

Cherokee County Veterans Learn to Fly Fish through innovative Partnership program

Have you ever thought of doing something that will help reduce anxiety with PTSD, something that will help Veterans with disabilities get out of the house and want to learn to do something they may have done as kids or pre-military? Something that teaches patience, and helps Veterans re-connect with their families in a lifelong recreation program that they thought they would never be able to again do? Something that involves both male and female Veterans at the same time?

These questions get asked every day from local Veterans of our VA, our local county Parks and recreation department, and of other organizations, and most times the answer is "Sorry we can't help".

Well a group of local organizations have partnered to create a program that goes right to the heart of this need.

The Cherokee County Homeless Veteran Program, (CCHVP) and the Cohutta Chapter of Trout Unlimited have announced and are implementing a free fly fishing program for disabled and elderly Veterans of Cherokee County.

According Don Thomson, Trout Unlimited Cohutta Chapter president, "the four week program is being led by chapter instructors and provides the following classroom instructions; Intro to fly fishing, equipment used, lines leaders and knots, clean water conservation and insect life, places to fish, fly tying, fly casting. The program will also culminate in a go fishing day at a private fishing club in the North Georgia Mountains, where they are waiving the \$500 per person daily fee.

The free program includes the use of fly fishing equipment and focuses on disabled Veterans as well as elderly Veterans of all skill levels. The fly fishing program is designed to focus on getting disabled Veterans out of the house into adaptive sports so that they can again be part of the community.

According to Jim Lindenmayer, Director of the Cherokee County Homeless Veteran program, "the Veterans Administration has placed a lot of focus on developing and conducting adaptive sports programs for veterans at a number of VA Medical Centers around the country. With Cherokee County being remote from these Medical Centers there is a great need for communities to develop such programs at a local level."

"In addition to the adaptive sports slant on this program we also see mental health and quality of life improvements for the Veterans and their families who are in our program", added Lindenmayer. "The group of Veterans we have in this pilot program include Veterans from three War Eras, some are combat injured Veterans, over 80% of the

Veterans in the program are rated at 90% or higher Service Connected disabled by the VA, and we have both male and female Veterans participating.”

As part of this program we have Liz Nelson, a 10 year Army Veteran and Therapist assigned to look at the quality of life and other aspects that this program can bring to our Veterans.

According to Liz Nelson, “The transition back to civilian life is often difficult for many veterans. They face numerous physical, mental, emotional and social challenges as they return to their families and communities. Living a more self-directed, self-determined and independent life is key in improving the quality of life of veterans and their families. Nontraditional approaches to health and healing can provide a chance for veterans to improve their quality of life. For those veterans with physical or emotional wounds, adaptive sports programs, therapeutic recreation programs and other social and outdoor activities for the veteran community can reduce the negative effects of these challenges. Posttraumatic stress disorder, substance use problems, depression, anxiety, isolation and suicide risks can occur at high rates in the veteran population. Outdoor recreation, nature-based and adaptive sports can provide a chance for veterans to channel their emotions and their focus to something positive. These unique programs can “turn a disability into an ability,” can promote meaningful relationships and connections, and help veterans build a life and purpose after a disability. The benefits of these activities and programs result in a renewed sense of hope and an opportunity to live life to the fullest for those who have served and sacrificed.”

Adaptive sports programs are not just for injured or disabled veterans. According to Lindenmayer, there are a number of groups that would benefit from adaptive sports programs to include:

- 1.2 million Disabled Veterans in the US, 181,000 of them from the Iraq/Afghanistan war. (www.CBSnews.com)
- 17,000 Spinal Cord Injuries suffered by non-military civilians per year in the US and there are an estimated 282,000 currently living in the US. (*NSC/ISC – National Spinal Cord Injury Statistic Center*)
- An estimated 367,069 people living with Down syndrome in the US. (www.CDC.gov)
- 800,000 people suffer from Strokes each year, with more than half of those over 65 suffering some type of reduced mobility. (www.CDC.gov)
- 2.35 million People suffer injuries/disabilities each year in automobile accidents. (www.ASIRT.org – *Association for Safe International Road Travel*)

“We are pleased to create this program in partnership with the Veterans of Cherokee County and CCHVP, added Don Thomson. “Fishing is a sport for life and can be enjoyed at all ages and skill levels.”

Even though this is the pilot for this partnership program, the early feedback from the Veterans is that they want to see more programs like this being done locally. “We are

submitting this program to the VA for funding consideration as part of the recent VA Adaptive Sports Grant RFP that was recently released and hope that it gets funding t”o expand the program next year, Lindenmayer went on to say, “but even if we do not get funding from the VA, we will continue to create local programs for our Veterans as they have sacrificed so much of their lives through their service to our country that it is time we took care of them without VA support.”