



Stairwell Mural at VA Jesse Brown- Chicago



Skylight Mural at VA Jesse Brown- Chicago

Five Things to Consider When Creating Healthcare Art Programs for Military Facilities

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Today's military hospitals are no longer stereotypical clinics adorned with American flags. Our military population requires a unique and thoughtful approach - both to healthcare and healing art programs.

Research tells us that certain types of art can have positive effects on health outcomes. Specifically, studies show that:

- Proximity to nature can help patients lower stress resulting in a reduced need for pain medication and improved patient outcomes.
- Familiar surroundings can help reduce stress and build a sense of security and comfort for patients within a healthcare facility.
- Expanding a hospital's boundaries into the community through mutually beneficial relationships can offer patients a sense of connection to the community during a hospital stay and reduce feelings of isolation.

Military healthcare facilities serve a unique patient population. Some care for military members and their families, offering a variety of services, while others are designed to care for service members with a specific type of injury or illness. In either case, a military facility requires special consideration when selecting artwork due to the distinct characteristics and culture of the population.

When selecting art for military facilities, consider the following five factors:

1. The age and physical strength of the viewer. Compared to other healthcare facilities, patients at a military hospital are often physically strong people leading active lifestyles. In order for these men and women to connect with artwork, the subject matter must resonate with their lifestyle and interests. Images depicting strength and power can be motivating for service members who are rehabbing from injury or illness. They can remind the viewer of their past accomplishments and their capacity for recovery – including the promise of again participating in extreme sports.

At the National Intrepid Center of Excellence, an awe-inspiring collection of original photographs by National Geographic photographers of our National Parks are placed throughout the facility. Just as the parks are our country's national treasures, the images reinforce the message that our military personnel are true national treasures and our nation's finest resource. The photographs are both meditative and motivating.

Well-placed artwork can support physical therapy programs while motivating patients to set realistic rehabilitation goals and visualize future program rewards.

2. Locale and the relationship to patients. Military families relocate often so it's a challenge to create a feeling of home through specific imagery. When we travel a lot, it is easy to forget which rental car is ours or what floor of the hotel our room is on. A sense of disorientation can be a regular occurrence for military service members. Locale-specific artwork can serve to remind the patient and visitor where they are in the moment.

3. Patriotism. An identifying and distinguishing trait of military personnel is their sense of patriotism and honor. Visualizing patriotism through artwork in a healthcare facility that serves the military reminds patients that they are surrounded by people who understand and share their background. Using creative ways to visually represent love of country and a feeling of homeland support can create a contemporary environment and evoke a deep sense of pride. Properly selected artwork can reinforce military identity while recognizing and supporting the home troops through a combination of traditional military icons and thoughtfully selected artwork.

4. Camaraderie and a sense of belonging. For service members, the military is family. Artwork can help create a sense of belonging and can also reinforce messages of support from the worldwide military family. At NICoE Fort Campbell, patients and visitors enjoy a rotating photo gallery featuring the yearly Army Digital Photo Contest winners. The gallery offers breathtaking views of the world as seen through the eyes of our troops along with touching family moments depicting shared commonalities of military life. The gallery connects viewers to places all over the world, helping to keep the Army family connected. These photos help remind patients and visitors of their worldwide family of support while connecting them to others who have traveled in their shoes.

5. The difference between healing art and visual triggers. When people think of the military, images of tanks, guns or aircraft may come to mind, depending on which branch of military they are associated with. While these images represent military service, they are often not appropriate in healing environments. It's important to remember that in-service photos of daily life - no matter how awe inspiring - can serve as triggers that impede the healing process. Many service members being treated at a military facility have been involved in some sort of injury or trauma – so they needn't be reminded of the situation that sent them there. Consider choosing inspirational artwork such as soaring eagles or military homecomings in which families are reunited.

Military facilities, like any other healthcare facility, require thoughtful consideration of the unique patient population.