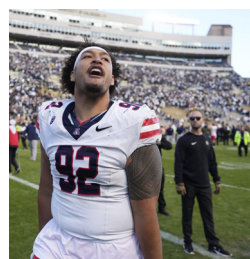




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EASTERN COLORADO HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

VA TOLD VETERANS' NEEDS NEGLECTED



RJ SANGOSTI — THE DENVER POST

The Rocky Mountain Regional VA Medical Center is going through changes because of operational oversight issues and concerns about workplace culture. The Colorado VA system recently reassigned two high-ranking officials, including the director and his chief of staff. This image was created using a plastic filter the photographer attached to a 50mm lens for a stylized look at the Aurora hospital on Thursday.

Allegations of poor leadership, culture of fear, hostile work environment

By Sam Tabachnik
stabachnik@denverpost.com

In 2021, an employee with the Department of Veterans Affairs in Aurora alerted leadership to a troubling practice within the federal agency's Eastern Colorado Health Care System, a vast network providing services for 100,000 veterans.

The whistleblower worked for the Prosthetic and Sensory Aids Service, which supplies military veterans with artificial limbs, wheelchairs, surgical implants, glasses, hearing aids and other devices to help them live more functional lives.

Many veterans, however, weren't getting these services for up to a year — or at all, the whistleblower alleged. That's because the head of the prosthetics department, Norma Mestas, was directing staff members to delete orders as if they had never come in, three former employees who worked in the department told The Denver Post. The motive, they said: reduce wait times and backlogs to make it look as though the department was operating smoothly.

The orders, up to 2,500 at one point, would remain untouched for months, the employees said. Some vets in the end would

never get their devices, they alleged.

"I have seen (the prosthetics) service go from broken to highly functioning under our former chief to almost immediately start to crumble and end up where we are today, broken worse than I could have ever imagined," the whistleblower wrote to VA leadership in an April 2022 follow-up email reviewed by The Post.

This individual, whom The Post agreed not to identify out of concerns about retaliation, said they had raised the issue for more than a year and nothing had been done. Patient care

used to be a priority for the eastern Colorado VA, this person wrote to the system's now-regional director, Sunaina Kumar-Giebel.

But not anymore, the whistleblower wrote: "The veterans that our service serves are suffering and there is the potential for serious health implications or even veteran deaths that could result due to this service's negligence."

Last month, VA leaders reassigned the Aurora-based Eastern Colorado Health Care System's director, Michael Kilmer, and his chief of staff after

VA » PAGE 16

OCT. 7 INCURSION

Hamas' gambit for permanent state of war

By Ben Hubbard and Maria Abi-Habib
The New York Times

Thousands have been killed in the Gaza Strip, with entire families wiped out. Israeli airstrikes have reduced Palestinian neighborhoods to expanses of rubble, while doctors treat screaming children in darkened hospitals with no anesthesia. Across the Middle East, fear has spread over the possible outbreak of a broader regional war.

But in the bloody arithmetic of Hamas' leaders, the carnage is not the regrettable outcome of a big miscalculation. Quite the opposite, they say: It is the necessary cost of a great accomplishment — the shattering of the status quo and the opening of a new, more volatile chapter in their fight against Israel.

It was necessary to "change the entire equation and not just have a clash," Khalil al-Hayya, a member of Hamas' top leadership body, told The New York Times in Doha. "We succeeded in putting the Palestinian issue back on the table, and now no one in the region is experiencing calm."

Since the shocking Hamas attack Oct. 7, in which Israel says about 1,400 people were killed — most of them civilians — and more than 240 others dragged back to Gaza as captives, the group's leaders have praised the operation, with some hoping it will set off a sustained conflict that ends any pretense of coexistence among Israel, Gaza and the countries around them.

"I hope that the state of war with Israel will become permanent on all the borders and that the Arab world will stand with us," Taher Nounou, a Hamas media adviser, told the Times.

In weeks of interviews, Hamas leaders, along with Arab, Israeli and Western officials who track the group, said the attack had been planned and executed by a tight circle of commanders in Gaza who did not share the details with their own political representatives abroad or with their

HAMAS » PAGE 10

Inside: Israel's prime minister rejects cease-fire calls; the pressure is growing as Gaza hospitals are caught in the fighting. PAGE A2

WASHINGTON

Speaker offers plan to avert a government shutdown

Mike Johnson proposed a bill that would have staggered deadlines for funding U.S. agencies; it is not known if he has enough GOP support to pass it. PAGE A4

PERSPECTIVE

Why hasn't America passed the baton to the next generation?

Whether it's power or a fear of dying, none of the nation's elderly politicians seems ready to retire and leave the stress and decisions behind. PAGE D1

BUSINESS

PUC to scrutinize Xcel's \$15 billion clean energy plan

Environmentalists don't like the new natural gas plants, and local residents want a proposed transmission line in Eastern Colorado moved. PAGE K1

NFL SUNDAY

Barber Louie Romero is the go-to guy for Denver's athletes

He's cut the hair of Justin Simmons and Jamal Murray. But sit in his chair and the talk isn't sports. "Clients become friends (and) friends become family." PAGE L1

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RELAX

These 5 Colorado dude ranches are spectacular in the winter



RJ SANGOSTI — DENVER POST FILE

Guests head out through the snow on a trail ride at Sundance Trail Ranch near Red Feather Lakes in December 2013.

Break away for horse rides, skiing, hot springs soaks and gourmet meals

By Brittany Anas
Special to The Denver Post

Dude ranches often are associated with summer vacations. We picture city slickers slipping away to enjoy the great outdoors and fresh mountain air, learning the rhythms of a horse's gait and some new tunes around a campfire. But visiting a ranch in winter?

Oh, what fun! Come the colder months, Colorado's dude ranches offer all kinds of activities, including gliding across the snow on cross-country skis and galloping through the powder on horseback. There's also dog sledding, sleigh rides, tubing and more, says Courtney Frazier, executive director of the Colorado Dude & Guest Ranch Association.

"You'll love the evening campfires and cozy cabins," Frazier says. "Some of our ranches also have full spas to relax in after a busy day of exploring the Rocky Mountains."

Saddle up: Here are five dude ranches that are perfect for winter escapes with amenities that include a private ski mountain, a top-notch culinary program and a murder mystery weekend.

C Lazy U Ranch

The C Lazy U near Granby couldn't have a more idyllic setting. Days on the 8,500-acre ranch start with "Cowboy Coffee" traditions around an outdoor firepit with the nip of the alpine air and end with toasting s'mores. In between, there are horse and sleigh rides through the winter wonderland. Plus, a Zamboni

RANCH » PAGE 37



PROVIDED BY DEVIL'S THUMB RANCH

Devil's Thumb Ranch near Winter Park is an inviting place to escape from the city and indulge in seasonal activities like Nordic skiing and horse-drawn sleigh rides. Afterward, gather near a fire for a snack and talk about the next day's plans.

Ranch

FROM PAGE 36

is used to groom a pond on the property so you can skate in the open air or join a pickup hockey game.

Guests can also go fly-fishing in Willow Creek, a tributary of the Colorado River. Some sections build up ice shelves, but the creek is still flowing and the fish are still biting.

Three daily gourmet meals are a part of the all-inclusive rate (expect to pay \$587 per person/night or more) and the winter dining menu includes caramel apple venison, pheasant cordon bleu, duck confit perogies and rose glazed pink prawns.

Devil's Thumb Ranch Resort & Spa

Go dashing through the snow — on a sleigh, cross-country skis, or with a pair of snowshoes strapped to your feet. Devil's Thumb Ranch near Granby is a rustic-luxe winter playground with some unique offerings, including cozy rides in a heated snow cat that traverses the snow-covered Ranch Creek Valley.

The resort also has fat tire bikes that can plow through powder, and Winter Park Ski Resort is just 10 miles from the ranch if doing laps on the slopes is on your mind.

After playing in the snow, book a spa treatment and slink into a copper soaking tub or enjoy a heated river stone massage.

Rates vary widely, depending on lodging, meal and activities booked. Expect to pay at least \$460 a night for lodging for two people.

Vista Verde Guest Ranch

Old West meets luxury at Vista Verde, an all-inclusive dude ranch near Steamboat Springs.

The culinary program is worth writing home about, with winter dishes that include carrot cake waffles with walnut syrup, Cuban sandwiches and gnocchi with short rib ragu.

At dinner, add a wine pairing. The guest ranch's cellar, with more than 90 selections, has received accolades from Wine Spectator.

There are plenty of ways to work up an appetite. The ranch has a fleet of fat tire bikes, plus snowmobiling excursions, tubing, and backcountry ski touring. There also are plenty of groomed trails for beginners.

Three-night stays in late winter start at \$2,295 per person.

Three Forks Ranch

Near the Colorado-Wyoming border,
RANCH » PAGE 38



JAD DAVENPORT — PROVIDED BY VISTA VERDE RANCH

Vista Verde Ranch offers all-inclusive stays with a variety of activities, including the occasional live-music performance in the lodge.



PROVIDED BY C LAZY U RANCH

The C Lazy U Ranch near Granby is an all-inclusive luxury guest ranch with daily activities all winter.

Ranch

FROM PAGE 37

Three Forks Ranch bills itself as being the “West Kept Secret.”

The 200,000-acre ranch has an exclusive partnership with the Mayo Clinic, a healthcare nonprofit that staffs the wellness facility with certified coaches who can provide nutrition advice and personal training.

A stay at the all-inclusive resort includes spa treatments (guests staying three nights can pre-book two services). The ranch also offers private skiing on a mountain that gets blanketed in snow and has 20 runs. Heated snowcats deliver guests to the summit.

Nightly rates start at \$1,995 per person.

Sundance Trail Guest Ranch

Sundance Trail’s guests have a few options for winter visits at the ranch near Red Feather Lakes. The Country Inn stay includes lodging, meals and morning horseback rides. Or, select the bed-and-breakfast route.

Guests enjoy horseback rides through the Roosevelt National Forest, cozying up by the fireplace and stargazing in the jacuzzi. Gather a group of eight to 12 people and the ranch will provide a Murder Mystery getaway. Between meals and horseback rides your group can try to figure out “whodunnit.”

Bed and breakfast nightly rates start at \$230 per two-person suite or \$170 for single occupancy.



RJ SANGOSTI — DENVER POST FILE

Guests' cowboy boots are lined up for the next ride at Sundance Trail Guest Ranch near Red Feather Lakes on Dec. 20, 2013.