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David Booth, left, president and founder of Combat Veterans to Careers, and Sandee Richmond, operations manager with the organization, have partnered with Take a Knee Foundation and Emerald Medical to bring Operation Field Trip to the area. The program is designed to provide veterans and first responders with mental-health treatments of ketamine therapy and counseling.

Veterans Nonprofit Offers New Therapy Program

New partnership helps support area veterans' and first responders' mental health.

By VERONICA WERNICKE
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Every time Lou Nicosia goes to sleep, an 8-millimeter film plays in slow motion in his head.

It replays memories of his time serving in the Vietnam War at only 18 years old.

"I was a door gunner on a helicopter, and it really affected me,"

said Nicosia, of the Village of Fenney. "You don't realize how it affects you. It's like a slow disease, and it doesn't get better."

He was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder in 1993, but it wasn't until starting Combat Veterans to Careers new program, Operation Field Trip, that he and his wife saw a positive change.

Combat Veterans to Careers, Take a Knee Foundation and Emerald Medical recently

partnered to offer a free program for veterans and first responders dealing with PTSD, anxiety and depression.

Operation Field Trip provides veterans and first responders with ketamine injections combined with mental health therapy, said David Booth, president and founder of Combat Veterans to Careers.

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"This innovative program is designed to address the mental health challenges faced by many veterans," said Sandee Richmond, operations manager for Combat Veterans to Careers.

Emerald Medical administers the treatment, Combat Veterans to Careers provides the location and funding for veterans and Take a Knee Foundation provides the funding for first responders.

"If you thought of it like anxiety, depression and PTSD were a fire and you had to put a fire out, you can go get a garden hose or a fire extinguisher," said Kris Hasenauer, a physician assistant and CEO of Emerald Medical. "Ketamine is like one of those planes that picks up water and drops it. It gives us a massive, very quick, very substantial improvement and really beneficial place to work from."

Emerald Medical staff provide treatment, including a 45-minute ketamine injection, followed by a 10- to 15-minute recuperation time. Then they schedule online therapy sessions. The sessions take place before the first ketamine injection and between each session, Hasenauer said.

Over the course of six treatments, ketamine builds in the body, and the results can last for months or even up to a year, Booth said.

Ketamine enhances the brain's neuroplasticity to allow it to reorganize itself and form new neural connections, helping the brain break free from thought patterns.

It also has a short term but very significant antidepressant effect, Hasenauer said.

"When you take somebody say at rock bottom or you're really just a shell, instead of dragging you up the mountain to get you out of the hole that you're in, we can take you and use this process like an elevator and lift you up," said Hasenauer. "Then we work on keeping you up there. It's a very powerful tool, and when it's used appropriately it has phenomenal results."

Operation Field Trip treatment rooms are set up in trailers next to the Combat Veterans to Careers office space in Wildwood, and they can treat four people at a time. They chose trailers so they can be moved in case they need to deploy in an emergency, Booth said.

Outside of the treatment sites, an area with chairs is set up where many patients end up sitting and talking with others as a natural peer support system, Booth said.

Emerald Medical has offered ketamine therapy for the last five years and saw this new partnership with Combat Veterans to Careers as an opportunity to expand its reach and treatment availability, said Hasenauer, a former U.S. Special Forces A-Team Member medical specialist.

Ketamine is a U.S. Food and Drug Administration-approved drug that has been used as an anesthetic, for pain relief, for treatment of depression and more, according to the National Library of Medicine.

In 2008 U.S. Special Operations Command started using it for pain control, Hasenauer said.

"We found that guys who got



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The seating area outside the trailers for Operation Field Trip. Combat Veterans to Careers partnered with Take a Knee Foundation and Emerald Medical to bring the program to the area. It is designed to provide veterans and first responders with mental health treatments of ketamine therapy and counseling.

ketamine for an injury didn't have such significant trauma like PTSD," Hasenauer said.

When combined, ketamine-assisted therapy and mental health therapy have shown quick and lasting results for people dealing with trauma-related mental health conditions, Booth said.

In a recent study by the University of Michigan and the VA Ann Arbor Healthcare System, nearly half of 215 veterans who received IV ketamine at VA hospitals saw a decrease in depression scores after six weeks of infusions.

Booth, a retired U.S. Army master sergeant, has gone through the treatment, and he and those around him have noticed a difference in

attitude and mannerisms.

He said he's dealt with mental health issues since being discharged after he was injured by a roadside bomb while serving in Iraq.

"(This treatment is) a game-changer in life," Booth said. "It helps every aspect of your life. This helps give my brain a break."

He's noticed that he's calmer and more relaxed and it has helped not let his anxieties and triggers get the best of him.

"You just feel free," Booth said.

Since May, Combat Veterans to Careers has offered sessions every other Saturday, with the next session taking place July 5.

So far, more than 30 veterans have participated in

the program, Booth said.

Nicosia is one of those veterans. He started his treatment in May.

The U.S. Army veteran served with an aviation unit during the Vietnam War. After the war, he said he dealt with a slew of issues but didn't realize he had PTSD until his diagnosis in 1993.

It took him getting into a big fight to realize he needed help, he said.

"I have PTSD really bad," Nicosia said. "I can't sleep. I was very angry and I flew off the handle quickly, and this had been going on for years."

After his diagnosis, he tried to treat his PTSD with medications from the VA, group therapy and other methods, but none of it really helped.

Then after hearing Booth

and other veterans talk about the impact ketamine injections and counseling sessions were having, he thought he should give it a try.

Now, only after two treatments, his wife, Phyllis, has noticed a change. Nicosia said they argue less, and she has told him he seems more relaxed.

"God bless David (Booth) for putting this together," Nicosia said. "It's starting to work for me, and I have to help my fellow veterans."

Each round of treatment costs about \$500, a series of six treatments is recommended, totaling about \$3,000 per participant. The entire cost is covered through Operation Field Trip.

Because the treatment isn't covered by insurance, Hasenauer said it's important that Combat Veterans to Careers offers this program for free for people who may not otherwise get a chance to try it.

The organization is looking for donations and program sponsors to help support veterans and first responders who would like to participate in this program.

To learn more about Operation Field Trip, email CombatVeteransToCareers@gmail.com or call 352-775-4008. To make a donation or apply for treatment, fill out the application at combatveteranstocareers.org/operation-field-trip.

"This program offers a unique and potentially life-changing approach to mental wellness for our veterans," Richmond said.

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