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## **Watertown VA Outpatient Clinic to accept applications for caregiver support**

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Caregivers need caregivers,  
too.



That is the message the Department of Veterans Affairs wants to get out to North Country residents who are caregivers for veterans.

“The VA realizes they’re out there, walking side-by-side with veterans,” said Cheryl M. Cox, the VA’s Syracuse-area caregiver support coordinator. “I think a lot of people don’t know there are programs and services to help with what the caregivers face.”

Ms. Cox said for some time, the VA has offered basic caregiver support services, including home health aides, respite care and adult day care. The new caregiver support program, however, is an enhanced version for caregivers of veterans who were injured on or after Sept. 11, 2001. Benefits of the enhanced program include a monthly stipend, mental health services and access to health insurance if they do not already have coverage.

For the caregiver to receive any help, Ms. Cox said the veteran being cared for must be enrolled with the VA.

Although the enhanced program was unveiled this summer, she said, few participants have signed up for the program throughout the greater Fort Drum area.

Brian E. and Michelle N. Wells, Watertown, were one of the first caregiver-veteran couples to enroll in the enhanced program.

Mrs. Wells has been her husband's caregiver for six years, after Mr. Wells was shot in the back of the head by a sniper while on a deployment in Iraq in April 2005. Before that, he had completed a tour in Iraq and one in Kosovo.

The former 10th Mountain Division infantryman is now medically retired. He has a traumatic brain injury and as an effect, struggles with basic functions on the left side of his body and has trouble remembering to complete tasks. After he was shot, he couldn't speak, eat, walk, or do many other daily activities by himself. He had to relearn nearly everything, Mrs. Wells said.

"He wasn't supposed to be here, but by the grace of God he is," she said.

Mr. Wells said he has been working on improving his speech and memory. While his injuries may improve, they'll never go away.

His wife helps take care of him around the clock to make sure any small incident doesn't turn into something major, such as leaving the stove on for hours, having a seizure, or falling, among other potential dangers.

"At times it's been 24/7, especially at the beginning," Mrs. Wells said. "He was in a wheelchair when he first came home. He couldn't hold a glass of water on his own, and I have to do his medications now in the morning and night. With his short-term memory it gets too complicated."

She does not work, as her husband's traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress disorder diagnosis still affect him. Being out of work, Mrs. Wells said the government's caregiver monthly stipend helps alleviate financial stress. She said she is most thankful for her questions and concerns being heard and answered. She has yet to use the respite care services, but said she plans to in the future.

Mr. Wells served his country for seven years, but had hoped to make his service a 20-year career.

Thankful for the support his wife receives through the program, Mr. Wells said other spouses of injured veterans should at least call the VA to inquire about the program.

"There are a lot of wives whose husbands are wounded or hurt as much as me," he said. "They have to take care of their kids and husbands. This makes them feel better too. People know they're doing something to take care of their family. I say all the time I'd be dead without her. I don't know what I'd do without Michelle."

To learn more about VA caregiver programs, call Ms. Cox at 425-4682.

Photo: Brian E. Wells and his wife and caregiver, Michelle N. Wells, stand in the doorway of the Veterans Affairs Clinic in Watertown. By Justin Sorensen