

National Veterans
Wellness + Healing Center
ANGEL FIRE

REMARKS BEFORE MILITARY AND VETERANS' AFFAIRS COMMITTEE
HELD IN ANGEL FIRE, NEW MEXICO
August 12, 2011

COMING HOME TO A LIFE CHANGING EXPERIENCE

I welcome Committee Co-Chair Senator Ulibarri, Representative Garcia and members of the Committee. Thank you for your support of the nation's active duty military members and veterans. I also want to thank you for visiting the home of the National Veterans Wellness and Healing Center here in Angel Fire.

I would like to update you on our activities during the last year. Last fall we competed for a \$350,000 stimulus grant. Initially we believed we were one of six competitors. By the time the announcement was finally made in the fall, all of the others had dropped out.

The contract was for 150 veteran couples to participate in seven-day Post Traumatic Stress Disorder retreats. The contract reimbursement per couple (\$2,333) was insufficient and had to be subsidized with Center fundraising. We held a golf tournament and silent auction to raise part of the money. Ninety-nine veteran couples have completed retreats and we start a retreat tomorrow for 24 couples. The final retreat starts September 10th for the last 27 couples. We currently have 57 couples on a waiting list. A couple is defined as a married couple, unmarried couple, two females or two males, or a veteran with a caregiver. In some cases two veterans come together. The veteran must be accompanied by someone they can go home with who will be there to support them. Particularly in the case of Vietnam veterans, the spouse has just as much PTSD as the veteran. It doesn't make sense to provide significant healing for one and leave the other untreated.

Past participants have included two World War II vets, two Korean War vets, a large number of Vietnam vets, Kosovo action vets, Gulf War '91 vets, Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) which is the Afghanistan theatre. A number of the OIF / OEF attendees have been former New Mexico National guard soldiers. Two active-duty officers and their spouses came from Ft Riley, KS. Three of the veterans came with service dogs. A number were in motorized wheelchairs. One vet stopped using his cane after the third day. Although this series of retreats concentrates on the healing of PTSD, one recent attendee from Santa Fe had TBI or Traumatic Brain Injury which he suffered from an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) in Iraq.

As you may be aware there is no charge to the veterans once they arrive. Vets from North Carolina, Arizona, Arkansas, Texas, Missouri, Colorado and California have paid their own travel expense to get here.

We have had inquiries from the Army's 7th Special Forces Group about coming to monitor a retreat.

One of the active-duty officers I mentioned has already coordinated a three-day retreat near Ft. Riley, Kansas for the end of October. Staff members will come from the US Army, Kansas State University, University of Kansas and the Haskell Indian Nations University, Lawrence, KS. He has scheduled a five-day retreat during April 2012. I will be attending the October retreat.

Here is a comment from the partner of a Vietnam veteran. "I am a partner to a Vietnam veteran and we were participants in the Wellness and Healing Retreat in Angel Fire, New Mexico. When I first arrived, I had no understanding of the disease PTSD and that there were so many veterans and their partners suffering in silence because of this disease. This retreat helped me to understand my partner's anger episodes and taught me different ways to help him get through it and helped me get through it. This disease is so strong and over-whelming, it is a comfort to know that there are people out there who are willing to help us out. This retreat helped us to open up and face our fears." Veteran Partner, April 2010 Retreat.

This is an interesting comment because in every retreat, about the second day one of the Vietnam spouses or partners has said "I thought I was the only one who had this problem for the last forty years." Another spouse or partner said "no you aren't, I've had it as well." Then one of the OIF /OEF spouses said "I hope I don't have to wait forty years for healing."

When a vet goes to the Veterans Administration (VA) or a Vet Center for PTSD treatment they are primarily treated with talk therapy and possibly medication. Some VA facilities are starting to use alternative modalities such as sweat lodges, but group counseling with spouses or partners is generally not available. There are support groups for spouses, that help the partner, but they don't connect the veteran and spouse. The Albuquerque VA and Vet Centers have some good programs particular to some treatment programs developed by the VA.

Cabinet Secretary for Veterans Services Tim Hale has continued a number of former Secretary John Garcia's programs and is working with the Mayor of Albuquerque as well as non-profits to provide a shelter for homeless female veterans. One of these attended our last retreat and we are in the process of developing a PTSD treatment program which we can take to them in Albuquerque as well as the shelter for male vets in Santa Fe.

Our focus is on Energy Psychology which consists of the following Complementary Alternative Modalities:

- Guided Imagery
- Emotional Freedom Technique
- Tapas Acupressure Technique
- Unwinding Frontal Occipital Hold
- Neuro Linguistic Programming

I have observed all of these in practice and I know they work, but don't ask me to explain each one in detail. The participants pick and choose the ones that they are most comfortable with and that work best for them. Candace Green, our Program Director is available to address the specifics of each technique.

We also utilize the following Alternative Therapies:

- Acupuncture
- Massage
- Reiki
- Yoga
- Art Therapy
- Nature Therapy
- Equine Therapy
- Native American Ceremony
- Traditional Talk Therapy

At the conclusion of each retreat we schedule a reunion four to six weeks later back here in Angel Fire. The group is given the option of continuing to hold reunions on their and all have chosen to do so. Initially they prefer to stick with their own group but over time are comfortable with joining other groups geographically. We now have combined groups in Albuquerque, Santa Fe and Las Vegas.

Over time we will develop provider lists throughout the state, so when a participant goes home and wants to continue a modality (acupuncture, for example), we can refer them to someone that understand veterans trauma.

Angel Fire Resort is donating land to our Center to build a facility. Looking toward the future, the National Veterans Wellness and Healing Center in Angel Fire will have a year-around campus that will accommodate veterans and their families, and support staff and researchers in the pursuit of assisting veterans to reclaim their productive and active lifestyle.

When completed, the Center will feature a facility including meeting and treatment rooms, an alternative therapies spa, as well as lodging options ranging from traditional hotel rooms to

small individual "casitas." The grounds will incorporate a small stable and corral, sweat lodge and bonfire area, outdoor amphitheatre, meditation areas, with seating and special gardens and walking paths which will connect to extensive trail systems.

When the campus is completed we will provide services for PTSD treatment, TBI treatment, host "Train the Trainer" programs for other states, bring soldiers from Warrior Transition Units to Angel Fire for R & R programs, develop programs for First Responders and devise specialized programs for military females that have been the victims of trauma.

We have made amazing strides to establish the village of Angel Fire as the top veteran-friendly small community in America. During each retreat local churches and other volunteers provide meals for the participants, welcome and carry luggage for participants upon their arrival and serve as support staff during the retreats.

The success of our innovative, family-oriented PTSD programs and the plan to deliver more programs this year continues to move the Center and Angel Fire toward its goals of serving 150 veteran families in 2011. Complemented by the vision to build the Center campus, we are ready to share these accomplishments with the nation and to solicit funding and support to bring this bold plan to fruition.

Each retreat provides an average of 600 hours of paid employment to local and regional individuals. The \$350,000 in stimulus dollars provided the equivalent of 15 full-time employees for a year.

The National Veterans Wellness and Healing Center plans to raise \$500,000 to continue running its Veterans Wellness program next year and \$5 million to build the Center campus. As an economic driver, when the Center is completed the Wellness programs will support 52 full-time employees a year.

As mentioned above we are working on Public/Private partnerships with one of the first being the donation of eight acres of land by the Angel Fire Resort for the Center. This donation can also be leveraged for grants which require matching funds to complete.

We have just completed an audit of our Fiscal Year 2011 financials which will be available for grant applications.

In conclusion, Part 2 Pictures from New York City filmed the retreat this past April and has made a documentary which will be shown on the Oprah Winfrey Network (OWN) this fall.

