



## Physician to Physician: Caring for Our Veterans

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Our family of hospice care providers is proud to say we honor our veterans 365 days a year. Veterans make up a significant portion of our hospice population and understanding the particular needs of these heroes improves the care we can provide for them. “Thank you for your service” is a default phrase used by many, and we replace and supplement that phrase with action.

We Honor Veterans (WHV) is a nationwide, independent program dedicated to recognizing veterans and improving their end-of-life care. This program has a tiered set of standards ranging from Level 1 to Level 5, with more than 91% of our hospice agencies participating. Over 90 of our branches have attained Level 3, meaning they go beyond providing ‘veteran-centric’ education and organizational capacity, and develop and strengthen relationships with veteran and other organizations. Another 60 branches have achieved Level 4 by demonstrating their commitment to increase access and further improve quality of care for veterans. Eight of our branches have been accredited with the new WHV Level 5 designation, indicating the most rigorous level of commitment that few have achieved.

Why is this important? With a few exceptions, veterans experience the same array of diseases and conditions leading to death as do others. However, because of their military training and experience, how veterans face and undergo their disease trajectory is often different. As one expert puts it, “Failure to understand the nature of suffering can result in a medical intervention that, though technically adequate, not only fails to relieve suffering, but becomes a source of suffering itself.”

Where veterans are in their end-of-life experience and how they proceed through these last months of life is often governed by the era in which they served. World War II veterans are now the oldest group we encounter – a group that is rapidly dwindling in numbers, meaning there is no longer appreciable support from peers. Korean War veterans are often underrecognized,

but have unique experiences complicating their care. Vietnam veterans were largely ignored or ostracized for their service leading to complicated relationships with others, as well as the healthcare system. While Gulf War and recent veterans are more accepted, they are relatively young with their own distinctive issues. All veterans are at significant risk for post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, and substance use disorders.

Recognizing veterans for their service can significantly lessen suffering. Such acknowledgement can range from a pinning ceremony that can be performed for any veteran, to Honor Flights, in which the veteran is flown to a gathering of contemporaries to meet together. Our organization recently instituted The Final Salute, where the veteran leaves one’s home for the final time under the US Flag for which he or she served. We are also implementing specific training on Soul Injury – another condition that, if not addressed, significantly complicates the suffering of dying veterans.

This article lacks the space for a full discussion of this wide-ranging and important topic, but such material is the core of the We Honor Veterans training. We are proud to be part of this very important program, and are committed to provide well-deserved recognition of our veterans while improving their care during their last journey in life.

**Questions about the *We Honor Veterans* program or our compassionate, veteran-centric hospice care? We are here.**