



Integrity

We act with high moral principle. We adhere to the highest professional standards, and we aim to maintain the trust and confidence of all with whom we engage.

Commitment

We work diligently to serve Veterans and other beneficiaries. We are each driven by an earnest belief in VA's mission.

Advocacy

We are truly Veteran-centric by identifying, fully considering, and appropriately advancing the interests of Veterans and other beneficiaries.

Respect

We treat those we have the privilege to serve and with whom we work with dignity and respect. We show respect to earn it.

Excellence

We strive for the highest quality and continuous improvement. We are thoughtful and decisive in leadership, accountable for our actions, willing to admit mistakes, and rigorous in correcting them.

Message from the Director

AS 2014 draws to a close, this annual report serves as a way for us to pause and to take stock of all the quality work we have completed and exceptional care we have provided to our patients over the past 12 months.

While this has been a challenging year for VA, it has also been a year of improvements for the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center and our Veterans. We opened a beautiful new clinic in Hinesville, Georgia to serve 7,000 Veterans there. Our Homeless Patient Aligned Care Team and pilot Homeless Tele-Health program were both established. We are expanding case capacity for complex robotic surgery cases, and have been chosen to be the VISN 7 Tele-Radiology hub serving as an additional resource for VA medical centers across South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama. At the Charleston VA and in our clinics, we have consistently provided timely access to care by planning ahead for patient growth. One strategy we started last year was our evening and weekend clinics that are well received by patients. Thanks to expanded clinic hours, increased staffing, tele-medicine and many other strategies, our average wait times for primary and specialty care continue to improve – while experiencing our largest patient growth year ever!

Soon we will expand our Beaufort VA Clinic and open a shared VA-DoD Dermatology Clinic there thanks to our partnership with Naval Hospital Beaufort. We are also opening a VA-DoD Physical Therapy clinic in the near future at Naval Health Clinic Charleston, and we are approved to open a new clinical annex in Charleston and a consolidated clinic in Myrtle Beach.

We have also continued our solid track record of quality care, ranking in the 90th percentile of all public and private sector hospitals according to the Healthcare Effectiveness Data and Information Set (HEDIS) measures. HEDIS is a tool used by more than 90 percent of America's health plans to measure performance on important dimensions of care and service such as controlling high blood pressure, comprehensive diabetes care, and breast cancer screening. HEDIS provides the information health care consumers need to reliably compare the performance of health care plans and organizations across the country.

Additionally, Charleston VAMC recently achieved a 5-star rating under VA's Strategic Analytics for Improvement and Learning (SAIL) evaluation system. This is a source of great pride as it places us in the top 10 percent of all VA medical centers in the nation. We are especially proud that we improved from a 3-star facility to a 5-star facility in just two quarters which is a testament to our team's commitment to providing the best care anywhere. SAIL assesses 25 quality measures in such areas as complications, patient safety, access, and customer satisfaction.

We at the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center understand that the true measure of quality care is not numbers or statistics – but rather our Veterans and their stories of improved health. Read on to discover the personal stories of some of our patients who are realizing their best health through partnership with VA clinicians and staff. Their stories of success do more to showcase our service and dedication than numbers ever could.

Stott R. Stracks



Hair's journey began in August 2013. His positive attitude and willingness to give 100 percent towards his oncology treatment carried him successfully through a tough few months. By his side through the entire process was his oncology care team at the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center.

Every member of the oncology team at the Charleston VA Medical Center is nationally certified in oncology care. Their ultimate mission is to decrease the morbidity and mortality of cancer patients through:

- Patient education aimed at cancer prevention.
- Evaluation aimed at early and accurate diagnosis.
- Delivery of standard of care oncology treatment within the scope of the patient's wishes.

- Appropriate and timely referral to a full range of supportive services including palliative care and hospice.
- Life-long surveillance for recurrence.

During a regular follow-up in early 2014, test showed that Hair was cancer free and there were no signs of any residual cancer tissue. Hair thanks his outstanding oncology care team for the positive results.

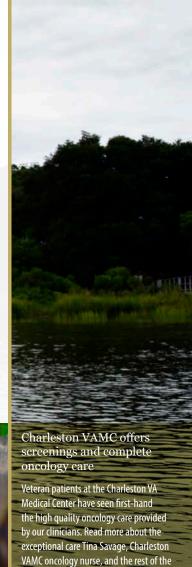
"Everyone from administrative staff, to nurses and doctors gave me sincere attention. The care I have received has always been very personable with absolutely no signs of delay or neglect," said Hair.

"I feel fantastic," he said. "I have a full life to live now."





cancer care to count on



team provide to Veterans on a daily basis: www.charleston.va.gov/AR14/oncology



In 2013, Emma Love

got a devastating diagnosis from her doctor – pancreatic cancer – one of the nation's deadliest forms of the disease with a five-year relative survival rate of just six percent.

MVA specialty cave for female heroes

Female doctors provide specialized care to women Veterans

With nearly 6,000 female Veteran patients and counting, the Charleston VA Medical Center is laser-focused on providing topnotch services to this unique group. Women Veterans can count on seeing a female provider in any of the clinics where they may require care. Dr. Ann Hanlon is one such physician. Learn more about the womencentered health care she offers here:

www.charleston.va.gov/AR14/women



Fortunately though, the surgery she underwent last November at the Charleston VAMC was a success and Love is now in remission from cancer. She said the care she received from the staff at the Charleston VA was more than she could have ever hoped for.

"It was special care," she said. "I received better care than I would have gotten in the private sector."

As a female Veteran, Love is part of the fastest growing demographic in the VA system. She started receiving her health care from the VA in the early 90s and said she has seen a complete restructuring of how women's care is handled at the VA overall.

Specifically, the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center's Women's Program ensures that female patients are given access to female clinicians, including 10 specially-trained women's health physicians, as well as unique services like breast reconstruction, female-only waiting rooms, pre-natal and pregnancy care, expert treatment for military sexual trauma and more. The facility also recently hired a female oncologist who specializes in the treatment of female-specific cancers.

Due to her positive experience at the Charleston VAMC, Love was eager to share the gift of VA health care with her daughter, Helena Frye, an Air Force Veteran who was struggling with PTSD after a recent deployment. Frye enrolled in the VA system and got the care she needed. Now, both mom and daughter are on the road to recovery and living life to the fullest.

"If a woman Veteran doesn't know what her options are at the VA, I recommend they talk to their primary care provider and find out what is out there," said Love. "If they come to the VA for their care, everything is kept private and the care is exceptional."





As chief of the Charleston VA Medical Center's Cardiac Cath Lab,

Dr. Valerían Fernandes

says his teaching philosophy is to help students keep the faith so they don't lose sight of their goals.

highest quality, patient centered care

"I hold them in very high respect just for choosing to come into this field and helping Veterans," Fernandes said.

Fernandes has been awarded the Faculty Excellence Award (clinical years) twice by the students he trains at Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center and Medical University of South Carolina. Fernandes' high quality of care mirrors the way Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center provides care to Veterans every day.

On Oct. 1, 2014 the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center achieved the 5-Star highest possible rating according to VA's Strategic Analytics for Improvement and Learning Value (SAIL) model in the third quarter of fiscal year 2014.

This rating ranks the Charleston VA in the top 10 percent of VA medical centers nationwide for quality of care and efficiency. SAIL is a comprehensive tool that assesses 25 quality measures in such areas as complications, patient safety, access to care, and customer satisfaction. SAIL also includes efficiency measures such as telephone abandonment rate and benchmarking employee satisfaction scores.

The Charleston VA is also ranked in the top 10th percentile according to the Healthcare Effectiveness Data and Information Set (HEDIS). HEDIS is an independent review that measures performance of 90 percent of America's health plans and facilities in both the public and private sector on dimensions of care and service.

"The VA mission is to make healthcare like it should be," Fernandes said, "patient driven rather than investigation driven. If we continue to use the patient centered medical home approach and everyone listens to the patient carefully, we can improve outcomes and improve understanding."







Personalized health plans guide patients toward enhanced well-being.

The personalized health plan is a living document that reflects the patient's values, priorities, health goals, and challenges at every stage of life. It is developed by the Veteran patient based on what is important in their life and outlines how good health decisions can help them reach their personal goals. Additionally, the utilization of PHP allows clinicians to provide focused, patient-centered care. This powerful tool helps patients to evaluate all aspects of their life that contribute to a sense of well-being and become proactive managers of their day-to-day health needs.

Improving health: one Veteran at a time

Great things happen when Veteran patients take an active role in improving their health. Malissa Robinson, health promotion disease prevention program manager at the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center, works hard each day to ensure that clinicians, nurses, and support staff have the tools and training they need to engage their patients in proactive discussions about their health care. See how Robinson helps promote healthy living:

www.charleston.va.gov/AR14/living

Thanks to her clinicians at the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center, Lorrie has seen first-hand how sports and fitness can positively influence recovery and continued wellness. And now she doesn't let anything hold her back.

Lollar-Ray first came to the Charleston VAMC a few years ago suffering from crippling post-traumatic stress disorder. As part of her treatment, the former Airman was encouraged to participate with Veterans on Deck, a sailing program intended to facilitate Veteran interactions outside of the medical center and alleviate stress and anxiety.

Being on the water did wonders to bring Lollar-Ray out of her isolated state and even afforded her the opportunity to participate in a sailing competition at the National Veterans Summer Sports Clinic – an activity she said "restored [her] can-do attitude."

The Charleston VA Medical Center is committed to partnering with patients in this way to help them help themselves when it comes to their health. In addition to championing stress management and physical fitness, the facility's health promotion and disease prevention program stresses the importance of routine immunizations and screenings, tobacco cessation, healthy eating, limiting alcohol, and weight management through the MOVE! program.

Patients are also cared for by interdisciplinary patient aligned care teams, which work with each Veteran to plan for whole-person care in support of life-long health and wellness.

Lollar-Ray now lives effectively with her PTSD and continues to make activity and fitness an integral part of her personal health plan.

Today, she tends to livestock, hunts, fishes her own stocked pond, rides Blue, her 8-year-old painted horse, and continues to sail almost weekly with the Veterans on Deck program. That's what it's all about ... accomplishing her goals and living out her best personal health.









Clinic battles PTSD with innovative techniques

As thousands of service members return from a decade of war in the Middle East, VA mental health professionals are digging deep to develop new techniques for combating the effects of PTSD. Dr. Peter Tuerk, section chief for the post-traumatic stress clinical team at the Charleston VAMC, explains how herbal supplements, transcranial magnetic stimulation, a specialized smartphone application and low-tech homework booklets are being utilized to help returning Veterans manage this often debilitating disease.

www.charleston.va.gov/AR14/mentalhealth

Tele-Mental Health: Quality care that spans the distance

Charleston VAMC is a recognized leader in the tele-mental health field providing specialty PTSD and Mental Health treatment options for Veterans across the southeast. VA mental health professionals, under the direction of Dr. Joseph Coll, have also teamed up with Winn Army Hospital at Fort Stewart, GA to provide care for returning service members - something that had not been possible prior to the Charleston VA's collaboration with the Department of Defense. Soldiers are now able to receive mental health services including medication management and evidence-based psychotherapies for PTSD and depression via these tele-mental health encounters.

Charleston VA recently hired 21 additional psychiatrists and four support staff to expand the Charleston tele-mental health service and has tripled its mental health staff over the past five years to increase access to mental health care for Veterans and service members alike.

treats the hidden wounds of war

His job ... to lead protective service details for high-ranking members of the brigade, congressmen, senators and VIPs taking them to forward operating bases.

Steuart and his team spent much of their time outside of the wire. While he was able to bring his entire team home from the war-front alive, the close calls, months of hypervigilance and countless nerve-racking missions took their toll. This Soldier found it hard to adjust to life back on American soil and it became clear over time that Steuart was suffering from severe post-traumatic stress disorder.

Struggling with alcoholism, depression and anger issues following his deployment, Steuart found it difficult to keep regular employment and began having suicidal thoughts.

But a move to Charleston, South Carolina changed things for the better. He met his wife and, at her urging, came to the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center — a move that put him in the care of world-renowned psychiatrists specializing in the research and development of new and effective treatment techniques for the disease.

Steuart was the first patient to go through a unique exposure therapy treatment at the medical center. Trained psychiatrists and therapists worked with Steuart, asking him to repeatedly retell his story and thus relive the traumatic experiences numerous times until his anxiety responses began to become less severe. He was tasked with intentionally placing himself into stressful situations that had previously triggered his PTSD – and remaining there until his nerves calmed. These exercises served to retrain Steuart's brain so that it no longer associated these scenarios with discomfort. Gradually, the symptoms of his PTSD began to subside and Steuart was able to function more normally.

"It (PTSD) is like a terrible car wreck that you are in and you live with the obvious scars and limp from all the injuries it caused you," explained Steuart. "It doesn't mean the crash killed you, there are just some speed bumps that you have to keep slowing down to go over each day along the road."

Joint Incentive Fund Projects

- Mobile MRI
- Ophthalmology
- Optometry
- Physical Therapy (New!)
- Dermatology (New!)



serves Veterans collaboratively

Radiologic Technologist and her partner Dana Robinson are part of VA-DoD sharing at its best.

Their patients are Airmen, Sailors, Veterans and other Department of Defense beneficiaries. The mobile MRI unit they operate – purchased by the VA-DoD Joint Incentive Fund – is located at Naval Health Clinic Charleston. And they're employed by the VA.

After six years of working side-by-side in the mobile MRI unit, Walker and Robinson function as a well-oiled machine – a microcosm of the greater collaboration happening between the VA and the DoD every day at Naval Health Clinic Charleston and elsewhere in the Charleston VAMC service area.

The Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center and its DoD partners have established a joint Optometry clinic, shared Ophthalmology, Cardiology, Pathology, and Radiology services to name a few. A joint Physical Therapy clinic will soon open at Naval Health Clinic Charleston and a VADOD Dermatology clinic is in the works at Naval Hospital Beaufort. All of these collaborations provide the highest quality care for VA and DoD beneficiaries alike, while improving continuity of care and efficiencies for both departments.

The two technologists work closely with schedulers from both the Navy and the Charleston VAMC to ensure that appointments are coordinated and kept to a strict schedule. They typically see anywhere between nine and 12 patients a day in tightly-organized succession. And, they say, because of the sharing, there's never a wasted moment when a patient is not being seen or the equipment is standing dormant.

"We really feel like we get the best of both worlds here," Walker explained, adding the greatest reward is working with such a wide variety of patients every day.









Lowcountry Federal Healthcare Alliance: Leading the way in VA-DoD collaborations

The Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center is home to one of twelve VA-DoD Joint Venture sites established nationwide. The VA and its DoD partners at Naval Health Clinic Charleston, Naval Hospital Beaufort and the 628th Medical Group at Joint Base Charleston-Air Base work together under the formal umbrella of the Lowcountry Federal Healthcare Alliance (LFHA) to identify and develop resource sharing opportunities. This Joint Venture recently won the Federal Employee of the Year 2014 Team Award for excellence in this endeavor.

Learn more about how LFHA strives to provide quality care to both Veterans and DoD beneficiaries here: www.charleston.va.gov/AR14/LFHA





Not only did Bradbury go through several months of recovery and physical rehabilitation at his local VA medical center after his accident, but he later received essential prosthetic aids at the medical centers in Florida where he moved to continue his higher education.

Always a man on the move, Bradbury's injury served to reignite his passion for sports and – through his involvement within the VA – he found new ways to enjoy some of his favorite activities.

"Getting involved with the VA sports clinic opened my eyes to the different equipment that was available to Veterans," Bradbury said. "They also provided me with a sense of comradery that I thought I had lost after leaving the Corps and getting injured."

Over the years, Bradbury has participated in the National Veterans Wheelchair Games – excelling in weightlifting, softball, basketball, and track and field events – as well as the Winter Sports Clinic where he showed great proficiency in ice hockey, fly fishing, and adaptive skiing events.

Today, you're likely to find this former Marine and life-long motorcycle enthusiast tooling around town on a custom-designed trike that allows him to ride independently.

You'll also find him assisting Veterans at the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center as the chief of prosthetics. Bradbury uses his personal experience and years of professional know-how to empower those with physical impairments. His goal – to help patients live the lives they imagine, despite their disabilities.

"My theory is, if you have an issue or concern, you figure out how to build a bridge and get over it," said Bradbury.



When it comes to developing innovative treatment techniques, research is everything. That's why the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center partners with the Medical University of South Carolina in an effort to bring the best minds together to work on some of health care's most difficult problems.

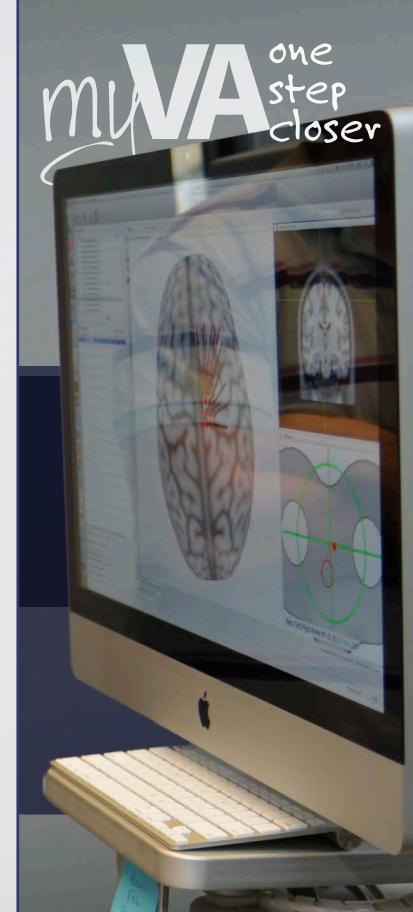
Dr. Bowden, a research health scientist with the Charleston VA and an assistant professor with MUSC, spent many years in private practice helping people recovery from injuries as a physical therapist. Eventually though, he wanted to know more about what made the human body react in certain ways. Bowden's primary question as an investigator is, "Why do people walk poorly?" It was this curiosity that brought him to research and now fuels his daily investigation into stroke recovery and mobility improvement.

In 2013, the Charleston VA Medical Center received \$8 million in funding from the VA specifically for research projects like Bowden's. Add this to the \$12 million received in outside funding and that spells big gains for Veterancentered health care investigation.

Just this year, the medical center completed construction on a new 1,600 square foot research building addition that will become ground-zero for numerous mental health and post-traumatic stress disorder related studies, among others. The cutting-edge equipment and state-of-the-art wet labs housed within the walls of this addition will translate into improved treatment techniques for Veterans battling serious service-related illnesses.

Bowden credits the partnership between the VA and MUSC with allowing him to make great strides in the field of stroke recovery research.

"The collaboration is really key," he said.
"Without the access to the skills, staff and tools that VA brings to the table, we wouldn't be making the connections or progress we have made here."



The Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center's

strong track record of providing the **highest quality**, **timely care** for Veterans continued in 2014. The facility added **weekend and evening clinic hours** and hired more than **30 new specialty clinicians** to enhance access to care. Additionally, patients benefit from **new high-tech treatments** for the medical issues most prevalent among Veterans.

Technology Advances Medical Care

Tele-ICU

Providing 24 hours a day/seven days a week critical care monitoring by ICU-trained professionals, Tele-ICU is an advanced form of tele-health that provides increased levels of critical care expertise to Veterans in distant intensive care units.

Using smart technologies, critical care nurses and intensivists monitor critically ill patients in collaboration with bedside nurses and physicians. Sophisticated computer and smart algorithm technology assists the Tele-ICU clinicians in the care of the critically ill Veteran patient. Two-way audiovisual communication is used to talk to the bedside nurse, doctor, patient, or family members. Tele-ICU serves as an extra set of eyes, and a consult resource for busy bedside staff.



Robotic Surgery

The Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center performed its first minimallyinvasive robotic surgery in January 2013 and was approved as a Robotic Center of Excellence and referral site for VISN7 facilities.

The DaVinci robot at the Charleston VA is the most advanced robotic

surgery equipment of this type in the greater Charleston area. With enhanced visualization, dual console capabilities, as well as simulation, this breakthrough surgical technology allows surgeons at the VAMC to perform minimally invasive surgery for complex procedures.

Building for the Future



Parking Deck

Charleston VAMC received approval from VA Central Office and the Office of Construction and Facilities Management to design and build a multi-story parking structure. Construction will begin in 2015. Charleston VAMC also received approval for a 603 space off-site parking lease that will open in early 2015. A shuttle contract will also be in place to shuttle Veteran patients and staff to and from the leased parking area.



Mental Health Research Addition

This single-story addition, that sets the foundation for future vertical expansion, includes five wet labs, 27 exam rooms and three group rooms. Charleston VAMC has 24 mental health principal investigators conducting studies in such areas as tele-mental health, pharmacogenomics, and repeated transcranial magnetic stimulation.

Our Greatest Resource... Our People

The Charleston VAMC Voluntary Service and volunteers are crucial to daily operations at the facility. With **63,700 volunteer hours** and **\$642,000 in donations**, the Charleston Voluntary Service department leads VISN 7 for Voluntary Service Value with between **\$1.4 and \$1.6 million in impact**. The medical center's nearly 880 volunteers provide invaluable support to staff, enabling them to more effectively serve Veteran patients.

Our world-class team of physicians, nurses, therapists, and allied health professionals includes many of the most talented and most recognized clinicians and administrators in the country. From Fulbright Scholar Kathryn
Magruder, PhD, to Faculty Excellence
Award Winner and Interventional
Cardiologist Valerian Fernandes, MD,
to VA Manager of the Year and
Assistant Chief of Environmental Service
Brian Tallmadge, the Charleston VA team
offers the highest caliber staff
to deliver to highest quality care for







109 Bee Street • www.charleston.va.gov 1-888-878-6884 • (843) 577-5011 Medical Center Director Scott R. Isaacks, MBA, FACHE Executive Editor Tonya Lobbestael Writers Jennifer Stripling Meredith Thomas Photographer James Arrowood Graphic Designer David Jones, MSOL