

New program to help veterans

VetCorps VISTA plans to compile veterans' benefits

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Durham has been named as one of 12 cities that will pilot a new federal program that supports returning veterans and their families.

VetCorps VISTA will be implemented through Durham Together for Resilient Youth (Durham TRY) under its co-founder, Wanda Boone, starting March 12.

Durham is the only North Carolina city to have VetCorps VISTA. By the end of the year, it will expand to 100 cities across the country.

"They thought that the best place for this program was in community coalitions across the U.S. because there was already a support structure in place," Boone said.

The program is organized by Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America and the National Guard Bureau's Prevention, Treatment and Outreach program, and funded in part by the Corporation for National Community Service.

"Coalitions are best because we already by nature of being coalitions have individuals that are instruments of change. The needs of the veterans can be met more readily in coalitions," Boone said.

VetCorps VISTA will identify services that currently exist in Durham for veterans, creating a comprehensive catalogue of resources.

"We will not reinvent the wheel, but we'll try to help publicize any and all providers of assistance in Durham," Boone said.

Boone is in the process of hiring a veteran's liaison "who understands the veteran language and culture" to work with her to implement the program and "draw out individuals who aren't having their needs met."

VetCorps VISTA will work with the Chamber of Commerce, Veterans Services, the Durham Veterans Affairs Medical Center and others to identify all services available for veterans.

For example, the medical center has a wealth of programs for veterans besides health care. There are special programs for veterans of Operations Enduring Freedom, Iraqi Freedom and



Wanda Boone, co-founder of Durham TRY, will head the new VetCorps VISTA program. (Staff photo by Laura Medlin)

New Dawn to connect them to appropriate health and community resources and help them reintegrate into civilian life, said Peter Tillman, public affairs officer.

VetCorps VISTA will help perform specific outreach to returning veterans, such as access to health care, counseling, support groups and employment.

Veterans will also be able to receive career training and polish their resumes. "Veterans have terrific skills, but sometimes those skills need to be translated into a language that employers understand," Boone said.

Boone had already formed a committee for meeting veterans' needs in Durham when she was asked to head VetCorps VISTA.

In September 2011, Boone held a meeting for people and organizations that were committed to helping veterans and military families, including clergy, state government officials, veterans, health care providers and VA Hospital staff. Boone's goal was to create a broad community awareness campaign and help address the stigma some veterans have of not fitting in.

The state director for substance abuse prevention was at the meeting. When she heard about VetCorps VISTA, she nominated Durham TRY to be part of the first round.

This program is needed, Boone said, because substance abuse, depression,

suicide and divorce rates are much more common in veterans than in the general population.

However, Boone also has a personal stake in helping veterans: Her husband is a veteran. Her father, brother and many of her friends are as well.

"There was no help for my husband when he came from Vietnam," she said. She wants to change that, but the task will not be easy.

There are 16,900 veterans in Durham, Boone said. One-fifth of the homeless are veterans. Three-quarters of veterans experience alcohol, drug or mental health problems. More than half have experienced "clinically serious stress reaction symptoms," including post-traumatic stress disorder.

Boone hopes that VetCorps VISTA will help individuals who are not having their needs met.

Boone said that some veterans feel stigmatized by going to a veteran's hospital for help because they do not want to be seen as weak or do not want to be identified as a veteran. If veterans do not feel comfortable going to the medical center, VetCorps VISTA will be able to direct them to another service provider, though Boone acknowledged the need to change veterans' perceptions.

"We need to help turn that stigma," Boone said. "I think that the community needs to be made more aware to the issues affecting veterans."