Mending Hearts, One Pillow at a Time

Suicide Prevention: Together, We Can Save Veteran Lives

WWII Army Veteran Celebrates 103 Years of Life
## OPERATIONAL EXCELLENCE

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## EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

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Providing Safe Quality Care

After the preliminary Office of Inspector General (OIG) report was released in April, the medical center staff undertook a number of immediate changes and improvements to resolve logistics and supply deficiencies noted by the OIG including:

• Establishing an effective inventory management process by reactivating the VA’s Generic Inventory Package (GIP);
• Launching a new process to monitor critical areas with Environment of Care rounds conducted twice daily to identify low medical supply stock, and to ensure cleanliness of supply areas;
• Creating a new supply request process, activating a dedicated telephone request line and email address to receive and manage emergent supply requests;
• Procuring a new Sterile Processing Service (SPS) temporary trailer space to ensure proper sterilization, decontamination and processing of medical equipment.

• Procurement of more than 2,700 medical instruments to ensure Surgical Service has replacement and spare instruments to safely perform procedures, increase operating room proficiency and improve the number of procedures that start on time;
• Initiating an aggressive recruitment effort to fill critical vacancies in Nursing, Logistics, Sterile Processing, Prosthetics, Mental Health and Police Services;
• Implementing an Environmental Management Service support contract to supplement cleaning the facility;
• Implementing a customer service internal communication campaign, “Putting Veterans First”, to offer helpful points of engagement to increase customer service and improve Veterans’ perception of VA care;
• Coordinating with community partners like the American Legion to host a Veterans Town Hall, as well as establishing regular employee town halls, monthly employee recognition ceremonies and one-on-one open-door sessions to encourage open communication and information sharing opportunities.

In May of 2017, Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary, Dr. David Shulkin, committed VAs nationwide to upholding the “Five Priorities”:

1. Offer Veterans greater choice by building a high performing integrated network of care and redesigning the rules around the choice program.
2. Modernize VA systems to enhance electronic medical record inter-operability and modernize Information Technology.
3. Focus resources to ensure efficient strengthening of foundational services within the Department and around community coordination with the Department of Defense and other stakeholders.
4. Improve Timeliness of Services by expanding access to care to decrease wait times, decisions on appeals and performance on disability claims.
5. Eliminating suicide among Veterans by expanding mental health care to Veterans with other than honorable discharge who require emergent mental health care as well as expanding community collaboration to broaden awareness of suicide prevention programs and opportunities available to Veterans.

The Washington DC VA Medical Center leadership team has been quite busy working on initiatives and establishing processes to align with Secretary Shulkin’s priorities by expanding access and offering weekend clinic hours; opening the new Transition and Care Management Center to offer enrollment assistance, care coordination and community resources to Veterans; as well as the Office of Public Affairs and the Suicide Prevention team launched a major Suicide Awareness Campaign that includes on-site issuance of gun locks, information about peer-support groups, therapy and marketing to bring awareness to the National Crisis Line.

To Cancel or Reschedule Medical Appointments at the DC VA Medical Center Call 202-745-4377

AVOID BEING A NO SHOW
Research Corner

The Washington DC Veterans Affairs Medical Center’s Research and Development is an interdisciplinary endeavor that incorporates laboratory, translational, clinical, and epidemiological studies to address a number of medical conditions from HIV/AIDS, TB, heart disease, stroke, and rehabilitation medicine to TBI, PTSD, alcoholism, substance abuse and mental health, and age-related illnesses. Several notable studies were published recently:

• Characteristics and Incidence of Chronic Illness in Community-Dwelling Predominantly Male U.S. Veteran Centenarians was recently published in the “Journal of American Geriatrics Society”. This is the largest study to-date with all the Veteran centenarians had no incidence of major chronic conditions between the ages of 80 and 99 years of age. The data demonstrate that Veteran centenarians tend to have a better health profile and their incidence of having one or more chronic illness ranges between 0.1-12.8 percent, which is lower than in the general population, underscoring the importance of further studying factors contributing to health and longevity in men and in Veterans. Authors include: Raja Elsadat Khoutib MD, MPH, Ali Fokar MPH; Nawar Shoea PhD; Leachie E. Bell-Wilson RN; Hans J. Moore MD; Edwin Olsen MD, JD; Marc R. Blackman MD and Maria Llorente, MD.

• Researchers in the DC VA Medical Center Calcium Signaling Laboratory recently published a paper, “Melamine induces Ca2+-sensing receptor activation and elicits apoptosis in proximal tubular cells”, in the "American Journal of Physiology" (April 5, 2017, edition).

The study shows that melamine, widely used in plastic dishware, can act on the calcium sensing receptor to regulate acute kidney injury and contributes to kidney stone formation.

Study corresponding author is Dr. Bidhan C. Bandopadhyay; other authors are Allen J Yen, Clifford Lawrence Rob, and Saviji R Ray.

• The study, Executive Functioning in TBI from Rehabilitation to Social Reintegration: COMPASS (Community Participation through self-efficacy skills Development), described in the Military Medical Research journal, seeks to determine whether Veterans who served in Iraq or Afghanistan and have executive dysfunction due to traumatic brain injury, will benefit from a novel goal self-management intervention. The study is funded by a grant from the VA ORD RR&D Program.

Authors include: Alexander Libin, PhD; Joel Scholten, MD; Maureen Schladen, PhD.

• A clinical trial from the Department of Veterans Affairs was recently published in the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA). The Washington DC Veterans Affairs Medical Center was one of 35 participating study sites with John T. Little, M.D. of the Mental Health Service serving as the Local Site Investigator. The study looked at 1,522 Veterans with Major Depressive Disorder, and found that the addition of an atypical antipsychotic medication to an antidepressant regimen showed greater improvement in symptoms of depression than switching to another antidepressant among patients who were not responding to their current antidepressant treatment.

The new transition and Care Management (TCM) Center is now open to offer a multitude of services to transitioning Veterans in a “one-stop” resource shop. The center is conveniently located in the Atrium of the DC VA Medical Center, in close proximity to the main entrance. According to TCM Program Manager Elsie Moore, the new center is a big improvement for injured and/or ill combat (OEF/OIF/OND) and Post 9/11-era Veterans. The new space is much larger and offers more patient privacy and efficiency for staff and Veterans alike. “Veterans are able to find us and many of the other services they need in one location,” Moore said. The TCM Program was formerly known as the OEF/OIF/OND (Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation New Dawn) Program. The name changed last year (2016) but its mission, to provide hands-on care management services to address physical, emotional, and social concerns associated with transitioning to civilian life, remains unchanged.

Co-located within the new TCM Center are a number of VA and community partner services including: Release of Information, MyHealthVet, Eligibility Office, The Veterans Pro Bono Legal Clinic, Financial Counseling Clinic, Veterans Benefits Administration/Vocational Rehabilitation & Education, Caregiver Program for Post 9/11 Veterans and Veteran Service Organization Claim Assistance. Please note some community and partner services are only available on a rotating basis. Please call the TCM for more information, (202)745-8000, extension 5-5560 or 5-5557.

A New “One-Stop” Resource for OEF/OIF/OND Veterans
Vein Illumination
Helping Ease Anxiety and Failed Venipunctures

If you’ve ever felt like a pincushion while giving blood or getting an IV started, technology now being used at the Washington DC Veterans Affairs Medical Center will be a welcome relief.

The vein illumination system is designed to help health care professionals locate the best vein for venipuncture and demonstrates the hospital’s commitment to improving patients’ experiences.

Simply pointing the lightweight, portable device at the skin and clicking to display the peripheral veins beneath the skin is improving the “first stick” success and reducing patients’ pain and anxiety.

Venipuncture is the most common invasive medical procedure worldwide with an estimated 2.7 million procedures conducted every day in the United States alone. Studies reveal that up to one third of attempts to access a vein fail the first time, creating unnecessary patient pain and stress.

Even the most experienced health care professionals can have difficulty accessing veins safely and quickly the first time. Before vein illumination, patients who are dehydrated, obese, have low body temperature, or whose veins roll often experienced multiple unsuccessful punctures.

The Infusion Nurses Society now recommends the use of vein visualization technology in their Standards of Practice. The INS Standards state, “Vascular visualization technology is employed to increase the success with peripheral cannulation and decrease the need for central vascular access device.”

Parking and Valet Relocation

As the Veteran population increases, Facilities Management Service is working to expand campus parking. In July 2017, contractors broke ground on the Parking Expansion Project. When the project is complete, in four months, 117 patient parking spaces will be added in Parking Lots 1 and 2.

To improve the Veteran experience, Valet Parking has relocated to the main entrance of the medical center. To use the Valet Parking services, show your Veteran identification card and the valet team will do the rest. Remember, no tipping – it’s our pleasure to provide service excellence.

Spreading Health Care Information Beyond the Walls of the Medical Center

Join us for the weekly radio show, “Veterans and Community Health Sunday Magazine”. The 30-minute round-table discussion is hosted by the medical center’s Office of Public Affairs and Community Relations and features current health and wellness information on a variety of topics presented by subject matter experts from the medical center and the community.

Topics range from heart healthy living to how to start your own business to understanding the administrations of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

The round table format encourages open dialogue about general health and wellness topics to personal development and community reintegration strategies for transitioning service members and their families.

If you miss the show on Sunday morning, there are several other ways to listen:

iTunes & www.washingtondc.va.gov

To make suggestions for topics, please call the Office of Public Affairs, 202-745-4037.

Veterans & Community Health

Sunday Morning at 5:00 a.m.

WMAL 105.9 FM  630 AM

Veterans & Community Health Sunday Magazine radio host
Gloria L. Hamilton
Meet the Newly Appointed Acting Director

April 13, VA Secretary, David J. Shulkin, M.D., appointed Col. (retired) Lawrence B. Connell Acting Medical Center Director at the Washington DC VA Medical Center. Mr. Connell is focused on providing staff the resources needed to ensure Veterans receive safe, quality health care.

“As the acting director of the Washington DC VA Medical Center, my top priority is the safety and well-being of the Veterans we are privileged to serve. My focus has been, and continues to be, on establishing processes that ensure employees and leaders have the appropriate resources and staffing to continue to deliver high quality care while improving the Veteran experience,” said Mr. Connell.

Since arriving at the medical center, he has instituted a new internal and external stakeholders communication plan complete with employee, Veteran and stakeholder town hall meetings to establish and maintain transparent communication.

Connell says, “The collaboration of our Veterans, employees, Veteran Service Organizations, members of Congress, and our community partners has been, and will always be, instrumental to our progress. Their insights are invaluable and are helping to chart our path moving forward.”

Prior to being appointed acting medical center director, Mr. Connell served as a senior advisor to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs. He graduated from the University of Rhode Island with a Bachelor of Science in Communications and earned a Master’s degree from Troy State University in International Relations.

He entered the Army in August of 1985, as a Distinguished Military Graduate and received a Regular Army appointment in Army Aviation. He served in the military all over the world including: Germany, Alabama, Washington, Hawaii and Texas.

The Vet Center program provides a broad range of counseling, outreach and referral services to assist eligible combat Veterans and their families in transitioning from military service to civilian life. Services include, but are not limited to individual and group counseling in areas such as PTSD, alcohol and drug assessment, Military Sexual Trauma and suicide prevention referrals. All services are free of cost and strictly confidential.

The Washington DC VA Medical Center has implemented a number of service improvements for women including the hiring of two maternity coordinators and a social worker who helps expectant mothers with obstetrics care as well as a full-time gynecologist and an in-house mammography suite for 2D and 3D mammograms with same-day results.

For more information, call the Women’s Health Clinic, 202-745-8582.
Suicide Prevention:
Together, We Can Save Veteran Lives

“I don’t want folks to know I’m asking for help.”
“I didn’t contact you sooner ‘cause I didn’t want it in my record.”

She hears Veterans say comments like this every day. And for the Washington DC Veterans Affairs Medical Center’s Suicide Prevention Program Coordinator, Valerie Jones-Rojas, it’s a fact she wishes she could change.

There remains such a stigma in our society attached to mental illness, Jones-Rojas explains. “I wish Veterans could know there is nothing to be ashamed of, it’s a part of life. Veterans who have diabetes and seek medical care are not marginalized unlike mental health consumers. We all need a little help sometimes.”

Jones-Rojas and her team are committed to helping Veterans in crisis and unfortunately they are very busy. According to the latest comprehensive analysis recently released by VA, an average of 20 Veterans commit suicide each day.

The medical center’s Suicide Prevention Program Office has a comprehensive plan that includes: handling referrals from the Crisis Line; accessing high risk Veterans, keeping close contact with Veterans and educating staff to recognize warning signs of suicide. They also have an open-door policy to their office on the third floor and a lot of Veterans stop by to chat.

“We’ve helped know that we are here for them and we understand. We will advocate for them and help them advocate for themselves,” Jones-Rojas said.

Some contributing factors related to Veteran suicide include: deployment stress, traumatic events, body image disturbance, transitioning to civilian life, social status change, loss of physical function and changes in the world view. Jones-Rojas says some Veterans may display warning signs of contemplating suicide.

Warning signs associated with suicide:
• Talking or writing about suicide or death
• Displaying a sense of hopelessness and worthlessness
• Reckless behavior, like driving too fast
• Giving away possessions
• Increased use of drugs or alcohol
• Preparatory behavior, like stockpiling medications
• Buying a rope and fashioning a noose

What to do if you recognize warning signs in a friend or family member?
• Probe a little bit. Is the person experiencing psychological or mental pain? Ask how you can help
• Talk openly to the person; don’t be afraid to ask, “Are you thinking about taking your life?” Asking does not put the thought in a person’s mind, but rather it opens an important dialogue.
• If they say yes, do NOT leave them alone. Explain that you will get help
• Remain calm, be direct and non-judgmental. Call 911
• Ask the person how they plan on taking their life
• Never promise to keep a person’s thoughts, plans or intent of suicide a secret
• Remember, they have opened up because they want help

Connect with support.
No matter what you are going through, resources will be there to help.
VeteransCrisisLine.net
1-800-273-8255
Press 1

We’re Here
Together, We Can Save Veteran Lives

SUMMER 2017
HEALTHIER VETERANS MAGAZINE
Putting Veterans First

Eagle Eye Customer Service Program

The customer service program is part of the Putting Veterans First initiative to focus on improving Veterans’ total health care experience. The program deployed at the DC VA Medical Center to assess, evaluate, improve and ensure excellent employee engagement and communication with colleagues, Veterans and visitors.

Eagle Eye Customer Service Hotline

If you have customer service feedback for the medical center director, and you are inside the medical center, pick up any telephone and dial extension 5-7474 to leave a voice message. There are also orange telephones located throughout the medical center that allow direct access to the hotline. To reach the hotline from an external line, dial 202-745-8000, ext. 57474.

Youth Volunteers: A Summer of Service

You may have noticed them at your last visit to the Washington DC VA Medical Center, the fresh-faced youth volunteers dressed in their bright red vests helping Veterans and working alongside staff throughout the hospital. There were 80 of them, ages 14-17, who raised their right hands and committed their summer breaks to sharing their time and talents to assist DC-area Veterans.

The youth volunteers perform a number of supportive tasks throughout the departments of the medical center including, administrative, clerical, research and customer service. The medical center’s Summer Youth Volunteer Program is a six-week commitment. At the end of the program, August 4, 2017, the youth volunteers will have volunteered, collectively, 7,200 hours.

The program provides a positive learning experience and professional growth for the youth volunteers who come from near and far to participate in the program. This year, 14 youth volunteers who worked were from the Howard University College of Pharmacy.

To volunteer with or make a donation to the Washington DC VA Medical Center, call Voluntary Service, 202-745-8320.

Mending Hearts, One Pillow at a Time

Veterans who have undergone cardiac surgery at the Washington DC Veterans Affairs Medical Center may now have an easier time recovering and adjusting to life after surgery thanks to the efforts of Chief of Cardiothoracic Surgery and Director of the Heart Center, Dr. Gregory Trachiotis.

In the 1990’s when the young doctor was in training at The George Washington University Hospital, he encountered a volunteer organization, the Mended Heart Program (MHP). Volunteers trained by (MHP) visit hospitalized heart patients across the nation to provide them a hand-made, heart-shaped pillow, education and someone to talk to who has been through heart surgery. The doctor was always pleased to see how well-received the visits and pillows were.

“I was familiar with MHP and I knew it would be good for our Veterans,” said Dr. Trachiotis.

The volunteers listen and share their experiences about what they faced including lifestyle changes, depression, recovery, treatments as well as address issues that go beyond the walls of the medical center. Most of all, MHP volunteers offer tangible proof and hope that life will be good again.

The doctor explains that with cardiac surgery often comes major stress, fears and personal questions about recovery and post-surgical activities. “With peer-to-peer support, Veterans are often more comfortable. It’s always best to hear from someone who has personally been in that position.”

Dr. Trachiotis, who also serves as professor of surgery, and also Chief, Cardiothoracic surgery at The George Washington University Hospital, explains when it comes to heart surgery, much has changed in recent years. Patients are recovering quicker and returning to work sooner and often leading more active lives than before having an operation for their heart disease. Veterans may remember their grandfather’s or father’s heart disease and have unrealistic or outdated expectations about their own recovery.

Having a peer who is willing to share his or her experience is becoming an invaluable part of the Veteran’s recovery.

The MHP has only been at the medical center for a few months, but already Veterans are benefiting from the program. They say they like that the pillows are sturdy enough to use as a brace against the surgical incision when they have to cough or sneeze or stand-up. After discharge, the pillow serves as a permanent reminder that they are not alone and that there is hope for a rich life after cardiac surgery.

MHP volunteers are providing a vital service that is much needed in a busy place like the Washington DC Veterans Affairs Heart Center. The Heart Center performs about 120-140 procedures a year, from beating heart cardiac bypass to complex valve surgeries, including transcatheter valve therapy (TVT), and transcatheter thoracic endovascular repair (TEVAR). The survival rates and outcomes measure compare favorably or exceed other non-VA programs in the mid-Atlantic region.
Connecting With The Community

Local volunteers and community partners are a crucial part of our health care team. By contributing their time, talent, funds or goods, they make it possible for us to continue to offer important Veteran programming and services. Also, the efforts of employees who volunteer their time, allow us to broaden community outreach and engagement events.

Veterans Consortium Pro Bono
The non-profit organization, Veterans Consortium Pro Bono, now has office hours in the new Transition and Care Management Center. The Consortium is available to help low-income Veterans and family members with issues concerning family law, landlord/tenant, government benefits, discharge upgrades and more. For more information, contact the TCM, 202-745-8000, ext. 53568.

Fisher House Family Members Summer BBQ
Veterans and family members celebrated the start of summer with a barbeque at the medical center’s Fisher House. Volunteers from GoogleServe hosted the annual event and music was provided by the all-Veteran band, The Bill Hariston Project. Fisher House provides a home away from home for families whose Veterans are hospitalized or undergoing treatment.

Gift Baskets for Formerly Homeless Veterans
Four hundred Veterans in the HUD-VASH program were treated to a fun afternoon with a barbecue lunch and fellowship. Each walked away with a much-needed basket of food, cleaning supplies and personal care items thanks to the generosity of: Coalition to Salute America’s Heroes, Feed the Children, Amazon Fresh, America’s Adopt a Soldier, Knights of Columbus, Omega Psi Phi and others.

AMVETS Recognizes VA Employees
Annually, AMVETS recognizes members of the community for their outstanding contributions to Veterans’ health care. This year, the organization awarded Primary Care Physician Dr. Kavitha Ranganath with the 2017 Rehabilitation Award, and named Supervisory Patient Representative Jonathan Wilson the 2017 Civil Servant of the Year.

Knights of Columbus Wheelchair Donation
The Knights of Columbus donated 115 wheelchairs in a ceremony at the medical center in July. Most of the chairs were given to Veterans in need and some will be used for escort service throughout the medical center.

Welcome Home
Recently returned combat-OEF/OIF/OND Veterans, active duty service members, as well as Veterans of all eras were honored with a Welcome Home Outreach Event at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center. The one-stop venue brought together VA and community partners to offer VA health care and benefits information, employment and education opportunities, housing counseling and community resources. This was the second year the medical center had partnered with WRAMAG.

The Gift of Song: Country Artist Craig Campbell
On his way to perform in the fireworks show in New York City on the 4th of July, country music recording artist Craig Campbell stopped in to visit Veterans at the medical center. The long-time supporter of active duty members and Veterans brought along his acoustic guitar and helped lift the spirits of hospitalized Veterans.

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WWII Army Veteran Celebrates 103 Years of Life

Ms. Anne Reeside celebrated her 103rd Birthday with her favorite things: family, friends, chicken wings, and cake at the Washington DC Veterans Affairs Medical Center’s Community Living Center (CLC).

Ms. Reeside was born during a turbulent time in the world, July 22, 1914, just six days before the official start of WWI. Her military life began in a similar fashion, just after the attack on Pearl Harbor Dec. 7, 1941, which swept America into World War II.

“The attack on Pearl Harbor is what motivated me to answer the call to serve my country,” Ms. Reeside recalls. “I wanted to help the war effort and keep our country safe.”

Ms. Reeside’s first duty station was at Camp Crowder, Missouri, where she nursed soldiers who were getting ready to go overseas and tended to German prisoners-of-war, who were also housed at the base.

Taking care of others comes naturally to Ms. Reeside, she is still known for checking on her fellow residents in the CLC every day.

“ar secret to living this long is to stay busy and help others as much as you can,” said Ms. Reeside. “As long as there is something that needs to be done, or someone who needs help, I am going to keep on moving forward.”

Ms. Reeside has been a resident of the Washington DC Veterans Affairs Medical Center since April 2013.

“I love being busy,” Ms. Reeside said. “I love baseball, animals, especially dogs, shopping, helping others and being around all my friends in the CLC.”

WWII Veteran Anne Reeside in her Army uniform (circa 1945).
Bringing Health Care Closer to Home: Community-Based Outpatient Clinics

Washington DC VA Medical Center operates four Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs) and a Community Resource and Referral Center in DC and the surrounding areas. The CBOCs offer Veterans the opportunity to receive quality health care closer to where they live. If you have any questions, you may call the clinic nearest to you directly or to make an appointment you may call the Patient Service Center, 202-745-8000, option 2.

Community Resource and Referral Center (CRRC) 202-636-7660
1500 Franklin Street, NE
Washington, DC 20018

Fort Belvoir Community Clinic 571-231-2408
9300 DeWitt Loop
Fort Belvoir, VA 22060

Southern MD VA Outpatient Clinic 301-884-7102
29431 Charlotte Hall Road
Charlotte Hall, MD 20622

Southeast Community Clinic 202-745-8685
820 Chesapeake Street, SE
Washington, DC 20032

Southern Prince George's County Community Clinic 301-423-3700
5801 Allentown Road
Camp Springs, MD 20746

My HealthVet is a web-based application designed specifically for Veterans and their families. It provides Veterans access to personal, secure, convenient, and trusted health information that improves their health and empowers them as health care consumers.

Services available on My HealthVet:
• Managing Appointments
• Ordering prescription refills online
• Establishing a personal health journal
• Wellness reminders

Visit www.myhealth.va.gov for more information.

Three Ways to Order Your Prescription Refills and Have Your Meds Delivered by Mail.
1. Call the Pharmacy Refill Line at: 202-745-4046
2. Go Online to My HealthVet at: www.myhealth.va.gov
3. Drop Your Refill slips in the Box on the Pharmacy Counter