

Spring 2014 Newsletter

Veterans Healthcare Advantage: The Wellness Magazine for New York/New Jersey Veterans

Special Section on Peer Specialists and Support Groups

Honoring Service, Empowering Health

Message from Network Director

Dear Veterans, Fellow Employees, Volunteers and Friends of the VA NY/NJ Healthcare Network,

I am pleased to share with you the Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN 3) Spring, 2014 online newsletter. The theme of this issue is “Honoring Service, Empowering Health”. The cornerstone to empowering health is providing personalized, proactive and patient driven care to our Veterans. We do this by listening to our Veterans, finding out what truly matters to them, and partnering with them to develop personalized health plans that emphasize the integration of medical care, self-care and skill building that will support wellbeing across the life span.

We know our Veterans are presented with a myriad of health care options every day, and we are committed to remaining their provider of choice. In order to accomplish this, we will embrace innovation and continue to cultivate a Veteran-centric culture through our people, our facilities, our research and through the use of technology. Building on the successes of traditional VA medical care, we are shifting our focus from solely treating illness, to now promoting health and well-being by considering the whole person; their strengths, values, needs and goals. This patient centered approach harnesses the power of a positive environment to support treatment and improve the healing process. It is what health providers need to do in order to stay relevant to patients, create better patient experiences and long term outcomes, and provide timely care at lower costs.

This newsletter highlights the VISN 3 health care initiatives that embrace the person centered approach found in each one of our VISN 3 medical centers. Some of the innovative programs highlighted in this issue are advanced rehabilitation methodologies for spinal cord injury, virtual technology to support Veterans on college campuses, partnerships with stakeholders to provide a safety net for homeless Veterans and recovery oriented services that promote independence for Veterans with mental illness.

I am very proud of the programs that you will learn about through this newsletter, and of the employees who are committed to providing a safe, high quality and outstanding health care

experience for our Veterans. With your support, VISN 3 will continue to strive to be the benchmark of excellence and value in healthcare by providing exemplary services that are patient-centered, data driven, team based and continuously improving.

Michael A. Sabo, MBA, FACHE
Network Director

My HealtheVet empowers you to manage your own health care

Healthcare, Your Way, Where you want it, when you want it.

Have questions? Ask your VA health care providers about which of our services are available and right for you.

Video Telehealth, Home Telehealth, Secure Messaging. You have a choice. Technology has made health care accessible. You have many more tools available to help you manage your health care. Here you'll find how they work and how you can benefit from each one.

Meeting your LIFESTYLE: Having choices means meeting your needs. Whether you prefer a more traditional in-office approach, or the use of video and other technologies, VA is here to work with you. Ask...You have a choice.

MyHealtheVet is VA's online personal health record. You can track personal health information, refill prescriptions, have access to portions of your medical record and communicate with your health care provider. Instead of making a phone call, use Secure messaging to send questions to your VA health care team. You will receive a response within three business days. Sign up at www.myhealth.va.gov

Home Telehealth: Track important health information such as heart rate, blood pressure, weight and blood glucose from the comfort of your home. Information is transmitted through a phone, tablet or computer. This may be useful for a variety of medical or mental health conditions including diabetes, heart failure (HF), chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), depression or post-traumatic stress.

Video Telehealth: Instead of fighting with traffic or mass transit to see a provider, the provider comes to you via secure video.

JJ Peters Bronx VA Medical Center

Empowering health through fitness

Veterans want to be strong and healthy while they are young and also as they age. Acknowledging this wish, one of VA's key strategic goals is to "Empower Veterans to improve

their well-being.” To improve delivery of preventive health care, the Bronx VA Medical Center recently launched a high-intensity fitness Boot Camp. This program aims to serve Veterans who previously had little contact with VA because they are younger and generally healthy, with few medical needs.

Bronx VA’s Rehabilitation Medicine hopes to help instill a tradition of exercise, bridging the gap between active service and a successful and healthy life in the community. The Boot Camp is designed to offer a very intense workout, appealing to strong individuals for whom traditional physical therapy programs are not sufficiently challenging. Many of the participants are recently discharged, dealing with the stress of job hunting, beginning school, and adapting to or starting families.

The proposal was enthusiastically embraced by Medical Center Director, Dr. Erik Langhoff, and implemented by Dr. Klingbeil, Chief, Rehabilitation Medicine and staff. It is housed at the Bronx VA campus in a motivating, Boot-Camp-like setting—a high-tech, climate-controlled, domed Army tent. “We are receiving positive comments from Veterans and staff,” said Dr. Klingbeil. Our aim was to integrate VA into the lives of our Veterans, to give them a healthy workout, a healthy outlook, and a relationship with VA health professionals who will be there to sustain them, through the years.”

VA New York Harbor Healthcare System

Empowering health by improving access

Use of a well-equipped van on college campuses is the latest thrust among outreach efforts already in place with Fordham University and CUNY’s John Jay and Baruch Colleges. Dr. Yvette Branson, VA New York Harbor Healthcare System’s Veterans Integration to Academic Leadership (VITAL) Initiative Coordinator, is stationed on several campuses weekly, enrolling and advising student Veterans and referring them for VA’s medical and social services.

Now, these services are being augmented by the van and its clinical staff. One day in early spring, the Harbor’s van parked in front of John Jay’s North Hall. It was staffed by Keith Robinson, NP, OEF/OIF, Program Nurse Maritza Bari, RN, a Social Worker, Psychologist, Outreach Specialist Lyn Johnson, a Marine Corps Veteran and others.

Mr. Robinson was available to get the ball rolling on vesting Veterans by providing comprehensive physical exams in the privacy of the van. “The vesting gets the Veteran up and running as a new patient,” explained Mr. Robinson. “Once in the VA system, Veterans have easy access to follow-up appointments and referrals for specialized clinics.” Mr. Robinson said he was also available in the van to give flu shots and write prescriptions as needed.

The patient first up that morning was Welby Alcantara, Marine Corps Veteran and John Jay Coordinator of Military and Veteran Services. "I had a shot and a physical," said Mr. Alcantara. "There's less hassle than dealing with the train going to the hospital. Boom! And, it's done and I'm off to work."

VA New Jersey Health Care System

Honoring service through education and empowerment

The War Related Illness and Injury Study Center (WRIISC), provides services that both honor Veterans and assist them on a road to improved health. Sharing knowledge empowers Veterans, and staff members at the WRIISC have developed a number of tailored educational classes to educate and support Veterans.

"Agent Orange: What you need to Know," is a popular class for Vietnam Veterans, held at the New Jersey WRIISC at the East Orange Campus of VA New Jersey Health Care System. Vietnam Veterans continue to have questions about Agent Orange and its possible effects on health. Providing Veterans with the most up-to-date scientific information allows patients to address their concerns while honoring their service and sacrifice. Feedback from the class continues to be extremely positive and Veterans appreciate the time and attention they receive. The newest class is focused on understanding exposure to fuels and solvents for concerned Veterans of all eras. This class provides excellent information and, in addition to the information provided during these exposure classes, Veterans are particularly impressed that an environmental medicine specialist is also available to answer any questions.

The "My Best Self" class is geared toward helping Gulf War Veterans effectively manage pain and sleeplessness and other chronic problems that can interfere with the quality of daily life. The class empowers Veterans to take charge of their health and live the best life possible regardless of symptoms. For more information, contact the NJ WRIISC at 1-800-248-8005.

VA Hudson Valley Healthcare System

Honoring service by paying tribute to the past

The Shadowbox Project started in 2012, when Vietnam Veterans at VA Hudson Valley Health Care System created shadowboxes with Creative Arts Therapist Rosemarie Rogers, Ancillary Care, and Barbara Smith, PhD., Mental Health. Each Veteran created a "shadowbox" as a metaphoric container in which they could safely place symbols of their Vietnam experience and the trauma it produced. For many of the Veterans, this simple, symbolic expression was the

first time they were able to access critical aspects of their war experiences that had haunted them for decades.

"The idea was to empower Vietnam Veterans in treatment for PTSD gain a deeper understanding of their combat experience through the expressive arts," said Rogers. "We conceived the work in three parts: A depiction of being 'In Country,' of coming 'Back to the World,' and 'A return to self and the present.' Liberated by the creation of the boxes, the Veterans were able to further their healing process by finally being able to voice and share in words their long-repressed feelings."

The Shadowboxes were exhibited at Rockland Community College and various Veterans' art events as a way of reengaging a community that more than 50 years ago turned their backs on the returning soldiers. The Veterans were invited by Ossining High School on Veterans Day, where students engaged with them about their artwork. They were profoundly moved by this experience, inviting the Veterans back to collaborate on a commemorative video entitled, "The 1st Annual Living History Project." This innovative approach to healing trauma utilizing art therapy has been recognized by VA nationally as a "Best Practice" for Patient Centered Care.

Northport VAMC

Empowering health through stress relief

Some people lie down at the end of the day and wake up in the morning refreshed and prepared to face a new day. But many Veterans can't get to sleep for hours because their anxiety and stress keeps them hyper-vigilant and unable to calm down.

"Sleep disorders are responsible for the symptoms of sleepiness, fatigue, headaches, body pain, irritable bowels, depression and anxiety," explains Dr. Avram R. Gold, a Northport VA Medical Center Sleep Medicine specialist.

With sleep disorders affecting as many as 30 percent of Veterans, VA has made treating sleep issues a high priority. Many different modalities of treatment are available to suit individual Veterans and their specific issues.

"The most common diagnosis made at VA's Northport Sleep Disorders Center is sleep disordered breathing," says Dr. Gold. "This condition is treated with nasal Continuous Positive Airway Pressure (nasal CPAP), which is a nasal mask that provides pressure to the throat, preventing snoring and complete upper airway obstruction (apnea) during sleep."

"I often speak to the Veterans about lifestyle behaviors that induce sleep, like getting exercise earlier in the day, eating dinner three hours before sleep, turning off the TV and bright lights, listening to restful music or guided imagery to quiet the mind, and we always promote

relaxation skills, like progressive relaxation, tai chi and meditation, and lavender essential oil in air diffusers or on a cotton ball near the bed,” says Richelle Rapaport, RN, MSN AHN-BC, a board-certified clinical specialist in holistic nursing.

VA New Jersey Health Care System

Empowering health using advanced technology

Veterans no longer have to worry about traffic delays, rain, sleet, or snow to see their health care providers for a traditional face-to-face visit. There is another option, “TeleResponse,” an Interactive Voice Response (IVR) technology.

TeleResponse provides a way to improve the care of patients who have low-risk, chronic conditions by allowing the Veteran to use a standard telephone to communicate about health-related issues. One particular type of TeleResponse system is Cardiocom. Optimized for patient ease-of-use, a clear, friendly voice prompts patients through their daily health check using simple instructions.

The Veteran uses the TeleResponse system on his/her phone to answer health-related questions. Because TeleResponse uses state-of-the-art voice recognition technology, patients can speak their responses directly into the phone. Should patients prefer not to do this, they can also respond to health questions by using the buttons on their telephone.

The voice or button transmission allows the health care provider to monitor Veteran responses to health questions on a daily basis. The responses are then transmitted securely and privately through phone lines to a Care Coordinator Nurse. Based on the transmission, the Care Coordinator Nurse may call the Veteran for further information and assist with the design of a personal plan of care to manage the health condition and provide referrals and further health education. This is all done in coordination with the Veteran’s primary care Patient Aligned Care Team. Currently, the VA New Jersey Health Care System has approximately 1,000 Veterans enrolled in the Home Telehealth TeleResponse system.

VA Hudson Valley Healthcare System

Honoring service by giving back to those in need

In 1996, the VA Hudson Valley Health Care System (VAHVHCS) initiated a food pantry on its Montrose Campus in Westchester County, N.Y., to serve its low income outpatients and their families. Since then, a food pantry has also opened on the Castle Point Campus. Together, they represent the largest non-mandated Food Pantry at a VA facility. These food pantries were

made possible through grants obtained from the New York State Department of Health and Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program, the Food Bank of Westchester, contributions from community-based service organizations, and from numerous food drives in the community.

The food pantries significantly impact those they serve. During Fiscal Year 2013, the food pantry at Montrose and Castle Point served 3,905 households, consisting of 676 children; 4,638 adults; and 1,815 elderly individuals. In addition, \$15,774 in funds and \$157,446 in nonperishable food items were donated for fiscal year 2013 for both campuses.

As a result of volunteers' diligence, the food pantries at VAHVHCS have consistently passed Food Bank annual inspections with excellent ratings. In June 2007, the Montrose Food Pantry and the volunteer supervisor were the recipients of the Food Bank of Westchester's Hunger Heroes Service Provider Award. In 2013, The Food Bank of Westchester presented Duke Searles, Volunteer, Montrose Campus, with the 2013 Hunger Heroes Award. In addition, VAHVHCS and volunteers received the American Hospital Association's Hospital Awards for Volunteer Excellence for their Community Service Program.

Northport VAMC

Honoring service by remembering those who served

In the fall of 2011, the Dignity Memorial three-quarter-size replica of the Vietnam War memorial visited Northport VA Medical Center. Hundreds of visiting Veterans, students, community members, and staff made their way into the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Garden Courtyard for one week to view the "wall," take rubbings of their loved one's names, or to have a quiet moment to remember the men and women who served and sacrificed in Vietnam. As the wall that heals moved on to its next location, the Vietnam Veterans of Northport VAMC felt the void its absence created.

"It was amazing to see how the wall touched so many people," said Richard Kitson, President of the Suffolk County Vietnam Veterans of America and Chief of Voluntary Service at Northport VAMC. "So a group of us got together and decided to build our own monument honoring all Veterans from all wars."

After almost two years of hard work and deliberation, four-ton black granite stones, laser etched with imagery from American wars, came together to form Northport VAMC's Wall of Wars monument. After seeing the beautiful imagery of the first stone placed, the Vietnam War panel, the others were quickly sponsored by generous and patriotic donors across Long Island.

In February 2014, the last of 12 stones were placed. Now the monument stands as a lasting tribute to the men and women who fought for our nation's independence and freedom.

VA New York Harbor Healthcare System

Empowering health by promoting resilience

"I didn't want to die or go to prison," says Anthony Stamatouras, explaining what motivated him, along with a supportive family, to give up Acid/LSD. Now, a full-time Peer Specialist in VA's Mental Health Outpatient Service, Mr. Stamatouras has been clean for 17 years.

Unlike many Veterans with a history of addiction, Mr. Stamatouras was never homeless. His family lives comfortably on Sutton Place. He first got into drugs while attending college. Since his recovery, Mr. Stamatouras has earned a Master's Degree in Psychology at Touro College and will soon earn a Bachelor's Degree in Health Services Management from Berkeley College in NYC. He is married and celebrating his 9th anniversary this year. Completely committed to the idea that "recovery works," Stamatouras is devoted to assisting people who have struggled with addiction, helping them give up their dependency on drugs and alcohol and lead productive lives.

Linda Kaplan, RN, PCTC, 17N, says, "Mr. Stamatouras has made a tremendous positive impact."

"Mr. Stamatouras is very candid about his clinical history, convinced that his openness will give hope of mental health recovery to others. He was diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder, a mental health illness he believes led to his struggle with substance abuse. Now, because of his own resilience, the help of his family and VA, he is not only doing well but helping individuals dealing with similar challenges," says John Tatarakis, RN, Clinical Nurse Specialist/Local Recovery Coordinator.

JJ Peters Bronx VAMC

Empowering Health by sharing recovery

Diagnosed with ALS (Lou Gehrig's Disease), everyday routines like getting dressed can represent a monumental chore for Veteran Bill Crain. But, Crain forges ahead, inspiring others with his strength and self-deprecating humor.

Crain is the longest participating member of a very large and robust group of Veterans who have come to VA for many years, to discuss whatever is on their minds. When things get emotional, the group will remind one another, evoking his inspiration: "Dude, Chill Like Bill."

Psychologist Kris Martin leads the group. “We come together to discuss some pretty emotional things,” said Martin, “from military experiences to issues at home or work. It can get intense. Bill participates and helps bring consensus.”

The group members pooled their money and bought “Chill Like Bill” shirts, which they are selling to raise money for ALS research. To order a shirt, contact Dr. Kristopher Martin at the James J. Peters VA, 718-584-9000 ext. 3415.

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VA Hudson Valley Health Care System

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Castle Point Campus

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Community Clinics:

Carmel
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(845) 228-5291

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Monticello, NY 12701
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150 Pike Street
Port Jervis, NY 12771
(845) 856-5396

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23 South Broadway
White Plains, NY 10601
(914) 421-1951

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124 New Main Street
Yonkers, NY 10701
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Queens (current)
41-03 Queens Blvd.
Sunnyside, NY 11104
(718) 741-4800

Queens (soon to open)
47-01 Queens Blvd.
Sunnyside, NY 11104
(718) 741-4800

VA Northport

(Long Island)

Medical Center:

79 Middleville Road
Northport, NY 11768
(631) 261-4400

Community Clinics:

Bay Shore
132 East Main Street
Bay Shore, NY 11706

Patchogue
4 Phyllis Drive
Patchogue, NY 11772
(631) 754-7978

Riverhead
300 Center Drive
Griffing Building
Riverhead, NY 11901
(631) 722-4950

Valley Stream
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Valley Stream, NY 11580

East Meadow
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Turnpike, Building "Q"
East Meadow, NY 11554
(516) 282-0670

VA New Jersey

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East Orange, NJ 07018-1095
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Lyons Campus
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Brick, NJ 08724
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654 East Jersey Street, 2A
Elizabeth, NJ 07206
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Brooklyn, NY 11209
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New York Campus
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VA Primary and
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Extension 8th Floor
Brooklyn, NY 11201
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Staten Island
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3rd Floor, Suite 301
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Harlem
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