



Rocky Mountain Connections

Volume 1, Issue 2

September 2007

Message from the Director

I am pleased to introduce myself as the new Network Director for the VA Rocky Mountain Network. I have been very busy since my arrival and look forward to the opportunity to meet you all in the future. A common thread throughout this newsletter is sharing some of the actions we are taking, as the newest generation of combat veterans return home, to ensure that we are “getting it right” in providing them the very best care and treatment possible. They deserve nothing less!

VA is aggressively working to increase access to health care services and to eliminate geographic disparities in levels of care. We are successfully doing this by increasing health care staff at selected VA locations, especially remote ones, and by promoting our telehealth capabilities throughout our system. No longer is traveling long distances to a dedicated VA health care site the only option for veterans in need of treatment. As in so many

other areas of our care, technology has changed the way VA delivers health care. We are excited about the development of the Craig, Colorado Telehealth Outreach Clinic.

Over the past several years, VA has increased funding for new and enhanced mental health programs for

Over the past several years, VA has increased funding for new and enhanced mental health programs for veterans of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom.

veterans of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF). As a result of this targeted funding for OEF/OIF veterans, specialty health teams are being developed. Each focuses on providing rapid assessment



GLEN GRIPPEN

and case management services for both returning veterans and their families, particularly for those who have been injured.

The Secretary recently approved the hire of 100 additional OEF/OIF combat veterans to support the Program by reaching out to active, National Guard, and Reserve veterans returning from Southwest Asia. This will advance the continuing success of our already active outreach efforts.

Please enjoy reading and learning about our activities in VISN 19.

Inside This Issue:

VA Hiring and Training 100 Transition Patient Advocates in Team Approach to Assist OEF/OIF Veterans 2

Wyoming Veterans Coalition Established 2

Welcome Home Veterans Benefit and Job Fair Held In Sheridan 3

VA Medical Center Recommended Site for Fisher House 4

Tela All’ – Telehealth is Coming! 4

VA Montana Rural/Frontier State 5

Veterans History Project Provides Way for Veterans, VHA Employees to Tell Their Story for Posterity 5



“About 80 percent of TPAs are veterans, and nearly a quarter of them are veterans from Iraq or Afghanistan.”

VA Hiring and Training 100 Transition Patient Advocates in Team Approach to Assist OEF/OIF Veterans

Veterans who served in the war in Iraq and Afghanistan frequently face a number of unfamiliar issues in making the sudden transition to civilian life. Shortly after serving in a combat zone, they rejoin their families and try to determine how to make a living or where to go to get medical treatment and benefits they need and have earned. To help make such adjustments easier, the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) is hiring and training 100 Transition Patient Advocates (TPA) nation-wide to provide individually tailored assistance to seriously injured veterans.

“The Transition Patient Advocate will be like Radar O’Reilly (the television and movie character from MASH),” said Kristin Day, Acting Director of VHA’s Office of Social Work Service, which oversees the new program. “This is the person who knows everybody, knows how to get things done and makes sure all connections are made and that everything goes as it is supposed to go.” Each TPA is part of a new Operation

Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF) Transition of Care and Case Management Team that is based at the VA medical center closest to the veteran’s home or best able to provide the services they require. The patient advocates will meet with veterans, family members and may even travel wherever the veteran needs to go. They will help veterans with every conceivable problem, from filling out paperwork to obtaining an appointment to receive specialized clinical treatment.

All severely wounded OEF/OIF veterans will be assigned a case management team. All other returning OEF/OIF veterans will be screened to determine if they need case management, and any veteran who desires a case management team will get one. In addition to the transition patient advocate, each team will include a program manager, case managers, nurses, social workers and veterans’ benefits manager to assist with benefits issues that previously have been addressed

separately from clinical and social services. About 80 percent of TPAs are veterans, and nearly a quarter of them are veterans from Iraq or Afghanistan. Many TPAs and other members of case management teams are VHA employees who have served in other positions. Day said the team approach is a direct response to what OEF/OIF veterans have said they wanted. The Intergovernmental Task Force chaired by VA Secretary R. James Nicholson recommended creation of such a program. “This represents a breakthrough, a new way of dealing with issues on behalf of the veteran,” Day said. “This is about being with them over a lifetime and letting them know we’re not going to leave them out there by themselves.” VISN 19 has been authorized three TPA positions. These individuals are stationed in the VA Montana Health Care System, the VA Salt Lake City Health Care System and the Eastern Colorado Health Care System and will cover all areas in VISN 19.

Wyoming Veterans Coalition Established

Cheyenne VA Medical Center

One of the drivers to the formation of the Wyoming Veterans Coalition was the vision of Cheyenne VA’s own OEF/OIF Coordinator. The Wyoming Veterans Coalition is a group of various private, state and federal agencies that have bound together by the mission to provide outreach and assistance to OEF/OIF veterans and their families. The Cheyenne VA is a very proud and active member of the Coalition.

The types of outreach and assistance performed by the Coalition are as broad and diverse as the variety of military missions that face our armed forces. The Coalition’s membership is capable of providing returning servicemen and women information and access to the full range of benefits and services of which they are eligible.

Additionally, all agencies will continue their individual out-

reach efforts to support veterans. Since the coalition was chartered in January, 2007, Cheyenne VA OEF/OIF and enrollment specialists have participated in two outreach fairs and have completed three visits to meet and assist returning Wyoming guard units. Over 300 Wyoming guardsmen were contacted about VA benefits at the

(continues page 3)



Cheyenne VA Medical Center (cont.)

Wyoming National Guard's "Mega Drill" (held in Cheyenne, January 2007) and the Wyoming Veterans Coalition Benefits and Job Fair (held in Sheridan, June 2007). Guardsmen were provided information on VA's OEF/OIF program, assisted with the VA's enrollment process and many even had VA staff assist with getting their first appointments scheduled!

Cheyenne VA and other members of the Wyoming Vets Coalition have also traveled to

military bases where Wyoming Guard and Reserve units were demobilized upon their return from active duty. At Fort Lewis, WA (2nd of the 300th – Wyoming Powder River Boys), Cheyenne, WY (Wyoming Air Guard 153rd Airlift Wing), Anchorage, AK (Wyoming Army National Guard 960th) as well as Fort Collins, CO (244th Bravo Company – Colorado Army Reserve Unit) the Cheyenne VA's OEF/OIF outreach program has made contacts with our returning soldiers.

Members of the coalition include OEF/OIF and enrollment specialists from both the Cheyenne and Sheridan VAMC's, F.E. Warren AFB, the DAV, the VFW, the American Legion, the U.S. Small Business Administration, the U.S. Department of Labor, the Wyoming Committee for Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR), the Wyoming Department of Workforce Services, the Wyoming Military Department and the Wyoming Veterans Commission.

"The types of outreach and assistance performed by the Coalition are as broad and diverse as the variety of military missions that face our armed forces."

Welcome Home Veterans Benefit and Job Fair held in Sheridan Sheridan VA Medical Center

The Wyoming Veterans Coalition, a group made up of Veteran Service Organizations, the Sheridan and Cheyenne VA Medical Centers, Vet Center, Veterans Benefits Administration, TriCare Health systems, the U.S. Department of Labor and others, hosted a "Welcome Home" Benefits and Job Fair in Sheridan for returning troops from Iraq.

Often, after service members come home, they do not access the VA benefits available to them right away. "Not accessing care or benefits as soon as a soldier returns from military service can make it difficult in the future to access their care. By enrolling now and finding out about all the benefit options, veterans will be better served." said Linda Kiester, Acting Operation Enduring and Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF) Program Manager at the Sheridan VAMC.

Men and Women returning home from fighting in the War on Terror have many benefits

available to them, such as two years of health care at the VA. "During that two year time, the VA will be able to enroll the veteran without the priority rules we apply to other enrollees. It is our way of saying thanks and we are here to help you." Kiester said as she oversees new appointments for OEF/OIF veterans.

The fair was open to veterans of all ages and branches of military service but the goal of the event was to introduce new veterans to the benefits provided by state and federal agencies, while also aiding veterans looking for employment or looking to change careers. Family members were invited to attend and learn about the many benefits that are available.

Kiester noted that often it is the family of a new veteran that encourages them to seek out various benefits. "Sometimes new veterans don't think they need these benefits, but they may and we want to provide

health care when it is needed" she says.

During the afternoon, soldiers that had just returned from overseas duty were given exclusive access to ensure they had time to ask questions, enroll for services or even get scheduled for medical appointments. This was the first time all veterans service organizations gathered together at one time in one location in the Sheridan area to provide one stop shopping for the veteran.

This unique partnership is assisting veterans in navigating the VA system to access care and benefits. As more men and women come home, the Wyoming Veterans Coalition will continue to work together to ensure each one has access to the services they need. Similar events will be planned across the state.





VA Medical Center Recommended Site for Fisher House VA Salt Lake City Health Care System

Safe, comfortable and affordable housing for families of veterans being treated by the Department of Veterans Affairs Salt Lake City Health Care System (VASLCHCS) may soon become a reality. The medical center's Salt Lake City campus was one of ten recommended sites for construction of a VA Fisher House, providing home-away-from-home accommodations.

Many of our returning service members need intensive physical and occupational rehabilitation, said Brian Westfield, VASLCHCS acting director. "Locating a Fisher House on our medical center campus will enable our patients to focus on their treatment and permit them to receive the full benefit of our

extensive world-class care."

The VA Fisher House will be a 21-guest suite, 16,000 square feet, two-story home, located on the southwestern portion of the medical center campus.

The facility will include common kitchen, laundry facilities, spacious dining room, living room with library, and toys for children.

Fisher Houses are built through public donations and contributions from the Fisher House Foundation. "If the community demonstrates strong support for a Fisher House by raising at least \$500,000 in matching construction funds, the Fisher House Foundation will prepare a proposal for the approval by

the Fisher House Foundation Board of Trustees. The proposal will include developing an architectural plan for the proposed Fisher House," said Don Willis, Community Fund Raising Committee Champion.

The Fisher House Foundation will review the ten newly recommended locations to determine sites for Fisher House construction in 2008 and 2009.

VASLCHCS treated 39,781 veterans last year, accounting for more than 400,500 outpatient visits and nearly 5,500 hospitalizations.

For more information on the Fisher House Foundation visit www.fisherhouse.org.

"Bottom line, providing quality, comprehensive care to our veterans is first and foremost in our minds,"

Tela All' — Telehealth is Coming! Grand Junction VA Medical Center

The anxious question on the streets in rural Craig, Colorado, and its surrounding counties (Routt, Rio Blanco, Moffat and Carbon County, WY) is "when is the new Craig Community VA Telehealth Outreach Clinic coming?" The Grand Junction VA Medical Center has a quick response..." it won't be long now!"

In April 2007, U.S. Congressman John Salazar and U.S. Senator Ken Salazar made an announcement that after a two year effort, veterans in rural Colorado would finally be offered VA health care closer to home.

All the hard work, determination and research put forth by Grand Junction VA Medical Center's employees and Craig's Veteran Service Organizations will be rewarded when the facility opens

the first "telehealth" clinic on the Western Slope of Colorado at the end of September. The perfect location has been secured. The clinic's new address is 551 Tucker Street, a block off the main thoroughfare in Craig.

With state-of-the-art technology, onsite nursing care and experienced staff of healthcare professionals at the Medical Center, the "Telehealth" clinic will offer veterans living in northwest Colorado an alternative to driving several hours over hazardous mountain terrain to receive medical care in Grand Junction. Debbra Nicholas-Olson, Administrative Officer for Clinical Programs and "planning coordinator" for the clinic says, "The Grand Junction VA is excited to offer quality health-care in a community that has actively pursued veteran health-

care resources for improved access and convenience. We truly expect the Craig clinic to serve as a best-practice model for other rural, underserved areas throughout our Network."

Services provided at the Clinic will be primary care follow-up, mental health follow-up, nurse clinic visits, medication management, immunizations, laboratory services, health screens, wound care, suture removal, blood pressure and diabetes care, and other services. For example, the new "otoscope" attachment is so precise and visually detailed that ear and throat exams taken by the nurse in Craig can be viewed, read and assessed remotely by a Primary Care Provider in Grand Junction.

Grand Junction VA Medical Center (cont.)

Although the operation of the Clinic will only be part-time when the Clinic opens (Monday thru Friday afternoons), Medical Center staff will closely observe

the use and growth of the clinic and make adjustments as necessary. "Bottom line, providing quality, comprehensive care to our veterans is first and foremost in our minds," says Dr. Susanne Feller, Chief of

Medicine Service. "I think we will see amazing progress in our ability to meet the health-care needs of our veterans with the realization of the new clinic."

VA Montana Rural/Frontier State

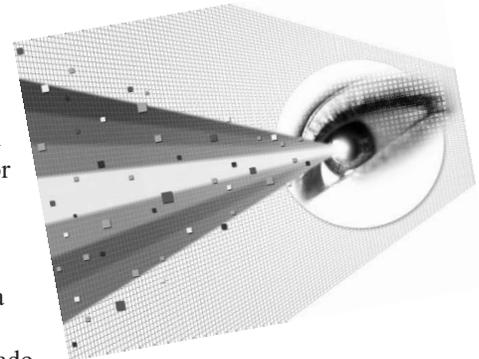
Montana Healthcare System

VA Montana Healthcare System recently had visitors from the information technology field including VA Central Office and private industry representatives. The majority of these visitors were from Washington DC. Their focus was planning technology for VA and where best to distribute this technology. They were interested in how Montana uses technology to overcome our rural/frontier state. VA Montana Healthcare System Director, Joe Underkofler, began his presentation to this group with a picture of the east coast from Arlington, Virginia to Bangor, Maine, overlaid on the state of Montana. The visitors quickly put into perspective the distances we deal with in Montana.

Montana uses technology such as teleretinal imaging. VA Montana has retinal cameras located in Miles City, Billings and Missoula, Montana. Veterans can visit these clinics and have

an image taken of their eye to determine if they have eye damage related to diabetes, or other illnesses that would require intervention by an ophthalmologist. After the images are taken of the eye an ophthalmologist at Fort Harrison reads the images and either confirms healthy eyes or requests the veteran come to Fort Harrison for care. VA Montana will have four additional cameras located in other VA clinics across Montana in the near future. This short painless visit prevents travel of great distances to Fort Harrison from across Montana. Teleretinal imaging is one of several ways Montana uses technology to overcome geographic distances. Other uses of technology include video conferencing equipment located at seven of our nine community clinics, which allows patients to visit with specialty doctors at Fort Harrison without traveling across the state. Uses of

this video conferencing equipment include mental health visits for patients in a crisis or counseling sessions with a specialist in Denver, Colorado. VA Montana also uses in home monitoring equipment for veterans with congestive heart failure, diabetes, hypertension and other illnesses. Veterans answer a few questions or enter information such as blood sugar levels or blood pressure levels. These are monitored daily by a nurse who notifies the patient if they need to adjust their medication or see their doctor. This monitoring has resulted in savings of thousands of dollars in hospitalizations and patient travel hardships.



"Teleretinal imaging is one of several ways Montana uses technology to overcome geographic distances."

Veterans History Project Provides Way for Veterans, VHA Employees To Tell Their Story For Posterity

More than 50,000 veterans nationwide have contributed their recorded stories to the Veterans History Project at the Library of Congress. Now, VHA and the Library have started a pilot project at VA's Maryland Health Care system, which will add the stories of VHA employees to the collection.

"Everyone has a story to tell," said Susan Kern, the voluntary services program manager who oversees VA's initial project. The employee aspect of the project may be expanded to other sites in the future.

Expanding the project to include employees will help VHA establish a record of the agency's

history, to include groundbreaking discoveries by VHA clinicians and researchers. For example, breakthroughs in areas such as prosthetics, heart disease and diabetes have benefited veterans and millions of other Americans.

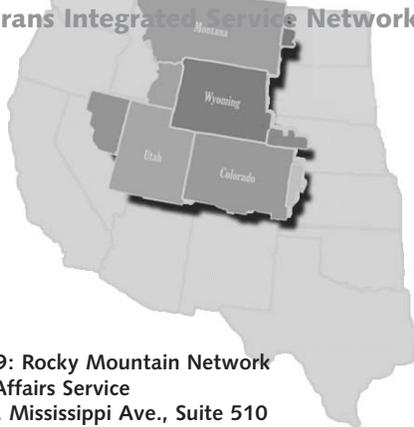


(continues page 6)

The VA Rocky Mountain Network

"To care for him who shall have borne the battle"

VA Rocky Mountain Health Care Network Veterans Integrated Service Network 19



VISN 19: Rocky Mountain Network
Public Affairs Service
4100 E. Mississippi Ave., Suite 510
Glendale, CO 80246



We're on the web!
<http://www.va.gov/visn19>

Veterans History Project (cont.)

"We need to record for posterity how such important work was done," said Darlene Richardson, VHA's Historian. "This is a great opportunity to preserve the history of those who have served veterans as well as that of veterans themselves,"

VHA employee James Hetmanski, lead Information Technology (IT) specialist at the Baltimore VA Medical Center and a 33-year VA employee, recorded the story of his role in the development of an IT process which enabled VA to print and scan bar codes on patients' wrist bands. The technology allows VA doctors and nurses to use laptop computers to call up veterans complete health records, including drug prescriptions, test results and diagnostic images.

"I wanted veterans to know that I'm proud of the work I have done to help them, and I think there is a need to preserve that," Hetmanski said.

Joel Coonin, an Army veteran who served in World War II and in the Korean War, retired from the Baltimore VA in 1991 after 38 years combined service. Coonin recorded his role in social services work

he did with VA, including helping to develop Baltimore's residential care program and nursing home programs.

"I talked more about what I did for VA (than his military service) because I loved working for VA," Coonin said.

Jeffrey Lofton, public affairs specialist for the Veterans History Project at the Library of Congress, said interviews are kept in unedited form. Interviews have been recorded with veterans from all American wars in the 20th and 21st Centuries.

"Our emphasis is on collecting stories of older veterans from World War I and II before it is too late," Lofton said.

Most of the interviews are conducted by volunteers such as Chris Borowski of the Baltimore VA Medical Center. Borowski says some of the interviews can be memorable, such as one he did with an eighty-year-old World War II Navy veteran who had the misfortune of holding two buddies as they were dying.

The veteran's family didn't know much about his service in the war because he had not talked about it before. He told Borowski that he developed a much closer bond with his grandson, a Marine who has served in Iraq, after sharing his story with him.

"I remember that when I turned the camera off, he began to cry," Borowski said.

Volunteers receive guidelines, including suggested questions, to help them conduct interviews. Interviews are sent to the Library's American Folklife Center, where they are catalogued and archived for public use, along with photos, letters, diaries, scrapbooks and memoirs. Veterans, the VHA historian and the site where the recording occurred also receive copies.

The Library has digitized about 4,000 of the interviews, which can be accessed via the Veterans History Project Web site at www.loc.gov/vets. Thematic presentations on the Library's web site include stories about women veterans, veterans of Asian heritage, veterans who took part in the D-Day invasion or were present at the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Veterans and VHA employees are encouraged to have their one-of-a-kind story recorded at their local facility. If their site does not have a Veterans History Project, they can arrange an interview through voluntary services. Individuals interested in conducting the interviews may contact the Voluntary Service Office at their site.