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Greg Rodriguez, left, and Ryan Krantz are among the military veterans who have stepped up efforts to help out the Midwest Brain Injury Clubhouse in Chicago after agency funding was cut. ALEX GARCIA/TRIBUNE PHOTO

Wounded veterans heed call for help

Soldiers taking on additional responsibilities in effort to help brain injury center keep afloat

By John Keilman
TRIBUNE REPORTER

Greg Rodriguez was once a strong young Marine who dreamed of becoming a drill sergeant. But that was before a pickup truck slammed into his car, causing brain damage that ended his military career and afflicts him to this day.

He is only 26, but walks with the stiff shuffle of an old man. He forgets things easily. His speech is muddled and difficult to understand.

But when he took the floor recently at Chicago's Midwest Brain Injury Clubhouse, a day center for people

who have suffered similar damage, he stood a little straighter, spoke a little louder, as the Marine Corps in him burst to the surface.

"I will try to use my grown-up voice so that ... so that ... so that ... everyone can hear me," he said, his neural system laboring to turn thought into words. "Today's course will be on ... on ... dealing with stress."

Despite the lingering effects of his injuries, Rodriguez has taken a central role at the clubhouse, which, like many social service agencies, has

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Vets lead fight to aid service agency

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been hit by the state's budget crisis. When late payments forced the group to slash its staff, Rodriguez and three other veterans stepped into the void.

They are answering phones, leading classes, even writing hectoring letters to the state seeking the clubhouse's money. They are, in essence, keeping the place going.

"They've become the critical component," said Antonio Romanucci, the group's co-founder. "They're the front line once again."

Since war began in Afghanistan and Iraq, the military has seen a spike in traumatic brain injuries. The Department of Defense says nearly 147,000 service members were diagnosed with such wounds over the last eight years, though some outside analysts believe the number to be more than twice as high.

Many of the injuries are the result of explosions.

Anthony D. Wagner, 27, said he was exposed to four or five blasts in Iraq when he was serving with the Army's 1st Cavalry Division in 2004 and 2005.

Though the LaSalle County native was never struck by shrapnel, the shock waves of the detonations still exacted a steep price. He became disoriented and nauseous, and his power of concentration faded. But his commanders never removed him from the fight, he said. "They told me to drink more water and take Motrin," he said.

His symptoms continued when he returned home, making it difficult for him to hold down a civilian job. It was only when he went to see a Veterans Affairs doctor that he was diagnosed with a traumatic brain injury.

Such damage can be simultaneously subtle and devastating. Dr. Andrew Naidech, a neurologist at Northwestern Memorial Hospital, said a person might appear to be fine, but "once you scratch the surface, you can find problems that make it very hard to function normally. You might be able to walk to the store, but you still have problems if you can't remember why you went to the store in the first place."

Wagner began working with a VA speech pathologist, who last year told him about the Midwest Brain Injury Clubhouse.

The 10-year-old organization on Chicago's Near West Side aids



Greg Rodriguez, right, talks with Aurora Lisardo during a group participation session at the Midwest Brain Injury Clubhouse in Chicago on Tuesday. Rodriguez suffered a brain injury in a traffic accident two weeks before his Marine unit was scheduled to go overseas. ABEL URIBE/TRIBUNE PHOTO

Adopt-a-Veteran

The Midwest Brain Injury Clubhouse will host an open house from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. Thursday to launch Adopt-a-Veteran, a fundraising program meant to bring more ex-military members into the group. The clubhouse is at 300 N. Elizabeth St., Suite 310 C, on Chicago's Near West Side.

about 60 civilians with brain injuries, helping them develop occupational skills or simply hang out with others who share their condition.

The group receives most of its funding from the state, but a grant from the Bob Woodruff Foundation — a charity founded by the ABC News anchor who suffered a brain injury in Iraq — prompted it to put a new focus on veterans.

The four vets were given internships that allowed them to regain their footing in a professional setting. But as they worked on clerical and marketing tasks,

the organization ran into trouble.

Executive Director Deborah Giesler said the state fell \$65,000 behind in its payments to the clubhouse, so she had to lay off one staff member and stop taking her own paycheck. As she turned to outside work to pay her own bills, the veterans became much more than interns.

Rodriguez, whose injuries were the most severe of the four, embraced the opportunity. His sister Soledad Rodriguez, with whom he lives in Stickney, said he had always had a taste for a challenge.

"He's a very dedicated person," she said. "Any problem the family had, he was the problem solver."

In March 2006, about two weeks before his Marine unit was due to leave for Iraq, he was headed to a San Diego electronics store with a buddy when a pickup truck collided with their car. He was in a coma for a month, his sister said, and was hospitalized for more than a year before he was finally released.

Therapy allowed him to regain the ability to walk, albeit gingerly, and he has made the most of his

growing physical powers: He has gone skiing, scuba diving and horseback riding, and while his speech remains halting and a bit slurred, he can get his point across.

"Because he's so motivated and works so hard, I feel like he has exceeded our very high expectations," said Laura Chalcraft, his speech pathologist at the Hines VA Hospital. "His capabilities are endless."

He comes to the clubhouse almost every day, and part of his expanding job is to lead an afternoon recreation session. It is no easy assignment — focus is typically not a strength of people with brain injuries — but he approaches it with patience and good humor.

One recent day, he and fellow vet Ryan Krantz, 28, of Orland Park, tried to coax 20 people into a visualization exercise intended to reduce stress. When Rodriguez asked one man what he enjoyed doing, the man's only response was a wild peal of laughter.

"He ... he enjoys it so much he can't even talk about it," Rodri-

guez joked.

Harvey Williams, 54, who suffered brain damage from a burst aneurysm, said Rodriguez has been an inspiring presence at the clubhouse. "He's doing the best he can, and I appreciate that, so I'll help him any way I can," Williams said. "He's just a good dude all around."

Rodriguez said he would like to return to school and perhaps someday establish his own center for people with brain injuries. For now, though, his mission is simply to keep one open.

"I was getting ready to be a drill instructor, to be an officer (when the accident happened)," he said. "I was getting ready to do a lot of things. Being here kind of brings all of that back."

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