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MEDIA CONTACT

Hallie Sheade, Ph.D.

S.T.E.P.S. With Horses

hallie@stepswithhorses.org

682-703-0794

North Texas Nonprofit Offers Mental Health Services Using Horses
Focus On Military Members, At-Risk Youth

Nov. 6, 2017 – Fort Worth, Texas – A new nonprofit organization called S.T.E.P.S. With Horses (STEPS) is pairing horses with active and veteran military service members and their families, at-risk youth and others with mental health concerns as a ground-breaking step to long-term healing.

STEPS was created in 2017 by husband-and-wife team Hallie Sheade, Ph.D., LPC and Paul Ziehe (Marine Corps Veteran) in order to better meet a growing need for an alternative form of mental health therapy through equine-assisted activities and therapies, including counseling and psychotherapy, therapeutic activities, education, and community engagement.

Sheade, a licensed professional counselor and registered play therapist, earned her doctorate in counseling at the University of North Texas, where she pioneered two equine-assisted counseling models. In 2014, she founded her Cleburne-based private practice, Equine Connection Counseling, which specializes in providing counseling and psychotherapy to veterans (and their families) and at-risk youth through interaction with horses. To date, ECC has provided more than 3,800 hours of individual counseling to more than 200 clients.

Horses can be very beneficial as counseling partners, Sheade says. The horse's presence in the session helps clients to feel more relaxed and less intimidated by the counseling process.

“For many people coming to counseling for mental health struggles, the idea of seeking help can feel pretty scary and overwhelming,” Sheade said. “The majority of the people who have come to us for equine-assisted counseling tend to be people who have avoided office-based counseling or who have been dissatisfied with the results of office-based counseling. These clients come to us because they're looking for something different. For many people, participating in counseling in a tranquil, outdoor environment puts them at ease.”

Sheade noticed that many of her clients were reluctant to end services once treatment goals had been met because they didn't want to lose the connection with the horse. Many of them experienced a relapse after termination of services. That's when Sheade developed the Spectrum of Therapeutic Equine-Partnered Services ([S.T.E.P.S.](#)) model. This approach provides multiple levels of mental health care treatment and post-treatment support at one location.

After completing counseling, clients can continue their relationship with the horse by participating in supportive activities designed to help them build upon the progress and skills achieved during counseling. They can become active members of a horse community through

which they can deepen their relationship with horses while also connecting with other people who share similar interests and experiences.

“The STEPS model is a revolutionary, one-of-a-kind approach to mental health treatment and ongoing wellness after treatment has ended,” Sheade said. “The driving force behind the model was to offer a spectrum of services to not only help clients to get better but also to support them in staying better.”

The STEPS approach is a great fit for veterans, says Ziehe. A native of Fort Worth, Ziehe is a veteran of the United States Marine Corps. He enlisted in 1996 and rose to the rank of sergeant. He was deployed in 2003 in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom and again in 2004 in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom II. He was honorably discharged in 2005, and began his horse adventure two years later. In 2010 he became certified by PATH International as a riding instructor with a focus on veterans helping veterans.

As many as 30 percent of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans suffer from posttraumatic stress, depression or traumatic brain injury, according to Ziehe and Sheade. Veterans commit suicide at an alarming rate of 22 each day. Many of these individuals go untreated, avoid traditional therapies or drop out of treatment prematurely, Ziehe says, “due to the stigma, and sometimes discomfort, associated with seeing a ‘shrink.’”

“This is a group of people, after all, who are highly self-reliant and trained to overcome their challenges on their own,” Ziehe said. “The STEPS model takes the counseling out of the office and into the pasture, thereby creating an environment that feels less clinical, even though clinical therapy is still being conducted. They don’t feel like they’re going to see their counselor – they’re going to see their horse.”

Veteran John Halpin is a former ECC client who didn’t want to give up his seeing his horse, a Belgian named Marshall. Halpin retired from the Marine Corps in 2009 after serving almost 25 years, with the final rank of sergeant major. He was deployed in 1991 in support of Operation Desert Storm, and served three tours in Iraq and one tour in Afghanistan.

“I didn’t come to grips with some of the things I saw in combat and with the Corps in general,” Halpin said. “I started the groundwork with Hallie and picked the horse. He and I just bonded. The comfort and bond with the horse has a calming effect for me. It helps me to forget. It grounds me and helps me out in my daily life. It’s closed the loop for me.”

Halpin is now helping work with children at a therapeutic riding center and also rides occasionally with other veterans.

“There are a lot of veterans out there who won’t ask for help and who won’t take the step. They need to know about equine therapy and this program,” Halpin said. “I can’t say enough about the program. I’m excited to be part of it.”

Sheade and Ziehe started S.T.E.P.S. With Horses to expand the work that ECC’s already done and create a comprehensive equine-assisted outpatient mental health treatment program. The vision is to create a mental health facility exclusively devoted to equine-assisted mental therapies

and to provide on-going post-treatment support. The goal is to provide financial assistance and scholarships through grants and tax-exempt donations for these vulnerable populations and to expand programming to provide supportive services to assist clients in maintaining positive mental health and reduce risk of relapse.

“The goal is to not only help people to get better, but to stay better,” Ziehe said.

Among the many equine-assisted therapeutic facilities in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, ECC has been one of only very few providing mental health support with a licensed professional counselor. The primary focus of most other facilities is group therapeutic riding – not individual counseling, according to Ziehe and Sheade.

“None of these facilities offers the structured continuity of care provided by STEPS through its innovative model,” Sheade said. In addition, ECC has been the only program to provide Equine-Partnered Play Therapy for young children, she said.

ECC is currently operating at Wings of Hope Equitherapy, a nonprofit located in Cleburne that provides equine-assisted activities for people with disabilities and health conditions. Once STEPS has established a home at its own location, operations will be transferred from ECC to STEPS.

Due to a growing waiting list for ECC’s services, the need for expansion is clear. STEPS’ intend is to expand and grow the work that ECC has been doing by reaching more clients and offering a wider array of therapeutic services. The nonprofit recently launched a capital campaign to raise \$1.2 million in order to acquire land and facilities, complete any needed renovations, and purchase equipment necessary for equine-assisted therapies/activities and long-term mental health support. The most immediate need is to find a location for a new home. STEPS is looking to identify potential partners who would be interested in helping to acquire and/or work out an arrangement that would allow the nonprofit to use land and facilities.

The organization is also seeking donations to continue providing free equine-assisted counseling services for military service members and their family members through its partner, Equine Connection Counseling, until a location is established. At that point, donations of horses, any breed and size that are suitable for counseling and eventually therapeutic activities such as riding will be welcome.

After establishing STEPS in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, Sheade and Ziehe hope to replicate the model to create additional locations.

“What we’ve done, through the STEPS model, is create opportunities for clients to maintain and deepen their relationships with horses while simultaneously building upon progress and skills achieved in counseling, become a part of a new community made of others with shared interests and experiences, and begin to give back to others, both human and horse,” Sheade said. “We strive to support clients in becoming a part of a new community – the horses’ community – whether that is here in our STEPS community or eventually out in the greater horse community outside of STEPS.”

For more information, please visit stepswithhorses.org.

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ABOUT S.T.E.P.S. WITH HORSES

Based in Fort Worth, Texas, S.T.E.P.S. With Horses is a nonprofit organization established in 2017 to improve the mental health and well-being of military service members and their families, at-risk youth, and others with mental health needs through equine-assisted activities and therapies, including counseling and psychotherapy, therapeutic activities, education, and community engagement. The nonprofit's one-of-a-kind Spectrum of Therapeutic Equine-Partnered Services (S.T.E.P.S.) model provides multiple levels of mental health care treatment and post-treatment at one location to promote positive, long-term mental health for clients. Founded by husband-and-wife PATH-certified equine specialists Hallie Sheade, Ph.D., LPC, and Paul Ziehe, S.T.E.P.S. With Horses partners with Sheade's private practice, Equine Connection Counseling, which specializes in providing equine-assisted counseling and psychotherapy to veterans and their family members and at-risk youth.

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