Equine Assisted Therapy for Traumatic Brain Injury Survivors
Ketra Toda, CBIS; Stephanie Kolakowsky-Hayner, PhD, CBIST

PROBLEM
There are an estimated 1.7 million traumatic brain injuries in the United States each year. However, there are currently no published peer-reviewed studies on the effectiveness of EAAT or EFP in the TBI population. Together, the American Hippotherapy Association and EGALA, The Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association, list just 29 articles published in peer-reviewed journals, none of which focus specifically on TBI and its sequelae. It remains to be seen whether treating problems associated with TBI through EAAT and EFP will prove beneficial.

BACKGROUND
For several decades hippotherapy, also called Equine Assisted Activities and Therapy (EAAT), has been an increasingly popular adjuvant treatment modality for persons with increased tone, spasticity, decreased trunk control, and developmental disabilities or disorders. Benefits include improved muscular and postural control, decreased spasticity, improved range of motion, improved sensory integration and improved motor skills. Cerebral Palsy, Down’s syndrome, Multiple Sclerosis, and paraplegia are the most common diagnoses among those using EAAT.

Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) also called Equine Facilitated Learning (EFL), has also become more available. EFP does not necessarily involve riding and instead focuses on skills development, increased self-confidence and self-esteem, and working through emotional and behavioral difficulties. Autism, learning disabilities, emotional problems and psychiatric disorders are the most common diagnoses among those using EFP. Many EFP centers also work with at-risk youth.

Equines are helping veterans as well. Tens of thousands of soldiers have been injured in the current wars. Many suffer from PTSD. And as is well known, many of these soldiers have suffered traumatic brain injuries, mainly from blast exposures, leaving them with cognitive, emotional and/or physical deficits. According to the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH Intl.), there are currently 43 “Horses for Heroes” programs in the United States, providing EAAT and EFP to veteran servicemen and women.

WHY HORSES?
Horses elicit a wide range of emotions and behaviors in people of all ages. Because they are prey animals, they are supremely sensitive to body language, tone, and touch. At the same time, horses are large, powerful animals that follow quiet, strong leadership. In psychotherapy, these characteristics allow the horse, its behaviors and movement to be used as metaphor. Horses very effectively mirror our emotional and physical states, creating opportunities for greater self-awareness and for practicing congruence between emotions and behaviors. On a physical level, the movements of a walking horse closely mimic the movements of a walking human. Almost from the moment a person settles onto the back of the horse, he or she begins working on balance, coordination, core strengthening and motor planning. Even cognitive/linguistic and memory tasks can be addressed with new vocabulary associated with the horse, its appropriate handling, riding and tack. Clearly, great care must be taken to train and develop reliable, gentle horses for this work. Generally, therapeutic riding centers take some time to find the right fit between the client and the most appropriate horse. A good bond with the horse provides a strong motivation to continue with therapy, providing a unique source of multisensory input, skills mastery, confidence, self-esteem and pleasure. Recovery from TBI continues for many years, making EAAT a potential ongoing source of physical, behavioral and emotional recovery.

INDIVIDUALIZED PROGRAMMING
PATH, Intl. recommends that EEAT or EFP participants with TBI should be at least at the Rancho Los Amigos Scale of Functioning Level VI, be free of seizures, shunts, or drains, and have a complete skull. From this baseline, certified riding centers develop individualized programs to address motor, balance, visuo-spatial, and multitasking deficits, as well as a host of psychological issues. As a result, most PATH Intl. certified centers practice a kind of integrated or “collateral” therapy, where behavioral, emotional and physical problems are addressed at the same time, aiming for slow and steady progress through structured tasks in a quiet and low-stress environment. Generally, concepts are presented and almost immediately put to use in the barn, stall, or on horseback, which facilitates recall, sequencing and attention.