

FOCUS VA

RALPH H. JOHNSON MEDICAL CENTER

www.charleston.va.gov

Summer 2014

Friendships through Fishing

Peer to Pier program gives Veterans a fun way to bond, heal and thrive.

Open for Business

New state-of-the-art Hinesville VA clinic opens to fanfare and accolades in an underserved community.

Preparing for the Worst

VA has plans in place to care for and evacuate patients during times of disaster.



director's letter



Since 1966 the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center has been privileged to care for the Veterans of the Lowcountry. We have seen many improvements and advances in medical care over the years that have enabled us to provide the highest quality care for those we are privileged to serve. For the past two fiscal years, our VA has met 100 percent of VA's clinical performance standards which include access measures. We have also followed the practice of daily tracking of appointments in each clinic, and weekly tracking by executive leadership and management to ensure our patients are seen in a timely manner.

While our VA has a strong track record of providing the right care at the right time, there is always room for improvement. We have expanded our Saturday and evening clinics providing primary care and select specialty care. We have increased the number of patient appointments available and opened our new Hinesville VA Outpatient Clinic earlier this

summer. We have increased the number of patient appointments available, and are hiring new staff, as needed.

I am extremely pleased to report that currently patients who are new to Charleston VAMC are being offered a primary care appointment within 14 days. But there is more to do in the days ahead as we welcome more of our heroes home. I am confident that with the support of our stakeholders and the devoted efforts of our VA employees and volunteers, we will continue to deliver the best care anywhere for our Veterans.

Finally, I want to thank our Veterans, Veteran Service Organizations, and stakeholders for the outpouring of support during this time. Your letters, words of encouragement and Letters to the Editor have affirmed your confidence and trust in our VA. I commit to you all that we will not rest in our efforts to continually improve VA services and timeliness to ensure your best health.

Sincerely,

Scott R. Isaacks, FACHE
Interim Director



on the cover

Veteran Alvin Finley casts his line, in an attempt to make the catch of the day, during the Peer to Pier Veteran Fishing group activity. Photo by James Arrowood



109 Bee St.
Charleston, SC 29401
www.charleston.va.gov

1-888-878-6884
(843) 577-5011

Interim Director
Scott Isaacks

Acting Associate Director
Shiela Meuse

Chief of Staff
Florence Hutchison, MD

**Associate Director for Patient/
Nursing Service**
Mary C. Fraggos, RN, MS, CNA, BC

Assistant Director
Felissa Koernig



Editors
Jenny Stripling
Meredith Thomas

Public Affairs Officer
Tonya C. Lobbetael

Focus VA is a quarterly publication designed for Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center stakeholders. Its purpose is to inform, educate, entertain and generate new ideas. An official publication, *Focus VA* is printed using appropriated funds in compliance with federal regulations. Contents of *Focus VA* are not necessarily the official views of, or endorsed by, the U.S. Government, the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Veterans Health Administration or the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center. To contact the editor, email charlestonpao@va.gov

To view *Focus VA* online visit
www.charleston.va.gov.

Follow Charleston VAMC on
Twitter and Facebook.



[charlestonvamc](https://twitter.com/charlestonvamc)



[vamccharleston](https://www.facebook.com/vamccharleston)



VA news

4 HINESVILLE CLINIC OPENS TO HUGE CROWDS

Nearly 450 visitors celebrate the grand opening of the medical center's newest community based outpatient clinic.

6 VA-DOD JOINT VENTURE TAKES TOP HONORS AT FEDERAL AWARDS

The Lowcountry Federal Healthcare Alliance wins the Federal Employee of the Year's Team Award.

to your health

7 VETERAN PATIENT GETS FISHING WISH

VA staff help Community Living Center resident enjoy a fisherman's day on the water.

8 PEER SUPPORT PROGRAM IMPROVES QUALITY OF LIFE FOR VETERANS

Peer Support Specialists help Veterans struggling with mental health issues.

10 PEER TO PIER BRINGS VETERANS TOGETHER

Fishing program allows Veterans to bond and share their struggles while enjoying a favorite pastime.



Veteran to Veteran

12 VA PRACTICES DISASTER RESPONSE AT CDP

Employees from all over the nation get training on how to handle emergency situations.

13 IN CASE OF EMERGENCY

Medical center has plans in place for evacuating inpatients during major weather events.

15 VA PARTICIPATES IN MULTI-AGENCY PATIENT EVACUATION EXERCISE

DUV used in large-scale exercise involving DoD and local, state and federal emergency response entities.





Tracey Nelson, administrative officer for the new Hinesville CBOC, welcomes the crowd to the grand opening for the facility as guest speakers Congressman Jack Kingston, Mayor James Thomas, Jr., Charles Sepich, Scott Isaacks, and Col. Kirk Eggleston look on.

New Hinesville Outpatient Clinic opens to huge crowds

By Meredith A. H. Thomas, Public Affairs Specialist, Photos by James Arrowood

The Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center's newest community based outpatient clinic opened its doors during an official ribbon-cutting ceremony on June 13 in Hinesville, Georgia. The state-of-the-art 23,000-square-foot facility welcomed more than 450 visitors during the inaugural event, which was held in conjunction with the Charleston VAMC's annual Welcome Home celebration.

The ceremony boasted several guest speakers including Hinesville Mayor James Thomas, Jr., Winn Army Community Hospital Commander Col. Kirk Eggleston, Charleston VAMC Interim Director Scott Isaacks, and VA Southeast Network Director Charles Sepich. Congressman Jack Kingston, U.S. Representative to the 1st Congressional District of Georgia, was on hand as the keynote speaker.

Kingston, who was instrumental in obtaining initial permissions to construct the facility, lauded the clinic as a welcome and sorely-needed addition to Hinesville – a community that is home to a rapidly-growing Veteran population due to its proximity to Ft. Stewart. The Hinesville CBOC was modified during the planning phases to be larger than originally proposed in order to handle the influx of soldiers returning home from duty overseas.

"We have to make sure we take care of our Veterans because they are part of our national security system," Kingston said.

Isaacks and Sepich both addressed the large crowd of Veterans, military officials, community leaders, VA staff and volunteers – and both stressed the top-notch care that Veterans can expect to receive at local VA facilities.

"At the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center, we are known for providing the highest standards of quality care," Isaacks said. "That tradition of excellence continues to be proven today as we consistently excel, meeting 100 percent of VA's clinical quality measures last year. That means you can rest assured that, at this clinic, you will receive the best care anywhere."

The permanent Hinesville clinic replaces a much smaller interim clinic, which was activated in July 2011. The new facility can provide services for up to 7,200 patients and anticipates nearly 16,000 primary care visits and 10,200 mental health visits each year.

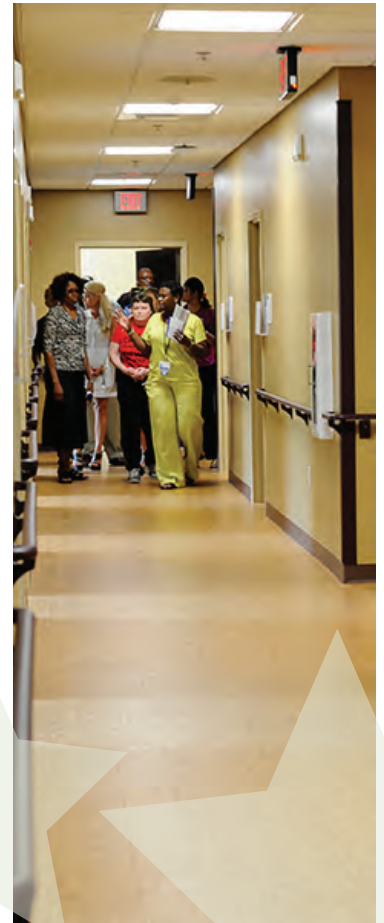
Guests at the event were treated, prior to the start of the ceremony, to military-themed musical selections performed by the 3rd Infantry Division Division Band Brass Quintet based out of Fort Stewart. Tracey Nelson, administrative officer for the new clinic, served as mistress of ceremonies and greeted the crowd warmly before the invocation was given by John Painter, Chaplain at the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center. Spc. Shannon Rafferty of the 3rd Infantry Division Band sang a beautiful rendition of the national anthem, followed by the recitation of the National Anthem by local Hinesville Army Veteran Sherry Young.

Following the grand opening and ribbon cutting, throngs of guests toured the facility and enjoyed refreshments and the information fair set up in conjunction with the corresponding Welcome Home event. Clinic staff provided health screenings and VA employees were on hand to explain eligibility and enrollment with Veterans new to the VA system.

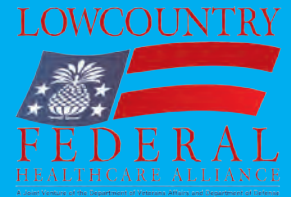


The brand new Hinesville VA Outpatient Clinic is fully operational and is currently scheduling Veteran appointments and seeing new patients. For questions regarding eligibility for VA healthcare, please visit our website at www.charleston.va.gov.

Sepich, Kingston, Thomas, Eggleston and Isaacks are joined by clinic staff as they cut the ceremonial ribbon to officially open the brand new Hinesville VA Outpatient Clinic.



Clockwise: Congressman Jack Kingston thanks a Veteran following the grand opening ceremony of the Hinesville CBOC. Kingston was instrumental in bringing the new clinic to fruition, A member of the 3rd Infantry Division Band Brass Quintet plays a military tune to entertain the crowd prior to the grand opening ceremony for the Hinesville VA Outpatient Clinic in Georgia, Janet Triplett, nurse manager at the Hinesville VA Outpatient Clinic, leads visitors on a tour of the new facility during the grand opening and Welcome Home event, VA staff assist a Veteran during the Welcome Home event that took place in conjunction with the Hinesville clinic grand opening, Hinesville Veterans listen intently as speakers address the audience at the Hinesville CBOC grand opening.



Lowcountry Federal Healthcare Alliance won the Federal Employee of the Year 2014 Team Award for collaboration to provide shared medical services to VA and DoD patients. Team members pictured (l-r): Rebecca Gardner, Cmdr. Robin Lewis, Rick Mahon, Capt. Marvin Jones, Col. Judith Hughes, Scott Isaacks, Sharon Winkler, Ray Seegers, Tonya Lobbestael and Kris Patterson.

FEOY TEAM AWARD GOES TO VA/DOD LFHA

By Tonya Lobbestael, Public Affairs Officer, Photo by James Arrowood

The Lowcountry Federal Healthcare Alliance won the Federal Employee of the Year Team Award for its collaboration to provide shared health care services to Veterans and DoD beneficiaries, improving access, continuity of care and cost efficiencies for care delivery.

The Lowcountry Federal Health Alliance (LFHA) is one of only 12 VA-DoD Joint Venture Sites in the U.S. This voluntary partnership, started in 2006, was established voluntarily by Naval Health Clinic Charleston, Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center, 628th Medical Group and Naval Hospital Beaufort. The partner organizations have completed multiple Joint Incentive Fund projects that have improved access for patient care and resulted in significant cost savings and cost avoidances for the government.

These include a joint Optometry and Ophthalmology Clinic at Joint Base Charleston-Weapons that provided more than 10,000 episodes of care for Veterans, active duty, dependents and military retirees yielding a cost avoidance of more than \$1M so far, and two mobile MRI units located at Naval Health Clinic Charleston and Naval Hospital Beaufort. LFHA is currently implementing two more Joint Incentive Fund projects – a shared

physical therapy clinic at Naval Health Clinic Charleston, and a shared dermatology clinic at Naval Hospital Beaufort.

“We are incredibly proud of our track record for successful collaborations which has been recognized by both the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Defense. And we are especially proud to be serving our heroes who have sacrificed so much for our freedom,” said Capt. Marvin Jones, Commanding Officer, Naval Health Clinic Charleston and LFHA chairman.

VA also has two clinics co-located with DoD. VA’s Goose Creek clinic is co-located with Naval Health Clinic Charleston. There VA and Navy staff work side-by-side in the lab and services such as radiology and pharmacy service both VA and DoD patients. VA’s Beaufort clinic is co-located with Naval Hospital Beaufort. Similar services are shared for all patients there too.

“Our VA-DoD partnership benefits Veteran and DoD patients in so many ways,” said Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center Interim Director Scott Isaacks. “Working together we are able to provide the specialty care they need closer to home while saving taxpayer dollars, improving continuity of

patient and family centered care and easing the transition from active duty to Veteran status.”

LFHA also partners to provide shared orthopedics, cardiology and audiology services. DoD and VA staff also train together to maintain professional proficiencies. “Our LFHA team is setting the standard for working together to improve patient care,” said 628th Medical Group Commander Col. Judith Hughes. “The bottom line is important, but it’s really all about the patients and making sure they have the best care and the best access to that care right here in our federal community.”

The Lowcountry Federal Healthcare Alliance partnership was made possible by the National Defense Authorization Act 2003, Section 721, which authorized the Department of Defense (DoD) and the VA Health Care Sharing Incentive Fund. The purpose of this Act was to provide funding that allowed various local, regional and national entities to coordinate and share health care resources. The purpose of the alliance is to develop mutually beneficial medical service sharing agreements that improve access to quality and cost-effective health care for all of their beneficiaries. The alliance was recognized as a VA-DoD Joint Venture site in 2012.

Gone Fishing

Veteran patient sets off for day on the water

By Jenny Stripling, Public Affairs Specialist, Photo by James Arrowood



Veteran Chris Gibson and Bill Campbell set off for a day on the water. Campbell was one of the employees at the VA who helped plan the fishing trip for Gibson. Charleston VA employees and The Reel Deal fishing with Charters of Charleston.



“Bless the troops who put their life on the line for us. Watch over us today as we embark on this day of fishing. Thank you for letting Chris be here with us today.”

When fishing with The Reel Deal Charters of Charleston a prayer is said before every fishing excursion and on this day that was no exception. What was different, however, was that along for the ride and experience this particular day was Charleston VA Medical Center’s Community Living Center resident, Chris Gibson.

Gibson is a 38 year-old Air Force Veteran who loves to fish and has been enjoying the hobby his entire life. He recalls teaching himself to fish at an early age.

“I used to ride my bike to the creek when I was a young boy,” said Gibson. “The best thing about fishing for me is fighting the fish and reeling them in.”

Gibson was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in December 2013 and has been a resident in the Charleston VAMC CLC since the beginning of April. Gibson was able to join the group for the day thanks to some employees at the Charleston VA Medical Center.

David Bradbury, chief of prosthetics at the Charleston VA Medical Center, met Chris by chance while sitting outside the VA having lunch.

“Chris was in his power wheelchair and came outside for some fresh air,” said Bradbury. “We began to talk about his military experience as many Veterans do and I learned of his service in the Air Force.”

“He told me of his medical condition and began talking about various activities and one common subject that came about was fishing. He expressed to me that if he could do one more thing it would be going back out on a boat for a fishing trip. We departed ways shortly after and I returned to my office and discussed this with some employees who had contacts within the community and this is where the planning began.”

Bill Campbell, Program Coordinator at the Charleston VA Medical Center, was happy to reach out to his contacts at The Reel Deal Charters to make Gibson’s wish a reality.

“The trip was a great opportunity to do something for a well deserving Veteran,” said Bradbury. “It’s events in the community like this that bring people together for a common goal of having fun. It was truly a blessing to share that time with Chris and his pleasure for fishing.”

The sun was shining bright over the Cooper River the day of the fishing excursion and it was obvious from Gibson’s smile that he didn’t want to be anywhere else but there on the water.

“This is great. I’m excited about today. The last time I went fishing I didn’t catch anything, so hopefully today there will be something,” said Gibson.

Not only did Gibson end up catching something during the fishing trip, he caught the biggest fish of the day.

The Reel Deal Charters is owned and operated by Rich and Theresa Harris and they were more than happy to accommodate Gibson on one of their fishing trips.

No matter what branch of service, we are family. This is what you do for family. Take care of one another,” said Theresa Harris, an Air force Veteran herself.

Gibson said he can’t thank the employees in the CLC enough for giving him the opportunity to enjoy so many activities as a resident and for teaching him one very important thing:

“Enjoy the time you have because you just never know.”



Peer Support Specialist Todd Harwood is seen here during a Veteran Peer Support fishing group that is held every Thursday at the Mt. Pleasant Waterfront Pier. Veterans have time to relax and bond with one another while participating in the fishing group.



PEER SUPPORT PROGRAM

IMPROVING QUALITY OF LIFE FOR VETERANS

By Jenny Stripling, Public Affairs Specialist, Photos by James Arrowood

Veterans who have made the transition from active duty soldier into civilian life may find the change to be challenging, especially when dealing with mental health issues such as depression or PTSD. With the right tools and resources, along with a stellar support system, building a better life is possible for those Veteran patients.

Todd Harwood is one of the program leaders for the VA's Peer Support Program. He said he could have used this program when he faced his own mental challenges.

"I wish I had fellow Veterans that I could have related to more," Harwood said.

Harwood is one of many peer support specialists who, as Veterans themselves, have had a mental health and/or co-occurring condition and have been trained and certified to help other Veterans with these conditions. They actively volunteer or are hired to provide peer support services to others engaged in mental health treatment. They share knowledge and experience with other Veterans, so that they, too, may learn to lead the lives they deserve.

According to Harwood the Peer Support Program may be utilized by Veterans being seen or treated by Mental Health Programs throughout the VA.

"Veterans are given the opportunity to have individual sessions with a peer support specialist to ask questions about the recovery experience and treatment options that are offered," said Harwood. "Through the program they are able to seek employment, education and learn new coping and life skills."

Harwood said Veterans benefit from socialization and camaraderie building groups and recreational opportunities,



Veteran Donald Phillips talks with Charleston VA Peer Support Specialist, Michael Robinson, during one of their sessions. Phillips says the times he can talk with Michael helps him tremendously in making sure he's staying on the right track.

benefits, resources, advocacy for care, and simply having someone who understands their language and what they are going through so as to translate this to their doctors who may not fully understand.

Joyce Bell, Social Worker at the Charleston VA Medical Center, has been on the Peer Support conference planning committee for several years and is one of two official points of contacts in VISN 7 for Peer Specialists.

"No matter how skilled, educated, or dedicated a professional is, a peer specialist has a unique contribution," said Bell. "A certified peer specialist, a Veteran with peer specialist training, offers a shared similar lived experience in recovery and hope of recovery like no one else.

"They are often the first light in the darkness for many, that moment when a Veteran thinks maybe they can get better."

Charleston VA Peer Support Specialist, Michael Robinson, understands the struggle some Veterans face after returning home from combat, or even in day-to-day life. As someone who at one point in his life found himself living on the street addicted to drugs and alcohol, Robinson says the benefits of this program are invaluable to Veterans.

"I think the biggest benefit Veterans receive with this program is the fact they are being helped by fellow Veterans," said Robinson.

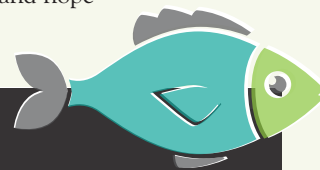
Robinson said Veterans tend to open up more to a fellow Veteran because of the commonality they both have.

"Not only that, I was once homeless, addicted to drugs, and just plain lost until I came to the VA for help. Therefore, when I talk with the Veterans who come into the Homeless Program, I can share my experience with them and show them that their lives can definitely change and that I am willing to assist them in any way that I can in hopes that they will become productive members of society."

Robinson says he hopes that what he shares with Veterans will make them think, 'If he can do it then maybe I can as well'.

Robinson meets with Donald Phillips regularly. Phillips is a Vietnam War era Veteran who admittedly relied on substance abuse in the past to get through life. Phillips is part of the Peer Support Program here at the Charleston VA and says it has changed his life.

"Joining the peer support program last year was totally awakening for me," said Phillips. "Michael and the entire staff have been more than amazing and have led me to other avenues that have increased my awareness of life. I cannot say enough about the VA. Some people don't know about the help they can get from the VA and I wish I could shout it from the rooftops. They are all so gracious and patient here. Without the VA I am 90 percent sure I wouldn't be here today."



The American Veteran video magazine is produced by the Department of Veterans Affairs and reports stories of interest and value to Veterans, their families and the American public. They recently interviewed peer support specialists and Veterans at the Charleston VA for a video piece that will be live on The American Veteran Website at a later date. Visit the Charleston VAMC website at www.charleston.va.gov for the latest news and information on the video release.

Calm Waters

Peer to Pier program

a means of therapy, bonding



Veterans Heywood Wall and Al Finley, guided by Peer Support Specialist Todd Harwood, can be found fishing at Mt. Pleasant Memorial Waterfront Park every other Thursday with several other Veterans.

By Jenny Stripling, Public Affairs Specialist, Photos by James Arrowood

A group of Veterans meditatively attach bait to tiny fishing hooks. The work is meticulous and relaxing for them.

The calm and tranquility of water is a world away from combat and war. Maybe that's one reason why this activity is so loved by this group of Veterans.

Guiding and encouraging the group is Todd Harwood, Peer Support Specialist at the Goose Creek VA Clinic. Harwood went above and beyond, implementing this Charleston group fishing activity for Veterans, aptly named Peer to Pier.

Through his interactions with Veterans daily as a VA certified peer support specialist, Harwood would hear Veterans express their want and desire for some sort of group activity. He identified an activity that several Veterans had expressed joy in participating in, but claiming they had no one to fish with, a lack of motivation to go, or were dealing with social anxiety and isolation.

Harwood was committed in finding a way to continue Veterans progress in socialization and camaraderie building outside the walls of the VA. As a Veteran himself, Harwood knows what it can be like to feel alone and not know where to go; who to talk to.

"This fishing group is designed to help Veterans socialize with other Veterans and bring them out of isolation," said Harwood. "I wanted to help other Veterans find their road to recovery just a little easier than I found mine.

As a peer support specialist, Harwood is one of many who play a vital role in a Veteran's road to recovery from stress, PTSD and other mental health issues. Peer Support Specialists share knowledge and experiences with other Veterans, so that they, too, may learn to lead the lives they deserve.

The Air Force took Veteran Heyward Wall all over the world for 22 years until he finally settled in Charleston. Receiving his care from the Goose Creek clinic, he found out about the group fishing activity and thought it sounded like a really great way to meet other Veterans.

"It's relaxing. You come out here every other week and bond with everyone else and share stories," said Wall. "I'm out here every time. I look forward to it and have become real good friend with Pastor Finley."

Alvin Finley, Air Force Veteran, sits back and relaxes on a swing on the Mt. Pleasant pier, his fishing rod set waiting for a bite. Finley receives his care at the Goose Creek VA clinic and has found both new friends and joy from the Peer to Pier group.



Veteran Alvin Finley casts his line, in an attempt to make the catch of the day, during the Peer to Pier Veteran Fishing group activity.



Alvin Finley, Air Force Veteran, baits his fishing hook, as Veteran Heyward Wall, background, relaxes while waiting for a bite.

“Every other Thursday we are here fishing, bonding with one another,” said Finley with a smile. “It really gives you a feeling of camaraderie with other Veterans and you meet people you may not have met otherwise.”

Finley also joined the VA sponsored MOVE! Program which is designed for overweight Veterans who have made the commitment to lead healthier, more active lifestyles. Finley said he has lost weight and also stays active with all of the wonderful programs designed for Veterans in mind.

Although Finley doesn’t receive treatment for PTSD, he said he relates and feels for his fellow Veteran fishers who do receive the care they need.

“It’s tough. You see what war and stress can do to people,” said Finley. “Being out here at the water with them means a lot.”

When asked what Finley would tell another Veteran who was on the fence about participating in a group activity such as MOVE! or Peer to Pier fishing, he offered up simple yet profound advice.

“Try it. You have to try it. What have you got to lose?”

Veterans can also participate in a group swim therapy and Harwood said more Veteran centric activity groups like this are likely to come, but recovery as a whole starts with the individual.

“A lot of the Veterans still have the feeling of being unwanted after the Vietnam War and have trust issues that the general public cares or respects what they did,” explains Harwood.

“People walking along the pier will stop and the conversation usually starts out with ‘what are you fishing for?’ and then they find out we are a bunch of Veterans out here fishing. It’s important for the general public to see Veterans out living a happy, meaningful life.”

Harwood said recovery is different for everyone and wants to let Veterans know that the VA is here to serve them in any capacity.

“My goal is to continue to inform them of the current activity offerings in the future, just in case something sparks their interest.”

The Peer to Pier fishing group averages 12 to 15 Veterans each session, with sessions occurring every two weeks until September 11. All Veterans are welcome to sign up.

**For more information
or to become involved
with the Peer to Pier
fishing group or Peer
Support Program, please
call 843-377-7400.**

VA Practices Disaster Response at CDP

By Public Affairs Staff

Predicting disaster or hazardous incidents is impossible. The next major event can come at any moment. Preparation and planning for the unexpected is the only course of action when the number of lives saved is determined by an appropriate response.

Following a hazardous event organizations specializing in a variety of skills are mobilized to assist in the rescue and recovery. These organizations may represent local or state governments as the federal government supports. Healthcare is no different and as hospitals and clinics become overwhelmed medical services become ever more important.

Recently, 39 employees from the Veterans Health Administration attended training at FEMA's Center for Domestic Preparedness. The group represented 14 states and 22 VA medical centers. Acting under the leadership of Health and Human Services (HHS), during an emergency the VA may be activated to perform public health and medical care.

"This training provides a great opportunity for our VA staffs who have never experienced a disaster," said Tim Turner, area emergency manager for Veterans Health Administration office of Emergency Management, Birmingham, Ala. "Disaster response is about planning, and training like this focuses on that concept and opens discussion about critical decision making skills."

The VA employees conducted the week of training at the CDP's Noble Training Facility. The NTF is the only hospital in the nation solely dedicated to training healthcare professionals for mass casualty response. They attended two healthcare courses, Hospital Emergency Response Training and Healthcare Leadership for Mass Casualty Incidents.



Courtesy photo

Veterans Health Administration personnel operate inside the command center of the Noble Training Facility (NTF) at FEMA's Center for Domestic Preparedness (CDP), in Anniston, Ala. Recently, 39 employees from the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) attended training at the CDP.

"I have more confidence in our ability to plan," said Judy Hamrick, VA deputy nurse executive, Robley Rex VA Medical Center, Louisville, Ky. "If you don't know your organization's plan, how do you know you're completing procedures wrong? Rather than reacting when a disaster occurs, I intend to implement a planned process."

During training, the students were required to activate the hospital's command center and effectively provide a medical response to a simulated mass casualty incident. The training slightly changed from normal operations often experienced in a VA hospital. Common day-to-day practice is to treat veterans, however, following a disaster the VA could be called upon to support state and local healthcare services.

"We never know when something is going to happen," said Iris Bryan, Licensed Practical Nurse, Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center, Charleston, S.C. "Most people don't realize other responsibilities the VA has during a disaster. We have knowledgeable staff who can be put to good use taking care of the population, supporting our state and local agencies."

The CDP finalized an Interagency Agreement with VHA in Fiscal Year 2013. Over the past eight months the CDP has trained more than 250 VHA personnel and multiple iterations are scheduled throughout

the year.

"I did not anticipate how good the training would be," said Vince Vernacchio, assistant nurse manager of ambulatory care, Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center, Charleston, S.C. "I'm learning more about the process of responding to a mass casualty type event. The training is going to help identify weak areas and other vulnerabilities in our response plans."

The CDP plays a leading role in preparing state, local and tribal responders to prepare for and respond to manmade events or major accidents involving mass casualties. CDP training is fully funded for tribal, state, and local response personnel. Round-trip air and ground transportation, lodging, and meals are provided at no cost to responders or their agency or jurisdiction. Federal personnel may also attend the numerous training programs offered at CDP.

**To learn more about the Center
for Domestic Preparedness,**

**visit <http://cdp.dhs.gov> or call 866-213-9553
or to learn more about the VHA visit <http://www.va.gov>. You can also visit the CDP on
Facebook at www.facebook.com/cdpfema
and follow the center on Twitter at**



In case of EMERGENCY

Hurricane evacuation for inpatients



The Dual Use Vehicle can accommodate both ambulatory and non-ambulatory patients, wheel chairs or litters and stretchers.



Medical Center staff secure ambulatory patients in the DUV during a hurricane preparedness exercise.

By Laura Valentine, Public Affairs Specialist, Photos by James Arrowood

Each year at the beginning of hurricane season we like to remind our readership about the importance of being prepared. Having bottled water, canned goods, candles, lanterns and oil, and a way to cook without power should all be part of our preparations for bad weather. We should also have an evacuation plan if a storm or other threat, such as a fire, becomes a danger to your household. This year I thought I'd touch on how Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center evacuates our inpatient and Community Living Center population.

Every organization has a plan, but outside of the federal government, especially the military, we don't usually hear about "exercises." VA practices evacuation methods (and other scenarios often) to make sure that our staff members are up-to-speed when it comes to evacuating our patient population for a hurricane or other potential threat.

In the event of a contingency requiring total evacuation, the VAMC director makes this decision and informs the necessary offices. Although lots of planning is happening in the background with clinical staff and emergency management team members, evacuation begins after the director makes the call. The director is charged with calling other VA hospitals in the region to receive our patients and to serve as an alternate care site. The chief of staff, chief of health administration and the associate director

for patient/nursing services all work together to coordinate the evacuation.

Once evacuation is declared, the nurse in charge of each ward first takes role of all patients in his/her area and begins preparations for evacuation. He or she communicates directly with the chief of health administration to ensure all patients are accounted for and proper measures are taken to evacuate. While the charge nurse is preparing inpatients for evacuation the director or appointed designee will notify the Charleston County Preparedness Command Post and also communicate any hospital needs to the National Disaster Medical System.

The Charleston VAMC serves more than 659,000 Veterans per year through outpatient visits. The medical center also operates 110 beds for inpatient stays of which 20 beds are dedicated to the CLC. This means on a regular day, Charleston may care for more than 2,600 Veterans. Most outpatients have the ability and means to leave on their own, but their evacuations must also be taken into consideration when coordinating local efforts for transportation.

Along with contacting other VA medical centers, we request evacuation assistance from Joint Base Charleston, local ambulances and emergency medical service personnel. Local ambulances and buses work side-by-side with our Dual Use



Charles Tupper, emergency preparedness coordinator, shows VAMC staff the patient backpack used during transport.



The Stryker evacuation chair enables hospital personnel to safely move wheelchair patients down stairs in the event that elevators are inoperable.

Vehicles to safely transport ambulatory and non-ambulatory patients to a designated location away from the imminent danger. DUVs are large buses designed to carry stretchers, litters and wheelchairs. The 28 foot DUV can carry up to nine litter/stretcher patients or 14 ambulatory or up to five wheelchairs. The 36 foot DUV can accommodate 15 litters/stretcher patients or 30 ambulatory or up to eight wheelchairs. Each DUV can hold a combination of inpatients as well. Local ambulatory support will increase our timeliness in evacuating our inpatient and nursing home population while maintaining the highest standards of safety.

To ensure that each patient receives the required care at the designated alternate care site, Veterans receive a backpack that includes their picture ID, Computerized Patient Record System orders, a medication administration record and any current medications he or she may be taking. Routine medications travel in each patient's backpack while narcotic medications are kept in a double locked box during transport and are distributed to the Veteran based on the medication administration record. This ensures Veterans receive the correct care and medication when traveling to and when they arrive at the alternate care site.

So what happens if you are part of our Home Based Primary Care program? When you sign up for HBPC you have the option to evacuate with the inpatient and nursing home population or through your own means. Each Veteran assigned to HBPC has the option upon admission to the program to choose which better suits his or her needs. If you choose to evacuate with the hospital, you and your caregiver will receive information about the VAMC's emergency plan. An emergency kit is provided for those HBPC patients electing to evacuate with the hospital. Regardless of whether you choose to evacuate with the facility or not, the HBPC staff will evaluate and assist families, if needed, with developing a concrete emergency plan. The same applies for Veterans with spinal cord injuries/diseases, multiple sclerosis and those Veterans on oxygen. Veterans with spinal cord injuries evacuate to Augusta, while those with MS will be transported to Columbia; as well as those on home oxygen.



In the event of an emergency,
visit: <http://www.charleston.va.gov/emergency/> for the latest information regarding the event.

VA Assists in patient evacuation

during multi-agency national disaster exercise

By Meredith A. H. Thomas, Public Affairs Specialist

The Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center teamed up with Airmen serving at Joint Base Charleston – Air Base recently to provide crucial patient evacuation support during a large-scale national disaster exercise held at the base and in Greenville, South Carolina.

The exercise, under the coordination of the South Carolina Army National Guard, hinged on an earthquake scenario, which resulted in loss of life, injuries, property damage and displaced victims seeking shelter according to Capt. Lee Knoell, assistant director of operations with JB Charleston's 315th Aeromedical Evacuation Squadron and exercise planner for the drill.

"Our joint objective during this exercise was to coordinate patient movement," Knoell said. "The AES was responsible for airlifting the patients and providing medical treatment en-route to the safe location set up by the National Disaster Medical System in the Greenville-Spartanburg area. The VA stepped in to help us coordinate the ground transportation of mock casualties with their Dual Use Vehicle prior to them being loaded on the aircraft."

The NDMS is an all-encompassing entity that brings together several federal, state and local emergency response organizations in times of crisis and mass casualty. The Air Force plays an integral part in these situations by allowing access to cargo carriers and airborne medical technicians for the evacuation of injured individuals. The VA supports the cause by providing knowledgeable emergency management staff and patient transportation vehicles.

The VA and 315th AES Airmen, along with participants from the 315th Aerospace Medicine Squadron and Active-duty servicemembers with the 628th Medical Group, worked together to analyze and process roughly 50 simulated patients, all played by Cadets from five different South Carolina Civil Air Patrol squadrons. These patients were evaluated and transported to the flightline from a casualty staging area according to the severity of the injuries indicated on their patient scenario cards. Most of the casualties were made up to look as if they had realistic injuries.

Ambulatory patients rode regular passenger



buses, while those that required litter transport were transferred to either an ambulance bus – a large military passenger vehicle that can be configured to hold patients on litters – or a Dual Use Vehicle specially designed by the VA to interface with cargo planes like the C-17 Globemaster IIIs utilized at JB Charleston.

According to Charles Tupper, emergency preparedness coordinator for the Charleston VAMC, the large DUV utilized during the exercise is capable of moving fifteen standard NATO litter-borne patients and makes loading and unloading casualties easy with a wide access back door.

Knoell agrees. "The DUV really made our lives a lot easier during the exercise," he said. "The military buses that we typically use can make transfers difficult. The DUV was much more comfortable and had the benefit of being air conditioned, which is actually a crucial thing when you are talking about patient safety in hot climates like ours."

Transporting the patients carefully and efficiently was of the utmost importance according to Maj. David Ferguson, flight nurse and medical crew director with the 315th AES during the mission.

"We were sure to practice our patient movements and coordinate the litter carries carefully," Ferguson said. "It's also crucial to keep track of your patients, monitor their injuries and get them safely to the evacuation point so they

can be seen and treated further."

Patients were transferred from the vehicles to the cargo area of a C-17 and then flown about an hour away to the Greenville-Spartanburg International Airport where the emergency evacuation area had been stood up by the NDMS. Two flight nurses and four medical technicians accompanied the patients on the plane and completed training tasks by providing emergency care while in flight.

Once on the ground in Greenville, patients were offloaded from the plane. Local emergency response teams wheeled the litter-bound patients to the tented emergency care area using unique "rickshaw" carriers.

From there, the patients were immediately processed to be seen at local hospitals with the help of Active-duty soldiers from Fort Jackson in Columbia, South Carolina.

"This is such an incredible exercise because it gets the Reserve and Active Duty of different branches working together, along with state emergency agencies, the Civil Air Patrol, local hospitals and the VA," said Ferguson. "Joint agency exercises usually start off with a little confusion at first, so we practice like this to learn how to coordinate effectively and work together more efficiently when a real disaster occurs."

Knoell agrees. "It's reassuring to see multiple governmental agencies coming together under one umbrella to provide care and assistance during a time of crisis," he said.



Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center
109 Bee Street
Charleston, SC 29401

PRSRT STD
US POSTAGE
PAID
COLUMBIA, SC
PERMIT 1204

IMPORTANT VA PHONE NUMBERS

Charleston VA Medical Center

843-577-5011 or toll free 1-888-878-6884 or TTY: 843-789-6888

Telephone Advice Line

843-789-6400 or toll free at 1-888-878-6884

Veterans who need medical advice from their Primary Care provider or have questions about their medications can call the TAP line Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

Scheduling an Appointment

843-789-6500 or toll free at 1-888-878-6884

Veterans who need to schedule, cancel or reschedule an appointment for all Primary Care Clinics including Myrtle Beach, Savannah, Beaufort, Trident and Goose Creek can call Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

Automated Prescription Refill Line

843-577-5011 or toll free at 1-888-878-6884

Veterans who need to request a refill of a prescription or check the status of refills can call 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Have your social security number and prescription numbers ready when calling.

VA Benefits (other than health care)

1-800-827-1000

Veterans who need information on VA benefits including VA pension and compensation, home loans, and education can call the VA Regional Office.

Billing Questions

1-866-258-2772

Veterans who have questions about a bill received from the Charleston VA Medical Center can call the VA Revenue Center.

Veterans Crisis Line

1-800-273-TALK (8255) Press 1 for Veterans

Veterans can call the Veterans Crisis Line to talk to trained professionals 24 hours a day, seven days a week or visit www.veteranscrisisline.net

My HealtheVet

www.myhealth.va.gov

Veterans can manage their health by logging onto My HealtheVet, which offers access to Veteran health benefits and services.

For more information on VA related topics visit www.charleston.va.gov. Follow us on Facebook and Twitter.

