

**February 20, 2014**

**House Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Health hearing,**

**“An Examination of Veteran Access to Traditional and Alternative Forms of Mental Health Therapy”**

Chairman Benishek, Ranking Member Brownley, and Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee:

On behalf of Reins of H.O.P.E. (Human Opportunity Partnering with Equines) as its Founder and Executive Director, I offer gratitude for the chance to share information on our Equine Assisted Psychotherapy Program, H.O.P.E. for Warriors, serving our active duty service members, veterans, reservists and their families.

Reins of H.O.P.E. was established in 2006 as a non-profit serving Ventura County's at risk youth population. Our tool: Equine Assisted Psychotherapy and Learning sessions (EAP). Our client roster has grown steadily each year since, as has the number of sessions offered.

All of our Licensed Mental Health Therapists and Equine Specialists are trained and certified by EAGALA, Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association. As the world's largest and most professionally respected association for this kind of psychotherapy, EAGALA sets the global standard for care. It has more than 4,000 members in 49 countries and a certified staff of over 600 treatment programs. They have established The EAGALA Military Services Designation, which ensures that practitioners complete specialized training in order to have cultural fluency in the military community. Though equine assisted psychotherapy is a relatively new discipline, EAGALA is committed to building a body of evidence-based, peer reviewed research. For a listing of research and studies please visit: [www.eagala.org/research](http://www.eagala.org/research).

The EAGLALA model, [Ret] Col. Jimmy L. Walters affirmed, “uses the horse to gain insight into behaviors and perceptions. The horses' reactions provide unbiased, real time feedback, breaking through the barriers that many military members experience in conversations with others who cannot begin to understand what we feel . . . Equine assisted psychotherapy provides a strategy for dealing with trauma in a way that makes sense to military service members.”

In January 2011, Reins of H.O.P.E. launched the H.O.P.E. for Warriors Program to provide active duty service members, veterans, reservists, and their families with no cost, unlimited, confidential EAP sessions to fill the increasing need for vital, readily accessible mental health services. We offer individual, groups, families, couples, overnight retreats

and team building sessions. This popular program accounts for 80 % of our non-profit clinical hours and continues to grow.

Reins of H.O.P.E. sessions take place on the ground in outdoor settings. No riding is involved. Sessions with the horses allow exploration of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors and foster trust, resilience, adaptability. These inevitably lead to better problem solving, improved communication, and healthier relationships. Many clients have told us that our arena and horses have created the only space where they feel safe to talk about their military experiences and issues. These clients connect naturally with horses since, like us, horses are herd animals whose survival depends on constant communication. Yet unlike humans, horses, as prey animals, must stay constantly vigilant. Extraordinarily sensitive to their surroundings, they can sense emotional energy around them and often mirror it. They are therefore catalysts for insights on patterns of thought and behavior. They also offer clients the experience of a new way of being. Powerful yet gentle, these animals are effective ambassadors of nature as well as apt teachers in awareness—that is, being in the present moment, calming oneself quickly, setting appropriate boundaries and learning to trust—coping skills key to healing and living a healthy lifestyle.

The H.O.P.E. for Warriors Program takes head-on issues of transition, reintegration, depression, PTSD, suicide, MST, substance abuse, anger, grief and loss.

At Reins of H.O.P.E., our goal is to increase the awareness of Alternative Treatment Modalities, such as Equine Assisted Psychotherapy in the mental health community. But we need the recognition from the VA that alternative therapies are effective and an appropriate level of care for our veterans. In order to reach and help heal our increasing veteran population we pride ourselves in our collaborative and adjunctive form of therapy that we provide with our referral base organizations such as, Fleet and Family Services from US Navy base Ventura County, Aurora Vista del Mar Hospital Military Program, Ventura Vet Center, FOCUS, Oxnard Family Circle Veterans Program and SART.

Since 2011, the H.O.P.E. for Warriors Program has conducted over 684 clinical hours and serviced over 530 equine sessions at no cost, funded solely by our broad-based community donors, foundations and grants. It is our intention and mission never to turn away a veteran in need of mental health services. We seek a collaborative relationship with the VA and their mental health providers to fulfill our mission: to provide our veterans with a vital program.

A few of our clients' voices join mine:

**Josette Wingo, WWII Navy Wave:** “Equine Therapy at Reins of H.O.P.E. is a warm, validation program which can have an almost instantaneous effect on returning veterans who might be dealing with PTSD or . . . other trauma. These difficulties often impede

readjusting and [a] return to their best lives, In the short time I have been participating, I realize how being with the gentle, intuitive horses and their calming effects can have life changing possibilities.”

**Retired Col. George Compton, US Army (Advisory Board Member):** “I am an absolute believer in the H.O.P.E. for Warrior Program. Without this program we’d have more veterans in jail and in trouble.”

**David Parker, Retired Master Sergeant E-8 US Army:** “This program has been a positive influence in my life. I have learned healthy coping skills to finally deal with my anger management issues. It has changed my life for the better,”

**Larry, Vietnam veteran:** “I don’t associate very well with other people and when we go out to the horse program it allows me to relax enough to be able to communicate with people freely. I feel like I am worth something instead of a piece of trash. I am very impressed with their program and would like to see it expand more to help other vets. They really care.”

**Rebecca, US Army Bronze Star Iraq Veteran:** “Participating in the INNPower Retreat for women veterans I found friendship and a safe place to fall when it’s really needed, which I have not found since I left active duty. A lot of women soldiers feel forgotten.”

**Sarah Hedge, Active duty Seabee, 2<sup>nd</sup> class petty officer:** “I attribute my healing process of PTSD to the relationship with the horses and the specific activities which helped me gain my life back. I am off all antidepressants, sleeping meds and alcohol . . . I am happy.”

**Sir Winston Churchill** once said, “There is something about the outside of a horse that is good for the inside of a man.”

Thank you for the opportunity to present our Reins of H.O.P.E. Program. It is our honor to serve and give back to our service members, veterans and their families who have fought for our Nation’s freedom. I invite you to come up to Ojai as did Congresswoman Brownley to experience firsthand how our horses are healing heroes with honor.

Respectfully Submitted,

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Founder/Executive Director