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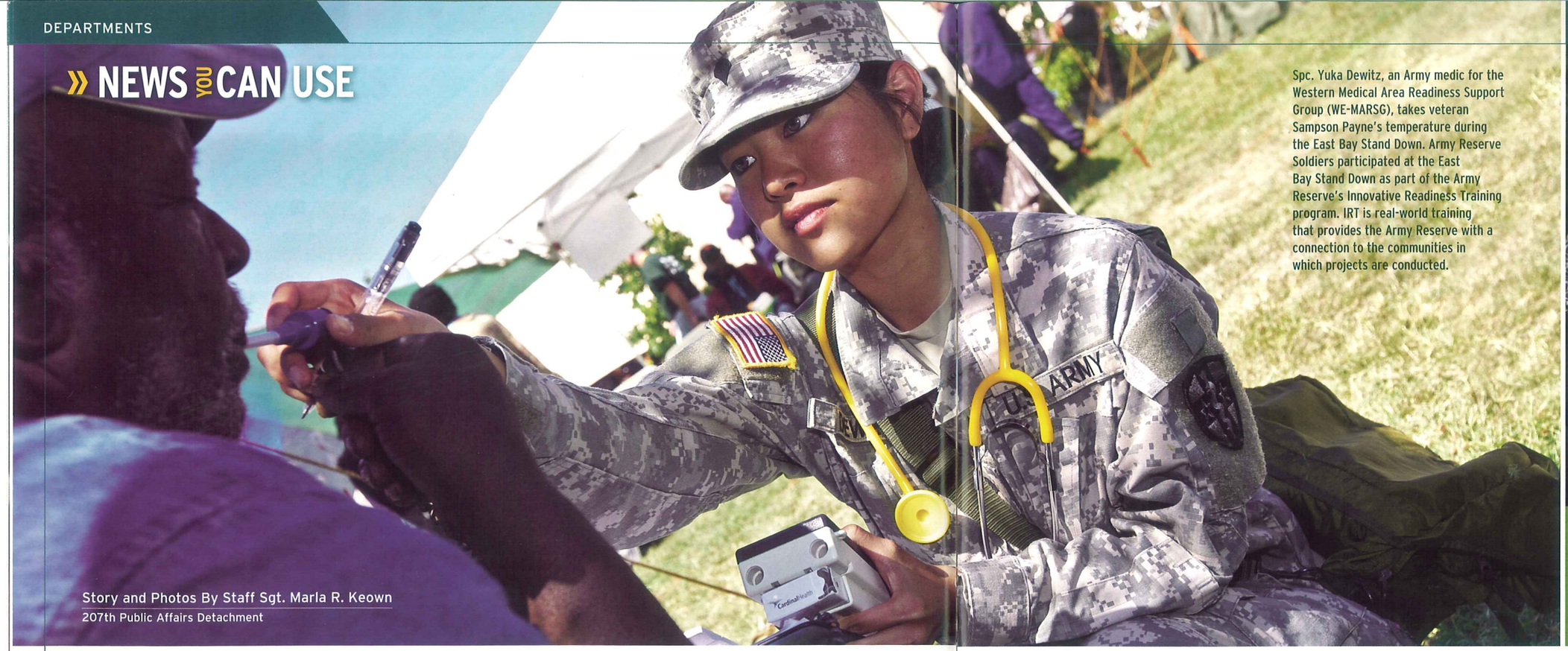
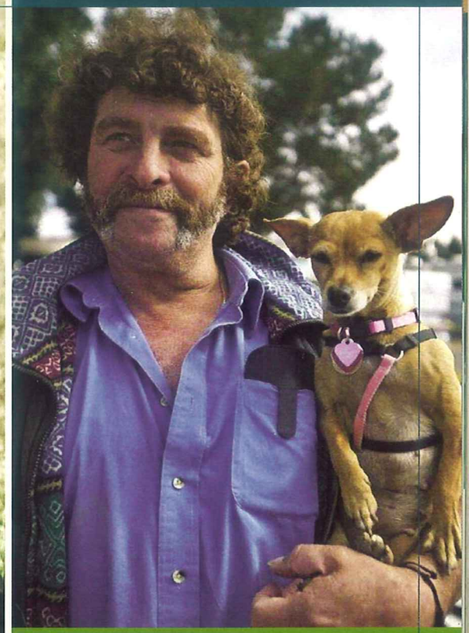


Spc. Yuka Dewitz, an Army medic for the Western Medical Area Readiness Support Group (WE-MARSG), takes veteran Sampson Payne's temperature during the East Bay Stand Down. Army Reserve Soldiers participated at the East Bay Stand Down as part of the Army Reserve's Innovative Readiness Training program. IRT is real-world training that provides the Army Reserve with a connection to the communities in which projects are conducted.



John Morgan and his dog, Lady, wait to be admitted to East Bay Stand Down at Alameda County Fairgrounds in Pleasanton, Calif., Aug. 5, 2010. The four-day Stand Down is part of a plan to eradicate homelessness among veterans. Attendees from surrounding counties of the San Francisco Bay Area were given social, medical and legal assistance.

East Bay Stand Down for Vets

Eradicate Homelessness, Enable New Opportunities

Story and Photos By Staff Sgt. Marla R. Keown
207th Public Affairs Detachment

PLEASANTON, Calif. — The rising sun burns off the cool Bay Area fog while bringing the August heat with each passing minute. A line forms inside the Alameda County Fairgrounds, where a beat of hearty laughs and generous gabble can be heard. Before John Morgan, a homeless veteran, can join the group, he is intercepted by Soldiers armed with clipboards and boxes.

In order for him to gain access and join the more than 400 East Bay Stand Down participants, he is told he must turn over his worldly possessions. In Morgan's case, he needed some extra assurance that his one worldly possession, a Chihuahua named Lady, would be well cared for.

Once inside, Morgan, along with all of the participants, was given access to showers, clothing, and a haircut. A hot meal, legal counsel, and medical care were also part of this four-day event designed to bring homeless veterans and resources together in one place.

Part of the support provided was made possible by the Innovative Readiness Training program, which allows Reserve Soldiers to maintain their military job specialties while serving communities that need their particular skill.

In this instance, the Army Reserve Medical Command's Western Medical Area Readiness Support Group (WE-MARSG) provided care that would otherwise have been virtually inaccessible. The Army Reserve Soldiers served the homeless veterans through the IRT program in many ways. Medics from WE-MARSG assembled 45 tents in three days prior to the Stand Down before they began taking the veterans' vital information and providing them with dental, mental, and general health care as well as physical therapy.

"We take a brief history, we review their vital signs, their medications they have with them, and we make sure the information is channeled back to the medical provider," said Capt. Charlene Richardson, an Army Reserve Soldier with the WE-MARSG. She believes the training will leave a lasting impression on the Soldiers as well as the participants. "I think a lot of the time we forget that we do have veterans out there who don't have a place to stay," she said. "I am very pleased and I am proud to be in this uniform and proud to be here."

The military presence "makes it feel like a real military operation that is the positive part of a lot of these peoples' lives," said Bart Buechner, executive board member of East Bay Stand Down. "That is the same spirit that you can feel in this camp."

The event has already made a difference for some of the veterans. Charles Boykins, a tent leader coordinator, was once an East Bay Stand Down participant. "It was a very pivotal time," he said. "It was what people call the crossroads in your life." He credits the East Bay Stand Down for enabling him to choose the right path. "I was able to turn my life around because I was able to keep my job and get back on track."

Help and understanding comes from people qualified to address the many things that stand between these veterans and their hope for a different future. Chaplains, mental health specialists, and social workers were readily available. More than 2,000 volunteers, both military and civilian, assisted.

The aim of East Bay Stand Down is "to set up a pathway for [veterans] to break free from the problems that they have found themselves in," said founder Denver Mills.

That's what Morgan hopes is in store for him and Lady, who was cared for by the local Humane Society for the duration of their stay. After surviving on the streets of San Francisco for the past 10 years, he hopes the East Bay Stand Down can give him a new chance in life and an opportunity to be better than what he was. ✪