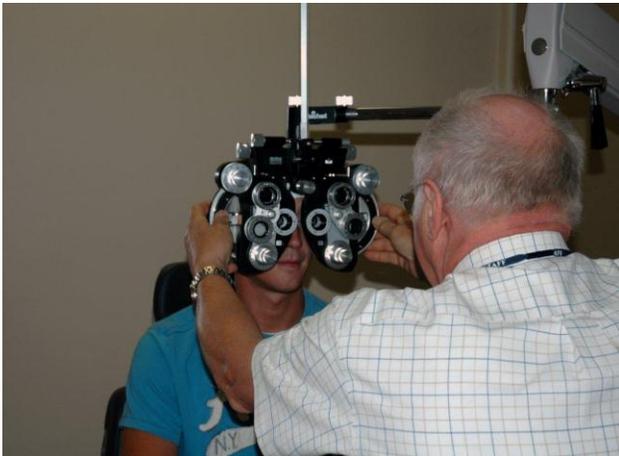


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News Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Returning Soldiers Get Help from VA BHHCS



*Photos above and below:
Sgt. Mitch Demers of the SDNG's 200th Engineer Unit
gets an eye exam during his Soldier Days visit.*



Many soldiers return home only to begin the new battle of putting their life back together. The Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation New Dawn (OEF/OIF/OND) Program staff for VA Black Hills Health Care System (BHHCS) is dedicated to helping these soldiers get the health care and assistance they've earned.

With the help of many VA BHHCS employees, Lori Vosika, OEF/OIF/OND Program Manager, orchestrated the event "Soldier Days" to help these returning soldiers get their VA health care started. The goal of this event was to provide soldiers with access and same-day-service, to minimize their absence from home, family, work and school.

Vosika noticed that a large portion of a returning Army National Guard Unit, the 200th Engineering Unit headquartered in Pierre, S.D., contained Veterans that would be eligible for care at VA BHHCS, but lived in central South Dakota. These returning soldiers would be living up to four hours

away from the Fort Meade VA Medical Center. Vosika knew they would be busy integrating back into civilian life and may not have time to make several trips across the state for medical care.

“We identified geographically where our soldiers were coming from and we decided how best to get them here,” Vosika said. “We ended up incorporating returning soldiers from the 200th, 139th and 189th SD Army National Guard Units.”

Vosika and her team started months ago, by attending the Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Events of these returning Guard Units. There, the OEF/OIF/OND team and the VA BHHCS Business Office helped finalize VA health care enrollment for soldiers. This way, when they arrived at the Soldier Days event, they would be able to go straight to their appointments, with the main business portion of the process complete.

“The idea was to get all the business stuff out of the way, except for ID cards, so that when the soldiers arrived, it could be a one-stop-shopping health care extravaganza,” Vosika said.

After much planning and preparation, VA BHHCS hosted four Soldier Days events, in July and August. Immediately following the first Soldier Days event they began hearing positive feedback.

“The soldiers that have come through have been very impressed,” Vosika said. “We had a soldier tell us, ‘you guys rock!’ She told her fellow soldiers, ‘oh my gosh, you guys have to go to VA.’ The word of mouth has been great.”

At each Soldier Day event the soldiers arrive to a checklist of pre-scheduled appointments, some of which came by way of a health care screener at the Yellow Ribbon Events. Each soldier was then assigned an ambassador to help them find their way around the facility and to their appointments. The ambassadors included volunteers from local service organizations to include the Disabled American Veteran Association—including Auxiliary Chapter 3 from Rapid City and Auxiliary Chapter 11 from the Northern Black Hills, the American Legion Riders, the Christian Motorcycle Rider Association and the VFW.

“It’s a group of soldiers talking to soldiers, and Veterans talking to Veterans,” Vosika said. “If we show one or two the way and they have a good experience, they go out there and talk to each other.”

At Soldier Days, returning soldiers were able to see health care professionals in primary care, women’s health, dental and vision. Diagnostics of x-ray, lab and MRI, and specialists of orthopedics, physical and occupational therapy, audiology, behavioral/mental health and traumatic brain injury team stood ready to provide same day service. Each Soldier Days event also included breakfast, lunch and snacks provided by Veteran Service Organizations, the American Red Cross and VA BHHCS Nutrition and Food Service.

Sgt. Mitch Demers of the 200th Engineer Unit attended the fourth Soldier Days event and had nothing but good things to say about it.

“I appreciate it all very much,” Demers said. “I’m sure some people didn’t get this opportunity. You feel honored to have people volunteer their time, their days, to help us out. I’m sure some of them never got this help. So for them to turn around and try to make it better for us is pretty humbling.”

Throughout the four Soldier Days events, 62 soldiers attended and received same-day health care appointments across many specialty areas.

“I can’t say thanks to everybody,” Demers said. “But I really would if I could.”

If you have questions about Soldier Days, please contact Lori Vosika at 605-745-2000, ext. 92176.

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