



# Illinois Department of Natural Resources

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Pat Quinn, Governor  
Marc Miller, Director

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## **IDNR Partners With Marion VA Medical Center to Provide Equine Therapy for Veterans**

### *Pilot Project at Giant City State Park Part of Two-Year Agreement*

SPRINGFIELD - The Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) is launching a two-year pilot project with the Marion Veterans Affairs (VA) Medical Center to offer equine therapy for armed forces veterans at Giant City State Park in Makanda. The medical center will refer veterans, as appropriate, living with post-traumatic stress syndrome or other mental health issues to Giant City State Park's Equine Therapy Program.

"Our State Parks are an integral part of the Illinois communities they serve, providing recreational opportunities, fostering an ethic of stewardship, and educating the public about our natural resources," said IDNR Director Marc Miller. "We're also dedicated to ensuring our programs and services allow everyone to benefit, including veterans and persons with disabilities."

"We are thankful to share this innovative program with our community partners. The ability to offer alternative therapies, including Equine Therapy, is encouraged by VA. My expectations are high for veteran recovery utilizing this program," said Marion VA Medical Center Director Don Hutson.

The equine therapy program is being operated by not-for-profit Specialized Equine Services (SES) which already provides similar services at Giant City State Park. More than 25 horses, ponies and mules, will participate in the pilot project which began on January 1<sup>st</sup>.

"Specialized Equine Services is very excited to have the support of the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, the Illinois VA Medical Center and the Illinois Conservation Foundation," said Patricia Nardini, President and Co-Founder of SES. "The healing power of horses is so incredible and their emotional intelligence is beyond our imagination. It is our goal to reach more people who would benefit from working and interacting with our horses like Tootsie, Rocky, Whisper and Snowflake."

“We are grateful to the Illinois Department of Natural Resources and the Marion VA Medical Center for their efforts to have this program begin in 2015,” said Rodrigo Garcia, Acting Director, Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs. “Programs that directly benefit and serve our Illinois veterans - especially those that help our veterans with tools, services, and skills they need - are always welcome. We hope eligible veterans will reach out and take advantage of this, and other programs.”

Funding for veteran therapy sessions will be provided by The Marion VA Medical Center while the IDNR will provide up to \$2,000 per year to pay for SES's annual training required to remain certified in equine therapy. The investment in this certification will enable Specialized Equine Services to provide equine therapy for both veterans and other individuals living with psychological, neurological and physical conditions.

“The staff at Giant City Stables is exceptional and privacy and personal accommodations are of the utmost importance. I personally recommend to every veteran to at least give it a shot,” said former U.S. Army Sergeant Aaron Gajowiak.

The Illinois Conservation Foundation (ICF) will provide up to \$2,000 per year to fund SES's travel and lodging costs for associated training.

“The Illinois Conservation Foundation is proud to help fund this worthwhile program that provides help for those that fight for our freedom every day,” said ICF Executive Director Eric Schmidt.

**About the Marion VA Medical Center:**

The VA Medical Center in Marion, Illinois, provides care to 43,722 veterans annually in 27 counties in Southern Illinois, 8 counties in Southwestern Indiana, and 17 counties in Northwest Kentucky. The medical center is a general medical and surgical facility that operates 55 acute care beds, a 60 bed Community Living Center and a 14 bed residential treatment facility. A Health Care Center is located in Evansville, Indiana that provides outpatient primary care, behavioral medicine, surgery, dental and other services; and ten Outpatient Clinics that provide primary care and behavioral medicine services are located in Harrisburg; Marion; Carbondale; Effingham; and Mt. Vernon, IL; Paducah; Hanson; Owensboro; and Mayfield, Kentucky; and Vincennes Indiana.

**About Specialized Equine Services and Therapeutic Riding, Inc.:**

The mission of Specialized Equine Services is to provide exceptional equine based therapeutic services, through trained accredited and dedicated professionals and volunteers, improving the quality of life for those in Southern Illinois. Specialized Equine Services is a 501(c) 3 non-profit corporation, helping children, adults and veterans with psychological, neurological and physical conditions such as Down syndrome, MS, CP, Autism, Brain Injury, PTSD, Stroke and Cancer. For more information on equine services at Giant City State Park visit: [www.SESTherapeuticRiding.com](http://www.SESTherapeuticRiding.com) or [www.facebook.com/specializedequineservices](https://www.facebook.com/specializedequineservices), call us at 618-529-4110 or visit the facility at 722 Giant City Road, Makanda, IL 62958.

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