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## New SMH program meets needs of veteran patients

By [editor@pioneertribune.com](mailto:editor@pioneertribune.com)  
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Jessica Baker

MANISTIQUE – Schoolcraft Memorial Hospital (SMH), a trusted provider of comprehensive healthcare in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, is proud to announce the launch of new healthcare services specifically tailored to meet the unique needs of veteran patients. This initiative ensures that veterans receive the highest quality of care and support, recognizing their service and sacrifice for our nation.

Approximately 19 million veterans live in the United States, many of whom face challenges accessing the care they need. Community and rural hospitals are coming together to bridge these gaps and provide essential services to veterans.

To meet this growing demand, Schoolcraft Memorial Hospital, in collaboration with the Veteran’s Affairs (VA) Office of Rural Health, has developed targeted strategies and resources to assist veterans in addressing the complex health issues that can arise from their military service. Veterans represent a unique patient population, often experiencing physical and emotional challenges due to their service.

Andy Bertapelle, CEO and US Navy veteran, shares his excitement about the new partnership. “This new program reaffirms our hospital’s commitment to supporting those who served and ensuring veterans and their families receive the highest level of care.”

The PACT Act of 2022 and subsequent 2024 expansion have brought the most substantial increase in Veteran benefits, eligibility, and healthcare access in over 30 years, significantly impacting more than 530,000 Michigan Veterans not yet enrolled in VA services. In response, Schoolcraft Memorial Hospital developed a specialized program in partnership with the VA’s Office of Rural Health to improve care continuity for rural veterans. This program also involves close collaboration with Schoolcraft County Veterans Service Officer (VSO), Jodi Wilson, to provide “warm hand-offs” for veterans seeking additional benefits and service-related support.

At appointment checkin, you may have noticed a new set of evidence-based questions, “Have you ever served in the US military, armed forces or uniformed services?” This allows for more accurate assessments and more tailored care and services to newly identified veterans, patients and their families.

Jessica Baker, who will serve as the hospital’s Veteran Coordinator, draws her motivation from her own family’s legacy: her parents and siblings, who together have served 56 years in the Air Force to date, and both of her grandfathers, great-grandfathers, aunts, uncles, and cousins have served in the Armed Forces. Having witnessed military service challenges firsthand, Baker brings a personal commitment and passion to this role.

"We are honored to provide services that address the physical, mental, and emotional needs of our Veterans," said Jessica Baker, Patient Navigator and Veteran Coordinator at Schoolcraft Memorial Hospital. "We'll be there every step of the way, helping veterans navigate enrollment and overcoming any healthcare access barriers. I am thrilled to be part of this initiative; it's a privilege to serve those whose sacrifices remind us that freedom is not free."

For more information about eligibility or enrollment in VA healthcare, veterans can contact Baker at (906) 341-3750 or via email at PN@SCMH.ORG.

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