Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center

Moving Veterans along the tracks of excellent health care

VA LOCOMOTIVE

Issue 7 | May 2019

NEW MENTAL HEALTH BUILDING OPENS FOR VETS

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INTERACTIVE CAMPUS MAP

Did you know that we have an online interactive map to help find your way around the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center campus? We understand the importance of quickly and easily finding the way to your destination. Our online interactive campus and floor maps lead you turn-by-turn to your destination.

The interactive maps present the same clear information as on a printed map, but in an easy-to-use format that provides step-by-step directions to your destination. You can select the department or building you need, and a moving route marker leads you turn-by-turn to your destination.

The interactive map is located at https://interactive.medmaps.com/site/vahouston and can also be found on our website at www.houston.va.gov.

The interactive maps offer:

- Convenience at your fingertips: view on desktop or mobile.
- Locate specific buildings and directions to clinics and other areas within the main building.
- Find your way around our campus before you arrive.
- Navigate our buildings and floors while you are here.
- Guides you straight to your destination.
- Print out a map before coming.
- Campus map, floor maps, a directory of services, and a VA Visitor Guide are also available in pdf format.

Don't like interactive technology? Hard copy maps of each floor of the Medical Center are available for all Veterans and visitors. Ask our information desk staff in the main lobby for a copy of our campus and floor maps.

We hope our hard copy and interactive maps will assist you in finding your way around our campus and our Medical Center. Thank you for choosing the Houston VA Medical Center as your healthcare provider. It is our honor and privilege to serve you.

FROM the DIRECTOR

Francisco Vazquez, MBA

Did you notice something different the last time you came to your VA appointment? Maybe it was a friendly greeting that wasn't there before. Maybe you met a helpful volunteer in a red coat or vest at one of our main entrances. Maybe you walked through our newly-remodeled lobby or had an appointment in our brand new mental health building. Maybe it was just a new, more welcoming attitude. Veterans coming to their Houston VA or one of our community-based outpatient clinics are finding an improved experience when they go in for care thanks to a shift in our culture. We are working hard to deliver an excellent patient experience to each and every Veteran who enters our doors.

One of our biggest priorities is to ensure that all of our 5,400+ employees are trained and focused on providing Veterans not only with the care they need but also care that is exceptional and consistent. We have implemented a standard phone greeting to create a uniform way to greet callers and let you know in a clear, friendly way who you have reached at when calling your VA. All of our medical center leaders and administrators are making "rounds" throughout the facility; speaking directly with Veterans about the care and services they received and making improvements and changes from this feedback. We are training all of our employees in an "Own the Moment" customer service philosophy that encourages them to connect with, understand, and guide Veterans through moments that matter on their VA journey.

At the Houston VA, our Veterans truly are the center of everything we do. We are constantly working to make sure you know about the health care and benefits you have earned through your service to our country. A new law, called the MISSION Act, will go into effect in a few weeks. The MISSION Act will strengthen our ability to provide you with the state-of-the-art care and services you deserve in a timely manner. Under the MISSION Act, VA will continue to provide you with an excellent health care experience and deliver the right care at the right time, at the right place. We are committed to continuing to expand our use of telehealth in your home; allowing you to receive care anywhere by using a tablet or smart phone. The MISSION Act will provide more options for health care, including community care and urgent care, to our Veterans. I would encourage each of you to learn more about the MISSION Act by visiting www.missionact.va.gov.

It is a very exciting time to be in the VA. So many changes and improvements are going on; each one designed to improve the services we provide to you...the Veteran. As a Navy Veteran myself, providing top quality care to our Veterans is very personal to me. One of the most enjoyable parts of my job is getting to meet and know our Veterans. I want you to know that all of us here at the Houston VA consider it an honor and a privilege to care for you. Thank you for entrusting us with your health care. I hope you enjoy this issue of the Locomotive and will share the good news.

VA LOCOMOTIVE

COVER PHOTO: *Leaders cut the ribbon for the new mental health building. From left to right: Caroline Nelson, Acting Associate Director; Kelly Irving, Associate Director Patient Care Services; Dr. Kaki York, Deputy Clinical Executive, Mental Health Care Line; Dr. Wayne Goodman, Chair, Menninger Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Baylor College of Medicine; Dr. Laura Marsh, Mental Health Care Line Executive; Francisco Vazquez, Medical Center Director; Robert Worley, VBA Regional Office Director; J. Kalavar, Chief of Staff; and Tim Stroud, Easter Seals of Greater Houston. Photo by: Michael Lane*

MEDICAL CENTER DIRECTOR
Francisco Vazquez, MBA

COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR
Maureen Dyman

EDITOR | DESIGN
Nikki Verbeck

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS & PHOTOGRAPHERS
Todd Goodman
Shawn James
Michael Lane
Regit Sasser
Deborah Williams

Published by:
Communications Office
Michael E. DeBakey VAMC
Communications Office
2002 Holcombe Blvd.
Houston, Texas 77030

713.794.7349
VHAHOUPublicAffairs@va.gov
www.houston.va.gov
www.facebook.com/HoustonVAMC
www.twitter.com/VAHouston
www.instagram.com/HoustonVAMC/
www.flickr.com/photos/houstonvamc

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Veterans Health Administration
Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center

NEW BUILDING OFFERS PEACEFUL, MODERN, HEALING ENVIRONMENT

by Maureen Dyman

On May 3, the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center held a ribbon cutting ceremony to mark the official opening of a new outpatient mental health building that streamlines access to mental health services for Veterans on our campus. The new building, located outside the medical center's main entrance in Building 108A near our Veteran gym, offers Veterans a modern, healing environment.

The new Mental Health building has comfortable rooms for marriage and family counseling. Photo by: Nikki Verbeck

"There's so much care that went into the designing and building of this building. It really comes from our care and respect of our veterans," said Laura Marsh, M.D., executive director of the Mental Health Care Line. "We wanted the new building to be a calm and welcoming place of healing—not as much like a hospital, but more of a place where there's work to be done together... where mental health is good medicine."

The new mental health building houses outpatient mental health programs such as the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) Program, neuropsychology, Veterans Justice Outreach, behavioral health, and marriage and family counseling. It features a separate waiting room for women Veterans and families, computer access, charging stations and an open floor plan that promotes social interaction between Veterans in the building. The first floor of the building also houses group therapy and training rooms.

"We are so proud of the care we provide to Veterans here in Houston," said Frank Vazquez, medical center director. "This new building will allow us to provide this care to our Veterans in a modern, professional environment designed specifically with their needs in mind.

In the last year, the Houston VA has hired 90 additional front-line mental health clinicians including psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers to care for the growing number of veterans seeking VA care. Every month, approximately 1,000 new Veterans register for care at the Houston VA. To meet the needs of this growing population of Veterans, the medical center is also expanding the scope of the services.

"A few short years ago we did not provide marriage and family therapy here at the Houston VA," said Marsh. "Today, we have eight providers working fulltime to provide this valuable service to our Veterans and their families. We are constantly growing, changing and expanding to meet the needs of our Veterans."

Houston has also added additional mental health staff and services in each of our nine community based outpatient clinics. The medical center prides itself on bringing as much care as possible out closer to where Veterans live. In addition, Houston VA is expanding the use of tele-mental health, allowing Veterans connect through an App and see their providers from the comfort of their homes via a tablet, computer or smart phone.

"It's all about making it as easy and convenient as possible for our Veterans to receive care at our VA," Marsh said.

The new mental health building is the latest of many infrastructure improvements that have been underway to improve capacity to meet the needs of Veterans. Last year the medical center opened a brand new parking garage on our campus. The new employee garage, with 400+ spaces, sits on the edge of campus and has allowed us to open additional parking for our Veterans closer to the main building. In addition, the medical center has remodeled the Emergency Department, is working on an expansion in the Spinal Cord Injury unit, opened two new hybrid Operating Rooms and has improved the waiting areas and lobbies with new furniture, lighting, etc.

The main waiting room in the new mental health building is open and spacious. Photo by: Nikki Verbeck

"I promise that we are far from done when it comes to improving the environment for our Veterans," Vazquez said. "We are still working on ways to improve the parking on our campus and are planning to build a new administration building to open up additional space in our main medical center for more clinical services."

The Houston VA is one of the largest and most complex VA medical centers in the country, serving as the primary health care provider for more than 114,000 veterans in southeast Texas. The VA offers Veterans same-day services for urgent primary and mental health care needs. Same-day services means a Veteran with an urgent need for primary care and mental health-care receives services that may include: a face-to-face visit with a clinician; advice provided during a call with a nurse; a telehealth or video care visit; an appointment made with a specialist; or a prescription filled the same day, depending upon what best meets the needs of the Veteran.

"It's up to us here at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center to pay back part of the debt our grateful nation owes to the men and women who serve in our armed forces," said Vazquez. "We are going to offer world-class care to our Veterans and provide it to them in a Veteran-centric manner. Our new mental health building is a visible testament to our commitment and dedication to our Veterans. We want all Veterans to know that top quality care is here and easy to access."

The new building has a special waiting area for Veterans with small children. Photo by: Nikki Verbeck

MY HEALTHEVET

My HealtheVet is a web-based personal health record that gives Veterans information and tools to improve their health. Registration is required to have full access to all features. Registrants can access more than 18 million pages of health information from the site's Health Education Library. They are able to:

- Refill your VA prescriptions, track delivery, view a list of your VA medications and other details.
- Keep track of your upcoming appointments and get email reminders.
- Communicate securely with your VA health care team and other VA staff about non-emergency information or questions.
- View, print, or download a copy of your VA medical record information or enter your own health information.

Visit www.myhealth.va.gov to find out more.

TELE-MENTAL HEALTH: AN EASY WAY FOR VETERANS TO GET THE CARE THEY NEED

by Todd Goodman

Veterans who have a computer, smart phone, or tablet now have access to mental health services from the Michael E. Debakey VA Medical Center. It's tele-mental health, and it's helped nearly 1,000 Houston-area Veterans get the care they need.

Tele-mental health uses the app VA Video Connect, a secure connection between the Veteran and provider. So long as the provider knows where the Veteran is—in case of emergency—it can be used anywhere.

Air Force Veteran Christopher Banks said he prefers therapy in the comfort of his own home.

"It is actually easier than coming into the facility," Banks said. "I can be in my own home, which helps me with sharing. Plus, it's much better because I don't have to deal with traffic."

This technology is perfect for Veterans who live far away, have medical problems, or find it difficult to leave the house.

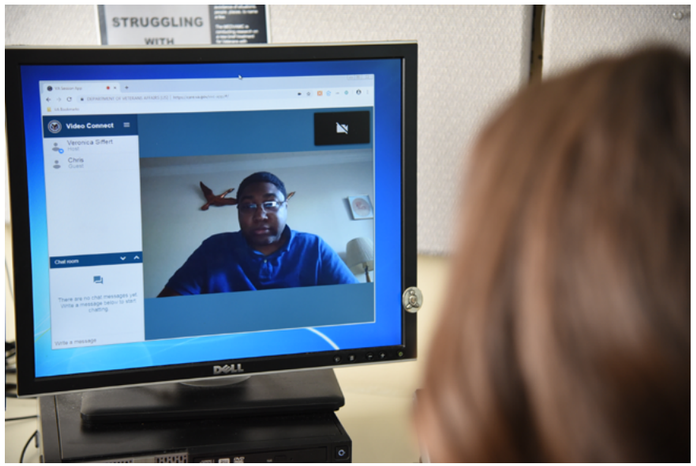
"Often, coming to the clinic is a big burden for our Veterans," said Dr. Jan Lindsay, psychologist. "Barriers include child care, traffic, parking, taking off work, or feeling anxiety when leaving their homes to come for treatment."

With tele-mental health services those barriers can be eliminated. Houston VAMC is a leader in this field, with growth over the past 4 years nearly 7 times VA's national average.

Banks, who has trouble walking, often cancelled his mental health appointments. And fighting traffic did nothing to help when he did show up to his appointment.

"I'd get so stressed from the drive that I would spend 90 percent of my therapy talking about why I'm so angry," he said.

"This is a major benefit for those with mobility issues," said Dr. Kaki York, deputy clinical executive, Mental Health Care Line. "We have Vets with ALS or Parkinson's or who have had a stroke, for whatever reason cannot get here to continue treatment. Also, family therapy services—have you ever tried to coordinate an entire family? It's very difficult. Video allows them to get in the same place at the same time instead of getting all of them to the VA."



Air Force Veteran Christopher Banks receives tele-mental health services from the comfort of his home from Social Worker Veronica Siffert, LCSW. Photo by: Todd Goodman

This technology also will allow for more consistency in treatment in Veterans whose jobs require them to relocate.

"Houston has a lot of oil field workers who live here for part of the time but somewhere else the other time," said York. "They're here for three months, then travel for six months. If they have internet connection, we are here for them."

It's up to the Veteran how much he or she uses video services. Patients have the option to combine in-person visits with video ones. They just need to discuss this with their providers.

"If you like coming into the clinic to see your provider, you can continue to do so and only use video telehealth when convenient," said Lindsay. "We are trying to be more flexible in our approach to delivering mental health care and meet Veterans where they live to increase access to care."

Houston has 75 mental health providers who are equipped to provide video connect services. Providers have reported that Veterans love this as an option, said Lindsay.

"When we provide psychotherapy via telehealth, some Veterans report that being at home makes it easier to focus on the work being done and acquire the skills they need to engage their lives more fully," she said. "They feel safer at home."

Also, providers have said that it provides unique insight into Veterans' experiences. Providers are given access to the patients' homes. Many times, when asked what medications they are taking, Veterans may forget. With this technology, they just walk into the bathroom and show the provider their medicine cabinets.

According to Banks, another advantage is that items the therapist recommends he read are right at his fingertips.

"When I was with the providers, they would recommend different links or health guides and I had to wait to get home to pull it up," he said. "With telehealth it's right there. We can be in a chat and I can copy and paste or pin it to the search bar. It makes it easier, especially when they recommend a book. If you aren't a person who takes pen and paper to session, you'd never remember that when you got home. Memory is not the most reliable, especially with some of us Vets. At home, I can open a search bar and go straight to it."

Veterans interested in VA Video Connect for mental health services need to speak with their providers and have a mobile device and internet connection. Resources are available for the duration of treatment for those Veterans who lack the proper set-up.

"Our goal would be any mental health clinician at the main facility to provide telehealth services when the patient wants it and provider thinks it would be helpful," said York. "We are not quite 100% there yet, but we are getting close."

VIETNAM VETERANS DAY CEREMONY

Houston National Cemetery hosted a ceremony to thank and honor Veterans of the Vietnam War, including Prisoners of War and those Missing in Action.

This event, in honor of National Vietnam Veterans Day, gave the VA and the community the opportunity to once again thank these Veterans for their service and sacrifice on behalf of the United States. The event also included a pinning ceremony for all Vietnam Veterans in attendance.

Attendees salute during the National Anthem at the Vietnam Veteran Ceremony held at the Houston National Ceremony. Photo by: Todd Goodman

"It's nice to be honored," said Vietnam Veteran Clifford Morris, Army, 1st Cavalry Division. "To me, it doesn't bother me that we were not recognized {when we returned from war} because I wasn't in the infantry. The corporate sector recognized us, though. They hired us first. It's nice to be recognized."

More than 58,000 U.S. troops lost their lives in service to their Nation during this war and more than 300,000 were wounded. In 2017, the president signed the Vietnam War Veterans Recognition Act, which designates March 29 of each year as National Vietnam War Veterans Day. March 29 was designated as this was the day that the final servicemembers withdrew from Vietnam.

Air Force and Vietnam Veteran Dan Unger said, "A lot of brave men and women went willingly when asked. It's never too late to say, 'Thank you.'"

SOCIAL WORKERS CHANGE LIVES

by Todd Goodman

Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center social workers are involved in nearly every aspect of Veteran care. Social workers are a diverse group, ranging in specialties from mental health counseling to housing homeless Veterans. Many people think they just do discharge planning, but social workers are looking for resources as soon as the Veteran walks through the facility door.

"We are the best networkers there are," said Claudia Mullin, licensed clinical social worker (LCSW) in the Inpatient Trauma Treatment Program for Female Veterans. "Helping to provide, look for, and research all potential options for Veterans really is a strength of our profession."

That is one of the things that makes social workers so valuable, their network of resources. Another is their ability to provide mental health counseling. In fact, they make up the largest group of mental health providers in the country.

Mullin, who has more than 30 years of experience in mental health, said that social workers look past the diagnosis, digging deeper to find the root of the problem.

"We don't see patients as their diagnoses," she said. "The symptom is the tip of the iceberg. We try to address the psycho-social experiences that lead to the symptom. For instance, most substance abusers usually have trauma as a basis for why they're self-medicating."

For social workers, it's about getting to the root of the problem so that the person can make real progress and sustain the results.

"I look at someone as a person, not the sum of his or her problems," said Natosha LaCour, LCSW, Community-Based Outpatient Clinic Social Work supervisor. "I believe we all have the power to impact change and help others. We want to empower them to help themselves."

LaCour, who has worked in several areas of the hospital, said her time in homeless services impacted her the most.

"We'd meet people who had nothing, living on the street, no income, not connected with family, battling addiction, just really going through a tough time," she said. "I saw how instrumental social work can be to get someone's life back on track."

Natosha LaCour (r), LCSW, Community-Based Outpatient Clinic Social Work supervisor, discusses the finer points of social work with Aundrienne Coomer, LMSW, Mental Health Service, during a recent supervision meeting. Photo by: Todd Goodman

Helping Veterans rediscover themselves, find a place to live, get a job, and pay their rent gave LaCour such a sense of service.

"There was a shine in their eyes, a sense of pride," she said. "They felt complete again. I saw how impactful my role had been. That was the most rewarding time of my career. I'll see some of my older Veterans from time to time and it's always a nice reunion. You become a part of their lives. You're in their homes. There is a different dynamic in the relationship."

For Mullin, it has been her work with trauma survivors that has been the most impactful.

"The most rewarding experience for me is the almost miraculous healing that occurs when a survivor truly accepts and believes that they were not responsible in any way for what happened to them," she said. "Observing the powerful transformation that occurs when victims go from surviving to thriving is soul satisfying."

Social work allows for many of these types of career moments. It's a problem solver's dream.

"I love the challenge of problem solving," said LaCour. "You're constantly looking at different problems to come up with a treatment plan to impact a family's life in a positive way. For every problem, there is a solution. Take things one day and one problem at a time. Every day is a new challenge."

VA DENTAL SERVICES COME TO CONROE

Veterans seeking VA dental services can now receive their care in our Conroe VA Outpatient Clinic. A new dental expansion opened at the Conroe clinic, to the delight of Veterans who live in the area. "It's so nice not to have to travel all the way in to the Medical Center to receive dental care," said Marine Corps Veteran, Danny Clayton, one of the first patients seen in the new dental expansion. "It's much more convenient and quick to see one of the new dentists right here in Conroe."

Veteran Danny Clayton (seated) visits the new Dental Expansion Clinic at our Conroe CBOC with Dr. Ricky Morlen, Chief of Dental Services Houston; Deepa Agusala, Chief of Staffs Office; and Dr. Qiuyi Liang, Dentist for Conroe. Photo by: Janet Dollins

The Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center in Houston operates nine community based outpatient clinics, with dental services being offered only at the main medical center. The new dental expansion brings dental care close to where many Veterans live and takes some pressure off the medical center's dental service, which serves more than 6,700 Veterans annually.

"We are proud to offer state-of-the-art dental care to Veterans in our Conroe Clinic," said Francisco Vazquez, Houston VA Medical Center Director. "We have hired nine new employees for our new Conroe Dental location so far, including dentists, hygienists, etc."

Veterans who want to inquire about Dental care are encouraged to call the Houston VA at 713-794-7288 to determine eligibility. Veterans who are eligible can contact the Conroe Dental Clinic at 936-522-4045 to schedule an appointment.

RED COAT AMBASSADOR PROGRAM

Need assistance while at the Houston VA Medical Center? Look for our Red Coat Ambassadors! Red Coat Ambassadors are staff, volunteers, and Veterans who assist patients and visitors by greeting them when they enter the facility, providing information, wayfinding, and any other assistance needed.

Look for these Ambassadors wearing red coats as you enter the main medical center. They will be happy to welcome you to our VA and assist you however they can.

Photo right: Francisco Vazquez, Medical Center Director, shakes a Veteran's hand while serving as a Red Coat Ambassador. Photo by: Todd Goodman

GUITARS FOR VETS

▶ *by Todd Goodman*

Each Tuesday morning in the Community Living Center (CLC) Relaxation Room of the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center, the gentle sounds of strumming guitars can be heard as CLC inpatients learn to play.

Guitars for Vets is a non-profit organization that provides 10 individual guitar lessons to Veterans in the CLC struggling with physical injuries or emotional distress. Once lessons have been completed, the Veteran receives a free acoustic guitar.

The program is a great way to get patients out of their rooms and interacting with others.

"I was pretty-much staying in bed, except for physical therapy," said Army Veteran Ronald Williams. "I was bummed out about the whole situation. My ability to walk had diminished and I was just sitting in my room trying to be positive."

U.S. Army Veteran Ronald Williams takes his first guitar lesson with instructor David Champlin as part of Guitar for Vets. The program provides 10 lessons and an acoustic guitar to the Veteran free of charge. Photo by: Todd Goodman

While in his room, Williams was visited by Art Therapist Sheryl Corbit who spoke about various activities available to Veterans. Williams was sold when she mentioned guitar classes.

"I toyed with it once," he said. "I may as well try again."

Williams used to play guitar left-handed, but a surgery to fuse his right wrist left him with limited dexterity in his fingering hand. Now, the determined Veteran is trying to learn to play right-handed.

"Everything in my brain wants to go the other way," he said. "It's amazing how much I am going to have to relearn."

Students are taught basic chords and songs. One of the first songs they learn is Amazing Grace, which provides a good foundation.

"Playing the guitar is relaxing, reduces stress, lowers blood pressure, and helps to alleviate depression," said Corbit.

That certainly was the case for Army Veteran Guadalupe Alvarado, who has been an inpatient for 14 months. He said the program has been instrumental in getting him out of his room to socialize with his fellow Veterans. Alvarado, a program graduate, often shows up in the Relaxation Room to watch others receive a lesson. It's a chance for him to reinforce what he already has learned.

"I like to hear a little bit more," he said. "The more I learn, the more I can play."

Alvarado got involved in Guitars for Vets because he, too, found himself spending too much time alone in his room.

"I got depressed from being lonely all of the time," he said. "That's why I got involved with this program and other art therapy programs. It's nice to have someone to talk to."

Corbit said she tries to invite everyone on the inpatient floor to join either her art group or Guitars for Vets.

"I see the Vets coming to the group and their attitude seems to lighten and improve," she said. "Not only are they learning, but they seem to feel good about themselves. It improves their self-esteem."

Williams sure lit up when the guitar was placed into his hands. Even though the natural lefty is having to relearn everything, he remains excited for the challenge.

"The important thing is to play as good as you can and have fun," he said. "I made some progress after one lesson. I can already see what is possible."

MILLION VETERAN PROGRAM ENROLLS 24,000TH MEMBER

▶ *by Todd Goodman*

Million Veteran Program (MVP) at Michael E. Debakey VA Medical Center recently enrolled its 24,000th member, bringing the nationwide total to more than 730,000 Veterans.

MVP is a genome study with the goal of enrolling one million Veterans. It looks at how genetics affect health. For instance, why one medication may work for one, but not another; why two people could fight side-by-side in a war zone but only one of them gets post-traumatic stress disorder.

Army Veteran Eugene Christen participates in the Million Veteran Program (MVP) at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center. MVP is a genome study that looks at how genetics affect health. Photo by: Todd Goodman

"Regarding issues like PTSD, those are the kinds of questions we need to answer," said Dr. Alan Swann, VA staff psychiatrist and Baylor College of Medicine Dept. of Psychiatry. "This study can help provide those answers. It gives us a great repository not only of genetic material, but questionnaires about health, and the electronic record, the treatments they got, and how they responded to them. You just can't get that kind of knowledge in a conventional study."

VA researchers use MVP data to examine various illnesses and conditions that are prevalent among Veterans. However, they also emphasize issues that affect all people—including cancer, heart disease, diabetes, and arthritis.

"I think MVP is a terrific investment in the future of medicine," said Swann. "This program is forward thinking and ambitious, but also very practical."

The most important thing is to continue to amass data. Houston VAMC currently ranks second nationally in enrolling MVP Veterans, but initially the medical center struggled with enrollment.

"We were trying to sign people up over the phone," said Bonito Manego, MVP research coordinator. "I'd call 100 Veterans and enroll just a couple."

That changed when MVP recruiters moved to the lab. All it takes to enroll is a signature and one extra vial of blood during a routine lab visit.

"Ever since we began recruiting in person, our numbers have gone up significantly," he said. "We currently enroll about 15 Veterans per day."

Army and Vietnam Veteran Eugene Christen enrolled at the behest of Vietnam Veterans of America Texas State Council, which urged its members to take part in the study.

"I'm just trying to do my part," said Christen. "A lot of our guys are suffering the effects of Agent Orange. We want more information and hope that this genome study can provide it."

There still is a long way to go to understand genetics and the role they play in disease, but the future looks bright with this study.

"We haven't had the data of the population to study this thoroughly," said Swann. "That is the most exciting thing about MVP—the repository of information that will be available to researchers."

Veterans interested in participating in this program can stop by the lab on the 1st floor or call 1-866-441-6075.

TWO NEW OR'S OFFER VETERANS THE "BEST OF THE BEST"

by Maureen Dyman

Medical Center Director Frank Vazquez and leaders from the Houston VA Surgery Department cut the ribbon to officially open two additional new Hybrid Operating Rooms on the 5th floor of the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center. The new ORs are equipped with advanced medical imaging devices and other high tech surgical equipment that will enable MEDVAMC's surgeons to perform minimally-invasive surgeries. The two new ORs will be used for vascular, cardiac, orthopedic spine and neurosurgery cases.

The combination of a traditional operating room with an image guided interventional suite will allow Houston VA surgeons to perform highly complex, advanced surgical procedures. The new state-of-the-art space will allow for the combination of image guided surgery with open procedures. "In total, our now four Hybrid ORs combine a conventional operating room with the latest imaging systems and laparoscopic equipment, making it possible for us to perform cutting edge vascular, cardiac, neurosurgery and orthopedic surgeries," said Dr. Samir Awad, Chief of the Houston VA's Operative Care Line. "We will be able to perform more minimally invasive procedures, improving access and making the recovery time for our Veterans much faster and less complicated."

Two new hybrid operating rooms opened at MEDVAMC. Cutting the ribbon at the opening was Frank Vazquez, Medical Center Director; Dr. Samir Awad, Operative Care Line Executive; Dr. Panagiotis Kougias, Chief of Vascular Surgery; and Dr. Fuentes, Chief of Neurosurgery. Photo by: VA staff

At MEDVAMC, a team of multi-disciplinary groups of clinicians work together to meet the complex needs of Veteran patients, said Awad. The versatility of these hybrid rooms allow for a diverse number of open and minimally invasive surgeries with all of the necessary capability and personnel in one space.

Last year surgeons at the Houston VA performed more than 9,500 surgeries, making it one of the busiest VA medical center surgery programs in the country. The addition of two new Hybrid ORs will add additional surgical space and capability to the highly complex medical center that currently serves more than 113,000 Veterans in southeastern Texas.

The most important benefit to having the new Hybrid ORs is that they will improve the quality of life for Veteran patients. "Patients typically experience shorter recovery times following a procedure in a hybrid OR, due to less stress from open surgeries," said Dr. J. Kalavar, MEDVAMC Chief of Staff. "In addition, they have shorter lengths of stay in the hospital and recover much quicker. We are thrilled to be able to offer our Veterans the best of the best. They deserve nothing less."

COMMUNITY LIVING CENTER RATED FIVE STAR FOR QUALITY

by Maureen Dyman

The Houston VA recently announced that its nursing home received five stars as part of its annual performance rating. The announcement comes after VA extended its unprecedented record of transparency by continuing to make public its annual nursing home ratings for every facility in the country.

"We are proud of the top quality, Veteran-centric health care provided to Veterans in our Houston VA Community Living Center," said Frank Vazquez, MEDVAMC Medical Center Director. "It is truly an honor and a privilege for us at pay back part of the debt a grateful nation owes to the men and women who have served our country by providing our Veterans with the highest quality of care."

Veterans in our Community Living Center celebrated Fat Tuesday with a Mardi Gras parade through the first floor of the medical center. Festive music was played, participants were dancing and beads were distributed. Thank you to all who participated to make this event a joyous one. Photo by: Todd Goodman

VA's quality measures are meant to show how well the nursing homes in the Department are addressing the physical and clinical needs of its residents. The data, which is used to drive improvement efforts across the VA nursing home system, shows that, overall, VA's nursing home system – composed of more than 130 community living centers – compares closely with private sector nursing homes, even though the department on average cares for sicker patients in its nursing homes than do private facilities.

According to Dr. Syed Imam, director of the medical center's Rehabilitation and Extended Care Line, Houston's CLC five-star rating is the result of the spirit of teamwork and cooperation that exists between all staff on the units and throughout the medical center. "Our CLC staff's commitment and dedication to providing the highest quality of care for our Veterans is unwavering," said Imam. "We are on a continuous journey to look for ways to improve the quality of care we provide to our CLC residents and it shows in the clinical outcomes and performance ratings."

Houston's 199-bed CLC resembles "home" as much as possible. There are activities for Veterans of all ages and family friendly places for visiting. Veterans are invited to decorate their rooms and pets are allowed to visit the Community Living Center. Veterans in the CLC may stay for a short time or, in rare instances, for the rest of their lives. It is a place where Veterans can receive nursing home level of care, which includes help with activities of daily living (e.g., bathing and getting dressed) and skilled nursing and medical care.

"The mission of our Community Living Center is to restore each Veteran to his or her highest level of well-being," Imam said. "We also work to prevent declines in health and to provide comfort at the end of life."

VA VIDEO CONNECT

VA Video Connect connects Veterans with their health care team from anywhere, using encryption to ensure a secure and private session. It makes VA health care more convenient and reduces travel times for Veterans, especially those in very rural areas with limited access to VA health care facilities, and it allows quick and easy health care access from any mobile or web-based device.

Veterans and their health care providers jointly decide whether to use VA Video Connect for a medical visit. Please speak with your VA care team if you are interested in potentially receiving care through VA Video Connect. Ahead of a VA Video Connect appointment, you will receive an email or calendar invite with a link to launch the session.

VA Video Connect works on nearly any device that has an internet connection and a web camera. For example, it works on Windows-based PCs and laptops, Windows mobile devices, iOS mobile devices, Android mobile devices, etc.

More information about VA Video Connect can be found at https://mobile.va.gov/app/va-video-connect.

HELP PREVENT VETERAN SUICIDE

Your Houston VA is committed to doing everything it can to prevent Veteran suicide. Our team of ten suicide prevention coordinators engages in Veteran outreach throughout Houston and the surrounding areas, providing support and monitoring for at-risk Vets and participating in suicide prevention programs including using predictive modeling based on patient health records, VA's Opioid Safety Initiative and the distribution of gun locks, among many other programs. But, we need your help, too.

You don't need to have specialized training to support the Veterans in your life. We can all do something to help a Veteran who is going through a difficult time. Even seemingly small actions can have a huge impact: Preventing suicide begins with just the willingness to Be There.

Showing your support can be as simple as sending a Veteran a text message — inviting someone over to catch up or sharing a positive thought are both great ways to communicate that you care. Your words could be exactly what a Veteran in crisis needs to hear and could be a reminder of the many people out there who are willing to listen.

Simply reaching out to a Veteran in need and opening the door for a discussion could make all the difference. Learn more ways to show your support and Be There by visiting VeteransCrisisLine.net/BeThere to find more resources and information.

Veterans Crisis Line

1-800-273-8255
PRESS 1

Same Day Services Offered in Primary Care & Mental Health

MICHAEL E. DEBAKEY VA MEDICAL CENTER

Our Same Day Service Guarantee

When you contact us, we will address your needs that day and may also schedule future follow up visits.

Same Day Services include: responding to secure messages, scheduling future visits, telephone contacts, as well as face to face services, both in the clinic and by telehealth.

How to Access Same Day Services

Make an appointment by calling your Primary Care or Mental Health Team.

No Primary Care or Mental Health doctor?
Call (713) 794-8454

VA | U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Veterans Health Administration
Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center

VA MISSION Act

Your Care is Our Mission

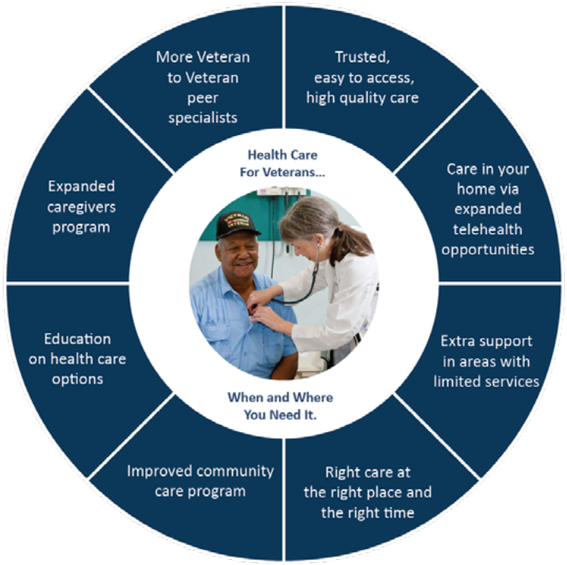
Implementation begins June 6, 2019

WHAT IS THE VA MISSION ACT?

The VA MISSION Act is legislation passed by Congress and signed into law on June 6, 2018. Through this VA will need to make changes in several key areas including:

- Streamlining and Improving Community Care,
- Establishing a new Urgent Care benefit,
- Expanding Caregivers Eligibility,
- Strengthening VA's Workforce,
- and Strengthening VA's Infrastructure.

Through the MISSION Act, VA has additional opportunities to enhance our high-quality health care to our nation's Veterans. You can learn more about the MISSION Act by visiting this link. Below are some frequently asked questions.



Q: What does the MISSION acronym stand for?

A: Maintaining Internal Systems and Strengthening Integrated Outside Networks (MISSION).

Q: How will the MISSION Act benefit Veterans?

A: The MISSION Act empowers Veterans and enhances care options. VA will:

- Continue to be a trusted, caring partner
- Meet Veterans where they are, with the right care at the right place and the right time
- Provide telehealth in their home, in a VA facility, or in the community
- Focus on providing an excellent experience for Veterans and their families.

Q: Is the MISSION Act about privatizing Veterans' health care?

A: No, it's not about privatizing VA. The MISSION Act is designed to strengthen and improve VA's high-quality health care system.

Q: What does the MISSION Act encompass?

A: The MISSION Act legislation contains more than 50 sections intended to strengthen and improve VA's ability to deliver world-class health care. If you're interested in learning more you can read through the handout entitled MISSION ACT 101: How the law will improve VA's ability to deliver health care to Veterans" on VA's VAntage Point blog.

MEDVAMC Veteran Community in the Care: 713-794-8777

Visit our web page for more information on the VA MISSION Act:
www.houston.va.gov/VAMISSIONAct.asp

MAGNET RECOGNITION

The Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center has attained Magnet recognition again in 2019, a testament to its continued dedication to high-quality nursing practice. The American Nurses Credentialing Center's Magnet Recognition Program® distinguishes health care organizations that meet rigorous standards for nursing excellence. This credential is the highest national honor for professional nursing practice.

Receiving Magnet recognition for the fourth time is a great achievement for the Houston VA as it continues to proudly belong to the global community of Magnet-recognized organizations. Just 8% of U.S. hospitals have achieved Magnet recognition. Houston VA is the first VA in the country to attain Magnet recognition four times.

"Magnet recognition is a tremendous honor and reflects our commitment to delivering the highest quality of care to our Veterans," said Kelly Irving, MEDVAMC Associate Director for Patient Care Services. "To earn Magnet recognition once was a great accomplishment and an incredible source of pride for our nurses. Our repeated achievement of this credential underscores the foundation of excellence and values that drive our staff to strive harder each day to meet the health care needs of the Veterans we serve."

Research demonstrates that Magnet recognition provides specific benefits to health care organizations and their communities, such as:

- Higher patient satisfaction with nurse communication, availability of help and receipt of discharge information.
- Lower risk of 30-day mortality and lower failure to rescue rates.
- Higher job satisfaction among nurses.

Magnet recognition is the gold standard for nursing excellence and is a factor when the public judges health care organizations. Houston VA maintains one of the lowest nursing turnover rates.

IMPORTANT PHONE NUMBERS

Michael E. DeBakey VAMC	713.791.1414 | 1.800.553.2278
Patient Advocate	713.794.7884
Returning Service Members	713.794.7034(8825/7928)
Veterans Crisis Line	1.800.273.TALK (8255)
Caregiver Support Hotline	1.855.260.3274
Hotline for Homeless Veterans	1.877.4AID.VET
Hotline for Women Veterans	1.855.VA.WOMEN
VA Outpatient Clinics	
Beaumont	409.981.8550 | 1.800.833.7734
Conroe	936.522.4000 | 1.800.553.2278, ext. 10900
Galveston	409.761.3200 | 1.800.553.2278, ext. 11000
Katy	281.578.4600
Lake Jackson	979.230.4852
Lufkin	936.671.4300 | 1.800.209.3120
Richmond	832.595.7700 | 1.800.553.2278, ext. 10000
Texas City	409.986.2900 | 1.800.553.2278, ext. 10500
Tomball	281.516.1505

VA NETWORK TELECARE & APPOINTMENT CENTER

713.794.8985

1.800.639.5137

Services Include:

- Appointment Scheduling
- Community Resources
- General Information
- Health Education
- Medical Advice
- Medical Concerns
- Mental Health Concerns
- Prescription Refills
- Suicide Intervention
- Symptom Analysis

Visit www.houston.va.gov *and sign up to receive news and information by email.*