



National Center for Healthcare Advancement and Partnerships

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VHA National Center for Healthcare
Advancement and Partnerships

Helping Hands: Strengthening and Expanding Partnerships to Serve Veterans in Their Communities



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featured in this newsletter:

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U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

A Note from the Chief Officer and Nurse Executive

As 2024 draws to a close, the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) National Center for Healthcare Advancement and Partnerships (HAP) reflects on accomplishments over the last three months, significant achievements throughout the year, and the efforts needed in 2025 to advance HAP's mission and vision.

Through strategic non-monetary partnerships and Healthcare Advancement Initiatives (HAI), VA staff and collaborators in the community have enhanced access to services and resources that improve the quality of life of Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors.

In this season of gratitude, we extend our thanks to those within and outside of VA that contributed to advancing the health and well-being of Veterans. HAP has continued to expand its reach through new and renewed partnerships, offering vital resources to help the increasingly diverse population of Veterans thrive in an evolving landscape.

Our commitment to enhancing Veteran Community Partnerships is reflected in our comprehensive strategies to achieve optimal outcomes. By fostering formal partnerships and informal collaboration with organizations outside VA, we have been able to positively impact more Veterans than ever before, including those transitioning out of the military, Veterans not already engaged in VA care, and those facing unexpected challenges. For example, in the wake of Hurricane Helene's devastation to North Carolina and its Veteran community, recovery efforts were significantly strengthened through community engagement by Veterans, community partners, and supports within and outside of VA.

A prime example of our mission in action is the 2024 Community Partnership Challenge (CPC) winner, "Giving a Hand Up, Not a Hand-Out," a partnership between VA Central California Health Care System and Central Valley Veterans. This theme of partnering at the individual and organizational levels resonates throughout this issue.

This year marked the 10th anniversary of the CPC, with the 2024 theme, "Bridging the Gap Through Partnerships," underscoring the importance of collaborations that connect Veterans with both VA and community resources. The CPC highlights partnerships that address emerging challenges, serve Veterans and their families, and enhance the quality of life for those who have served our nation.

As you explore our newsletter, you will find information on how you can participate in the 2025 CPC, which celebrates "The Power of Partnerships." The upcoming year's CPC emphasizes the transformative impact of non-monetary partnerships between VHA and community organizations, focusing on coalitions, technology, and the Veteran voice to expand or enhance care provided by VA and utilizing non-VA partners to address social determinants of health (SDOH).

As we look forward to the next year, we also want to recognize partners that share our passion for improving access to resources across SDOH. By collaborating with organizations such as Pet Partners, Onward Ops, and Connected Warriors, VA and its partners help ensure Veterans have resources that help them overcome unique challenges and not just succeed but thrive in their post-military communities.

In closing, HAP extends its deepest gratitude to you for your ongoing commitment to Veterans and their continued service to this great country. On behalf of VHA and everyone in HAP, we wish you a festive holiday season and a joyful start to the new year.

In good health,

Chien Chen,
DNP, MSN, RN, PMH-BC,
NPD-BC, NEA-BC, FNAP, FAAN
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Veteran Community Partnerships: Year-End Highlights

Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) strives to provide a complete array of services, including helping its former active-duty service members transition back into the civilian world and live healthier lives. One such helping hand is the Veteran Community Partnerships (VCP) initiative. VCPs ensure Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors have equitable access to care and support services by connecting VA medical center programs with diverse community organizations. VCPs foster seamless access to support services by building coalitions of Veterans, VA staff, community groups, and government agencies.

HAP has supported the VCP initiative since 2017 and continues to steer it through a leadership workgroup. VCPs are uniquely co-chaired by both VA facility and community staff.

HAP's vision is to develop and strengthen VCPs across VHA to help meet VA strategic goals and VHA priorities. This includes providing more infrastructure and direct support to individual VCPs and standardizing the VCP mission more broadly. Through this framework, HAP aims to ensure the continued growth of VCPs throughout VA.

The guiding principles of VCP are to be inclusive, strategic, and creative, focusing on representing and serving Veterans and their beneficiaries; having a positive influence in the community; fostering connections with Veterans; identifying the right partners to help achieve VCP goals; and recognizing that valuable partnerships can come from any source.

Partnerships are critical to enabling access to the greatest range of resources and services for Veterans, regardless of eligibility or location. They also strengthen community connections, enhance network relationships, and support a "No Wrong Door" philosophy, ensuring that Veterans and their families can access the help they need when they need it.

There are 68 active VCPs across the nation. Each is unique in its service approach and delivery. They have hosted more than 200 events, attended by thousands of Veterans. Event topics include VA benefits/enrollment, mental health and suicide prevention (MISSION Act), food-insecurity, caregiver support, homelessness, care coordination, rural communities, and the PACT Act. These events resulted in numerous positive changes in practice, to expand the reach and accessibility of services and resources that VA does not provide and to further help those Veterans not in VA care.



Real-life success stories highlight the impact of VCP on Veterans' lives:

VISN 21: VA Northern California Health Care System East Bay from Darryl Fontecha: Disabled American

"It took me a year and a half since separating from the Air Force where I had to admit it to myself, I need help. It's clearly not working, so I went to the VA and ended up coming across VCP members. Yeah, since touring Veteran service organizations and Veteran nonprofits, I was just getting wowed at everything that they were showing me or every meeting they were, they would allow me to attend alongside them. And a lot of these guys are Veterans themselves. Find the ones who are eager to be proud of the work that they do with their hands because they will give you their time and energy for free just to feel good. That's what I'm doing, and that's how it helps. I want them to know that it'll [VCP] help Veterans who are hopeless, who don't feel like there are people out there helping them or willing to help them or looking to find them."



VISN 8: VA Tampa Health Care System from Mario Lamar: Gulf War Veteran

"We all have to work together, and the VCP creates that community where we can collaborate and more effectively serve the Veteran. I had to work with multiple organizations, nonprofits, government, the county, state, educational organizations, you know, these are the relationships I developed and we're developing our personal relationships. You know, when you're in this, when you're in the military, you know, you look to your right, you got a brother. You look to your left and there's a brother. But when you get out of the military, there's no one you know. And now suddenly, they look to the right. I got one of my brothers or my sisters, in the same way. The big thing is to help create a team, get more Veterans involved, and find out about the organizations that can help them get to that next step. The VCP can be a vehicle to make sure folks do not do it alone anymore."



In 2024, significant progress has been made in empowering collaboration between VA and its partners to develop and expand options for Veterans. VCP activities align with VA's health care priorities and VHA's long-range plan framework. Priorities include preventing Veteran suicide, supporting Veterans' whole health, connecting Veterans to the soonest and best care, and supporting Veterans with military environmental exposures. Through this alignment, VCP activities are strategic, creative, and inclusive to promote Veterans' health and wellness.

The VCP initiative supports VA's efforts to optimize choice and services for Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors by amplifying community engagement and partnerships.

Upcoming initiatives include connecting Veterans to timely, high-quality care, supporting whole health, and advancing VA's journey toward becoming a High Reliability Organization.

For more information, contact vcp@va.gov, or visit va.gov/healthpartnerships/vcp.asp.

Helping Hands: How Partnerships Expand Services for Veterans During Disasters and Beyond

When a disaster strikes, it can upend everything, leaving individuals without basic necessities and in urgent need of support. [Studies have shown](#) that coordinated efforts between multidisciplinary agencies can foster resilience by strengthening communities' capacity to respond to mental health needs and provide resources across social determinants of health. That's where partnerships play a crucial role—expanding and enhancing the services Veterans Affairs (VA) can offer to Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors, particularly during times of crisis.

VA partnerships are vital for ensuring that Veterans can access the support they need, no matter where they are or what disaster may be unfolding. By collaborating with local organizations, VA is able to expand its services to meet Veterans where they are—directly in their communities—ensuring timely and effective assistance. The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) [National Center for Healthcare Advancement and Partnerships \(HAP\)](#) helps to grow non-monetary partnerships that support VA's mission, including partnerships that reach vulnerable Veterans during unexpected emergencies.

One of the most significant ways these partnerships shine is during natural disasters. For example, when Hurricane Helene made landfall in October, it caused widespread destruction, leaving many Veterans displaced and in urgent need of help. Through its partnerships, VA was able to deploy teams to local shelters to respond to the emergency. These teams, including social workers, homeless program specialists, and mental health professionals, worked to ensure that Veterans received the care they needed during the crisis.

As [Secretary McDonough](#) noted during his visit to western North Carolina, "I admire that you are doing these amazing things for our Veterans, even as you are wrestling with the same devastation as everyone else." Leveraging partnerships with community organizations enhanced VA's ability to provide seamless, community-based support in the face of widespread disaster.

VA partnerships do not only come into play during large-scale natural disasters, but they also ensure support is available year-round to Veterans in all types of communities, no matter the circumstances.

One example is the [Central Valley Veterans \(CVV\)](#) partnership with the VA Central California Health Care



System. They are one of three winners for 2024 in the [VHA National Community Partnership Challenge](#) facilitated by HAP. Their motto, "Giving a Hand Up, Not a Hand-Out," reflects their commitment to helping Veterans in crisis, particularly those who are homeless or facing immediate hardships. CVV offers a range of services to meet urgent needs, from food and shelter to furniture and employment support. They provide consistent, accessible support 24/7, 365 days a year.

Veterans like Vivian R., a U.S. Marine Corps Veteran, have felt the positive impact of CVV's services. She shares, "Central Valley Vets has played many vital and important roles in my family's life. They helped us move, provided my children and I with beds and other household furniture, and even took us grocery shopping for our new place. They've helped with holiday meals and presents for my children and paid half our rent for one month. CVV has given us hope and confidence to return to the workforce. I don't know how I would have done it without them."

It is just one illustration of how VA partnerships help enhance the services available to Veterans, ensuring help is there when it's needed most. Together, VA and its community partners not only support Veterans during disasters but also build resilience and provide critical assistance in the everyday lives of those who have served.

As the VA continues to grow non-monetary partnerships, together with the community, we can foster greater resilience through a shared goal to ensure that Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors can access the comprehensive support they need—when and where they need it—within the communities they call home.

"I admire that you are doing these amazing things for our Veterans, even as you are wrestling with the same devastation as everyone else."

—Secretary McDonough



VHA National Community Partnership Challenge – 2025 submissions portal opening soon!

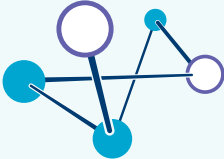
Beginning in early January, VHA staff will have the opportunity to submit entries for the 2025 VHA National Community Partnership Challenge (CPC) and share how they have seen the power of partnerships enhance delivery of services to meet the needs of Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors.

CPC is an annual event led by the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) National Center for Healthcare Advancement and Partnerships (HAP) to recognize outstanding partnerships that advance the health and well-being of Veterans and their communities. VA medical centers, health care centers, community-based outpatient centers, clinics, program offices, and VHA employees are eligible and encouraged to submit an entry.

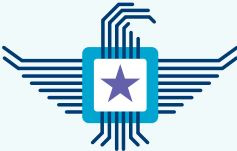
This year’s theme, The Power of Partnerships, celebrates the impact of non-monetary partnerships between VHA and community organizations. These partnerships enhance creativity and innovation in health care delivery to meet Veterans’ and their families’ unique needs. This year’s challenge seeks to recognize non-monetary partnerships that are created to expand or enhance care provided by VA and external partners to address needs across social determinants of health (SDOH). Social determinants of health are conditions in the environments in which people live, learn, work, play, worship, and age that affect a wide range of health, functioning, and quality-of-life outcomes and risks in the categories of education, employment, food security, housing, spiritual support, and transportation.

CPC entries should demonstrate the three highly valued VHA ideals: a High Reliability Organization (HRO) and an organization that demonstrates inclusion, diversity, equity and access (IDEA) and demonstrates integrity, commitment, advocacy, respect and excellence (ICARE). Entries are required to provide a description of how the partnership demonstrates all three ideals.

Entries for this year’s CPC should demonstrate how the partnership delivered services and other resources to Veterans, their families, caregivers, or survivors in alignment with one or more of the following categories:



The Power of Coalitions: partnerships that leverage community coalitions (more than one partner or VA programs) to directly improve or support Veteran health and well-being.



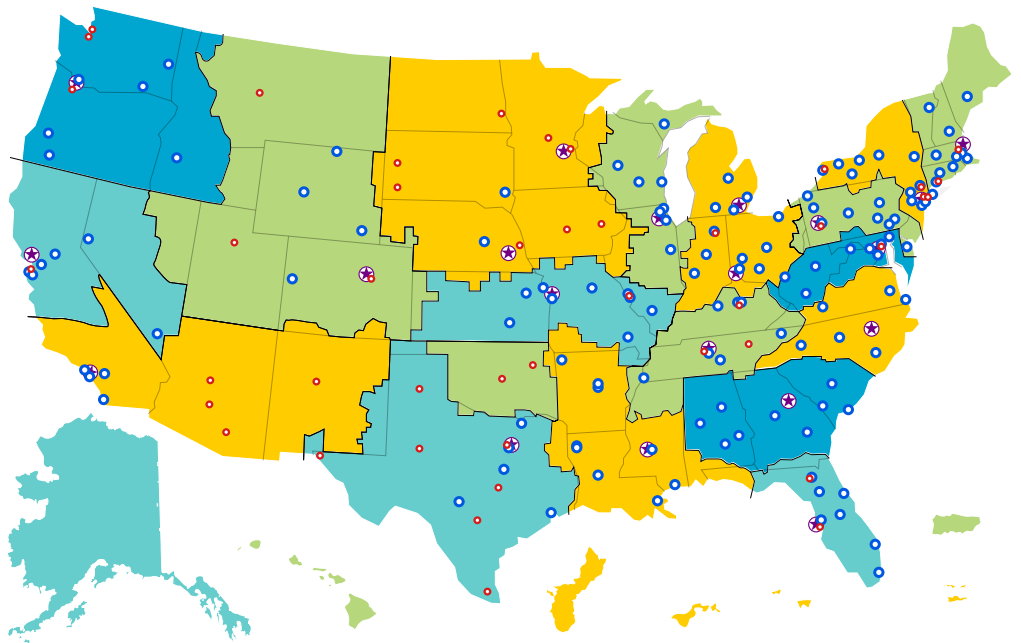
The Power of Technology: partnerships that leverage new technology or existing technology in a new way to improve or support Veteran health and well-being. Technology can refer to machines (like computers, applications, or digital health products) but also techniques and processes (like 3D printing, how we leverage devices, or how we improve access to services).



The Power of the Veteran Voice: partnerships that are built on needs/gaps identified by Veterans.

HAP welcomes entries from local (VAMC), regional (VISN), or national program office VHA staff. This year's CPC aims to celebrate the wide range of collaborative VHA partnerships that identify Veterans' needs and gaps in services and address these unmet needs to better serve Veterans. Partnerships bring new opportunities and augment services and programs offered by VHA.

There are thousands of successful partnerships taking place across VHA. Strategic partnerships are force multipliers that help meet Veterans' needs, their families, caregivers, and survivors. We want to celebrate your success!



The top three entries will be celebrated and announced in 2025 during the VHA National Community Partnership Showcase, when the Under Secretary for Health will announce and recognize the winning partnership during a formal awards ceremony. Each winner will receive the coveted VHA National Community Partnership Challenge Diamond Award and special recognition by the Office of the Secretary. All winning entries will also be widely publicized.

Submissions will be accepted from January 1 through March 7, 2025, on the [Partnership Challenge Welcome](#) (VA Intranet link; requires VA network access).

For more information, visit [Partnership Challenge Welcome](#) (VA Intranet link; requires VA network access) or contact VHA_Partnerships@va.gov.

Send questions to VHA_Partnerships@va.gov



VA and Pet Partners bring joy to Veterans through animal visits

Animal-assisted interventions (AAI) have proven to benefit the mental health and emotional well-being of military Veterans. In November 2019, Veterans Health Administration (VHA) and Pet Partners formed a partnership to support Veteran health and well-being through the power of the human-animal bond. Dedicated volunteer teams have visited more than 11,000 Veterans each year, fostering moments of peace, joy, and healing through the human-animal bond since the start of the partnership.

Therapy animal teams, made available through Pet Partner's [volunteer program](#), bring comfort and joy to the Veterans they visit. Pet Partners ensures therapy animal teams meet the highest standards to provide safe, successful interactions for Veterans. VHA encourages VA medical centers (VAMC) to establish and expand trained therapy animal team visitations that increase social connectedness and decrease loneliness through the human-animal bond. The partnership also provides therapy animal team [volunteer opportunities](#) for Veterans who want to support community members – elders, children, and others – with their pets.

Whether visiting a VAMC waiting room, Veteran's hospital room, or Veterans receiving VA residential treatment for mental health or substance use disorders, including therapy animal teams in treatment is a promising practice that may enhance the emotional well-being of Veterans and contribute to positive outcomes for their physical, social, and cognitive health. AAI can boost morale, decrease stress levels, encourage healing, and enhance overall happiness and success in the daily life of Veterans.

Are you a Veteran interested in knowing if there's a Pet Partners program at your facility? You can contact your facility's [Center for Development and Civic Engagement \(CDCE\) office](#). Use the directory to find the contact information for your VA facility or ask your provider for your facility's CDCE office contact information. You may also do an Internet search using Pet Partners and your region or city (e.g., Pet Partners Texas) to find out if Pet Partners volunteers at your local VA facility.

Are you a current Pet Partners volunteer interested in visiting with Veterans in your community? Learn more about the [VHA and Pet Partners agreement](#) and consider taking Pet Partners' continuing education course, Working with Veterans. The course is available to currently registered volunteers at no cost. To sign up, log in to the [Volunteer Center](#) and click Courses and Events

The Working with Veterans course is also available to the public. See [Pet Partner's Online Education page](#) for more information.

Current volunteers interested in working with Veterans may earn an [animal-assisted crisis response \(AACR\)](#) credential through Pet Partners. The AACR training prepares teams for responding in the immediate aftermath of a crisis event, and also provides valuable education on working with people who have experienced trauma. Veterans can contact their [facility's CDCE office](#) to find the contact information.



Onward and Upward with ETS-SP from active service military to Veteran

By partnering with Veteran-serving organizations, VA and its community partners reach more service members, Veterans, their families, and caregivers to improve their economic security, health, and quality of life outcomes across social determinants of health. Non-monetary partnerships such as the one led by the [National Center for Healthcare Advancement and Partnerships \(HAP\)](#) between VHA and the Expiration Term of Service Sponsorship Program (ETS-SP) help both VA and ETS-SP empower service members with the support and information needed to achieve success as Veterans.

The [Onward Ops](#) military transition program run by ETS-SP provides free support to currently serving and recently separated Veterans, including Reserve and National Guard members, across critical areas such as employment, housing, and education. It offers Veterans access to local, regional, and national resources essential for successful reintegration into communities, with an emphasis on social determinants of health (like suicide prevention). Access to healthcare is key. By collaborating under a non-monetary partnership, service members and Veterans get all the benefits they are eligible for from both VA and Onward Ops more easily, efficiently, and quickly. According to Onward Ops surveys, Veterans that connect with them are 80% more successful with realizing the full range of VA benefits.

“Our community partners help VA efficiently increase our impact and serve more Veterans, saving them time and helping them access the benefits they earned more quickly,” said Christine Eickhoff, HAP health system specialist. “The partnership with Onward Ops is reaching more Veterans every year, helping more service members, Veterans, and their families achieve their health and career goals post-military service.”

In 2024, more than 7,500 service members/Veterans enrolled in Onward Ops, a 15% increase from 2023, providing employment search support, mentorship, and digital guidance tools. Through

the partnership, Onward Ops connected more than 5,600 Veterans to VA for enrollment in VA health care and referred more than 130 Veterans at imminent risk of suicide to VA for mental health services. Together, VA and Onward Ops trained more than 1,200 peer sponsors, who are available to provide 1:1 peer support to service members as they transition back into civilian life.

Having screened more than 15,500 service members for suicide risk, the partnership with Onward Ops helps VA provide proactive, personalized support to service members to address suicide risk factors earlier in the transition process, thereby lowering risks and supporting more successful transitions to civilian life for service members and their families.

Onward Ops supports a full life cycle and stresses, “Your next deployment isn’t a military operation. It’s a deployment into the civilian world.”

2024 IMPACT REPORT

Onward Ops

MILITARY TRANSITION SUPPORT



ONWARD OPS
Powered by **ETS SPONSORSHIP**

Our mission is to empower every transitioning service member with the support and information needed to achieve success as Veterans.

 15,500+ Transitioning service members screened for suicide risk	 130+ Veterans at imminent risk for suicide identified and referred to care
 7,500 Transitioning service members enrolled and supported	 5,600 Veterans assisted with enrolling in VA Healthcare
 1,200 Sponsors trained and certified	 75 Veterans assisted with food insecurity and/or short term housing

 **ONWARD OPS**
FOUNDATION

onwardops.org
contact@onwardops.org





VHA and Connected Warriors Partnership Enhances Healing for Veterans

In June 2024, the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) kicked off a new non-monetary partnership with Connected Warriors, a nationwide nonprofit organization that empowers Veterans, active-duty service members, first responders, and their families through trauma-conscious yoga. This collaboration, facilitated by the VHA [National Center for Healthcare Advancement and Partnerships \(HAP\)](#), offers free services to help address the mental, physical, and emotional challenges Veterans face, providing tools for healing and resilience.

“The partnership with Connected Warriors is an example of the community partnerships that HAP facilitates to provide resources and patient-driven health care services that better serve Veterans,” said Kimberly Pugh, RN, EdD, HAP health system specialist.

Empowering Veterans Through Trauma-Conscious Yoga

Connected Warriors creates safe, inclusive spaces for Veterans and families to heal and transform through free yoga classes based on trauma-informed practices. These sessions are designed to address PTSD, anxiety, chronic pain, and insomnia and promote strength and self-awareness.

With over 125 weekly classes in 24 states and 9 countries, Connected Warriors reaches more than 2,200 participants monthly. It is expanding to some active military zones.

A Holistic Approach to Healing

The VHA-Connected Warriors partnership aligns with the VA’s mission to deliver high-quality, accessible care tailored to Veterans’ needs. By offering yoga mats and props at no cost, the program eliminates barriers to participation.

Connected Warriors also cultivates a supportive community where Veterans can share their experiences and build meaningful connections. This holistic approach integrates

physical healing with emotional support, empowering Veterans to take control of their well-being.

Judy Weaver, founder of Connected Warriors, notes, “The whole premise is our military teaches our service members to be the best warfighters in the world, and they teach them how to be present in chaos.”

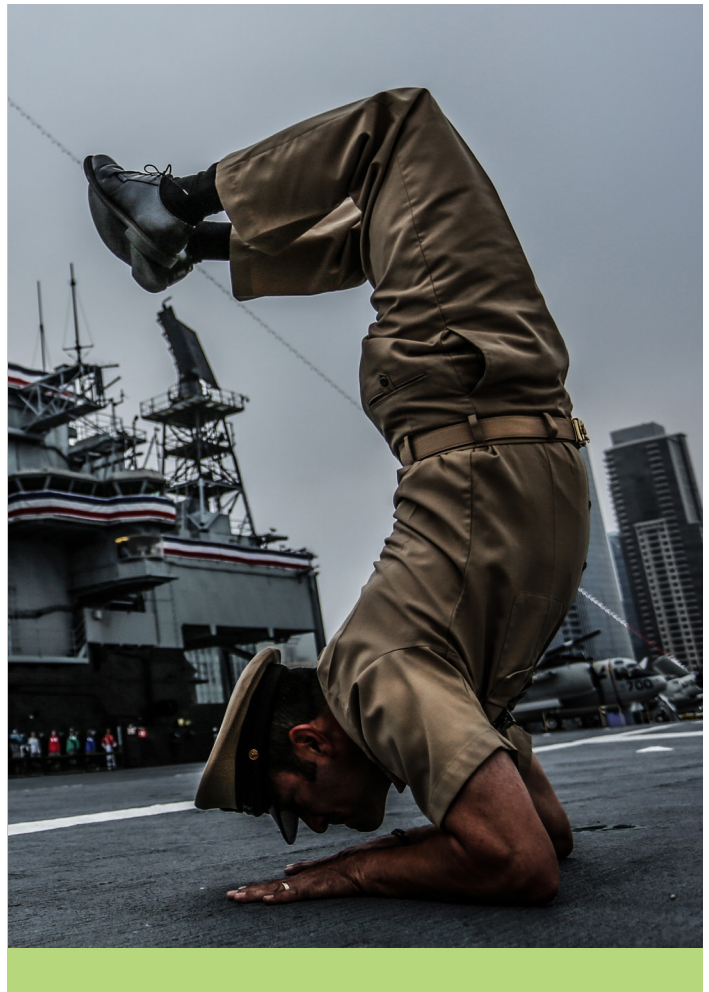
“Yoga teaches them to be present in peace,” says Weaver. Being present in peace addresses many of the challenges that Veterans and service members face.

Veterans’ Stories of Transformation

One particular Veteran, an Army Ranger who served five tours in the Middle East, helped inspire Weaver to found Connected Warriors. He was diagnosed with ALS, often known as Lou Gehrig’s disease, and wanted to keep his mind engaged as his body failed.

Learning and practicing yoga was this man’s last journey, and while he was neither pretzel man nor handstand man – he was a yogi,” says Weaver. “You should have seen his smile when he was able to use his mind to move a finger on his weak side. He lived in the moment, truly present without fear of the outcome and with complete acceptance.”

Weaver adds, “Another thing about his experience is that the equipment and resources VA provided for him was unbelievably remarkable.”



Strengthening Communities Through Collaboration

The partnership goes beyond yoga classes. By offering Trauma-Conscious Yoga Teacher Training, Connected Warriors ensures Veterans have access to trained instructors in their communities, helping sustain the program and expand its reach.

A Vision for Healing and Growth

Connected Warriors empowers individuals to take control of their healing journey. Their mission, “Helping the world feel better—one breath at a time,” drives their work, fostering community connections and improving lives.

VHA and Connected Warriors are equipping Veterans and their families with tools to heal, grow, and thrive.

For more information on [Connected Warriors](https://connectedwarriors.org/) (<https://connectedwarriors.org/>)

For more information visit the [VHA Partnerships website](https://www.va.gov/HEALTHPARTNERSHIPS/) (<https://www.va.gov/HEALTHPARTNERSHIPS/>)



Season's Greetings from HAP!

As we close out a remarkable year, we are deeply grateful for the partnerships we have strengthened and the new collaborations formed to better serve Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors.

This holiday season, we reflect on new VA partnerships with organizations such as AmeriCorps, Connected Warriors, Mediflix, Paralyzed Veterans of America, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the Veterans Yoga Project. Together, partnerships expand the reach and impact of VA and partner resources, ensuring Veterans receive the care and support they deserve.

HAP wishes you a very happy holiday season and a bright, successful start to the new year!



For more information about VHA partnerships, visit va.gov/healthpartnerships/partnerships.asp

VA



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Veterans Health Administration
National Center for Healthcare
Advancement and Partnerships

To share a partnership opportunity or consult with HAP on a non-monetary partnership, please contact our office via email:

VHA_Partnerships@va.gov
va.gov/healthpartnerships