Beavercreek resident Barry McCain returned from military service in Iraq in August 2011 with an extremely painful bulged disk from a back injury.

McCain, 49, suffered the injury while trying to move a 70-pound piece of electronic equipment onto an 8.5-foot truck. All of the platforms to help fix the trucks had already been sent home, so he thinks he might not have hurt himself if he had something better to stand on than a stepladder.

Although he had a supportive wife and no young children at home, McCain said he understood why veterans commit suicide at more than twice the average national rate, and veterans account for more than 20 percent of suicides nationwide.

“The first six months I was back, I was hurting so bad that there was no enjoyment to my life,” he said.

(McCain is a fourth cousin to U.S. Sen. John McCain, the Arizona Republican and former Vietnam prisoner of war, and the two don’t have a personal relationship.)

But McCain found relief through a nonprofit organization called the Returning Veterans Project that coordinates 144 mental and physical health care practitioners donating services throughout Oregon and Southwest Washington.

Located near the Veteran’s Affairs clinic in West Linn, the Vermillion and Bloom chiropractic office started by realigning his back twice a week, along with providing weekly physical therapy and massages.

McCain went from taking muscle relaxers and “eating a lot of Advil” to working in his garden and some days forgetting about the pain.

“That was so wonderful that the chiropractors and the Returning Veterans Project were so dedicated to soldiers coming back,” McCain said. “The VA is wonderful, and the people there are great, but they just can’t see all the veterans that need medical care.”

McCain’s wife, Barbara, the customer support coordinator for the Army Strong Community Center, said she sees a lot of folks come in who need to be referred to the project.

“Without the Returning Veterans Project, you never would have made the progress you’ve made, because the VA is so overburdened,” she said.

The Returning Veterans Project is also trying to address the fact that Oregon’s Army National Guard and Reserves was tied with Minnesota’s for having the highest rate of suicides in the nation. The nonprofit works to de-stigmatize mental health services for veterans. The group has reduced the wait for services, provided for holistic care and expanded services to include military families, by leveraging private resources to deliver a high standard of free, confidential care.
One of the soldiers that McCain worked with in Iraq recently sent him a text saying, “Sarge, I need to talk with someone.” McCain persuaded the soldier to visit a psychologist through Returning Veterans Project.

**After Veterans Day**

Clackamas Community College will commemorate Veteran’s Day with a special reading of words of war and peace from 4 to 6 p.m. Tuesday, Nov. 13, in the Literary Arts Center, room 220 in Rook Hall at the Oregon City campus. Participants are encouraged to share writings that describe a veteran transitioning to civilian life, an event that happened in wartime, or a letter to or from a veteran.

Even after all of the Veterans Day events, the Returning Veterans Project will continue to provide services for Iraq and Afghanistan War veterans, Guard/Reserve and active-duty service members and their families.

CCC will help in the effort to keep those services going to those veteran families that need them through its Army Strong office on the Oregon City campus, the first such center west of the Mississippi River.

During 2011, these volunteers gave 2,638 hours of counseling and health care services to 230 war veterans and 134 military family members: spouses/partners, children, parents and other relatives affected by their loved one's military service.

Among those the Returning Veterans Project helped was McCain’s son, Spc. Cody McCain, a 21-year-old combat medic with the 82nd Airborne who returned Nov. 1 to Fort Bragg after deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. Cody McCain had graduated from CCC in 2008, and with the intermediate EMT training he’s received in the military, his parents expect he could return home in a few years and be immediately qualified to work in an ambulance.

McCain (the father) decided to re-enlist in the Army in 2008 with his son, even after serving from 1984 to ‘87 watching the East German and Czechoslovakian borders. The age limit to enlist is generally 42, but as a veteran, he found a loophole in the rules.

“The recruiter said, ‘Subtract your active-duty years from your age, and you’re eligible,’ so if I could keep one soldier from having to go back, it was worth it,” he said.

Due to ongoing troop withdrawals, the Returning Veterans Project expects a surge in service demands next year and is trying to raise $42,000 by Dec. 31 to support its free, confidential health services.