

# MONTHLY REPORT FROM THE DIRECTOR

## Portrait Dedication Ceremony

Friday, January 31 will be an exciting day at our VA, at 10 a.m. our medical center's Front Lobby we will be unveiling and dedicating the new portrait of PFC Ralph H. Johnson—a portrait that truly reflects Ralph.

While the original portrait of Ralph is a beautiful artistic rendering, it was brought to our attention during the commissioning of the USS Ralph Johnson just two years ago that the image was not a true likeness of our namesake. When his sister Helen Richards went to San Diego to visit the Marine Corps installation shortly before the commissioning, she received a copy of his official enlistment photo - one of only a small handful of images that exist of Ralph whose memorabilia was destroyed by Hurricane Hugo some 30 years ago. When Helen shared the photo with us, our VA began working to find an artist who would do his likeness justice. That artist of the new portrait is fellow Vietnam-era Veteran Rick Austin who donated his incredible talent and countless hours of time to create the new portrait. Our VA is incredibly grateful to Rick for his meticulous care to provide a portrait that is an exact image of Ralph. We also owe a special thanks to Jim and Laura Thompson for donating the art supplies for Rick's use.

When Ralph laid down his life on the battlefield in Vietnam more than 50 years ago, he did much more than save his fellow marines. He gave a legacy of unparalleled service beyond self that we seek to fulfill every day at Charleston VAMC. It is a legacy that embraces sacrifice, demands integrity, and ensures truth in every instance. You can read more about Ralph's selfless sacrifice on our [website](#).

The [ceremony](#) is open to the public, so if you're able, I hope you'll join me, along with Ralph's family, for this special ceremony. I expect the remarks

from Ralph's sister Helen and the artist to both be very touching and a reminder of the importance of the work we do at our VA to provide the highest quality health services for the Veterans entrusted in our care.

## Fresh Xpress

Through many different channels our VA goes above and beyond to care for Veterans beyond traditional health care. One area that is specifically important is to ensure that none of our Veterans lack access to healthy food options. Two years ago, our Nutrition and Food Service opened our medical center's Veteran Food Pantry to serve nutritionally-challenged patients by providing healthy foods for those in need. The program has experienced tremendous success serving around 35 Veterans each month at both our VAMC and community VA outpatient clinics.

A recent effort to expand access to healthy foods for Veterans is the addition of Fresh Xpress. This partnership with the Lowcountry Food Bank will bring fresh produce to our medical center on a quarterly basis - available to Veteran at no cost. All Veterans need to bring is a bag of their own to take fresh fruit and vegetables home. Our first Fresh Xpress distribution was held on May 21, 2019. In just five hours, 3,590 pounds of produce were distributed to 352 Veteran households that included 912 individuals. Free recipes were also available for Veterans, further assisting them in creating healthy at-home meal options. In 2020, this distribution will be held quarterly on the last Tuesday of the month beginning this month on [Jan. 28 from 9 a.m. to 12 p.m.](#) under the front overhang at our VA front entrance and following at the same time and location on April 28, June 28 and Oct. 27.

The work we do through specialized programs and offerings like Fresh Xpress demonstrate our proactive

solutions to engage Veterans in a healthy lifestyle that focuses on the well-being of their bodies, and ultimately their souls—a wholistic approach that goes deeper than the traditional alimnet-treatment approach. It is our goal to keep Veterans happy and healthy, not just free of aches and pains. Through these special offerings, it is my hope that Veterans feel truly cared for by our VA, building trust with our Veteran patients, and that they have a deep understanding that we have their back—just like the Servicemembers who stood by their sides during enlistment. Veterans can count on us.

Sincerely,

Ronnie Smith, MHSA, MBA,  
Acting Director & CEO




**Ronnie Smith, MSHA, MBA**  
Acting Medical Center Director

**CHECK IT OUT-**  
[CHARLESTON VAMC](#)  
[VIRTUAL TOUR](#)

## UPCOMING EVENTS

Jan. 28, 9 a.m. – 12 p.m., VAMC Front Overhang: [Fresh Express Produce Distribution](#)

Jan. 31, 10 a.m., VAMC Front Lobby – [PFC Ralph H. Johnson Portrait Dedication Ceremony](#)

Feb. 13, 11 a.m. – 2 p.m., VAMC Main Auditorium, [Veteran Employment Job Fair](#)

Feb. 27, 10 a.m. – 12 p.m., College of Charleston School of Professional Studies (3800 Paramount Dr., North Charleston) – [Military, Veteran and Spouse Career & Resource Fair](#)

## SUICIDE PREVENTION

 **Choose VA**

 **1,694 FAMILIES SERVED**



**VA** | Ralph H. Johnson  
VA Medical Center