

Keller center helping veterans with Horses for Heroes

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BY FAYE REEDER

Horses for Heroes. For some local veterans who are struggling to find effective treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder and related problems, there's hope on the horizon for a nontraditional approach. Through a grant from the Texas Veterans Commission fund, Rocky Top Therapy Center in Keller is now serving veterans through its Horses for Heroes program.

The center uses a relatively new branch of psychotherapy in which individuals interact with horses to help them learn skills in communication, trust and discipline. Equine-assisted psychotherapy is proving to be an effective treatment.

"The focus of EAP is to develop a trusting relationship with the horse," said program director **Brooke Knox**.

The program pairs a veteran with a counselor and a professionally certified horse specialist. "Caring for their chosen horse is a big part of EAP. They learn to catch and halter, to groom, and depending on interest and ability, much more."

Rocky Top also offers veterans therapeutic riding to address physical injuries and conditions and hippotherapy to use the movement of the horse as a medical tool. Clients may use a single therapy or a combination. Professionals at the center stress that most participants receive care through Veterans Affairs and that the equine services complement their other treatments.

But for some who have not responded to other treatments or who need additional support, the horse program is helping them develop coping skills, confidence and distress tolerance and often translates into more success in the traditional therapies.

A therapeutic group for female veterans is being offered, with plans for others that are geared toward women. But so far there's been a fairly even split between male and female participants. Participants range in age from 21 to 60. Treatments are also available for veterans' children and loved ones. Children as young as 3 can be involved in play therapy.

Most clients attend weekly individual EAP sessions, but small groups are occasionally offered. Veterans choosing the therapeutic riding program can select private or group sessions. The Horses for Heroes program is operated separately from the other Rocky Top programs for nonveterans.

"As many of our clients have experienced combat trauma and/or military sexual trauma, we work to maintain privacy and feelings of safety," Knox said. "We also treat military veterans with a sort of cultural sensitivity, understanding that their needs and experiences are quite different from the civilian population."

Rocky Top President **Doug Newton** said, "We are extremely pleased to be among 21 organizations to receive over \$5.4 million in grants from the TVC fund and to be able to offer these services to our military families."

Referrals are made by the treating physician, by VA personnel or by family readiness staff in the Defense Department.

"Horses for Heroes provides challenges and growth experiences for the veteran in a peaceful and supportive setting," Knox said.

As one veteran said: "This is my safe place; this is where I can just be me."

Veterans who want to know more about the program and how it may benefit them or a relative can contact Knox at 817-379-5717 or bknox@rockytoptherapy.org.