

**GratitudeAmerica MIL-SERV Retreats Program:
Military Support and Educational Retreats for Veterans (MIL-SERV) – Communities Serving Our Service
Members, Veterans and Their Families After War**

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Community-Based Integrative Intensive Retreats for Service Members, Veterans, and Families

Successful reintegration for newly returning military personnel and Veterans is compromised by numerous physical and behavioral health conditions, such as Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). Veterans of all generations continue to suffer from the same issues, and many have not received successful treatment in the past. There is a growing national understanding that Veterans of all generations who have participated in a variety of conflicts- as well as Active Duty Military, National Guard, and Reservists- need holistic wellness programs in order to recapture a sense of well-being and lead rewarding and productive lives. Over the past decade, the Department of Defense (DoD) took drastic steps to understand the causes of military-related PTSD and develop a multitude of programs to reduce the negative effects. In addition to these initiatives in the DoD, a number of non-profit organizations have supplemented the nation's effort in the treatment of PTSD by establishing their own treatment programs. The programs that emerged as the most effective are those that take a holistic approach to the treatment of combat-related PTSD and related problems. However, most existing programs provide too little basic understanding of the physiology of war-zone stress and the many ways in which this interacts with and intensifies the emotional effects – and of the concept of stress system balance as a foundation of resilience. As a result, people are left only with a deficit-based pathology model that reinforces their sense of shame and worthlessness and makes it more difficult for them to acknowledge their symptoms and seek help.

The **GratitudeAmerica MIL-SERV Program** is specifically designed to assist Military Service Members, Veterans and their Families (SMVF) affected by combat by using a community-based, holistic, and integrative approach that supports, treats, educates, and motivates participants over a 3-day period and provides a structure that includes ongoing program and peer support. The proposed Retreats Program encompasses a psychoeducational and skills-training approach toward empowerment and destigmatization of post-combat stress effects. The Retreats Program utilizes evidence-based traditional and holistic modalities when working with Veteran Couples/Families to include: group psychoeducation, small group conjoint/family psychoeducation and therapy, mind-body and complementary treatment interventions (e.g., yoga, massage, Tai Chi), and animal-assisted therapies. The treatment involves a holistically-based PTSD psychoeducational and peer recovery support program that respects five core principles:

- 1) Intergenerational Combat Veteran interaction – Pairing Veterans with the Soldiers of today;
- 2) Focus on the Veteran and Spouse/Family as a single unit – Including the Veteran Family System;
- 3) Active Community and State involvement – a program by local communities to help local veterans;
- 4) The “Battle Buddies” concept – peer-to-peer support between participants;
- 5) Preparation and Follow-up Care – therapeutic support for participants before, during, and after the retreat (for 1 year Post-Retreat).

Building on current local and national partnerships, including staff at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, the National Veterans Wellness and Healing Center, GratitudeAmerica, Inc., Invisible Wound, and others, the **Institute for the Health and Security of Military Families at Kansas State University** will provide the **GratitudeAmerica MIL-SERV Program** in the Flint Hills of Kansas in the Fall 2014. Since 2011, the Institute for the Health and Security of Military Families at K-State has partnered with the National Veterans Wellness and Healing Center in Angel Fire NM and GratitudeAmerica, Inc. in Marineland FL to provide MIL-SERV Retreats. To date, 13 week-long retreats have been held at Angel Fire NM and three 3-day “mini” retreats have been conducted in Kansas (Oct-2011) and Florida (June-2013 & Feb-2014). Preliminary data from the 2011 Angel Fire

NM 7-day retreats (data collection did not involve K-State in 2011), showed a significant reduction in PTSD symptoms in Veterans ($n= 149$) and secondary trauma symptoms in Spouses ($n = 147$). Mean PTSD measure pre-test = 61.21 for Veterans (≥ 50 is the cutoff indicating PTSD) and Mean = 43.41 for spouses; post-retreat data: Mean = 42.75 Veterans, 29.86 Spouses; at one month follow-up, mean scores remained at the post-retreat levels. The Marineland FL retreat data consists of 3 data points (pre/post/3 month follow-up) with 15 Veteran-Caregiver pairs. Preliminary data indicates a significant improvement in relationship functioning in the couple dyads, with an improvement in PTSD symptoms (nonsignificant results, but further data is needed due to the small sample size).

No other holistic, evidence-based PTSD psychoeducational and peer recovery support programs that respect the five core principles outlined above currently exists for SMVF in the U.S. There are a number of retreats-based SMVF programs, but none include these core principles nor do they include a systemic approach to treatment. Implementing an ongoing program that includes the whole family system will enhance the efficiency of PTSD treatment options while saving valuable funds and promoting more effective treatment approaches. Because of the emphasis on community-engagement and the **Community-Based Integrative Intensive Retreats for Service Members, Veterans, and Families** held in Florida in 2013 and 2014, the Institute is partnering with **GratitudeAmerica** to provide this program to SMVF in Kansas during Fall 2014. The **GratitudeAmerica MIL-SERV Program**, developed by a team of experienced researchers, service members, families, clinicians, and community citizens, has become a national model for community-based integrative psychoeducational and peer recovery support programs for Military Service Members, Veterans, and their Families.

Engaged Activities:

The **GratitudeAmerica MIL-SERV Program Retreats** are open to any Veteran who served in combat who is either pre-diagnosed with PTSD or displays symptoms of PTSD, to include Active Component, Reserve, and National Guard Service members. Veterans are not required to have a PTSD diagnosis prior to the retreat. All military/veteran participants must have a current spouse/partner or caregiver who is also willing to participate in the retreat, as the Program treats the Veteran Couple/Family together as a single unit. In addition, participants are encouraged to bring their children (dependents under 18 and adult children) to participate in this holistic Retreat.

The Retreats include both therapeutic and engagement activities, to provide psychoeducation and recreational activities for participants to promote couple and family interactions within and between participants. The format of the Retreats develops a “community” of support among participants to reduce isolation and increased connections. Participants engage in a variety of therapeutic approaches to reduce stigma and increase engagement in treatment systems for participants post-retreat. During the 3-day Program, participants are exposed to 3 hours of combat-trauma psychoeducation; 3 hours of break-out sessions; 3 hours of yoga, massage, Tai Chi, and other mind-body complementary interventions; 2 hours of Animal-Assisted Therapy; 2 hours of individual couples/family counseling; 3 hours of expressive therapies (art, drama); a Native American Healing Ceremony; and other retreat activities. The Retreats are held in a relaxed and natural environment (planned for the Rock Springs 4-H Center, Junction City KS). The program is provided at no cost for participating SMVF and staff, to include all meals and lodging (participants are to provide their own transportation to and from the Retreat). The **GratitudeAmerica MIL-SERV Program** provides the opportunity for Military and Veteran Families to come together, reconnect in their relationships, and reclaim their lives.

Timeline:

- **May 2014:** Schedule Retreat dates and complete contract with Rock Springs 4-H Center
- **June/July 2014:** Develop retreat program and program marketing and recruitment plan
- **August 2014:** Begin recruitment, finalize program and staffing

- **September/October 2014:** Finalize participants (10 couples/families), submit preliminary materials to staff and participants, send participants pre-retreat research survey
- **Late October/Early November 2014:** Conduct retreat; complete post-retreat research survey and evaluation
- **November 2014 – November 2015:** Continue post-retreat follow-up and community resource engagement and support for retreat participants
- **January 2015:** Complete 3-month follow-up research survey
- **December 2014 – February 2015:** Research data analysis
- **Spring 2015:** Submit grants for expanded national program; complete preliminary research publications

Benchmarks

Short-Term Impact: The proposed program will provide an additional retreat serving 10 SMVF participants in Kansas. Additional research data will be collected to support the efficacy of the 3-day retreat model. In addition, the proposed retreat will be an expansion of previous retreats to include children and family members. Previous retreats have only included veterans and a single identified caregiver who participated (usually a spouse or parent). In addition, the program includes a community-based component that will include 1-year follow-up with staff and other retreat participants, as well as engagement with clinical and support services within their local communities to provide ongoing services post-retreat. Additional retreats will be conducted in FL (3 planned for 2014) and NM (6 week-long retreats planned in Summer 2014), with data collected at all retreats.

Long-Term Impact: The current proposed project expands on the previous retreats program by providing an additional program to use in federal grant and foundation funding proposals. Federal proposals will be developed to conduct retreats held at all 3 locations: Marineland FL, Angel Fire NM, and Rock Springs 4-H Center, Junction City KS. These proposed retreats will include 24 5-7 day SMVF Retreats (8 in each location, half couples only, half family inclusive). The goal of these retreats will be to serve 250-300+ SMVF annually. In 2012, the NVWHC Angel Fire NM program had a waiting list of 170 couples for their bi-monthly 7-day retreat program, which was launched in April 2011 – indicating an increasingly critical need across the nation. Each SMVF Retreat will include 10-12 SMVF Couples/Families at each location (KS, FL and NM). The expanded program allows for the inclusion of veteran families, providing a suitable platform for research by Kansas State University's Institute for the Health and Security of Military Families, with data on program effectiveness to sustain the GratitudeAmerica MIL-SERV Retreats Program on a long-term basis, building on the current university and national partnerships, and engaging community partners to establish an ongoing network of care.

Collaborative Partners:

PI: Dr. Briana S. Nelson Goff, Institute for the Health and Security of Military Families, Kansas State University

K-State Research and Program Partners: Dr. Elaine Johannes, Dr. Bronwyn Fees, Dr. Mindy Markham, Dr. Joyce Baptist, Dr. Bradford Wiles, and Kali Summers, School of Family Studies and Human Services

Other Academic Partners: Dr. David Albright, Director, Center for Education and Research for Veterans and Military Families, School of Social Work, University of Missouri-Columbia

National Partners: Staff from GratitudeAmerica, Inc., Marineland FL; Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, Bethesda MD; National Veterans Wellness and Healing Center, Angel Fire NM; Invisible Wound (Animal Assisted therapeutic programs), Virginia

Military Partners: 1st Infantry Division and Fort Riley KS; Kansas and Missouri National Guard (participant recruitment)

Community Partners: Hosted by Rock Springs 4-H Center, Junction City KS; Local community agencies to engage in support of participant families in the 1 year post-retreat to include, medical, behavioral health, school, faith-based, and other local community agencies.