

## **New VA effort wants a veteran's caregiver to be part of the treatment process**

Department of Veterans Affairs hospitals are undertaking a new effort focused on assuring family members and loved ones caring for veterans are included in treatment, a practice already happening at some facilities but isn't standard policy yet.

The initiative, which launched Friday, has medical providers at a handful of VA centers across the country reaching out to veterans to determine whether they want their caregiver in the room during treatment. On paper, the caregiver would then be involved in the entire care process, including treatment planning with doctors.

"They [caregivers] are the first line of defense against the worst of all possible outcomes — suicides," said Elizabeth Dole, a former Republican senator from North Carolina and secretary of labor and transportation. "These heroes provide care that is extensive, intimate and around the clock."

The new effort, kicking off in three VA regions, was spurred by the Elizabeth Dole Foundation, an advocacy group for the 5.5 million spouses, parents, family members and friends who take care of injured veterans at home.

"It's about including the caregiver as a true partner. We know the veteran in our clinics but we don't know what's happening the other 23 hours of the day," said Lisa Pape, deputy chief officer for patient care services at VA. "That caregiver is experiencing that life journey. And they can fill in the pieces and paint the picture that we're not able to see so we want to include them."

The VA's Caregiver Support Program, which now assists caregivers of veterans who served after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States, will grow each of the next two years. Starting in June of 2020, caregivers of veterans who served anytime after 1974 will be able to apply for full services, and sometime in 2021 caregivers of veterans who served during or after World War II can apply.

Once the expansion is fully phased in, caregivers of all veterans who served from World War II on will be eligible for full benefits from the Caregiver Support Program, which today is available only to caregivers of post-9/11 veterans. To be eligible for full benefits, caregivers must be caring for veterans with medical conditions linked to their time serving in the military.