

# Healing spirits



BOB ZELLAR/Gazette Staff

Senator John Walsh gets a tour of Intermountain Equestrian Center from ICA Board Chair Paul Gatzemeier on Friday. ICA is planning to an equine therapy program for veterans

## Billings center to provide equine therapy for veterans

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Veterans with physical disabilities and psychological trauma from their time at war may soon have access to support from the horses at Intermountain Equestrian Center.

The center, located on U.S. Highway 3 north of Billings, announced plans Friday to offer an equine therapy program for veterans. The nonprofit program is called Horses Spirits Healing.

"The need is immense," said Paul Gatzemeier, board chair for the center.

The wind blew louder than the horses' nickers as Gatzemeier took U.S. Sen John Walsh, D-Mont., on a tour of the center's grounds. But they spoke quietly through the barns, stables and arenas, which the center uses for its existing equine service

es and hosts the Rocky Mountain College equestrian program.

Imparting a sense of calm is one of horses' therapeutic powers, Gatzemeier said. So is what executive director Barb Skelton called their "nonjudgmental" nature.

"All they care about is that you're kind to them," she said, "and they'll be kind to you."

Veterans in the program will be able to interact with horses in a variety of ways. Riding might be a useful rehabilitation activity for some participants with physical ailments, while working in the stables or walking alongside the animals may prove therapeutic for certain veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder.

In some cases, a veteran may simply read a book inside a horse stall, said Barb

Skelton, IEC executive director.

The horses "will smell them, come over and nuzzle them," she said.

"It just matters that they're around the horse," Gatzemeier said.

The center is working with two equine therapy instructors, certified by different organizations, who will lead activities. Otherwise, Gatzemeier said, the longstanding center is already outfitted to accommodate the program.

He hopes to partner with local agencies to connect with veterans over the next several months. Another goal is to receive medical referrals from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

Eventually the center could serve veterans from multiple states, Gatzemeier said.

"We certainly owe it to our vets," Skelton said.

*"All (horses) care about is that you're kind to them, and they'll be kind to you."*

— Barb Skelton

executive director of the Rocky Mountain College equestrian program