

THE ASPIRE CENTER

VETERAN RESIDENTIAL REHABILITATION TREATMENT PROGRAM

Questions & Answers





Table of Contents

What is the Aspire Center?.....	2
Why now? Why here?	3
Are such Centers effective?	4
A good neighbor	4
What will the Center look like?	5
Security	6
Will the Center be expanded in the future?	7
Will the Center include a methadone clinic?	7
What happens to Veterans after they leave the Center?	7
What is posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)?	7
Does treatment for PTSD work?	8
What is traumatic brain injury (TBI)?.....	8
Does treatment for TBI work?	9
More information	9
References	9

The Aspire Center Veteran Residential Rehabilitation Treatment Program (RRTP)

1 What is the Aspire Center?

Overview

The Center will be a 40-bed residential treatment facility (also known as a domiciliary) aimed at promoting recovery¹ in Servicemembers, particularly those returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Services

The Center will provide multiple treatment modalities, including: case management/social work, vocational rehabilitation, neuropsychological assessment, psychotherapy, occupational therapy, educational classes, medication management, and complementary/alternative therapies. It will be a forum for the implementation and development of novel treatments for posttraumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, and other problems affecting Veteran recovery.

Staff

Services will be provided by experienced VA employees with expertise in the above areas. Staff will include 27 full-time employees including Licensed Vocational Nurses, Registered Nurses, Social Workers/Case Managers, Nurse Practitioner, Psychologists, Vocational Rehabilitation Specialist, Occupational Therapist, Psychiatrist, Chaplain, Pharmacist and Registered Dietitian. In addition to the professional staff, there will be other VA support staff for housekeeping, security, etc.

Housing

The Center will provide temporary housing for Veterans who do not need inpatient care, but would benefit from rehabilitation services for an average of 60-120 days. There will be a total of 40 beds with 6 beds for female Veterans and 10 for Veterans with mild traumatic brain injury. Although the Center will include elements of mental health and substance use treatment for

Recovery

A process of change through which individuals improve their health and wellness, live a self-directed life, and strive to reach their full potential¹.

those Veterans who need them, the facility will not be an inpatient psychiatric facility or mental health hospital, drug rehab program, homeless shelter, or long-term stay facility.

Intake criteria & procedure

All Veterans will be carefully screened and selected for admission through the San Diego VA Medical Center in La Jolla. No “walk-ins” will be permitted. Per VA regulations for RRTP facilities², in order to be admitted to the Aspire Center, Veterans must meet 7 eligibility criteria:

1. Be assessed as not meeting criteria for acute psychiatric or medical admission.
2. Have tried a less restrictive treatment alternative, or one was unavailable.
3. Be assessed as requiring the structure and support of a residential treatment environment.
4. Be assessed as not a significant risk of harm to self or others.
5. Be lacking a stable lifestyle or living arrangement that is conducive to recovery.
6. Be capable of self-preservation and basic self-care.
7. Have identified treatment and rehabilitation needs, which can be met by the program.

In addition, Aspire Center Veterans must:

8. Have been honorably discharged.
9. Be compliant with all program rules (breaking rules can lead to consequences up to and including discharge from the program).

2 Why now? Why here?

San Diego has the largest concentration of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans in the country—currently 28,000 and growing. The stress of deployment, including exposure to combat and terrorist attacks, causes some Veterans to experience adjustment difficulties that, if left unaddressed, could result in poor outcomes such as unemployment and homelessness. Supporting these Veterans' return to normal civilian life is a top priority for the VA. These Veterans often require a level of care that is higher than standard outpatient services provided by the VA but less intensive than inpatient hospitalization. In addition to the 107 Residential

“I feel safe here.”

—Veteran,
Mountain Home
Tennessee Domiciliary

Rehabilitation Treatment Programs already present across the nation, the VA is funding the creation of 5 additional facilities such as the Aspire Center across the country to serve Veterans requiring this level of intensive care, so that they can live normal lives.

3 Are such Centers effective?

RRTP facilities such as the Aspire Center have a rich history in the VA. The first was founded over a century ago in 1908, and there are currently 107 facilities nationwide. In fiscal year 2010, nearly three quarters of Veterans (72%) successfully completed the program³. Also, the majority of Veterans demonstrated improvements in symptoms and functioning; e.g., 85% showed improvement in mental health problems and 73% showed improved relationships with family and friends. Numerous published studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of the VA's RRTP/domiciliary program^{4,5,6,7}.

4 A good neighbor

The Aspire Center will be a good neighbor in Old Town and our presence brings several benefits to community, including:

- **Financial benefit.** The Center will create new jobs and will bring \$6 million annually into the community for five years, not including the financial contributions of the professional staff, who will be utilizing local businesses.
- **No vehicular congestion.** The Center has 93 underground parking spaces, which will be more than sufficient to accommodate patients, staff, and visitors. Absolutely no street parking will be allowed.
- **Pride.** Given the innovative nature of the Aspire Center and the exciting work that will take place there, the Center is poised to become a national center of excellence. It is our hope that the Old Town community will take pride in serving as the home for such a facility. We intend to create a community advisory committee to assist us with program development including a volunteer program whereby local residents and students become part of our program offerings.

*"This program
has saved my
life."*

*—Veteran,
Detroit Domiciliary*

5 What will the Center look like?

The Center will be quiet, uncluttered, and will appear to anyone on the street as simply a business building. There will be a designated smoking patio in the back, completely out of view of passersby. Loitering outside the facility or in the neighborhood will be strictly prohibited. All Aspire Center Veterans will sign a contract indicating that they agree to follow the Center rules and understand that rule violation will be grounds for dismissal.



Play area for Veterans' children



Living wall



Kitchen



Retreat & rest area



Bedroom

6 Security

The Center will be a safe haven for Veterans concentrating on their process of recovery in preparation for a return to civilian life. Maintaining a safe environment for Veterans, staff, and the neighboring community is a top priority. Numerous safeguards will be in place to ensure safety:

- **Strict entry criteria.** VA mandates² state that Veterans who present a significant risk of harm to themselves or others or who meet criteria for acute psychiatric or medical hospitalization *must not* be admitted to RRTPs such as the Aspire Center.
- **Mandated hospitalization.** California law mandates that healthcare providers must hospitalize patients who are a danger to themselves or others, for treatment and evaluation⁸. Aspire Center Veterans will be under intensive observation by staff trained to recognize such risk. In the unlikely event that a Veteran becomes a danger to himself/herself or others after being admitted to the Aspire Center, staff will arrange for immediate secure transfer to the VA hospital in La Jolla.
- **Security measures.** The Center will have 24/7 clinical staff and there will never be less than three staff members present at any time. The Center will have one main controlled and monitored entry/exit point and the doors will be locked every day at 5 p.m. There will be a strictly enforced 11 p.m. curfew. Veterans will be required to check in and out of the building. Violation of any safety rules will be grounds for discharge from the program.
- **Safety track record.** With the VA's more than 100-year experience with RRTP programs, there has been no incidence of violence or disturbances within the adjoining neighborhoods. There are numerous examples of positive interactions with surrounding communities. For example, one RRTP is co-located with a Montessori School in New York, with a middle school and high school next door.

“Please keep doing what you’re doing. I can’t say enough good things about the program.”

*—Veteran,
Mountain Home
Tennessee Domiciliary*

7 Will the Center be expanded in the future?

There are no plans to increase the number of beds for the facility.

8 Will the Center include a methadone clinic?

No, this is not a substance abuse rehabilitation program.

9 What happens to Veterans after they leave the Center?

Upon graduation from the program and with the assistance of a VA Case Manager, the Veteran will transition to his or her own home to live independently. VA San Diego Healthcare System has a comprehensive case management team that assists Veterans with all aspects of reintegration including assistance with housing and finding employment. Veterans who choose to leave against our advice will be assisted by the VA in locating appropriate housing and alternative treatments and will never be “discharged to the streets.”

10 What is posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)?

PTSD is an anxiety disorder that a person can develop after experiencing a traumatic event—i.e., something horrible and frightening that the person witnesses or that happens to them. During this type of event, the person thinks that his or her life or others' lives are in danger, and may feel afraid or feel that there is no control over what is happening. The most common traumatic event experienced by the Veterans we serve is from exposure to combat. About 7% of Americans will develop PTSD over the course of their lifetime⁹ and about 3.5% of U.S. adults aged 18 to 54—5.2 million people—have PTSD during the course of a given year¹⁰. An estimated 14% of Veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan have PTSD¹¹.

The symptoms of PTSD include¹²: 1) reliving the event (also called re-experiencing, e.g., nightmares or flashbacks); 2) avoiding situations that remind you of the event; 3) feeling emotionally numb (e.g., difficulty expressing feelings, not interested in pleasurable activities); 4) feeling keyed up (e.g., jittery/easily startled, irritable, always alert, on the lookout for danger).

11 Does treatment for PTSD work?

PTSD is treatable; there are effective, evidence-based treatments for the condition. The two main types are psychotherapy (counseling) and medication. These are often prescribed together, and both will be offered at the Aspire Center for Veterans who need them. An

example of a PTSD treatment offered by the VA is *Prolonged Exposure (PE)*—a type of psychotherapy that involves talking about the trauma repeatedly until the memories are no longer upsetting. Patients also go into situations that are safe but which they have been avoiding because they are related to the trauma. Research indicates that the average PE-treated patient fared better than 86% of patients in control conditions at the end of treatment on PTSD measures¹³.

Another evidence-based treatment that will be provided is *Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT)*, which focuses on challenging and modifying maladaptive beliefs related to the traumatic experience. CPT has been shown to reduce PTSD symptoms significantly more than a control group in Veterans with chronic military-related PTSD¹⁴.



12 What is traumatic brain injury (TBI)?

The primary causes of TBIs in the civilian population are falls, motor vehicle accidents, being struck by an object, and assaults. The conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have resulted in increased numbers of Veterans who have experienced traumatic brain injuries, due to blasts, motor vehicle accidents, and gunshot wounds. TBIs can be categorized into mild, moderate, or severe, depending on how long the person experiences a loss of consciousness and the severity of consequences, such as amnesia¹⁵.

The vast majority of TBIs are categorized as mild. Initial symptoms of mild TBI such as headache, dizziness, insomnia, impaired memory and/or lowered tolerance for noise and light, typically resolve by 6 months. Some patients however continue to experience residual “post-concussive” symptoms including: somatic (headache, tinnitus, insomnia, etc.), cognitive (memory, attention and concentration difficulties) and emotional/behavioral (irritability, depression, anxiety, disinhibition)¹⁵.

13 Does treatment for TBI work?

A great deal of research is currently underway on the assessment and treatment of TBI. Studies suggest that various treatment approaches are promising, including patient and family education, memory aids, exercise, and occupational rehabilitation^{15,16}. The VA and the Dept. of Defense have established practice guidelines for the treatment of TBI¹⁶. The Aspire Center would be the first RRTP to include a special track to specifically address the needs of returning Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans with TBI.

14 More Information

- **PTSD:** www.ptsd.va.gov
- **Traumatic brain injury:** www.polytrauma.va.gov/understanding-tbi/
- **Recovery:** www.samhsa.gov/recovery
- **VA handbook on RRTP facilities (procedures & requirements):**
http://www.va.gov/vhapublications/ViewPublication.asp?pub_ID=2354
- **Contact** Debbie Dominick, LCSW, Aspire Center Director at (858) 642-6441.

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- ¹⁵ National Center for PTSD: <http://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/pages/traumatic-brain-injury-ptsd.asp>
- ¹⁶ http://www.healthquality.va.gov/management_of_concussion_mtbi.asp

Our Mission

Our Servicemembers and Veterans have sacrificed to keep our country—and everything it represents—safe.

We honor and serve those men and women by fulfilling President Lincoln’s promise “**to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan.**”

We strive to provide Servicemembers and Veterans with the world-class benefits and services they have earned, and will adhere to the highest standards of compassion, commitment, excellence, professionalism, integrity, accountability, and stewardship.



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