09 November 2023

To Whom It May Concern,

I am writing this letter in support of Medicine Horse and the exceptional and life-changing work they do with Veterans through Operation Be Herd groups. This grant for Medicine Horse has allowed so many Veterans to experience healing in a gentle and connecting way.

Since 2021, Veterans from the Boulder Vet Center (and other Veterans through the community who sign up) have been able to participate in 10 iterations of 8-week groups with 8-10 Veterans participating each time. This group has been one of the favorite groups we offer at the Vet Center as it is a way for Veterans to connect with horses, mini donkeys, goats, and sheep, which is often easier for them than connecting with other people. Medicine Horse has been able to have a tremendous and positive impact on these Veterans.

At the Boulder Vet Center, we focus on providing services to Veterans and service members who served in combat operations, areas of hostility, stateside deployments or endured military service-related trauma. We also serve their families to support the growth and goals of the Veteran or service member. Two primary areas we work on with Veterans are: Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) from combat events experienced and witnessed while deployed to their various war zones (Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan) and Military Sexual Trauma (MST).

The traumas Veterans and Servicemembers have experienced and witnessed are unspeakable. It takes a lot of heartache, time, and effort on their parts to work through these traumas and to begin to reclaim their lives. One of the incredible benefits about Medicine Horse is that the horses don’t need them to talk about the horrors they’ve seen or experienced. The Veterans can be themselves and in being with the horses and the therapists at Medicine Horse they begin to learn how to ground, to feel some calm and peace in their lives, to be able to stay in the moment, and to feel some relief from anxiety, PTSD, Depression, and other challenges. After this acceptance and connection from the horses, the Veterans are then able to be more open with the therapists and fellow group members, which is another piece of their healing.

Veterans who have been in combat operations often return home to a feeling of no longer belonging in society and not feeling a sense of community. Their experiences so impact them they are forever changed and feel separate and isolated. Not only is the therapy offered through Medicine Horse invaluable in helping Veterans, but also the fact that there are civilian community members and therapists who take an interest in their well-being and healing. This helps shift the perception that they are alone, and others can’t understand what they’ve been through. The Medicine Horse team and horses are invested in these Veterans and their healing. This begins to bridge the gap that Veterans often feel between themselves and civilians and life after combat and the military.

Some of the things Veterans share about Medicine Horse are that they feel calmer, more connected to themselves and others, more hopeful and accepted, and less depressed or anxious. Specific examples of some of the positive impacts of Medicine Horse are the following: Four Veterans who had an extremely difficult time leaving their homes, due to severe PTSD, anxiety, and agoraphobia, were able to attend Medicine Horse as one of their exposure goals. Because their experiences with the horses were so rewarding, they were able to have extra motivation to follow through with these goals and were successful. One of these Veterans stated, “this is my first Veterans group and I appreciate the authenticity and openness of each of you and the horses who help me have the only calm moments I have during my week”. A Vietnam Veteran indicated he was so depressed all the time and he makes it out to see the horses because it’s a time in the week where he is able to connect and feel calm and have some degree of happiness. It has helped decrease his thoughts of suicide. From an Iraq/Afghanistan Veteran who had multiple tours, “this is the first time I’ve really known that I made it back alive”. He has survived combat and was able to be more in his body in a way that wasn’t terrifying. Another gift from the horses was for sexual trauma survivors who find it very difficult to trust or to allow themselves to be touched. These individuals were able to have connections with the horses, therapists, and the group members while also being able to work on setting healthy boundaries and stepping into a feeling of empowerment.

The gifts of Medicine Horse are in the skilled, compassionate, and insightful therapists who teach these Veterans how to work with these horses in safe and therapeutic ways. This healing goes much deeper than each individual group or each round of 8-weeks. These Veterans have been able to carry these experiences and feelings forward with them. Often Veterans ask to repeat the group if there are openings, after new Veterans get priority, because the experience is so life altering for them.

A final thought. I have been able to participate in these groups with the Veterans and Medicine Horse as a collaborative effort between our two organizations for the past few years. As a therapist of Veterans for 18+ years, it has been incredible to witness in person some of these life changing moments of calm, connection, healing, and peace. An additional and unexpected benefit to my being the representative therapist from the Boulder Vet Center partnering with Medicine Horse, is the grounding and recharge I personally receive just being with the horses and the Veterans in their process. This unexpected boon, as the Medicine Horse therapists and I work with our Veterans and the horses, helps me continue to provide the deep trauma work that I’ve been doing with Veterans for 18+ years. It has been a buffer against secondary trauma and burnout for me. While this is not the intention or the purpose of this group, I felt it was significant to share as I have a large caseload of Veterans and this group has truly helped me continue working effectively in the trauma work these Veterans need. The far-reaching impact also extends to this therapist and Director and all of those I treat.

Without reservation, I wholeheartedly endorse Medicine Horse and the service they provide to some of our nation’s Veterans who deserve for us as a community to say more than, “thank you for your service”. Medicine Horse is going beyond just saying thanks and *doing* something. They are showingthese service members and Veterans that they are witnessed, heard, and valued in real and healing ways. Their service, sacrifice, and struggles are not forgotten and do not need to be shouldered by the Veteran alone.

I hope you will take these things into consideration as you are in the decision-making process about continuing this grant for our Veterans through Medicine Horse. Without Medicine Horse this benefit is not offered to our Veterans, and they are the poorer for it. It is our hope that our Veterans will be able to continue to receive this great and healing benefit after so much service and sacrifice for our country. There is power in this grant and the equine therapy coming from caring community members who are taking an interest in our Veterans. It helps them know they are not alone in their coming home and healing journey. You are making a difference in extending this grant. I know these words can never adequately describe the impact that you and these monetary funds have on so many Veterans, but I hope it has given you a glimpse into just how impactful this grant and each of you is.

Thank you for your consideration and for the grant money already provided for the past groups and those who have already benefitted so greatly. It means so much to these Veterans and their family members who also benefit through their Veteran being more at peace.

It is my pleasure to share any other information you might want or need. Please reach out with any questions or for further information as needed.

Respectfully,

Collette Archibald, LCSW

Director/Therapist

Boulder Vet Center