Lee Health, Home Base SWFL Announce New Mental Health Services for Veterans and Military Families Impacted by the Invisible Wounds of War

**Florida Governor Ron DeSantis; four-star Army General Fred Franks; and Lee Health President & CEO Larry Antonucci, M.D., MBA on hand for Veterans Day Announcement**

(FORT MYERS, FL. – Nov. 11, 2019) --- More than 100,000 veterans reside in Southwest Florida, yet many former service members across the state are lacking access to needed mental health services. Today, a new collaboration aims to increase the availability of mental health services to SWFL veterans and their families.

Home Base Southwest Florida, a Red Sox Foundation and Massachusetts General Hospital Program, formally announced its expansion and clinical partnership with Lee Health, the largest healthcare system in Southwest Florida, to offer mental health services for veterans and military families who call Southwest Florida home – at no cost. Florida Governor Ron DeSantis joined Lee Health and Home Base SWFL leadership for the press conference announcement at Lee Health.

“Florida is home to more than 1.5 million veterans, and it is our duty to ensure those who have served our country are receiving the care and support they deserve. As a fellow veteran who served in Iraq, I understand and appreciate the sacrifices made by our veterans, military members and their families. Many veterans are still fighting the invisible wounds of war and these new mental health services are critical to ensuring veterans in Southwest Florida can lead healthy lives,” Florida Governor Ron DeSantis

Mental health services for the treatment of the invisible wounds of war, such as post-traumatic stress (PTS), transitional anxiety and depression, will be available at the Lee Health Behavioral Health Clinic beginning November 11th.

The clinical program at Lee Health will offer a multidisciplinary approach to care and complement Home Base Southwest Florida’s Warrior Health & Fitness Program, which has served as a platform for more than 250 local veterans to come together, reconnect with other members of the military community and embark on a path towards long-term wellness. Through the Warrior Health & Fitness Program, physical health goals like losing weight, gaining muscle, eating healthier, and managing pre-existing injuries and health issues are common, but the program also includes mental health and wellness goals.

Previously, those seeking clinical care could access mental health services through Home Base’s two-week intensive clinical program headquartered in Boston, MA. These services will now be available in their home community at Lee Health.
Emphasizing the need of mental health treatment access, U.S. Marine combat veteran and Naples resident Karter Elliott, spoke about his personal journey in seeking care, noting that like many other veterans impacted by post-traumatic stress, it was a long process to understand what was happening to him, before he could be open to doing something about it.

Elliott suffered from nightmares, anxiety and outbursts that wouldn’t go away – it was tearing apart his family. With the help of Home Base Southwest Florida, Elliott was able to find the mental health care he needed to help him manage it all and enrolled in Home Base’s two-week ICP in Boston.

“I was sick of like the roller coaster ride and the low points,” Elliott said. “But I think I was finally ready to take the steps to take care of myself, for the betterment of my family.”

Elliott says the intensive therapy changed his life, but he found it difficult to find a mental health care provider who offered evidence-based therapies to sustain his progress back home, until now.

“Five years ago, Home Base Southwest Florida was created to help fill an important need for our veterans transitioning from military service and we are proud to expand our mission once again,” said Home Base SWFL Program Director and U.S. Marine veteran Armando Hernandez. “This partnership with Lee Health will augment our ability to serve veterans in the area and ensure our veterans, impacted by the invisible wounds of war, receive access to timely and quality medical care.”

Eric Raab, D.O., a psychiatrist with Lee Health, will serve as clinical leader for the Home Base SWFL Outpatient Clinic at Lee Health. For the past year, he and designated members of Lee Health’s behavioral health clinical team have received extensive clinical training in evidence-based therapies for PTSD by Home Base’s clinical experts from the leading Psychiatry Department in the nation – Massachusetts General Hospital.

“While most military Service members and veterans who return from deployment can reintegrate successfully into civilian life, an estimated 1 in 3 may experience mental health problems, such as PTS, major depression, and anxiety,” said Raab. “We are taking a major step in bringing Home Base’s gold-standard care of treatment for the invisible wounds to Southwest Florida and encouraging local veterans to take that all-important first step in getting the vital care and services they need to begin the healing process.”

Lee Health clinicians will continue to participate in weekly phone consultations for the next six months to ensure the best care is delivered to Southwest Florida veterans and their adult family members and will continue to work in tandem with Home Base Southwest Florida staff to best serve each patient, ensuring that no veteran—and his or her family—falls through the cracks.

“We know that treatment works, and that recovery is possible,” said Kris Fay, Chief Administrative Officer for Lee Physician Group. “We see it every day in our behavioral health clinic. It is deeply satisfying to collaborate with Home Base SWFL to help veterans get the mental health services they need and deserve.”

Addressing what is often a barrier to care, clinical services at Lee Health will be provided at NO COST to veterans or military Families connecting to care through Home Base Southwest Florida. This care will be funded through the philanthropic support from Wounded Warrior Project and
the generosity of individual and corporate donors from the Southwest Florida region supporting Home Base Southwest Florida signature events like the Kensington and Pelican’s Nest golf tournaments and Run to Home Base Florida.

For Home Base Southwest Florida Honorary Director, four-star General (USA ret) Fred Franks, Vietnam and Desert Storm Veteran, who began Home Base SWFL in early 2014 as Health and Fitness with a vision of being able to offer the full family of Home Base Programs, "the establishment of these clinical services brings that vision to reality and adds to our fulfillment of that trust. It takes tremendous courage for a veteran to step forward and ask for help – not all trauma of war or service is physical or apparent, and many of our returning Service members need care and support. The establishment of these clinical services is the fulfillment of a trust. The trust between our Nation, our communities and our veterans that when their mission and duties are complete, we will be there for them at home.”

To learn more about clinical services available to veterans, Service members and military Families at Home Base SWFL’s Outpatient Clinic at Lee Health, please contact Home Base Southwest Florida’s Operation & Special Projects Manager Monique Hashimoto at homebaseswfl@partners.org, (239) 338-8389, or visit www.homebase.org/SWFL.

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ABOUT HOME BASE SOUTHWEST FLORIDA: With the understanding that veterans do not come home to programs; they come home to communities, Home Base SWFL engages with veterans and Service members through community-based initiatives to include a Warrior Health & Fitness Program focused on exercise, wellness and camaraderie. In addition to supervised exercise, participating veterans receive education about healthy eating and living, sleep hygiene, stress management, and the health benefits of physical activity.

Home Base SWFL also provides world-class clinical care to veterans impacted by post-traumatic stress, traumatic brain injury, substance use disorders, depression, anxiety and other issues related to their service through its Outpatient Clinic at Lee Health and through Home Base’s two-week Intensive Clinical Program (ICP) headquartered in Boston, MA. All clinical mental health services are provided at no cost to veterans, Service members and their Families, regardless of ability to pay, experience level or discharge status.

To learn more about Home Base SWFL or to connect to care, visit www.homebaseorg/SWFL.

ABOUT LEE HEALTH: Since the opening of the first hospital in 1916, Lee Health has been a health care leader in Southwest Florida, constantly evolving to meet the needs of the community. A non-profit, integrated health care services organization, Lee Health is committed to the well-being of every individual served, focused on healthy living and maintaining good health. Staffed by caring people, inspiring health, services are conveniently located throughout the community in four acute care hospitals, two specialty hospitals, outpatient centers, walk-in medical centers, primary care and specialty physician practices and other services across the continuum of care. Learn more at www.LeeHealth.org.