

Vet Centers help veterans readjust to civilian life

Vet Centers provide a broad range of counseling, outreach and referral services to eligible veterans in order to help them make a satisfying post-war readjustment to civilian life – whether in person, over the phone or via a mobile app.

Our veterans have in-person access to two regional centers managed by the Department of Veteran Affairs: the Sacramento Vet Center under the direction of Jeff Jewell and the Concord Vet Center under the direction of Denver Mills.

These services are free and usually only for veterans who have served in a combat theater and their family members, which have evolved since the Vet Center Program was established by Congress in 1979 out of the recognition that a significant number of Vietnam-era vets were still experiencing readjustment problems. There are both group and individual counseling sessions provided.

In April 1991, in response to the Persian Gulf War, Congress extended the eligibility to veterans who served during other periods of armed hostilities after the Vietnam era. Those other periods are identified as Lebanon, Grenada, Panama, the Persian Gulf, Somalia and Kosovo/Bosnia. In October 1996, Congress extended the eligibility to include World War II and Korean combat veterans.

On April 1, 2003 the Secretary of Veterans Affairs extended eligibility for Vet Center services to veterans of Operation Enduring Freedom and on June 25, 2003 Vet Center eligibility was extended to veterans of Operation Iraqi Freedom and subsequent operations within the Global War on Terrorism.

The family members of all veterans listed above are eligible for Vet Center services as well. On August 5, 2003 the VA authorized Vet Centers to furnish bereavement counseling services to surviving parents, spouses, children and siblings of service members who die of any cause while on active duty, to include federally activated Reserve and National Guard personnel.

There is also a crisis phone line. This phone line connects Veterans in crisis and their families and friends with qualified responders through a confidential toll-free hotline, online chat, or text. Veterans and their loved ones can call (800) 273-8255, chat online, or send a text message to 838255 to receive confidential support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.

The VA has also developed an “app” to help veterans with their readjustment: PTSD Coach. The app can help veterans learn about and manage symptoms that commonly occur after trauma. Its features include:

- Reliable information on post-traumatic stress disorder and treatments that work
- Tools for screening and tracking symptoms
- Convenient, easy-to-use skills to help veterans handle stress symptoms
- Direct links to support and help
- Always with the veteran to access when they need it

PTSD Coach has now been downloaded more than 100,000 times in 74 countries around the world. You can get this free application on your smartphone by googling PTSD COACH and downloading it.

All of these resources are there to support veterans and their families in their time of need. While the Vet Centers are mostly for combat veterans, the app and crisis line are for all veterans and their families in need of this service.

The Vet Centers are instrumental in supporting efforts to file successful claims for PTSD: they provide evidence of the symptoms of PTSD and evidence of treatment for this condition. In some cases the centers will see combat veterans with other than honorable discharges who are having adjustment problems. Check with them to see if you qualify.

Please call the Sacramento Vet Center at (916) 566-7430 if you live in Dixon, Fairfield, Suisun City, Rio Vista or Vacaville or the Concord Vet Center at (925) 680-4526 if you live in Vallejo or Benicia. They both stand ready to help veterans with combat-related issues.

Ted Puntillo is director of Veteran Services for Solano County. Reach him at 784-6590 or TEPuntillo@SolanoCounty.com. The Solano County Veteran Services Office, 675 Texas St. in Fairfield, is open from 9 a.m. to noon and 1 to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday.