

San Jose Mercury News (California)

Distributed by McClatchy-Tribune Business News

May 11, 2008 Sunday

Silicon Valley vets gather for locally unprecedented welcome home: Outreach party a first in valley

BYLINE: Lisa Fernandez, San Jose Mercury News, Calif.

SECTION: STATE AND REGIONAL NEWS

LENGTH: 512 words

May 11--Veterans gathered Saturday on the lawns of Moffett Field in Mountain View for an unprecedented event. It was the first time service members of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars were officially welcomed home and connected en masse with doctors, social workers and even meditation gurus.

The all-day affair mirrors similar "Welcome Home 2008" events held throughout the country, as mandated last year by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

But this upbeat family party was a first for Silicon Valley, said Romeo Horvath, where about 600 to 800 guests came -- triple the number that some other events have attracted.

Horvath, coordinator of the event, is an Iraqi war veteran who now works for the VA Palo Alto Health Care System.

"I think today was a great success," Horvath said, as the crowds behind him enjoyed shaved ice, pop music and an Elmo bounce house. "We want to overcome that bad image from the Vietnam War era where soldiers just don't get the help they need."

Medics and meditators

Lined up in rows on Chase Park were dozens of booths staffed by brain injury educators, college admissions officers and even Best Buy employees offering discounts for military members. One booth touted a professor from the **Pacific Graduate School of Psychology** studying whether meditation helps post-traumatic stress.

San Jose Mayor Chuck Reed, Sunnyvale Mayor Tony Spitaleri, state Sen. Leland Yee of San Francisco and U.S. Rep. Anna Eshoo of Palo Alto attended, along with a host of staff members from other congressional offices.

On the national level, U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates this week took a huge step in trying to destigmatize mental health illness by urging the troops to get psychiatric counseling for their "unseen wounds."

Still, Horvath said there's been enough "lip service" about helping veterans, but the real change has yet to be seen. He wonders when it will trickle down to the units

themselves, where the sergeants proactively urge their rank-and-file to seek help, and the military eagerly dispenses it.

Some of that change has already happened.

Rahiem Akbar, 28, of San Francisco, who was stationed in Kuwait, said he's been pretty impressed with the follow-up calls he's received since getting out of the Navy in 2004.

"I've gotten several calls and surveys wondering how I'm doing, seeing if I need care," he said. "It seems like they're trying to make an effort to change their image. It's much better than when my dad came home from Vietnam and Korea."

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

To learn more about the Palo Alto VA, click on www.palo-alto.med.va.gov.

Contact Lisa Fernandez at lfernandez@mercurynews.com or (408) 920-5002.

To see more of the San Jose Mercury News, or to subscribe to the newspaper, go to <http://www.mercurynews.com>. Copyright (c) 2008, San Jose Mercury News, Calif. Distributed by McClatchy-Tribune Information Services. For reprints, email tmsreprints@permissionsgroup.com, call 800-374-7985 or 847-635-6550, send a fax to 847-635-6968, or write to The Permissions Group Inc., 1247 Milwaukee Ave., Suite 303, Glenview, IL 60025, USA.