

Fall 2016

my VA QUARTERLY

Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center

The Women's Health Issue

*VA provides specialized care for
women who donned the uniform*

Home at Last

*Homeless Veteran is reunited
with his sisters after 32 years*

CANCER,
YOU PICKED
THE WRONG
DVA



VA

Ralph H. Johnson
VA Medical Center

CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA



From the Director

Women have answered their nation's call and have volunteered to serve in the U.S. military as far back as the American Revolution. They often disguised themselves as men in order to fight in those early wars. They served as pilots during World War II and today they serve in almost every military occupation – including combat roles. Women currently make up 10 percent of America's Veteran population and their numbers are growing. Approximately 20 percent of new recruits to the armed forces are women. Today, there are more than two million women Veterans in the U.S. By 2043, that number is expected to grow to nearly 2.4 million. Our female Veterans are a unique population with unique health care needs. In order to address these needs, it is critical that women Veterans feel valued and respected. The employees here at the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center are dedicated to ensuring the female Veterans who entrust us with their care are treated with dignity and heartfelt gratitude. It is the very least we can do to honor their sacrifice and noble dedication to our country.

In this special Women's Health issue of myVA Quarterly, we hope to highlight some of the specialized programs for women offered here at your VA. Patricia Hancox, Charleston VA Women Veterans Program Manager, will share more about the expansion of gender-specific services here and at the facility's community outpatient clinics. VA offers gynecological services, breast and cervical cancer screenings, mammograms, and even maternity care. Clinicians here are also sensitive to military-specific conditions, such as military sexual trauma, which affect women at a disproportionate rate and require carefully managed treatment.

In our cover story feature, you'll meet Army Veteran Edith White, a breast cancer survivor whose comprehensive treatment was coordinated through her case management team here at Charleston VA. She also underwent a double mastectomy and hysterectomy here at our hospital after she tested positive for the genetic

mutation that can increase a woman's risk of breast and ovarian cancers. Plastic surgeons here at our VA were also able to reconstruct Edith's breasts once she had healed from her previous surgeries in what she hopes will be the final step in her recovery process. Ms. White is truly a testament to the enduring strength and perseverance of women battling this potentially-life threatening disease. I am proud that the talented staff here at VA is working hard each day to manifest positive outcomes for female Veterans during what is surely a trying and difficult time in their lives.

It is our hope that our female Veterans always feel welcomed and well-cared for at their Charleston VA. As more women enroll for health care and services here, we are working diligently to provide world-class care catered toward their specific needs. I'd like to personally extend an invitation to all female Veterans to come and see what your VA has to offer. You may be surprised at what you find. You served with selfless integrity. Now let us provide you with the care you've so rightfully earned and deserve.

With deepest respect and gratitude,


Scott R. Issacks, FACHE

On the Cover

Veteran Edith White enjoys some time outdoors as she recovers from breast cancer treatments provided through the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center.



Photo by James Arrowood, Medical Photographer.

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Community leaders gather to cut the ribbon on SCServes Lowcountry, officially launching the live resource database.

Photo by James Arrowood, Medical Photographer.

Medical center partners with SCServes, hosts ribbon cutting

By Erin Curran, Public Affairs Specialist

On August 2, more than 100 representatives of Charleston community organizations gathered in the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center's Main Auditorium to celebrate the ribbon cutting of SCServes Lowcountry, a newly coordinated network of comprehensive services, resources and care.

"We have to create communities that are committed to collaborating to meet the needs of its citizens," said keynote speaker Deputy Secretary of the Department of Labor Christopher P. Lu. "Community-based care is catching on and organizations are teaming up to better meet the needs of Veterans and their families."

SCServes is part of a broader national effort, AmericaServes, led by Syracuse University's Institute for Veterans and Military Families, which aims to better address the needs of Servicemembers, Veterans, and their families through streamlined access to high-quality providers on a coordinated basis. South Carolina is the fourth state to launch this type of network nationwide.

Charleston VAMC was excited to announce that it is the first health care organization to partner with SCServes Lowcountry. The medical center has been a member of the Charleston community for more than 50 years, working with community organizations to collaboratively provide exceptional care for Lowcountry Veterans.

Four years ago, Charleston VAMC became a founding member of the Tri-county Veteran Support Network, now functioning as its MyVA Community Board. The group was established to bring local organizations that offer Veteran services

together to exchange ideas and formulate strategies for referring Veterans to the resources they need. Bringing SCServes to South Carolina was an idea brought forward during the Support Network meetings and the commitment to move forward in partnership with SCServes is the latest way Charleston VAMC is building strong community relationships to meet the needs of Veteran patients.

"These partnerships support the care of Veterans when assistance isn't available through VA funding or programs," said Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center Director Scott Isaacks. "Many Veterans have more than just one need, and through SCServes, Veterans can connect with affiliated organizations throughout the Lowcountry to assist them with everything from food, to childcare and housing, and we will continue to provide eligible Veterans with the health care benefits they have earned."

The ribbon cutting was part of a two-day event attended by leaders from federal, state, public, private, and nonprofit organizations serving South Carolina Servicemembers, Veterans and military families.

"Our medical center pledges to serve as an active participant in what has already become the largest affiliate of AmericaServes. We commend each of the organizations already registered with SCServes and encourage other community organizations throughout our state to consider joining us in giving back to those who made sacrifices to protect our freedom," said Isaacks.



Gastroenterology Unit makes improvements, doubles capacity

By Erin Curran, Public Affairs Specialist

On March 28, The Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center expanded its Gastroenterology (GI) Procedure Center from two to four rooms, doubling the future capacity for Veteran procedures, while making some major improvements in the unit's processes. GI procedures include colonoscopies, esophagogastroduodenoscopies, PEG tubes and liver biopsies.

For the three years leading up to the expansion – during the planning and construction phases – staff worked diligently, within the two-room space they had, to more efficiently see patients on the unit, increasing the total number of Veterans seen per year from 2,000 to 3,000.

"I couldn't have asked for a better staff," said Nurse Manager Sheryl Jones. "They always want to do what's best for patients in a safe environment."

Since opening the additional rooms in March, the GI Unit is averaging about 117 procedures per week, putting them on track to complete more than 5,500 procedures this year.

"We are still recruiting additional endoscopists and once we have them on board

we'll have the ability to complete about 38 procedures per day, putting us at around 8,000 total procedures for the year," said Jones.

Jones is the nurse manager for both the GI Unit and the Ambulatory Care Center (ACC). When patients are seen for their GI procedure, they visit the ACC for pre and post-procedure evaluations. Jones established a dedicated ACC charge nurse and designated them as the main point of contact for other staff, noting this was a critical step in improving processes within the ACC.

"When a procedure is delayed more than 30 minutes, the charge nurse works collaboratively with other staff to find out the reason why and then communicates that reason directly to the patient and their family – with hourly updates," said Jones. "We have also been able to add additional curtains in the room for privacy, we reduced the amount of lead time a patient had to check-in prior to their procedure from three hours to two hours, and I, as nurse manager, address any Veteran concerns quickly and directly with the patient."

GI has also added a Saturday procedure day once per month where they see approximately

18 to 20 Veterans. Staff members volunteer to work outside of their normal hours to be able to provide this additional access for Veterans, which reduces the number of Veterans who have to be referred to doctors in the community for care.

"Our Veterans love coming on Saturdays. It often fits into their schedule better and they always say how easy it is for them to park here," said Jones. "For this extra clinic day we have to have support from sterile processing service, housekeeping, medical support staff and the ACC. They all work together to make this happen for our Veterans."

Another positive change to the area is that one staff member is on-call 24/7 for any emergency procedures. This strategy also allows for more Veterans to be seen within the VA as opposed to being sent to community clinicians.

The continued commitment from ACC and GI staff at Charleston VAMC, along with the support of medical center leadership, have improved access and continues to bring top-quality care to Lowcountry Veterans.



ZIKA VIRUS: What you need to know, how to protect yourself

By JW Huckfeldt, Public Affairs Specialist, TCF Intern

Veterans here in the Lowcountry are no strangers to the presence of mosquitoes. Summers bring them in droves to the Southeast, and while they are mostly just a pesky annoyance, recent confirmed cases of Zika virus in southern parts of Florida have some concerned that the virus may spread farther north. The biggest risk of Zika virus infection is to females in their child-bearing years or those who are, or are planning to become, pregnant.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Zika virus “is spread to people primarily by the bite of an infected mosquito. The illness is usually mild with symptoms lasting up to a week and many people do not have symptoms or will have only mild symptoms. However, Zika virus during pregnancy can cause a serious birth defect called microcephaly and other severe brain defects.”

Microcephaly is a rare disorder, which causes a baby's head to be smaller than normal and can result in severe brain defects.

The Zika virus is spreading and non-travel, mosquito-bite related cases of Zika infection have been reported in Florida. Travelers infected with the virus who unknowingly bring it back to the U.S. can transfer the virus to uninfected people if bitten by a mosquito—infesting the insect and essentially making it a carrier.

Researchers also discovered that the Zika virus isn't spread by mosquitos alone—it can also be sexually transmitted.

Since Zika is primarily spread by infected mosquitos, the CDC recommends wearing long sleeves and pants, if possible, in places known to have the Zika virus. Using an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)-registered

insect repellant, preferably ones containing the active ingredients DEET, picardin, or oil of lemon eucalyptus, can also help deter mosquitos from biting.

There have been no recorded incidents of Zika being transmitted through casual contact, such as a handshake or hug. The virus oftentimes displays mild symptoms and infection rarely sends people to the hospital. The symptoms typically last from several days up to a week. Also, once a person has contracted the Zika virus, it's unlikely that he or she will contract the illness again.

Symptoms include fever, headache, a skin rash and/or redness covered by bumps, joint pain, pink eye, and muscle pain and soreness. In extremely rare cases, people who have been infected with Zika were also diagnosed with Guillain-Barre syndrome as a result, a neurological disorder that is not contagious.



Stock photo.


The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) offers Zika protection kits that include insect repellant, permethrin spray to treat clothing, biological treatment tabs for standing water, thermometer, condoms and educational material.

Currently, no cure or vaccine for Zika exists so prevention is key. For the latest information on the Zika virus, visit www.cdc.gov/zika/.



A pregnant woman protects herself from possible Zika infection by wearing a long-sleeve shirt and pants while applying insect repellent to areas not covered by clothing.

Zika virus is spread primarily through mosquito bites but can also be sexually transmitted.



The Women's Health Program affords female Veterans the opportunity to seek specialized treatment in a comfortable environment.

Women's Health Program provides specialized care for female Veterans

By JW Huckfeldt, Public Affairs Specialist, TCF Intern

The Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center introduced the Women's Health Program in 2007, and it's a good thing, too—the number of female Veterans has doubled in the last decade to more than two million nationwide.

The Women's Health Program at Charleston VAMC has grown over the last nine years with almost 9,000 women Veterans now enrolled. The program offers these Veterans a wealth of gender-specific health care including gynecology services, mammograms, breast and cervical cancer screening, maternity care and menopause symptom management, just to name a few. In fact, the program is a leader in gynecologic robotic surgery.

"I enjoy overseeing a program that continues to evolve as more women utilize the VA for their health care," Women Veterans Program Manager Pat Hancox said. "I work alongside many dedicated staff, both at the Ralph H. Johnson Medical Center and the outpatient clinics, who constantly go above the call of duty to ensure female Veterans are treated with dignity and respect."

Hancox, a licensed clinical social worker (LCSW), helps women Veterans navigate the enrollment process, coordinate health care and understand the benefits they have earned.

The Women's Health Program goes beyond helping women Veterans with gender-specific health care. Other services offered

help treat post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), family and parenting issues, smoking cessation, and nutrition and weight management. A comprehensive list of Women's Health services can be found online at www.charleston.va.gov/services/women/.

VA also provides free military sexual trauma (MST)-related care to Veterans who have experienced sexual assault or sexual harassment while on active duty. Veterans do not need a VA disability rating or service connection, and may be able to receive this care even if they are not eligible for other VA care. Charleston VAMC's Military Sexual Trauma Coordinator Carol Denier is available to Veterans, both female and male, and other individuals who may have questions about receiving treatment for MST. She can be reached by calling 843-789-7721.

"As we grow the program and more female Veterans enroll, I would like to see us expand our services to include more family and female waiting areas, child care during appointments, enhancing women's mental health groups and improving our gynecology waiting area and exam rooms," Hancox said. "I have the pleasure of advocating for women Veterans to ensure they receive timely and high-quality health care services provided in a sensitive and safe environment."

VA offers comprehensive breast cancer care to Veterans

By Erin Curran, Public Affairs Specialist



Photo by James Arrowood, Medical Photographer.

“Women Veterans are the fastest growing segment of our patients at the VA,” said, Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center Chief of Surgical Service Mark Lockett, M.D. “The VA is becoming increasingly more sophisticated to accommodate female Veterans and they are surprised at the capabilities we have to manage women’s health issues.”

Veteran Edith White received comprehensive cancer care through the Charleston VA Medical Center.

At her annual routine mammogram in September 2013, U.S. Army Veteran Edith White got the news that many women dread—there was a lump. Within a month, the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center coordinated her biopsy appointment at the Medical University of South Carolina Hollings Cancer Center.

"The process happened quickly," said White. "It was such a short amount of time between my mammogram and the biopsy. The VA set up my appointment and then called me with the date, time, and location. Elizabeth took care of all that for me."

Physician Assistant Elizabeth Spitz serves in an essential role for breast cancer treatment at Charleston VAMC by closely coordinating with community partners to treat Veterans. She is the point person on-site at the VA who patients can contact directly, making her very accessible for breast cancer patients as they go through treatment.

White has a significant family history of breast cancer so, following a lumpectomy and radiation, she was recommended by her VA oncology team for genetic testing through a telegenetics partnership with the Salt Lake City VA Medical Center. The testing took place right at her local VA outpatient clinic in Myrtle Beach, making the appointment very convenient for her. She tested positive for the genetic mutation that can increase a woman's risk of breast and ovarian cancers. In June 2015, White opted for a double mastectomy and hysterectomy at Charleston VAMC.

"I am thankful to the people in my community that recommended I go enroll in VA health care," said White. "The VA has helped guide me through these surgeries and treatments. I am now encouraging others in my town to ask about their eligibility."

The Loris, South Carolina native has been healing from her surgeries and getting back to gardening.

"I've been able to plant a few things. I love to see the flowers when they start to bloom and watch the goldfish in my pond," said White.

In September 2016, White had what she hopes will be the final surgery in her cancer recovery - breast reconstruction. The procedure was performed by plastic surgeons at Ralph H. Johnson VAMC.

After surgery, she's looking forward to traveling around the country to visit family. She has plans to visit her brother in Washington, D.C. - this will be her first time to our nation's capital and she can't wait to see the monuments and the museums. She's also hoping to get to El Paso, Texas, to visit with her sister.

Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center Chief of Surgical Service Mark Lockett, M.D. and his team work hand-in-hand with community providers to coordinate care for female Veterans to access treatments they need for breast cancer diagnoses. Spitz works on Lockett's team and serves a vital role to assist patients with their care—whether a Veteran's appointment is at a VA site of care or out in the community, all appointments flow through her. The surgical team has guaranteed that she is easily accessible through her own direct phone line.

This patient-centered care approach is what drives the type of breast cancer treatment that will be followed.

"Typically our goal is to treat the cancer in a manner that meets the patient's preferences," said Lockett.

Eighty percent of breast cancer diagnoses begin with a minimally invasive needle biopsy. This simple outpatient procedure keeps patients out of the operating room during diagnosis, so they can be more comfortable in their home environment.

"Many of our female patients are expecting that they will be sent out for care, but we can care for them at VA," said Lockett. "If surgery and reconstruction are needed, the majority of those procedures can happen right here at VA. Choosing care at VA has another benefit—coordination of medical records—that is typically better than other hospitals and systems."

VA medical centers work closely with community partners to facilitate

the sharing of records and compile them within the VA record. This process creates one, complete medical record for the patient resulting in better quality care for the Veteran.

With an ever-changing face of who the word 'Veteran' describes and with approximately one tenth of Charleston VAMC patients being female, the medical center is expanding services to meet the unique needs of women Veterans, a group of Veterans they are proud to serve.

Current number of female Veterans enrolled at Charleston VAMC

8,719

Mammography is monitored through Primary Care Providers and the Women Veterans Program Manager starting at age 40 for early detection of breast cancer. Individual higher risk factors, such as genetic flags or family history, may be reasons for a provider to recommend screenings at an earlier age.

Green light: Glowing mice help advance research of respiratory disease

By Meredith Hagen, Lead Public Affairs Specialist

Charleston VAMC Research Technician Lindsay McDonald, Ph.D., uses a black light to demonstrate the green glow of a genetically engineered mouse used to research pulmonary fibrosis. The mouse's cells emit fluorescent green light, which can be seen through the ears in the photo.



Charleston VA Associate Chief of Staff for Research R. Amanda C. LaRue, Ph.D., investigates cells through a microscope. LaRue's study focuses on hematopoietic stem cells and the role they play in respiratory disease.

Mice are a common fixture in many research laboratory settings, however, Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center's research facility has one special mouse, with distinct characteristics, that is helping researchers make great strides in their analysis of respiratory disease, among other things. This normally black mouse glows fluorescent green when exposed to a black light.

"These transgenic mice are 'engineered' through a process that crosses their genes with that of a type of jellyfish," said Charleston VAMC's Associate Chief of Staff for Research R. Amanda C. LaRue, Ph.D. "When the process is successful, almost every cell in the mouse's body emits a green glow that we can then use as a marker to track the movements of the types of cells we are interested in – in our case, hematopoietic stem cells (HSC)."

LaRue and her research team irradiate recipient mice, essentially killing their current stem cells, and replace them with HSCs from the green donor mouse. This allows them to easily see where the cells travel and how they change and react in the body in order to better understand the lung disease, pulmonary fibrosis.

"Patients who have pulmonary fibrosis develop scar tissue in their lungs that inhibits normal lung function," LaRue explained. "Because of the scarring, it becomes increasingly difficult for the patient to breathe and, unfortunately, there is no cure. At this time, the only way to restore lung function in those suffering from this disease is a lung transplant and patients often die waiting for this procedure."

Though pulmonary fibrosis affects both Veteran and non-Veteran populations, this study is of particular interest to those who served in the Gulf War. Military members who were in theater during this conflict are at increased risk for the disease due to the sand, geological dust and other particles they regularly inhaled in the desert environment.

LaRue's team simulates this same exposure in the mice with the green HSCs by putting the animals to sleep and then injecting silica particles directly into their lungs. "The tiny silica crystals, which make up sand, have extremely sharp edges that, when inhaled, chafe the sensitive tissue inside the lungs each time the person takes a breath," said LaRue. "What we've found through our research is that the body sends out cells called circulatory fibroblast precursors (CFP) when this happens. These cells originate from stem cells in the bone marrow and migrate to the lungs through circulation to become fibroblasts. Fibroblasts are cells that heal damage in the body, but in patients with pulmonary fibrosis, these cells ultimately end up creating tough scar tissue that limits the ability of the lungs to inflate and take in oxygen."

Servicemembers who have recently served in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan may also be at risk for pulmonary fibrosis after working in similar environments as their Gulf War predecessors. However, since there is often a significant time gap between exposure and diagnosis of the disease, sometimes 30 or 40 years, these younger Veterans may not see symptoms until they are in their 50s or 60s.

"Our goal is to really make some significant progress in finding alternative treatments for this disease," LaRue said. "I don't see these cells as inherently 'good' or 'bad,' they're basically just doing a job. If we can develop an understanding of why they do what they do, then we can work on trying to influence the undesirable behaviors."

There are two prescription drugs currently approved by the Food and Drug Administration for use in treating pulmonary fibrosis patients. LaRue hopes her research will shed some light on how to use these drugs more effectively to possibly target receptors and suppress the production of the problematic fibroblasts.

"I see all of this as my way of giving back," said LaRue. "I come from a big military family and this research is how I can be involved in helping our Veterans and contribute to the big picture."

Photos by Mary O'Dell, Stakeholder Relations Intern.

Telemental health hub offers access, convenience for women Veterans seeking treatment

By JW Huckfeldt, Public Affairs Specialist, TCF Intern

More than 10 years ago, the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center Mental Health Team found a way to expand access, convenience, and willingness to participate in therapy for Veterans who may be struggling with receiving care. The solution was a secure technology known as telemental health (TMH) where a Veteran sees their provider via video teleconference. Today, Charleston VAMC has become VA's first National Telemental Health Hub providing evidence-based mental health services to Veterans either in their nearest VA clinic or in their home throughout six states including South Carolina, Georgia, North Carolina, Alabama, Maine and West Virginia, with plans to grow in the coming year.

"One of our biggest challenges is trying to identify the Veterans who are not seeking care, especially women Veterans," Charleston VAMC's Director of the Regional Telemental Health Hub Anna Birks, PsyD said. "There are a number of barriers that prevent women Veterans from seeking treatment."

Women Veterans – and all Veterans – may struggle with the stigma of being seen by a mental health practitioner, be intimidated by the clinical environment, live too far away from the VA medical center, or have difficulty committing to treatment due to work schedules. For female Veterans, those challenges are often compounded by child care and other obstacles presented by daily life, or being uncomfortable amongst a patient population that is predominantly male. Charleston VAMC hopes to reach more female Veterans through the TMH hub, which recently added 12 more mental health providers. In 2015, Charleston VAMC provided more than 13,000 TMH patient encounters serving 4,538 Veterans. But only 448 Veterans – less than 10 percent – are women Veterans receiving treatment via TMH. Charleston VAMC is looking to change that trend and expand usage among women Veterans. Recently, the mental health team has focused on home-based TMH services, which are especially well-received by women Veterans. Now, at Charleston VAMC, in-home TMH is available through several mental health specialty clinics including the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Clinical Team and the Couples and Family Clinic.

Many women report that home-based TMH has made engaging in treatment easier for them due to less travel time, participating in treatment in the comfort of their own home, or feeling more at ease talking with their clinician about difficult topics over a video monitor than they do in face-to-face meetings.

As Charleston VAMC's National Telemental Health Hub continues to grow, the team looks forward to expanding access even further with a Telemental Health Annex to open in 2017 that will accommodate the recently hired providers, eight new providers and current TMH staff. The TMH team also anticipates adding parts of Texas to its service network in the coming year.

Female Veterans Needed for PTSD Research Study

Are you a female Veteran who is experiencing psychological or emotional stress related to an unwanted sexual experience that occurred during your military service? We are currently enrolling participants at the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center and Medical University of South Carolina for a post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) research study.

We are conducting a research study to determine if videoconferencing technology is an acceptable alternative to traditional face-to-face therapy for military sexual trauma (MST)-related PTSD. Help your fellow female Veterans by helping us improve treatment for military women across the country.

Who is conducting the study?

The study is being conducted at the Medical University of South Carolina and Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center with support from funding via the Department of Defense.

For more information, please contact the study coordinator at 843-789-6519. All calls are confidential and compensation is provided.



Photo by James Arrowood, Medical Photographer.

Charleston VAMC's Director of the Regional Telemental Health Hub, Dr. Anna Birks, conducts a treatment session with a female Veteran via telemental health.

Charleston VA celebrates 50 years of service to Veterans

By Lanelle W. Strawder, Public Affairs Specialist

Over the years, the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center has been a place of healing, recovery and triumph for Veterans living in South Carolina, Georgia and beyond. This year the medical center celebrates 50 years of serving our nation's heroes and honoring the men and women whose service will continue to safeguard our freedoms.

Opening in 1966, the medical center was a welcome addition in Charleston—a city whose strong economic and cultural heritage has attracted Veterans for decades. The medical center accepted its first patient on June 27, 1966, and has welcomed an ever-expanding stream of patients since that day. Over time, the medical center has grown and expanded to include six outpatient clinics located as far north as Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, and down the coast to Hinesville, Georgia—each dedicated to meeting the needs of every Veteran who chooses to seek care within Charleston VA's health care system. Technological advances, such as telemental health and teleradiology, have allowed the Ralph H. Johnson VAMC to serve Veterans all across the country.

The Charleston VA has undergone a number of changes in its 50-year span as a fixture in the Charleston community. From structural changes that have helped increase patient capacity and the services offered, to the hospital's move from a primarily inpatient facility to one focusing on acute care, the medical center's mission has always remained the same—to provide the best possible health care to Veterans living in the Lowcountry.

Since day one, Charleston VA's leadership and medical teams have been committed to providing the highest quality of care to patients, by utilizing best clinical practice, advancing VA's commitment to conduct research that improves patients' health, research objectives, and being a national leader for training the next generation of medical providers. Commitment to these goals have led Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center to be distinguished as one of the best for health care quality and efficiency in the VA system.

Fifty years later Charleston VAMC also takes pride in the special relationships it's built with Veterans, other health care institutions, and the community as a whole. Through these connections, Charleston VA has witnessed its fair share of celebrations – like the Veteran who married his high school sweetheart in the VA chapel – and challenges – such as the hospital's transformation into a place of hope and refuge during Hurricane Hugo in 1995 – in its 50 years, and through it all, remains steadfast in its position as a place of solace and pride for Veterans.

On September 5, 1991, 25 years after opening its doors, the medical center – originally named the Charleston Veterans Administration Hospital – was renamed the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center in honor of one of Charleston's own. The hospital's namesake, Pfc. Ralph Henry Johnson, was a 19-year-old U.S. Marine who valiantly gave his life during the Vietnam War by hurling himself onto a grenade to protect the lives of his comrades. By bearing his name, the character and virtue that came to define Johnson's life have become embodied in the service that the medical center provides to its patients.

Now, in observation of 50 years of service to Veterans, the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center renews its dedication to provide exceptional health care that improves the health and well-being of Veterans of all eras.




A photo of the Charleston Veterans Administration Hospital in 1966.



A photo of the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center in 2007.



A photo of the east corner of the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center taken in 2016. The Veterans Enrichment Center is a recent addition to the hospital.



Linda Henry takes great pride in making sure every Veteran entering Charleston VAMC feels welcomed and respected.

Photo by James Arrowood, Medical Photographer.

A warm welcome: Front desk clerk takes 'hello' to a new level

By Mary O'Dell, Stakeholder Relations Intern

Many Veterans that come to the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center are greeted by a smiling face, thanks to full-time Front Desk Receptionist Linda Henry. Her positive attitude and willingness to help anyone and everyone to the best of her ability can be seen by those around her and is recognized throughout the medical center.

Henry, a U.S. Air Force Veteran of more than 13 years, describes her job as the "best job in the hospital."

"You never know who you are going to see or meet sitting at that front desk," Henry explained. "And you never know what someone might be going through or what they are currently dealing with. Veterans come to our VA for many different reasons."

Some Veterans come to VA facilities simply to be around other Veterans

and as a Veteran herself, Henry thinks this is a great thing.

"As Veterans, we are all able to relate to each other in some way," Henry said. "Some Veterans don't have anyone else, so it's nice that there are people here to be there for them."

Henry is one of those people. Whether she's greeting patients and visitors, directing those who need it around the hospital, or reaching out to find an answer if she doesn't already have it, she makes customer service her top priority.

"I do my best to take a few minutes and speak with our visitors," Henry said. "We want to make sure their visit at our VA is excellent, and most of the time it starts with that front desk area, so I'm sure to help in any way I can."

Henry explained that sometimes a smile and "good morning" can go a lot further than someone might think. Her

favorite part of the job is sharing stories, meeting different people, and making life-long friends, many of whom are also female Veterans, in the process.

First introduced to VA as a patient, Henry transitioned into her career at the Charleston VAMC through a vocational rehabilitation program known as Compensated Work Therapy. Henry's medical issues began making the physical demand of the housekeeping service difficult, and she was notified of this new front desk position by a coworker.

She didn't know much about the position in the beginning, but certainly has no regrets in taking it. Henry humbly explained that when she goes home for the day, she feels like she has helped in one way or another to make other people's days a little brighter.

"Life is good," Henry says. "I couldn't ask for anything better."

German Leon in the early 80s, shortly after he entered the United States Army.



German Leon meets with Charleston VAMC Social Worker, Charles West. West says Leon is adjusting well and the future is bright for the Veteran.

With open arms: Homeless Veteran finds his way home

By Lanelle W. Strawder, Public Affairs Specialist

It's not every day that a person gets a second chance at life. As he sits in the comfort his sister's living room looking through the pages of a family photo album, 54-year-old Army Veteran German Leon realizes his second chance is now.

Last year, just a few days before Thanksgiving, Marta Sallie received a phone call that she would never forget. Her younger sister Ana Judge had just received a Facebook message from a woman in Atlanta asking if she knew someone named German Leon. Shock and excitement overwhelmed the sisters who had not seen or heard from their brother for more than three decades.

The eldest of three children, German Leon was born in Colón, Panama, to an American father and Panamanian mother. The family relocated to the United States while Leon and his sisters were young,

choosing to settle in the coastal city of Charleston, South Carolina. After finishing high school, Leon enlisted into the U.S. Army.

After serving three years in the military, Leon returned to the family home. But after a short time, the 22-year-old became restless living back in South Carolina. In the summer of 1984, determined to make his own way in the world, Leon left his mother's home to find a job and embark on a new life. His family had no way of knowing it'd be years until they saw him again.

Patrice Green is a social worker at the Atlanta VA Medical Center. Working primarily with homeless Veterans, Green's 30-year career has allowed her to exercise her passion of helping Veterans and finding ways to support them as they face the challenges of life after service.

Green met Leon in April 2015. By that time, Leon had been homeless for several years, living in and out of shelters. Years of battling an undiagnosed, and therefore untreated, mental illness had left him unable to maintain a steady job or place of residence.

When Green first met Leon, he was standoffish and uninterested in speaking to her. After about six months, Leon finally began opening up—including about his desire to see his family again, especially his mother, whom he'd left behind so many years ago.

"There wasn't a whole lot we had to go on," Green says of the experience. "He could barely remember anything. Really all he knew were his mom and sisters' names."

The search for Leon's family would prove difficult. He had a hard time remembering anything about his life

after the military and any identification he'd once had was long gone. His status as an immigrant only complicated matters as Green spent months trying to help this Veteran get his life back, and running into one dead end after another.

One day a student intern working with Green at the time suggested they take their search to the internet. Using his family members' names and other vague details they'd been able to gather, together they crafted a Facebook message to a few users whose names looked promising.

"When I tell you we got a response back in less than 24 hours, we just couldn't believe it," Green says remembering how eager the sisters were to hear that their brother may have been found.

They immediately set up a phone call between Leon and his sisters, marking the beginning of a new

chapter for the man who'd spent years wondering when that day would come.

The day Ana Judge received the Facebook message, the sisters initially thought it was a hoax.

Sallie recalls: "I just thought there's no way. After all these years—is this really him?"

But when she heard her brother's voice, there was no doubt left in her mind. It was the end of a 32-year wait—a wait during which Sallie had never given up hope of finding her big brother.

Unfortunately for Leon, however, he'd never be able to tell his mother goodbye. She'd passed away just four months before Leon reunited with his family.

"Our mother never stopped looking for German. She always knew that one day we'd find him. She never lost hope."

Leon's mother had kept his things—including old photos and his

military papers—neatly stored away for her son so he'd have them when he returned.

It's been nearly a year since Leon rejoined his family in Charleston. He lives with Sallie and she is happy to have her brother back in their lives.

"I kind of feel like I'm getting to know him all over again," says Judge, "because I was so young when he left."

For Sallie, though, she says her brother is a different man from the one who left a lifetime ago. His mental state requires monitoring and medication, but Sallie, a caregiver by nature, is determined to keep him healthy. She makes sure he schedules his appointments at the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center, where he now gets his medical care.

Of his experience, Leon says, "I don't mind telling my story. I just hope someone out there hears it, and it helps them find their way home."



"It's great to be home,"
Leon says. "I feel great."



Ralph H. Johnson VAMC
109 Bee Street
Charleston, SC 29401

Important VA Phone Numbers

Charleston VA Medical Center

843-577-5011 or toll-free **1-888-878-6884**

TTY: 843-789-6888

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 a.m. to 4 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 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Automated Prescription Refill Line

843-577-5011 or toll-free at **1-888-878-6884**

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.

Veterans Crisis Line

1-800-273-TALK (8255), Press 1 for Veterans

Veterans can call the Veterans Crisis Line to talk to trained professionals 24 hours a day, seven days a week or visit www.veteranscrisisline.net.

My HealtheVet

www.myhealth.va.gov

Veterans can manage their health by logging onto My HealtheVet, which offers access to Veteran health benefits and services.

