

Army To Open Rehab Center For Amputee Vets

AP) War veterans who have lost a limb will relearn tasks like shooting a weapon, driving a car or rappelling down a cliff at a new rehabilitation center opening at Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

The 31,000 square-foot facility will offer state-of-the art physical therapy and occupational therapy, sports programs, virtual reality systems and training with prosthetics to help troops regain a range of abilities, said Walter Reed spokeswoman Lori Calvillo.

It opens Thursday at the Army's hospital in northwest Washington, which has treated some 500 vets who have lost limbs or function of a limb in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Called the Military Advanced Training Center for Soldier Amputees, it is for outpatients - troops who have already completed initial rehab for their wounds while in the Walter Reed hospital.

"It's for advanced treatment - not just the person who's learning to walk again, but the person who wants to run, getting back to whatever they want to be," Calvillo said of the new facility.

Walter Reed is the flagship hospital of the Army's system of medical facilities. It has treated 501 of the 681 amputees from the Iraq and Afghan campaigns that have been treated in Army medical centers, though some received treatment at more than one location over time, the Army said.

Only a small percentage of those who have lost a limb - that is 47 people - have remained in the service, officials have said. Most serve as instructors, in desk jobs or other positions that suit their physical abilities.

No soldier who has requested to stay has been turned down, though they must work with assignment managers to find appropriate jobs.

"This is all part of taking care of our soldier, recognizing that our soldiers have the skills and experience to still serve in the Army," said Lt. Col. Kevin Arata, a spokesman for the Army's Human Resources Command. "It is also part of our warrior ethos - never leave a fallen comrade."

The Army does not track the number who have returned to the war zone, though there are a number who have returned after losing part of a hand or foot.

Among the equipment available at the center is a weapons simulator. "It's like virtual reality to teach the soldier how to shoot a weapon again. Even if they are not going back into the military, a lot of them are hunters," Calvillo said.

There's an automotive engine repair area where soldiers can work on their fine motor skills and dexterity, and climbing ropes, a climbing wall and a rappelling wall to work on overhead skills and build confidence.

The center also has treadmills, elliptical trainers and cardiovascular equipment as well as a running track and equipment to help patients work on their balance, gait and other skills.

A vehicle simulator is available to re-teach driving so patients can regain their independence said Calvillo. The center also has office space for psychologists, social workers, benefits counselors, researchers, physicians and other staff.

Patients currently move from clinic to clinic within the hospital for outpatient services and the new \$10 million center will put the services in one location.

Construction on the Military Advanced Training Center began in November but the money for it was approved in 2004 - before a national commission decided Walter Reed will be among military facilities that will be eventually closed in a base realignment. Walter Reed is slated to be closed in 2011.

Officials said the new center was designed with that in mind - that is, so that the equipment can be moved to another location.

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