

Veterans may lose support center

Next Level Outreach Campus helps veterans in a variety of ways, but the center may close if it does not receive enough money in the coming months.



Staff photo by Brian Fanney

Captain Newborn, executive director of Next Level Veterans Outreach Campus, holds an exploded shell that took of the leg of a local veteran. Many veterans come to the center for health care, mental health counseling and comraderie.

By Brian Fanney
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One wrong move and Boyd Jones, Jr. might not have made it.

He's still here, but the effects of digging up land mines at Fort Bragg remain with him.

"They were constantly telling me, 'Jones, don't hit your shovel with any metal,'" he said. "I never did, and I guess that's why I'm here."

Jones suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder. He goes to Next Level Veterans Outreach Campus regularly to commiserate with his fellow service members and receive help from a dedicated staff.

He's not the only one. More than

1,000 veterans have come to the center since it opened in August 2012.

But Captain Newborn, executive director, said he will be forced to close Next Level and end services for veterans like Jones unless he receives enough money in the next month or two.

"They get unconditional acceptance here. We want them here," Newborn said. "As a community, we have to uphold the military covenant. The military covenant is the nation's promise — the nation's promise — to serve and look after those who risked their lives to protect our freedom."

'A place of their own'

Next Level is run out of a converted

school gymnasium at 1107 Holloway St. in Durham. With high ceilings, dozens of uniforms hanging on each wall and plenty of computers for use, the center helps veterans in need.

The center took about \$350,000 to start to bring the building up to code and hire a professional staff. All of the money came from Newborn and his sister.

"I do believe in following the voice of God. I fought it at first because how am I going to pay for all this?" Newborn said. "But God won. I did it for the right reasons because there is no money in this."

All of Next Level's services are free. Newborn does not receive salary.

He said PNC Bank gives him a small amount of money to run the center, but

it will cost hundreds of thousands more to keep it open. The center needs about \$800,000 to run the center like he wants, but he said could cut the budget to half that, if needed.

"A professional staff requires professional salaries," he said. "We believe in what we're doing, and now the community needs to step up and support this center."

Prior to running Next Level, Newborn ran a mental health clinic. He said he made a good living and it was hard to leave his lifestyle behind, but statistics regarding the veteran population moved him to start Next Level.

About 18 veterans take their lives each day, according to a study by the Department of Veterans Affairs.

"Every day someone's shooting at you," Newborn said. "Every day people are being blown up. It does something to the brain. It battle scars the brain."

Next Level reflects Newborn's commitment to mental health with post-traumatic stress disorder treatment and mental health counseling. The center also houses computers, a health care clinic and unique therapies, like deep-sea fishing, for the veterans.

He said the fishing trips help to replace bad memories with something more pleasant — a form of therapy that's proven effective.

With more money, Newborn said he would add emergency housing, a women's center and a museum to the center.

"They don't need to be going to homeless shelters and rescue missions," Newborn said. "They need a place of their own and that's why we've done this."

Fighting for benefits

At the center, the veterans joke about their kids, discuss their wives and quietly talk about memories that civilians may not understand.

Jones, who dug up land mines, spent 21 consecutive years in the North Carolina National Guard. However, the Department of Veterans Affairs has no record of him and says it cannot help.

"I'm a veteran and they kicked me to

the curb," he said. "One little tap and I would have been an angel now."

His story is not uncommon at Next Level. That's why James R. Alston, a retired army veteran who served from 1968 to 1969 in Vietnam, helps veterans at the center file medical claims with the VA.

"It's not a gimmick, and the VA doesn't have money just to give out, but if you can show them in a reasonable sense, those are the kind of claims that I enjoy working on," he said. "All I have to do is just help veterans and coming to this center has been a real inspiring part of my life."

Alston said the key to filing a successful claim with the VA is documenting disabilities that are connected to service. He taught himself the system while fighting for his own disability.

The fight often takes years.

Gretchel N. Carter-Hinton has fought to receive the disability payments that her husband applied for since his death on Sept. 23, 2010.

"My husband was in the Navy for over 21 years. He went around the world — the world —

five times. He went to D.C. and was honored at the White House," she said. "They denied his claim on the day that he died. He never knew that he was denied."

Carter-Hinton, like many of the veterans at the center, is frustrated by the VA but finds comfort within the center's community.

"I felt alone these last three years," she said. "But everyone I met here has been so gracious. I feel like I have a renewed family again."

'It keeps me going'

Veteran Anthony Taylor is blind and uses a motorized wheelchair because he can't walk. He has diabetes and stomach and prostate issues, among

other problems.

"I try to make sure I come here and get involved," he said. "It keeps me going."

It takes him an hour and half to get to the center from Harnett County.

Though he served in Vietnam and Okinawa, Taylor said toxic waters at Camp Lejeune caused his ailments.

Though Congress authorized care for the veterans and families who had spent more than 30 days at Lejeune, many veterans were denied care.

"The VA was put in charge of trying to take care of veterans and they are not doing what President Obama signed into law," Taylor said.

He is helping to organize a rally for victims in Washington, D.C., as a member of the Senior Veterans Council — an organization that Next Level houses.

"Until they see action in DC, they aren't going to do anything," Taylor said. "The rallying point is getting all the veterans together from the whole state."

Newborn said cases like Taylor's break his heart.

"We have people who come here in wheelchairs with fourth stage cancer

and still have that gleam of hope," he said. "They know they're going to die, but they want the help for their families."

The group's last meeting at the meeting

saw almost 40 people in attendance.

"I don't have an outlet to come to because I'm blind and I'm crippled," Taylor said. "I come here for fellowship with other veterans with similar problems."

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-Captain Newborn

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To learn more about Next Level Outreach Campus visit:

<http://www.nextlevelvets.com>

To learn more veterans health and disability claims visit:

<http://www.va.gov>