

## 'We're here to save lives:' Mental health clinic focused on post-9/11 veterans opens in OKC



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The Oklahoman



For Medal of Honor recipient Ryan Pitts, who did his basic training at Oklahoma's Fort Sill, the impact of the military on his mental health wasn't clear until years after his service ended.

Though Pitts was physically wounded on July 13, 2008, which required a month in the hospital and many surgeries, it was the "invisible wounds" that affected him most.

It's because of his personal experience with mental health concerns that he is now an ambassador of the [Steven A. Cohen Veterans Network](#), which is opening mental health clinics across the country focused on serving post-9/11 veterans and their families. The 24th such clinic is now officially open in south Oklahoma City, the state's second after the [Lawton clinic](#) opened for in-person services in 2021.



### **New OKC mental health clinic for veterans a 'beacon of hope'**

The Steven A. Cohen Military Family Clinic is now open at 1500 SW 104 and is operated by Red Rock Behavioral Health Services. Cohen clinics provide clients with same-day crisis appointments and see people no matter their discharge status, role while in service, or whether or not they have insurance. Pre-9/11 veterans will be seen as clinician availability allows.

Gov. Kevin Stitt called the clinics and the Cohen Veterans Network a "beacon of hope" in the Sooner State, which is home to more than 300,000 veterans and nearly 20,000 active duty military members, according to Military State Policy Source.

Carrie Slatton-Hodges, commissioner of the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services, hailed the clinic's open arms towards families of military members and veterans.

"We have very little in our state for the spouses and the children of those that are deployed," Slatton-Hodges said. "And one of the things that is so critical about the mission of Steven Cohen is that he wants to make sure that any of those children and spouses are supported — supported without worrying about, do they have insurance that will cover that, do they have the means to pay for that."



The state is partnering with Cohen Veterans Network in covering the cost of counseling sessions, whether the patient has insurance or not.

Sen. Paul Rosino, R-Oklahoma City, said ever since he was approached by Slatton-Hodges about bringing Cohen to Oklahoma, he saw the clinics as a necessity for veterans and wanted to see one open in Oklahoma City.

"Our military members, our active duty members, our reservists, our guard members, they are at the ready as soon as they're called," Rosino said. "What we need to do is show them that we have a commitment when they come home and they need us that we will be there to support them."

**Medal of Honor recipient recalls effects of military service on mental health**



Pitts is like many veterans or active duty military members who were scared to ask for help when it comes to their mental health.

While Pitts served in Afghanistan, having deployed twice for a total of 27 months combined between 2005 and 2009, he said the Army would send mental health professionals out when something traumatic would happen.

But it was extremely rare for those Pitts was deployed with to utilize those services, he said. There was a culture of stigmatization around asking for help, and a desire to seem strong.

"It didn't hit me until years later after my service, that I started to feel the effects of those invisible wounds, of the survivor's guilt," Pitts said. "The day that I was wounded, we lost nine brothers, eight of them in a position that I felt responsible for."

More than a decade after he first joined the army, Pitts finally made the call and started receiving counseling.

Now, he said he knows that there's no difference in seeking mental health services than going to the doctor for twisting his ankle.

"My biggest regret is that I didn't ask for help sooner," Pitts said.

Today, he said from speaking with friends who are serving in active duty, there is far less stigma around seeking mental health services and less fear that it will negatively impact your military career.



### **How veterans clinic can help veterans and their families**

Steven A. Cohen founded the Cohen Veterans Network in 2016, with a \$275 million commitment to launch a network of mental health clinics.

Unlike a typical mental health clinic, the counselors and staff at all Cohen clinics are trained in military cultural competency and best practices when treating veterans and their families.



Verna Foust, CEO of Red Rock, said many of her staff members at the Lawton and Oklahoma City clinics are also veterans.

"We seek them out, and they seek us out," Foust said. "Because they understand it and they want to help veterans."

Getting seen at either the Lawton or Oklahoma City clinics, which also offer telehealth visits, is as simple as a phone call, Foust said. Anyone who is in crisis will be seen the same day, she said.

**New veterans clinic an opportunity to 'provide hope' for South OKC Chamber**



Getting veterans and their families the help they need is a personal passion for Jamie Crowe, membership director for the South Oklahoma City Chamber.

Ahead of the official ribbon cutting, Crowe shared that she lost her father-in-law, a Vietnam veteran, to suicide. This was just mere months after his wife died, she told *The Oklahoman*.

Crowe said she wants to make more people aware of the triggers that could lead someone to suicide, and to help other military families who may have a loved one struggling find the help they need.

And having the clinic in south Oklahoma City is beneficial thanks to its proximity to Tinker Air Force base. Many of those stationed at Tinker reside along the Interstate 240 corridor, she said. According to an analysis done by the chamber, 8.9% of Oklahoma City's adult population are veterans.

The chamber is excited for the opportunity to "provide hope" for those who need the services offered at the clinic, Crowe said.

Oklahoma City councilmember Matthew Hinkle, who represents south Oklahoma City, said the clinic is "a great addition" to the area.

"Their privately-funded wraparound services for active and non-active military and the families and anyone who's affected by the trauma of the military are absolutely needed," Hinkle said.

### **Cohen veteran clinics 'here to save lives'**



Anthony Hassan, President and CEO of Cohen Veterans Network, said the network's mission is to "get upstream" of a future mental health crisis for post-9/11 veterans. Cohen, Hassan said, wants to give these veterans the resources that didn't exist when service members returned from Vietnam, services that have long been stigmatized.



The destigmatization of veterans seeking help with mental health is something Hassan personally fought for while he served as a mental health officer in the Army and the Air Force. During Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2004, Hassan was part of the first-ever Air Force combat stress control and prevention team embedded with the Army.

"It was very hard to get people to accept the help that they needed ... there was help available they just chose not to ask for it," Hassan said. "Now that they're civilians, they're more likely to ask for help. And so that's why we're starting to see a lot of problems that were unattended to for so many years, now they're not doing that well. So we get them back to better."

Hassan said even for veterans who don't see combat, mental health issues exist. In fact, much of those the clinics see are for mental health concerns not related to combat. Veterans experience anxiety, depression and stressors just like anyone else — but military life can exacerbate those to another level, he said.

His goal is to make sure any veteran or family member who asks for help receives it, and the earlier the better.

"Do you know how hard it is to raise your hand and ask for help, and when you do, nobody's there for you? It doesn't happen when you come to a Cohen clinic," Hassan said. "We're here to save lives, save families, save futures of our military children so they can get help early and develop into healthy individuals."

