June 2016

Monthly Report from the Director

VA | Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center

Scott R. Isaacks, FACHE
Medical Center Director

Party in the Park

Every Tuesday in June, 6 p.m.

Waterfront Park,
Mt. Pleasant

Expanding access to care while sustaining the high quality medical services the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center is known for can be challenging - especially when you factor in our continued record growth that ranked us the 5th fastest growing VA in the U.S. for percent increase of unique patients in FY2015. But where there is a will, there is a way. And where there is a highly motivated team who relishes the opportunity to think outside of the box, incredible solutions are often found. Our vision is to find innovative ways to care for Veterans that improve their health while developing best practices that can be replicated to serve Veterans across the country.

VA is a recognized national leader in mental health care, especially in such areas as treating Post Traumatic Stress and other conditions that are prominent in the Veteran community. Some 10 years ago, our Mental Health team began researching and utilizing Tele-Mental Health. Our team found services provided by secure video teleconference are as effective as inpatient sessions, often more convenient for the Veteran, and even provide opportunities to get Veterans who might not otherwise seek treatment the help they need. Over the past decade, our VA has grown TMH providing services to Veterans across South Carolina, Georgia and Alabama, and at Fort Stewart, providing more than 13,000 Tele-Mental Health encounters last year alone. Now, the Department of Veterans Affairs has named our medical center the first National VA Tele-Mental Health Hub designated to provide care to Veterans from Maine to West Virginia, and in multiple states across the U.S. This hub will expand access to the latest Mental Health treatments with our world-class psychologists and psychiatrists.

Innovative ideas and plans are being implemented across our VA to ensure we continue our track record of providing the care Veterans need when they need it. Even with our growth we continue to be well below average wait time for Primary Care and Mental Health, and we are meeting the average wait time for Specialty Care. We are working to bring more specialty services to our community clinics in Hinesville, Savannah, Myrtle Beach, Beaufort and Goose Creek, most recently opening our new VA-DoD Physical Therapy Clinic in Beaufort.

While leadership is fully committed to expanding services and access, our staff is equally determined to do so. Just a few weeks ago, we opened our GI expansion, doubling the size of this

Each of the new Charleston VAMC GI procedure rooms is outfitted with state of the art equipment to ensure safe, efficient, high-quality care for Veterans.

clinic. This increases access for GI procedures such as colonoscopies and liver biopsies. Since the expansion opened, the GI Unit is averaging about 117 procedures per week, putting them on track to complete more than 5,500 procedures this year. But before the expansion ever opened, we held a special Saturday procedure clinic for Veterans who needed these appointments. The GI team was so excited to see the positive response of our Veteran patients for this Saturday clinic that they came to me and asked if they could volunteer to hold a Saturday clinic once a month. I immediately gave them a resounding "Yes!" and they have performed GI procedures during their monthly Saturday clinic ever since. I want to thank our GI team for their willingness to go above and beyond to serve Veterans, and share their story with you as just one example of the many dedicated team members that serve Veterans every day at our VA.

Our Medical Foster Home program is another innovation that is poised to expand access to care for some of our most vulnerable Veterans - those in need of long term care. Through this program, individuals interested in becoming a full-time caregiver are fully trained by our VA and then paired with a Veteran who moves into the caregiver's home. This is a great alternative for Veterans who need full-time care but do not want to enter a nursing home setting. We have seen amazing bonds develop between these Veterans and the caregiver families. One Veteran wrote me last year saying it was the first time he spent Christmas with a family in decades. Now, thanks to legislation passed by the South Carolina legislature and signed by Gov. Haley earlier this month, VA caregivers may have up to 3 Veterans in their care through this program. I want to thank Caregiver Rose Doctor who championed this effort and I am pleased to say inquiries about becoming a Medical Foster Home caregiver have more than doubled in recent months.

While there are many great things happening for Veterans at our VA, I could not close this message without remembering the tragedy that took place in June 12 in Orlando. It was with a heavy heart that we all watched the events unfold. Our community knows only too well the horror and overwhelming grief of senseless violence that claims the lives of innocent people, for it was barely a year ago that nine members of Emmanuel AME were lost. I was struck once again by the love extended across our community and from our community to the citizens of Orlando as Charlestonians encourage them to remain united, to care for the victims' families, and to find healing through forgiveness. Charleston and Orlando will forever share a bond forged in tragedy but sustained by an unwavering hope for an end to hatred and violence. It is a bond that in many ways is similar to the bond our Veterans share - one that is forged in conflict and sustained by the brotherhood and sisterhood of those willing to sacrifice all for our freedom. As we care for them, I challenge our team and our community to remember every day the privilege we now have to serve and let us always do so with grace, honor and devotion to their health and well-being.

With respect and gratitude,

Scott R. Isaacks

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