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Horse Sense

Equine Therapy by Warriors Heart Helps Active-Duty Military, Veterans,
and First Responders Rebuild Their Lives

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Cover Story

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Horse Sense

Equine Therapy by Warriors Heart Helps Active-Duty Military, Veterans, and First Responders Rebuild Their Lives



The relationship between people and horses is widely celebrated in popular culture and is one of the longest and most steadfast interspecies connections in history, dating back more than 6,000 years to the first domesticated herds. Today, this enduring bond forms the basis for a deeply profound and intensely meaningful program of equine therapy, run by the holistic healing organization, Warriors Heart.

"Working with these incredible animals encourages self-awareness on both a physical and mental level, fostering a deep sense of presence and connection," explains Mike Marotta the executive director of Warriors Heart Virginia. "These remarkable horses have an unparalleled ability to unlock potential and possibilities, offering healing and growth to individuals from every background. Each session introduces opportunities to develop mindfulness, balance and clear communication; skills that extend far beyond their time with the horses.

"Our equine programs offer countless benefits to our warriors, many of whom are experiencing the unique bond with horses for the first time," Marotta adds. "It's truly inspiring to witness their transformation over the weeks as they grow more self-aware, confident and grounded."

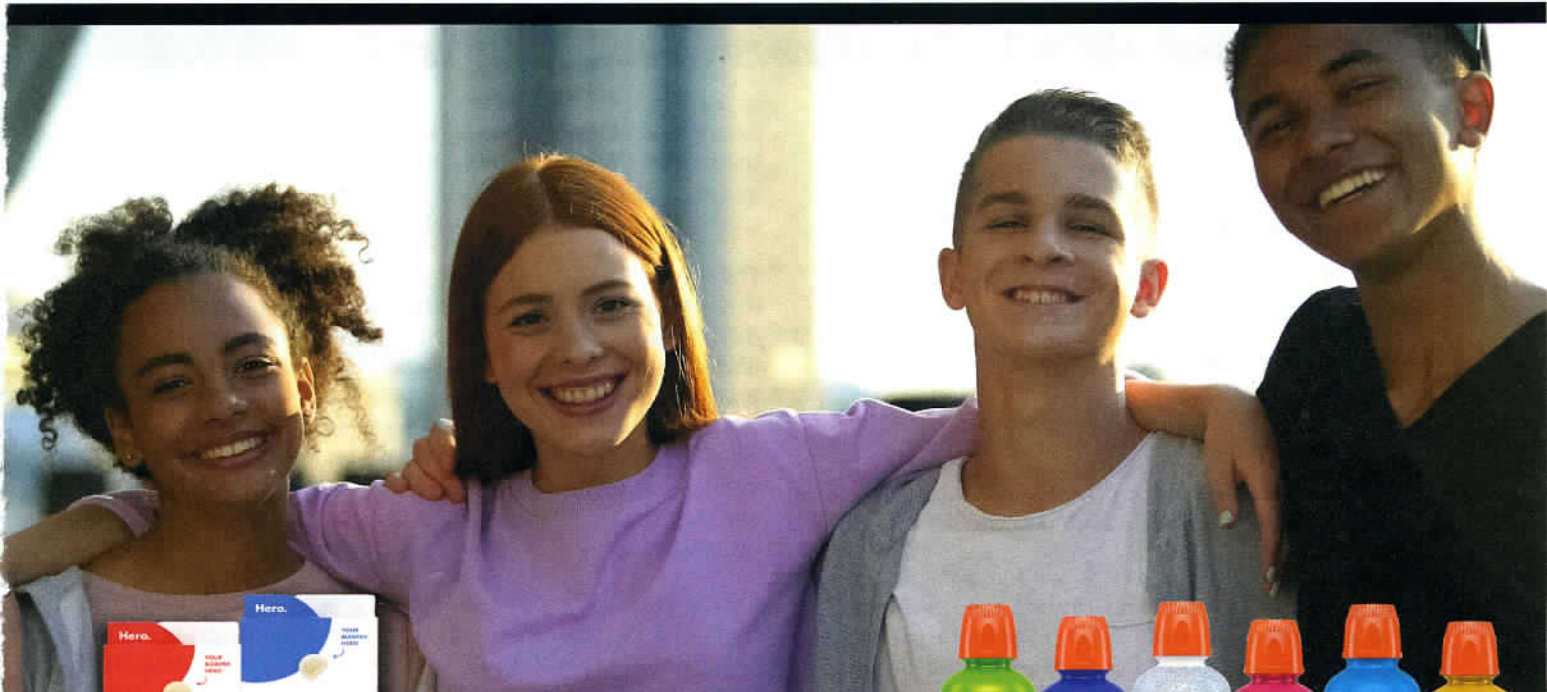
Warriors Heart is a private, accredited addiction and post-traumatic stress disorder treatment facility built specifically for active-duty military, veterans, and first responders struggling with addiction, PTSD, trauma, anxiety, suicide ideation, other mental health conditions, and co-occurring issues. Warriors Heart currently operates facilities in two locations: one in Texas and one in Virginia.

"The ranch locations feel like the 'opposite of a hospital' and provide luxury accommodations; it's a beautiful healing environment with horses, lakes, hiking trails and more," Marotta says. "We offer a 42-day residential program designed around the realities of service life, because the people who protect and serve deserve care that under-

stands them. Our team includes people who wore the uniform, carried a badge, came through the fire themselves, or have loved ones who did, and that shared experience is the foundation of everything we do here."

Marotta himself is no stranger to those stresses, having served in the U.S. Air Force in the 68th Airlift Squadron, supporting Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom; as well as a spending nearly two decades in law enforcement with the San Antonio Police Department. "Warriors Heart works because it's built from the inside; the peer-to-peer model, 'Warriors Healing Warriors,' removes the shame from the equation," he points out. "When your counselor has been where you are, the conversation changes completely. Our 42-day residential program combines evidence-based clinical treatment with experiential therapies like equine, wood/metal shop, art, fitness and more, all designed around warrior culture. We also offer an alumni program and Warriors Anonymous to support warriors after they leave our care, because healing doesn't stop at discharge.

"The hardest part isn't the trauma itself; it's the culture that says asking for help means you couldn't handle it," he continues. "Warriors carry PTSD, TBI, addiction, moral injury and the weight of transition, often all at once, and they carry it alone because that's what they were trained to do. Warriors Heart is a unique holistic healing program exclusively for warriors - active-duty military, veterans



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“

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is that there's no pretending.
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You can't armor up
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and first responders—so they can heal with their peers, rebuild their lives and not feel shame asking for help.”

The new equine program is an elective therapy that is designed to give participants new skills to help them rebuild their lives; any warrior in the residential program can participate in the equine program as long as there are no physical or safety limitations that would make it unsafe for them to be around or ride horses.

“Warriors are trained to stay guarded; that's what keeps them alive in the field, and it's also what can make traditional therapy difficult when they come home,” Marotta points out. “What we know with horses is that there's no pretending. A horse responds to your energy right now, in this moment. You can't armor up and fake calm. Warriors who struggled

to open up elsewhere were telling us the horses grounded them, that caring for the animals helped them rest their minds, that they had to trust the horse so the horse would trust them. We knew we had to build around that.”

The equine therapy program is part of the Warriors Heart drive to stimulate whole-person healing, which Marotta describes as “actually rebuilding the connection to self and others that trauma and addiction take away. Horses teach grounding and boundaries in a way that's impossible to intellectualize. The horse either trusts you or it doesn't. Warriors respond to that honesty, and they always have. Working with horses also teaches emotional regulation, learning to regulate our own energy and how that impacts those around us.”

Equine therapy is offered at both the Texas and Virginia locations, where warriors work directly with horses: grooming, feeding, basic care and horseback riding. In Virginia, the program also includes carriage driving and how to work horses from the ground, along with general barn responsibilities, which builds a level of discipline and focus that translates directly into healing. In Texas, the work centers on grounding and boundaries.

“Horses feel your energy,” Marotta asserts. “If you're scattered, they're scattered. Learning to regulate yourself well enough to be trusted by a 1,200-pound animal is a lesson

that sticks. One of the things that stays with us is watching warriors learn to sync their breathing with a horse's rhythm as a way to self-regulate. For someone who has been running on adrenaline and survival mode for years, finding that kind of stillness with an animal is something you have to see to understand.

"Warriors have also told us that working with the horses taught them how to hold boundaries with intention, and how to give calm, clear direction and actually feel stronger for it," he continues. "Some warriors, when they go home, continue on with horses, whether it's getting a horse or working with them. It can give them another sense of purpose. Those are lessons that go well beyond the arena."

Warriors Heart is a private, accredited treatment center, accepting commercial and government insurance. The organization works directly with warriors and their families to help navigate the admissions and coverage process. The organization reaches families through referral partners, word of mouth, social media, and through warriors who share their own stories.

Additionally, Warriors Heart works with other organizations to ensure all those who need care can receive it. "Some of our key mission partners include the Avalon Action Alliance, Gary Sinise Foundation and Frontline Healing Foundation, to name a few," Marotta comments. "Avalon helps us reach more warriors who need care, and the Gary Sinise Foundation is one of many nonprofits we work with to help fund treatment for warriors who need financial assistance to get here. Frontline Healing Foundation helps financially support warriors who don't have the means to

pay for treatment. These relationships are a big part of how we make sure cost and access to care don't stand between a warrior and getting help."

This year marks the 10-year anniversary of the opening of the Warriors Heart flagship campus in Bandera, Texas, and since that time, the organization has served more than 4,400 warriors. The Milford, VA, location opened three years ago, and Warriors Heart hopes to open a third site in the near future.

"Warriors have told us the horses grounded them and spoke to their life, that equine therapy was invaluable and priceless to their recovery, that riding and caring for the animals helped them rest their mind in a way they hadn't been able to in years," Marotta shares. "We hope to keep expanding so more warriors have access to that kind of experience."

"Our warriors consistently rate equine as the top elective group in their treatment experience," he adds. "Equine therapy gives warriors something that is hard to find anywhere else: an honest, immediate relationship with a living being that responds to exactly who you are in that moment. That is a powerful thing to offer someone who is working their way back to themselves." 

Warriors Heart offers a 24-hour hotline **(866-955-4035)** to assist warriors who need help with drug or alcohol addiction, PTSD. The group also can be reached online at: **warriorsheart.com/connect**

