Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center
Moving Veterans along the tracks of excellent health care

Veterans Day Ceremony at the Houston VA Medical Center, Pages 4-5
Tell Us What You Think!

Many Veterans have asked for clarification regarding the Town Hall meeting signs posted around the MEDVAMC campus and in our community based outpatient clinics. In case you are wondering, Town Hall meetings are for you! Every quarter MEDVAMC leadership sponsors a Veteran Town Hall meeting. At these meetings, VA leadership from key areas of the Medical Center, including the Director himself, give short updates on what is going on at our VA Medical Center or Clinic, and then the floor is open to Veterans. It’s a great time for Veterans to give us your feedback, both positive and negative. Town Hall meetings are one of the most important ways to share your voice with the folks that can make real changes, the VA leadership. If you’ve ever had an idea, suggestion or comment on how to improve your VA experience, we want to hear from you!

“I encourage every patient to participate in our quarterly Town Hall meetings,” said Frank Vazquez, Director of the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center. “It’s imperative that we receive feedback on the job we’re doing. In order for us to continuously improve as a medical center and to maintain the best possible care for our Veterans and those who serve them, we must keep open lines of communication. Our Town Hall meetings are a perfect opportunity to do that. With the feedback we receive we can determine areas of improvement or validate practices that are currently successful. It’s a great way to help us, help you.”

In addition to our VA Medical Center, Houston is also home to a VA Regional Benefits Office and a VA National Cemetery. Leadership from these VA components are also present at all Town Hall meetings to take Veteran feedback. The VA Regional Benefits Office even provides claims assistance at the Town Hall meetings.

Our last Town Hall was held in early January at the VA Regional Office. We are planning our next Veteran Town Hall in April near our Richmond VA Outpatient Clinic.

Can’t make a Veteran Town Hall because of transportation or commuting reasons? Stay tuned for more information on our Virtual Town Hall meetings, which are slated to start in late 2017. With Tele-Town Hall, you’ll have the opportunity to call into the meeting and listen virtually. You’ll also have the ability to ask questions through a screener who will then pass your questions along to the leadership in real-time. We look forward to hearing from more Veterans without you even having to leave your home.

Stay tuned for additional specifics about our upcoming Town Hall meetings. If you have questions about Town Hall meetings or need more information, call the Houston VA Public Affairs Office at 713-794-7349.

For those of us who work at the VA, we like to think of every day as Veterans Day. We truly can never honor and thank our Veterans enough. It is our privilege to provide top quality healthcare to the men and women who have served in our U.S. Armed Forces. Since I arrived at the Houston VA in late August, I have made a special point to walk around the Medical Center and our clinics and talk frankly with Veterans and their family members. I have been pleased to hear many wonderful stories about the excellent care that we are providing to Veterans. I have also heard some great suggestions on how we can improve things here at the MEDVAMC and have truly taken these suggestions to heart. With more than 109,000 Veterans registered for care here, we are one of the largest, most complex VA Medical Centers in the country. Every week day more than 3,000 Veterans come to our Medical Center and/or one of our outpatient clinics for appointments.

We all know that things in any organization are not perfect. There will be days when things don’t run as smoothly as we would like. However, our goal is to make every single Veteran’s experience top notch from beginning to end. From the moment you drive on to our campus, we want you to encounter upbeat, polite employees who are willing to help you at every turn. We know that Veterans have a choice where to receive their healthcare and we want to have your confidence and trust, to make the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center your healthcare provider of choice. Our goal and focus is to provide you timely world-class care of the highest quality in a Veteran-centric manner.

There are many things about this Medical Center that make it one of the most prestigious highly-rated facilities in the country. We have incredible clinicians working here who are leaders in their field of expertise. We have caring nurses whose dedication to our patients and to nursing excellence has made MEDVAMC the only Medical Center in the country to receive re-designation of Nursing Magnet status twice. We have the latest medical technology and incredible research going on here in Houston. My goal is to put all of these things together so that your Houston VA runs as efficiently and smoothly as possible; with our Veterans at the heart of everything we do.

In 2017, like every other year, we will be facing new challenges and changes. I want to assure you that at the Houston VA, we will be doing everything in our power to build trust with our Nation’s Veterans, improve service and care delivery and set the course for long-term excellence. As a Navy Veteran myself, I feel a powerful personal connection and great respect for my fellow Veterans whom I am honored to serve. I always welcome your feedback and suggestions and look forward to meeting you at our Medical Center, in one of our clinics, or at one of our quarterly Veteran Town Hall meetings. Thank you for your service and for allowing us to take care of your healthcare needs. Happy new year and best wishes always.
U.S. Senator Ted Cruz, Congressman Al Green and Houston’s Mayor Sylvester Turner joined hundreds of enthusiastic Veterans at MEDVAMC’s 2016 Veterans Day celebration in the Medical Center auditorium. In addition to a moving ceremony with speeches from all three of these important visitors and MEDVAMC Director Frank Vazquez, Veterans were presented with flag lapel pins and offered free refreshments, courtesy of McDonald’s.

“As employees of the Department of Veterans Affairs, we are privileged to honor our Veterans for their sacrifice by providing them health care of the highest quality in a timely manner,” Vazquez said at the ceremony. “Americans of every era have earned the services VA provides and it is our job to care for them with dignity and respect. For those of us at the VA, every day is Veterans Day.”
A FAMILIAR FACE RETURNS TO HOUSTON VA

Frank Vazquez, M.B.A., made his return to the Houston area to assume the duties as Director of the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center in mid-August. Vazquez previously held the position of Associate Director of the medical center from 2011-2013.

As director of the Houston VA, Vazquez is the chief executive officer charged with management of one of the most complex VA medical centers in the country with more than 4,600 employees and an annual budget of approximately $912 million. In addition to caring for more than 109,000 Veterans in southeast Texas, the MEDVAMC also serves as a regional and national referral center for many services including cardiology, liver transplant, traumatic brain injury, epilepsy and other neurological disorders, radiation therapy, and spinal cord injury care.

“I am thrilled to return to Houston to serve as the director of a world-class facility, responsible for providing the best health care to our Veterans,” said Vazquez. “I strive to unify and lead through partnership and teamwork. I am very excited to interact and meet as many Veterans and amazing staff members as possible.”

Mr. Vazquez believes in a hands-on approach and can be found around the campus working in different departments throughout the hospital to get a feel for what is happening on the front lines. He has already spent time assisting in the Community Living Center kitchen; serving our Veterans their most important meal of the day, breakfast, and working with Environmental Management Service cleaning part of a nursing unit.

Mr. Vazquez has more than 24 years of federal service with a wide variety of technical and progressive leadership experience. He served as Vice President of Information Management at the Philadelphia VA Medical Center, he was the Chief Information Officer at the VA Medical Center in Sherburne, Wyoming, and he also served as the Vista System Manager at the Central Texas Veterans Health Care System. He also has been a civilian employee of the U.S. Navy and held positions in computer and software engineering at the Naval Air Warfare Center (Avionics Division) in Indianapolis, Indiana. Most recently he served as the medical center director at the Wichita, KS, VA Medical Center.

A proud Navy Veteran, Mr. Vazquez served as a Surface Warfare Officer onboard the USS Okinawa (LPH3) in San Diego, California from 1986 to 1990. Upon separation from active duty he served for 10 years in the United States Naval Reserve.

A graduate of the Universidad Sagrado Corazon in San Juan, Puerto Rico with a Bachelor of Science degree in Computer Science, Mr. Vazquez received a Master of Business Administration from Texas Woman’s University. He is an active member of the American College of Healthcare Executives.

MEDVAMC would like to officially welcome Mr. Vazquez back to Houston!

WOMEN’S HEALTH CENTER GRAND OPENING

More than 25 years after the original women’s clinic opened at the Houston VA Medical Center, staff and female Veterans, some of whom have been around since the beginning, celebrated the new year by opening a brand new Women’s Health Center in early January. The new center more than triples the size of the old clinic and offers women Veterans a modern, relaxing environment in which to receive their top quality healthcare.

“Texas has a higher population of women Veterans than any other state in the country and here in Houston we are seeing women Veterans come in at record numbers,” said Frank Vazquez, Medical Center Director. “Our beautiful expanded new Women’s Health Center will allow us to meet the needs of this important and growing segment of our Veteran population.

In addition to a private entrance just for women Veterans, the new Center will also include primary care, mental health care, in-house mammography and maternity care coordination. It will be a state-of-the-art facility with comprehensive breast care offered, including ultrasound, US guided biopsy, and breast MRI; with two full-time breast radiologists dedicated to providing outstanding breast care to our female veterans. Currently more than 12,000 women Veterans receive their care at the MEDVAMC, a number that has more than doubled in the past five years.

“Our growing women Veteran population averages about 20 years younger than our male Veterans,” said Dr. Rola El-Serag, Director of the Women’s Health Program. “In fact, right now we are providing maternity care coordination for more than 300 Veterans.”

Although the new Women’s Health Center didn’t officially open until January, patients have been seen in the new space since October and are definitely noticing a difference. “This new Center makes it easier for us to go into the VA and easily find the experts who can relate to our issues and really help us,” said Adrian Rideau, an Army Veteran and mother of three who is receiving maternity care coordination from the MEDVAMC.

To honor women Veterans and celebrate their growing families, MEDVAMC staff and volunteers recently threw a baby shower for a group of very thankful pregnant women Veterans who will be receiving their care in the new Center. Gifts donated by local Veterans Service Organizations were distributed to attendees, who enjoyed meeting other pregnant Veterans and making new friends.

“I didn’t expect the VA to throw me a baby shower, that’s for sure,” said Katy Bland an Army Veteran who recently had her first child. “I feel very appreciated and supported; something I didn’t even know to expect from the VA.”

According to El-Serag, the grand opening celebration was about much more than just the new space. “When I think about what this clinic means to our women, it’s not just about the beautiful, new physical space it’s in,” said El-Serag. “It’s really about the meaning of what we do here and is symbolic of the importance and priority that we place on our women Veterans.”
NEW TECHNOLOGY HELPS MEDVAMC CARDIAC PATIENTS

Surgery can be scary. Your mind is occupied with questions of the unknown. You wonder about the outcome, the recovery and any unforeseen complication. Then when it’s all said and done you’re left with a reminder, a fleeting memory of your experience and in some cases you may be left with a more permanent reminder.

Until now, patients at the Michael E. DeBakey Medical Center who underwent surgery to open blocked arteries in the heart, had permanent reminders of their surgery in the form of a metallic stent, a tiny device used to create space in the heart’s passageway.

In November of 2016, a VA Cardiac Catheterization Laboratory team became the first Houston-based medical professionals to successfully complete an angioplasty using a new state-of-the-art bioresorbable stent, which dissolves in the body over the course of two years. “This particular type of stent is unique because it has the capability of being absorbed by the body,” said Dr. David Paniagua, director of structural heart disease interventions at the Houston VA. “Most of the stents we’ve used in the past are metallic structures that remain in the body. When you implant a metallic stent it remains in the person forever. So, this new technology with the stent is an enormous leap forward. After about two to three years the patient has no stent and the healing process of the artery is done, so it’s like being back to a normal.”

Paniagua says this breakthrough is significant because it creates less obstruction if the patient ever needs a follow-up procedure.

Heart diseases remains the leading cause of death in the United States and with those types of numbers, the MEDVAMC Cardiology department stays extremely busy, performing more than 1,200 angioplasty or structural heart disease treatments a year. MEDVAMC is the busiest catheterization lab in the entire VA healthcare system. “Our Veteran patients and their families deserve the best health care our country has to offer,” says Paniagua. “I’m proud to be a part of a team that delivers cutting-edge technology and treatment to them.”

Treatment Resistant Depression

Do you suffer from depression? Are you 55 and older?

If so, you may be eligible for a research study to determine the benefits of Ketamine for the treatment of depression in Veterans over the age of 55 with a history of Treatment Resistant Depression.

Participants will receive compensation for their time. Inpatient hospitalization for one week is required. For more information, please call 713-667-9560 or email moodscbm.edu.
OLD GLORY RUN PARTICIPANTS TAKE STRIDES THROUGH HOUSTON  

With Old Glory clenched in hand and pride gleaming on their faces, runners both civilian and Veteran made their way to the Houston VAMC campus recently, as part of the 3rd annual Old Glory Run. Members of Team Red White and Blue (RWB), a non-profit organization dedicated to enriching the lives of America’s Veterans by connecting them to their communities through physical and social activity, began their coast-to-coast endeavor with a ceremony on September 11, 2016 in Redmond, Washington.

The event involved carrying a single American flag, relay-style, across the country in a 60-day journey that culminated in Tampa, home of Team RWB on Veterans Day 2016. After completing 41 days and stretching across almost half the country, the Old Glory Run brought its members through Houston. Day 42 commenced in the outskirts of Houston in Richmond, Texas. Members trekked across a 35-mile course through the city, finding their way to the MEDVAMC.

“We’ve never had an event here where runners came through the VA campus,” said Lt. Ollie Howard, a VA police officer and Veteran. “We had four control points for the runners, to lead them through the property. Our Police Officers, who are all Veterans themselves, ended up joining in at the end of the run, finishing with the members at the gazebo. It was a tremendous feeling of comradery; it just makes you feel good.”

Uniting Veterans and creating new relationships through physical fitness and team building are at the forefront of Team RWB’s mission. Texas alone hosts nine different Team RWB chapters spanning from El Paso to Houston. The chapters post weekly fitness group listings and host monthly events to encourage physical activity and wellness.

Sgt. Kenny Price, a VA police officer who assisted in security for the event and who is also a Veteran, joined Team RWB during the event, after learning of the chapter located near his home in Conroe, Texas.

“I was in the Marines, so I like comradery,” said Price. “There were Veterans running, but several of the members participating were civilians, and they took it upon themselves to take this challenge. You have a chance to run with the American flag. It’s an honor. I went and joined Team RWB that day.”

After reaching the VA campus, participants were met by medical center staff and Veterans who gathered together for a flag retirement ceremony completing the events of the day. “When you get out of the military, you still like to serve,” said Price. “My service has always been in law enforcement, but now there are so many other great organizations like Team RWB that help us connect. The end game is to assist other Veterans and raise awareness. I wish I would have known sooner about the Old Glory Run because I would have loved to participate myself.”

MEDVAMC hosted a variety of activities for Veterans over the holiday season. To see more photos of our holiday activities, visit www.flickr.com/photos/houstonvamc.

HOLIDAY ACTIVITIES AT MEDVAMC!

Students from Dobie High School visited Veterans and decorated their doors for the holidays.

Team RWB participants with members of VA Police after completing a 35-mile course through the city of Houston. It was the first time the Annual Old Glory Run made its way through the state of Texas on its journey across the country from California to Florida. Photo by: Maureen Dyman

Members of First Presbyterian Church passed out gift bags, coats, hats, cookies, drinks, snacks, and cards to Veterans during their annual holiday party and coat drive outside the Outpatient Pharmacy! Photo by: Tanya Lucky.

The American Legion Auxiliary held their Annual ALA Inpatient Gift Shop. Veterans are able to choose gifts to be mailed to their immediate families for free! Photo by: Deborah Williams.

Joyful Sounds Choir visited Veterans in the Community Living Center, singing holiday songs. Photo by: Barbara Bell.

Veterans waiting in several clinics received gift cards for free pizza from California Pizza Kitchen and their customers. The cards were passed out to appreciative Veterans by Shelita Magee, Voluntary Service Specialist! Photos by: Nikki Farbeck.

by Manda Emery
MEDICATION COPAYMENTS

A charges a copayment for each 30 day or less supply of medication provided on an outpatient basis for the treatment of a non-service connected condition.

These changes apply to:

- Veterans without a service-connected condition, or
- Veterans with a disability rated less than 50%
  - Who are receiving outpatient treatment for a non-service connected condition, and
  - Whose annual income exceeds the limit set by law.

Note: Medication copayments do not apply to former Prisoners of War, catastrophically disabled Veterans, or those covered by other exceptions as set by law.

For more information, call 1-877-222-VETS (8387), or visit www.va.gov/healthbenefits.

Effective early 2017, copay amounts are:

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<th>Priority Group</th>
<th>Outpatient Medication Tier</th>
<th>Copayment amount</th>
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<td>1–30 day supply</td>
<td>31–60 day supply</td>
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<td>Tier 1</td>
<td>(Preferred Generics)</td>
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<td>Tier 2</td>
<td>(Non-Preferred Generics and some OTCs)</td>
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<td>Tier 3</td>
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$700 Medication Copayment Cap

Copayments stop each calendar year for Priority Groups 2–8 once a $700 cap is reached.

IMPORTANT PHONE NUMBERS

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