Charles George VAMC is employing a life-changing prosthetic device for Veterans suffering from a variety of illnesses affecting their ability to walk. The Ness L300 Go device can improve mobility, increase safety and return independence to many of the Veterans we serve.

The device can assist people recovering from Stroke, Multiple Sclerosis, Cerebral Palsy, Traumatic Brain Injury or Incomplete Spinal Cord Injury. It has a 3-axis gyroscope and accelerometer embedded, which senses movement and immediately applies the necessary electrical stimulation to help a user walk. Paired with a mobile app, the L300 can track usage, set goals and monitor activity to show progress.

STORY CONTINUES ON PAGE 3

TOP PHOTO: Clifton Helms (Right) uses a Ness L300 Foot Drop System, enabling his ability to use his legs. Photo by Shahron James.
Wow, it was an eventful month with Hurricane Dorian. First, the hurricane was projected to go into Florida, disturbing portions of Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi. Then to our surprise, it took a turn, up the east coast towards VISN 6. It was clear our experience with Hurricane Florence last year prepared us well. The agility and professionalism of staff at the VISN and throughout the network was amplified during the hurricane. Our leadership team and program chiefs ran our Incident Command Center (ICC) to ensure we had coordinated efforts and communication throughout the region. All the facilities ran their own 24-hour ICC, with all participating in daily hurricane calls to provide any assistance needed.

Our daily reports to Central Office Leadership were concise and consistent, exemplifying that we were prepared and ready for whatever Dorian brought our way. Our communication to Veterans and staff was pushed out timely throughout the field utilizing social media, national hotlines, websites, news channels, and personal phone calls to each and every vulnerable patient in VISN 6. All of this was done in less than two-days. Not many organizations can respond with that type of efficiency and accuracy in that short amount of time.

When the full ICC team arrived every morning, VISN 6 staff and facilities were already assessing their coastal clinics, updating the team on road closures, power outages, current evacuated counties, and staff accountability. Our facilities are quickly rescheduling appointments for Veterans and ensuring they get the health care they need, when they need it. Unlike Florence (this time last year), Dorian brought a lot of wind, tornadoes and rain, but no major damage to our coastal sites is known at this time. We had a few water leaks here and there, but nothing that couldn’t be resolved quickly.

No matter what - no matter when, we strive to be a reliable health care enterprise for our Veterans and staff. This is a perfect example of the high reliability culture we want to promote and expect at all times.

— DeAnne M. Seekins
VISN 6 Network Director

The Department of Veterans Affairs has appointed David Collins as the new Medical Center Director for Hampton VA.

Collins is a 28-year Veteran of the Navy Medical Service Corps, whose recent appointments include service as the Executive Assistant to the Navy Surgeon General, Commanding Officer of the Jacksonville Naval Hospital and Chief Operating Officer of the Naval Hospital in Bremerton, Washington. He also spent time as the Executive Officer for NATO’s Multinational Medical Unit in Afghanistan, demonstrating an ability to relate to other military Veterans with a similar background. He is a current resident of the Hampton and Chesapeake Community.

Collins has received several notable military honors, including the Legion of Merit. He earned his Master of Science in Human Resource Management from Troy University in 1999, and a Bachelor’s of Business and Management from the University of Maryland in 1991.

With more than 1,800 employees, the Hampton VA Medical Center is a 438-bed teaching facility serving Veterans in eastern Virginia and northeastern North Carolina. The medical center, 4th-oldest in the nation, is located on 85 acres overlooking the Chesapeake Bay, and includes outpatient clinics in Virginia Beach, Va. and Elizabeth City, N.C.
Korean War Vet Regains Ability to Walk, In Asheville

Charles George VAMC has partnered with Bioness, inc. to bring the product to Veterans. Dr. Anne Hammonds saw the potential for the device to improve life for Clifton Helms, a Korean War Veteran.

To prepare, Helms worked with Hammonds for nearly three weeks, while staying at the Charles George Community Living Center to determine his appropriateness to use the L300 Go device. They also worked for several weeks on an outpatient basis, with the goal of increasing his safety and mobility at home.

Because of this device, Helms can remain independent and return to everyday activities like dressing himself and enjoying the hobbies he loves. Recently, while on vacation at the beach with his wife and daughter, He was able to walk in the sand barefoot and use his metal detector, activities he loves. He can do those things because of the L300 device. Other interventional aids require that he wear a shoe.

The Bioness program utilized by the Charles George VAMC is designed to match the appropriate device to a suitable candidate. Dr. Hammonds employs a team to work with individuals over the course of weeks or months, assessing their capability and need.

The team works with the Veteran to develop a personalized treatment plan to set goals. During this training period Hammonds checks the Veteran’s ability to safely place the device on the leg, conduct proper maintenance for continued safe use and demonstrate improved gait, increasing independence. When the Veteran shows competency with the device, it is purchased for the Veteran’s personal use.

Gratified to receive his personal device, Helms said, “We got one of the best hospitals in the world, the staff are so kind and helpful.”

The Ness L300 has not only helped him improve physically, but he also notes the positive impact it has had on his state of mind. He says, “I am no longer down in the dumps, I can get around and enjoy life again.”

The Charles George VAMC Rehabilitation Department is looking forward to using the device in both inpatient rehabilitation and outpatient rehabilitation to benefit Veterans.

A common misconception about paralysis is that it often is equated to life limitations. Well, if you ask the assistive technology (AT) team at the Richmond VA Medical Center, they might disagree. The AT team uses modern innovations and their own creativity to reveal new possibilities for patients every day.

Engineers on the AT team must have the problem-solving capability to effectively address patient needs. Seth Hills, VA clinical rehabilitation engineer, first got involved with adaptive gaming when one of his patients wanted to play video games again.

The patient wanted to play Nintendo Wii, but the system often requires the use of two hands simultaneously: a remote in one hand, a nun-chuck in the other. The patient has paralysis on one side of his body. But Hills saw an opportunity. He thought, “What can we do to adapt the controller so it can be used by just one hand?”

After intense brainstorming and a complex production process, the AT team created a device combining the Wii remote and nun-chuck into a single controller which could be operated using only one hand.

Since then, Hills has worked with many other Veterans to create custom gaming setups to fit their needs. One of these Veterans, Lance Knadler, served as a machine gunner in the Marines, enjoyed gaming on Microsoft Xbox for 15 years, often playing Destiny and Destiny 2.

He’s collected more than 58 video games on his Xbox account but has been unable to play since a car accident left his legs paralyzed and caused limited mobility in his hands. The AT team got to work with several slick pieces of hardware thanks to a partnership between Microsoft and VA. They used Microsoft’s Xbox Adaptive Controller system as the basis for a custom acrylic desktop for Knadler’s motorized wheelchair. Then they erected oversized joysticks, an oral bite switch, and buttons positioned for his elbows to push.

Knadler said he is excited to get the opportunity to play multiplayer games such as Smite and Castle Crashers with his 9-year-old daughter. “She’s looking forward to playing some co-op with her daddy,” Knadler said. Co-op refers to cooperative play between two players in the same game.

The therapeutic benefits of this activity have led members of the AT team to teach VA occupational and recreational therapists how to include video games in patient treatment plans. Hills offers training sessions and simulations for healthcare professionals wanting to learn how to incorporate adaptive gaming technology.

Currently, Richmond VA is one of only five VA Medical Centers in the country with an AT program. However, the Richmond team regularly shares its best practices with VA medical centers trying to start programs of their own. VA employees or patients with questions regarding adaptive technology should contact Melissa Oliver, Assistive Technology Program Coordinator, at Melissa.Oliver@va.gov.
Finding a Voice for Your Calling: Richmond Pastoral Care Graduate Finds New Purpose

By Megan Kon | Richmond VAMC Public Affairs

Retired Navy Veteran and proud father Chip Connelly watched his daughter accept her certificate for completing the 2019 Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) program. Chip and his wife sat supportively in the Chapel at Richmond’s McGuire VA Medical Center (VAMC), awaiting their daughter’s reflections on her CPE experience. “It’s wonderful to celebrate another step in her journey,” Chip said. “She is discovering for herself where her faith is leading her. We got her to church every Sunday, but this was her personal call.”

Kelley Connelly, a Virginia native, sang the chorus to “A Living Prayer” by Allison Krauss in a portion of her reflection’s speech. “In Your love I find release,” Kelley said, quoting the song. “The love that I’ve received from Chaplain Ken Linder, Chief Stone, the residents, my intern cohorts, staff at school, patients I have built relationships with, my friends and family, and especially from God’s abundant love, I have found release. A release I didn’t even know I needed. A release from my own anxieties, questions and doubt, CPE has been my living prayer.”

Connelly came into the program hoping to learn more about pastoral care and to strengthen her skills as a passionate pastor while visiting patients on a regular basis. “What I wasn’t expecting was the opportunity to visit myself,” Kelley said.

Before she found her calling, Kelley was determined to become an accomplished opera singer. She studied music performance at Shenandoah Conservatory, learned from talented teachers and conductors, and even sang at the University of Notre Dame. The, she began to feel a Divine intervention in her life pushing her to serve others. Five years later, Kelley began her CPE training. As she approaches her final year of seminary, she still craves the opportunity to serve others.

“This was the answer to a prayer I didn’t know I was praying,” Kelley said. “To my surprise, I stand here hungry for the chance to sing again. I can feel my vocal chords yearn for the opportunity to incorporate music into my ministry.”

Chaplain Service at McGuire is committed to the development of compassionate and competent spiritual caregivers through the CPE program. Chaplain Linder leads this program. “To see them grow in confidence, to see their fears allayed and see them blossom to become effective ministers; touching people’s lives and bringing comfort and healing to the inner person — it’s a real thrill,” Linder said.

This year, four residents and eight interns graduated from the CPE program. “CPE is primarily about the self and the transformation, growth and freedom from hindrances and constraints, to liberate this empowered person for ministry,” Linder said.

“Combine that with skill building and development of approaches to pastoral care, they are then prepared to flourish in pastoral ministry,” he continued. “I want to express my sincere gratitude to senior leadership of McGuire for their tremendous support to enable this program to be so well resourced; expanding it and growing it to reach even more people.”

For more information about the CPE program, please visit the website at: https://www.richmond.va.gov/Clinical_Pastoral_Edu-

Kelly Connelly and her parents pose proudly after the CPE graduation.

Abe the Eagle Is Looking for a Place to Land!

Introducing Abe the Eagle! Abe is used to recognize the unit that embodies teamwork and efficiency between the Emergency Department (ED) and inpatient units. When Abe is received — an acronym for Anything Beyond the ED — he is accompanied by a certificate and treats for the unit with the lowest admission waits each week.

Patient admission wait times are a SAIL measure for the ED, which are determined based on the time between the ED doctor’s decision to admit and the time the patient arrives at the unit. The goal is to have the patient admitted to the unit within 90 minutes. Shorter admission waits are associated with better patient outcomes and increased patient satisfaction.

The Intensive Care Unit (ICU), Step Down Unit (SDU), Inpatient Mental Health, and Acute Med/Surg all compete for the chance to be the most efficient unit, with the reward of being the next ‘landing spot’ for Abe.

Congratulations to Team SDU, upon whose “nest” Abe has landed as the most recent winner.

“We are excited to see how this competition serves to improve teamwork, efficiency and patient care outcomes at Hampton VA! Keep working together,” said Carrie Barber, Nurse Manager, Emergency Department.

Hampton VAMC Emergency Department staff (L to R) are: Ms. Comfort, RN; Chartina Cooper, MSA; Michael Everett, MSA; Nicole Lassiter, MSA; Steven Outlaw, MSA; and James Bonner, RN.
VA Geriatric Scholar Improves Quality of Care for Veterans

Every morning starts the same way for Veteran Kenneth Tutt, age 79. At 8:00am he makes a phone call to Nurse Practitioner Rhonda Weinhold. Weinhold is a VA Home-Based Primary Care provider. She has been working with Tutt for four years. Together they review his weight, blood pressure and sugar levels.

“There is no doubt in my mind I would not be here if it was not for this program,” said Tutt.

Home Based Primary Care (HBPC) is a VA program bringing primary health care into Veterans’ homes. HBPC provides integrated, patient-centered care for Veterans with complex medical needs. Veterans in the program are assigned a primary care provider like Ms. Weinhold, based at the Staunton, Va., community-based outpatient clinic. “The families, the caregivers in the home, they really depend on us,” she says. “A lot of our patients consider us part of the family.”

Recently, Weinhold began something new for Tutt and several other patients that has helped to reduce their medications and resulted in higher satisfaction with their quality of life. Not long ago, she attended a VA Geriatric Scholar Program class, where she was inspired to develop a medication management program to review patient medication prescriptions. The idea came in part from a HBPC routine: setting up monthly medication boxes. “We love doing it, but we noticed our patients were on so many medications. We just thought, are there medications we could potentially get rid of that actually might be doing more harm or that are not needed?” She teamed up with HBPC team member Jena Willis, Doctor of Pharmacy (PharmD), to develop the idea.

The review, it turns out, often results in a reduction of medications. Weinhold says it is good because, “Research shows the more medications patients are on, especially for the elderly population, the greater the risk for falls.” In fact, Tutt admits to having fallen at home a few times in the past.

They consolidate the medication de-escalation recommendations, adding them to each patient’s electronic health record (“EHR”). Tutt, like most HBPC patients, takes a lot of medications for a variety of health conditions. Weinhold asked Veterans, “How do you feel about trying to get off some medicine?” Tutt thought, “It was a terrific idea.”

The project has helped Tutt feel he’s got a better chance of being the person he’s always been. “I’ve been an outdoor person all my life,” said Tutt, who served in the Navy from 1958 to 1970. “I garden, I raise flowers. I’ve had to cut back, but I’m still mobile.”

“Our goal with Home Based Primary Care is patient safety,” said Weinhold. “We’re there to keep them safe in the home and to keep them in the home as long as possible.”

As they fine-tuned their process, Weinhold brought others onboard. It was a team effort. Three registered nurses met in person with 80 patients over six months. “We were able to reduce the number of medications an average two medicines per patient,” said Weinhold.

After their success in Staunton, they were able to coordinate with Salem VAMC pharmacy residents’ grand rounds presentation on the de-escalation of therapy for the medical department there. The Salem VAMC is Staunton CBOC’s parent facility. The residents added the information to their presentation as an introduction to the rest of the medical facility. “The most rewarding thing is providing improved quality of life for our patients, whether it’s three more days, three more years, or 30 more years,” said Willis.

VA Modifies Smoke-Free Policies At Health Care Facilities

WASHINGTON – As part of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs’ (VA) commitment to a smoke-free health care environment for Veterans, in October, the department will extend its smoke-free policies to include employees at its health care facilities.

This follows the department’s June 1 announcement of a new policy restricting smoking by patients, visitors, volunteers, contractors and vendors at its health care facilities. The integration of these two efforts guarantees a fully smoke-free environment for Veterans.

“This policy change is consistent with our mission to promote a healthy environment for patients, visitors and employees at our facilities and is an important element of improving our health care system,” said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. “It will reduce the harmful effects of smoking, including exposure to second and third-hand smoke, as well as increase safety and reduce fire hazards caused by smoking.”

The VA has collaborated with key stakeholders to update and recertify the employee policy to be consistent with department’s commitment to Veterans and the community. Implementation of the employee smoke-free policy will be completed no later than January 2020 based on employee union-negotiated timelines.

The Veterans Health Administration’s (VHA) smoke-free policy applies to cigarettes, cigars, pipes, any other combustion of tobacco and non-Federal Drug Administration approved electronic nicotine delivery systems, including but not limited to electronic or e-cigarettes, vape pens or e-cigars.

To learn more about health risks associated with smoking, visit the Surgeon General’s website at https://www.hhs.gov/surgeongeneral/reports-and-publications/to-bacco/index.html or https://smokefree.gov/.

VHA has resources and programs to assist employees in their smoke free journey and these can be found at the following VHA website at https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/quit-to-bacco/

Bikers Ride for Veterans in Asheville

By Tara Manis-Healey | ASHEVILLE VAMC PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Riders of the Concerned Bikers Association completed a 46-mile ride August 17, ending at Asheville’s Charles George VA medical center (VAMC), to honor and celebrate Veterans.

The Charles George VAMC Voluntary Service coordinates the annual event, which began 19 years ago, and is the longest continuous motorcycle appreciation event in western North Carolina. “Our medical center is fortunate to have strong and lasting community partnerships,” Steph Young, Charles George Director, said. “Relationships like this help keep Veterans connected to a community that cares. When people come together for events that contribute to Veterans’ well-being, the effect of those contributions are far reaching.” When they arrived at the medical center, riders and participants enjoyed live music, food and bike games as part of the community-wide festivities throughout the day.

More than 20 local private businesses and veteran service organizations come together each year to create a successful event for the benefit of Veterans. As a result, Concerned Bikers Association donated $4,400 to the medical center this year, adding to their past total donations totaling more than $50,000.

The medical center uses donations like this to enhance the care and services offered to Veterans. This year’s funds are designated for the Heroes’ Welcome Program, which provides a welcome letter and a gift upon admission to CGVAMC. Since the program began in February 2019, 1,253 veterans have been visited by volunteers and received the welcome gift, providing that personal touch.

According to David Przestrzelski, CGVAMC Chief Nurse Executive, the medical center is fortunate to have a strong network of community partners who support Veterans and the mission of the VA. “The beautiful weather for this year’s run was only matched by the enthusiasm of the Volunteers, CLC residents and families and the nearly 200 riders, some who have been participating since the first ride.” Przestrzelski said, “We sold out of T-shirts! Selling out of T-shirts shows how proud we all are of this longstanding event.” As Przestrzelski met and thanked the four waves of riders when they arrived at the medical center, they consistently voiced how happy they were to support our Veterans, and especially the work that Charles George VAMC does on their behalf.

VA/DoD Partnership Achieves Milestone, Fayetteville VA’s First Robotic Surgery

An ongoing initiative to provide expanded health care services to area VA and DOD beneficiaries through shared staff, resources and facilities recently achieved a dual milestone when Dr. Obinna Igwilo performed Fayetteville VA’s first robotic surgeries using Da Vinci technology. The achievement also doubled as the VA healthcare system’s first Da Vinci surgeries at Womack Army Medical Center, continuing an advancing partnership with Womack and the VA.

Assisting in the surgeries were Coastal HCS employees: Operating Room staff, circulating nurses Katherine Howard and Amanda Amon, RNs; along with scrub techs Lisa Belk-Williams, Ciji Perry, Quincy Porter and Tony Prewit; and the anesthesia team of Leesa Davis, CRNA, and Dora Franzoni, MD.

The Da Vinci robot uses the most advanced technology available, enabling the surgeon to perform complex operations through a few tiny incisions, while increasing the surgeons’ vision, precision, dexterity and control.

The Da Vinci adaptive, state-of-the-art technology allows the surgeon’s hand motions to be translated into precise movements spread to four robotic arms working inside the patient’s body.

Although the feat represented a first for Fayetteville VA, for Dr. Igwilo, one of Fayetteville VA’s newest hires, it was a familiar procedure — he has performed robotic surgeries since 2014. He is board certified in General Surgery with special interest in endocrine surgery, robotic surgery, advanced laparoscopic or minimally invasive/access surgery and endoscopic procedures.

He was previously on staff at Cape Fear Valley Health System in Fayetteville and actively engaged with the training of medical students and surgical residents there while also serving as Clinical Assistant Professor of Surgery with Campbell University School of Osteopathic Medicine.

Igwilo said the Veterans who received the surgeries were “very happy to have received the benefit of this innovative technology.” He also commented that the opportunity to perform complex procedures was one of the selling points that factored heavily in his decision to come work for VA.

Fayetteville VA Coastal Healthcare System also offers traditional minimally invasive laparoscopic surgeries. Minimally invasive surgeries are becoming more common than open surgeries. Robotic and endoscopic technology continues to advance, making these surgeries easier for the surgeon and safer for the patients.

Advantages to the patient include

STORY CONTINUED ON BOTTOM OF PAGE 7
Dr. Obinna Igwilo recently performed Fayetteville VA's first robotic surgery using Da Vinci technology. (Graphic Depiction by De Anna Clark)

Fayetteville Coastal Health Care System is seeking community mental health agencies, local human services agencies, hospitals, veterans and their families, and any other interested organizations or individuals to participate in its annual Mental Health Summit slated for Sept. 9. The summit will be held from 8:30am-4:00pm at Fort Bragg’s Family Readiness Group (FRG) Center at nearby Pope Field.

The purpose of the summit is to enhance mental health care for Veterans and their family members through collaboration between VA and community partners, said primary event organizer Sita Chandana Kanithi, Psy.D., FV AMC Mental Health Service Line Local Recovery Coordinator.

“The central goals of the Community Mental Health Summit are to identify existing resources and services, acknowledge strong practices, recognize gaps and challenges in meeting the mental healthcare needs of our Veterans and families, and begin conversations on how to bridge these gaps,” Dr. Kanithi said.

This year’s theme is “3-D Recovery: Mind, Body & Spirit.” Topics include: supporting transitioning servicemembers, serious mental illness, moral injury, substance use, employment, parenting and more. Subject matter experts will share helpful tips and information on recognizing mental health warning signs and how to access resources for help. VA and community resources will be highlighted in a resource fair. We will offer interactive wellness activities including chair massages, art/music workshops, and giveaways.

The summit breakout sessions are designed to foster collaboration in a small-group setting. The goal of the breakout session is to develop a plan with specific action steps to improve various aspects of mental health care of Veterans in the Fayetteville region.

“Meeting the mental health care needs of Veterans and their families is among the VA’s highest priorities,” Dr. Kanithi added. “VA recognizes that truly Veteran-centered care requires active and ongoing cooperation with the local community. Through collaboration, the VA can promote awareness and utilization of VA mental health resources, help Veterans gain access to community services, and build healthy communities for Veterans and their families.”

VA health care systems nationwide have conducted annual, locally-driven Mental Health Summits since fall 2013.

For more information on VA Mental Health Program, visit http://www.mental-health.va.gov/VAMentalHealthGroup.asp.

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deceased blood loss, shorter hospital stays, faster recovery, and less post-operative pain. And less post-operative pain translates to less reliance on post-operative narcotics for the Veteran.

“For Veterans whose surgical problems can be treated with advanced robotic, minimally invasive surgeries, the VA partnership with WAMC is a winning combination,” said Dr. Jayne Maynor, Fayetteville VA Coastal Healthcare System Interim Chief of Surgery. “We are committed to innovative and excellent care for our Veteran population.”

Fayetteville VA Chief of Staff Dr. Jeffrey Morgan lauded the Da Vinci surgeries as a sterling example of VA/DOD collaboration and the resulting benefit of resource sharing and cooperation between Fayetteville VA and Womack Army Medical Center.

Not only does the partnership demonstrate the organizations’ commitment to good stewardship of taxpayer resources, but more importantly, the collaboration helps to ensure that patients receive the best care possible.

“Cooperation and collaboration yield rewards on so many levels,” Dr. Morgan said. “Like in this instance, where VA gets access to this great Womack AMC facility and our providers get the opportunity to perform higher complexity procedures, maximizing their skills and expanding our healthcare services to our Veterans. This VA/DoD partnership is a model for other healthcare systems. We are extremely grateful for the opportunity to partner with our DOD colleagues to provide safe, high-quality, patient-centered care to our respective patient populations.”
VA Secretary Checks on Hurricane Recovery in Southeastern NC Market

By Steve Wilkins
VISN 6 PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Almost a year ago, the Wilmington VA Health Care Center stood in a shambles. A victim of Hurricane Florence as it ravaged the Wilmington area, the facility had been severely damaged, and Veterans were diverted for some time to receive care from volunteers in mobile medical units and at other locations in the community.

“The building had holes in it,” declared VA Secretary Robert Wilkie, reflecting on the “destruction” he saw personally during a visit right after the storm. The Secretary accompanied Senator Thom Tillis through stops at the Wilmington HCC and other locations in the Fayetteville NC Coastal Health Care System catchment August 6 and 7, meeting Veterans and staff. They were following up on hurricane recovery efforts and seemed pleased with what they found.

The Wilmington facility bounced back within weeks of the weather event, so was fully operational as they toured with facility administrator Deborah Caruso, Fayetteville NC Coastal Health Care System Director Daniel Ducker, and VISN 6 Director DeAnne Seekins.

Impressed with the robust clip of Veterans passing through VA’s doors, and Veterans’ complimentary comments (the Wilmington HCC currently boasts an 88-percent trust score), walking the facility hallways, the Secretary noted his interest in continuing to answer the call of a growing Veteran population throughout North Carolina.

According to his statistics, Wilkie mentioned that North Carolina would have more Veterans than California by 2030, continuing the current pace; and that only Texas contained a larger rural population. In fact, Women Veterans passing through VA’s doors, and Veterans’ complimentary comments (the Wilmington HCC currently boasts an 88-percent trust score), walking the facility hallways, the Secretary noted his interest in continuing to answer the call of a growing Veteran population throughout North Carolina.

Impressed with the robust clip of Veterans passing through VA’s doors, and Veterans’ complimentary comments (the Wilmington HCC currently boasts an 88-percent trust score), walking the facility hallways, the Secretary noted his interest in continuing to answer the call of a growing Veteran population throughout North Carolina.

TOP PHOTO: VA Secretary Robert Wilkie (right, light-colored coat), accompanied by Senator Thom Tillis, met staff at the Wilmington Health Care Center as they toured the Southeastern region of North Carolina August 6 and 7. (Photo Courtesy of Senator Tillis’ office)
The Annual National Veterans Creative Arts Festival is an event showcasing Veteran talent in the categories of Creative Writing, Art, Music, Dance and Drama. Salisbury VA Medical Center’s Recreation Therapist, Jenny Taylor, who has been involved in the competition for approximately 11 years, modeled a monthly Creative Arts Workshop (CAW) after this nationwide event. The workshop touches on all the above listed categories. The Salisbury CAW was developed this way with the intention of encouraging Veterans who wish to submit pieces to Salisbury’s local Annual Creative Arts Festival competition, with the possibility of advancing to the National competition. The CAWs are designed to bring arts and humanities opportunities to Veterans as an extension of their overall health and wellbeing.

Currently, the workshops are held at the Salisbury VAMC on the second Tuesday of each month for residential patients, but outpatient Veterans are also welcomed. For Salisbury’s most recent workshop, Veterans participated in an instructor-led painting project. Each Veteran in attendance was provided a canvas, painting supplies, and given a step-by-step tutorial on how to re-create a painting designed by the instructor, Melody Martin. Ms. Martin is not only an art teacher for these Veterans, but she proudly serves as a Salisbury VA employee, and has for more than 15 years. Ms. Martin expressed that teaching the painting workshop gives her “an opportunity to meet the Veterans and speak with them on a more personal level.”

For this class, Ms. Martin led the Veterans through the process of painting an American Flag. The class began with a bit of art history and an introduction on the most effective way to utilize acrylic paint. Salisbury’s Veterans have varying levels of painting experience, which means that some individuals may need one-on-one guidance. Ms. Martin noted that one of the Veterans who attends paints using only his mouth, due to limitations. After the initial background was painted for the flag, the instructor gave the Veterans freedom of creative expression to individualize their art, with guidance, tips and pointers as needed. The specialized guidance and one-on-one attention is much appreciated by the Veteran artists.

Veteran Kimberly Knighting had never painted her own piece before. She expressed that she always wanted to, but the opportunity hadn’t come about until now. As with most Veterans who attend these painting workshops, Ms. Knighting was initially apprehensive. However, when asked if she would attend the workshop again given the chance, she happily replied, “Yes. One hundred and twenty percent! I really wish there were more opportunities like this.” Ms. Knighting’s finished flag is proudly displayed on the wall in her room at the VA.

American Flag Artwork: Just a few of the paintings produced by participants in the Salisbury VA Medical Center’s Creative Arts Workshop established by the center’s recreation therapist Jenny Taylor, and instructed by Melody Martin.

Operation Song continues mission of telling stories through music

SECOND ITERATION OF MUSIC RETREATS TO LAUNCH IN AUGUST

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has announced that it is expanding its partnership with nonprofit Operation Song to launch a series of songwriting retreats aimed at helping Veterans to share and cope with military experiences through music.

Operation Song is hosting 10 Veterans for a three-day weekend retreat in Nashville, Tenn., from Aug. 15-17.

“VA is committed to exploring new and innovative ways to care for Veterans,” said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. “This includes using creative arts therapies in conjunction with community partners to help Veterans express themselves when conventional therapeutic methods may not be enough.”

Founded by Grammy- and Dove award-nominated songwriter Bob Regan, Operation Song’s first three-day music retreat in partnership with VA was held in November 2018. During that event, professional songwriters and VA therapists worked with Veterans to write and record songs.

The Nashville-based organization has worked with hundreds of Veterans from nearly every military conflict to tell their sometimes-challenging stories using music.

While a background in music is not necessary to participate, interested Veterans must be referred by their VA health care provider, be able to function independently and willing to travel to the retreat location. The program is offered at no cost to Veteran participants.

To read stories from the 2018 retreat, visit VA’s Official YouTube webpage.
VA PARTNERS WITH NATIONAL GUARD
To Provide On-Site Counseling During Training Weekends

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the Department of Defense formalized a partnership June 28 between VA’s Vet Centers and the National Guard Bureau to provide Vet Center counseling, outreach staff and other services to members during training or drill weekends.

“This relationship between VA and the National Guard further advances the department’s efforts to decrease service member and Veteran suicide,” said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. “Vet Center staff will provide counseling and referral to those who may be under stress and at risk for self-harm.”

VA’s 300 Vet Centers, 80 Mobile Vet Centers and a 24/7 call center provide community-based counseling for a wide range of social and psychological services, including confidential readjustment counseling and outreach, and referral to eligible Veterans, active-duty, National Guard and Reserve members, and their families.

Vet Center counselors and outreach staff, many of whom are Veterans themselves, are experienced and prepared to discuss the tragedies of war, loss, grief and transition after trauma.

Suicide prevention is a top priority for the National Guard, which experienced the highest rate of suicide among military components in 2017. Since then, VA has seen a 38-percent increase in National Guard service members seeking Vet Center services.*

“This is an important and historic day for the National Guard and Veterans Affairs,” said Gen. Joseph L. Lengyel, chief of the National Guard Bureau. “This partnership will increase our ability to offer access to services to our Guard Soldiers and Airmen and their families who live in remote locations. Ultimately, this partnership will positively impact the readiness of our force.”

Suicides across the Guard have dropped to the lowest point than they have been in the past 5 years when comparing annual data from January to August. NGB is carefully examining the information to determine whether a direct correlation exists between the reduction of suicides so far in 2019, and this type of strategic engagement.

Nearly 300,000 Veterans and active-duty service members received Vet Center services in 2018.

To find out more about Vet Centers, or to locate a nearby Vet Center, visit www.vetcenter.va.gov.

*Data was pulled from Oct. 1, 2017 to July 31, 2018, and compared with data from Oct. 1, 2018, to July 31, 2019.

VA Launches Veterans Legacy Memorial to Honor Deceased Veterans Online

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs’ (VA) National Cemetery Administration (NCA) launched the Veterans Legacy Memorial (VLM) Aug. 14, the country’s first digital platform dedicated entirely to the preservation of the memory of the 3.7 million Veterans interred in VA national cemeteries.

Each Veteran will have their own memorial page on the VLM, a secure, Web-based platform that creates a perpetual memorial extending beyond the physical border of the national cemetery.

“Veterans Legacy Memorial ensures ‘no Veteran ever dies’ by honoring the legacy of our nation’s Veterans not just in our cemeteries, but in a new and innovative digital setting,” said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. “It enhances the onsite national cemetery experience and extends the experience to those who otherwise are unable to physically visit the cemetery.”

NCA, in conjunction with VA’s Office of Information and Technology, built the architecture for the site, starting with the information contained on every Veteran’s headstone.

In the initial rollout, the public will be able to search the site for Veterans, find out where they are buried and read the basic details of their lives and service. Future capabilities may be expanded to allow families, survivors, fellow Veterans and others to add historic photos and share memories to a deceased Veteran’s memorial page. Such capabilities will include provisions that allow NCA to manage the site in a manner that maintains the same level of decorum our customers experience in our national cemeteries.

For more information about the Veterans Legacy Memorial, visit https://www.va.gov/remember, or contact Dr. Bryce Carpenter, Veterans Legacy Program Manager, at bryce.carpenter@va.gov.

Have questions about Veterans Legacy Memorial? Find what you’re looking for at VLM FAQ.
To address health concerns for Veterans suffering from cancer, particularly in rural areas, VHA established the National Precision Oncology Program in 2016. The program is an extension of a pilot program created by the Massachusetts Veterans Epidemiology Research and Information Center in 2015. Its purpose is to standardize precision oncology across VA. The program involves the genetic profiling of certain types of cancerous tumors. Specifically, a “one-size-fits-all” treatment approach doesn’t always work for every patient. Understanding how a specific tumor grows and mutates, will help providers develop effective treatment plans for those suffering from aggressive forms of cancer. While open to all qualified Veterans, recent emphasis is toward providing precision oncology services to rural Veterans. Given the difficulties of treating Veterans living in rural areas who have been diagnosed with cancer, the precision approach helps deliver the right treatment, to the right patient at the right time, which inevitably saves the Veteran time and money.

For example, a Veteran diagnosed with lung cancer at a VA hospital. VA physicians take a sample of their tumor and send it to a qualified laboratory for genomic sequencing tests, a process that determines the DNA sequence of genes that are considered important in lung cancer. The tests identify specific mutations, that cause the lung cancer to grow, allowing the patient to benefit from drugs that are targeted to those specific mutations. It also helps identify the Veteran as potential candidate for clinical trials of new medications that target those mutations.

So, the Veteran may receive treatment with medications that are not only state of the art, but best intended for their body with their cancer type, giving them a greater chance at beating the cancer and doing it more safely. This is especially helpful for Veterans living in areas where little research occurs, because the program opens opportunities for them that geographically may have been out of their reach.

“New breakthroughs in medical treatments usually come from academic research facilities, which are usually located in urban areas,” says Dr. Michael Kelley, chief of Hematology-Oncology at the Durham VA Healthcare System (DVAHCS).

“Unfortunately, this also means that patients in rural areas may not feel the effects of cutting-edge research. Since a large portion of VA’s patients are rural Veterans, it was critical that we make sure they benefit from the newest treatments and research available. Essentially, we’re serving those that are underserved.”
VisN 6 Sites Of Care & VA Vet Centers

Asheville VAMC
1700 Tunnel Road
Asheville, NC 28803
828- 276-7011 | 1-800-932-6480
www.asheville.va.gov

Durham VAMC
501 Fulton Street
Durham, NC 27705
919-786-4181 | 1-888-570-8890
www.durham.va.gov

Fayetteville VAMC
2300 Ramsey Street
Fayetteville, NC 28304
910-483-9727 | 1-888-544-9961
www.fayettevillenc.va.gov

Hampton VAMC
100 Eisenhower Dr.
Hampton, VA 23666
757-722-0800 | 1-888-544-9961
www.hampton.va.gov

Richmond VAMC
1970 Broad Rock Blvd.
Richmond, VA 23249
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www.richmond.va.gov

Salisbury VAMC
1901 Brewer Ave.
Salisbury, NC 28144
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www.salisbury.va.gov

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Asheville, NC 28804
704-259-1000

Charlottesville CBOC
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Chesapeake, VA 23320
757-722-9860

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Danville, VA 24540
434-710-4710

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Emporia, VA 23847
434-345-1000

Fayetteville CBOC
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Fayetteville, NC 28304
910-480-6720 | 1-800-771-0106

Fayetteville Rehabilitation Clinic
4211 Reardon Rd., Ste 100 B
Fayetteville, NC 28304
910-800-7323

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647 Majay Street
Franklin, VA 23851-0200
828-360-1761

Fredericksburg CBOC
130 Executive Center Pkwy
Fredericksburg, VA 22401
540-370-4490

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16400 Spotsylvania Ave., Ste 300
Fredericksburg, VA 22408
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Goldensboro, NC 27238
919-731-4800

Greenville HCC
400 Hoke Blvd.
Greenville, NC 27834
252-830-3140

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Hamlet, NC 28345
910-581-3380

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3440 Century Place, Ste 100
Hickory, NC 28601
828-431-5400

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1324 Hillandale Road Durham
North Carolina 27705
919-383-6107

Jacksonville CBOC
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Jacksonville, NC 28546
910-353-6100

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308 Byrnn Mann Road
Jacksonville, NC 28545
910-353-6440

Jacksonville 3 VA Clinic
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Jacksonville, NC 28546
910-353-6406

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Kernersville, NC 27284
336-315-2500

Lynchburg CBOC
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Lynchburg, VA 24501
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Morehead City CBOC
5420 U.S. 70
Morehead City, NC 28557
252-340-2349

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3305 Durrent Blvd.
Raleigh, NC 27610
919-312-0100

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3040 Hammond Business Place
Raleigh, NC 27603
919-409-6298

Raleigh III CBOC
1900 Atlantic Ave., Ste 300
Raleigh, NC 27604
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Pembroke, NC 28372
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1312 Tramway Road Sanford, NC 27332
919-775-6100

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Staunton, VA 24401
540-986-5777

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141 Ben Ball Ave.
Tazewell, VA 24651
774-988-8860

Virginia Beach CBOC
344 Clarified Avenue
Virginia Beach, VA 757-727-0661

Wilmington HCC
1703 Gardner Rd.
Wilmington, NC 28405
910-543-5300

Wytheville CBOC
165 Poplar Ferry Rd.
Wytheville, VA 24382-1203
754-733-1400

VA Dialysis and Blind Rehabilitation Clinics at Brier Creek
6001 Arco Corporate Drive
Raleigh, NC 27617
919-361-6478

Greensboro Vet Center
3515 W Market Street Suite 120
Greensboro, NC 27403
336-320-5306

Jacksonville, N.C. Vet Center
110 A Branchwood Drive
Jacksonville, NC 28546
910-517-1100

Norfolk Vet Center
1717 Church Street
Norfolk, VA 23504
757-622-7504

Raleigh Vet Center
8851 Ellerbe Lane
Raleigh, NC 27617
(919) 361-6478

Roanoke Vet Center
350 Albermarle Ave.
SW Roanoke, VA 24016
540-242-8764

Virginia Beach Vet Center
334 Southport Circle, Suite 102
Virginia Beach, VA 23452
757-248-3685

VA Dialysis Clinic Fayetteville
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Questions or comments about the newsletter, email or call 919-555-5541

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VisN 6 Editorial
Dolanne Glenn // VisN 6 Network Director
Tara Dicks // Director of Communications
Steve Wilkins // Editor

Production Team
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