



GENERAL ACUPUNCTURE

AWB National Veterans' Project Provides Community Training Ground

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Acupuncturists Without Borders (AWB) came about in 2005 as a result of a grassroots effort following Hurricane Katrina. Practitioners from all over the country responded to AWB's call and came to greater New Orleans to use acupuncture to help heal people. AWB set up clinics on street corners, in firehouses, churches and housing projects to give free community-style acupuncture treatments to people from all walks of life - not only to those who had lost their homes, loved ones and livelihoods, but also to FEMA workers, first responders and relief workers.

What We Learned in New Orleans

During our field work in New Orleans, our volunteers lived in chaotic and crowded conditions and responded with creativity and flexibility to the ever-changing environment. It was an amazing, collaborative effort under very difficult circumstances. One benefit of our work there was to realize that we had developed a very effective model for treating in chaotic conditions.

Our biggest lesson in New Orleans was that it isn't just about what needles you use or what points you stimulate. It's also about how you treat people in distress. It's about being able to work in challenging environments and create order and healing where there is chaos. These are vital skills, essential to this work, that most acupuncture schools don't teach. This is expertise that AWB now has.

The reality is that the next disaster could happen near you. AWB wants to take our volunteers to the next practical level and coach them on how to implement a program in their own home towns.

The Veterans' Project

This is where the Veterans' Project comes in. No one who reads the newspapers can question that there is a need for mental health treatment among our returning veterans. AWB demonstrated that the community acupuncture protocol we used in New Orleans is effective with trauma and symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Our Veterans' Project is designed to encourage the startup of local volunteer acupuncture clinics to provide free community-style acupuncture to veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan to their families. The initiative is nationwide and encourages a focus of treatment on stress-related symptoms such as anxiety, sleep problems, irritability, hypervigilance, flashbacks and mental foginess - all of which can be indications of PTSD or postcombat stress. Community-style acupuncture can provide a simple, nonprescription, nonverbal healing modality in a safe environment and, in this case, among a community of veterans and their peers.

Goals of the Veterans' Project

Our fundamental goal is to help alleviate some of the PTSD and post-combat stress symptoms combat veterans experience over time, both in terms of degree and severity. In this way, we hope to bring healing and peace into the lives of those who receive treatment, as well as to help their families and their communities. We also hope our volunteers will see the Veterans' Project as an opportunity to hone their skills for the future, as well as a way of facilitating the healing of our veterans and their families from the trauma and horrors of war.

AWB has developed a grassroots model that facilitates the startup of the many veterans' clinics around the country, autonomously run, and for which AWB serves as the coordinating organization. Local groups are a part of a national network of similar clinics, which were established with the help of and which operate under the general guidelines of AWB.

Establishing local veterans' clinic sites gives local groups experience working together and creates bonds among those interested in this kind of service work. These groups will have strong connections in their own communities and be ready to respond in minutes when a need arises.

The Albuquerque Veterans' Clinic

Our pilot clinic, the Albuquerque Veterans' Clinic, ran continuously for more than a year. Its challenges and successes have informed our recommendations and plans for other clinics. Getting a group of veterans to attend regularly was an initial difficulty, but they turned the corner when a couple of veterans in a support group at the VA stood up and talked about their positive experiences at the clinic.

Here's a sample of the feedback we've been getting from the veterans:

"Very relaxing and calming, which promotes less anxiety."

"I just want to thank you very much for offering this service."

"I'm very thankful to you. You've helped me in the above systems [mental clarity, improved energy, sleeping problems, bad dreams, headaches, anxiety, depression, anger, helps me be calmer, helps me cope with day-to-day life better] . "

"Very relaxing, and the feeling of being among fellow veterans was also very reassuring."

The Project Expands

The Albuquerque Veterans' Clinic has given hundreds of treatments to veterans in the past year. It also has become totally self-sustaining and solvent. Donations have exceeded expenses, and the clinic regularly sends a donation to AWB to help support the creation of other clinics. As of February 2008, other clinics already are operating in Chicago, Baltimore, Grants' Pass (Ore.), Arlington (Mass.), Framingham (Mass.) and New York.

AWB has continued work on the infrastructure of the project. We completed the 70-page *Field Manual for the Veterans' Project* , which includes information on logistics, clinical protocols, team-building leadership and membership, outreach, fundraising, managing supplies, scheduling, press release templates and financial management. The manual also includes samples of all necessary clinic forms.

We have also set up the Veterans' Project Advisory Board, composed of military veterans,

acupuncturists and others with backgrounds in related fields.

AWB holds regular informational conference calls with acupuncturists who are starting up local veterans' clinics. We plan to enhance this networking by creating an interactive Web site where clinics can share information and assist each other in national publicity efforts.

In the months to come, we expect to add clinics in Portland (Me.), Santa Fe, Madison (Wis.), San Francisco and elsewhere. AWB's nationwide database of those interested in starting clinics contains more than 700 acupuncturists and allied health professionals. We expect the project to have a snowball effect as it gains momentum in the year to come.

Additional funding will go directly to support AWB's further development of this program and the groups creating veterans clinics. Funding still is needed for our interactive Web site project which will greatly enhance communication between local groups. We provide monthly updates to the field manual, regular conference calls to connect groups around the country and unlimited AWB staff support for volunteers. In addition, AWB will continue to keep its volunteers informed about veterans' issues and will increasingly work on providing national media coverage for the program.

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