

# Fulfilling the Promise - An Introduction to the Vermont Veterans' Home

By  
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People planting beautiful flower gardens, fishing in a trout pond, watching deer graze, feeding ducks and squirrels, strolling across lawns with beautiful mountain, is this how you would picture a nursing home? If not, come visit the Vermont Veterans' Home located in Bennington, Vermont. These outdoor activities are just a small part of the Vermont Veterans' Home initiative to promote quality of life as well as quality of care for veterans and their spouses (hereafter referred to as veterans).

The Vermont Veterans' Home was opened April 1, 1887 with 25 veterans residing at the Home, which was a working farm. As the Home has continued to grow, the needs of the veterans have continued to be met with many changes to the Home. The mission has always remained the same: "to fulfill the promise" of caring for the veterans who have fought so hard to protect our country's promise of freedom.

The Veterans' Home embraces a social model of care and social work values, which is manifested by the high importance placed on the social service department, the number of social work staff and the education of the staff. First, the Home has 2 licensed clinical social workers: Grace Wilson, LICSW, Director of Social Services and Christina Cosgrove, LICSW, Director and Social Worker for the Dementia Program. Most nursing homes across the country do not have any licensed clinical social workers on staff, but only as a consultant.

The social service department has 3 social workers providing direct social work services to approximately 150 veterans. This ratio of social work staff to veterans is much higher than the regulatory requirement which is one social worker with a BSW for every 120 residents. Grace Wilson, Director of the department focuses on helping new veterans move into the Home and assisting them with a positive transition. Christina Cosgrove, works with veterans with memory loss in the Dementia Program, Sheila Mullineaux, MA, and William MacMillan, BA, provide social work for the veterans on the other neighborhoods.

Upon admission to the Home social workers meet with the veteran and/or family to complete a psychosocial assessment, mini cog to assess for dementia, and Geriatric Depression Scale or Cornell Depression Scale to screen for depression. “Depression is extremely under recognized in elders living in long term care and we want to be proactive in identifying veterans with depression. Depression is treatable disease and with appropriate treatment the veteran’s quality of life can be greatly improved” said Grace Wilson.

Meeting veterans’ highest possible quality of life is our goal. For veterans with memory loss, learning as much as possible about who they were, what were their preferences, likes, and dislike, helps with understanding how to reach the person behind the cloak of dementia. The Life Story is completed on veterans in the Dementia Program to help staff connect and reach people with memory loss. The life story also helps staff care plan interventions to deal with some of the behavioral symptoms of dementia from a positive, strength-based approach.

Currently the Home is actively examining how language plays a powerful role in creating a person-centered culture. Thus, the Home is changing it’s lexicon, “residents”, are now called

“veterans” and spouses of veterans are called “members” demonstrating respect, dignity and getting away from an institutional language. Wings or units are now called neighborhoods. C-wing is now called Cardinal Point, B-wing is called Brandon Boulevard, East wing is called East Haven, North wing is called North Village and A-wing is American way. Veterans were.

The Dementia Program, which consists of 2 neighborhoods, is now Freedom Village exemplifying the right of people with dementia to have the freedom to be themselves with dignity and respect. This is an important part of our philosophy “we need to enter their reality and for staff who love working with people with dementia this is where one can be creative, have fun and enhance quality of life all at the same time” said Cosgrove.

Namaste and The Club are specialized programs specifically designed to enhance the quality of life of veterans in Freedom Village. Namaste, meaning honoring the spirit within, is for veterans with advanced dementia where traditional types of activity programs don’t meet their needs. Namaste uses activities of daily living to pro, emphasizes nonverbal engagement and comfort through music, touch, massage, and aromatherapy for the veterans with late stage dementia. Laughter radiates from The Club as veterans with early and middle stage dementia are engaged in cognitive, physical and spiritual fun activities.

In addition to positive activities and programs, the staff on Freedom Village have been working to create a positive environment for the veterans which plays a large role in the level of anxiety the individual experiences. The walls are decorated with artwork illustrating many of the

objects and scenes members would see in areas where they grew up. The pictures provide a comforting and familiar environment to those who live at the Home when everything else may seem strange and stressful.

Individuality, empowerment, and freedom of expression are celebrated at the Vermont Veterans' Home. An old storage room has been turned into a flourishing greenhouse by one of the veterans Harold Makepeace, thus enabling him to continue his lifelong gardening passion that began when he was six years old on a plantation with his grandfather. Harold remarks that the Veterans' Home is the "perfect place" and calls his greenhouse his "lifesaver." Many veterans are involved in the Healing Arts program, brought to the Veterans' Home through collaboration with the Vermont Art Exchange. The weekly art group allows members to show off their incredible talent and provide an alternative way of communicating for those who may have a limited ability to talk. Other people are working with a poet or on their own to express themselves through writing.

Empowerment, autonomy, and self-determination are emphasized throughout the Veterans' Home through the veterans' power to make change and choices. Veterans and members have monthly council meetings where they bring up concerns and attempt to make the Home a better place to live through collaboration with the staff. In the dining room veterans and members have several options of what they want to eat and the power to choose their meal. Religious services, exercise groups, Bingo, and brain teasers are just a few of the numerous opportunities veterans can chose to participate in to keep their mind, body, and spirit engaged and healthy.

Family and social support and relationships are important at the Veterans' Home demonstrated through the incorporation of support groups, family involvement in care plans, educational programs, and celebrations for veterans and families. The Reagan Room is a private room for people who are dying with an adjacent room for family members to stay with their loved one.

Many may think that entering into a nursing home represents the ending of life. However, it can also be the opportunity to develop a new beginning. For people moving into the Vermont Veterans' Home it can be a time to learn new things, find new ways to express themselves, and continue to develop to their full potential, as current veterans and members at the Vermont Veterans' Home are doing everyday.