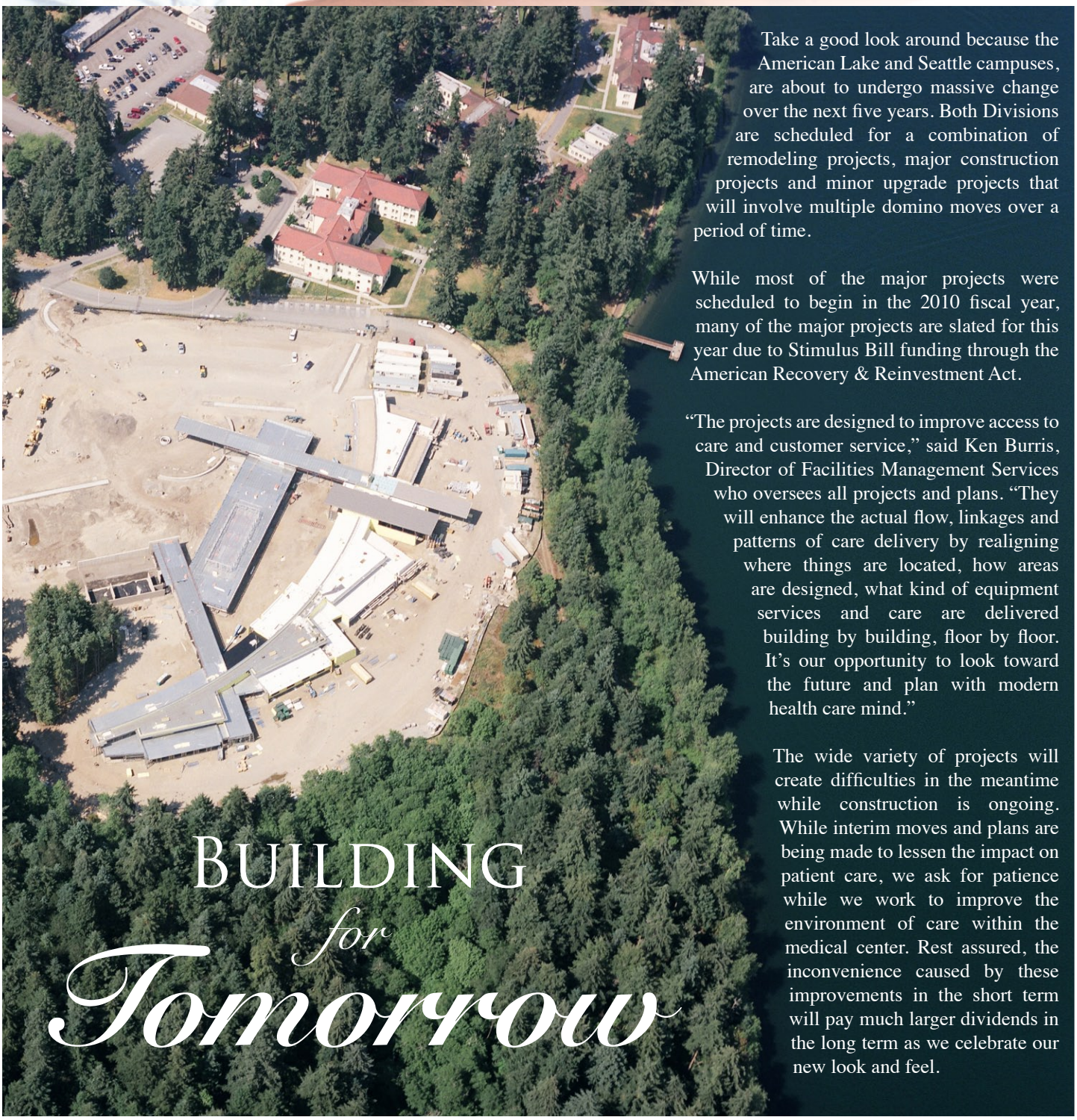
VA Puget Sound NEWS

Proudly Serving Veterans of the Northwest

VA Puget Sound Health Care System • American Lake & Seattle Issue 1 • 2009



Building *for* Tomorrow

Take a good look around because the American Lake and Seattle campuses, are about to undergo massive change over the next five years. Both Divisions are scheduled for a combination of remodeling projects, major construction projects and minor upgrade projects that will involve multiple domino moves over a period of time.

While most of the major projects were scheduled to begin in the 2010 fiscal year, many of the major projects are slated for this year due to Stimulus Bill funding through the American Recovery & Reinvestment Act.

"The projects are designed to improve access to care and customer service," said Ken Burris, Director of Facilities Management Services who oversees all projects and plans. "They will enhance the actual flow, linkages and patterns of care delivery by realigning where things are located, how areas are designed, what kind of equipment services and care are delivered building by building, floor by floor. It's our opportunity to look toward the future and plan with modern health care mind."

The wide variety of projects will create difficulties in the meantime while construction is ongoing. While interim moves and plans are being made to lessen the impact on patient care, we ask for patience while we work to improve the environment of care within the medical center. Rest assured, the inconvenience caused by these improvements in the short term will pay much larger dividends in the long term as we celebrate our new look and feel.

Building for Tomorrow

Centralized Call Center Streamlines Appointments

When VA Puget Sound asked our Veteran patients, "How can we better serve you?" One of the top concerns was telephone service. As a result, in November 2008 VA Puget Sound developed a new Centralized Call Center to provide veterans a streamlined system for scheduling appointments with more than 1,000 VA clinics.

For example, "the Call Center has greatly improved our customer service," states Sheila Arie, Program Manager. In February 2009 alone, the call center received more than 16,000 calls. National call center guidelines require that calls be answered within 30 seconds and that no more than 5% of the calls be lost. So far, VA Puget Sound has exceeded both of these measures. "This is fantastic and sets a benchmark for the rest of the medical center to follow." states Stan Johnson, medical center director.

Currently, the call center is staffed by 15 operators working 7:00 a.m. – 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday, with voice mail after hours. Since the call center was launched, most clinics have reduced their backlog of appointments and many have added appointment slots.

One of the side benefits of the center is that operators are able to answer routine questions such as:

- Should I eat before my appointment?
- Should I bring my meds with me?
- Do I need an appointment for pharmacy, or can I get this done by calling the pharmacy refill line?
- What do I need to bring for my sleep study?
- Could you give me driving directions?
- Where do I catch the shuttle at either division?
- Where do I find my clinic in the hospital?

Another advantage to centralized scheduling is that where possible, call center operators are able to schedule appointments in different clinics on the same day for a Veteran. This drastically reduces a Veteran's travel time.

"Having one number for Veterans to call is very convenient for patients," said Sheila Arie, Chief of Outpatient Support. This new system allows clinic staff to "concentrate on more complex questions and provide direct care to patients," added Arie. Keep in mind, patients who need a specialty appointment still need a referral from their primary care provider first. The best time to call is during non-peak hours which include afternoons and Tuesday through Friday.

For more information about the Centralized Scheduling Center, please call Sheila Arie, (253) 583-3111.

Electronic Message System

If you have visited us recently, you have probably noticed the many new electronic messaging flat screens. They are located in the canteens, entrances and at several locations in our clinical waiting areas. The information displayed is intended to be educational to Veterans, staff and all who visit VA Puget Sound.

The digital messaging has been helpful to get the word out about many important topics including major announcements, events and observances, health

tips, valet parking and our Mobile Medical Unit, achievements of our award-winning employees and updates related to benefits and services. In emergency situations the digital message system will be used to share important information and instructions with our staff and those visiting the medical center's two Divisions as well as our community outpatient clinics.

The same information on the public screens is also being shared via our in-house cable system. Veterans hospitalized in our inpatient units will find the information on Channel 3 in Seattle and Channel 85 at American Lake.

The first phase of the boards were installed in March 2009 at both Seattle and American Lake Divisions. Phase Two will begin late 2010 and will include many other areas of both divisions

When you next visit us at either Division, please take a moment to check out the information. For more information about the message boards, contact the Office of Public Affairs at (206) 764-2435 or publicaffairspugetsound@va.gov.

Improving Access to Care

With the growing demand by patients for appointments, a number of clinical service lines undertook a "Systems Redesign" effort to handle the increasing demand while maintaining a high quality of care for our Veterans.

The effort looks at opportunities to redesign the way VA Puget Sound does businesses: how we schedule patients, how we assign physician time, how we measure success in terms of clinic timeliness of appointments, access to care, scheduling of follow up appointments, etc. Recently, nine clinical service lines completed the second learning session of the VA Puget Sound Systems Redesign Collaborative. This included Outpatient Pharmacy, Sleep Lab, Nutrition Services, Inpatient Team, Deployment Health, Speech Pathology, GRECC/GEC, Neurology, and Pain Clinic.

The focus of the collaborative was to assist the clinical teams in improving patient access by matching provider supply with patient demand. Additional topics included reducing patient wait times, and improving patient flow through the inpatient service. Many teams have made significant progress since the first learning session in January of this year and continue to report their successes at weekly senior leadership meetings.

A third and final Learning Session is planned for August 2009. The Systems Redesign Office would like to thank the teams for their hard work and dedication, and we look forward to celebrating your successes!

Welcome Home event brings VA services to returning combat Veterans

For many service members transitioning from active duty status to civilian lives, the benefits and entitlements they've earned can seem overwhelming and confusing to access. Rumors and misinformation often thrive in a deployment setting, and unfortunately, sometimes those who return don't get the attention the accurate information they need and deserve.

To help address this and prevent any Veteran from slipping through the cracks, VA Puget Sound, along with the Washington State National Guard and the Veterans Benefits Administration, and other Veterans organizations traveled to Fort McCoy, WI to welcome home more than 3,400 soldiers of the Washington National Guard 81st Brigade Combat Team.

Most traditional Welcome Home events provide lots of information but provided little in the way of one-on-one guidance on how to use the VA and its partners. The goal at Fort McCoy's post deployment Welcome Home was to personally interact with, and help each individual soldier before they boarded the plane for home in the Pacific Northwest, explained Tom Riggs, chief of transition services for the Washington State National Guard.

Soldiers speak with employment specialists before returning to civilian life after returning from Iraq.

"The inspiration to do this came from our experience in 2004 when the Washington State National Guard deployed last time," he said. "It was realized then that our soldiers were now Veterans in every sense of the word. We also realized that they would now be eligible for all the benefits that Veterans are entitled to and that we would have to find a way to educate them on how to access these benefits."

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Tom Riggs assists a National Guardsman with filing a VA Claim.

Building for Tomorrow

If Walls Could Talk

If our walls could talk, what would they say? Since the first nail was driven at the American Lake Division in 1923, to the lights coming on in the Seattle Division's new Cath Lab in winter 2008, VA Puget Sound has served generations of Veterans, taken care of by employees and volunteers striving to provide the best in VA health care. Each generation of Veterans brings with it different values and potential.VA Puget Sound staff, in turn, learn from those generations.

"The newest generation of combat Veterans, those returning from wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, bring with them a new challenges. An expanded Polytrauma unit and rehabilitation therapy center for Veterans recovering from traumatic brain injuries amputations and other injuries are prime examples of VA Puget Sound anticipating the needs of those returning home," stated Stan Johnson, Director.

In order to ensure that VA and national health care industry standards are met for patient safety, infection control, an Environment of Care group was formed in the last year to tour VA Puget Sound every week to point out areas where not only repairs should be made, but where the physical environment can be improved. New paint and flooring is being installed, patient rooms are being redesigned to give more privacy and nursing stations are becoming more centralized, all in an effort to give VA health care a more personalized and less institutional feeling.

For example, with more women Veterans and Veterans with families coming to VA for health care services, VA Puget Sound is increasing its capacity to these new and unique groups with a new larger Women's Clinic at the American Lake Division (slated to open this fall) to match the stand-alone Women's Clinic at the Seattle Division.

"We are expanding our CBOC and MMU programs to bring more outpatient care to where our Veterans live, lessening the travel and time burden for them," said Ken Burris, Director of Facilities Management Services. "We understand that they have very busy lives and we are working to develop care centered on our patients and their needs."

While it is interesting to wonder what the care takers in 1923 imagined health care would be like in the 21st Century, VA Puget Sound is positioned as a leader in VA health care long into the future. New buildings and remodels at both divisions will provide needed space for the expected increase in the Global War on Terrorism needs of Veterans and the newest and latest equipment and technology that our patients will require.

Of course, as medical technology has advanced, VA has often led way by investing both time and resources into implementing and developing many of the technologies that are considered best practices now.

Finally, we want VA Puget Sound to be a medical center of which the community can be proud. The American Lake Division was recently listed on the National Register of Historic Places. In Seattle, a new "Medical Mall" entrance and emergency department will create a single main entrance and help create the atmosphere of a modern health care facility. Along with new research and treatment buildings, additional parking and the beautiful Fisher House, VA Puget Sound is poised to handle the challenges of future while maintaining its proud link to the past.

Artist's rendering of the new Emergency Department entrance at the Seattle Division

Aerial shot of the Community living Center under construction at American Lake

At the American Lake Division

New 70,000 square foot hospital building. Will house specialty care, surgery, pharmacy, laboratories, social work and more. Finish in 2012.

Renovation of Domiciliary – Finish in 2010.

New 78,000 square foot Community Living Center – Already begun, finished in 2010.

At the Seattle Division

New Emergency Department with 25 exam rooms will also create new main entrance for Seattle Division. Finish in 2010.

New Therapy Pool/Polytrauma Rehabilitation building: Designed in 2009 and built in 2010.

Remodeled Cancer Center – all beds will be private or semi-private with individual bathrooms. Beginning in 2009.

New 165,000 square foot Mental Health and Research Building: Design in 2009, construction begins 2011.

Seismic reinforcement and renovation of bed tower. Begin 2011.

Expansion of specialty clinics: dermatology, dental clinic, urology, minor surgery, pain clinic and orthopedic clinics. Begin 2011.

New P.E.T. and C.T. scanners. Installation begins 2011.

New Parking Structure construction to start in 2010.

Message from the Network Director

Susan Pendergrass, PhDH

It is with great excitement, and a sense of expectation, that I greet you for the first time as your new Network Director. As employees of the Department of Veterans Affairs, I believe that we have been given a great honor to serve those who have so nobly served us. In my new role, I look forward to collaborating with you as we strive to enhance and improve the care our Veterans so richly deserve.

When one thinks of the level of commitment that each Veteran made when he or she agreed to protect our country, it is only fitting that we emulate that same commitment in a demonstration of thanks. As we work toward the fulfillment of this goal, it is important to have a road map. As Victor Fuch (Henry J. Kaiser, Jr., Professor of Economics and of Health Research and Policy) so aptly said "if you don't know where you're going, any road will get you there." In this time of increased demands and limited time in which to complete our work, we need strong leadership and a clear sense of purpose. I intend to provide that leadership. Our shared purpose is to provide exemplary care to Veterans who have chosen us to help them on their journey through life.

Throughout my professional career, I have continued to challenge myself with one basic question, "If I were the patient, how would I feel about the attention and treatment that I am being provided?" My challenge to each and every one of you, each and every day, is to keep that question in mind, and to continuously work on improving the care that you offer.

> "If I were the patient, how would I feel about the attention and treatment that I am being provided?"

In this spirit, VA's core values of Trust, Respect, Excellence, Commitment and Compassion must be incorporated in our daily work. These are the directional guides that I will use to structure our work, and ask you to adopt. They are also the principles by which I will lead. When we look back on our efforts and accomplishments in the months and years ahead, I want us to be able to say with conviction, "When all was said and done, we made the best effort possible and were part of a team that accomplished great things for our Veterans."

I look forward to visiting each Medical Center and VISN 20 Clinic in the near future, and to meeting and working with all of you. Until then, thank you for your excellent efforts on behalf of our Veterans.

Public Affairs Highlights

Over the last several months, VA Puget Sound's work has been featured by many media local, regional, national and international media outlets. Here is a summary of the great work being highlighted.

- Dr. John Breitner's research on NSAIDs ability to delay the onset of Alzheimer's disease was featured by Reuters and CBS Radio.
- Dr. George Merriam's research on growth hormone stimulation featuring a Veteran who says the treatment improved his coordination and energy were featured on KING 5 TV.
- KMPS Radio and Sandusky Radio Seattle did separate interviews with the Fisher House Manager, the Director of Public Affairs and a family.
- KBTC Public Television in Tacoma followed "a day in the life" of a Fisher House family for their documentary show "Full Focus". It also focused on the story of a Fisher House board member whose brother was killed in Iraq. This aired on KBTC this spring.
- Dr. David Cook's research on how the body regulates the A-beta molecule and its connection to Alzheimer's disease made it into several international health news publications in April.
- HBO premiered a special program on May 10 highlighting Dr. Suzanne Craft's work with Alzheimer's patients. Her work was recognized as one of the top programs in the country and HBO spent a couple of days interviewing staff and patients.
- The Compensated Work Therapy program was highlighted in the Northwest Guardian (Fort Lewis) newspaper. One of the program's counselors and several graduates who found employment through the program were interviewed.
- In April, KING 5 Television featured Project Healing Waters, a program that teaches Veterans suffering from PTSD and other ailments how to fly fish.
- In May, the Seattle Times featured the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction class taught by Dr. David Kearney. Veterans were photographed in yoga poses.
- In May, the American Lake Veterans Golf Course was featured on KING 5's Evening Magazine. The golf rehabilitiation program was highlighted in a story about Iraq Veteran's road to recovery from a leg amputation.
- In June, the golf course and recreational therapy program were featured on NBC Nightly News.
- In June, the Wall of Heroes dedication was covered by KIRO Radio and KING 5 News

Message from the Director

Stan Johnson, Director VA Puget Sound Health Care System

I will be leaving at the end of August after serving as the Medical Center Director for the past two years to assume the role of Medical Center Director at the San Diego VA Medical Center. I chose to come to the Pacific Northwest and VA Puget Sound to make a difference. My goal has always been to move us forward, to help shape new initiatives and to realign our practices to be more patient centered.

I feel that so much has been done to accomplish these goals. We have stressed the themes of Accountability, Access, Quality, and Cost Effectiveness in discussions at our town meetings and in leadership meetings. We have also focused on systems redesign, collaborative and new approaches to reducing wait times, centralized scheduling, reducing reliance on fee service and working smarter within the resources we have.

I am quite proud of many other accomplishments as your director. Our systems redesign projects have resulted in greater access to care by better matching clinic schedules and provider coverage with the needs of our patients; a new centralized call center has improved customer service and streamlined the process by which we schedule and remind Veterans of their appointments; opening CBOCs in Mount Vernon and shortly in the South Sound region and partnering with VALOR Health Care to provide care at other CBOC sites. The success of our Rural Health Initiative Mobile Medical Unit has enabled us to see Veterans whose distance from one of our Medical Centers made the journey a day-long effort. This innovative program has expanded our service in areas where they are needed most. Additionally, we have been fortunate to receive funding for significant capital projects which will enable us to undertake a remarkable slate of renovation and building projects at our Seattle and American Lake Divisions that will lead to an even better environment of care for our patients and a better working environment for our staff.

As a result of our collective actions, we have the ability to impact the quality of care we provide and the perception of that care. In doing so, we must continue to review our practices and to be accountable to each other and to our patients and their families.

I want to thank each of you for the job you do each day and for the contributions you make to better the lives of our patients and their families. To our Veteran patients, I hope that you are able to see the improvements we have made and those we will continue to make to better meet your needs and those of your fellow Veterans.

It has been my pleasure to serve as the Leader of this medical center, and I take with me fond memories of very committed groups of professionals who have dedicated their careers to excellence within VA.

Making a Difference

Awards

Dr. Robert Pearlman was recently awarded the American Society of Bioethics and Humanities (ASBH) Distinguished Service Award for 2009 for leading the effort in developing the ASBH publication "Improving Competency in Clinical Ethics Consultation: An Educational Guide". This groundbreaking work provides both VA and non-VA ethics consultants with an important ethics tool to provide higher quality health care. Dr. Pearlman has been with VA for more than 30 years and is also a Professor of Medicine (Division of Gerontology and Geriatric Medicine) and an Adjunct Professor of Health Services and Bioethics and Humanities at the University of Washington.

Kathleen Lewis, Nursing Supervisor of Nursing Services at VA Puget Sound is the recipient of the 27th Annual Secretary's Hands and Heart Award. This award is given in recognition for professional expertise, exceptional, sustained and compassionate direct patient care and the emotional support, help and guidance provided to Veteran patients beyond the call of duty. Ms. Lewis entered on duty as a registered nurse at VA Puget Sound Health Care System on January 9, 1972. During an outreach activity at the Pike Place Senior Center, she observed many Veterans with foot problems seriously affecting their overall health and mobility. Through her own initiative, she arranged a preceptorship on foot care with a clinical nurse specialist in endocrinology and soon became an expert in the neural assessment of the foot. She soon developed a team to provide specialized care to Veterans, which also included patient care for hypertension and diabetes. Over the years, she has led this specialized outreach clinic to provide much needed services to indigent and/or homeless Veterans.

Eligibility/Enrollment

Changes to the Priority Group 8 Enrollment Restriction

Effective June 15, 2009, new regulations went into effect that will allow certain Priority Group 8 Veterans to be enrolled in the VA health care system if their household income does not exceed the current VA income thresholds (means test threshold and/or geographical means test threshold) by more than 10%.
What this means for you:

If you are already enrolled in VA Health Care – nothing will change for you.

If you applied for enrollment on or after January 1, 2009, and you were denied enrollment because your income exceeded the VA income threshold, VA will determine if you are eligible under this new rule. You will not need to submit another application for enrollment. If you are eligible under this new rule, the VA will notify you by mail. You will receive a letter from the VA Health Eligibility Center notifying you of your eligibility for enrollment and welcoming you to the VA health care system. Included with the letter will be instructions for getting care and how to obtain a Veterans Identification Card.

If you applied for enrollment before January 1, 2009, and were denied enrollment because your income was too high, you will need to reapply for enrollment.

Whatever your enrollment determination, VA encourages all Veterans to apply for enrollment as this will help us in our future planning and budget efforts as well as allow us to be in a better position to identify necessary funding levels to Congress.

If you are Veteran who has never applied for VA health care, or you have questions about VA health care, visit www.VA.gov, call 1-800 329-8387 or come into any VA medical center to speak to an enrollment specialist.

Swine Flu - Are you prepared?

When H1N1, or Swine Flu, first made headlines in April, 2009 VA Puget Sound immediately put into place its infection control and emergency preparedness action plans to educate patients, staff and if necessary, reach out to help the local community.

Although no patients at VA Puget Sound have been identified with the H1N1 strain associated with the pandemic, VA Puget Sound took advantage of the opportunity to test and refine its ability to respond to a potential outbreak.

"I think the most important reminder from our recent experience is that, at its most basic level, infection control and prevention is about doing the simple things like washing your hands, covering your nose and mouth when you cough or sneeze and staying away from obviously sick people," said Marcus Grandjean, health science specialist.

Aside from the virus itself, one of the largest threats during a pandemic is the spread of misinformation and rumors. By taking advantage of communication technologies, VA Puget Sound's Emergency Operations Team worked quickly to take information from the CDC, Public Health – Seattle & King County, Washington State Department of Health and VHA headquarters to disseminate it quickly via email, web sites, posters and electronic display systems.

"I am really proud of how everyone came together quickly and developed a set of procedures that everyone could follow easily and quickly if the virus was suspected at one of our facilities," said Grandjean. For the few people who came in with flu-like symptoms, VA Puget Sound staff responded quickly and appropriately to keep the chance of spreading the virus to a minimum, said Grandjean.

Even though the H1N1 flu seems to be less virulent than originally thought, people still need to be vigilant in washing their hands, said Grandjean. While flu is most commonly seen in the late fall and spring, this flu (H1N1) entered our community when we normally don't see it. We may expect to see flu continue through the summer months and everyone has a responsibility to help prevent the spread of flu in the community. Simply continue to follow the basic steps to prevent illness such as washing your hands and get your flu vaccination this fall.

For information about basic hand hygiene, infection prevention measures or how to protect you and your loved ones, visit Centers for Disease Control at www.cdc.gov or talk to your primary care provider.

Welcome Dr. William Campbell

New VA Puget Sound Chief of Staff

Dr. William Campbell, Chief of Staff VA Puget Sound Health Care System

Dr. William Campbell has accepted the position of Chief of Staff at VA Puget Sound, effective July 27, 2009.

Dr. Campbell comes to VA Puget Sound from the South Texas Veterans Health Care System in San Antonio where he was the Assistant Chief of Staff. He is board certified in Emergency Medicine, Anesthesiology, Psychiatry, and Forensic Psychiatry.

Dr. Campbell has a wide and diverse clinical and professional background, including clinical practice, academics and research in the fields of forensic psychiatry, emergency medicine and anesthesiology. He brings a wealth of experience and knowledge to VA Puget Sound and we are looking forward to Dr. Campbell's clinical leadership.

Making a Difference

Volunteers Making a Difference

While doctors, nurses and health care providers are the backbone of any medical facility, it is the community volunteers who work to add that special element. VA Puget Sound has more than 1,000 volunteers who everyday show up to work to ensure Veterans are treated to the best service possible.

Voluntary Specialist Chaun Shivers receives recognition for her retirement from Deputy Director DeAnn Dietrich, Associate Director of Nursing Frankie Manning, Chief of Staff Dr. Gordon Starkebaum and Director Stan Johnson

Some of the medical center's volunteers work as drivers, getting up as early as 4 a.m. to pick up Veterans at their homes to bring them to the medical center for their appointments. They serve more than 10,000 patients and drive more than 436,000 miles per year. Others help transport Veterans, specimens, mail and packages throughout the medical center. Many others work at the American Lake Veterans Golf Course mowing the fairways, giving golf lessons, while others help take care of our needy Veterans by handing out clothing. These are just a few of the many assignments VA volunteers assist staff in doing.

To recognize their stellar service, VA Puget Sound recently held a Volunteer recognition event at Emerald Downs racetrack to say "Thank You" for the more than 160,000 hours of donated time and effort volunteers give every year. "Our volunteers represent the outstanding community sentiment toward our Veteran population," said Stan Johnson, Director of VA Puget Sound. "Their tireless work and devotion to our patients and their families is something special to behold."

Nellie Jean Blackburn, AMVETS volunteer for the American Lake Veterans Golf Course receives the Presidential Lifetime Achievement Award for 4000 hours of volunteer service from Deputy Director DeAnn Dietrich, Associate Director of Nursing Frankie Manning, Chief of Staff Dr. Gordon Starkebaum and Director Stan Johnson

This year's thank you bash, the Cinco de Mayo Volunteer Recognition and Awards Program, recognized 218 volunteers with special awards presented by the executive leadership of VA Puget Sound. In total, more than 400 volunteers qualified for a VA National Award for volunteering.

Very special recognition was given to Walter J. Eisenreich for 50, 000 hours of volunteer service. Walt is a Veteran who served in the Air Force from 1960 to 1972. He started his volunteer career at VA Puget Sound June '81 with Nursing Escort as a runner. Today, he continues to serve our veterans and staff as a "trail-blazer". Walt leads the way for his fellow veterans to their desired location or clinic in addition to representing our hospital as a "Greeter" at the main entrance. To put Walt's 50,000 hours into perspective it is the equivalent to 24 years of full-time employment!

One notable volunteer who was missing, however, was long-time manager of the American Lake Veterans Golf Course, Mike Kearney. Kearney, who recently passed away at the age of 68, was one of the founding members of the volunteer group, Friends of the American Lake Golf Course, who helped transform a modest course into one of the nation's finest golf rehabilitation programs.

Mike was the catalyst for turning the golf course at American Lake into an award winning rehabilitative golf facility. He couldn't do enough – in his mind – to repay Veterans for their sacrifices and worked tirelessly to bring his dream to fruition. "His loss will be felt for many years to come," said Jeff Honeycutt, Director of VA Puget Sound's Voluntary Service program. To learn how to become a volunteer, please call (206) 764-2195 or (253) 583-1054.

Volunteer Walter J. Eisenreich

Acupunture: Pain management and relaxation

In recent years, VA Puget Sound has taken steps toward creating an environment of care that stimulates healing and encourages relaxation and healing.

Although practiced for more than 2,500 years in China, acupuncture has had a presence in the U.S. since the 1970s. Western doctors are now taking a serious interest in the ancient art of acupuncture.

While working part time for VA Puget Sound as a nurse, in early 2008, Laurieanne Nabinger broached the idea of creating an acupuncture clinic with Associate Director of Nursing Services Frankie Manning.

"I've worked in many different areas of nursing, geriatrics, intensive care units and the emergency department. I was hired in 2006 as a registered nurse to work in the ICU and ER," said Nabinger. "I've always wanted to help people, but I wanted to take it to a new level, a more natural level. I really wanted to be more hands on in the treatment of people."

"Mrs. Manning was really the driving force behind this; she pushed to have the position approved. It took some time, but here I am and I think the program is a success," Nabinger said.

Since November 2008, Nabinger has been providing acupuncture care to patients dealing with chronic pain issues, PTSD, depression and other symptoms.

The typical appointment lasts about an hour, said Nabinger, and involves following specific treatment plans designed for each patient. Depending on where the pain is located, or if the patient is dealing with a health issue such as depression, she inserts the needles at different acupointswhich help allow for the free movement of the body's Qi (pronounced "chee") and can help provide relief, she said. "Everything we use is sterilized and used only once," she explained.

VA Puget Sound was one of the first VA facilities to embrace acupuncture and now has a growing Complementary and Alternative Medicine program. This includes acupuncture, chiropractic care and mindfulness meditation clinics held at both the American Lake and Seattle Divisions.

Seattle's acupuncture clinic is currently seeing more than 30 patients a week and has proven to be very popular with many of the Veterans who take advantage of this unique treatment option. Veterans who think they may benefit from acupuncture treatment can contact their primary care provider for more information.

Laurieanne Nabinger performs acupuncture during a recent appointment.

Enhancing the Environment of Care

Mount Vernon Community Clinic Opens

Veterans living in Northwest Washington now have a VA Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) to call their own. The official celebration took place July 2, 2009. The Mount Vernon CBOC is began seeing patients who were seen at the monthly outreach clinics in Bellingham and Friday Harbor and the interim site in Sedro-Woolley. Also being transitioned are patients who are currently being seen at other VA sites including VA Puget Sound.

"I can't thank our Veterans enough for working with us as we progressed towards bringing this beautiful clinic online," said Susan Passalaqua, Nurse Manager for the Mount Vernon CBOC. "It's been a long process but I think when the community sees this clinic they will agree it's been worth the wait. Our staff have worked hard towards this day. Currently, more than 2,100 patients are enrolled at the clinic and that number is expected to grow in the months ahead."

With panoramic views of the Cascade Mountains, the clinic's central location near Skagit Valley Hospital allows for patients from Skagit, Whatcom, Island, San Juan and northern Snohomish Counties to get their primary care closer to home.

Primary and mental health care services will be provided at the CBOC, along with pharmacist medication review, social work services and some lab services. The clinic is not a drop-in clinic and does not have emergency room services, so an appointment is necessary.

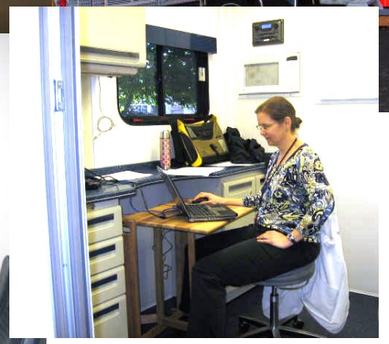
If you are currently a VA patient, and are interested in moving your primary care services to a CBOC, please contact Pat Tulip at (206) 764-2547.

Top left: Local Veteran Walt DeKraai checks into the Mount Vernon CBOC.
Bottom left: Earl Erickson and Walt DeKraai after touring the new clinic.
Top right: Senator Patty Murray speaks during the CBOC dedication ceremony July 2, 2009.
Bottom right: Senator Patty Murray shakes hands with Dr. Tom Martin.

This Is How We Roll

One of VA Puget Sound's patient care goals is to reduce the distance that Veterans have to travel to receive health care. As part of a national pilot program sponsored by the Office of Rural Development, VA Puget Sound became the first of four medical centers to take possession of a state of the art Mobile Medical Unit (MMU).

VA Puget Sound received their Mobile Medical Unit in June of 2008 and wasted no time getting it out on the road providing primary and mental health care to rural areas of Washington State. Currently the MMU serves three communities in Western Washington: Aberdeen, Shelton and Morton.



The VA Puget Sound Mobile Medical Unit expands to allow space for primary and mental health care, along with having extra touches such as panels to simulate natural light.

The MMU provides comprehensive primary care, mental health counseling, social work counseling, follow up appointments, and some eligibility and enrollment services. The MMU clinical staff consists of a nurse practitioner, LPN, and social worker, along with support from health plan management for eligibility questions and a driver from Environmental Management Services.

The MMU brings health services to enrolled veterans that have difficulty accessing VA health care due to the distance they would need to travel to receive care at one of our main facilities or Community Based Outpatient Clinics. DeAnn Dietrich, Deputy Director for VA Puget Sound, states, "The Mobile Medical Unit gives us one more tool to provide healthcare to our honored Veterans. It enables us to deliver the care where it's needed and saves the Veteran the hassle and cost of traveling 50 or more miles just to have a prescription refilled or to have a blood sample drawn."

In addition to bringing care to rural areas of Washington State, the MMU also expands VA Puget Sound's capacity to respond to emergencies around the state, fulfilling our role of supporting our community.

For example, during the Hood Canal Bridge closure in May, VA Puget Sound staff were able to deliver care while reducing travel timefor Veterans who would have otherwise faced a drive around the Puget Sound to our medical centers.

Enhancing the Environment of Care

An Eye on Improving Life

Imagine giving up coffee because you are anxious about dropping the cup when you pour, or refusing to go to your favorite restaurant because you can no longer read the menu. Veterans who are losing their vision and can no longer see well enough to drive, take a walk in the neighborhood or read a newspaper often feel hopeless and too dependent on others. To answer these challenges, VA Puget Sound offers programs for visually impaired and visually impaired Veterans that can help them gain back their mobility and independence.

Bill Wilson, one of a dedicated staff helping Veterans with diminished vision learn the skills they need.

Veterans with eye complaints will regularly be seen by optometrists and ophthalmologists who monitor and treat visual degeneration of many kinds. This allows patients who are diagnosed with severe vision loss to have resources within easy reach. Many Veterans are already using our services. 31,050 visits were made to the eye clinics in the Seattle and American Lake Division in 2008.

The Visual Impairment Services Team (VIST) Coordinators are an initial contact for most Veterans with severe vision loss. They can refer patients to the Low Vision Clinics, Blind Rehabilitation Centers and the Blind Rehabilitation Outpatient Specialists. There is one VIST Coordinator at each division of VA Puget Sound: Walt Werkhoven at American Lake and Kim Richardson at Seattle. VIST Coordinators are case managers who follow treatment to ensure their patients arrive for the appropriate appointments and are seen by providers to guarantee comprehensive care. They also serve by providing counseling and problem resolution and they can help connect patients with resources in the community.

Low Vision Clinics are available at both American Lake and Seattle divisions. Advanced tools and practices to identify a patient's visual acuity and visual field will aid in assessing the extent of vision loss. Dr. Irene Yang and Dr. George Meers run these clinics and recommend appropriate treatment and devices to help patients achieve their goals. These optometrists spend time counseling patients about what can or cannot be done with a specific loss of sight. They can offer a new ray of hope to patients by demonstrating what it possible.

One of ten national VA Blind Rehabilitation Centers can be found at VA Puget Sound. The center, under the leadership of Timothy Sniffen, is located at the American Lake Division. It offers courses in orientation and mobility, manual skills, activities of daily living, low vision and communications. The program typically runs for 30 days but this will vary with a patient's needs. Nursing coverage is provided twenty-four hours a day; counseling and family training are also available. 114 Veterans graduated and were discharged from the program in 2008.

The Blind Rehabilitation Outpatient Specialist is a rehabilitation teacher who specializes in several disciplines. Assessment for the program, recommendations about specific courses and follow up training after graduation are essential tasks.

However, not all Veterans are able to commit to the program at the Blind Rehabilitation Center. This is where Bill Wilson fills an invaluable role, providing the necessary outreach and training at the Veteran's home. He has eighteen years experience in facets of blind rehabilitation, and is one of less than seventy such specialists currently employed by the Veterans Health Administration.

Mr. Wilson specializes in living skills and low vision. It is not a surprise that activities of daily living can be much more challenging with decreased or absent sight. Pouring a hot cup of coffee, shaving or cooking can become downright dangerous.

The center offers help with training and an assortment of tools such as with measuring beakers, safety knives and oven mitts. Essentially, teaching a Veteran to safely negotiate through the day with confidence.

Mr. Wilson can offer several devices that help those with severe vision loss to read. Hand held or portable magnifiers, with their own light sources, can be used at eateries, stores, churches, theatres, etc. Desktop closed circuit television systems can be used to read mail, newspapers and books. Some devices have a tilting camera head that can be used to look at anything - magnified and in detail.

A truly ingenious item is the optical character reader. It can actually read, in male or female voice, English or Spanish text! For those Veterans whose sight has diminished to a point where magnification devices are no longer helpful, this item is a real asset.

Bill Wilson notes the impact this makes in Veterans' lives.

"It makes a real difference," says Bill. "They do not know this exists- I show up - and working with them opens up a new world. They can read mail without depending on their spouse. They can read menus; they go out with the guys again…what I see is the independence."

Mr. Wilson's assessment and training sessions can take anywhere from one to sixteen hours. He is in demand now serving all of VA Puget Sound's service area, traveling to Yakima, Port Angeles, Bremerton or Bellingham in any given week.

Culture Change

Transforming the mindset of staff and patients

Before the 1999 publication of the Institute of Medicine's landmark report, "To Err is Human", almost all health care organizations conducted investigations of events that caused harm to patients. Few of these investigations, however, used a systems-based approach to problem solving.

The focus was on individuals and mistakes, rather than why events happen and how to prevent them. By shifting the goal from eliminating errors to reducing or eliminating harm to patients - much has been accomplished at VA.

Reducing or eliminating the risk of harm to patients is the real key to patient safety. While we will never eliminate all individual errors, the goal of transforming the environment is to make it acceptable to identify potential risks, to bring problems to the attention of others as a team, and to develop systems to prevent these things form happening in the future. That's why Puget Sound has focused its VA's patient safety program on a "systems approach" to problem solving. We use methods and apply ideas from industry models such as aviation and nuclear power, to target and eliminate system vulnerabilities.

Those events that are judged to be an intentionally unsafe act can result in the assignment of blame and punitive action. Intentional unsafe acts, as they pertain to patients, are any events that result from a criminal act, a purposefully unsafe act, an act related to alcohol or substance abuse or patient abuse.

"The goal is not to target people; or to create a culture of blame, states Elizabeth Mattox, Director of Patient Safety. "We look for ways to break that link in the chain of events that can create a recurring problem: those underlying systems-based problems that went ignored or unaddressed," she adds.

One of the most important ways to do this is to learn from close calls, sometimes called "near misses," which occur at a much higher frequency than actual adverse events. Addressing problems in this way not only results in safer systems, but it also focuses everyone's efforts on continually identifying potential problems and fixing them.

"Welcome Home event brings VA services to returning combat Veterans" continued from page 3

What Riggs and his team have done has made the demobilization a "one-stop shop" for VA benefits, employment services, counseling services and state assistance. When the soldiers show up for the demobilization, each soldier has a folder with all their forms prefilled with their information. This way, all the soldiers have to do is verify the info and sign it to be enrolled for VA health care. If the soldiers want to file a claim for injury or disability, all their paperwork is ready and service officers are on hand to help process their claims. If the soldiers know they are going to be looking for work, unemployment claims can be started quicker than waiting until they get home. Representatives from WorkSource and unions are on hand to provide jobs and training programs.

"This is important because I witnessed what happened during the last demobilization in 2004, and I saw the soldiers who needed help and became homeless," said Riggs. "This time I knew we had to get in front of this and prepare these soldiers to transition back to civilian life and give each soldiers a good touch before they headed back to their families and friends."

For more information about the Welcome Home Event for the Washington National Guard, visit www.va.gov/pugetsound

Top Left: Linda Gillespie-Gateley, VISN 20 OEF/OIF program manager, explains VA benefits to a solider recently returned from Iraq.
Top Right: Army National Guard Colonel Mary Forbes (far right) helps walk a soldier through the demobilization process at Fort McCoy, WI
Bottom left: Soldiers pass from table to table to learn about the benefits theyíve earned while serving in Iraq.
Bottom right: Soldiers line up to hear about the new 9/11 GI Bill.

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