Concerning Women

A PUBLICATION FOR WOMEN VETERANS OF THE LOWCOUNTRY

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a message from the *Program Manager*

Dear Friends,

There are many exciting changes for women utilizing the VA for their health care needs thanks to your feedback. As we strive to continually provide the best comprehensive care for your gender-specific needs, we are also working to make you feel welcome at the VA.

We are completing a new family waiting room at the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center, and most of our restrooms now have baby changing tables and sanitary product dispensers. We also have privacy curtains to help ensure your exams are conducted with your dignity and privacy in mind.

Our women's health providers, who have specialized training in women's health with a focus on disease prevention, are in each clinic to better serve you. I strongly encourage you to have your annual mammogram, Pap and routine blood work to check your cholesterol levels and risk for diabetes.

Have you registered for MyHealtheVet? It's a convenient way to access secure VA health information and manage your healthcare. You can also refill your VA prescriptions and send messages to your health care provider through the site. Contact Heather Friesen at ext. 6880 for more information.

And make sure to get your flu shot. Just call 1-888-878-6884 to schedule your appointment.

Patricia Hancox LISW-CP

Patricia Hancox, LISW-CP
Women Veterans Program Manager
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VA fights rising female homelessness

Homelessness is on the rise amongst female Veterans, a group that is at four times greater risk than their male counterparts. With women making up approximately 15 percent of the U.S. active duty military, and 20 percent of the National Guard and Reserve, VA estimates there are currently 1.8 million female Veterans. Of that number about three percent, or 55,000, are homeless.

Most homeless female Veterans served during conflict periods – Vietnam, the Gulf War, Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. Increases in female deployment, currently estimated at 182,000 for OIF and OEF versus 41,000 in the Gulf War, correlate with females suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), the two greatest causes of homelessness in this population. Other contributing factors include substance abuse, physical and mental health issues, and military sexual trauma.

Since 1999, VA Social Worker Erin Smith has gained a real understanding of these complex issues as she has fought to eradicate homelessness amongst Veterans.

"I find the work incredibly rewarding, but also challenging as there are so many different issues to tackle in a day," she said. Smith, who worked for many years at Crisis Ministries, understands that women tend to resist asking for services, but is thankful that is starting to change as is proven by more women coming to the VA for help.

The Charleston VA's Homeless Program operates 12 walk-in regional clinics where Veterans who are homeless, or fear becoming homeless can receive medical care and referrals for assistance. The walk-in clinic located at the VA medical center is open Monday – Friday, 9:00 – 11:00 a.m. Counseling, transitional housing with facilities for women and children, and specialized care for Veterans suffering from PTSD or who have experienced military sexual trauma are available. VA also offers employment assistance such as the compensated work therapy program to get homeless Veterans back on their feet.

VA partners with community organizations, legal assistance and job training programs to meet Veteran needs. VA provides transitional housing through local nonprofit shelters, and partners with Housing and Urban Development to provide the HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing program that moves Veterans into permanent subsidized housing.

For more information on VA's Homeless Program, call (843) 789-7953 or go to www.charleston.va.gov.

Among the Floating Benches

Col. Mary Martin knew what she wanted in life. She wanted to be a nurse. She wanted to serve in the military so she joined the Air Force. She wanted to teach so she joined the faculty at the MUSC College of Nursing after she retired from active duty.

But there were a few things she didn't know. She didn't know she would be assigned to the Pentagon representing the Chief of Air Force Reserve on medical matters in Washington, D.C. She didn't know she would be a close-range eyewitness to the terrorists flying a jetliner into that building on Sept. 11, 2011. And she didn't know that she would develop Post Traumatic Stress Disorder because of the carnage she saw on that dark day.

For years she struggled with the memory of seeing the plane smash into the Pentagon as she stood in the parking lot just feet away from the impact. She remembers seeing the belly of the plane and hearing the roar of the low-flying jetliner as it approached the building. She remembers that last second.

"I actually heard him accelerate," Martin said quietly. "The plane was going so fast. I thought, 'You should hear a crash.' But there was no crash." Then seconds later in what seemed a surreal situation there was a huge fireball. And reality hit.

Martin sprang into action helping a young worker from the Pentagon evacuate, and organizing communication with her headquarters Air Force Reserve unit from her nearby home.

She was sad and angry but she thought her reactions were normal given the circumstances. She functioned at her job but her marriage fell apart and she started to isolate more and more.

"PTSD likes isolation. PTSD likes meaningless distractions," she said recalling withdrawing from friends, family and social situations more and more in the months following the attack. Finally a year later she sought help from a civilian therapist.

> *"I will be at the Pentagon walking among the floating benches honoring all those who lost their lives on that day."*
>
> Mary Martin

But it wasn't until 2010, after moving to Charleston, that a fellow faculty member at MUSC suggested she come to the VA for treatment.

"It takes so much courage to say I need help," said Martin, adding she was limping along with outside help that does not have the expertise found at the VA. Martin entered an intensive five months of Prolonged Exposure Therapy, an empirically supported or research proven treatment method, to deal with her PTSD.

Prolonged Exposure is a two-pronged approach where the patient and therapist talk about the trauma repeatedly during recorded sessions, explained Charleston VA Clinical Psychologist Rachel Darrow, Ph.D. who worked with Martin. The patient listens to the tape of the trauma on her own as part of her "homework." Concurrently, the patient also participates in activities she perceives as distressing. A typical example is being in crowds.

Reducing avoidance of the memory allows the patient to feel physical sensations and emotions related to the memory in a safe environment so that it is not as distressing in the future, according to Darrow. Reducing avoidance of activities allows the patient to live an active life without fear dictating her actions.

"The point," explained Psychologist Rachel Darrow, Ph.D., "is not to forget the memories or emotions. The point is to help Mary regain control and deal more successfully with the memories."

Martin, who retold her story over and over and faithfully completed her homework is the first to admit how painful and hard the process is. But, as she said, she was ready to be healed.

"Today I can put 9/11 in perspective and respect it," said Martin. In fact, Martin has dealt so well with her PTSD that she has special plans for the 10th anniversary of 9/11.

"I will be at the Pentagon walking among the floating benches honoring all those who lost their lives on that day," she said. And while she's there, and after she comes home, she will know how to deal with the memories.

Concerning Women is offered to provide health information. Medical advice should be obtained from your health care provider. If you would like to provide any suggestions or story ideas email us at vhachaconcerningwomen@va.gov. or check out the latest news on our website www.charleston.va.gov. Questions or comments, please call (843) 789-7260.
Editor: Tonya Lobbestael

Meet Your New Women's Health Coordinator

Providing the highest quality women's health care for our Veterans is a big priority at the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center. And our new Women's Health Coordinator Patricia Hancox is here to make sure that priority is met.

Broadening outreach efforts to women Veterans and Veterans Service Organizations in the community is her first priority.

Hancox joins the VA team in Charleston after serving as a social worker at Dorn VAMC in Columbia, S.C. She brings a deep commitment to Veterans and women's care to her new position.

"One of my best friends was wounded in Vietnam and had a lot of care at the VA," said Hancox. "He would tell me the tales of the VA experiences and that whole brotherhood appealed to me." Her friend inspired her to pursue a social work career serving Veterans. Hancox also has three brothers who are Veterans.

Broadening outreach efforts to women Veterans and Veterans Service Organizations in the community is her first priority. Many women Veterans are not aware of VA services available to them and Hancox plans to change that. She also has plans to bring a more holistic approach to women's care in order to best meet their needs.

Patricia Hancox, LISW-CP

Conway Veteran wins gold at National Veterans Wheelchair Games

Air Force Veteran Judy Overholt jokes that the two gold medals and one silver that she won at the National Veterans Wheelchair Games are "just icing on the cake" but they sure are sweet for the 52 year-old Conway native.

"Everywhere you went people were rolling down car windows and saying 'Thank you for your service!"
Judy Overholt

Overholt, who competed along with 31 other Southeastern Paralyzed Veterans of America team members, took first place in stick bowling and the hand controls division of the motorized slalom. She won the silver medal in the hand controls division of the Power Chair 200. But she laughed that she was really hoping for a bronze since she already had gold and silver medals from this event that draws more than 600 Veterans who use wheelchairs and receive care at the VA.

This was Overholt's third year competing in the Wheelchair Games, and she says it was the best.

"Everywhere you went people were rolling down car windows and saying 'Thank you for your service!" she said.

The 2011 Games, which carried the theme "Where Heroes Become Legends", are designed for Veterans who use wheelchairs due to spinal cord injuries, amputations, or neurological problems, for athletic competition. The event is presented by Paralyzed Veterans of America and the Department of Veterans Affairs.

To find out more about the 2012 National Veterans Wheelchair Games, that will be held in Richmond, Va., go to, **http://www.va.gov/opa/speceven/wcg/index.asp.**

Beneficiary Travel Change

Charleston VAMC has been requested by the Veterans Health Administration to make beneficiary travel payments by direct deposit to the Veteran's bank account effective Nov. 1. The travel payment amount per mile will not change. Veterans who are eligible for travel pay should stop by the Travel Office to sign up for direct deposit.

Important VA Phone Numbers

Charleston VA Medical Center: **843-577-5011** or toll free **1-888-878-6884**

Telephone Advice Line: **843-789-6400** or toll free at **1-888-878-6884**

Veterans who need medical advice from their Primary Care provider or have questions about their medications can call the TAP line Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

Scheduling an Appointment: **843-789-6500** or toll free at **1-888-878-6884**

Veterans who need to schedule, cancel or reschedule an appointment for all Primary Care Clinics including Myrtle Beach, Savannah, Beaufort, Trident and Goose Creek can call Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

Automated Prescription Refill Line: **843-577-5011 extension 5220** or toll free at **1-888-878-6884 extension 5220**

Veterans who need to request a refill of a prescription or check the status of refills can call 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Have your social security number and prescription numbers ready when calling.

VA Benefits (other than health care): **1-800-827-1000**

Veterans who need information on VA benefits including VA pension and compensation, home loans and education can call the VA Regional Office.

Billing Questions: **1-866-258-2772**

Veterans who have questions about a bill received from the Charleston VA Medical Center can call the VA Revenue Center.

Suicide Prevention: **1-800-273-TALK (8255) Press 1 for Veterans**

Veterans can call the VA Suicide Prevention Lifeline to talk to trained professionals 24 hours a day, seven days a week or visit our website **www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org.**

My Health*e*Vet: www.myhealth.va.gov

My Health*e*Vet empowers you to manage your health. It offers anywhere, anytime Internet access to Veteran health care information and services. Log on and sign up today!

For more information on VA related topics visit **www.charleston.va.gov.**

Concerning VA Women

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