

San Antonio VAMC: Leading the Way in Therapy and Care

As a leader in physical and recreational therapy, the San Antonio Veterans Affairs Medical Center (VAMC) in Texas provides veterans with facilities, programs and support services that are helping them heal and recover from sometimes devastating injuries, while easing their transition back to civilian life.

POLYTRAUMA REHAB CENTER

Stephanie Mireles, a Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialist (CTRS) who works in the Polytrauma Rehabilitation Center (PRC) at the San Antonio VAMC, is responsible for treating both inpatients and outpatients.

“The PRC’s patient population ranges from Traumatic Brain Injuries (TBIs) and blast injuries to strokes and amputations,” she points out. “I work on various activities to improve physical functioning, coping skills, executive functioning and leisure-related skills while interacting within the community. For physical modes, I use a variety of indoor and outdoor activities to promote physical functioning, such as basketball, bocce ball, washers, horseshoes, ladder ball, disk golf and Jenga.”

For cognitive modes, Mireles says she uses activities such as Scrabble, Connect Four, UNO and various puzzles to improve cognition. “For social modes, I use national food holidays as a way to engage groups in conversation while enjoying a snack. I also utilize social groups as a way to engage conversations during activities. Various organizations often visit to provide dinners and games for the patients as well.”

For cognitive screenings, patients work with an in-house speech language pathologist to see what grade level each patient comprehends. “I also work with physical therapy to determine functionally what they are capable of before I



The Polytrauma Rehabilitation Center (PRC)



start any physical activities with a patient,” notes Mireles.

Some available programs in recreation therapy include national food holidays, popcorn Fridays, outings, 1:1 sessions and any group socialization opportunities. “I have hosted a field day with Rackspace as well as the Wounded Warrior Project to provide assistance with outing costs,” she says.

The PRC is currently in the process of installing a pool for patient therapy use, and physical therapy and occupational therapy work with recreation therapy in the pool.

Outpatients are given a listing of current and local adaptive sporting opportunities within the community that they can participate in. “The PRC will have several outpatients attending the Winter Sports Clinic in 2014,” notes Mireles. “I have worked with patients regarding rehabilitation goals to prepare for the clinic. We provide community re-entry outings, as well as try and involve the families before discharge.”

POLYTRAUMA TRANSITIONAL REHAB PROGRAM

The role of Polytrauma Transitional Rehabilitation Program (PTRP) is to help veterans — many who have suffered TBIs — reintegrate back into the community through reintegration outings, according to Tania DeLeon, a CTRS with a master’s in Recreation & Leisure Studies (MSRLS).

“Different modes to help increase physical, cognitive and social functioning include, but are not limited to, bowling (to increase physical functioning), as well as social reintegration, swimming, Frisbee golf, sailing and rock climbing,” she explains. “To increase cognitive functioning, I use a variety of

recreation activities such as Scrabble and various card games. These activities increase cognitive functioning as well as social skills when done in groups.”

“All patients must be assessed individually in order to create an individualized treatment plan,” adds Mary Dawn Fail, CTRS/MSRLS. “Modes of therapy are based on an individual patient’s needs and include physical, cognitive, social and behavioral therapy.”

Programs available in the area of Recreation Therapy include social skills training, recreation activities that stimulate cognitive functioning, and a variety of community reintegration outings. The PTRP joins with organizations such as Opera-

tion Comfort, Door in the Wall and San Antonio Sports to provide various activities to veterans. Some of the activities include adaptive sailing, swimming and skiing. “We attend many events sponsored by Warrior Transition Battalion (WTB) and Operation Comfort from Fort Sam Houston,” says Fail. “Activities are also provided by the Door in the Wall Program. In addition, I have attended the National Veterans Summer Sports Clinic with three veterans from San Antonio. Veterans are active in events year round that help keep them in shape for the clinic.”

Therapists in the PTRP take veterans to the Jimmy Brought Gym pool at Fort Sam Houston for recreational and therapeutic purposes. “Being in the water helps the patients improve range of motion on any of their affected limbs,” says DeLeon. “The pool also has a lift for patients who are unable to use the ramp to access the pool.”

In addition, the Operation Comfort program hosts adapted swimming classes every Tuesday and Thursday at the Jimmy Brought Gym pool. “Many physical aspects can be addressed through the aquatic program, such as range of motion, endurance, stamina and ability for non-weight bearing patients to utilize limbs,” says Fail.

At the PTRP, the physical therapist, kinesiotherapist and recreation therapist are typically all present at one time. “When a therapist is not present, the recreation therapist will use guided exercises recommended by the physical therapist to help veterans gain range of motion and/or decrease pain,” notes DeLeon.

Some of the equipment provided to veterans includes bowling ramps, lifts for the pool, adaptive equipment for archery and adaptive equipment for air rifles.

“Here at the Polytrauma Transitional Rehabilitation Program, recreation therapists provide community reintegration outings to help veterans with a smooth transition back into the community,” says DeLeon. “Also, active-duty service members will discharge to the Warrior Transition Unit/Barracks where they are assisted with transitioning back to either active duty or a discharge from the military.”

“Community integration plays a major role in the transition unit,” adds Fail. “Therapists are able to assess what adaptations or coping skills are needed for the veteran to live independently.”

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