

A Place for Healing and Connection

VA health care facilities are increasingly offering alternatives to conventional Western medicine. The Salt Lake City VA Medical Center's healing garden incorporates traditional Native American therapies.

What was once a patch of asphalt is now a place of solace filled with native plants, rock benches, sculpture and trees dedicated to a deeper level of healing for veterans at the VA Salt Lake City Health Care System, Purtkwahgahm (Burk-Wah-ga-me), dedicated last summer, is an outdoor garden named after the native Ute word that translates to "Healing Ground."

The medical center provides care to veterans in the largest geographic area in the VA system. "We have quite a challenge in meeting the diverse needs of our patients," said James R. Floyd, medical center director. "They come from urban areas and very remote rural areas, they come from tribes, they come from all races, and when they come to Salt Lake City, their needs need to be met in a manner that fits them."

For veterans who suffer from chronic pain, drug addiction and mental illness, there is a need for connection, inclusion and understanding. The healing ground is a tranquil, therapeutic space to meditate, reflect and enjoy a connection with nature.

The idea to create a Native American healing ground originated through the medical center's residential treatment program called "Eagle's Nest." The program is designed to aid veterans living in remote areas and provide treatment to those suffering from substance abuse and trauma. The healing ground was seen as an opportunity to reach out to Native veterans who might feel disconnected from the VA system due to lack of awareness or resources.

However, Purtkwahgahm is not just for Native Americans. "This is a place that honors all veterans and their families. It is inclusive of spiritual symbols, cultures and ethnic groups," said Dr. Stephen K. Harmon, director of patient education, during the dedication ceremony.

Native American culture is very inclusive, allowing those who participate to develop a deeper understanding while retaining their own feature beliefs, according to social worker Kym Couture.

Veterans can explore their spiritual self through a Sweat Lodge Purification Ceremony; express emotions fully through song and music during drumming ceremonies; and use smudging ceremonies to symbolically cleanse, purify and protect the physical and spiritual body. They may also become more connected by pledging a sincere mind and heart as they bring awareness to their intention with the sacred burning of tobacco.

Sandra Smeeding and Susan Osguthorpe founded the Integrative Health Program as a holistic approach to healing. "We feel an integrative approach will become increasingly more common in traditional medical settings," said Smeeding, "with conventional Western medicine addressing the needs of individuals for medication and surgery, and a holistic, self-empowerment, non-pharmacological approach addressing core attitudes and beliefs to assist those coping with chronic conditions."

Veterans participating in the program have come to discover ways to manage and even excel despite their difficulties. They may still live with a measure of chronic pain and illness, but they are no longer focused on or controlled by their condition. They often experience a positive change in self-perception, relief from physical and emotional stress and pain, an increased ability to cope with their chronic condition, and new self-empowerment skills.

"Being in this space offers an immediate and everlasting resource for inward reflection and the experience of connection we all desire in the deepest parts of ourselves. The experience of connection holds within it the nature of spiritual healing," Smeeding said.

The hope is that those who use the resources at Purkwahgahm will experience a transformation similar to that which occurred on the grounds where the garden lies. Once a vacant and abandoned asphalt lot, it has now turned into a park-like garden of beauty and growth, with an optimistic future.

By Jacob Floyd and Susan Huff



James J. Lackey, an Army veteran of Desert Storm, enjoys the healing garden on the grounds of the Salt Lake City VA Medical Center. The garden, which offers veterans a place for quiet reflection and meditation, is part of a broader effort by the medical center to meet the diverse needs of its patients.

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