

VA



U.S. Department  
of Veterans Affairs

Office of Construction &  
Facilities Management



# Healing Environment design guidelines

September 2016

“To care for him who shall have borne  
the battle and for his widow and for his  
orphan”

—*Abraham Lincoln,*  
*Motto of the Department of Veterans Affairs*  
*from the Second Inaugural Address, 1864*

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# Executive Summary



**Figure 0.1:** American Legion Post 11 Honor Guard at ceremony honoring Veterans at Lambeau Field. Green Bay, Wisconsin.

## A New Care Model

The mission of the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) is to honor America's Veterans by providing progressive healthcare that improves their health and well-being. One of the critical challenges faced by the VHA is transforming a medical model that focuses on treating only the illness into a model that focuses on the patient's comprehensive set of health-related needs. The Institute of Medicine (IOM) supports this paradigm with a position relative to the healthcare industry that is holistic rather than "reactive, episodic, inefficient and impersonal."

The new Patient Centered Care Model developed and implemented by the VHA Office of Patient Centered Care & Cultural Transformation (OPCC&CT) employs a personalized strategy that more fully addresses the health and well-being of Veterans. The model takes a broad look at the physical, emotional, mental, social, spiritual, and environmental factors that impact a Veteran's health. This approach involves understanding how the environment influences health, and how environments should be designed to best support positive health outcomes.



**Figure 0.2:** Grant Wood's memorial window within memorial room. Building re-opening ceremony. Veterans Memorial Building, Cedar Rapids, Iowa.



“The atmosphere of VA medical centers plays a crucial role in helping suffering Veterans overcome their stoicism and seek help. What Veterans require is an environment that clearly communicates, *This is a healing place. This is a place that welcomes Veterans, honors your service, and understands your needs. We will do everything possible to ensure you feel safe, comfortable, and relaxed as we help you heal.*

If an aging facility is not welcoming—even beckoning—in aspect, if it fails to provide for the changing needs—physical and non-physical—of Veterans, if it neglects the needs of visiting family members or the staff that serve within it, then the facility sadly contradicts the critically important mission of the VA. Many who need it will not go there, and many who go there will not feel comfortable enough to return.

The environment does not heal. The environment makes healing possible.”

—Mary Edwards Wertsch,  
author of *Military Brats: Legacies of  
Childhood inside the Fortress*

### **A Need For Healing**

When trauma occurs, those most affected frequently experience suffering that continues long after the traumatic event has passed. These individuals have experienced more than stress—they’ve been wounded. A wound is a persistent loss of a person’s ability to function as they normally would. If not successfully treated, a wound can persist for a lifetime. When people are mentally or emotionally wounded, they may say they do not feel like themselves, do not feel “whole,” or that something in them has been lost. When a wound is invisible, the person affected may not be able to identify it or articulate why it is happening.

### **A Place For Healing**

A VA Healing Environment is a facility whose carefully coordinated architectural features are designed and maintained to facilitate the healing process of wounded Veterans. Healing is a comprehensive repair effort that requires every available resource of body, mind and spirit. This repair effort is much more than just rest and relaxation, or stress management. The healing process often involves gradual functional improvement through a combination of ongoing professional treatment, community support, and suitable environment.

The short-term impact of a Healing Environment may not be as dramatic as the impact of a helpful therapy session or a positive social interaction, but Healing Environments are uniquely important to a Veteran’s healing process. They provide structure and consistency - they are there twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. In addition, Veterans have the ability to personalize their environments, and to choose their experiences from among an array of healing options.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of the VA Healing Environment Design Guidelines is to establish a holistic Healing Environment framework. The guidelines describe ways to plan and design the key public elements of a healthcare facility to deliver safe, effective, and efficient healthcare to Veterans. The VA Healing Environment Design Guidelines are to be utilized by VA facility managers, architects, interior designers, planners, clinicians, and architecture/engineering (A/E) consultants.

Providing appropriately planned and designed facilities is critical for the mission of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the Office of Construction and Facilities Management (CFM). VA planning and design standards, located in the CFM Technical Information Library (TIL), provide guidance for the design professionals and VA personnel tasked with planning and designing VA facilities. These standards follow, respond to, and support VA/VHA directives, policies and procedures published by VA and VHA Program Offices.

### **Healing Environment Design Guidelines Team**

The core team responsible for the guidelines is composed of representatives from CFM, professionals in the fields of architecture, medical planning and engineering, and researchers with experience

implementing Healing Environments within the VA and civilian communities.

### Subject Matter Experts

The formulation of a Subject Matter Expert (SME) group was key to the development of the Healing Environment Design Guidelines. The Subject Matter Experts have a diversity of skills and life experiences that contribute important content, insights, and knowledge. The SME group includes: Veterans, mental health experts, medical researchers, architects, medical doctors, engineers, members of a community Veterans' center, Veteran peer mentors, educators, an artist, family counselor, healthcare administrator, an executive director of a community based Veteran center, a writer, and various VA personnel. The inclusion of Veteran Subject Matter Experts insures that the voices of Veterans contribute to the creation of the Healing Environment Design Guidelines. Focus groups and conference calls have allowed Veteran SMEs across the country to participate.

### Guideline Organization

The Healing Environment Design Guidelines are organized into five main chapters, each of which is intended to contribute to the reader's understanding of Healing Environments and the impact they will have in shaping future VA health care settings.

#### 1.0 Introduction

Chapter 1.0 defines the term "Healing Environment."

#### 2.0 The Healing Needs of Veterans

Chapter 2.0 contextualizes the specific healing needs of Veterans, and surveys changing demographic information for U.S. servicemembers from WW II to Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation New Dawn (OEF/OIF/OND).

#### 3.0 Healing Environment Design Principles

Chapter 3.0 outlines the key design principles affecting future VA construction projects, and provides evidence supporting the inclusion of each design principle. These principles aim to inspire high quality designs that meet the needs of patients, staff, and visitors in VA facilities, and that promote the VA's new patient-centered mission. Designers, staff, and all those involved in the design of VA Healing Environments will be able to reference these principles.

#### 4.0 Applying Design Principles to Space Typologies at a VA Facility

Chapter 4.0 examines how the design principles in Chapter 3.0 may be implemented through architectural and engineering solutions. The chapter is broken down into space typologies that make up a VA healing facility. Special consideration is given to the nature of a Veteran's healing journey from beginning to end.

Chosen examples highlight the spatial concepts, characteristics, relationships, and other design features that contribute to a Healing Environment. These examples compare space typologies through the use of diagrams, images, and supportive text.



**Figure 0.3:** Historic image of the entry gate at the Milwaukee Soldiers Home, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.



**Figure 0.4:** Veteran Job Fair at the Veterans Memorial Building in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.



**Figure 0.5:** View of moveable exterior partitions and interior courtyard. VA Southern Nevada Healthcare System. North Las Vegas, Nevada.



**Figure 0.6:** Sweat lodges were utilized by particular American Indian tribes for healing of trauma of warriors after a military engagement. Sweat lodge facilitated by Michael Toahy, U.S. Army Veteran and member of the Southern Arapaho Tribe. Crescent City, Indiana.

## **5.0 Informing the Present and Shaping the Future: Gathering Evidence of Healing Impact**

These guidelines introduce a framework for measuring the effects of Healing Environments. These measurements enable the healing effectiveness of VA facilities to be estimated. Correlation between healing outcomes at each facility and the built features of the facility will also help facility designers and managers understand how to improve Healing Environments.

### **Appendices**

Appendix A provides resources for VA architectural standards and criteria. Appendix B is a narrative by Dr. James Munroe who founded the Veterans Improvement Program at the Boston VA. VA mental health providers brought Vietnam Veterans for up to three days to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington, D.C. for mental health therapy and the resolution of loss. Appendix C is a case study of an adaptive re-use Veterans Memorial Building project in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Appendix D examines the history of Healing Environments and analyzes five precedents ranging from the 5th century BCE Greek healing cities, Japanese tea gardens, Native American sweat lodges, to the post-Civil War Grand Army of the Republic Halls. Appendix E presents a case study of the conference/multipurpose room of a Veteran-serving facility, the Veterans Memorial Building in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

**Please note:** The following chapters incorporate a significant number of relevant photographs and diagrams to aid VA facility personnel, design consultants, and clinicians with Healing Environment design decisions. However, many of the photographs have design attributes not directly related to Healing Environment design. Specific design elements are linked to bullet points listing the attributes served by them. The diagrams are generic and will need to be modified according to occupancy requirements, building codes, and location availability. However, it is important to be attentive to the critical adjacencies that accompany a proposed building component.

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