Veteran Robert “Bob” White, who entered the Army in 1943 was presented with the Bronze Star Medal for Meritorious Service by U.S. Representative Scott Taylor Aug. 21 at the Hampton VA Medical Center. White served as an Army communication lineman with the 507th Parachute Infantry of the 17th Airborne Division during World War II. He participated in D-Day, The Battle of the Bulge, and Operation Varsity, and was awarded the Combat Infantry Badge with three bronze service stars and a bronze arrowhead for his service. Taylor says that in 1947, the government authorized that those who were awarded the Combat Infantry Badge should also be awarded a Bronze Star. White was excited to receive the medal. “I'm here. I'm enjoying it and I can't believe this is happening,” he said.
It’s Autumn, and time again to protect yourself and others from the impact of flu season by scheduling your flu shot and reminding all Veterans to get theirs, too. Did you know that starting Aug. 15, 2018, until March 31, 2019, VA and Walgreens will continue their national partnership to provide no-cost quadrivalent flu shots to enrolled Veterans of the VA health care system? Enrolled Veteran patients nationwide have the option of getting their flu shot at any of Walgreens’ 8,200 locations in addition to their local VA health care facilities. No appointment is required; Veterans can go to Walgreens, tell the pharmacist they receive care at a VA facility, then show their Veterans Health Identification Card and another form of photo ID. After all is said and done, the Veteran’s immunization record will be updated electronically in their VA electronic health record.

Autumn also represents the arrival of the holiday season. That’s one of the reasons why September is deemed Suicide Prevention Month. As the days pass and the holiday season approaches, depression and anxiety can heighten, especially amongst our Veteran community. I’ve said this many times; holidays are not always joyful for everyone, and we need check on one another — even those who may appear like they have it all together. As you begin to prepare for trips to watch the leaves turn, and plan for special gatherings, take time to memorize the Veterans Crisis Line number (800-273-8255, press 1). It’s always there to provide that emotional assistance in a time of need. The 20 Veterans a day committing suicide is a portion of the 120-plus Americans a day who are taking their own lives. While we may need to press one on that hotline number for Veterans, not pressing one when you dial 800-273-8255 is the number for the national suicide hotline, which is there to help anyone. So, learn that number and keep it with you.

This season you will also begin to notice more Whole Health options. Our own #LiveWhole campaign is creating awareness of the benefits of living to prevent illness and injury, no matter your age — truly living a whole and fulfilling life. By doing things in our lives that strengthen our mind and bodies, like finding a way to move, whether it’s walking, gardening, running; to eating better, getting good amounts of rest and taking time to relax, we can fend off sickness. We can also take advantage of alternative therapies that naturally help our bodies instead of relying solely on medications for recuperation. You’ll see flyers and posters, announcements about training sessions and informational pieces that describe in more detail how incorporating some of these practices into our lives can help each of us live more fully. Our providers are sharing the news with Veterans and will be happy to discuss with you, whenever asked. What better time to take stock of ourselves and energize than harvest season? Live Whole and enjoy the fall season.

Recognizing DVAHCS’ Top Accomplishments

By Joshua D. Edson

Sunil V. Rao, M.D., chief of cardiology at the Durham Veterans Affairs Health System, a professor at Duke University Health System and a member of the Duke Clinical Research Institute became the editor-in-chief of the American Heart Association’s journal *Circulation: Cardiovascular Interventions*.

Dr. Rao’s main research focuses include pharmacological and interventional therapies for acute coronary syndromes, and bleeding and blood transfusion complications among patients with ischemic heart disease, according to the release. As its name suggests, *Circulation: Cardiovascular Interventions* publishes research centered on interventional techniques to treat coronary and structural heart disease and vascular conditions.
Since 2008, Richmond Fisher House has provided housing for more than 7,000 families of Veterans receiving treatment at McGuire VA Medical Center. Although the house in Richmond is only 10 years old, the Fisher House Foundation has provided housing for military families for nearly 30 years.

Construction worker Zachary Fisher was an avid supporter of the military, yet was unable to serve in combat during World War II due to an injury. Determined to give back to his nation despite his ailment, Fisher and his wife, Elizabeth, established the Fisher House Foundation in 1990. The nonprofit has grown tremendously, creating more than 76 Fisher Houses, 32 of which are located on VA hospital grounds.

Ten years ago, the Fisher House Foundation funded a house at McGuire. Wayne Walker, manager of the Richmond Fisher House, enthusiastically described how it has evolved since its construction.

“When the house was first built, we had 80 percent occupancy,” Walker said. “Now, we are almost always at capacity and there is sometimes a waiting list.”

Demand for lodging at Richmond Fisher House has increased so much that groundbreaking for a second facility will occur Sept. 26, the 108th birthday of the late Zachary Fisher. Walker, who served for 25 years in the Army, advocated for this date to serve as a symbol of how the Fishers’ legacy continues to provide places of comfort and compassion for Veterans’ families.

A second Fisher House will increase total accommodations to between 100 and 120 families per month, doubling the current capacity. Walker said he looks forward to the creation of additional housing and that he is always trying to provide the best customer service to our Veterans.

The Richmond Fisher House Foundation provides invaluable services for the families of Veterans. For more information about house and its mission, visit richmondfisherhouse.org.

Charles “Dave” Collins was appointed as the Administrator of the Charlotte VA Health Care Center Aug. 5.

According to Salisbury VA Health Care System Director Joe Vaughn, “Dave has played a key role in activating the Charlotte healthcare center since opening in 2014. He brings a wealth of experience to his new role, with over 20 years in various Air Force executive positions, and we are excited about his new role at our organization.” The Charlotte HCC is a subordinate unit of the Salisbury VAHCS.

As Administrator, Collins is directly responsible for leading approximately 310 staff, including approximately 50 physician employees in the operation and provision of Veteran health care in the Charlotte area.

The Charlotte HCC provides a full range of primary care and outpatient services, including complex services such as ambulatory services, rehab medicine, dialysis, dental and endoscopic procedures. At nearly 425,000 sf, the Charlotte HCC is the largest VA facility of its kind in the United States and serves Veterans from a 10-county area surrounding Charlotte, N.C. Combined with the 20,000 nmsf Charlotte VA Community Based Outpatient Clinic, care was provided to more than 32,100 unique Veterans through more than 320,000 patient encounters last year.

Collins has been the HCC’s Associate Administrator since October 2016. He’d been an Administrative Officer there in years prior. He is a proven strategic leader with extensive healthcare administrative, financial and human resources management experience.

Before joining the VA, Collins served as Air Force (AF) Program Manager for the AF Medical Operating Agency, in San Antonio, Texas. He is a retired USAF Command Chief Master Sergeant, serving at clinic, hospital, aeromedical evacuation, wing and major command levels during his 29-year military career. He earned Master’s Degrees in Health Administration and Human Resource Management from Webster University.
Navy Veteran Richard Cole wanted nothing more than to return to the comforts of home with his loving wife, Yvette. Richard was told his only option was to relocate to a nursing home to care for his many healthcare needs. Even though Yvette had no medical training, she was determined to learn the skills necessary to fulfill her husband’s wish.

While admitted to the McGuire VA Medical Center’s Intensive Care Unit, Richard learned his kidneys were failing. It wasn’t until registered nurse Pamela Wade, home hemodialysis coordinator, took it upon herself to help the Coles, that the Veteran’s wish started to become a reality. Day after day, Yvette observed dialysis treatment procedures as nurses cared for her husband.

“Pam has been instrumental to us,” Yvette said. “I do not know what we would do without her.”

Home hemodialysis is not a typical option for patients with advanced ALS — a progressive neurodegenerative disease that affects voluntary muscle movements. Richard needs around-the-clock care, ventilators and dialysis treatments every other day. Even though the odds were less than favorable, Wade took it upon herself to teach Yvette how to use the dialysis machine.

“There are certain criteria you have to pass to go home,” Wade said. “He didn’t fit any of them, but he wanted to go home. It is what the patient really wanted. I couldn’t say no.” That was 2½ years ago.

Due to full paralysis, Richard’s only method of communication is through facial expressions and assistive technology. The Tobii eye-tracking program he uses allows him to write and store messages to communicate with others. It takes time and effort to formulate a single word, let alone a complete sentence.

“Every time, Mr. Cole comes in with a big smile on his face,” said Wade. “He has his message stored, ready to thank me. He gets so excited; he sends them faster than the computer can say them aloud.”

Going above and beyond her normal duties, Wade helps coordinate Richard’s care to streamline the process for the Veteran and his family.

“Pam has been a godsend,” said Yvette. “I can’t say enough good things about her. I am just grateful she stepped in when she did.”

By Yanitz Irizamy | RICHMOND VAMC PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Fayetteville VA Medical Center and City of Fayetteville Host Community Homeless Stand Down Aug. 24

FAYETTEVILLE, N.C. — Area homeless Veterans, and anyone facing the threat of homelessness, had the chance to find help when the Fayetteville VA Medical Center, the City of Fayetteville and Volunteers of America hosted a Community Homeless Stand Down Aug. 23 at Festival Park near downtown.

The event was designed to give people access to agencies and services that can make a difference in their lives. Services provided included housing assistance, NC Works employment assistance, medical screening, Veterans’ services, community services and more. Food was served and free haircuts/manicures were available. FAST (Fayetteville Area System of Transit) offered transportation to/from the event.

Fayetteville VAMC and its community-based clinics have participated in, and hosted, numerous stand down events in areas they serve and welcome partnerships with the City of Fayetteville and likeminded groups such as Volunteers of America and the Cumberland County Continuum of Care on Homelessness, said Maurice Smith, certified peer support specialist, HUD-VA SH Program, Fayetteville VAMC.

“By partnering with our communities, stand down events streamline access to homeless programs and resources, and reduce barriers to these services,” Smith said.

“Stand Down” is a military term that refers to the time when troops are brought back from the battlefield for rest and recuperation.

(LEFT PHOTO) L. Martinez at the Fayetteville VA Medical Center and City of Fayetteville Community Homeless Stand Down Aug. 23.
The Salem VA Medical Center’s Gerofit program recently celebrated its 3rd-year anniversary with a luncheon and award ceremony on Aug. 3, 2018.

The Gerofit offers supervised exercise classes at the Salem VA Medical Center and three VA Community Clinics: Danville, Staunton, and Wytheville. A fourth tele-Gerofit class is scheduled for the Lynchburg VA Clinic.

The Salem VA Medical Center has an exercise center designated for Gerofit and also broadcasts the innovative tele-Gerofit classes, which provide exercise opportunities to Veterans living in remote areas. More than 250 Veterans have participated in Gerofit since the program started in 2015 at Salem VA Medical Center. To date, more than 16,000 patient encounters have been documented in the program.

Charles Calloway, a Veteran Gerofit participant since 2015, who attended the luncheon and award ceremony explained,

“Gerofit has been a great help to me. When I began some 3 years ago, I was in need of a change to improve my health. Gerofit has done that for me. I have lost over 20 pounds and toned up. My eating habits are now better. I really understand the importance of this program.”

Gerofit was originally designed and implemented at the Durham VA Medical Center for older Veterans to promote health and wellness. It directly improves wellness through structured and supervised group exercise that translates to less medication use for pain, cardiovascular disease and diabetes.

The program has been designated a VHA Best Practice, and spread to VA Medical Centers across the country through an Enterprise-Wide Initiative. Improved outcomes at Gerofit expansion sites, including Salem, were recently published in the Journal of the American Geriatrics Society, featuring Gerofit as a program that works. Veterans 65 or older can enroll in the program at participating sites. Interested Veterans can ask their primary doctor to refer them to Gerofit.

This year, more than 45 Veterans who are currently participating in Gerofit attended the luncheon and award ceremony, hosted by VFW Post 1264. Salem VA Director Rebecca Stackhouse presented awards in recognition of consistent exercise class attendance.

By Kimberly L. Birkett, MPH | RESEARCH COORDINATOR, GERIATRIC RESEARCH & EDUCATION

These Veterans give it their all to lose weight and stay healthy. (Photo: Brett Robbins, Public Affairs Officer)
Charles George Hosts 18th Annual Veterans Appreciation Motorcycle Run

By Wayne Wheeler | PUBLIC AFFAIRS VOLUNTEER

A light mist did little to rain on the 18th Annual Veterans Appreciation Motorcycle Run this past Aug. 17th.

Starting at several different points, upwards of 150 “hogs” (motorcycles, to the uninitiated) got underway with a throaty roar at 9:00am. The bikes followed a prescribed course that ended at the Charles George VA Medical Center. Most bikers paid a $10 initiation fee to join this Poker Run. At four stops along the way, and at the finish, they drew a playing card. The resulting “poker hand” spelled a cash reward for the winner and for the hospital’s Veterans — a 50/50 split.

Every year, Asheville’s Voluntary Services dedicate their time to providing extraordinary services to inpatients in the hospital. These are special services outside of the medical center’s budget. A special service might entail buying flowers for some Vet’s wife on her birthday or a special type of food an inpatient might crave. The goal of proving these special services is to promote wellness and to enhance the Veteran’s quality of life.

At the finish line, the motorcyclists picked up their final playing cards to complete their poker hands. A luncheon was available at a basic cost, and T-shirt and bracelets were available for sale. In addition, there were motorcycle games and a volunteer band provided music. All proceeds went to support Veterans in Western North Carolina. In total, more than $4,200 was raised.

Motorcycle game winners accept their award at the 18th annual Veterans Appreciation Motorcycle Run at the Charles George VAMC. In all, more than $4,200 was raised to support inpatients at the medical center.

SALEM VA HOSTS 28TH ANNUAL STAR CITY CRUISERS SHOW TO BENEFIT VETERANS

On Aug. 28, 2018, the Salem VA Medical Center hosted the 28th annual Star City Cruisers Car, Truck, & Cycle Show to benefit area Veterans. The event is conducted in partnership with Salem VAMC’s Voluntary Service and supports the VAVS Committee in serving area Veterans. More than $5,000 was raised to help with purchases of canteen books and to provide haircuts for Veterans throughout the year; to prepare for the upcoming Homeless Veteran Stand Down in November, and to provide craft items and other diversional activities for Veterans, as well as to help sponsor the annual POW/MIA Luncheon. Despite the rainy weather that day, there were 107 vehicles on display.
Excellent Care – Earned by Veterans – Delivered Here | SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2018

McGuire Radiology Improves Mammogram Access

By Deanna Davison | PUBLIC AFFAIRS INTERN

The radiology department at McGuire VA Medical Center recently began a new initiative to include same day, walk-in services for mammograms. This new program allows some Veterans to self-schedule their appointments without seeing their women's health or primary care provider first — something they could not do previously.

wait times, radiology supervisor Jessica Batten said her team's scheduling allows for natural breaks, so walk-ins are accommodated as quickly as possible. Many patients, she said, prefer to have multiple appointments taken care of in the same day. The walk-in and self-requested scheduling service allows that to happen.

“Before, the scheduler had to call the patient, and first-time appointments could take a couple months,” Batten said. “This gives the patients more control.”

All women Veterans who are established patients at McGuire and meet qualifications for routine mammograms — meaning they are 40 or older, experience no symptoms and have not had a mammogram within the last year — are eligible to walk in or self-schedule. A Veteran who is experiencing related symptoms will still be seen, but they should schedule appointments through their primary care doctor.

Batten said the improved scheduling and appointment system comes at the perfect time because women Veterans continue to increase both in number and in age. Because the program is new, there are some kinks to work through as radiology employees adjust to the new processes, but Batten said she is grateful for the open lines of communication she and her team share.

“There’s a lot of collaboration,” she said. “We have a lot of support from women’s health, from primary care ... everyone we work with.”

The initiative kicked off in Richmond Aug. 1 after being piloted by VA medical centers in San Diego, Washington, and Birmingham, Ala.

As the new Salisbury VA Medical Center Director, Joseph P. Vaughn met with every department to determine how the Salisbury VA Medical Center could deliver even better customer service. On April 18, Mr. Vaughn met with the Call Center Staff where he was introduced to Salisbury’s best practice of Continuous Improvement (CI) Boards and then took immediate action on one of the staff’s ideas.

Cindy Ware and Vickie Hatley had recommended adding another break room, as the current break room was too small for the 25 employees in Building 11-C. Engineering service assisted in the creation of a new break room area with furniture and a television.

“The Call Center Staff is usually the first contact that a Veteran has with our facility,” Vaughn said. “It is vital that their calls are answered in a timely and efficient manner. I knew that we could improve on telephone customer service, so I challenged the staff to meet the national metrics for a call abandonment rate of less than 5 percent and an average speed of answering calls of less than 30 seconds.”

The Call Center not only accepted the challenge, but exceeded the metrics for the month of July. On Aug. 9, Vaughn provided pizzas for the Call Center staff to celebrate their success.

Currently, 102 CI Boards are in place throughout the Salisbury VA Health Care System. Since Inception in 2015, 1010 ideas have been received and 964 ideas have been implemented. The CI Boards provide leaders with an easy employee engagement tool that promotes collaboration and ownership.

Salisbury VA Medical Center Director Joseph Vaughn congratulates Cindy Ware and Vickie Hatley on successful completion of their continuous improvement idea of a new break room for the Salisbury VA Call Center.

Salisbury VA Call Center Staff Receives New Break Room, Exceeds Expectations

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When Charles George VA Medical Center Surgical Intensive Care Unit nurse Dee Lanier recently completed a quality improvement project, the wheels of her mind started turning about how to reduce stress among surgical patients suffering from confusion, dementia or Alzheimer’s disease, along with conditions necessitating surgery.

From her research and experience, Lanier knew that traditional methods for calming patients frightened by IV needles, blood pressure machines and respirators were often counterproductive. Sedatives and wrist restraints are not only detrimental to the physical and mental welfare of patients, but also to staff trying to administer care.

She turned to RN Dr. Cathy Hebert, a nurse educator in Charles George’s Learning Resources Service, for a kinder and gentler response to what professionals call “ICU or hospital-acquired delirium.”

“This is a great example of how we are trying to move toward a non-pharmacological approach in older adults, to avoid using dangerous antipsychotic medications and instead focus on the whole person,” said Hebert.

An experienced geriatric nurse herself, Hebert recommended Activity Blankets which she knew had been introduced in post-surgical settings with remarkable results.

Activity blankets are lap-size squares of colorful fabric donned with items that provide both tactile and mental stimulation, redirecting the attention of the blanket holder away from hospital hardware and to the blanket itself.

Attached to the blankets are zippers, buttons, pockets, small stuffed animals, and gadgets like measuring spoons. All of the items can be manipulated by the holder, to help achieve a sense of control over their situation and with this sense of control, calm often prevails.

“I had seen them used successfully at other hospitals and they are recommended by leading geriatric organizations,” said Hebert.

Excited about the prospect of providing a new tool for nurses and doctors, Hebert and Lanier reached out to VA Voluntary Service (VAVS) for help bringing this methodology home. With their extensive reach into the mountain community, VAVS Chief Craig Doane and Specialist Vicki Eatmon called on one of their staunchest local volunteer allies, the Cherokee American Legion Auxiliary, who agreed to buy materials for, and to produce 30 Activity Blankets for the hospital.

Ten Veterans were provided with a blanket in the first two weeks of the program, with positive reports from nursing staff, saying they see reduced anxiety and use of restraints. The blankets are needed not only to serve surgical patients, but also Veteran residents living in the Community Living Center (CLC) and our other care areas of the Charles George VA Medical Center.
WASHINGTON — To mark Suicide Prevention Month this September, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is shining a light on effective ways to prevent Veteran suicide with its Be There campaign.

The campaign highlights the risk factors and warning signs for suicide, provides information about VA mental health and suicide prevention resources, and helps individuals and organizations to start the conversation around Veteran mental health in their communities.

“In our various communities, everyone is in a position to make a difference for a Veteran who may be at risk for suicide,” said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie, who recorded a video about VA’s strategies to prevent Veteran suicide. “A common misconception is that you need special training to talk safely about suicide risk or show concern for someone who is in distress. One simple act of kindness could help save a life. I encourage everyone this September, and beyond, to take the first step in acting as that support system.”

Talking with a Veteran about mental health or suicide risk may be challenging, but VA encourages community leaders, colleagues, family and friends to simply “Be There” by sharing messages of support that can help show a Veteran you care. VA has also collaborated with community partners and is asking individuals across the country this month to share resources with Veterans in their lives via the BeThere-ForVeterans.com webpage.

Veterans in crisis or having thoughts of suicide — and those who know a Veteran in crisis — can call the Veterans Crisis Line for confidential support 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. Call 800-273-8255 and press 1, chat online at VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat or text to 838255.
VA Expands Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program to Improve Service to Veterans

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs’ (VA) Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program (VR&E) recently began the process of reducing the average counselor-to-caseload ratio, to one to 125 or below, through the hiring of 172 vocational rehabilitation counselors (VRCs).

The hiring effort, which began early this summer, will help improve service to Veterans with service-connected disabilities and employment barriers, as well as help provide them with expedited services to improve their ability to transition to the civilian workforce.

“The VR&E program is much more than a benefits program,” said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. “It’s a vital support network, where VA’s expert counselors work closely with Veterans on their personalized vocational rehabilitation goals. Congressional funding enables us to expand our team of counselors who are on the ground across the country working tirelessly for Veterans, and we appreciate their support.”

VA is committed to ensuring that its counselors have manageable caseloads and the resources needed to ensure Veterans are receiving thorough, quality services. Currently, 941 counselors are working across VA’s 56 regional offices, as well as in on-based and satellite locations. Once hiring is complete for the additional 172 counselors, a total of 1,113 VRCs will be deployed in the field to serve Veterans. This includes 905 VRCs at regional and out-based offices, 132 Integrated Disability Evaluation System counselors at 71 military installations and 76 Veteran Success on Campus counselors at 105 institutions of higher learning.

Since 2014, more than 56,000 Veterans have either completed a rehabilitation plan, are employed, or have achieved a greater independence in living through VR&E assistance. The VR&E program currently has more than 123,000 participants. For more information about VR&E, visit https://www.benefits.va.gov/vocerehab/.

CLICK HERE FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT VR&E
The 2018-2019 Flu Season Is Here and the VA is Ready!

By Glenn A. Johnson | CHIEF OF HEALTH CARE MEDIA VHA OFFICE OF COMMUNITY CARE

The current 2018-2019 season may be just as dangerous as last year. To make it easier for Veterans to get a flu vaccination, the Department of Veterans Affairs has made two methods for getting a no-cost flu vaccination available to Veterans nationwide. This year, like all others, flu shots will continue to be given at all VA Medical Centers and Community Based Outpatient Clinics for free. A Veteran simply needs to ask their primary care physician for the vaccination when they visit.

The other method is for a Veteran to receive a no cost vaccination is through the VA/Walgreens partnership within the Retail Immunization Program by visiting any of the 8200 Walgreens pharmacies nationally through the VA's Retail Immunization program. The Veteran simply needs to visit a Walgreens pharmacy, present their Veterans Health Identification Card and one other form of photo ID to receive a vaccination.

Since the program’s inception in 2014-2015, the number of vaccinations has increased dramatically from less than 20,000 to a record for last year’s campaign which delivered 105,010 vaccinations at a final cost to the taxpayer of $3,202,805.00. Over 25 percent of those vaccinations given were to rural veterans, a notoriously underserved population.

“Our partnership with Walgreens has been a positive and effective force in the VA’s ability to meet the vaccination needs of our rural veterans with Walgreens providing over 105,000 vaccinations on behalf of the VA during the 2017-2018 flu season,” said Elizabeth Tyler, VA’s Program Manager for the Retail Immunization Program.

“And,” Tyler continued, “we expect that partnership to grow even more strong and effective for our current 2018-2019 season with an estimated delivery of 161,000 vaccinations between Aug. 2018 and the end of March 2019.”

Another perk of the VA-Walgreens partnership is that after a Walgreens pharmacist administers the flu shot, the Veteran’s immunization information is transmitted directly to VA through the eHealth Exchange and becomes part of the patient’s VA health record. The Walgreens immunization records are automatically available for VA clinicians to review within 24 hours.

For the 2018-2019 flu season the no-cost option is for the quadrivalent version of the vaccine. Any Veteran requesting another type of flu shot such as “High Dose,” trivalent or a flu shot outside of the contracted timeframe, Walgreens’ staff will refer Veteran patients to their local VA health facilities to obtain a VA provided no-cost flu shot.

For more information about this important benefit, please visit our website at: https://www.va.gov/COMMUNITYCARE/programs/veterans/immunization.asp