

VA changing to accommodate women

Agency planning to lease building in Loma Linda

By Jim Steinberg Staff Writer

Christina Phan still carries the three pieces of shrapnel from a mortar round that went off near her Army office at Camp Victory in Baghdad, Iraq.

Because of those service-related injuries, Phan, a 24-year-old Corona resident, is entitled to lifetime medical privileges from the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Now with a 3-year-old daughter, Phan has been surprised the VA can deal with her women's health issues

and will cover medical costs when she has another child.

VA health delivery systems are changing in Loma Linda and around the nation. With more women than ever serving in uniform, the number of women needing services is growing.

At the Jerry L. Pettis Memorial Veterans Medical Center in Loma Linda, Lisa Roybal, a nurse practitioner and women's veterans program manager, initiates contact with former military females who move to the area.

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Christina Phan at her desk in 2005 with the Army Signal Corps in Iraq about a month after she was hit by shrapnel.

Photo courtesy of Christina Phan

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Roybal said women she connects with are often surprised to learn that the VA has a staff gynecologist and a breast surgeon, a state-of-the-art digital mammography unit and machine to measure bone density.

In 2005, Pettis Memorial saw 2,561 female patients, while in fiscal 2009, which ended Sept. 30, that number increased 30 percent to 3,694, Roybal said.

To accommodate the growing number of veterans — including female veterans — a lease is being finalized on property on Redlands Boulevard near Mountain View Avenue — that would provide significant space for women's health, Roybal said.

Eleven rooms will be designated for women's health and there will be a women-only waiting room.

"It will be a calm environment, with soothing colors and overstuffed chairs," Roybal said. "It will be very inviting, not a sterile waiting room."

The mammography and bone density units will be moved there as well, she said.

As part of a goal to make women's health services a one-stop shop, 13 VA internal medicine physicians from the area will be attending a women's health "mini-residency" in Long Beach in January, Roybal said.

The goal is to educate doctors who have been used to primarily male patients in new practices for women's health issues.

Currently, women see a primary care physician and are then referred to specialists for gender-specific problems.

In the new building, the primary care physician will be able to address routine women's issues, Roybal said.

The new building will also integrate the services of a psychologist, she said. "All their care will be in one place."

Nationally, the average age of a female veteran using the VA is 48 while the average age of a male veteran is 61.

Among the women veterans returning from Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, 85.5 percent are below age 40 and 58.9 percent are between ages 20 and 29, Roybal said.

Although women are not assigned to combat situations, the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have no front lines, so women driving convoys or involved in door-to-door searches are exposed to the same dangers as men.

Phan, an Army specialist, was an office worker for a Signal Corps unit assigned to Camp Victory, a large complex near the Baghdad airport that had been the site of Saddam Hussein's zoo.

When the compound was targeted for mortar attack in June 2005, Phan was taking out the trash.

She heard an explosion several buildings away, then heard the loud whistle as a mortar's shell approached her. She never heard the explosion — just a loud ringing in her ears after it occurred.

She ran into the office, dropped to the ground and covered her head. That's when she felt warm blood running down her face. She had been hit by seven shell fragments, primarily on the right side of her body.

One piece tore through her side and lodged in her liver, where it still resides. Others hit her face, neck, forehead and arm.

One piece remains lodged under her right eye, and another in her left arm.

Phan attends Riverside City College on the Post 9/11 GI Bill and is majoring in medical transcription. She also plans to pick up a second major as a medical administration assistant.

Not having to worry about her health care is a huge relief, she said.

Jim.steinberg@inlandnewspapers.com
909-386-3855

The "Sun"
26 Dec. 09
Pg. A-1 + A-5