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## Partnerships form in West Valley to assist returning veterans



Vietnam veteran and personal trainer John Stephens works with veterans at Rio Vista Recreation Center in Peoria.

Michael Schennum/The Republic

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### ActiVet Program

Peoria and the West Valley Vet Center are launching a pilot program for combat veterans recovering from physical injuries and/or mental-health issues. Certified personal trainers at the Rio Vista Recreation Center will design exercise

By **Jackee Coe**  
The Republic | azcentral.com  
Fri Nov 8, 2013 9:18 AM

A recent partnership between Peoria and the West Valley Vet Center to help combat veterans heal mentally and physically is a model that experts say is needed to assist the influx of returning war veterans.

The U.S. Department of Defense estimates that up to 1 million veterans nationwide will return from Iraq and Afghanistan and transition back into civilian life over the next five years.

These men and women can struggle to pick up where they left off before being called to duty, whether in their careers or families. And many return with physical and mental scars, only to be met by bureaucracy and backlog at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs when they seek help.

To alleviate those frustrations, many non-profit groups, government agencies and others are partnering to help veterans navigate the maze.

The complexity of the various government and private systems of care for veterans can be overwhelming, said Nicola Winkel, community liaison for the Arizona Coalition for Military Families.

"We need to be working together," she said.

Peoria's ActiVet program is an example of that collaboration.

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programs for each veteran, who also will receive counseling support at the veterans center. Honorably discharged combat veterans with service-related disability can apply.

To apply: Call Dr. Adam McCray at 623-398-8854.

Deadline: Sunday, Dec. 15.

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### Veterans numbers

About 625,000 military service members and veterans live in Arizona, according to the Arizona Coalition for Military Families.

About 56 percent of all Iraq and Afghanistan veterans have used the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs health care since October 2001, according to the VA.

About 1 million veterans will return from Iraq and Afghanistan within the next five years, according to the U.S. Department of Defense. That breaks down to about 200,000 a year.

### The Peoria partnership

The ActiVet program will provide 25 combat veterans with service-related injuries, including post-traumatic stress disorder, a year's membership to the city's Rio Vista Recreation Center. There, they will receive personal training, along with counseling from the West Valley Vet Center.

The center, which opened in 2011, is an outpatient mental-health clinic in Peoria that helps combat veterans work through a host of issues, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, substance abuse and readjustment to family life.

The partnership between the veterans center and the city is funded by a \$5,000 grant from the Arizona Department of Veterans Services. The aim is to provide veterans with a holistic approach to their recovery at less cost, Rio Vista manager Jackie Stanley said.

Studies have shown physical exercise helps reduce stress, anxiety, depression and PTSD symptoms, said Dr. Adam McCray, team leader at the veterans center.

"It allows us to expand the scope of our services and to multiply the force with which we intervene to help people improve their lives," McCray said

### Other area services

Peoria's program is one of many for veterans in the West Valley.

Glendale Mayor Jerry Weiers recently sponsored a job fair to connect veterans with employment opportunities and other resources, such as education, health and legal services.

"Many of our veterans have additional needs beyond just finding employment," Weiers said.

Surprise launched a Veterans' Workforce Development campaign last year to provide job training, skills assessment and civilian employment for veterans.

Peoria's Veterans Memorial Board provides instruction and free books to help veterans get the services they need at the VA.

West Valley colleges and universities also have services for returning veterans. Arizona State University's West campus and Glendale and Estrella Mountain community colleges have programs to ensure veterans have resources to succeed academically. That includes peer-mentoring programs and training for faculty and staff on recognizing and accommodating veterans' needs.

For veterans who struggle to navigate the system, the Sun City-based Operation American Patriot is there to help.

The advocacy group uses a wide-reaching network to help veterans caught in the government bureaucracy get the assistance they need, whether with jobs, legal, housing, clinical, chaplaincy or mentoring.

"We do everything we can to cut bureaucracy so that if they need something immediately, they can get access to those services immediately," spokeswoman Teresa Wright said.

### Veterans' struggles

Returning veterans often struggle on a variety of fronts, experts say. Many have mental illnesses, like PTSD and traumatic-brain injury, which, if left untreated, can lead to substance abuse and suicide.

Others struggle to find work because employers or veterans have difficulty translating their military skills to civilian jobs, or employers want to hire them for lower-wage positions that will not support their families.

"Everyone comes out of the military with a certain set of skills, like discipline, duty, loyalty," said Jason Hansman, senior program manager for health programs at Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, a national non-profit. "They're high-quality employees, employees that you probably don't need to worry about them showing up on time. They're going to be early, they're going to listen to directions, they are trainable."

Several national and local groups, including the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, National Organization of Veterans' Advocates, Arizona Coalition for Military Families and the state Department of Veteran Services, host training to educate employers on how to put veterans' skills to use in their companies.

Many experts say there are enough services available to help returning veterans, but the assistance comes from so many government, private and non-profit sources that it can be difficult to navigate.

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Still, countless veterans struggle to get the help they need in a timely manner. Wright said advocates at

Operation American Patriot frequently get calls from veterans frustrated with the backlog at the VA or who don't know where to find the resources they need.

"It may not be a capacity issue. It might be a connection issue," Hansman said. "A lot of resources are sitting idle or not to capacity across the country."

The Arizona Coalition for Military Families recognizes the challenges created by the convoluted systems and tries to foster more collaboration to ease the process for veterans and their families, Winkel said.

That collaboration is especially important as Arizona braces for the influx of returning veterans in the next five years, she said. The assistance is ready and available, but the different sectors must work together to provide effective care.

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