

VOICES OF VISN 6

— Excellent Care — Earned by Veterans — Delivered Here —



VETERANS MAKE *Music to Tell Their Stories*

Inside This Issue



By Rosaire Bushey | SALEM VA HCS PUBLIC AFFAIRS

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Geneo Graves looks younger than his 57 years. He's fit, mobile and possesses a deep and steady voice. What you can't see, however, is the anguish Graves lives with: pain that becomes clearer as he discusses his 30 years of service.

Working with the Wounded Warrior Project and CreatiVets, Graves had the opportunity to travel to Nashville in 2019 and tell his story to a professional songwriter. In July 2020, his song and ten others were released in an album called *Veteran Songs* with Graves' song, "Stories," being the first single released.

Because of his connection to special operations, Graves' stories aren't steeped in detail. More often they are generalizations followed by a wry smile and nod to convey, "You know what I mean." He's participated in no fewer than eight combat missions from Mogadishu, to Panama, to Iraq, and from places where the unit kept a camp to locations where he'll only admit, "We were there for a quick second."

When Graves retired in 2013, he found himself living with injuries he wasn't even aware he had at the time.

"I didn't know I had PTSD or anything," Graves admits. "My walls started falling

TOP PHOTO: Army Special Forces Veteran Geneo Graves spent time with writers through a program in Nashville and has written a song that was released recently as a single. (Photo by CreatiVets/Jason Myers)

MESSAGE FROM THE Network Director



Greetings,

I hope this finds you enjoying summer! In some ways it is hard to believe the year is half over, and yet so much has happened, it's hard to believe it isn't already over! We are well underway in our planning for fall. We remain flexible in our planning and processes, as COVID-19 hasn't let up around the nation, and particularly for us, in North Carolina. Our Moving Forward task force has adjusted accordingly and each of our facilities continues to expand cautiously. We haven't backtracked, but we have slowed our efforts considerably to ensure optimal safety around our facilities. It is important, too, that we stress to everyone how important it is to mask and social distance everywhere we go, not just in the hospital or clinic. If we are going to control this menace, we must remain vigilant 24/7. Until it is safe, we must keep certain restrictions in place. That may be somewhat difficult for some Veterans, but it is essential to curtail the spread of the disease.

We are working within VA's supply chain processes, with a goal of maintaining a surplus of PPE and testing supplies through the fall and into next year. It hasn't always been easy, but VA and our Logistics professionals in the VISN have performed admirably in adjusting to challenges and adapting processes to make sure that staff and Veterans are as safe as possible.

Already here, the 2020 hurricane season has so far met predictions as an above average season. We have already had nine named storms. VISN 6 emergency managers work closely with their professional community counterparts to keep senior leadership informed of any potential threats well in advance to allow for sufficient preparation. This year, VA has developed a plan for how to respond to hurricanes (and other disasters) in the middle of a pandemic. VISN 6 is experienced and well prepared to respond to hurricanes, and we are confident of our abilities, even with COVID-19. Although Hurricane Isaias damaged some communities, VA facilities weathered the storm and our staff performed well.

We've seen, this year, that just because we are dealing with challenges, it doesn't mean we can look beyond those we already expect. So, I must remind you that flu season will be upon us shortly. We expect our first shipments of vaccines to arrive in September. It will be more important than ever to inoculate the greatest population we can to help our most vulnerable patients go through the season with the strongest possible support, with enriched immune systems and environments that bolster their defenses against the coronavirus disease. Again, our effort is not just about us doing what's right for ourselves; we need to think about what is best for our neighbor.

Remember, mask up, social distance, wash your hands frequently, and take the opportunity to notice and enjoy the little things.

– **DeAnne M. Seekins**
VISN 6 Network Director

Hampton Nurse Honored as One of the Best

On Jul 17th, Hampton VA Medical Center staff was honored as one of their outstanding CLC Nursing Assistants, Ms. Saretha Cannon, received an award from VACO for Excellence in Nursing!

The Secretary of Veterans Affairs Award for Excellence recognizes individuals for superior performance of their duties over the preceding year. Ms. Cannon, as a VISN 6 winner was considered for and has received National recognition.

She officially received her award July 17 in a virtual ceremony hosted by VHA Chief Nursing Officer Beth Taylor, with Dr. Richard Stone, VHA Executive in Charge, and VA Secretary Robert Wilke. During the ceremony she received plaques from the Secretary, VISN 6, and Hampton VAMC. She also received a medallion from the Secretary.

Hampton VA leadership also offered gracious appreciation with the following note:

"Ms. Cannon, we are grateful for the nursing care that you provide on a daily basis as you protect a very fragile patient population caring for Veterans with advanced dementia. While continually providing outstanding care to Veterans, you strive to develop innovative nursing practices, such as implementing the use of weighted vests to reduce a Veteran's anxiety & stress. Your accomplishment of building positive and sustaining trusting relationships with Veterans and staff, your steady commitment to the goal of excellence and the compassion you exhibit every day are a tribute to the essential mission of our organization and are, in all respects, the embodiment of the VA ICARE principles."



CLC Nurse Assistant Saretha Cannon earned the Secretary of Veterans Affairs Award for Excellence, which she received July 17. She is pictured second from right, here with (L – R); CLC Nurse Manager Renieta Brown. Chief of Community Living Center Vernadine Hampton. Ms. Cannon and Mrs. Crystal Lindaman Associate Director for Patient Care Services.

Western North Carolina VA HCS Nurses Earn National Awards

By Vance Janes | WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA VA HCS PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Two Western North Carolina VA Health Care System employees were presented Secretary of VA's Awards for Excellence in Nursing & for Advancement in Nursing Programs during a virtual ceremony July 17 at the Charles George VA Medical Center.

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Sec Wilkie visits with Medical Sub Specialty Staff Members during his visit to the Hampton VA Medical Center. Pictured (l-r) Physician Assistant Garth Elliot, Nurse Practitioner Dr. Tamika Champagne, Dr. Katrina Parr, VA Secretary Robert Wilkie and Director David Collins

VA Secretary Impressed With Hampton VA Visit | By John Rogers | HAMPTON VAMC PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Secretary of Veteran Affairs Robert Wilkie visited the Hampton VA Medical Center July 31 to personally thank staff for their service to Veterans and for their outstanding efforts in fighting COVID-19 on a tour of the facility. This was Secretary Wilkie's first visit to Hampton VAMC since his Senate confirmation July 23, 2018.

He immediately began greeting staff, touring the COVID screening, testing and mobile pharmacy areas. The Secretary thanked staff members and presented challenge coins to screeners.

Secretary Wilkie also received a leadership briefing, led by Medical Center Director David Collins, covering COVID Response, Veterans Access to Care, Appointment Wait Times, and Suicide Prevention efforts. He seemed very pleased with the increase in VA Video Connect (VVC) appointments conducted by Hampton VA providers; from 59 in February to over 15,000 in July.

Among the highlights of the Secretary's brief, Dr. Usha Subramanian shared Hampton's success in hiring 24 new Primary Care Providers over the last year. Then Dr. Robert Hersh presented elements of Cutaneous Oncology, a skin cancer management program combining the expertise of Dermatology with the technical capabilities of Plastic Surgery. In

the United States, only the Cleveland Clinic boasts a similar model. Cutaneous Oncology includes Mohs surgery, a precise surgical technique used to treat skin cancer by progressively removing thin layers of cancer-containing skin until only cancer-free tissue remains. Hampton VAMC shares Mohs surgeon Dr. Anis Miladi with the Naval Medical Center in



Hampton VA Primary Care Chief of Staff Dr. Usha Subramanian (left) briefs Secretary Wilkie on Hampton VA Primary Care Service performance

Portsmouth. This is the first job-sharing position of its kind between VA and DoD. It is cost-effective and has a track record of accessible, high quality surgical service for Veterans and DoD patients alike.

The Secretary took time from his schedule to present coins to five staff members for their outstanding service during the COVID-19 response, including Wound Care Registered Nurse Joseph Kraft, who supported VA's 4th mission through recent deployments to New Orleans and New Jersey.

As he left, Secretary Wilkie told everyone that through VA's mission to assist non-VA hospital centers in times of emergency, VA staff are now in 46 states, taking care of non-Veteran patients, and deployed in nursing homes around the country. He concluded, saying, "We have the best story in government ... people have not left their posts. We have fewer requests for leaves, and fewer absences at VA at this time than we did this time last year when there was no epidemic. People are staying at their posts, and that's a testament to their dedication."

We are extremely thankful for the opportunity to host Secretary Wilkie. Hampton is proud of the service provided to Veterans, and it was very reassuring to receive thanks and recognition from the Secretary.

VETERANS LIFE CENTER NORTH CAROLINA

Honored guests celebrate the grand opening of the North Carolina Veterans Life Center (VLC) in Butner, N.C. Aug. 1. (L-R) VLC Exec. Dir., Brig. Gen. Thomas Gorry (USMC, Ret.), Butner, N.C. Mayor Terry Turner, N.C. Secretary of Commerce Anthony Copeland, VLC Founder John Turner, Hon. Marilyn Avila, VA Secretary Robert Wilkie, U.S. Senator Thom Tillis, Col. David Hayden (USA, Ret.) (Photo by Stephen R. Wilkins)

VA Secretary Wilkie Attends VLC Inaugural

By Stephen Wilkins | VISN 6 PUBLIC AFFAIRS

BUTNER, N.C. — On Saturday, Aug. 1, 2020, U.S. Secretary of Veterans Affairs Robert Wilkie, Senator Thom Tillis and Brooks Tucker, Asst. Sec for Congressional and Legislative Affairs, joined more than 40 dignitaries for the grand opening of the Veterans Life Center (VLC) in Butner, N.C.

This was Secretary Wilkie's second visit to the VLC — noticeably very different from the first, when there was only a concrete slab and a vision of what could be.

Wilkie, a U.S. Air Force and Navy Veteran, and a North Carolina native, expressed his deep understanding of the respect and gratitude North Carolinians holds for their military community; and how families, just like his own, deal with the wounds of war.

Wilkie ended his speech by acknowledging John Turner, Army Veteran and founder of VLC, for bringing thousands of people together to support our service members; "this is a manifestation of all we are proud of

in North Carolina."

Turner finished the event with an emotional recognition of appreciation to all those who believed in his vision, which was propelled to a new level after two battle buddies took their own lives. "Losing someone in combat was painful," he recalled, "but the two soldiers we've lost since coming home is maddening, and that is why I am so passionate about this."

The Veterans Life Center is a 100-plus-bed residential facility designed to improve the lives of 21st Century North Carolina Veterans who are experiencing reintegration obstacles by providing temporary housing and services to achieve self-reliance in two years or less. Organizers of the center want Veterans to see VLC as another resource for them if they are in crisis.

For more information, please visit www.vlcn.org.



VA Secretary Robert Wilkie addresses a gathering of community partners and government officials during the grand opening of the Veterans Life Center, a comprehensive, residential rehabilitation center for transitioning Veterans in Butner, N.C. Aug. 1. (Photo by Stephen R. Wilkins)

Central VA HCS Provides Expanded Services for Fastest-Growing Veteran Population

By Megan Kon | CENTRAL VA HCS PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Dawn Bates, a 38-year-old Navy Veteran, recently sought gynecological care at the Central Virginia VA Health Care System (CVHCS) after prolonged issues with bleeding and anemia. Women Veterans may be interested to know just how extensively women's CVHCS services have developed over the last few years.

In addition to the many female-specific routine exams and screenings offered to women Veterans through the medical center — including colposcopy, cervical cancer screening and prevention, chronic pelvic pain, endometriosis, and abnormal bleeding issues — gynecological surgical care has been offered since 2017, when Dr. Jordan Hylton and her colleagues established the gynecology program. Surgical options include hysterectomy, hysteroscopy, laparoscopy and others. Hylton is the Associate OB/GYN Residency Program Director at both CVHCS and Virginia Commonwealth University.

“Dr. Hylton always made time to talk to me,” Bates explained. “Her bedside manner is impeccable — it's like talking to a friend more than a doctor.” Dr. Hylton is a board-certified Obstetrician/Gynecologist and Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine. Together, Hylton and her surgical colleagues possess more than 50 years of combined experience.

After first meeting with Hylton, Bates said she felt she could trust her skill and expertise. Following surgery, during her recovery, Bates discovered that others in the office afforded her the same level of comfort when she needed to call in for help. “I'm grateful [staff] was so readily available to answer my call.”

Women Veterans in central and northern Virginia area are

currently the fastest-growing population in VA's [Mid-Atlantic Health Care Network](#) (VISN 6), one of the nation's fastest-growing regions. VISN 6 manages Veteran health care in 44 sites of care in North Carolina and Virginia. The CVHCS currently serves approximately 10,000 women Veterans each year.

“As our population grows, we strive to make adjustments and ensure services are available in-house as frequently as possible to reduce care in the community and enhance continuity of care,” said Haisley Holden, [Women Veterans Program Manager](#) (WVPM).

The CVHCS Women's Health Center offers specialized gynecological services to its patients, and plans are underway to break ground on a standalone 12,000 square-foot clinic. Services at the Women's Health Center include a complete list of services that can be found here. For information about all Women Veterans programs and services, contact Haisley Holden at (804) 675-5000 ext. 2799 or by sending a secure message to the [Women Veterans Program](#).



Dr. Jordan Hylton, Associate OB/GYN Residency Program Director at both CVHCS and Virginia Commonwealth University.

Western North Carolina VA HCS Nurses Earn National Awards

Chief Nurse Executive Dave Przestrzelski and Licensed Practical Nurse Jim Luetkenhaus won in the Nurse Executive and Licensed Practical Nurse categories respectively. Stephanie Young, Western North Carolina VA Health Care System Director, presented the awards on behalf of Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Robert Wilkie and Dr. Richard Stone, Veterans Health Administration Executive in Charge, who participated in the virtual event.

“We're extraordinarily proud that this is the 200th anniversary of Florence Nightingale and the fact that nurses continue to be the centerpiece in delivery of extraordinary care in this nation,” Dr. Stone said. “The innovation, the creativity that you've demonstrated in the care of very sick patients continues to amaze me.”

Secretary Wilkie agreed and said that of the more than 100,000 nurses in the VA, it's imperative that the VA recognizes nurses for all the things they bring to the table. In doing so, Wilkie said Historian Stephen Ambrose used to write, “It is never possible to praise nurses too highly,” and added that he thought that sentiment encapsulates the importance of what nurses do.

In presenting Luetkenhaus with his award, Ms. Young expressed her thanks on behalf of the Health Care System and the VA. “We're very proud of the work you do,” she said. “Mr. Luetkenhaus always displays the ICARE values, he is the go-to person in the urology department, he is also recognized by the residents of Duke as their nurse of the year. So, congratulations Jim, we're very proud of you.”



Charles George VA Medical Center Licensed Practical Nurse Jim Luetkenhaus.



Charles George VA Medical Center Chief Nurse Executive Dave Przestrzelski.

VA Offers Debt Relief to Veterans Through Year's End

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has announced its commitment to extend debt relief to Veterans adversely impacted by COVID-19 to the end of 2020 by suspending certain debt-collection actions.

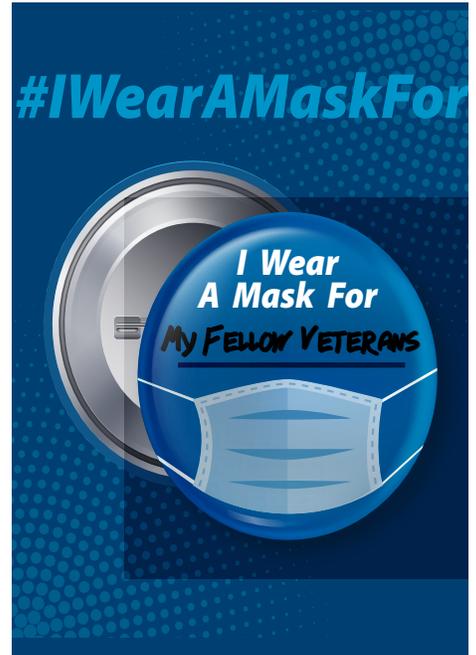
The department recognizes that Veterans and beneficiaries are still being greatly impacted by the coronavirus, prompting the extension of financial relief.

“Veterans and their families should be focused on their health and safety during the pandemic,” said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. “VA is taking action to give those with pending debts greater flexibility during these challenging times.”

VA is suspending all actions on Veteran debts under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Treasury Department. This includes the suspension of collection action or extending repayment terms on pre-existing VA debts — whichever the Veteran prefers.

For benefit debts, Veterans should contact the VA Debt Management Center at 1-800-827-0648.

For health care debts, Veterans should contact the Health Resource Center at 1-866-400-1238 or <https://www.pay.gov> for payments.



Veteran Geneo Graves during an Active-duty deployment. (Courtesy photo)

COVER STORY CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Veterans Make Music to Tell Their Stories

apart and I didn't know what was going on. I came here, specifically to Salem, to get things together in 2014, because I knew Salem had the best VA around. Since then I've had nine surgeries to repair everything from head to toe.”

During his career, Graves logged more than 2,000 jumps, a staggering total that he shrugs off with, “I was on jump status for 20 years, including my time with combat camera. It adds up.”

Graves cites the Wounded Warrior Project as instrumental in his therapy, and eventually he became a peer mentor for the group, helping other Veterans to deal with stress and PTSD.

“Even though I'm still dealing with it, I'm in a better place to help others right now and that's what I like doing,” he said. “There are Veterans who have not left their house in two, three, four years sometimes, so we pull them out and get them out of their comfort zones — kayaking, horse riding, equine therapy — just to get them used to being around people again.”

When Graves sat down with Nashville songwriter and singer Johnny Bulford and his wife Heidi, he had a lot to share.

“I told them my stories and they took notes,” Graves recalled. “It took about four hours and there was so much there, that's where the song title, ‘Stories,’ comes from. It was difficult to narrow it down to one thing.”

Each song from each Veteran is different, and Graves said that you can tell sometimes what branch the Veteran was in through the song.

“I wanted my song to reach all Veterans,” he said. “The song talks about what we all go to sleep at night thinking about, that no one knows we go to sleep thinking about — the things you can't share with loved ones. Special operators still can't talk about things they've experienced, not even with psychologists, because of all the disclosures we've signed.”

STORY CONTINUED ON PAGE 7

VA Expands Funding for Emergency Response for Veterans Experiencing or at Risk of Homelessness During COVID-19 Pandemic

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has announced that it is allocating an additional \$400 million of its [coronavirus relief funding](#) to enhance the department's emergency relief response for Veterans experiencing or at risk of homelessness during the coronavirus pandemic.

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) allocated \$17.2 billion for the Veterans Health Administration, of which \$700 million is devoted to expanding services for and addressing the challenges faced by Veterans who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

"The additional allocation of CARES Act funding will support the continuity of care

of vulnerable Veterans during the COVID-19 pandemic," said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie.

"With this additional funding, VA's Homeless Programs Office can provide more homeless prevention assistance and emergency housing to make it possible for Veterans to maintain appropriate physical distancing and to ensure that they are living in safe conditions."

The newly allocated funds will be used for the [Supportive Services for Veteran Families Program](#) (SSVF). SSVF offers several ways to secure housing for Veterans experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

In total, \$602 million of coronavirus relief funding has now been allocated for this pro-

gram, which will also help the [Housing and Urban Development-VA Supportive Housing Program](#) to place Veterans in safe housing to isolate them from the virus.

Other coronavirus relief funding devoted to providing emergency shelter and supportive services for Veterans includes \$88 million for the [Grant and Per Diem Program](#), and \$10 million for the [Health Care for Homeless Veterans Program](#).

VA hosted a national webinar July 17 to support budgeting and planning for grantees of the SSVF funding. [Learn more](#) about how VA is working to protect Veterans during the COVID-19 pandemic, and about [VA's homeless programs](#).

STORY CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6

Not being musically inclined to either singing or an instrument, Graves was surprised at the level of attention he and the other Veterans were given in Nashville.

"They picked eleven of us for the album and I didn't expect any of this," he said. "It was therapy for us, but Richard [Casper, co-founder of CreatiVets] calls me one day and says, 'We're going to release your song in partnership with Big Machine Label Group.'"

The backing of a record label meant that CreatiVets, a non-profit formed in 2013 by Casper, himself a wounded Marine, could not only record music, they could make it available for sale and through audio services online.

"One of the things the experience tries to do is help Veterans remap the way they think about an experience," Casper explained. "The thing about the music and how we selected the songs is that the Veterans want to talk about all types of things, so there are inspirational songs, and war stories, songs that speak to kids, or spouses — you never know what a Vet wants to hear, but we want to use these songs to heal and build relationships."

"I've always had a love for country music, and I wanted my song to have a country flavor," Graves said. "I love that part of it because it's very open, it's a very clean sound and they understood what I wanted when I told them how I wanted it to sound."

When the band arrived, Graves was amazed at the efficiency of their process, how they wrote music, using a mathematical-style charting language.



Veteran Geneo Graves discusses his CreatiVets songwriting experience during a recent interview. (Photo by Rosaire Bushey)

"They were like, 'OK, you take this part, and you take this, and the piano guy takes this,' and I was, 'Wow! What is this?' And they go into the booth and start — it's just amazing how they do it."

Bulford pre-recorded the lyrics to the song and the musicians used that recording to dictate the music.

"The music and lyrics just come together and we're sitting there and people, the band and the Veterans, are in tears, and one guy says, 'Oh my God, whose song is this?' and the piano guy is crying — it's that powerful for a lot of people."

An hour later and the band had three versions of the song. (Songs from the album can be heard by saying, "Alexa, play music by Veterans," for Amazon Echo owners, or via streaming services like Spotify, YouTube Music and others.)

"The musicians were hugging us, amazed at the things we were saying," Graves said. "That's what the magic is, and why they brought us together. That was Richard's con-

cept — to have someone understand."

Regarding his own song, Graves said the most powerful part of the lyrics sums up what he feels every day.

"The lyrics, 'When they call me a hero, I don't feel like a hero because I've stood next to saints who are no longer here' — that's how I feel, because I have brothers I lost in Somalia and places like that. People I trained and everything, and then I'm back home and — my brothers that I lost — those are the heroes to me. Part of my PTSD is the guilt/remorse of being here. I feel like I shouldn't, sometimes, because they're not here. I'm trying to speak for them because they're not here so people can understand, these are the heroes."

Now that the song is recorded, Graves is turning his attention to volunteering and putting some of his military training to work.

"We're losing our World War II Veterans and I would love to document them, use my skills as a photographer to tell the untold stories of Veterans and Veterans hospitals and do things like that so the guys are not forgotten," he said. "I'll continue peer mentoring and doing whatever WWP and CreatiVets needs, and to help local Veterans as much as I can, to take care of things they need to take care of."

Graves understands the importance of his work as a peer mentor and how it makes a difference to the lives of some Veterans.

"There have been two occasions where I've spoken with Veterans who were preparing to harm themselves," he said. "They're both still with us."

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged nationwide health care operations in a variety of ways. Yet, it seems that every facet of VA Health care has responded with swift action to address identification and testing, prevention and protection, treatment and containment, and finally, eradication. Along with so many other organizations and partners, VA rushed to fill gaps in logistics and supplies, and adapted or modified operations to inhibit spread of the virus and protect lives. Several individuals have dedicated their time and effort the past few months to developing and improving testing methods. While others study to better understand the virus, more researchers are committed to apply what is learned in ways that help all of those disciplines to handle the virus more effectively. In VISN 6, research is taking place in nearly every medical center, earnestly exploring to discover answers and solutions. Most of the research projects are distinctive, but some are partnerships with other VA or community efforts.

VA is particularly concerned with the effect of the disease on high-risk patients, through age or condition. Of the VISN efforts, a Durham study is analyzing the effect of COVID-19 on cancer patients. According to principal investigator Dr. Daphne Friedman, the primary objective of the study is to monitor long-term effects of the illness and treatments according to a variety of factors, including pre-existing comorbidities, cancer type and treatment, demographic factors, as well as severity and fatality, and cancer treatment modifications like dose adjustments.

The work is important because it intends to increase knowledge about the extent to which COVID-19 may require adjustments in treatment and how it may affect cancer outcomes.

In another study being conducted in Durham, Dr. Ayako Suzuki and the Durham Cooperative Studies Program Epidemiology Center team are collaborating with Drs. Christopher Hostler and Michael Yarrington in Infectious Disease to conduct research using readily available electronic health records (EHR). The study will rapidly identify medications and clinical conditions that may affect COVID-19 and help further COVID-19 prevention and treatment.

Richmond's Brian Davis, M.D., has been concentrating on the safety and effect of vitamin C on the disease. His study was inspired by a prior study on sepsis and lung failure led by Dr. Alpha Fowler of Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). That study measured patients who were on a ventilator with the treatment. Davis believes that although vitamin C is erroneously held by some to cure practically everything, that this treatment helps tamper down the inflammatory process to promote healing of the lung tissue. Other research has indicated it may also increase the body's production of white cells that fight off viruses, called lymphocytes.

Researchers at the Charles George VA in Asheville are investigating whether a drug already available has an effect on the virus. Dr. Charles Mahan is leading the study that measures the impact of an intravenous infusion of the drug on the condition and recuperation of

male and female Veteran hospitalized patients who have been diagnosed with COVID-19 pneumonia and have impaired respiratory function. In addition to future gains from the research, some of the patients in the study may benefit immediately from the treatment, if successful.

Six VISN 6 facilities are also participating in studies designed to feed back into a larger collective conducted by the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota. In that case, the Mayo Clinic Expanded Access Program (EAP) to Convalescent Plasma for the Treatment of COVID-19 study has been approved by the Mayo Clinic Institutional Review Board (IRB) and a VA/ORD agreement with Mayo Clinic IRB enables VA medical center participation. Each site's R&D committee then approved participation. Through this project, as of July 23, VA has transfused 896 units of COVID-19 convalescent plasma. A total of 132 Veterans have received more than one unit. Another VA research project, the Million Veteran Program (MVP), has added COVID-19 research points as well.

Wherever possible, VISN 6 clinicians and staff have rushed to address the challenges of mitigating the effect and spread of the coronavirus disease. Several of the efforts to invent apparatus or adjust operational capabilities, protect staff and safeguard Veterans have been documented in other writings and publications. With other VA and community organizations, VA and VISN research is committed to the control and eventual elimination of the danger created by the disease.

Study Shows VA Surgical Care Better Than or Equal to Non-VA Hospitals

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) recently announced that VA hospitals outperform or match neighboring non-VA hospitals in surgical quality and overall patient safety satisfaction.

The finding comes from a study conducted by VA and university researchers that was published June 26, in the *Journal of Surgical Research*.

"The prospect of having surgery can be stressful," said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. "For Veterans, who often have choices in where they receive care, it is in their best interest to make fully informed health care decisions. This study provides valuable information when faced with such an important

choice."

Researchers at the White River Junction VA Medical Center in Vermont and the Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center in New Hampshire completed the study. They identified VA medical centers with at least one non-VA hospital within 25 miles in three U.S. regions: West-Southwest, New England and Deep South.

With a sample of 34 VA facilities and 319 neighboring non-VA hospitals, the researchers used benchmarks created by the [Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality](#). They also used scores from the [Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems](#). The results showed that VA facilities performed better or as good as non-VA

hospitals in overall patient safety indicators (PSIs), which measure potential hospital complications and adverse events following surgeries and other procedures. VA hospitals performed much better in surgery-specific PSIs.

The researchers also found VA and non-VA hospitals were about equal in patient satisfaction with overall hospital experience.

The data were collected from [Hospital Compare](#), a publicly available database that helps consumers decide where to seek health care. The [Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services](#) runs the database. Visit [VA's Office of Research and Development](#).

#IWearAMaskFor



Wearing a mask is one of the most important things you can do to keep the people around you safe. Tell us who you wear a mask for by posting a photo of yourself in a mask and tagging us on [Facebook/Twitter/Instagram](#) @insert_localVAMC_handle using the hashtag **#IWearAMaskFor**.

 @deptvetaffairs

 @VeteransHealth

 @VeteransHealth

VA



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Local Shoe Store Donates to Veteran Residents of the Salisbury VA's Community Living Center

By Amanda Reilly | SALISBURY VA HCS PUBLIC AFFAIRS

In critical times, such as the current COVID-19 pandemic, the Salisbury VA Health Care System has seen no shortage of kindness and selfless generosity from local organizations and businesses in the communities where their four facilities are located. One of the most recent donations came from Ralph Baker of Ralph Baker's Shoes in Salisbury, N.C. The donation consisted of almost 100 pairs of Cloud Nine indoor/outdoor, non-slip shoes that were fitted and distributed to Veteran residents in the Community Living Center.

The Community Living Center (CLC) was the first unit at the Salisbury VA to strictly enforce a no visitation policy when COVID-19 surfaced in early March of 2020, as the CLC residents are among their most vulnerable population. This means that routine visits from family and friends have not been possible, other than by FaceTime or other virtual means. With such drastic changes occurring in the daily lives of these residents, donations like the shoes from Ralph Baker have truly elevated the spirits of these Veterans.

Community Living Center staff, in-

cluding nursing staff, frontline nursing staff, Rehabilitation and Recreation Therapy staff all made themselves available to ensure that this generous donation was received and distributed to the CLC residents in a seamless fashion. "I love my new slippers!" and "They are so soft and comfortable!" were some of the exclamations overheard by staff from the CLC Veterans regarding their Cloud Nine shoes from Ralph Baker.

Some of the other local businesses and organizations that have recently donated to Salisbury VA Health Care System's Veterans, frontline staff or both include John Deere, IFB Solutions, Krispy Kreme, Domino's Pizza and O'Charley's, to name a few. For further guidance or questions regarding donations, Salisbury VA Health Care System's Voluntary Service Office can be reached at (704) 638-9000 extension 13906.

RIGHT-PHOTO: Ralph Baker of Ralph Baker's Shoes in Salisbury, N.C., donated nearly 100 pairs of Cloud Nine indoor/outdoor, non-slip shoes to Veterans in the facility's Community Living Center.



National Academies Affirms Scientific Necessity of VA Canine Research

WASHINGTON — A National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine (NASEM) [study](#) has affirmed the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) position that canine research is "scientifically necessary" for certain areas of research that benefit seriously disabled Veterans.

An independent committee assembled by NASEM to examine the issue determined that use of canines is necessary for VA research into spinal cord injury and heart disease, and will need to continue for the foreseeable future. It also found that current VA animal research programs are meeting and exceeding all federal regulations and guidelines.

The study was commissioned by VA to provide an independent, rigorous and unbiased look at how the ethics of research with animals, together with scientific principles,

must inform the process of determining what research to conduct. The study will help ensure that the debate surrounding this issue is grounded in careful analysis, scientific consensus and facts.

"This study confirms what we've said all along: At this point canine research is the only viable option for developing and testing certain treatments to improve the quality of life of some seriously disabled Veterans," said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie.

VA canine research has led to the development of the cardiac pacemaker (1950s), liver transplantation (1960s), the use of ablation to treat cardiac arrhythmias (late 1990s-early 2000s) and improved techniques for hip replacement surgery (1990s).

Most recently, [canine research in Cleveland](#) involving VA researchers led to the development of a device that allows

paralyzed patients to breathe without a ventilator, cough independently and communicate with a stronger voice. This device gave Veterans increased independence and significantly reduced respiratory infections and hospitalizations.

VA has reduced its use of canines in research to the absolute minimum required at this time to fulfill its commitment to finding treatments for Veterans with life-threatening health conditions.

But VA has supported this type of research for decades and continues to do so because it is absolutely necessary to better treat life-threatening health conditions in our Veterans.

To see how canine research benefits Veterans, see [here](#).

VA and Partner Agencies Announce COVID-19 Insights Partnership

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), along with the Departments of Energy (DOE) and Health and Human Services (HHS), recently announced the formation of the COVID-19 Insights Partnership, an initiative to coordinate and share health data as well as research and expertise to aid in the fight against COVID-19.

The COVID-19 Insights Partnership creates a framework for VA and HHS to utilize DOE's world-leading high-performance computing (HPC) and artificial intelligence resources to conduct COVID-19 research and analyze health data that would otherwise not be possible.

“Veterans served this country by putting on the uniform and protecting American interests overseas, and now their health data will help in the fight against COVID-19 here at home,” said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie.

“President Trump is marshalling all the resources he has available in the federal government to fight the virus, and Veterans should be proud of the role they’re playing.”

“The Department of Energy is proud to be a member of the COVID-19 Insights Partnership,” said Secretary of Energy Dan Brouillette. “Our nation’s understanding of COVID-19 has already benefitted greatly from our world-leading, high-performance computing and artificial intelligence resources, and we look forward to continuing our coordination across federal departments and agencies in the fight against this virus.”

“This unprecedented data and computing partnership is the latest addition to President Trump’s whole-of-government effort against COVID-19,” said HHS Secretary Alex Azar. “The volume and quality of the data HHS has on COVID-19 has advanced by leaps and bounds in recent months. The Department of Energy’s world-class resources will help us derive new insights from the data we gather to help patients and protect our country.”

Research and analysis conducted by the COVID-19 Insights Partnership will focus on vaccine and therapeutic development and

outcomes, virology and other critical scientific topics to understand COVID-19 better. HHS and VA will provide additional updates and information on research projects as it becomes available.

Summit, the United States’ fastest supercomputer, located at DOE’s Oak Ridge National Laboratory, is accelerating COVID-19 research by running large-scale, complex analyses on a vast amount of health data. Summit’s unmatched capacity to analyze massive integrated datasets and to divine insights will help researchers to identify and advance potential treatments, and to enhance outcomes for COVID-19 patients with unprecedented speed.

The partnership expands upon recent efforts by the Trump administration to leverage cutting-edge technologies in the fight against COVID-19, such as the [COVID-19 High Performance Computing Consortium](#), which provides researchers worldwide with HPC resources and expertise from leading industry, federal government, and academia partners to accelerate the COVID-19 vaccine and therapeutic research.

**Preventing
the Flu
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VISN 6 Sites Of Care & VA Vet Centers

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www.asheville.va.gov

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Durham, NC 27705
919-286-0411 | 888-878-6880
www.durham.va.gov

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2300 Ramsey Street
Fayetteville, NC 28301
910-488-2120 | 800-771-6106
www.fayettevilleenc.va.gov

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100 Emancipation Dr.
Hampton, VA 23667
757-722-9961 | 866-544-9961
www.hampton.va.gov

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1201 Broad Rock Blvd.
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www.richmond.va.gov

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www.salem.va.gov

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910-908-2222

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336-515-5000

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Wilmington, NC 28405
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165 Peppers Ferry Rd.
Wytheville, VA 24382-2363
276-223-5400

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VA Dialysis and Blind Rehabilitation Clinics at Brier Creek

8081 Arco Corporate Drive
Raleigh, NC 27617
919-286-5220

VA Dialysis Clinic Fayetteville

2301 Robeson Street, Ste. 101
Fayetteville, NC 28305, 910-483-9727

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704-549-8025

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Greensboro, NC 27403
336-333-5366

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910-577-1100

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757-623-7584

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Roanoke, VA 24016
540-342-9726

Virginia Beach Vet Center

324 Southport Circle, Suite 102
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757-248-3665

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