

Addressing Veterans in Veterans Homes and Hospitals

Whether the Veteran is a 23 year old with recent wounds, a middle-aged Vet with health issues or a 95 year old living in a Veterans home, we have learned best practices for thanking the Vets, making them feel special and forming friendships:

1. Cleanliness: In all the places we visit, there are sanitizing dispensers in the halls and lobbies. Use them before you enter each Veteran's room and when you leave the room.
2. Health: If you aren't feeling well, stay outside the facility. Entering a hospital or a home when you are sick endangers the Veterans and you.
3. How you act and present yourself is important:
 - a. Always be polite and respectful. Always ask the Vet if they mind having a visitor. We are honoring these Veterans. They are special and should be treated in that manner.
 - b. Introduce yourself and describe the National Veterans Awareness Ride (each May, we ride from Sacramento, CA to Washington, DC., stopping each day at Veterans Homes and Hospitals, participating in local memorial services and speaking in schools). If you shake hands with the Vet, offer a full but gentle handshake. Let their grip be more firm.
 - c. Ease into a conversation with the Veteran. Share a little about yourself: Where are you from, what branch of the service were you in, what kind of bike you are riding, etc. Ask the Veteran "get to know you" questions. Their name and where they're from. What branch of the service were/are they in? What they do or did for a living? What are they interested in (sports, movies, books, etc.)? Because it might be uncomfortable for a Vet to sit and look up for an extended period of time, see if you can be level to the Vet's line of sight. Unless they bring it up, do not ask why they are in the hospital or home. That's private and personal. Likewise, unless they bring it up, tread lightly on politics and religion. We're here to give thanks and begin a friendship, not win a debate.
 - d. Present to the Veteran an NVAR Ride Pin and explain its significance (each year, we produce a newly designed pin that we present to Veterans we meet in hospitals and homes, to nurses, doctors and others who help our Veterans. We also award the pins to police officers, fire fighters, Veteran and fraternal organizations and others who help us accomplish our mission).
 - e. If we have "Thank You" cards that were created by school children, present one to the Vet and, if appropriate, read it to them.

- f. If you meet a Veteran of the Mideast Conflicts, if possible, get a group of NVAR participants and present a Freedom Medal to him/her.

The Freedom Medal is a special award, created and produced by the Vietnam Veterans of America. These medals have been given to the National Veterans Awareness Ride to present to Mideast Conflict Vets.

When we award the medal to a Veteran, we explain that when the Vietnam War service members returned, they were not given the welcome home they deserved. We want to make sure that never happens again.

We then read both sides of the medal and put the ribbon and medal around the neck of the Vet. And welcome him/her home.

If the Veteran has a spouse, we present a Spousal Pin and share our thanks for the sacrifices that the spouse made.

- g. No photos of Veterans in the hospitals or homes are allowed without permission. The NVAR Coordinator will clarify permission requirements at each facility.
- h. Be respectful of the time that you spend with the Veteran. Some of the Vets we meet want and need to spend a lot of time with you. Some of the people we meet don't get a lot of visitors and really, really appreciate the time that we spend with them. If you feel that it is appropriate spend as much time with the Vet as is comfortable. Likewise, if a Vet is tired or you feel that you should cut your visit short, that's just fine.

If you are participating in the NVAR for the first time and/or feel uncomfortable visiting the Veterans in the hospitals and homes, partner up with a person who has been on the ride before and watch the interaction until you feel comfortable.

Our goal is to make each Vet feel special. It's up to you to make that happen, by what you say, how you say it and the moments that you spend making a new friend.