

Support for veterans with MS



The VA offers care and resources to the nation's vets.

by **Maureen Salamon**

Craig B. was a military chaplain who traveled to some turbulent spots—including Bosnia, the Middle East and the Korean Demilitarized Zone—to counsel soldiers in the midst of turmoil. But when his 15 years of service ended in the early 2000s, Craig returned to the U.S. to face his own crisis: twin diagnoses of post-traumatic stress disorder and multiple sclerosis, after investigating symptoms that had first appeared during military service.

A friend's suggestion that he investigate the medical care and resources available through the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) proved life-changing. His service-connected MS designation made him eligible for full medical benefits as well as access to a variety of other programs, including mobility devices, prescription medications and ongoing physical, occupational and speech therapy—at little or no cost.

“How have the benefits made my life easier? I have a power chair—that is [like] my legs. And the medications I take—goodness knows what I would be like if I didn't have those,” says the 59-year-old Washington state resident.

While Craig might have received similar care at an independent MS clinic, he never tried that route because his local VA facility seemed to offer distinct advantages, he says. Most notably, VA-based care is typically much more affordable for vets with service-connected MS. In addition, the VA has greatly expanded its expertise in MS in the past decade, having established two MS Centers of Excellence in 2003.

Striving for excellence

Marsha Tarver, PhD, associate director of education at the VA's MS Centers of Excellence (MSCoE) West in Seattle, says VA staff understand the unique experiences and health conditions that can accompany military service and are expertly positioned to address those needs.

The MSCoE not only make a network of 80 regional programs available to 30,000 veterans with MS nationwide, but also teach clinicians about the complexities of MS, and how to implement appropriate treatments and rehabilitation strategies, through fellowships, educational programs and research opportunities. The National MS Society and the MSCoE also share resources and information. In addition, the centers work with regional providers to deliver consistent standards of MS care.

Craig says he found that the professionals at his facility "definitely have the specialized knowledge to understand MS." What he appreciated most of all, he says, was the multispecialty and inclusive approach. "All the disciplines involved with a patient's care come together for discussions. I was included in that circle so I could listen and, if I had anything else to offer, I could say that. If I had questions, they could answer them right away."

Wide-ranging support

In addition to healthcare, vets and their families may also be eligible for home improvement grants, respite care, driver assessments and more. However, which services are available to each honorably discharged veteran—and how much of the cost is covered—depend on whether or not the vet's MS is considered service-connected, meaning MS was diagnosed during active military service or up to seven years after discharge.

Depending upon eligibility status, prescription copays can be as little as \$8 a month, even for expensive disease-modifying drugs, Tarver says. However, since coverage depends on many variables, vets should contact their local VA representative to learn more about what their individual coverage would include.

"Being your own advocate is important whether you're in the VA system or the civilian system," says Craig's wife, Marilyn, who is a registered nurse at a non-VA hospital near their home. "In the medical realm, you need to ask questions to find out what benefits you're eligible for. With the VA being such a vast system, that's even more important."

Community resources

Veterans who wish to pursue additional avenues of support and empowerment can connect with service organizations such as Paralyzed Veterans of America (pva.org) and Disabled American Veterans (dav.org).

"Veterans service organizations are an integral part of the benefits process," explains James Shepard, a licensed clinical social worker for the VA Puget Sound Health Care System. He helps vets "take a holistic look at their environment, what they have available, what they may be eligible for, and connect those pieces," he says.

VA social workers such as Shepard work with local and state agencies to ensure that vets with MS are enrolled in supportive programs, which may include assistance with food, home healthcare or Medicaid coverage.

Shepard finds his work helping veterans access care and assistance extraordinarily satisfying, especially considering how much they have contributed to the nation. “There’s a lot of gratification when you can really help someone navigate his or her own journey,” he says.

Maureen Salamon is a New Jersey-based writer. She has written for The New York Times, CNN and other major outlets.

For more information on veterans’ MS benefits, visit va.gov.

[VIDEO: A Veteran’s Perspective](#). While serving as an officer on the bridge of the USS Bonhomme Richard in 2009, Donnie Horner was diagnosed with MS.

Learn more about the National MS Society’s [collaboration with the Department of Veterans Affairs MS Center of Excellence](#).