

TESTIMONY OF MJHS HOSPICE AND PALLIATIVE CARE

OVERSIGHT: PROMISING THERAPIES FOR VETERANS' MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL HEALTH

SUBMITTED TO THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE ON VETERANS

CHAIR ROBERT HOLDEN PRESIDING

June 18, 2024

Chair Holden and members of the New York City Council Committee on Veterans, thank you for holding this public hearing to allow stakeholders the opportunity to discuss promising therapies to address the mental and emotional health of Veterans as well as resolution #441.

MJHS is a not-for-profit health system that has been caring for at-risk New Yorkers since 1907. MJHS Hospice and Palliative Care has been providing end-of-life care to New Yorkers with serious and life-limiting illnesses since 1979. Our services are patient centered, recognizing that each patient and family we care for has their own special needs and sensitivities based on past experiences, family structure and religious beliefs. To meet the unique needs of our patients who are Veteran and their families, we have expanded our interdisciplinary team to include a Veteran liaison.

Our Veteran liaison is part of the We Honor Veterans (WHV) program, a collaboration between the U.S. Department for Veteran Affairs (VA) and the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization. MJHS has been part of this initiative since its inception in 2019. Our program was the first in New York State to be recognized as a Level 5 partner, the highest credential possible. As such MJHS has mentored other hospices across the country. Our robust program earned us the 2023 WHV Outstanding Program Award. The goal of WHV has always been to cultivate a Veteran-centric culture and to ensure that end of life care is delivered in alignment with the lived experiences of our Veterans. Our staff is trained to provide trauma-informed care to ensure caregivers and our staff are equipped with tools to address PTS and PTSD. Our hospice care team also uses active listening during visits, honors the military service of patients who've served, and encourages families to explore healing together—as needed.

When our team is caring for Veterans who are struggling with past trauma, we have found music therapy to be an effective adjunct to their patient care. Music can affect a person at the physical, cognitive, emotional, psychological, and spiritual level.



Modern music therapy traces its beginnings to the post-World War II era, when nurses in VA hospitals noticed the positive physical and emotional responses from Veterans when musicians performed for them. Further research was endorsed by the Army and Office of the Surgeon General, and what these pioneers discovered was remarkable.¹ The researchers found that music helped reduce depression, anxiety and PTSD and minimize the physical, psychologic, and social manifestations of trauma caused by the lasting effects of war. These findings sparked a deeper interest in the therapeutic potential of music and laid the foundation for the profession as we know it today.

Music therapy can be a powerful tool for addressing the needs of Veterans and their families at end-of-life. Veterans can carry the burden of trauma and loss, especially at the end of life when it increases due to dementia and other debilitating conditions. Since 2009, MJHS has incorporated music therapy into our hospice program to treat depression, trauma and PTSD and at our nursing home dementia units. Techniques used by our therapists range from singing, playing instruments, improvisation, song writing and lyric analysis, to engaging families in making music together. MJHS therapists are trained in more complex expressions that include life review and guided imagery. It is through these methods that music therapy helps validate the patient and their needs allowing them the opportunity to increase communication, self-expression, confidence, and joy.

Specific interventions that cater to a hospice patient's favorite song or music genre can improve mood, decrease the perception of pain, increase relaxation and acceptance of personal assistance from the care team. Music therapy can also help to repair or strengthen familial relationships at end of life, providing families with an alternative method of communication that softens the experience of approaching the death of their loved one. MJHS has provided music therapy intervention to patients residing in assisted living, group homes, hospitals, and within the Veteran's personal home, with all experiencing significant positive impact.

For example, MJHS Hospice treated a Veteran who had a stroke that caused paralysis and worsened his speech. When he joined our hospice program, he was already withdrawn and depressed, unable to communicate his needs. His condition worsened and he did not want to speak to anyone. His wife shared with our team that they had enjoyed singing together in their younger years. They used to enjoy spending time at their local café where they would play the juke box and sing and dance together. After a few visits from our music therapist, we discovered he still could sing, and music could still bring him joy. His wife later reported that his "whole mood would change" as he grew excited about upcoming visits from our therapist. Not only did music therapy return joy to the patient and his wife, it rekindled their musical bond. The MJHS Hospice team has seen this intervention rekindle the spark of life that exists in all of us, even up to our last days helping to minimize depression and anxiety.

Unfortunately, while music therapy has demonstrated benefits, it is typically not a covered service under health insurance. MJHS must turn to fundraising and grants to underwrite the cost associated with our music therapy program. We are open to pursuing additional funding opportunities to expand our existing program.

¹ "Music Therapy and Military Populations." MusicTherapy.org, 13/06/2024.
https://www.musictherapy.org/research/music_therapy_and_military_populations/



MJHS supports [resolution 441](#), to designate March 29th every year as *Vietnam Veterans Day in the City of New York* “in honor of the bravery and sacrifice of the Americans who served and in recognition of the past and present dedication of their families and caregivers.” The number of Vietnam Veterans admitted into the MJHS Hospice program continues to grow, as does the complexity of their needs. In 2021, Vietnam Veterans made up for 8% of our veteran patients. In 2022 that number increased to 14% and already this year that number has increased to 18%. We have found that Vietnam Veterans require additional support and planning from public and private organizations long-before they are admitted to a hospice program. We have encountered far too many Veterans who have a terminal diagnosis due to exposure to Agent Orange, but who are not yet connected to the VA, and have not applied for benefits. We desire to raise awareness of the benefits of the PACT Act for Veterans who served in Vietnam as well as their caregivers. MJHS has helped several Vietnam Veterans and their families with filing disability claims that can lead to financial help for those living on fixed incomes. We hope that more Veterans will be able to realize this benefit and ask that the committee consider ways to promote greater awareness of this important benefit.

Many Vietnam Veterans feel disenfranchised due to the icy reception they received upon their return home. MJHS is honored to have participated in the annual National Vietnam Veterans War Day *Reading of the Names* ceremony with the United Veterans War Council to further show our support for the almost 1,400 New York City Veterans who were lost during this campaign and the thousands who are still with us. This ceremony, while profoundly meaningful, is a small event with a limited number of participants. We believe resolution 441 will have a therapeutic effect and provide a long-overdue, publicly celebrated welcome home to help these Veterans overcome much of their traumatic history.

MJHS is grateful for the opportunity to share our experiences and observations with the Committee on Veterans today. We are also grateful for the collaborative support we have shared with the New York City Department of Veterans’ Services, the New York State Department of Veterans’ Services, and the many VSOs we collaborate with. MJHS saw a 46% increase in the number of hospice patients who are Veterans last year. A fact we attribute to the increasing number of Veterans in New York City who are over the age of 65 ² We seek to collaborate with you, your colleagues, and other Veteran community stakeholders to advance our shared work in supporting this vulnerable population to ensure they receive the best possible care throughout their entire life journey. We cannot do this work alone.

We look forward to future opportunities to partner with your committee, staff and other Veteran service organizations to expand the availability of music therapy, benefit advisement and health services to New York City Veterans and to establish March 29th as a day of acknowledgement for Vietnam Veterans.

Thank you for all you do to support Veterans and their families.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'David Wagner'.

David Wagner
President, CEO
MJHS Health Systems

² Murphy, Jarrett. "A Statistical Snapshot of NYC's Veterans." *City Limits*, 11, Nov. 2020, <https://citylimits.org/2020/11/11/a-statistical-snapshot-of-nycs-Veterans/>.