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INFORMED DECISION-MAKING FOR HOLISTIC SUSTAINABILITY

## **Project Healing Waters Fly Fishing**

### **Help for Vets' Minds, Bodies & Spirits**

A study by RAND Corporation indicates that 400,000 to 600,000 Iraq and Afghanistan veterans suffer from psychological injuries. Another 320,000 returnees suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), major depression and traumatic brain injury (TBI). Research shows that three-fourths of these individuals receive minimal to no care.

Data further demonstrates that without treatment intervention, these veterans are significantly more likely to suffer from substance abuse, divorce, unemployment, homelessness and suicide. Medical practitioners and wounded veterans say treatment for these rampant, costly and debilitating issues requires a new approach. Many excellent rehabilitation programs offer activities ranging from art classes to surfing and from mountaineering to music.



For its part, Project Healing Waters Fly Fishing (PHWFF) is trying unconventional means to assist veterans with the transition home. Basically, PHWFF volunteers are dedicated to assisting wounded war veterans with the help of a fly rod and a reel. The national organization was founded by Navy Capt. Ed Nicholson (Ret.), an avid fly-fisherman who spent 30 years in the Navy before working a decade more as a defense contractor. In 2005, at the height of the carnage in Iraq, he was at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., and saw soldiers and sailors hobbling around on crutches and struggling through rehab. He thought, "I should take a couple of these guys fishing with me."

Seven years later, Project Healing Waters has expanded to include programs at 136 locations in 46 states. Although it is not officially part of the Veterans Administration (VA), its programs typically run through local Department of Defense hospitals, VA hospitals, state veterans' hospitals, veterans' nursing homes or community-based outpatient VA clinics.

The mission of Project Healing Waters Fly Fishing is straight forward: Assist in the physical and emotional rehabilitation of disabled active duty military personnel and veterans through fly fishing and fly-tying education and outings. The program is open to any disabled vet, not just those from Desert Storm, Iraq and Afghanistan. All expenses are paid. The vets don't even need a fly rod.

As a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, PHWFF is dependent on fund raisers, tax-deductible donations, merchandise from local fly fishing shops, land owners with water recreation features and the help of numerous volunteers. Many volunteers are veterans of conflicts from the Vietnam era to the present. The Project's programs provide basic no-cost fly-fishing, fly-casting, fly-tying and rod building classes for wounded and injured personnel – from beginner level to those with prior fly-fishing and tying experience. Many are adapting their skills to their new abilities. Fly-fishing and tying equipment and materials are provided to the participants, including equipment that accommodates their special handicap needs.

Since its inception, PHWFF has helped more than 3,000 military service members and veterans across the country on an annual basis. Nearly 100,000 volunteer hours are recorded every year.



While Healing Waters is not designed as a mental health program (no counselors are at sit-down activities or on trips), the very nature of fly fishing – the serenity and simple routine of fly casting – makes it very therapeutic.

Fly fishing, it seems, is an ideal way in which to conduct therapy. One thing fly fishing provides is a very beautiful and tranquil environment. Supporters of the program often say, "The almighty Creator did not put beautiful fish in an ugly setting."

*Image Courtesy of Project Healing Waters Fly Fishing, Denver, Colorado, Program*

**PHWFF volunteers set up activities with members from the local Federation of Fly Fishers and Trout Unlimited.**

Project Healing Waters leaders believe healing properties exist in the outdoor environment. They say being outdoors has helped those suffering from perceptual stress, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and sleep quality. Reductions in anxiety, depression, stress, suicidal tendencies and autism also occur. PHWFF is not a one-time fishing trip for returning men and

women but rather a year-round schedule of weekly instruction and program events. This is why it is a favorite within the Department of Veterans Affairs and military hospitals.

Recreation Therapy Supervisor Ron Davis, VA Eastern Colorado Health Care System, says his group uses a thorough physical rehabilitation and mental health care analysis to determine the challenges for each veteran. "When we took our studies to the Denver Healing Waters leaders they assured us they would be devoted, consistent and reliable, and they would be around for the long haul," Davis explains. "The program is an excellent fit for the values of the VA and the wellness of our vets."

Recreation Inpatient Acute Rehab and Outpatient Therapist Adeline Velasquez adds, "I need calming and relaxing events for my veterans. Project Healing Waters activities allow my patients to get off the ward. These activities give them therapeutic opportunities for social skills while removing physical and mental barriers to participate in fly fishing successfully."

The five-year-old Denver program is one of the most active in the United States. Marty Martinez and his brother, Manual, started PHW-Denver as a fly-tying class for five vets at the Denver VA home. Initial funding, materials and volunteers came from the Front Range Fly Fishers Club. Currently, the program has nearly 200 volunteers who assist more than 175 veterans with numerous rehabilitation activities.

Richard, a veteran in the Denver program, says Project Healing Waters has him enthused about being outdoors again. "After four hip replacements, I just sat around," Richard explains. "Then, Project Healing Waters challenged me to learn to fish in beautiful Colorado. The volunteers also challenged me to tie my own flies. They motivated me. So, now my hips feel better, and when I'm not fishing, I may be just sitting around, but it's at my fly-tying bench."

Pablo, another Denver veteran, says Project Healing Waters reminds him of the Marine Corps. "You could always count on somebody coming after you, if you were hurt. Well, with my wound I have trouble walking, much less wading in a stream," Pablo explains. "When I'm out with the Project Healing Waters group, there is always someone who will lift me up and across the water. I never need a wading staff."



*Image Courtesy of Project Healing Waters Fly Fishing, Denver, Colorado, Program*

**Colorado Parks and Wildlife has many metro-Denver, handicapped accessible fishing spots for disabled veterans.**

Dave Miner, current leader of the Denver group, and Bob Province, a founding member, see a busy future for “healing those who have served.” Miner explains: “Presently, we’re recruiting for more volunteers so we can provide the VA with more than therapeutic recreation. We’re looking to partner with Ron Davis and the Denver VA Medical Center to serve the Life Skills, Acute Care, Community Living and PTSD centers and clinics. It’s all about teaching new skills and supporting veterans’ families.”

Miner says he is also working with the VA on a program that will allow volunteers to become more aware of veterans’ disabilities. He explains, “As we become more sensitive to the symptoms of their physical and emotional wounds, we’ll be helping them get the most benefit from fly fishing’s rehabilitation.”

Since the Denver VA accepts so many veterans from the western United States, Province has started an outreach program he describes as a “continuation process.” He explains: “When veterans leave Denver, they are motivated to improve their lives and their relationships with their families. By learning more about fly fishing, we feel this motivation will continue. Our process is simple. After the veteran returns home, we’ll ask a local Healing Waters Program member to contact the vet and invite him or her into the local program. Or, at least, we’ll find a fishing club in the area for the vet. Project Healing Waters won’t abandon its veterans.”

## **Everything Fly Fishing**

Project Healing Waters – Denver, and its counterpart programs throughout the United States, offers numerous activities that help heal veterans with a life-long sport. These activities typically include:

1. Fly Tying. Volunteers conduct eight-week sessions at two metro-Denver Veterans Administration Clinics, as well as an ongoing advanced class at a local sporting goods store. Each veteran is provided with a tying vise, tying tools and material to tie six to eight copies of seven fly patterns. Veterans learn about hook terminology, fly dressing and parts of the fly body.

2. Fly Rod Building. During spring and fall sessions, veterans learn how to build their own rods that are ready to fish when completed. Components and construction principles are explained, and veterans are encouraged to be creative with their selection of some of the materials.

3. Fly Casting. Denver’s Project Healing Waters program has a team of casting instructors who are certified by the Federation of Fly Fishers, an international fly fishing advocate group known for its conservation and educational programs. During spring, summer and fall, five-weekly, two-hour casting classes are held at local lakes. In addition, veterans can also attend several day-long sessions that include one-on-one casting lessons from volunteers and certified instructors. Several of these are family-oriented. Veterans learn rod and reel nomenclature, numerous casting styles and several basic knots.

4. Fly fishing outings. With support from area fly shops, professional fishing guides, commercial guest ranch operators and agencies, such as the Colorado Division of Wildlife, veterans of Project Healing Waters enjoy more than one dozen fishing outings every year.

During each outing, a handful of veterans are accompanied by volunteers to waters that include lakes and streams in Colorado and neighboring states. Some fishing outings include white water rafting. One day and multi-day trips are available at no cost to the veterans and volunteers.

For more information, contact Jerry Donovan, Public relations coordinator, Project Healing Waters Fly Fishing - Denver Program, phone: 720-283-8555, email: [jerryfdonovan@msn.com](mailto:jerryfdonovan@msn.com). Or go to the website at [projecthealingwatersdenver.org](http://projecthealingwatersdenver.org).



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