. Now let us serve you!

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Veterans’ Healthy Living

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Gerry Maguire, Veteran, business owner, and proud father of three had a wonderful life until he started experiencing back pain and was forced to undergo surgery. Diagnosed with degenerative joint disease, he said, “I woke one morning to find I could not stand on my own two feet and fell to the floor.”

Unable to work, Gerry looked into collecting workers’ compensation, which he had always paid into, only to find that he didn’t qualify for the benefits. This left Gerry without an income and overwhelmed with financial obligations. In a short time, he lost his business, had his truck repossessed, and was evicted from his apartment. Without a home, Gerry was forced to surrender custody of his three children to their mother, which was the toughest and most heartbreaking of all his trials and tribulations.

“I began having thoughts that maybe my children would be better off if I were not among the living,” he said. Alone, feeling helpless, and full of “empty resentment,” Gerry contemplated suicide not once, but twice and it was only the thoughts of his children that saved him.

“On the advice of a fellow Veteran, I went to the Bedford VA Medical Center, just to talk to someone,” said Gerry. At the hospital, in tears and unable to speak, he was approached by a nurse who began simply with, “Are you okay?”

Realizing Gerry was in crisis, the nurse quickly connected him with a social worker and the Homeless Coordinator, who was, “a young, petite, button of a woman, who I would learn later could move mountains,” Gerry related.

Gerry received emergency funds, was signed up for vocational rehabilitation, and made contact with the Compensated Work Therapy Manager. He said, “Suddenly, I had a job!” Along with employment assistance, Gerry was set up with housing. “I entered into the Housing and Urban Development/VA Supported Housing program in July 2008 and used my VASH voucher to obtain housing. I have been able to provide a good home for my children and myself ever since.”

Overcoming all obstacles, Gerry obtained a college degree that came “four years after I found the courage to ask for help.” With both feet firmly on the ground and his head held high, Gerry offers this valuable message for others:

“Please ask for help! You may never meet the angel who saved my life, but as I witnessed, she is part of a network of people who do care. They really do care!”
Stress, stressors, and trauma are a part of life, and these challenges come in many forms. We all have stress, but upon returning home from deployment, it is not unusual to experience a different kind of stress than what may have been felt on the battlefield. For some people, seeing, experiencing, or learning about a traumatizing event causes fear, helplessness, or horror.

Returning Veterans often deal with a broad range of feelings and emotions such as anger, sadness, and anxiety. Understanding why these feelings are occurring can be difficult and add to the stress of readjustment and transition for a Veteran and his or her loved ones. If negative feelings and emotions are prolonged, or if it is difficult to positively communicate with others, counseling with a health care professional could help.

According to Casey Taft, Ph.D., at the National Center for PTSD in Boston, and the director of the “Strength At Home” program, the decision to develop the program four years ago was based on need. Dr. Taft has been working with Veterans and military couples to teach them how to manage anger, improve their communication skills, and deal with any post-traumatic stress issues.

The 12 session “Strength at Home” program is designed to provide in-depth counseling support and training for male Veterans and service members. These sessions focus on ways to manage stress and anger, how to improve communication, and how to strengthen relationships. The counselors understand the stressors of serving in the military and the challenges that occur in the cycle of deployment and reintegration with family and community.
anger and developing more positive, non-aggressive ways of communicating in relationships.

The goal of the 10 session “Strength at Home” couples program is to help Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom military couples strengthen their relationships. The classes are led by trained counselors familiar with the unique challenges military families face. They are designed to foster communication and help Veterans and their families learn effective methods to de-escalate situations, engage in positive communication, learn anger and stress management, and increase feelings of closeness and happiness. You are not alone. All “Strength At Home” programs center on enhancing relationships.

To see if you and/or your partner are eligible for enrollment in one of the programs, contact Strength at Home outreach coordinator Amy Rachiele at 857-364-4173 for a confidential screening. Information shared in the screening process is not shared with any individuals, courts, or commanding officers.

You may participate in these programs at no cost. Some compensation may be available for participation in these programs.

The “Strength At Home” programs are offered at several locations throughout the VA New England Healthcare System.

For more information, visit the website www.strengthathome.com for locations and times.

“Strength at Home” program director Dr. Casey Taft.
Veterans returning from the battle front can face many challenges in readjusting to civilian life. For young Veterans coming home from Iraq or Afghanistan, homelessness, unemployment, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) are higher than the national average. According to William Busby, Northeast Regional Director of the VA Vet Centers, the Vet Centers provide a broad range of services to make the transition from the battle front to the home front an experience with a positive outcome.

“We provide readjustment counseling to help our Veterans return to a reasonable lifestyle,” said Busby. “All the Vet Centers have a marriage and family life counselor on staff. When a Veteran who served in a combat zone comes in, they register at the Medical Center and they are checked out medically. If they are dealing with issues that require medication, we refer them to the Medical Center.”

The Vet Centers work with the Medical Centers to screen and offer readjustment counseling, military sexual trauma counseling, substance abuse assessments, and bereavement counseling. “Often, we partner to provide VBA benefits counseling, community outreach assistance with job training and re-training, small business services, and educational opportunities,” Busby said.

Although they are under the same health care branch as VA, the difference between Vet Centers and the Medical Centers is that a Veteran can only be seen at a Vet Center if they served in a combat zone or if they experienced sexual trauma while on active duty. “Many of our Veterans are suffering from PTSD,” Busby said. “There’s a higher suicide rate among our soldiers now; that’s another reason why it is imperative we work together with the Medical Centers.”

Additional services the Vet Centers provide are Yellow Ribbon events for families to receive training on how to help Veterans readjust. Post Deployment Help Reassessments are also available.

There are currently 300 Vet Centers nationwide. To reach Veterans in remote areas, VA also provides mobile Vet Centers. Busby said, “We are on the same team, and we are here for our Veterans every step of the way.”

For contact information for each of the New England Vet Centers, please visit www.vetcenter.va.gov or contact your local VA Medical Center.
Opportunities for Veterans are Being Planted

Last September, the VA Central Western Massachusetts Healthcare System (VACWMHCS) in Leeds, Mass., hosted an Environmental Protection Agency Rain Garden Training for area VA Medical Centers and private hospitals. The event provided hands-on training on how to site, size, design, install, and maintain a rain garden. “We installed all the planting in three hours. I was amazed at how people stuck with it despite the sweat on their brow,” said landscape architect Tom Benjamin.

The 800-square foot garden was constructed in a low-lying area near the VA Medical Center at Leeds. The garden captures 30 percent more run-off water than regular lawns or gardens the same size, giving a positive environmental impact by preventing pollutants collected in run-off from going into storm drains and on to streams, rivers, and ponds.

The garden not only provides an environmentally friendly function, it is also in sync with the mission and purpose of the horticulture therapy program at medical centers where Veterans participate in therapeutic, vocational, and wellness programs. In Leeds, Veterans plant and sell a variety of plants from their onsite greenhouse called Bear Hill Gardens.

Lorraine Brisson, coordinator for the Incentive Therapy Program at VACWMHCS, says the rain garden is, “In the perfect spot...right outside the greenhouse and potting area, so anyone working will be able to enjoy and admire it.”

Play it Safe with Home Oxygen Use

Oxygen is a fire hazard that causes a flame to burn fast and hot. In the home, oxygen therapy increases the amount of oxygen in the environment, saturating clothing, fabric, hair, or any porous objects in the area where oxygen is being used.

Here are some life-saving oxygen safety tips:

- Stay 15 feet away (five giant steps) from any open flame.
- Do not use equipment that could cause a spark such as an electric razor, and avoid combustible petroleum-based products such as vapor rubs.
- Use oxygen in a well-ventilated area and do not use or store it in a closet or cabinet.
- NEVER smoke while using oxygen and make sure you are at least 15 feet away from anyone who is smoking.
- Install smoke detectors in your home and check the batteries regularly.
- Keep a fire extinguisher on hand and make sure you know how to use it.
- Have a plan for evacuation out of each room.