Acess to care has been a major focus in VA for the past several years and it’s something I am personally invested in actively managing day to day here at Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center. Connecting you – our Veterans – with the care you need, when you need it, is a top priority and we’ve worked hard throughout our health care system to expand access where we are able. While our metrics show that our access is far above averages both within and outside of VA – with our clinicians completing 97 percent or greater of all appointments within 30 days for the past several years, as denoted by VA’s Access Audit – many of our patients still perceive our access to be poor. I am the first to say that we will always seek out and find opportunities for improvement in striving to provide the highest-quality, timely care to our Veterans, however I feel this gap between perception and reality may be a failure to communicate the availability of these appointments. So, this is where I really need your help. Word of mouth is a powerful tool and, so too, is the connection and trust between brothers and sisters in arms. I’m asking that you share your experiences of timely care at your VA with all the Veterans you regularly meet in your daily lives. Help us spread the good news about our appointment availability so Veterans in need of care can feel confident that they can be seen quickly. Based on numerous focus groups and responses to patient satisfaction surveys, we understand that many of our Veterans believe the prevalent national media message about the quality and access to care they might expect at VA or perhaps they had an undesirable experience when visiting a VA hospital in the past. You can help us change the narrative. I, and every member of my team here, come to work each day looking for ways in which we can be better, and do better, for our Veterans. We realize that we aren’t perfect and our mission is to never stop pursuing excellence in providing care to you, our honored heroes. That is why employees here have put in countless hours developing new strategies to meet our growing needs for appointment availability and I truly believe we’ve made a lot of headway. Below you’ll see a list of expanded care options we have implemented in the past few years.

- **Evening and Weekend Appointments:** In Primary Care, Mental Health and some specialty care areas we have expanded appointment availability to maximize options for Veteran patients, and expanded evening and weekend clinic hours.
- **Same Day Appointments:** Same Day Primary Care and Mental Health appointments are available at each clinic.
- **Triaging Patients with Symptoms:** Our schedulers refer any Veteran with a symptomatic condition who calls to schedule an appointment directly to our clinical staff for triage to ensure their immediate health care needs are met.
- **VAR App:** We offer the Veteran Appointment Requests (VAR) app that allows Veterans to request an appointment in their Primary Care clinic online. Veterans who use the app are then contacted by our team within three to five business days to schedule that appointment.
- **Walk-in Patients:** While Veterans are encouraged to schedule an appointment, we do have the ability to see walk-in patients for needed same-day care.

If you personally have a need for care, please contact us – we have several options for providing you with services on your preferred timeline. To schedule an appointment, please call (843) 789-6400 or toll free at 1-888-878-8664. Our scheduling team is happy to help, and can often arrange for you to be seen on the same day, if needed. Please, also share these scheduling options with other Veterans.

**UPCOMING EVENTS**

- **RiverDogs Military Appreciation Night and Welcome Home**
  Aug. 11, 6:00 p.m.
  Joseph P. Riley Jr. Park

- **Red Cross Blood Drive**
  Aug. 15, 10:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.
  Ralph H. Johnson VAMC

- **Veteran Employment Fair**
  Aug. 25, 10:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.
  Ralph H. Johnson VAMC
  Main Auditorium

**CHECK IT OUT!**

2017 Annual Report Video
I am also pleased to announce that VEText, a new national appointment text reminder system that will be used for every Veteran who has a mobile number listed with our VAMC will go live here on July 27. VEText will send a text reminder seven days before a Veteran’s appointment, and again two days before the appointment. The Veteran will have the option to confirm or cancel the appointment by responding to the text. This system will supplement our reminder phone calls and letters, while serving to open cancelled appointments for other Veteran patients. Every Veteran with a cell phone number listed in their health record is automatically enrolled in the program, so it is very important for Veterans to ensure we have their correct number. Veterans may update the phone numbers during check-in at their next appointment, or use the self-service kiosks located in our VAMC and clinics to update their information. Veterans may also opt out of VEText at any time by responding STOP to an appointment reminder text.

For more information on VEText, click this link and read FAQs.

Our goal is to provide the right care at the right time for every Veteran, and to provide the health care quality, experience and access we would want for our own family members. Thanks for helping us let them know they can count on our VA – their VA – to do just that.

The Rest of the Story

Last month, I included a new feature in my message on VA media coverage that does not include all the facts based on journalist and radio personality Paul Harvey’s “The Rest of the Story.” While there is always room for improvement – something we work on every day at our VA – I believe it is very important for our Veterans and their families to know the full story so they can help us improve when needed, and be assured they are receiving the best care for their medical needs.

In June, USA Today published a story asserting that many VA Community Living Centers (CLCs) are not rated well based on VA’s CLC Strategies for Analytics for Improvement and Learning (SAIL) star-rating system. Specifically, the article focused on several 1-star VA care facilities but failed to include the 73 nursing homes, including Charleston VAMC’s Community Living Center, rated 4 and 5 stars. So, here is the rest of the story ...

This is the first year VA has compiled ratings for our nursing homes using the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services rating system. That’s why we are now able to present an apples-to-apples comparison of VA homes with private facilities.

VA nursing homes often have sicker patients than do private facilities. It is also important to know that private sector nursing homes admit patients selectively, but VA does not refuse to admit any eligible Veteran regardless of his or her medical condition. While these factors make achieving 4- or 5-star quality ratings more challenging, we know caring for every eligible Veteran in our facilities where they receive more nursing attention and personalized care is the right thing to do.

I want to personally thank our CLC team, our CLC volunteers, and all the services such as Environmental Management, Nutrition & Food, Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation, that support the high-quality care provided to our Veteran residents.

We are also mindful that there is always room for improvement, and we are very thankful for the families of our CLC residents who partner with us in these efforts. We invite each of our Veterans and their families to work with us in each area to make this the best care and care experience for all who choose our VA.

With gratitude and respect,

Scott R. Isaacks
Director