

## Veterans' care could be village's future

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Many groups collaborate for a military respite center

By CHRIS KNIGHT, Enterprise Senior Staff Writer

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### Article Photos

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Some of the local people involved in planning the Patriot Hills at Saranac Lake project pose in front of the veterans memorial in the village's Riverside Park: (from left) Barry Brogan of the North Country Behavioral Health Network, Chandler Ralph of Adirondack Medical Center, Susan Waters, Joe Keegan of North Country Community College, Bob Ross of St. Joseph's Addiction Treatment and Recovery Centers, Iraq war veteran Greg Moore, Frank Karl of Saranac Lake Veterans of Foreign Wars post, Mike Conway of the Adirondack Economic Development Corporation, Amy Tuthill of Paul Smith's College, Jeremy Evans of the village of Saranac Lake, Mark Kurtz of the local arts community and Terry Gach of Trudeau Institute.  
(Enterprise photo — Peter Crowley)

### Article Links

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» [Patriot Hills of New York](#) » [High hopes expressed for a cluster of veterans' services here](#) » [VA will put a clinic in Saranac Lake](#)

SARANAC LAKE - A broad-based coalition of community leaders and veteran advocates are working to bring a first-of-its-kind retreat and reintegration facility for veterans, active military personnel and their families to this village.

Patriot Hills at Saranac Lake involves construction of a \$30 million hotel and conference center that would host a wide range of support programs, counseling and services for military personnel and their families from across the Northeast.

Organizers say the project would build on Saranac Lake's history as a pioneering health resort and, when combined with other veteran-related initiatives in the area, could make the village a center for veteran healing and breathe new life into the local economy. Organizers expect the project to create about 120 permanent jobs plus another 180 or so during construction of the hotel.

But Patriot Hills at Saranac Lake is far from a done deal. If it's going to happen, the project has plenty of hurdles to clear: building community and political support, securing the necessary public and private funding, getting a hotel developer interested in the proposal and finding a site in the village for the project.

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## Genesis

The Patriot Hills at Saranac Lake concept can't be credited to just a single person or organization; supporters describe the project as a collaboration of veterans' advocates who were all working toward the same goal and "coalesced."

Bob Ross, president and CEO of St. Joseph's Addiction Treatment and Recovery Centers in Saranac Lake, called it an "organic" process that grew "from a series of conversations and complementary ideas into a concept."

About a year ago, a group of local people interested in veterans' issues began informal discussions about how the Saranac Lake community could come together to provide more support services to veterans returning to their home communities. At that point, St. Joseph's was already working on a plan to build a 25-bed veterans' community residence on its property in Saranac Lake for veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and substance addiction. Local veterans' organizations were also making a push to get the Veterans Administration to locate an outpatient health clinic in the Saranac Lake area.

"We began to realize that there were a lot of different spokes of a wheel - different organizations around the community that were providing services, but there was no coordinated effort," said Keith Wells of the Saranac Lake Area Chamber of Commerce. "So we coalesced."

Col. Eric Olsen, a Saranac Lake resident who is New York state chaplain for the state Division of Military and Naval Affairs, was involved in those early discussions. He said he first saw a need to provide more help to the troops after returning home from a year-long deployment to Iraq in 2005. There were no programs or support services available for the dozens of North Country soldiers who he served with in the New York Army National Guard, Olsen said.

"After a few days of briefings and medical checks, they cut us loose and we returned home," he said.

Within a short period of time, Olsen said it became apparent that many of the soldiers were having a difficult time making the transition.

"Our retention rates were not good, the criminal behavior and drug rates were all over the map, our soldiers were suffering from PTSD and traumatic brain injury, and other guys were just depressed," he said. "The incidents of marital problems and domestic issues were rising."

In response, the Guard launched a Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program that requires soldiers to attend reintegration sessions 30 and 60 days after they return from a combat zone. The meetings are usually held in hotels.

Olsen suggested the program would be more effective if it is held in a permanent retreat center designed specifically to meet the needs of soldiers and veterans. "We don't have any place where a soldier or a guardsman can go and just feel at home," he said. "We need a place like that. At the same time other people were recognizing the same thing."

One of those other people was Jeannine Mannarino, the president of Patriot Hills of New York, a three-year-old nonprofit organization that's been working to create a re-entry and respite facility for soldiers and their families.

Mannarino traces the Patriot Hills idea back to the Vietnam War era.

"I remember I was 14 years old, watching our Vietnam veterans come home and wondering what was going to happen to them," said Mannarino, who comes from a military family. "The sympathy out there was very minimal. I wondered who's going to take care of them."

The spark for what would become Patriot Hills would come years later, as Mannarino, who had a 24-year career in the National Guard, saw many of her friends returning from Iraq and Afghanistan and dealing with serious reintegration problems.

"I started looking at what kind of facilities we have out there for the transition back to their homes and families," she said. "When they come home, they go straight to their armory, which is fine because the first thing they want to do is embrace their family. But there's got to be another step in this process."

Urged on by her daughter, Mannarino began to network with other veteran advocates. That grassroots effort, she says, eventually led to the creation of Patriot Hills of New York and a search for a location to host the retreat center.

That search eventually brought Mannarino to Olsen, who both happened to work in the same building for the state Division of Military and Naval Affairs. Mannarino recalled hearing Olsen speak about setting up a retreat center in Saranac Lake for returning veterans.

"I told him about the project we were working on," Mannarino said. "He thought it was a great idea. Later we sat down and started discussing the project and what Saranac Lake was trying to put together. We eventually put this map together of what, from start to finish, Patriot Hills at Saranac Lake would look like."

In July of 2009, Mannarino met with the Saranac Lake group that had been working on the same issues, which at that point had grown to include veteran organizations, representatives of North Country Community College, Paul Smith's College and Adirondack Medical Center, more local leaders and members of Saranac Lake's arts and healing communities.

"We met with them in Albany, and it was a great meeting right from the get-go," Tom Michael, Saranac Lake's mayor at the time recalled. "They had a concept, we had the community resources and institutions, and we basically found each other and started working together."

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Why Saranac Lake?

Mannarino and Patriot Hills had been looking all over the state for a location to build or host a retreat center. Ross said they ultimately convinced Mannarino and her backers that a community-based facility in a village like Saranac Lake would be ideal for the veterans the facility would serve.

"What we excited them about was the idea of not being in a place but being in a community," Ross said. "They had the concept, but they hadn't really thought, until talking to us, of the extreme value of doing it in an inviting, receptive, energized community."

Several other sites for the project were considered, including Saratoga Springs and Lake George, before the group focused on Saranac Lake. Mannarino said two sites in Lake George were considered; both were pre-existing structures that had been used as recreational facilities.

"There was nothing that lent itself to the whole community-based partnership and collaboration that we're going to be able to build up and bring together in Saranac Lake," she said.

Olsen said Saratoga Springs was crossed off the list because it wasn't a "four-season kind of place" and doesn't have the sense of community that Saranac Lake has.

"You have to have a community," he said. "These soldiers need a place where they feel like they belong. You also want to get people far enough away and into a community and environment where they can feel safe, secure and welcome."

Another key reason why Saranac Lake was so attractive is its history and culture of healing, which dates to 1885 when Dr. Edward Livingston Trudeau established the Adirondack Cottage Sanitarium and started a tuberculosis curing industry on which the tiny hamlet was built into a busy village, the biggest in the Adirondack Park.

Photographer Mark Kurtz, a member of the steering committee representing local artists, thinks Patriot Hills at Saranac Lake is the successor of that tradition.

"I think historically this community is receptive to this healing kind of thing," he said. "It really was an integrated part of the fabric of this community. I think we'll quickly look back at our history and roots and say this is something we can pick up on pretty quickly."

While there's nothing wrong with tapping into Saranac Lake's history of caring, Olsen noted that many of the people who were around during the TB curing days are gone or retired.

"This community has to learn those skills over again and take on this new mission at heart," he said. "I don't want it compared to what we used to be; I want to create what we can be. I believe this kind of project and mission will give a sense of purpose and bring together the citizens of this community into a sense of belonging, and allow them to use their gifts, talents and their abilities to move not only the community forward but also our state and our nation."

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The facility

Ross said the hotel would operate as a normal, commercial hotel, open to the general public.

"It is a place that pays taxes, is privately owned, employs a lot of people and is not a governmental institution," Ross said. "So in that sense it would be a classically positive contribution to the community from a jobs-development and a tax-base purpose."

At the same time, the facility would be designed to be "military family friendly," Ross said. It would have amenities that might not be found in a regular hotel, like rooms for counseling and space for military reintegration programs and meetings. One idea the group has discussed is creating a military museum as part of the hotel complex.

Olsen said it's important that Patriot Hills is tailored to a military lifestyle.

"I want a place that speaks to the culture of the soldier," he said. "They need some place of quality. They don't need a dump. These are heroes, and we need to treat them well. We need a place that speaks our language."

To get the project off the ground, Ross said the community will have to attract a hotel company and developer who might be interested in doing something positive for veterans. Patriot Hills at Saranac Lake is seen as a model for similar projects that could happen in other parts of the country.

"This would be a prototype," Ross said. "It would put whichever hotel chain that might be interested in doing it in a very positive position because they would be getting a lot of favorable publicity for branding themselves and that connection."

The size of the hotel, how many veterans it would serve and where it could be located all have yet to be determined. Ross said they first need to determine the range of services the facility could provide before contacting any potential developers or hotel chains.

"The number of rooms depends upon a developer and a hotel deciding how this would fit into their experience for a community with the profile Saranac Lake has," Ross said. "We're not talking about something that would be too small to meet the needs or so big that it would dwarf the community."

While it may seem like there's not much developable property in the village, Ross said he thinks the community can get creative.

"I don't think we'd be comfortable putting in the time and energy if we didn't think it would be possible to find one or more viable sites," he said.

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### Programs

The Patriot Hills retreat center, according to a statement summarizing the project, is designed to provide a "healing and nurturing experience where veterans and military families will have an opportunity to work and recreate with fellow warriors and peers in a cathartic atmosphere of respect, admiration and understanding."

The facility's programs will focus on soldier fitness, suicide prevention, marriage and grief counseling, leadership training, therapeutic counseling and anger management. Other programs will include vocational training, career fairs, job placement and year-round recreational opportunities in the Adirondacks.

Mannarino said she'd also like to develop programs geared specifically for women veterans and soldiers suffering from sleep deprivation.

"The whole idea behind Patriot Hills is making it so our soldiers will be able to receive multitudes of services," Mannarino said.

Olsen said he wants to "disconnect" the soldiers who come for help.

"This community can do that," he said. "With Dewey Mountain, with Lake Placid down the road, with the lakes, the fishing, hiking and biking, the autumn season - all these kinds of things can allow for a continual healing environment."

In addition to programs for soldiers returning home from combat, Patriot Hills organizers also want to host pre-deployment programs and sessions for family members while their loved ones are serving abroad.

Supporters of the project say there will continue to be a need for the programs and services Patriot Hills plans to offer long after the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have come to an end.

Mannarino said the programs would be available to all veterans of the U.S. armed forces, not just the Guard or reservists, to ensure the facility is "self-sustainable" well into the future. She also noted that many Vietnam veterans are continuing to deal with depression and thoughts of suicide.

"I honestly can say I don't think the need is going to go away," she said. "The scars of war continue long after the battles are over."

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## Partners

Patriot Hills at Saranac Lake would tie into several other veteran-related initiatives, organizations and programs in the area such as the St. Joseph's veterans' community residence and a new Veterans Administration outpatient health clinic that the VA plans to locate in Saranac Lake.

North Country Community College will also be playing a significant role in the St. Joseph's veterans' program by providing educational and recreational support for the program. Both NCCC and Paul Smith's College also plan to play a role in the Patriot Hills program.

The local arts community is also helping to develop the Patriot Hills model.

Naj Wikoff of Keene Valley, another member of the steering committee, helped organize an arts and healing retreat for women veterans last year. That's just one kind of program that could be offered at Patriot Hills, he said.

"I think the most important impact of this is the fact that we can deliver really great programming service to the vets," he said. "Also it's going to create work opportunities and help stabilize the economy, because people will be coming year round."

Local veterans have also joined the partnership.

Greg Moore, the owner of Bear Essentials, a retail apparel business in Saranac Lake, was in the U.S. Army for 14 years and served in Iraq in 2004. He said Patriot Hills could be "an amazing asset" for Saranac Lake.

"A central facility with all the different services that we're thinking about - to have that in a relaxed atmosphere like this with a community's history of helping people in the past, I think would be a great fit," Moore said.

Frank Karl, adjutant of the Saranac Lake Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 3357, said Saranac Lake has a history of being very supportive of those in need.

"To me this would be double benefit," he said. "For so many of our veterans who are not getting the service they deserve - it will clear up much of that. Plus the economics and the jobs it brings to the area. We need to do everything we can to make this a reality."

Some of the other groups and organizations involved in the Patriot Hills at Saranac Lake project include Fort Drum, Adirondack Medical Center, the Trudeau Institute, the North Country Behavioral Healthcare Network and the Samaritan Village Veterans Program, which has a PTSD and addiction center on Long Island.

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## The cost

Patriot Hills is seeking \$7.2 million in federal funds over three years to lay the groundwork for the roughly \$30 million project. The federal money would pay for feasibility studies, project design, site acquisition costs and infrastructure work.

Ross said the federal investment would hopefully leverage \$20 million in private-sector investment, the majority of which would come from the hotel developer.

Some of the federal money would also be used to begin establishing programs and services, and to hire a small office staff. The project so far has been directed and coordinated by volunteers.

"It's been a remarkably collaborative process, but at this point there's enough going on that it would make sense to identify the funds to hire a small professional staff, and the rest of us would continue in a board or advisory group capacity," Ross said.

Ross said the goal is to collect enough in donations and private contributions after the first three years to no longer need federal money to pay for programs and services.

"The hope would be that by the end of those three years that we would have created a model that will be self-sustaining," he said.

U.S. Sens. Charles Schumer and Kirsten Gillibrand, and Reps. Scott Murphy and Bill Owens have all submitted a fiscal year 2011 funding request for the project to the Department of Defense, Ross said. \$3.26 million of the \$7.2 million is being sought in the first year.

Garry Douglas, president of the Plattsburgh-North Country Chamber of Commerce, said the Patriot Hills project is one of the chamber's top lobbying priorities this year.

"We're relatively hopeful, even in a difficult appropriations year, that given the subject matter of this, which frankly is mom and apple pie, all of us, including everyone in Congress, wants to support good projects that have something to do with assisting our wounded warriors," Douglas said.

Patriot Hills supporters hope to have the retreat and reintegration facility built and operational by 2013. In the meantime, they're working to establish services within Saranac Lake sometime later this year. A formal public announcement of the project, which will also mark the start of a fundraising campaign, is scheduled to take place April 23 in Saratoga Springs.

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Contact Chris Knight at (518) 891-2600 ext. 24 or [cknight@adirondackdailyenterprise.com](mailto:cknight@adirondackdailyenterprise.com).

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## **VA will put a clinic in Saranac Lake**

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SARANAC LAKE - The U.S. Veterans Administration is looking at two possible sites in the village for an outpatient health clinic for veterans.

Peter Potter, a spokesman for the Stratton VA Medical Center in Albany, which oversees the region's outpatient clinics, said the VA has narrowed its options and should make a decision within a week. He declined to say where the two potential sites in Saranac Lake are located.

The VA plans to split its staff between two clinic sites, one in Saranac Lake and one in Elizabethtown.

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SARANAC LAKE - Hopes are high for Patriot Hills at Saranac Lake, a proposed retreat and reintegration center for veterans and their families that might be housed in a new hotel and conference center in the village.

"I've been in this business for quite a long time, and I can tell you, quite frankly, that a project like this only comes around once or twice in a lifetime, where you have such a need you're trying to address and such a transformative project that can have such a powerful impact on a community," said Adirondack Economic Development Corporation Executive Director Mike Conway, a key player in the project. "It's really exciting."

"This is certainly a transformational project for the community," added former village Mayor Tom Michael, a member of the project's steering committee. "If you think about the way the tuberculosis industry was important to Saranac Lake 50 to 100 years ago, this is a very similar proposal."

Bob Ross, president and CEO of St. Joseph's Addiction Treatment and Recovery Centers, didn't think it was an exaggeration to say the Patriot Hills project could transform Saranac Lake.

"I don't think 'transformative' is a stretch," he said. "I think that's pretty accurate from my sense that it could well be that, and I think there's a lot of excitement about people working together trying to make that happen."

While supporters say the benefits to the community could be vast, they're quick to point out that the most important benefit is what the project would offer to the men and women who've put their lives on the line for their country.

"I see the community not rising to the economic advantage of this but to the humanity and to the patriotic necessity of this," said Col. Eric Olsen, a Saranac Lake resident who is New York state chaplain for the state Division of Military and Naval Affairs. "If we look at this as an economic necessity, it will never be what it's meant to be. If we take it in our hearts that we have a mission and obligation to the men, women and soldiers of our nation for what they've done to provide us with the security, the comfort we live in, and we share that gift that we have, then it will be exactly what it needs to be."

Jeannine Mannarino, president of Patriot Hills of New York, has engaged more than 40 people across the country to build support for the Patriot Hills model, which she hopes to replicate in other parts of the U.S. She's already secured endorsements from several military organizations including the Enlisted Association of the National Guard and the Eastern Chapter of the American Military Retirees Association.

"We've created a network," Mannarino said. "They believe in the project and totally support that project. That's huge because they're the ones that are going to make this happen."

Since August, Mannarino has also been talking to individual veterans about putting the first Patriot Hills retreat center in Saranac Lake. The response has been positive, she said.

"They all understand what Saranac Lake is about, and they all think Saranac Lake would be a perfect location for what we plan on doing," she said. "It has multitudes of resources. It's got a community that cares. That tradition and culture is well known."

The project has also been backed by several North Country politicians, including U.S. Rep. Bill Owens, who is an Air Force veteran, state Sen. Betty Little and Assemblywoman Teresa Sayward.