

Spring 2015

my VA QUARTERLY

Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center

Pushing Back Against PTSD

Army Veteran manages the hidden wounds of war with innovative treatment techniques.

Parking Solutions

Facility opens offsite lot and breaks ground on a new parking garage.



VA

Ralph H. Johnson
VA Medical Center

CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA



From the Director

Spring is a dynamic time in the Lowcountry as temperatures warm, azaleas begin to bloom and the world awakens with new life and new vitality. It is a time for new beginnings, increased activity and a renewed drive and sense of purpose. The same can most certainly be said for events and initiatives happening at our medical center and community clinics. Recently, the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical

Center received a 5-Star ranking in VA quality measures – placing your VA in the top 10 percent of all VA medical centers nationwide – with a 10th percentile ranking compared to public and private sector hospitals. Measurements of clinical quality, such as these, are important because they assure us that you, our Veteran patients, are receiving the best care anywhere at your VA. They also provide us with a springboard from which to dive in even further – endeavoring to continually improve in service to our Veterans.

In the past few months, we have gone to great lengths to provide outstanding customer service to our Veterans through initiatives including: establishment of an offsite parking lot and shuttle service to expand staff and patient parking options, evaluation and enhancement of current valet parking processes, and participation as an organizational partner in Senator Tim Scott's Veteran Job Fair and VA Forum, which assisted close to 1,000 Veterans with job searches and VA benefits questions. Earlier this year, we opened a new joint VA-DoD Dermatology Clinic at Naval Hospital Beaufort – a project that will save hundreds of thousands of dollars for both departments and offer valuable specialty care services to the growing patient population in that area. And in March we broke ground on our new Parking Deck – a construction project long in the making that promises to offer parking solutions for the future.

It truly is an exciting time at your VA. In April we broke ground on a new VA outpatient clinic in Savannah and soon we will open our Tele-Mental Health Lease and our Homeless Veteran Community Resource and Referral Center in North Charleston. As we grow, our goal continues to be providing the very best care anywhere with personalized services that meet your health care needs and exceed your patient experience expectations. Thank you for choosing the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center as your health care provider of choice. We look forward to serving you – in this season and in all the others to come.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Scott R. Isaacks".

Scott R. Isaacks, FACHE
Medical Center Director



**VA**

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Photo by Lt. Lisa Lill, Naval Hospital Beaufort Public Affairs

Capt. Anne Lear, Naval Hospital Beaufort commanding officer; Scott Isaacks, Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center director; Jack Leshner, dermatologist; and Charles Sepich, VA Southeast Network director, cut the ribbon to officially open the VA-DoD Dermatology Clinic during a ceremony Feb. 26. The clinic, located at Naval Hospital Beaufort, will serve VA patients as well as active duty service members and their families.

Dermatology VA-DoD Clinic Opens at Naval Hospital Beaufort

by Tonya Lobbstaal, Public Affairs Officer and Meredith Thomas, Public Affairs Specialist

The Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center and Naval Hospital Beaufort officially opened a shared Department of Veterans Affairs and Department of Defense Dermatology Clinic at the Naval Hospital Feb. 26 to serve Veterans, service members and military dependents.

The VA-DoD Dermatology Clinic, which is staffed by a VA dermatologist, licensed practical nurse and administrative specialist, is funded through the Federal government's Joint Incentive Fund. In 2006, the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center and Naval Hospital Beaufort joined forces with Naval Health Clinic Charleston and the Air Force's 628th Medical Group to form the Lowcountry Federal Healthcare Alliance. Recognized as a VA-DoD Joint Venture site in 2012, this group has partnered to successfully implement approximately 10 shared clinics providing such services as Optometry, Ophthalmology, Mobile MRI, Laboratory, Radiology, and other services to VA and DoD beneficiaries throughout the Lowcountry.

"Naval Hospital Beaufort was designated as a Joint Venture Site with the VA by the Joint Executive Council," said Capt. Anne Lear, commanding officer of Naval Hospital Beaufort. "This relationship has continued to grow over the past several years and is borne out of mutual interest in caring for those who serve or have served our country in various military corps. We see the importance of the handoff from DoD to the VA as our service members either retire or are identified to receive ongoing care in the Veteran's system."

Prior to the Dermatology clinic opening, Naval Hospital Beaufort referred its dermatology patients for care in the community and VA patients traveled to the VA medical center in Charleston. The addition of dermatology in Beaufort is expected to save both organizations approximately \$257,500 per year and eliminate the need for VA patients to travel up to 100 miles to Charleston for care.

"Today is really much more than a celebration of a new Dermatology clinic – it is a celebration of a strong partnership that will serve our Veterans, active duty service members, and their families for years to come," said Scott Isaacks, Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center director. "Our mutual commitment to providing the very best medical care for our nation's heroes has made this clinic a reality. That commitment continues to pave the way for increased collaborative sharing services in the future, such as orthopedics, laboratory and mental health care."

The partnership was made possible by the National Defense Authorization Act 2003, Section 721, which authorized the Department of Defense (DoD) and the VA Health Care Sharing Incentive Fund. The purpose of this Act was to provide funding that allowed various local, regional and national entities to coordinate and share health care resources. The purpose of the alliance is to develop mutually beneficial medical service sharing agreements that improve access to quality and cost-effective health care for all of their beneficiaries.

Charleston VAMC breaks ground on new parking deck, opens offsite lot

by Meredith Thomas, Public Affairs Specialist and Tonya Lobbetael, Public Affairs Officer

Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center leadership and local community officials joined together with Veterans and VA staff March 27 to turn a golden shovel full of dirt, ceremoniously breaking ground on a brand new parking deck project, which will begin construction within the next month.

"This garage will not only benefit the Veterans who use this facility, but also the employees who reliably get us the care that we need," said Joe Lysaght, deputy director of Charleston County Veterans Affairs. "This is such a long overdue situation - Veterans are happy about it and they are sharing that happiness."

The construction of the parking deck is just one part of a multifaceted plan to address the hospital's strained parking circumstances. In addition to the building project, Charleston VAMC has leased a 600 space offsite parking lot, located at 41 Folly Road, with contracted shuttle service to and from the facility free of charge for Veterans, staff and visitors. The lot is open Monday through Friday from 4:30 a.m. until 11:00 p.m. with shuttles running every five minutes during the peak hours of 6:00 – 8:30 a.m. and 3:00 – 5:30 p.m., and every 15 minutes at other times of the day. Offsite parking will remain active well after construction of the garage is complete, providing additional overflow parking when needed. Facility leadership is also taking a close look at the current valet parking process, seeking to identify ways to expand the service for Veterans visiting the hospital for appointments and procedures.

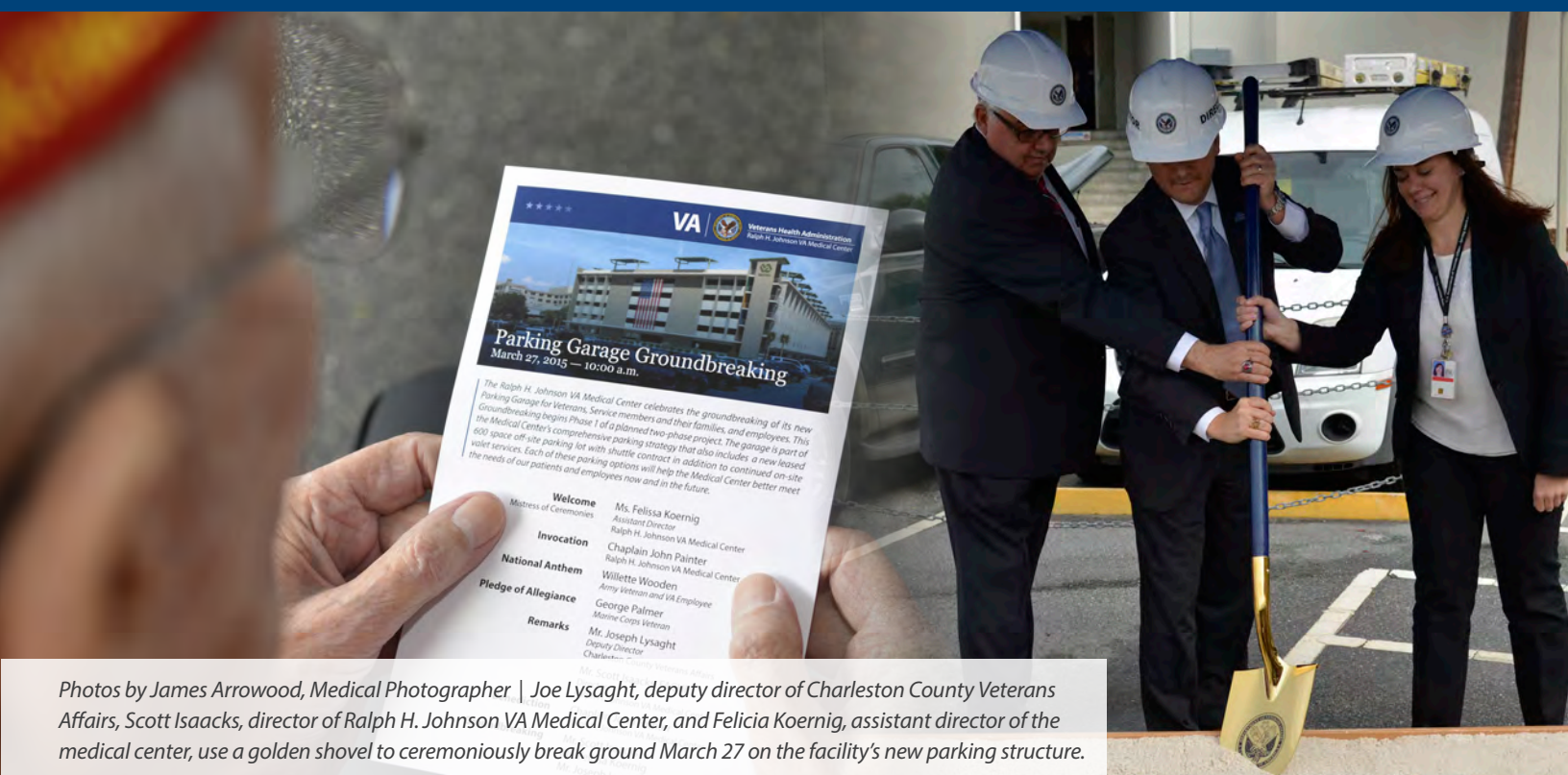
"This is a highly anticipated improvement – literally years in the making," said Scott Isaacks, Charleston VAMC director. "We have heard for many years from you, our Veterans, that a better parking solution is needed, and we have listened. Today's groundbreaking is a direct result of your input and partnership."

During construction of the parking deck, the VAMC will lose roughly 350 – 400 spaces in the employee lot according to Engineering Chief Jeff Sage. The addition of the 600 offsite spaces, though, means the facility will have a net gain of about 200 spaces while the deck is being built.

The parking deck, when fully complete, will provide nearly 1,000 parking spots for VA patients, volunteers, staff and visitors. The first phase of the project includes the design and construction of a 109,000 square foot, two story structure, which will also lay the groundwork for a proposed four additional parking levels to be built during the second phase of development.

While the offsite parking is available to patients and guests, Veterans and visitors are encouraged to use Charleston VAMC's complimentary valet service at the front entrance of the medical center. Patient and visitor parking, which is not affected by the parking deck construction, is also available on the VA campus.

For more information on parking, go to www.charleston.va.gov.



Photos by James Arrowood, Medical Photographer | Joe Lysaght, deputy director of Charleston County Veterans Affairs, Scott Isaacks, director of Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center, and Felicia Koernig, assistant director of the medical center, use a golden shovel to ceremoniously break ground March 27 on the facility's new parking structure.

Charleston VA offers 5-Star health care, improved access during rapid patient growth

by Meredith Thomas, Public Affairs Specialist and Tonya Lobbestael, Public Affairs Officer



The Ralph H. Johnson VA maintains its rating as a 5-Star medical center this quarter, which is the highest possible rating according to VA's Strategic Analytics for Improvement and Learning Value (SAIL) model. This quality care is offered in the midst of a patient boom at the facility and its community clinics. Charleston VAMC became the sixth fastest growing VA in the U.S. for percentage patient growth in the fourth quarter of fiscal year 2014 and continues to see an influx of patients. Currently the facility is seeing 150 to 200 new patients each week.

"We are very proud to again receive this recognition and are working very hard to improve every day. The most important part of our 5-Star rating is that it assures our Veterans that they can rely on the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center team to provide the very highest quality care and the best patient care experience for them," said Scott Isaacks, Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center director.

SAIL is a comprehensive tool that assesses 25 quality measures in such areas as complications, patient safety, access to care, and customer satisfaction. SAIL also includes efficiency measures such as telephone abandonment rate and benchmarking employee satisfaction scores. The 5-Star rating places the Charleston VA in the top 10 percent of VA medical centers nationwide for quality of care and efficiency and was first achieved by the Charleston VA in October 2014.

The Charleston VA is also ranked in the top 10th percentile according to the Healthcare Effectiveness Data and Information Set (HEDIS). HEDIS is an independent review that measures performance of 90 percent of America's health plans and facilities in both the public and private sector on dimensions of care and service.

"Achieving a 5-Star rating is quite an accomplishment, but maintaining it speaks even greater volumes about the quality of staff and the high level of care provided to our Veterans at the Charleston VA – especially when you also realize we are the sixth fastest growing VA in the country," said Isaacks.

The rapid patient growth has caused some growing pains at the facility, especially in specialty care areas such as orthopedics, urology, dermatology and surgery, but the Charleston VA has taken action – hiring 200 new staff members in the past year and actively recruiting to fill critical positions.

Despite the patient boom, the Charleston VA has been successful in maintaining above average access to care for its patients according to a recent VA data release. The report found that Ralph H. Johnson VAMC and its clinics completed nearly 99% of the scheduled appointments – more than 45,000 of them – within the system required 30 day time frame. This compared to the 97% national average.

Through the Veterans Access, Choice and Accountability Act, passed last year, the hospital is able to offer Veterans the opportunity to be seen by medical professionals in the community if they are expecting a wait longer than 30 days for appointments or live more than 40 miles from a VA facility. Increasingly though, the facility is finding that Veterans are choosing to stay with the VA for their care. Of the 1,846 Veterans who have been sent Veterans Choice cards through the program, only 56 have chosen to move their care to the community.

"What we are seeing is that our Veterans are attempting to get specialty care appointments sooner from providers in the community, but they end up coming back to us because they aren't able to be seen any quicker," said Isaacks. "Our numbers show that a very small number of our Veterans have chosen to seek care outside of our local VA system and I like to believe that's because they recognize and value the outstanding care that they get here."

Others have taken notice of the Charleston VAMC in recent months as well, including South Carolina Congressman Mark Sanford, City of Charleston Mayor Joe Riley, American Legion National Commander Michael Helm and South Carolina Congressman Tom Rice, all of whom visited the medical center claiming to have heard positive feedback from Veterans receiving care here.

"We are committed to continuing our track record of quality care at the Charleston VA medical center," said Isaacks. "In dealing with our growth challenges, we are consistently looking 6 months to a year down the road because I'm confident that we will continue to see more and more patients coming through our doors. We strive to be ahead of the curve so we can be certain we will be able to provide excellent care to our Veterans now and in the future."

American Legion National Commander tours facility

Photo by James Arrowood

Mike Helm, American Legion national commander, greets a Veteran patient in Patriot Harbor Community Living Center Jan. 28 on his tour of Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center. Helm met with patients and staff, distributed pins and learned of improvements, programs and research projects happening at the facility.



Congressman Sanford visits Charleston VAMC

Photo by James Arrowood

Congressman Mark Sanford participates in a scientific demonstration of new technology used in the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder with Dr. Peter Tuerk, researcher and section chief for the PTSD clinical team, during his visit to Charleston VAMC Feb. 6. Sanford was just one of several VIPs to tour the facility in recent months following news of the facility's 5-Star VA quality rating.



Veterans Access
Choice and
Accountability Act

Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center

Choice Navigator



Mariecia Smith



Charleston VAMC **Center of Innovation** promotes health care equity

by Jenny Stripling, Public Affairs Specialist

The Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center is on a mission to improve access and equity in healthcare for all Veterans.

As one of 19 nationally funded VHA Centers of Innovation (COIN), Charleston's COIN, called Health Equity and Rural Outreach Innovation Center (HEROIC), is helping to eliminate geographic, racial/ethnic, and gender-based disparities. Charleston COIN conducts research on the delivery and cost of care, focusing on how best to ensure every Veteran receives the same quality of health care.

"One of the greatest strengths of Charleston's HEROIC is the dynamic team of young researchers who are passionate about their work and dedicated to eliminating disparities," said Dr. Leonard Egede, director of the Charleston COIN program.

"As a result, we are a diverse group across expertise, race/ethnicity and gender, leading to our ability to develop innovative ideas with relevance to the field. Our diversity of disciplines and integration with clinical operations provides balance and insight, and creates an environment where we can investigate and impact real world problems."

How did COIN come about at the Charleston VA?

Charleston was originally funded as a small center called a TREP (Targeted Research Enhancement Program) and after four years transitioned to a mid-size center called a REAP (Research Enhancement Award Program). In 2012, Charleston's investigators, led by Egede, and Associate Director, Ken Ruggiero, applied for and were awarded one of 19 center grants in the nation. Only two of these 19 center grants focus on health equity issues placing Charleston in a great position to investigate and impact VA policies, health care practices and health outcomes for Veterans.

How does COIN benefit Veterans and stakeholders?

Health care disparities are well documented across a wide range of clinical areas and service types, with rural, racial/ethnic minorities and female Veterans experiencing poorer health care outcomes. Access to high-quality care is a key barrier, particularly for rural-dwelling Veterans. Addressing these disparities has been a major and ongoing priority for the VA, so the COIN's research will have tremendous impact on how Veterans receive care. There have also been methods developed to train VA providers, such as PE-Web, a web-based training for prolonged exposure for PTSD, and have tested online training for assessment and management of suicidality against the standard in-person training.

In what ways are Veterans getting involved with COIN?

Veterans can participate through specific studies, though each project has specific criteria. Currently patients are being enrolled for studies investigating questions related to delivery of PTSD treatment, care for Veterans with heart failure, use of My HealtheVet for Veterans with diabetes, mobile application for caregivers of Veterans with dementia, housing stability for homeless Veterans with substance use disorders, screening for lung cancer in Veterans, and perspectives on collection of race/ethnicity data by the VA.

"Our mission is to honor America's Veterans by providing exceptional healthcare that improves their health and well-being. We are doing just that with the research we are conducting," said Egede.



For more information on Charleston VA's COIN visit <http://www.hsr.d.research.va.gov/centers/heroic.cfm> and for an overview of the COIN program, visit <http://www.hsr.d.research.va.gov/centers>.

Veterans interested in participating in research projects or investigators interested in studying health-related issues in diverse Veteran populations, should call 843-789-6875.



Clinic battles PTSD with innovative techniques

by Meredith Thomas, Public Affairs Specialist

According to Dr. Peter Tuerk, section chief for the post-traumatic stress disorder clinical team at the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center, the clinic has seen an influx in recent years of service members returning from wars in Iraq and Afghanistan who are struggling with the often-debilitating effects of PTSD. That's why Tuerk's team and VA researchers are committed to identifying new treatment options that allow Veterans to see definitive and long-lasting results - helping them return as quickly as possible to a life of normalcy.

Tuerk employs new techniques and devices, such as smartphone applications, transcranial magnetic stimulation, and herbal supplements, alongside traditional clinical treatments to achieve maximum success for his patients. Tuerk is particularly excited about an innovative phone app, which, when paired with an inexpensive electrode, can monitor a patient's anxiety levels during therapy.

"We put the electrode on the Veteran's finger," he said. "The device is capable of determining how quickly tiny electro responses travel through the skin. The app then tracks how anxious the patient is each time they share their trauma narrative and provides tangible evidence that the process is working. The patient can see on a graph how their anxiety levels continue to drop as they do the work, so they are more likely to continue coming in and participating in therapy."

Studies into the effectiveness of transcranial magnetic stimulation in the treatment of PTSD have shown promise as well. Researchers have found that they can stimulate certain parts of the brain during a patient's exposure therapy to foster more positive treatment outcomes - and faster.

The clinical team also pairs the same exposure therapy with an herbal supplement called yohimbimen. Research shows that the herb, when taken in conjunction with therapy, may help

the Veteran's brain to relearn responses to offending stimuli more quickly. Essentially, connections in the brain that are associated with traumatic events are being rewired through extinction learning to extinguish the old response and replace it with a more appropriate one. The yohimbimen has been shown to speed up the process, resulting in a more rapid return to business as usual for Veterans battling PTSD.

"But it's not all high-tech," Tuerk explained. "We've known for years that homework compliance is associated with positive outcomes but we sometimes have trouble getting Veterans to complete the assignments. So, we developed these discreet little black notebooks that can fit in a back pocket. Once we distributed these, we found that Veterans were more likely to listen to their exposures every day and record their responses, therefore furthering their healing. It was a simple fix but one that has proven invaluable."

Additionally, Charleston VAMC is a recognized leader in the tele-mental health field providing specialty PTSD and Mental Health treatment options for Veterans across the southeast. VA mental health professionals have partnered with Winn Army Hospital at Fort Stewart, Georgia to provide care for returning service members - something that had not been possible at this major mobilization site prior to Charleston VA's collaboration with the Department of Defense. Soldiers there can now receive mental health services including medication management and evidence-based psychotherapies for PTSD and depression remotely via tele-mental health.

Charleston VA recently hired 21 additional psychiatrists and four support staff to expand the Charleston tele-mental health service and has tripled its mental health staff over the past five years to increase access to mental health care for Veterans and service members alike.

LEAVING WAR BEHIND

Charleston VAMC helps soldier fight PTSD

by Meredith Thomas, Public Affairs Specialist

“We had rounds skip around, just missing us; rockets fly right over our heads, destroying barracks,”

Army Veteran Bryan Steuart recalls of his deployment to Iraq in 2008-2009 in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

During the Soldier's year-long stint at the battle-hardened Camp Taji, a coalition military installation 20 miles north of the city of Baghdad, he was regularly put into harm's way leading protective service details for high-ranking members of the brigade as well as visiting congressmen, senators and generals. Steuart and his team spent much of their time outside of the wire, escorting these VIPs as they completed battlefield circulations and visited forward operating bases in the area.

While he was fortunate enough to bring his entire team home from the warfront alive, there were numerous close calls that could have proven fatal for Steuart and the Soldiers he was entrusted with protecting.

The months of hyper-vigilance and countless nerve-wrecking missions, during which the teams encountered potential improvised explosive devices and dangerous insurgents, took their toll. The Soldier found it hard to adjust to a mundane life back on American soil and it became clear over time that Steuart was suffering from severe post-traumatic stress disorder.

“When I first returned, I shut the world out and drank continually. I was afraid to leave my house and be around anyone,” Steuart said. “I once found myself curled up in a ball crying in the middle of Walmart.”

Steuart struggled with alcoholism, depression and anger issues during the period following his deployment. He found it difficult to keep regular employment and began having suicidal thoughts.





Veteran poet fights PTSD with poetry

Photo by Meredith Thomas

Poet and Veteran Colin D. Halloran reads excerpts from his new book, "Shortly Thereafter," to Charleston VAMC Veterans and staff during a poetry reading Feb. 12. Halloran shared his poetry and experiences with Veterans, held a guided writing workshop and took questions from participants. The event was present through the efforts of Mental Health staff and The Poetry Society of South Carolina, with the support of the National Endowment for the Arts, SC Arts Commission, and the Southern Arts Federation.

But a move to Charleston, South Carolina changed things for the better. Steuart met his wife and, at her urging, investigated treatment for his PTSD at the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center – a move that put him in the care of renowned psychiatrists specializing in the research and development of new and effective treatment techniques for the disease.

Steuart was the first patient to go through a unique exposure therapy treatment at the medical center. Trained psychiatrists and therapists worked with Steuart, asking him to repeatedly retell his story and thus relive the traumatic experiences numerous times until his anxiety responses began to become less severe. He was tasked with intentionally placing himself into stressful situations that had previously triggered his PTSD – and remaining there until his nerves calmed.

These exercises served to retrain Steuart's brain so that it no longer associated these scenarios with discomfort. Gradually, the symptoms of his PTSD began to subside and Steuart was able to function more normally.

"It is the only reason I am doing half as well as I am now," he said.

Still though, Steuart realizes that the battle will be ongoing. He struggles each day to manage his combat-related illness.

"I don't believe there is ever a 'cure' for PTSD," Steuart explained. "It is like a terrible car wreck that you are in and you live with the obvious scars and limp from all the injuries it caused you. It doesn't mean the crash killed you, there are just some speed bumps that you have to keep slowing down to go over each day along the road."



Army Veteran Bryan Steuart pauses for a photo with his team during their 2008 deployment to Camp Taji in Baghdad, Iraq.



Veterans Job Fair assists hundreds in search of employment, VA benefits

by Meredith Thomas, Public Affairs Specialist

Close to 1,000 Veterans and active duty service members turned out March 9 for the Veterans Job Fair and VA Forum held at the North Charleston Convention Center. The event, sponsored by U.S. Senator Tim Scott, the Department of Veterans Affairs and several other state and local agencies, sought to bring employment and benefits services directly to Veterans in need of assistance.

More than 100 employers – to include Boeing, SPAWAR, Walmart, Verizon Wireless, Goodwill and others – were on hand to interact with job seekers, answer questions and take applications and resumes. The Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center and the Columbia VA Regional Office were onsite to help Veterans enroll for VA health care and conduct VA claims workshops. VA leadership also spent time at the event conversing with area Veterans and addressing concerns.

“There are many service members transitioning to Veteran status that are in need of jobs and the VA appreciates Senator Scott’s leadership on bringing together some of the best employers in the Charleston area to help meet that need,” said Scott Isaacks, director of the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center.

In addition to receiving valuable employment assistance, nearly 180 Veterans were able to speak individually with VA eligibility and claims representatives to navigate the sometimes tricky enrollment process for health care and benefits.

“We understand that sometimes it can feel like a faceless procedure,” said Leanne Weldin, VA Regional Office director. “It’s nice at events like this for our Veterans to be able to sit down face-to-face with a claims person and get enrolled so they can start receiving and utilizing the benefits they’ve earned.”

Scott visited the event to take stock of the progress being made. The senator explained that the job fair was a way for area employers and the VA to “pay it forward” and express gratitude for our Veterans and their service to our country. He also lauded the partnership with the VA in helping to coordinate a one-stop-shop event for Veterans seeking help.

“We’ve been hearing a lot of negative news about the VA in the recent past,” Scott said. “But here is a day when we should celebrate the VA and the great work they are doing in the Lowcountry for our Veterans.”

Several employers were looking to hire immediately for open positions and acknowledged the quality work force present in the Veteran community. Scott said that a couple dozen Veterans were hired at the last event of this kind, which was held in 2013. He fully expects that this event will result in even more placements for Veterans in search of work.

Volunteer Awards Banquets

Charleston & Goose Creek

Tuesday, April 14 at 11:30 a.m.
Redbank Club, 2316 Red Bank Rd.
Goose Creek 29445

Savannah, Hinesville & Beaufort

Thursday, April 16 at 5:30 p.m.
Barnes Restaurant, 5320 Waters Ave.
Savannah, GA 31404

Myrtle Beach & Grand Strand

Tuesday, April 21 at 5:30 p.m.
Elks Lodge, 605 27th Ave. North
Myrtle Beach, SC 29577



Voluntary Service lends a hand to provide quality care

by Erin Comar, Public Affairs Specialist

The Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center and its Veterans rely heavily on the substantial support provided by the numerous volunteers and thousands of dollars' worth of donations that flow through Voluntary Service.

According to Vicki Johnson, assistant chief of Voluntary Service, there are approximately 1,000 registered volunteers that serve Veteran patients at the main medical center and its community based outpatient clinics. In fiscal year 2014, these individuals volunteered nearly 86,000 hours at Charleston VAMC's facilities, often providing additional services to Veterans that may not otherwise be available.

Volunteers serve in many roles: handing out coffee in waiting rooms, providing transportation services, assisting clinical and administrative staff, comforting patients at the bedside and more. The demographics of these volunteers are as diverse as the roles in which they serve. They are high school and college students, active duty military members, community partners, Veteran family members and former employees – and many are Veterans themselves.

Each year Voluntary Service holds several banquets to honor the commitment of the facility's volunteers. "The annual banquet is a time to recognize the dedication of our volunteers and to thank them for what they do," said Johnson. This year the banquets will be held in April; Charleston, Goose Creek and Trident volunteers will meet at the Redbank Club in Goose Creek on April 14; Savannah, Hinesville and Beaufort volunteers will gather on April 16 at Barnes Restaurant in Savannah; Myrtle Beach volunteers convene at the area Elks Lodge on April 21.

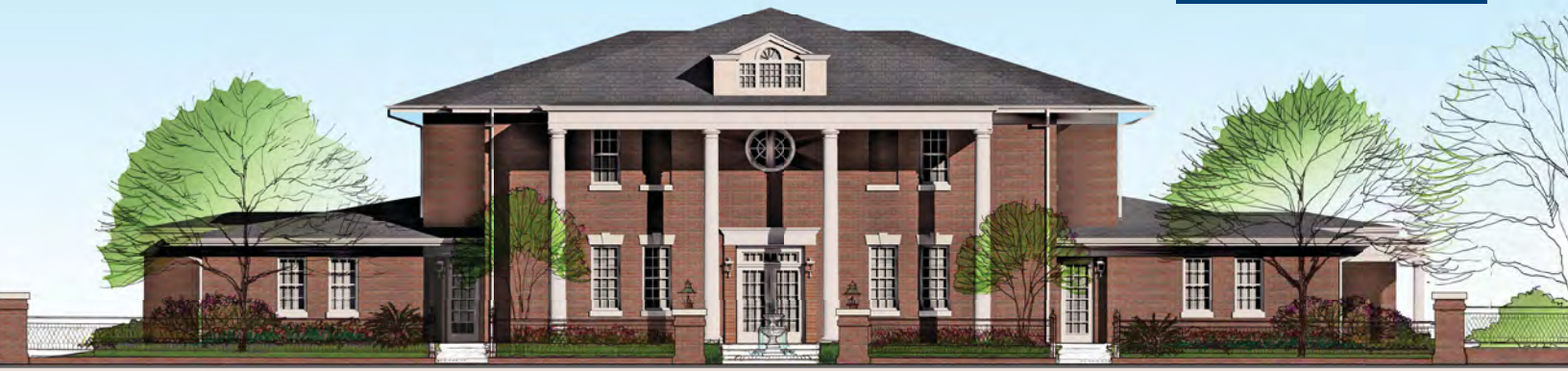
Voluntary Service also helps manage the generous community donations contributed to the medical center. In December of 2014, The American Legion donated \$6,000 worth of items, which included sweats, socks, underwear, and gift cards for McDonald's and Burger King. Johnson said, "Big donations like this are certainly helpful, however small contributions are just as important. One can of coffee or pack of t-shirts help provide for our Veterans too. Every donation matters." Donations from the community totaled \$335,000 in fiscal year 2014.

There are a few items that Voluntary Service is always in need of and would be welcomed donations throughout the year: backpacks, socks, underwear and t-shirts. "It is important to remember that our Veterans need things year round. While it is wonderful to get special items around the holidays, we provide services for Veterans during every season," said Johnson.

Voluntary Service is currently looking for local drivers in all of the area communities served by the Charleston VAMC. There is a particular need present in Hinesville, Georgia for drivers to transport patients to and from the Hinesville VA Clinic for scheduled appointments.

"Without people providing time and donations we wouldn't be able to provide what our Veterans need," said Johnson.

For more information on how to donate or volunteer, please contact Voluntary Service at (843) 789-7230 or visit www.charleston.va.gov/giving. Groups who would like to do patient visitation are also encouraged to use the above contacts.



Fisher House to provide home away from home in Charleston

by Tonya Lobbestael, Public Affairs Officer



Trux and Durbin Emerson with Major General James Livingston (USMC ret.) at a recent gala.

Trux and Durbin Emerson never served in the military. But when the couple learned of the need for affordable accommodations for families of Veterans receiving care at the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center, they became as determined as any commanding general to lead the campaign to serve those who have served our country.

In just two short years they established a non-profit organization, implemented a major fundraising campaign, held two golf tournaments and a gala, forged a relationship with Fisher House Foundation, and bought land to donate to VA that will be the site of Fisher House Charleston.

"Less than 2 years ago, a small group of us, inspired by Major General James Livingston (USMC ret.), began the journey that to many was just that — a dream," said Durbin Emerson. It's been a lot of work she laughs, quickly adding that building Fisher House Charleston has brought new meaning to both her and her husband.

Fisher House Charleston is a unique "home away from home" that can provide hope and encouragement for military and veterans and their families in their time of need.

Fisher House Charleston will be built at 150 Wentworth St. in Charleston less than a mile from the VA medical center. Once the property is donated to VA, it will become the Federal land on which the Fisher House Foundation will construct a 16-suite comfort home to serve the families of Veterans undergoing treatment at the VA medical center. There will be no charge to anyone staying at Fisher House Charleston, there will only be care and comfort. The operations of Fisher House Charleston will be covered under a public-private partnership of the Department of Veterans Affairs and Fisher House Foundation.

"The Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center and the Veterans we serve are thrilled to see Fisher House Charleston moving forward," said Ralph H. Johnson VA Director Scott Isaacks. "Many of the Veterans who are hospitalized at the VA are from other areas of South Carolina and Georgia. Fisher House Charleston will make it possible for their families to be near them which in turn positively impacts their medical care. Our Veterans deserve the very best and the support from the Charleston community to make Fisher House Charleston a reality is a real inspiration to us all."

For more information on Fisher House Charleston, visit www.fisherhousecharleston.org.





Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center
109 Bee Street
Charleston, SC 29401

PRSRT STD
US POSTAGE
PAID
COLUMBIA, SC
PERMIT 1204

Important VA Phone Numbers

Charleston VA Medical Center

843-577-5011 or toll-free 1-888-878-6884 or
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 8:00 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 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,
7 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 HealthVet

www.myhealth.va.gov
Veterans can manage their health by logging onto
My HealthVet, which offers access to Veteran health
benefits and services.



For more information on VA related topics, visit www.charleston.va.gov. Follow us on Facebook and Twitter.

