

# AllenForce treats veterans with therapeutic recreation

By Jessie Molloy

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AllenForce founder and CEO Donna Rielage speaks at a class at the Plainfield Township Community Center on Thursday, Oct. 12, 2023 in Plainfield. (Gary Middendorf/Gary Middendorf)

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Plainfield — When most people think of therapy, their minds might not immediately jump to outdoor recreation, but that’s one of the many techniques used by Plainfield-based AllenForce to assist veterans who are dealing with physical and psychological disabilities.

The process is called “therapeutic recreation,” and it’s a critical component of the whole health approach taken by AllenForce to help veterans overcome physical injuries and mental health issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder, in addition to the challenges of adjusting to life outside the military.

“Therapeutic recreation is so important because it deals with individuals on a holistic level,” said AllenForce founder and CEO Donna Rielage, a certified therapeutic recreation specialist. “We refer to it as a backdoor therapy. It’s not overt therapy – which has its place –

but we work with them through an environment which allows the walls to come down so they can connect with other people and create a network to find other services they might need.

“They’ll come to us for the recreation, but while they’re here, other conversations start to happen.”

Rielage founded the nonprofit AllenForce in 2012 after her work at the Northeast DuPage Special Recreation Association doing therapeutic recreation led her to creating programs for disabled veterans.

“Most special recreation districts deal with people who are born with disabilities,” Rielage said. “Our director at the time attended a conference and heard about the high number of veterans with multiple traumas. As medical technology has improved, the survival rate for injured veterans has increased, but that means the number of disabled veterans has increased. He said, ‘Somebody has to do something for these people.’ ”

Rielage was a stay-at-home mom at the time, “and I was looking to go back to work, and they asked me to come back part time and start a program,” she said.

The startup program, which was funded by a grant from the Christopher Reeve Foundation, was a success. When demand grew, Rielage said, her employers encouraged her to expand it independently, an endeavor that resulted in the formation of AllenForce.

The program is named for Rielage’s father, Don Allen, an Army veteran who passed away when Rielage was only 1 year old.

“I’ve always been very passionate about therapeutic recreation, and when the opportunity came up to serve the veteran community, it was an additional passion I did not expect,” Rielage said. “It brought me a deeper connection to my dad, and it’s given me insight into the type of person he must have been, which has been a gift for me.”

Today, the organization provides four different programs for veterans and their families: Healthy Minds Healthy Bodies, VetREC, SheForce and VETANK.

Healthy Minds Healthy Bodies is a trademarked program for which AllenForce partners with fitness centers and recreation departments to provide specialized programs for veterans.

VetREC organizes activities and outings for veterans and their families in the communities, such as hiking and fishing trips or bowling parties and private movie screenings.

Healthy Minds Healthy Bodies is based in Rielage’s original special recreation program in DuPage County. It focuses on whole health fitness for veterans, helps them network with other organizations, and provides services for veterans within the community.

Currently, AllenForce has 30 recreation and fitness centers that implement the program, including six special recreation associations.

## Meeting their needs

Rielage said that all the programs AllenForce offers stemmed from needs expressed by veterans and their families.

The SheForce program, for instance, specifically caters to women veterans and the female relatives of veterans.

“That program emerged from women saying they wanted to be segregated for a variety of reasons – experiences in the service, camaraderie, trauma they experienced – so we created the program for them,” Rielage said

The VETANK program also came about because of individual needs, although it was introduced early in AllenForce’s development. VETANKS are specialized, all-terrain power wheelchairs that run on treads similar to a tank instead of standard wheels.

“Not everyone wants to use something like that all the time, but sometimes they need them for outings,” Rielage said. “If you’ve ever been on a skateboard or a bike, you know sometimes a rock or a bump can hit a wheel and cause it to flip. The same thing can happen with wheelchairs out on a trail.”

AllenForce has acquired five of the \$10,000 to \$18,000 chairs through donations from the Firehouse Sub Safety Foundation, the Plainfield Firefighters Union and private donors. The organization brings the chairs to outings for participants to use and rents them out to members to use for private activities or events.

“Being out in nature can be so healing, and this gives them the opportunity to do that,” Rielage said. “It makes such a difference because it gives the veteran more freedom, but it also offers freedom for the family members with them.”

Rielage said veterans from all age groups and backgrounds have taken part in the programs since the organization started, ranging from Iraq and Afghanistan veterans who attended events with their young children, to a 90-year-old World War II veteran who attended a skydiving outing with a group that included his Vietnam-era veteran son.

“He didn’t actually jump, but he was so excited to go up with us and watch, and we arranged for him to ride in the cockpit while the others dived,” Rielage said. “We really do our best to serve all vets from all eras, and it’s wonderful because there is so much wisdom and support that gets passed between the generations that way.”

Rielage said one of the largest benefits of the organization is being able to help veterans of all backgrounds connect with one another and find camaraderie.

“The military culture is actually one of the most diverse groups that exists in our country,” Rielage said. “People of different ethnic groups, economic levels, gender [and] education levels all come together in basic training and come to rely on each other with their lives. When they come out of the military, that camaraderie is missed, and it can be difficult to transition back into the community.

“We help them come together, and work with them and their families to understand and ease that transition.”

Rielage said that in addition to providing services directly to veterans and their families, they also network with other organizations that provide services to veterans and people with disabilities.

“Everybody’s experiences and needs are unique, so it’s important to listen to what they need and meet them where they are at that point in time,” she said. “We might not offer what they need, but we can work with them to find someone who does.”

Although AllenForce doesn’t offer traditional therapy, Rielage said the group puts an emphasis on destigmatizing conversations around mental health and working with veterans and their families to find the support they need.

“It’s hard for vets who are trained to be ‘the strong one’ to go ask for help when they’re used to helping everyone else, and often it’s family members who are the ones who recognize problems and come to us seeking assistance,” Rielage said. “We try to emphasize the importance of getting rid of that stigma and asking for help.

“You wouldn’t hide a gushing cut. Hiding mental health struggles can be just as damaging.”

Since starting in 2012, AllenForce has worked with more than 3,200 veterans in Illinois and Maryland. Rielage hopes to see the program continue to spread in Illinois and the country in the coming years.

Plainfield Will County Veterans Recreation

## Jessie Molloy

Jessie has been reporting in Chicago and south suburban Will and Cook counties since 2011.



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