

How to give back to America's vets

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As New Yorkers consider how best to give back this holiday season, it may seem counterintuitive that military veterans — those strong, brave men and women who have selflessly dedicated their lives to serve our nation and their families — would need our support. They'll never ask for it, but we owe it to them.

Don't assume that veterans no longer serving overseas can always simply return to their families for the holidays. Unfortunately, this is sometimes far from the case. Many return to civilian life with the scars of battle not only on the outside but deep on the inside as well, where they aren't as easily visible — even to loved ones.

In the most heartbreaking cases, too many have returned home with their bodies or minds broken, in need of physical or psychological rehabilitation.

Thankfully, there are many ways that we can collectively give back to our veterans in this last week of the year. I'll be working to support these amazing and worthwhile nonprofits in particular:

* The pioneering **Operation Mend**, established in 2007, has two aims: It gives returning service members with severe facial injuries access to Brooke Army Medical Center, a leading burn and rehabilitation center in San Antonio, Texas. And it offers access to the nation's best plastic and reconstructive surgeons at the UCLA Ronald Reagan Medical Center in Los Angeles.

These facilities work in tandem toward putting back together the faces and bodies the battlefield tore apart, and they've made remarkable progress in improving veterans' lives. Operation Mend started with facial reconstruction and has grown to enhance the healing process both in mind and body. Truly miracles in action.

* Another wonderful organization focused on the physical and emotional injuries that former service members face is the **Wounded Warrior Project**. WWP is dedicated to helping veterans who incurred service-connected wounds, injuries or illnesses on or after 9/11. With a mission to honor and empower wounded warriors, WWP has numerous programs designed to help our warriors as they adjust to a new way of life. It is a first-class organization.

* For wounded vets, **Fisher House** understands, a home away from home, where family is able to be together, is often the best medicine. Founded in 1990, it assists more than 12,000 people each year by providing housing for the families of recovering wounded vets who are receiving treatment or therapy.

This program ensures that an active-duty service member or veteran in treatment is with his or her wife, husband, partner, parents or children for the support they need as they heal. There is at least one Fisher House near every major military medical facility — and

no family pays to stay there. Unfortunately, more houses are needed, as is the country's full support.

While the nation hopefully turns a corner in the job market, veterans are often the final group to go back to work in meaningful numbers; nearly 1 million vets are out of work now.

I implore bosses at small business and large corporations alike to take charge and hire the best: Please consider hiring a veteran today. You'll be glad you did for two reasons. It will be great for your company, and also be a great thing for your country.

As we celebrate the warmth and joy of the holidays and ring in 2012, let's come together and provide all of America's veterans with the support they deserve. We owe them nothing short of our profound gratitude, love and respect, especially those coming home from Afghanistan and Iraq, who have served us so ably and with such honor, dedication and sacrifice.

These men and women fought to make our country a better place for us. Let's make the effort and do the same for them. It's what makes America great and why we are the land of the free and the home of the brave.

Bill White is the CEO of Constellations Group, which brings together public agencies and private individuals and corporations to support initiatives that benefit our nation's military and veterans and their families.

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