

Local vets wage two-front war

Written by Story and photos by Andy Gibbons III Sun Correspondent
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Gallup veterans fight to reopen VA Transition Center

Freedom isn't free. It costs something that can only be paid by those in uniform. Some pay with everything, but what about the veterans who return to the home front? Finished with one war, these veterans often find themselves facing another when they return home.

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This is the situation facing local veterans in need of care. The Gallup Veterans Transition Center, at 513 Williams St., stopped receiving new admissions on June 10. The future of the center seemed uncertain at the time of closure, but later reports indicated that the center is temporarily closed due to lack of a full-time nurse on staff.

Some veterans have rolled their eyes, calling this an excuse, saying it's another move by the Veteran Affairs headquarters in Albuquerque to neglect Gallup.

But is there any truth to these feelings about a seemingly neutral logistical problem?

Sonja Brown, chief of the Voluntary Service and Public Affairs Operations for the New Mexico VA Health Care System, weighed in on this matter when contacted by the Gallup Sun. She addressed the situation at Gallup Psychosocial Residential Rehabilitation Program, the official name of the Transition Center.

"The staffing became critical when the only registered nurse at the facility notified Residential Leadership of his pending resignation," Brown said. "Because this resignation will greatly impact the program and poses a safety concern, leadership made the decision to temporarily close the facility and provide treatment here at the Raymond G. Murphy VA Medical Center in Albuquerque."

Many local vets, however, decided to fight back against the closure with a petition.

"I'm pushing for this petition as a concerned citizen and as a veteran myself, not necessarily as a government employee," Paul Talamante, a former social worker's assistant for the center, said.

Talamante, who's spearheading the petition, believes in the program's success in helping veterans with PTSD, depression, suicidal thoughts, alcoholism, and an institutionalized background, as well as those who live on the streets after their families gave up on them.

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He worries this is another instance of Americans giving up on their veterans. He has in-depth experience with the center's use of field trips, from balloon and bike rallies; its 90-day rehabilitation program; its 10-bed facility to treat substance abuse; and its effective 12-step programs.

"With the help of a higher power, we help change lives," he said. "We help veterans lead a productive lifestyle and cope with life, on life's terms."

Talamante's plan is to reach out on two fronts to get the petition signed, the first front being average community members at the Saturday Flea Market north of town, as well as at businesses like Sundance Dental, where office staff signed the petition.

The second front comprises other veterans, such as those at the Veterans Helping Veterans building, which was converted from an old fire station.

Like Talamante, Anthony Ocana, a volunteer for Veterans Helping Veterans, has experience with the center and its programs.

"We gotta keep it open, especially for our returning vets from the Middle East," Ocana said. "It's the most successful program I've ever been to or heard of."

The Gallup Sun reached out to Rep. Ben Ray Luján, D-N.M., for comment on this developing story.

"I am deeply concerned with this development and my office has been in contact with NMVAHCS to express the importance of this facility and the need to reopen it quickly," Luján said, in an email response.

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The Congressman seemed reassured that the center will reopen when a nurse is hired.

“Brave New Mexico men and women who served our nation deserve the care and services they have earned through their distinguished service,” he said. “This facility in Gallup provides vital services to our veterans and the VA must move quickly to hire staff and reopen its doors. Our veterans deserve nothing less.”

Luján said he has supported legislation that has bolstered health care for veterans in previous sessions of Congress. Adding that his work in Congress has made steps to fix or fund many parts of the VA.

“I will continue my efforts to fight for funding that ensures the VA is meeting the needs of veterans in our communities,” Luján said.

Meanwhile, Brown explained that staff assigned to the Veterans Transition Center are currently providing care for veterans at the Gallup VA Clinic.

“The question of re-opening is still on the table and will depend on the results of recruitment efforts,” she said. “Recruitment is underway.”

If you would like to help, come to the Saturday Gallup Flea Market, 340 Ninth St., or to the Veterans Helping Veterans building, 204 W. Maloney Ave. on July 23 and 30, from 10 am - 2 pm.

***Story and photos by Andy Gibbons III
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