



Becky Keith, associate professor of physical therapy at Arkansas State University and Beck PRIDE Center physical therapy coordinator, conducts physical rehabilitation with disabled veterans Dustin Stinson and Shannon Doyle Reed.

Arkansas State University Program Empowers Disabled Veterans

By Jim Hall

As thousands of veterans use their Post-9/11 GI Bill education benefits to build a solid future, campuses nationwide are recognizing veterans are good students and good business.

Many colleges and universities are building programs to meet the needs of the growing veteran population on campus. One such program is the Beck PRIDE Center for America's Wounded Veterans at Arkansas State University. The center offers first class educational programs and

services to disabled veterans.

Located on the campus of Arkansas State University at Jonesboro, Ark., the center focuses on Personal Rehabilitation, Individual Development and Education (PRIDE) to help disabled veterans achieve their education goals. The center is named in honor of Buddy and Charlotte Beck of Fairfax Station, Va., who provided initial funding to their alma mater for a center to meet veterans' needs in the university setting. Among the variety of programs and services available to disabled veterans are access to the higher education experience,

resources for counseling, advocacy and financial assistance.

The DAV Charitable Service Trust awarded the center a \$37,500 grant in 2008 to provide specialized rehabilitation services, mental health counseling, educational support and additional support services for veterans injured in military service. DAV National Service Officers regularly visit the center to provide claims assistance to the veterans.

A recent article in *Military Times Edge* magazine named Arkansas State University among the top ten of 101 colleges and universities listed as best

for vets in 2010. Areas ranked to determine the best for vets rating were financial assistance, academic flexibility, campus culture and support services. The university netted five out of five stars for support services.

The Beck PRIDE Center was founded in October 2007. It is a non-profit program housed in the College of Nursing and Health Professions. The program, designed to supplement VA and other federal and state programs, is a one-stop shop for veterans to have their needs assessed and provides resources and referrals to meet those needs. The services are provided free to wounded veterans, including those with traumatic brain injury (TBI) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

The university also recently became a participant in the Yellow Ribbon Program, created by the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008. The program allows institutions of higher

learning to enter voluntarily into an agreement with VA to fund tuition and fee expenses that exceed the highest public in-state undergraduate tuition rate. The institution can contribute a specified dollar amount of those expenses and VA will match the same amount as the institution not to exceed 50 percent of the difference. This adds even greater financial aid opportunities for veterans attending the university.

Services include but are not limited to counseling veterans on their education benefits, as well as GED referral; college enrollment, financial aid and scholarships; advising, planning and tutoring; disability accommodations; a veteran work study program; student-soldier networking and advocacy; and mentoring.

Among other opportunities available is the Governor Mike Beebe Veterans Scholarship Fund. Scholarships are awarded through the Sigma Pi Educational Foundation. They are designed to fund post-secondary

The DAV Charitable Service Trust awarded the center a \$37,500 grant in 2008 to provide specialized rehabilitation services, mental health counseling, educational support and additional support services for veterans injured in military service.

Staff Sgt. Dustin Stinson (in uniform), with fellow combat-wounded veteran Shannon Doyle Reed, right, and other veterans undergo orientation on accommodation services for veterans with hearing disabilities. Stinson and Reed were injured while serving in the 875TH Arkansas National Guard Combat Engineer Battalion in Iraq.



financial assistance for wounded and disabled veterans participating in the Beck PRIDE program.

Beyond education assistance, the center provides personal rehabilitation services such as physical therapy, nutrition counseling and other health related services; mental health services, which include resources for individual, family and group counseling, substance abuse treatment resources, and other information and seminars; information about community services, veterans' benefits, employment, finance services and more; and small business development services covering a variety of veteran-entrepreneur education and training courses such as business development, financing and operations guidance.

"It behooves institutions of higher education to address the needs of returning veterans and their dependents," Beck PRIDE Center Director Susan Tonymon said. "Veterans have earned benefits to pursue higher education, and we need to deliver on it. That's what we are trying to do."

"When a veteran signs up for the program, we take on the whole family because families, spouses and children often need assistance, too," Tonymon said.

Assistance for family members can include child care, housing and individual and family counseling in an effort to help the veteran and family succeed.

But it's not all about educating the veteran. The institution also benefits from the veteran experience.

"It's so rewarding to provide veterans with education opportunities and see them pursue their passion and work to achieve it," Tonymon said. "I am most impressed by the character and drive wounded veterans have as they transition from the military to realize their post-combat career dreams. As educators, we face a challenge, too. We need to understand military culture and how to get the most out of the rich experience veterans bring to the education environment."

Since opening the center has provided opportunities and assistance for nearly 200 disabled veterans, like

Dustin Stinson.

Stinson is a staff sergeant in the Arkansas Army National 875th Combat Engineer Battalion. He suffers a hearing loss, TBI and PTSD as a result of a roadside bomb in Iraq.


"The center is awesome," Stinson said. "When I first came to the center, I had problems with depression and anger. I wasn't sure I could do this, but Ms. Tonymon put me on the right path to the resources I needed to succeed."

Stinson finished a telecommunications program last year and is currently in his freshman year at the university working toward a major in computer information technology.

"The atmosphere here at the center is very comfortable," Stinson said. "You are around other veterans and everything is geared to help you succeed. At first, I didn't think I would have the money to go to college, but they showed me how to find the resources to afford it and provided the assistance to get the paperwork to the right people."

"I'm hoping to stay out of factory work and build a productive career in an atmosphere that is PTSD friendly, and the center is helping me to get there."

Helping the veterans "get there" and achieve their education, career and life goals is what Beck PRIDE is all about.

For more information about the Beck PRIDE Center at Arkansas State University visit their Web site at www2.astate.edu/cpi/beckpride. 

Beck PRIDE Center Director Susan E. Tonymon discusses benefits with Arkansas Army National Guard Staff Sergeant Dustin Stinson at the Arkansas State University Jonesboro Campus.

