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## VA reaches out to veterans

### Years of free health care are available to those who served in 2 battle zones

By **LINDSAY WISE HOUSTON CHRONICLE**

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#### Smiley N. Pool Chronicle

Jeremy Williams helps Richard Jimenez with paperwork for additional benefits Friday at the Michael E DeBakey VA Medical Center in Houston. Only about half of an estimated 13,000 veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan who live in the Houston area have enrolled.

Shane Linnell battled the Taliban in Afghanistan and insurgents in Iraq, earning a Bronze Star for valor in combat. But after leaving the Army in 2004, it took him four years to find the courage to walk into a VA hospital and ask for help.

The 30-year-old veteran from Crosby was always

angry, and it was starting to hurt his relationship with family and friends. Linnell realized he had to do something, or risk losing them.

“For a lot of veterans, the thought of seeking help for certain things is a bridge they’re not ready to cross,” he said. “I know speaking from personal experience, it’s difficult to admit when you have a problem, and it’s very difficult, especially for a combat veteran, to seek outside help. I didn’t for a long time.”

Only about half of the estimated 13,000 veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan who live in the Houston area have enrolled in a special VA program designed to ease their transition to civilian life. The program provides free health care for five years at any VA hospital or clinic and includes physical and psychological screenings for everything from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Traumatic Brain Injury to substance abuse and risk of homelessness.

“It’s a specialized approach, a very holistic assessment and treatment program that we do have at the VA that they’re not going to get anywhere else,” said Toni Brown, program manager at Houston’s Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center.

#### Initial hesitation

Brown and her team of case workers and patient advocates coordinate care for Iraq and Afghanistan veterans by guiding them to treatment programs and resources.

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Like Linnell, many returning veterans initially hesitate to come to the VA, so Brown's team is trying to bring the VA to them. Outreach efforts include Web sites, e-mail campaigns, focus groups, and family picnics that double as resource fairs.

"If we can provide them with an environment that's more fitting with their specific needs, then they'll feel more comfortable," Brown said.

In August, the VA Medical Center plans to open a new Post-Deployment Clinic to cater solely to veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. Staffed by a doctor, nurses, psychologist and case managers, the clinic will streamline the process for walk-in patients and enable some of the more intensive evaluations to be done the same day. A peer-support group will offer mentoring from fellow veterans.

"It's one-stop shopping," said Fern Taylor, program coordinator. "I say, just let us lay hands on you one time. If you never come back, that's OK, but at least let us do the screenings."

### Brain injury, PTSD

One of the first veterans to go through the program was Jeremy Williams, a 27-year-old Marine lance corporal from Houston. Williams enlisted in the Marine Corps in January 2000, at age 17, and served three tours in Iraq.

After leaving active duty for medical reasons in January 2007, Williams went to a VA clinic in Conroe complaining of debilitating headaches,

memory loss and light sensitivity so painful he had to wear sunglasses almost constantly. He was diagnosed with Traumatic Brain Injury and PTSD and referred to the VA Medical Center in Houston. Taylor and Brown's team met him there. "They literally walked me to all the different areas of the hospital and made sure I got what I needed," Williams said.

Now Williams works with the nonprofit Wounded Warrior Project to ensure other injured veterans don't fall through the cracks. He helps them file claims and encourages them to take advantage of benefits and compensation programs they've earned, even if it means a lot of paperwork and patience.

"The transitional period between the Department of Defense and the VA is too great now, and it's a systemic problem," Williams said. "It took me four months, over 120 days, to get registered and to get seen and to start getting into after-care and outpatient care."

A \$15 billion funding increase proposed by President Barack Obama's administration should help the VA continue to improve efficiency and outreach, but many veterans remain wary, said Paul Rieckhoff, executive director of the national advocacy group Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America.

"With our guys there was a running joke that if you don't have PTSD before you get in the VA, you have it by the time you leave because you're so frustrated with the bureaucracy," said Rieckhoff, who comes from a family with a long history of military service. "Don't get me wrong,

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they have great people at the VA, but they have a serious image problem. When I came back from Iraq, my dad and my grandfather both said, 'I wouldn't go to the VA if I was on fire.'"

**A new generation**

Until recently, Rieckhoff said, the VA was legally prohibited from advertising.

The old, passive attitude is starting to change as the VA adjusts to accommodate the country's newest generation of veterans, he said, but for now, local communities and grass-roots organizations must fill the gap. Rieckhoff's group, for example, advertises resources for veterans and their families on ESPN radio, subway stations and social networking sites.

In Houston, Linnell helps as a resource and referral specialist with the Texas Veteran Leadership Program.

"The best way this is going to work is through other Iraq and Afghanistan veterans talking to these guys: 'Hey, here's where you need to go, here's what you need to do to take care of yourself.'"

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