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How to Have a Stand Down

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Stand Downs are one part of the Department of Veterans Affairs' efforts to provide services to homeless veterans. Stand Downs are typically one to three day events providing services to homeless Veterans such as food, shelter, clothing, health screenings, VA and Social Security benefits counseling, and referrals to a variety of other necessary services, such as housing, employment and substance abuse treatment. Stand Downs are collaborative events, coordinated between local VAs, other government agencies, and community agencies who serve the homeless."

"The first Stand Down was organized in 1988 by a group of Vietnam Veterans in San Diego. Since then, Stand Downs have been used as an effective tool in reaching out to homeless Veterans, reaching more than 200,000 Veterans and their family members between 1994-2000."

-United States Department of Veteran Affairs.

Having been the Healing Touch Volunteer Coordinator at San Diego's Stand Down for the last six years, I have attained a great deal of experience and information that I believe could be beneficial to other Healing Touch practitioners throughout the country who want to serve our homeless Veterans.

1. PLAN AHEAD and TAKE ACTION

Check to see if there will be a Stand Down in your community and when it is scheduled to be held. This information may be found by googling The United States Department of Veterans Affairs or the National Coalition of Homeless Veterans. Note that Stand Downs may be one, two or three day events. This, too, will be stated on the schedule. Also note that the schedule, at

the time of this writing, is incomplete. If your city is not listed, send an email to the listed primary point of contact.

Check in with your local Healing Touch community to learn if there is a group of practitioners already volunteering in your area. If so, connect with them. If not, call the point of contact on the Stand Down listing and inquire whether they offer Complementary and Alternative Medicine.

If they do, ask if HT may be a part of it, then organize fellow Healing Touch practitioners and students by sending out a Call to Action. If they do not have a Complementary and Alternative Medicine tent/booth, tell the point of contact that you would like to get something started. Ask for their guidance - then take action and move forward.

2. GET HELP

If you have received permission from the point of contact for the city of your choice to create an Alternative and Complementary Medicine booth or tent, begin by contacting all local massage and acupuncture schools, reflexologists and Reiki practitioners. This information also may be obtained by utilizing Google.

At the San Diego Stand Down, there are a dozen or more acupuncturists working alongside massage therapists, Reiki practitioners, Healing Touch practitioners, and a few reflexologists and shiatsu practitioners.

Within our tent, we have 15 – 30 treatment tables that are annually loaned to us from massage and acupuncture schools. Two men donate their time and large truck to pick up, deliver, set up

continued on page 23

and return them. My wish for you is to be as fortunate. Have a large supply of paper towels and spray bottles filled with masage table safe disinfectant, and/or use the large plastic containers of disposable Lysol wipes.

If you are creating a new Complementary and Alternative booth/tent, get help and delegate! Please do not take this on by yourself. Stand Downs are community events with an involvement ratio that is often two to one. People want to help and be of service. Ask! Ask! Ask!

My first Stand Down was unlike anything I had ever seen before. It affected me deeply on a multitude of levels -- physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. So much so that it was my intention to have as many HT students and practitioners as possible experience it in the years to come. It is profound and most humbling. Many calls and connections are going to need to be made. Make a list of what you want and ask for what you need. Be bold. Be confident. Ultimately, maintain your focus on the bigger picture that is unfolding – serving our homeless Veterans. San Diego's 2012 Stand Down has already been scheduled for the week-end of July 13th and I intend on sending out a Call for Captains to our HT community by early April. A Call for Captains? Let me explain.

It seems that things did not go as well as I had hoped during last year's STAND DOWN. The need for an experienced person(s), someone who has been there before and could be present and available during each and every four hour shift was made apparent. From the feedback I received, Friday and Saturday went well; Sunday did not. (See PREPARE FOR THE UNEXPECTED.)

3. WORK TOGETHER

Learn the name and contact information of the person who is in charge of the Alternative and Complementary Medicine tent. It is important to develop a good working relationship and especially important to being communicating with this person via email and telephone as early as possible. Ask how many tables will be allotted for HT. Send your Call to Action to your HT Community as early as possible so that students and practitioners can save the date.

4. PREPARE FOR THE UNEXPECTED

Knowing that I was going to be out of town the weekend of the 2011 STAND DOWN, I tried, unsuccessfully, to have someone take over the role of volunteer coordinator. When no one came forward, I went ahead and coordinated and scheduled as best I could, trying to ensure that at least one experienced person, who had been at STAND DOWN before, would be volunteering each day.

The day before the STAND DOWN, I drove down to the San Diego High School football field to get the lay of the land and to see where we would be working and if there were any changes that needed to be noted. One of the changes was that the Complementary and Alternative Medicine tent had been revamped and relocated. It went from a low ceiling, camouflaged tent with a dirt floor that faced the intense afternoon sun, to a soaring high, white pavilion-like tent on concrete and shaded from the afternoon sun by a large dental mobile. It all looked so beautiful and seemed to be a HUGE improvement.

On Sunday morning, an eager group of HT volunteers arrived -- all of them new to STAND DOWN, including their Supervisor. Turns out that what appeared to be an ideal new location the day before STAND DOWN, actually was much worse in many ways.

The large dental mobile that blocked the afternoon sun had a large generator/compressor on the back of it – the part that bordered our “healing” area. It was loud - exceptionally loud - and it leaked water. I learned that many of our practitioners were standing in water! Had I been there, I would like to believe that I would not have allowed that to happen - insisting that the tables be moved to a quieter and drier location.

In defense of the Supervisor, it is my understanding that she did express her concern to our contact person and made strong suggestions for change and improvement - to no avail. And not wanting to risk jeopardizing our HT/STAND DOWN involvement, she maintained professional boundaries and shared her frustration with me the following day.

Which is why at this year's STAND DOWN, I am planning on having at least three Captains – one for each day – who also will be responsible for organizing, scheduling, supporting,

continued on page 24

welcoming, guiding, directing and keeping track of their volunteers to ensure optimal coverage so that all goes well. I also intend on having the four of us meet with our STAND DOWN contact person --the one in charge of the Alternative and Complementary tent PRIOR to the beginning of STAND DOWN for the purpose of introduction, clarity and empowerment.

5. BE PRESENT AND OPEN YOUR HEART

Of all my experiences working with homeless Veterans, there is one that stands out from all the others. There was a man who came to my table complaining of pain in his right shoulder. I can still clearly see him in my mind's eye.

After centering, attuning to him and making a heart connection, I carried my portable, folding massage stool to a place nearest his shoulder and moved in close. Rather than offering a pain drain or a variety of other appropriate techniques, I simply placed one hand under and one hand on top of his shoulder. Then I sat there holding his shoulder, feeling the warmth building beneath my hands, while gazing at him lovingly.

No words were spoken from either of us for the longest time. The whole while, his head was turned towards me and with open eyes, he was looking back at me. It probably appeared as if we were mesmerized with each other - and I felt unable to move.

Finally, with tears in his eyes he said to me, *"This isn't about me being a man or you being a woman. This is about being human."* With tears in my eyes, I nodded in agreement. It was all so simple, yet so profound.

I know that the majority of Healing Touch techniques are offered while standing and looking down upon the client. However, if there is an opportunity to sit and connect at eye level with your client, the shift in the energy is palpable. For me it feels much more sacred and intimate.

6. TAKE BREAKS

Resist the urge to ignore the needs of your body because of long waiting lines of the needy. Remember, you are one of a multitude of healers in service at STAND DOWN. It serves no one, least of all yourself, to sacrifice your well-being in service to the cause.

There may be times when you might need to leave the tent just to walk around. There may be times when you might need to go for a walk with another practitioner to process a profound experience or to simply sit in the sun and recharge. Always be sure to let someone know of your plans. I have never felt unsafe at Stand Down; it is just a wise practice.

7. PRACTICE UNIVERSAL PRECAUTION

Years ago, I dreamt I was to create aprons to be worn by practitioners at STAND DOWNS. The idea came through so clearly in my dreams that it felt as if I was being given instructions. So I followed the energy and spent a small fortune having them made and embroidered. They looked great and were perfect in offering a readily identifiable, professional image.

After selling only a few dozen, I "heard" that it was not about the money. It was about getting them out there. Hence the journey - of the aprons crisscrossing the nation - began. If a practitioner needs them for an upcoming event, they are shipped to her/him at the expense of the person who last used them -- washed and repackaged. And so it goes.

In addition to serving as a bit of a protective barrier, they also have pockets in the front that are ideal for holding hand sanitizers. Hand washing cannot be emphasized enough. At the last STAND DOWN, many practitioners wore latex gloves. Soap and water are available at either end of a row of port-a-potties. From an energetic perspective, it is recommended to wash to your elbows -- clearing and cleansing.

In addition, if you think you may be effected by strong scents, you may want to place a drop of lavender oil under your nose.

8. DEBRIEF

Know that you are not just offering Healing Touch. You are offering a warm and loving presence, along with an open and compassionate heart, and an attentive and non-judgmental ear. Put together - it is a powerful and potent package.

Clients may feel safe sharing their stories with you, and there is a strong possibility that you are going to hear stories of great pain and suffering. Please do not try to fix or change your client. If your client becomes moved and starts to emote on the table, let them. Offering tissues to someone who is crying sends

continued on page 25

messages that it is too much for you to handle, that it is making you uncomfortable, and that you would prefer that they stop. Know that tears are considered liquid gold and evidence that healing is happening.

If you have not read THE INVITATION by Oriah Mountain Dreamer, go online and read it. It is a powerful poem that references being unable to sit with someone in their pain, until you are able to sit in your own. Journal, grieve - keep letting go and become a clearer vessel of healing.

In San Diego, HT students Level 1 and up are welcomed to serve. For many who have only recently stepped on the path of the healer, they may encounter a situation for which they are unprepared to handle emotionally. Feedback from last year strongly suggested the need for a debriefing session at the end of the weekend for those participants who need to share and process their experiences.

9. VISUALIZE

I am currently in Ohio, providing care to my 89-year old mother. After she read what I have written, she said, "*My goodness honey, these STAND DOWNS sound like a lot of work for just one weekend*".

They are and it all seems so crazy to me. For one weekend out of the year, homeless veterans are helped in a multitude of ways. Then what? What about the other 51 weekends of the year?

It is my understanding that there are over 300 federally owned golf-courses throughout the United States (four in San Diego alone.) What a perfect place for healing -- a winning combination of beauty, nature and quiet.

Transforming military golf courses into healing centers and permanent Stand Downs would be unlike anything that has ever been done before. It would send a powerful message to both the veterans, as well as, the parents and loved ones of those who have served, that the military cares. It cares so much that it has come up with something so innovative and so outside the box, all in an effort to help heal the wounds of war and restore to wholeness shattered families and lives.

These Healing Centers/permanent Stand Downs would address

the multi-layered needs of both our homeless veterans and our returning troops, including those experiencing PTSD, psychological, emotional and spiritual trauma, and drug and alcohol abuse issues.

Furthermore, these Healing Centers/permanent Stand Downs could be self-sustaining, complete with solar energy, green houses, organic gardens - maybe even free-range chickens and goats! Every tried and true Alternative and Complementary Healing Modality would be readily available. I could go on - the possibilities are boundless. Can you imagine such places?

On behalf of all our homeless Veterans, as well as, those Veterans returning from war and in need of support and healing, I truly hope so.

About the author:



Carole Sarian recently completed her first novel, *Living with Lottie* which delves into the daily dramas of dementia. She is a Special Education Teacher and Healing Touch Certified Practitioner currently in teacher training with visions of teaching

Healing Touch to women in prisons, to Hospice volunteers, and to parents and staff of children with special needs.

In addition to being the San Diego trainer for The Twilight Brigade/Compassion in Action, she is also a Certified Grief© Specialist, a Certified Integrative Breathwork Practitioner in the Eupsychia Process, and a practicing Zen Buddhist married to a Zen Buddhist priest and Hospice Chaplain, with shared fantasies of traveling the country together on their Harley offering trainings, lectures, and book signings. She also offers Healing Touch and Massage at a Day Spa in Del Mar, CA.