

Charlie Norwood VA Medical Center:

The Power of RECREATION THERAPY

For veterans receiving treatment at the Charlie Norwood VA Medical Center (VAMC), in Augusta, Ga., recreation therapy provides a needed outlet while introducing them to activities that they can continue to enjoy for a lifetime. From Adaptive golf at one of Augusta's most prestigious golf courses in the world (home of the Masters) to kayak football and hand cycling – the VAMC Augusta is an exemplary program that continues to evolve and grow. Just recently, the VAMC began working with Entre Prises Climbing Walls to provide climbing enthusiasts at the VA with a challenging wall that can also provide opportunities for adaptive climbing.

"With the new population of veterans coming back from OEF/OIF, we've got younger guys who still want and enjoy being active," explains Eric Gray, recreation therapist, Charlie Norwood VAMC. "We put the idea out there about a new climbing wall among our veterans and got a lot of interest from not only our active duty rehab unit but also guys dealing with PTSD, those in the spinal cord injury unit as well as our blind rehab

unit. We saw the potential to be used with all populations."

The VAMC in Augusta is the only VA in the country to have an Active Duty Rehab unit, made up of soldiers who, once rehabbed, go back to full duty.

"We are looking at ways to keep them active and involved, and at different leisure pursuits," notes Gray. "So I started a kayaking program and then a cycling program and an adaptive golf program – we just want to continue to build programs where we think there is interest."

For the climbing wall project, the VA raised \$150,000, which in addition to the climbing wall and belaying systems, funded the creation of a therapeutic courtyard where the climbing wall will be installed. The courtyard will be used for rehab as well, featuring uneven terrain and different areas for gait training.

"We are going to have places to walk and different surfaces to walk on, such as pebbles and stones or grass, as well as stairs and bridges, and it will all be wheelchair accessible," notes Gray. "This will be a great place for veterans to relax and unwind and a place where you can come and clear your mind."

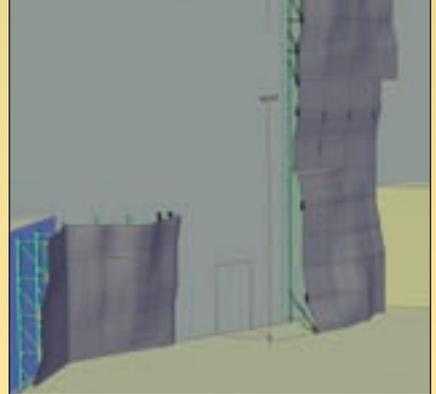
Completion of the climbing wall project is estimated for July, according to Gray. Once open, the wall will be available for open-recreational use as well as for use by physical and occupational therapists from different units, such as spinal cord injury.

"We can arrange a block of time for them, so they can work with the veterans and the adaptive equipment," notes Gray. "We will have some one-on-one sessions as well, with a physical or occupational therapist encouraging them and directing them."

As one would expect in Augusta, golf is very popular and the VAMC has a great working relationship with organizations that provide adaptive golf opportunities to veterans, such as the The Walton Rehab Foundation and the First Tee of Augusta.

"The Walton Rehab Foundation received a grant through First Tee of Augusta to be able to provide an adaptive

An artist rendering of the new climbing wall to be installed at the Augusta VA, Ga., this summer. PHOTO COURTESY OF ENTRE PRISSES CLIMBING WALLS



golf clinic the first Tuesday of every month," Gray explains.

The VAMC also has the good fortune of working with Charlie King, one of the top golf instructors in the nation, who provides free one-on-one instruction to four veterans each month.

Veterans have access to adaptive golf carts, such as the Solo Rider, at the many golf courses in the area, such as Augusta Municipal course, Augusta First Tee course and the Fort Gordon golf course.

As an avid kayaker, Gray introduced veterans to the activity with great success.

"There is actually a group of guys in the community who play kayak football, and it is something that started here in Augusta and they have been playing for decades now," notes Gray. "So I started to bring the vets out to play, and the guys got really excited because they get to leave the hospital and get in kayaks, play around, meet other people from the community and have a good time."

Gray works closely with River Runner, an organization based out of Walter Reed Medical Center, and organizes kayaking for veterans across the nation. The biking program is also very popular and the VA purchased a bunch of hand cycles, trikes and tandem cycles to provide another great outlet for veterans.

—GRF



Sgt. Roy Mitchell, who lost most of his left leg to an anti-tank mine in Afghanistan, admires his drive from a specialized adaptive golf cart during a First Swing golf clinic for wounded warriors.

PHOTO BY TIM HIPPS

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