



Iron Mountain Doctor Awarded Bronze Star

"I took care of our soldiers the best way I knew how"



Lt. Col. Edward A. Perez-Conde, a physician on the medical staff at the VA Medical Center in Iron Mountain, was recently awarded the Bronze Star Medal for exceptionally meritorious service from June 5, 2005 to Sept. 3, 2005, while serving as the Battalion Surgeon for Task Force, 3rd Battalion, 116th Brigade Combat Team (BCT) during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Here, Maj. Stewart McCabe, left, pins the Bronze Star on Lt. Col. Edward A. Perez-Conde. Inscribed on his award citation is the following passage, "His outstanding dedication to duty during combat operations in Iraq contributed to the overwhelming success of the command's mission. Lt. Col. Perez-Conde's actions are in keeping with the finest traditions of military service and reflect great credit

upon himself, his unit, and the United States Army." Dr. Perez-Conde is trained and board-certified in Emergency Medicine.

Lt. Col. Perez-Conde joined the U.S. Army Reserve (USAR) shortly after September 11, 2001, and continues to be an active member in the reserve. "I joined (the reserve) just after Sept. 11. I wanted to serve my country and take care of our soldiers," said Perez-Conde. He feels uncomfortable being called a hero. "I had a job to do and did what I was asked to do. I took care of our soldiers the best way I knew how. Despite the constant presence of danger, you had to do your job," said Perez-Conde.

While serving with the 116th Brigade Combat Unit in Kirkuk, Iraq, Lt. Col. Perez-Conde volunteered for a combat medic

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position on the Quick Reaction Force (QRF) because of the critical shortage of combat medics. He participated in several Quick Reaction Force rescue missions supporting combat operations in that area. The Quick Reaction Force was made up of mostly civilian personnel with selected military support. Lt. Col. Edward Perez-Conde has served as a physician with DET 1 for the past 6 years. He has deployed with not only the 452nd CSH, but also with other units to Afghanistan, Iraq and Kosovo. He completed military training as a Flight Surgeon in August 2007. Originally from Puerto Rico, Perez-Conde has resided in Iron Mountain since 1999 with his wife Anna, son, Alex and daughter, Laura.

Network News

Hines

Computer Quest Program



Fred Jackson from Patient Administration Service, assists Computer Quest participants from Nutrition and Food Service.

Piloting a new program to help employees improve their career development and promotion potential, Hines launched the Computer Quest program, aimed at assisting employees in learning basic computer skills.

This new EEO program assigns computer mentors for employees who are interested in learning computer skills. These mentors train the employees on keyboarding skills and negotiating a computer; making them more marketable and certainly more satisfied in their job. “We identified quite a few employees who don’t use computers regularly in their jobs,” said Barb Hunt, who spearheads the program at Hines. “It is very limiting if you do not know how to do things like enter your own leave into the computer or use the computer to read important messages. Employees who complete this program will be able to navigate Outlook and VISTA. So far the response from employees has been incredible.”

The one-on-one computer mentoring program has started its second track at Hines. Employees of Nutrition and Food Service are participating in the 10-week program, which teaches basic keyboarding, computer familiarization and the use of VISTA and Outlook.

“Computer Quest has been incredibly successful so far,” said Hunt. “Employees are gaining valuable skills they can use in their career and in their personal lives. In addition, the employees who are serving as mentors are finding the program to be very rewarding and enjoyable.”

Supervisory Fun Fair

“Family Feud”, “Jeopardy” and “Match Game” were highlights of the first annual Hines Supervisory Fun Fair, held in late February in the auditorium. Over 100 supervisors attended the fair, which offered training in employee development, innovations, rewards and recognition ideas and the CREW (Civility, Respect, and Engagement in the Workplace) initiative. Employees participated in various games and exercises as they learned new ideas and reviewed existing leadership and training programs already available in the hospital.

The fair was sponsored by the Hines Employer of Choice Committee, held in response to feedback from last year’s VHA All Employee Survey. “The goal of the fair was to educate our supervisors on some recognition and development ideas that they, as well as their employees, can use to improve morale and satisfaction in our facility,” said Katheryn Mansell, Chairperson of the Hines Employer of Choice Committee. “It was a very lively event that promoted networking and fun for supervisors from throughout the hospital.”



Chris Johnson (Acting Associate Director and Chief of Hines’ Nutrition and Food Service) and Mike Halm (Facility Management Service) played “Jeopardy” with employees while educating them on rewards and recognition programs in the hospital.

Iron Mountain

Community – VA Collaborative Effort

VA Medical Center in Iron Mountain has the largest patient service area east of the Mississippi river. The facility is located in a rural, geographically remote, sparsely populated area of the northern Midwest United States.

This facility is a primary and secondary care facility; however, provides limited specialty services. Veteran patients in need of a specialty service test, e.g., MRI or service, e.g., cardiology care must travel 200 plus miles to the Milwaukee VA Medical Center to receive these services.

Efforts are underway to collaboratively work with the local Dickinson County Hospital (DCH) to bring the care closer to the veteran's home. The facility is working on future agreements with DCH so that more services can be offered to our veterans.



Michael J. Murphy, Iron Mountain VA Medical Center Director (left) shaking hands with Jon Schon, Dickinson County Hospital Medical Center Director, finalizing the agreement to have MRI services provided to our veterans locally.

Jesse Brown

Staff “WOW” Patients and Co-Workers



Rose Bogan, Left, an Information Receptionist who is stationed near the main entrance at Jesse Brown VA Medical Center, was one of the first staff members to receive a WOW card, from Customer Satisfaction Coordinator Nikita Floore.

The medical center's new initiative—"Working on Winning (WOW)"—provides all medical center supervisors the opportunity to present a WOW card to any employee who is seen displaying exemplary customer service or going above and beyond the call of duty. The WOW card program is geared towards recognizing front line employees and identifying winning behaviors.

After an employee receives 10 WOW cards, they may be exchanged for a \$10 gift certificate for the Medical Center's Canteen Retail Store.

Ms. Bogan actually received two WOW cards. One was given to her by the Chief of Environmental Management Service for her help in maintaining the cleanliness of the main entrance and assistance in the presentation of flags at the entrance. The other was presented to her by Nikita Floore, JBVAMC's Customer Satisfaction Coordinator.

"I gave her a WOW for going above and beyond normal customer service and providing outstanding assistance to our veterans and visitors. Rose walks people to the

areas they are looking for and even solicits escort services when needed,” Floore said.

The WOW program is one of several new initiatives at JBVAMC to promote enhanced customer satisfaction. The medical center recently established a Standards of Behavior Council, which is developing Codes of Conduct and Standards of Behavior for Medical Center staff. A poster program – including a Customer Service Tool of the Month – displays messages throughout the facility regarding the expectations JBVAMC has for its staff while interacting with veterans, visitors and family members who are receiving care or services. “These programs send a message to our employees that we want them to work on their winning behaviors and attitudes so we can WOW our veterans, their families and our visitors,” Floore said. Working on Winning (WOW) cards, (below) can be given to any front-line employee by any supervisor for providing excellent customer service.

Jesse Brown VA Medical Center

WOW

Working on Winning

To: _____
(Please Print)

Date: _____

You WOW-ed Me When You...

From: _____
(Please Print)

In the Spirit of Jesse Brown

“Just Call Us”

Jesse Brown VA Medical Center has made great strides over recent years in improving performance measure scores, but continues to struggle with missed opportunities, which is when a patient is a no-show for a clinic appointment and the medical center is unable to give that appointment time to another veteran.



For that reason, JBVAMC has established a new Call Center that patients can call to schedule, change or cancel appointments. Staff at the Call Center also place reminder phone calls to patients two days prior to an upcoming appointment. Within two weeks after the medical center began making reminder calls, the number of no-show patients had already declined by 10 percent.

The center is located at JBVAMC’s Auburn Gresham CBOC and is staffed from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Mondays through Fridays. After hours, patients may leave messages for follow-up by the Call Center staff.

The Call Center has a toll-free number that is easy to remember – (888) 569-JBVA. The medical center has developed a “Just Call Us” marketing campaign – including distributing refrigerator magnet cards and placing posters throughout the facility, of staff wearing t-shirts with the Call Center phone number – to help patients remember that number and reminding them to always cancel any appointment they cannot attend, even if it is only an hour before the appointment is scheduled to begin.

On Monday, March 17, the medical center began a new policy in which patients are not given appointments more than three months in advance. Patients who have been asked by their healthcare provider to return for a follow-up visit more than 90 days later will not be given an appointment at that time; their names will be added to a

recall list and they will receive a letter 60 days before the return visit date requesting them to schedule the appointment. Follow-up letters and phone calls will be made to the patient if the appointment is not made.

Earlier this year, JBVAMC was recognized by William F. Feeley, Deputy Under Secretary for Health for Operations and Management, for the medical center's ability to schedule clinic appointments quickly for newly-enrolled veterans. By limiting its number of missed opportunities, JBVAMC hopes it will be able to schedule appointments for veterans even quicker.

March is National Nutrition Month



Nutrition & Food Service staff show off the more than 1,000 pounds of food donated by Jesse Brown VA employees during the first week of the medical center's National Nutrition Month observance in March. The food was delivered to the Veterans Food Pantry at the medical center's Auburn Gresham CBOC. Other Nutrition Month activities included tastings of exotic (and healthy) fruits and vegetables, a Nutritional Vendors Fair and the medical center's annual "Better for You" bake-off, in which employees are invited to prepare sweet or savory dishes for which they have modified the recipes to make them healthier.

New Center Helps the Mentally Disabled Recover

Affectionately known amongst veterans as "that place on the fourth floor," the new Psychosocial Rehabilitation and Recovery Center (PRRC) at Jesse Brown VAMC is providing Severely Mentally Ill (SMI) veterans with more than just a safe place to go. A ribbon cutting ceremony

was held Dec. 7, 2007, for the opening of the PRRC—one of only 17 Centrally Office-funded programs nationally, and the first of its kind in VISN 12. Instrumental in obtaining this funding was Dr. Mark Zerwic, lead psychologist at JBVAMC.

The program provides veterans diagnosed with SMI (Schizophrenia, Schizoaffective Disorder, and Psychosis Not Otherwise Specified) the opportunity to take an active part in their recovery. In this new program, veterans get to choose whether they want to be a part of the PRRC program, and to what extent. After deciding what their recovery goals might be, the veterans are then offered a menu of evidenced-based treatment classes, including coping skills, wellness planning, and recovery integration to name a few. Resembling a school curriculum, veterans are referred to as students—not as patients.

PRRC Coordinator Dr. Mark Schneider, along with a multidisciplinary team of professionals, created this program with contributions from the veterans themselves. "We are helping veterans regain a quality of life they have not had for a while. This program is unique because veterans have had significant input into the creation of it", says Dr. Schneider. "Additionally, veterans are learning to dream again—building upon their strengths rather than allowing their psychological challenges to define who they are."

Other veterans have noticed the positive change in the individuals enrolled in the PRRC program. "We have certainly seen a difference in [the individuals] in the program," says Strike Force Chief of Staff Marvin Gardner, who mans their information table daily. "Now, those guys rarely stop to speak because they are on a mission to get to the fourth floor—and it's a good thing."

Dr. Schneider says the PRRC team is proud to have a strong, collaborative relationship with veterans. "We hear positive feedback from Strike Force, and from Vet-to-Vet members. In addition to offering services to veterans with SMI, we are committed to training veterans to facilitate their own therapeutic peer groups in the future. We believe the veterans in our facility are our single greatest resource."

PRRC students are encouraged to seek meaning and purpose in their lives, and reintegration into the community of their choice. Dr. Zerwic says, "It's never too late to become the person you might have been." Veterans now have the opportunity to pursue their dreams with support from the PRRC staff and each other.



PRRC Team members (from left) Yakov Gertsberg, MD; Mark Schneider, PhD.; Bruce Kawasawa, PhD.; Walter Jones, Peer Support Technician; Merle Pray, Clinical Nurse Specialist; and Marjorie Erdman, LCSW.

New OEF/OIF Program Manager

Valerie M. Creedon, LCSW, was recently appointed to her new position in the Medical Center's Seamless Transition Team, as Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF) Program Manager. Previously, she had worked as a licensed clinical social



worker in JBVAMC's Home Based Primary Care and Acute Medical/Surgical Care programs since February 2005. She began her VA career as an intern in the Mental Health Intensive Case Management Program at Hines VA Hospital in 2003 – 2004.

Prior to joining VA, Ms. Creedon served as supervisor in the Aftercare Case Management Program at Mercy Home for Boys and Girls for six years. She holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology from Loras

College in Dubuque, Iowa, and a Master's in Social Work from the George Williams College of Social Work at Aurora University.

Valerie heads up the medical center's Seamless Transition Team, which helps returning veterans to transition into the VA and the community. Through extensive outreach efforts, they also work with local Active, Reserve, National Guard and community agencies to inform returning veterans of the availability of VA and other resources that can help them to readjust after returning home from combat services. The OEF/OIF Seamless Transition Team, in conjunction with its counterpart at Hines VAH, is planning a Welcome Home Celebration for all of our returning OEF/OIF veterans and active duty service men and women in the spring of 2008.

Madison

Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) Program

For the 3rd year, the VAH Madison is working with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) and the Wisconsin Department of Revenue in their 2008 Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) Partnership Program. This program provides free assistance in filing 2007 income tax returns, federal and state. Assisting the patients is the top priority. The VITA folks are also assisting volunteers, employees, and their extended family members, especially single parents eligible for earned income tax credits. The program is designed to assist with basic returns and ensure individuals are aware of the tax credits for homestead and earned income. The VITA Partnership Program site manager is in his 10th year with the program, and was recently appointed to serve on the Taxpayer Advocacy Panel, an advisory panel to the IRS.

Tax assistance began on February 1st, and will continue through April 11th. The assistance is by appointment only, scheduled through the Voluntary Service Office. Fliers with the program details have been included with the patient appointment reminder letters as well as being distributed at the Main Entrance Information Desk.

Vet Center Celebrates 25 years!

In December, the Madison Vet Center celebrated 25 years of providing services for Vietnam, Vietnam Era, and other veterans. Past and present staff served as the keynote speakers, as well as the Dane County Veterans Service Officer.

A new beginning was also celebrated at this same time, with the grand opening of the Madison Vet Center in their new location at 706 Williamson Street. The new Center provides excellent outreach, referral and counseling services to all combat veterans and their families, other veterans, and bereavement counseling for families who have lost a family member while on active duty.

Mental Health Outreach Available to Veteran Students

In February, the Mental Health Service Line at the VAH Madison, in cooperation with the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA) and the University of Wisconsin (UW) System, began offering a unique and innovative telemental health outreach service for veteran students at the UW Platteville campus. The VAH Madison, WDVA, and UW were concerned about the growing number of Operation Enduring Freedom /Operation Iraqi Freedom veterans who, after using their GI Bill benefits to go to college, were beginning to experience adjustment and mental health difficulties related to their service. The partnering agencies wanted to find a way to provide veteran students with easy access to assessment and care for these issues, while not disrupting their academic schedule. Through this partnership, Madison mental health clinicians are able to evaluate and treat veteran students through a high-speed, real-time video connection to the UW Platteville Student Counseling Center. The initiative can accommodate both scheduled services and “walk-in” veterans. A wide range of outpatient mental health services are available to UW Platteville veteran students, including assessment and treatment of depression, anxiety, drug and alcohol difficulties, relationship problems, and PTSD.

The partners in this initiative each play a critical role. The VAH Madison provides the direct clinical support. WDVA provides inter-agency facilitation and some of the needed equipment. The UW System and UW Platteville provide clinical space, administrative and back-up clinical support, and a portion of the connection needed to create the telemental health link.

VAH Madison clinicians have begun to provide Mental Health intake assessments for UW Platteville veteran students and follow-up care is being scheduled. As the project grows, there are plans being developed to expand this service to at least one additional UW campus by the end of FY 2008 with additional expansions in FY 2009.

Milwaukee

A Tribute To Women Veterans



Sandra M Faulkner is shown between mannequins displaying two of the more valuable pieces of her collection. These rare uniforms were worn by members of the WASP (Women Airforce Service Pilots) and the Marine Corps (L). Mrs. Faulkner, from Racine, WI, displayed a portion of her exhibit of women’s veteran memorabilia as the centerpiece of Women’s History Month at the Milwaukee VA Medical Center. Her interest in history is enhanced by her avocation. Officially, women have been serving on active duty in the U.S. military since 1901. Unofficially, they have been serving

since the American Revolution, during which some women dressed as men to enter the Continental Army. Others accompanied their husbands to camp and then onto the battlefield. Later, during the Civil War, at least 400 women on both sides of the conflict disguised themselves as men and assumed combat roles alongside the men.

Mrs. Faulkner's extensive uniform collection of over 150 hangers dates back to World War II. Her entire display will be featured at this year's Reclaiming Our Heritage (ROH), a living history event, held on the grounds of the medical center. This year, ROH on May 31-June 1, will salute women veterans. There are many activities including Kid's Day, the Positively Patriotic Parade, Civil War demonstrations, fashion shows, a street dance, and many more fun, family activities. The event is without charge.

North Chicago

System Wide Ongoing Assessment & Review (SOARS) Visit

On January 14-18, 2008, North Chicago was visited by the National SOARS team. SOARS stands for System Wide Ongoing Assessment & Review Strategy.

The SOARS mission is to provide assessment and educational consultation to medical centers using a systematic method for on-going self-improvement. SOARS supports a continuous readiness culture where each person understands the value of their contribution to the VHA mission. SOARS vision:

- Help provide quality health services to eligible veterans.
- Assist medical centers with meeting standards of care and remain continually ready for reviews.
- Identify strong practices, sharing this information with other networks and medical centers.

The team spent five days touring the facility and interviewing staff about patient care and other aspects of the medical center.

The SOARS team found nine strong practices that they have asked North Chicago to write up so they can be shared with others in the VA family. These are:

- JCAHO Readiness Handbook "Proud to Partner"
- Automatic routine for employee separation
- AED and easy oxygen on crash carts
- Quick card patient satisfaction survey
- Scrubs instead of gowns in MRI
- Myevaluation.com (resident supervision tool)
- Resident Learner's Perceptions Survey PI template
- Primary care
- Fall Restraint Reorganization (patient safety)

Of all the medical centers surveyed to date, only one other had more "Best Practices" identified than North Chicago. The team was most impressed with the help of the staff and in particular with the caring North Chicago provides to their patients.

Martin Luther King Celebration

North Chicago VA Medical Center held their Annual Martin Luther King, Jr. celebration on January 24, 2008 with a dynamic speech by Lake County Commissioner Angelo Kyle.



Mr. Kyle's powerful message spoke to the courage of individuals like the late Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who gave his life so that all people could experience equal rights and justice. Mr. Kyle gave insight into some unknown facts about the life of Dr. King. He said that his birth name was Michael and not Martin. He told the story where Dr. King was nearly stabbed to death by a woman wielding a pair of scissors. He also told of the indecision that Dr. King faced, as he prepared to make the most famous speech in history, "I Have a Dream." Dr. King

toyed between two other key messages before finally deciding upon the speech that was heard around the world.

Other highlights from the King celebration included musical contributions by Raymond Barnes of St. Matthews Missionary Baptist Church who sang, "One Day At A Time," and a passionate vocalist, Tiffany English of Jesus Name Apostolic Church sang, "Precious Lord." Courtney Doby of St. Matthews Missionary Baptist Church recited a poem.

State Senator Michael Bond provided the introduction of the keynote speaker and shared some unknown facts as well. He said that the petition to create the King Holiday was signed by six million people and was the largest petition in favor of a positive issue in the history of the nation.

Master of Ceremonies for the event was Dr. Walid Khayr, Leader, Infection Disease; opening remarks were made by Richard Holt, Deputy Associate Director for Patient/Nursing Services and Pastor John Caples provided the Invocation. The Rev. Henry Woods of Christian Valley MB Church of North Chicago gave the Benediction. Karen Carstens served as the chairperson of the Martin Luther King Committee.



Program Participants and Martin Luther King Committee members

Black History Month

North Chicago VAMC celebrated Black History Month by recognizing black leaders and pioneers who impacted history over the years.

The celebration featured African artifacts, handouts, paintings and posters. The theme was, "The Origins of Multiculturalism." Keynote speaker included Pastor and Teacher Dr. Reginald Blount, PhD, Pastor of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Waukegan, IL, who spoke and wowed the audience with his rendition of Reverend Run's Book: Words of Wisdom: Daily Affirmations of Faith. One of NCVAMC's own veterans, Bobbie Blackwell, recited a most encouraging poem he wrote himself. The "Youth Day" program featured NCVAMC SEDOL students with dance recitals including, Waukegan Jazz Steppers Performing Arts Drill Team, and the Dist. 187 Elementary School 3rd grade class. Mr. Gary McKelvy from Commissioned Art on Canvas was also among the performing arts exhibits.

The month long celebration ended with a "Dinner at Big Momma's House," where cultural foods, cookbooks, along with handouts, posters, painting displays and a film about Black American History were featured.

Throughout the month quilt pieces were sold to support the making of a "Unity Quilt."



Black History Committee displays the "Freedom Quilt" completed in 1994. This same committee is currently working on a new "Unity Quilt" for 2008.



Proud To Care

An energizing "Proud to Care" video was created, highlighting staff and programs at the North Chicago VA Medical Center (NCVAMC). The "Proud to Care" video will be shown to new employees, job fairs, outreach to OEF/OIF, monitors in waiting areas of clinics, vet organizations, community, visitors, etc., reflecting NCVAMC as the Provider and Employer of Choice. The video reflects what we are all about; humanitarian, the spirit of our organization, "the staff" and the importance of serving our veterans/active duty customers.

Tomah

Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF) Visits

In February, surveyors from the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF) held an exit briefing following a two-day survey of the Tomah VA's Compensated Work Therapy (CWT) and Transitional Residency (TR) programs.

The surveyors described the programs as very strong. They noted management and staff were perceived by the veterans as very effective, flexible and creative in meeting the needs of the veterans. They identified many strengths of the program, including the integration of the programs as part of the medical center and the availability of the electronic medical record. The program was judged to have excellent written procedures and policies to guide practices; and, overall, was considered to be very well-organized. Safety and security practices were identified as proactive and comprehensive. Areas for improvement included four consultative suggestions and two formal recommendations, which will require action plans.

Overall, Tomah officials felt this was an outstanding survey and a clear indication of the exceptional work our staff continuously performs in this area.

Scavenger Hunt

In March, the Tomah VA rolled out its new employee Intranet web site. To introduce the site's features to staff and to encourage staff to use the new site, a "scavenger hunt" was created.

A series of ten questions was developed with all the answers easily found in resources available on the website. Questions included an employee's telephone extension, the address of one of the Community Based Outpatient Clinics, the menu in the Canteen restaurant, what information is available on My HealthVet, etc. Employees were allowed to enter the contest one time; all those with correct answers were entered into a weekly drawing for 59-minutes of authorized absence.

Expand and Adapt Services to Meet Veterans' Needs

The Tomah VA is on the move! Some of the newest initiatives include:

- Establishing a new Mental Health model called "VICTOR:" Veterans Integrated Center for Treatment Outreach Recovery; a choice of programming will be offered to inpatients and outpatients alike.
- Expanding the Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) in La Crosse to include additional space for mental health in a nearby building.
- Relocating the facility-based Mental Health Intensive Case Management (MHICM) – also known as the Community Support Program – to a location off-campus in the Tomah community.
- Expanding the Compensated Work Therapy/Therapeutic Residence (CWT/TR) program, which now has room for ten veterans, and potentially moving it into the community.
- Home Based Primary Care will provide medical care to our veterans in their homes. The program is currently being developed and staff are being hired.

- All inpatient units are working on "Cultural Transformation" to make the environments and work processes more home-like and resident-centered. One of our residents worked as a licensed Nursing Home Administrator in California for many years. He now serves as an honorary member of our Long Term Care Council. This is an example of a resident-centered action.

Partnering With The National Guard

The Tomah VA has been developing a strong working relationship with the National Guard of Wisconsin and the end result has been a smoother transition into the world of being a "veteran" for Guard members returning from service in Iraq and Afghanistan.



Since 2003, Tomah VA staff have welcomed home and registered over 9,000 soldiers.

The VA is introduced to returning soldiers at demobilization events ("demobs") at Fort McCoy, which is located about ten miles from the Tomah VA. Soldiers, fresh from the theater of operations, go through a series of stations before going home. One station is for the VA, where the soldiers complete enrollment forms and explanations regarding their health benefits in VA. If they have immediate needs, telephone contact is made with the Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom case manager at their home VA. Soldiers without immediate needs are given the name and telephone number of his/her OEF/OIF case manager at their home VA. VA staff at the demobilizations mail the soldiers' forms to the VA facility of their choice so that he/she can be registered immediately in that system. Soldiers also receive benefits information from representatives of the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA).

Tomah VA staff have been attending demobs for over two years. Once optional, this well-received program is now mandated for all National Guard soldiers who are

coming home. Challenges exist for the staff involved, as demobs are often scheduled with little notice, and many events take place on weekends and holidays.

The program is about to expand. The National Guard is now offering quarterly "Community Based Health Care Organizations" (CBHCO) for soldiers who remain on active duty but who are on "medical hold." These soldiers have medical or mental conditions requiring further treatment or evaluation before they are allowed to go home. By remaining on active duty status, the soldier continues to receive his/her pay, rather than being discharged, not being able to work, and waiting for Compensation and Pension claims to be processed without any income.

The National Guard has invited VA to become involved at the CBHCO events. While there, VA representatives would see between 45 – 100 soldiers from six area states and their families. Staff would explain VA benefits, contact each soldier's home VA and provide the soldier with contact information for their home VA. Becoming involved in the CBHCO's will take the re-entry service one step further for the Tomah VA.

Another way the VA makes contacts with new veterans is at the National Guard's "reintegration" events. These events usually take place at a hotel or resort 45 – 60 days after the demobilization. Families are invited and the events serve as a "reunion" of sorts for the soldiers. These events are an excellent time for the VA to re-establish contact with the new veterans: many were in a hurry to get home during their demobilization process, and now, a month or two after being home, readjustment issues and other problems may have started to surface. The reintegration events also provide an opportunity for family members to talk to VA providers about concerns they may have regarding their veterans.

It's important to say "Welcome Home" to soldiers coming home from Iraq and Afghanistan. The Tomah VA is working hand-in-hand with the National Guard to take that welcome a few steps further and insure an easier transition back home for our country's newest veterans.

Champions' Challenge-Coming to a Close

The Tomah VA's Veterans' Canteen Service (VCS) and Healthier US Veterans Committee invited veterans, community members, and VA employees to join in the event-end of the "Champions' Challenge."

Last November, 315 individuals registered for "Challenge" participation. Individuals were urged to walk or roll 100 miles in 100 days while earning prizes along the way. One prize per person was issued for each milestone completed. Milestones were 25, 50, 75, and 100 miles. Those who met or exceeded the 100 mile milestone were eligible to enter a special national prize competition.

The "Champions' Challenge" event-end walk/roll occurred last month in concert with National Nutrition Month. Those who took the "Challenge" were encouraged to keep up the life-enriching physical activity in their quest to get fit for life.

Network Awards and Recognition

Physicians Honored at Hines VA Hospital

Two Hines physicians were recent recipients of prestigious awards honoring their commitment to patient care and teaching excellence.

Dr. Todd Ing was named the recipient of the 2008 Medal of Excellence from the American Association of Kidney Patients (AAKP). The AAKP medal honors a physician who has achieved outstanding success in caring for kidney disease patients, while also possessing extraordinary skills and devotion in the field of nephrology.

Dr. Ing is most highly noted for his outstanding patient care and support during his more than 25 years of service at the VA. His enthusiasm for his patients and his field of expertise has been disseminated by his teaching, publication of articles and books and his

organization of educational seminars for patients and healthcare professionals. He is a key member of the renal community, both nationally and internationally.

Dr. Scott Pawlikowski was named the Attending Professor of the Year at the Loyola Stritch School of Medicine. This award is given annually to honor faculty members for their expertise, dedication and enthusiasm in educating medical students to become knowledgeable, skilled and caring physicians. The Stritch Class of 2008 voted Dr. Pawlikowski Attending of the Year.

Dr. Pawlikowski has been working at Hines since July 2004. He routinely interacts with residents in his duties at Hines and teaches two classes for second year students. "I greatly enjoy teaching," he said. "The students keep us young, honest and on our toes with all the questions they ask."

Hines VA H Employees Published in International Manual

A group of dedicated Hines employees recently received word that their expertise and hard work will be shared internationally with other healthcare professionals. Congratulations to the following members of the Nutrition Support Team (NST) for their contribution to the American Society for Parenteral and Enteral Nutrition's (A.S.P.E.N.'s) recent publication of The Nutrition Support Patient Education Manual: Mary Theresa Lau, RN, MS, CNSN, APN, Katie Heintz-Miller, RD, CNSD, and Raymond Byrne, PharmD, BCSP. The NST shared their Home Total Parenteral Nutrition Booklet with A.S.P.E.N. who made only very minor changes in order to enhance the utility for all users.

This training manual will be used internationally for the training of patients who safely receive intravenous nutrition at home. It will benefit patients around the world. A.S.P.E.N is dedicated to improving patient care by advancing the science and practice of nutrition support therapy. With more than 5,500 members from around the world, A.S.P.E.N. is a community of dietitians, nurses, pharmacists, physicians, scientists,

students and other health professionals from every facet of nutrition support clinical practice, research and education.



The Hines Nutrition Support Team (from Left) Katie Heintz-Miller, RN, CNSD, Mary Theresa Lau, RN, MS, CNSN, APN and Raymond Byrne, PharmD, BCSP

Recreation Therapist Receives Positive Publicity

Jill Kalfoken-Jacobsen, a recreation therapist, was recently interviewed and photographed as part of an Associated Press story on the use of the Nintendo Wii video game for therapy, often called “Wii-abilitation.” A photograph of Jill, who was interviewed along with one of our OIF patients using the Wii, was featured along with stories appearing in newspapers around the country and even some international newspapers. The second page of the *Chicago Sun Times* and the front page of the Business Section of the *Tribune* carried the story, along with WBBM Radio and Medill News Service. Congratulations to Jill for portraying Hines in a professional manner and bringing the hospital and the VA some great positive publicity that extended across the country.

Dr. James C. Allen Veteran Vision Equity Act

In late December, President Bush signed into law an expansion of benefits for veterans with eye injuries. That law is named the Dr. James C. Allen Veteran Vision Equity Act. The law allows veterans who have a complete loss of sight in one eye due to a service-

connected injury to receive increased disability compensation if they begin to lose sight in their other eye, regardless of whether that loss of sight is service-connected. A 2002 federal law corrected a similar deficiency for those who suffered service-connected hearing loss.

Dr. Allen, a VAH Madison retired ophthalmologist, treated veterans there from 1967-2000. He saw the need for the benefits change for some of his patients and took action. Seven years ago, Dr. Allen researched solutions and started lobbying for the change by meeting with the local congressional representative. Dr. Allen was accompanied at that initial meeting by one of his patients that would benefit from an expansion of the vision benefits. We salute Dr. Allen for his outstanding determination in getting this inequity for America’s veterans corrected.



CARES

200 Bed Tower - “It’s a gorgeous facility with state-of-the-art equipment”

Jesse Brown VA Medical Center’s new 200-bed inpatient addition is nearing completion and is expected to begin admitting patients in mid-May of this year. The bed tower will house all inpatient beds, seven operating rooms, a cystology room, intensive care units, inpatient dialysis, SPD, outpatient surgical center and a chapel. The seven-floor, 223,000 square foot facility was funded under the Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services (CARES) Decision Document.

“It’s a gorgeous facility with state of the art equipment,” says Medical Center Director James S. Jones. “There won’t be a finer medical center in the City of Chicago and it is exactly what our veterans deserve.”

The bed tower offers Same Day Surgery and a chapel on its first floor, operating rooms and post-anesthesia on the second floor and an intensive care unit and telemetry/step down unit on the fourth floor. Medical/surgical inpatient units are located on the fifth and sixth floors, with the sixth floor also containing a Physical Therapy gym. There are also six family waiting rooms located throughout the facility, as well as a vending area.

The new addition is street accessible via Ogden Avenue and is conveniently located next to the MedPark parking garage. It can also be entered from within JBVAMC's main hospital building via the elevators on the 1st, 2nd, and 4th floors.



JBVAMC Director James S. Jones leads members of the VA Great Lakes Health Care System on a tour of the new patient bed tower.

Construction on New Parking Garage Begins at North Chicago



The new parking garage is scheduled to be completed in June 2008. The parking garage will provide patient and handicap parking. A four story open structure with 562 parking spaces, the parking garage will greatly improve facility accessibility.

Upon completion, a ribbon cutting ceremony will officially activate the new parking garage.

As parking garage construction continues, the contractor will be relocating utilities to prepare for the ambulatory care center construction for the new ambulatory care center which will begin shortly after activation of the parking garage.

We appreciate everyone's cooperation during these construction periods and are doing our best to assure patient services are not interrupted. We realize there will be some inconveniences during construction, however the end result will enhance our facility and help accomplish our VA/DoD Partnership integration.



Shuttle and Valet Parking Services During Construction

To ease the burden brought on by the construction, a new service has been temporarily made available at the North Chicago VAMC. First, a FREE Valet Parking Service in front of Bldg. 134 for all patients, as well as drivers with disabilities or those who require extra assistance is offered. It is available Monday – Friday, excluding federal holidays from 7 a.m.-4:30p.m. or later if needed.



Secondly, a Shuttle Service originating in the new south parking lot #11, will transport passengers to the front doors of Bldgs. 131, 133, 134, 135. The three shuttle buses will operate simultaneously on the route - one bus will always be present in parking lot #11 as the other two travel the route. The Shuttle Service operates Monday – Friday, excluding federal holidays from 6:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. The Shuttle Service will also provide transportation to and from the Great Lakes Train Station.

- 7:30 a.m. Pick up at Great Lakes Train Station and transport to NCVAMC
- 7:40 a.m. Pick up at Great Lakes Train Station and transport to NCVAMC
- 4:45 p.m. Shuttle will make one route to all scheduled stops: Bldgs. 131, 133, 134, 135 and then proceed to the train station for drop - off



The new parking plan will remain in effect until the parking garage is completed in June 2008. Fliers and maps have been distributed to help patients and staff with the parking and traffic changes.

Changes for Patient Financial Services Product Line

February 1st, 2008, was the long anticipated day for the VISN 12 Patient Financial Services (PFS) Product Line staff at the VAH Madison. It was official moving day! The movers arrived to



assist the staff in their relocation from the 7th Floor D Wing to a business setting at 3220 Deming Way, Suite 120, in Middleton. The new location is approximately 7 miles west of the hospital in the Blettner Corporation Business Park.

When Congress passed the Veterans Health-Care Amendments of 1986, VA was given the authority to seek reimbursement from third – party health insurers for the cost of medical care furnished to insured non-service connected (NSC) veterans. This law also authorized VA to assess a means test copayment to certain NSC veterans based on their income and assets. In 1990, the law was expanded to allow VA to seek reimbursement from third–party payers for the cost of medical care provided to insured service-connected veterans. As part of the passage of the Balanced Budget Act of 1997, Congress provided VA the authority to retain funds from third-party payments in a Medical Care Collections Fund (MCCF). VA also has the authority to collect inpatient, outpatient, medication and nursing home copayments from veterans and authority to recover third-party payments from veteran’s insurers. This money must be spent on providing VA medical care and services and on VA’s expenses associated with MCCF program operations. Patient Financial Services within VISN 12 is charged with responsibility for third-party and first party billing collections activities for seven hospitals and their associated Community Based Outpatient Clinics.

PFS became a VISN product line in 2000. PFS provides the MCCF operations for VISN 12 as one of three consolidated MCCF operations in the Department of Veteran Affairs. PFS is authorized for staffing of 170.5 employees. The majority of this staff are located in Middleton, however, specialty billing is done at Tomah, WI, and insurance verification is located in Iron Mountain, MI. Additionally, customer service staff is located at each medical facility to provide face to face assistance to patients regarding billing questions.

The Chief Business Office establishes expected results for each medical facility in the Network. In 2006, PFS collected just over \$30 million for VISN 12; last year, collections totaled over \$119 million. PFS also collected approximately \$17 million in Tricare and over \$300,000

in CHAMPVA funds in 2007. This year PFS is expected to collect approximately \$121 million for the Network. To accomplish this, PFS generates approximately 80,000 claims per month for the seven VISN medical facilities.



PFS had outgrown the space at the VAH Madison. The D Wing of the 7th floor was originally designed for approximately 90 employees. The current authorization for PFS staff located at Madison now numbers 122, not including intermittent student hires. While previously occupying approximately 10,000 square feet, the floor plan was designed with workflow in mind and incorporated some room for additional growth. The layout has cubicles in the center of the one story design with managers and supervisor offices around the perimeter. Additional space was carved out for meetings, training and storage. The main conference room can readily accommodate 50 people and is set up with video conferencing capability. It will also serve as a training room, with several computer terminals to support small groups. The PFS staff invites you to stop in and visit when you are in the area.



Along with PFS's new location comes a new leader. On January 6, 2008, Loretta M. Gulley joined the VISN 12 team as Director of Patient Financial Services. Her primary responsibilities include

management of the product line, and liaison with VISN and facility management officials, as well as being the

primary VISN 12 contact for the Chief Business Office in VA Central Office.

Prior to joining the VISN 12 team, Ms. Gulley was the Chief Operating Officer for the Mid-Atlantic Consolidated Patient Account Center in Asheville, NC. She also served as Business Implementation Manager/Network Revenue Manager in VISN 7 and a Project Manager in VISN 11 during the initial planning for CPAC. She brings 27 years of federal service to VISN 12, with previous positions that include Assistant Chief, Medical Administration Service at VAMC, Battle Creek, Michigan; MCCR Manager; Program Analyst; and Coding Supervisor. Ms. Gulley received an undergraduate degree from Great Lakes Christian College in Lansing, Michigan and an MBA in Strategic Planning from Davenport University in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Networks 11 and 12 Collaborate

Strategies to Help Veterans Lose Weight Explored in MOVE Conference

Jesse Brown VAMC was the site of the first multi-VISN MOVE (Managing Overweight Veterans Everywhere) Conference as Networks 11 and 12 co-sponsored a MOVE and Weight Management conference on March 6th–7th. Speakers included VISN 12 Chief Medical Officer Jeff Murawsky, MD, and Louis J. Aronne, MD, Professor of Clinical Medicine at Weill Cornell Medical College, who is internationally recognized for his contributions to the research and treatment of obesity.

Other guest speakers included Ken Jones, PhD, MOVE Program Manager with VHA's National Center for Health Promotion & Disease Prevention, and Susi Lewis, MA, RN, MOVE Special Projects Coordinator. Representatives from each medical center in VISN 11 and 12 attended the conference, which focused on reducing the incidence of obesity and diabetes through the MOVE program.

A presentation was also made on Bariatric Surgery by Jay Prystowsky, MD, Chief of Surgery for Jesse Brown

VA. JBVAMC will be the first medical center in VISN 12 to offer surgical procedures to provide additional options for patients trying to lose weight.



Presenters at the VISN 11/12 MOVE Conference included Dr. Louis Aronne, Professor of Clinical Medicine at Weill Cornell Medical College, who is internationally recognized for his contributions to the research and treatment of obesity

U.S. Air Force National Civic Outreach Tour

Taking care of patients who have been injured on the battlefield in Iraq or Afghanistan is something many VA employees are privileged to do on a routine basis. Even though several patients have come to Hines' Spinal Cord Injury Unit weeks after sustaining a battlefield injury, most of our employees can only imagine what these servicemen and women have been through, being injured and treated on the battlefield, transported to a hospital in a country like Germany, and then brought back to the United States.

Recently, Nathan Geraths, Hines Director, and Monica Steiner, MD, Chief of Hines Rehabilitation Service, got a firsthand look at what some veterans experience following a battlefield injury. They were privileged to participate in a U. S. Air Force National Civic Outreach Tour, which included flying on one of the military's C-17 Globemaster III aircrafts, otherwise known as a "Flying ICU" and visiting two premier military medical facilities in San Antonio, Texas.



Military personnel are able to treat critically ill service members mid-flight on the Airforce C-17 aircraft. This "dummy" was set up for the tour to show participants what the actual treatment facility looks like.

The tour began at 5:00 a.m. at O'Hare airport, where Mr. Geraths and Dr. Steiner, along with rehabilitation experts from throughout the Chicago healthcare community, climbed aboard the mobile ICU aircraft to travel to Wilford Hall Medical Center in San Antonio.



Kathleen Yosko, President and CEO of Marianjoy Rehabilitation Hospital, Brig. Gen (Dr) Byron C. Hepburn, Command Surgeon of the Air Mobility Command, Dr. Monica Steiner, Chief of Hines' Rehabilitation Service Line and Nathan Geraths, Hines Director, posed for a photo before boarding the C-17 Globemaster Aircraft (otherwise known as a mobile ICU).

Immediately the group was impressed by the mobile ICU, which is set up to treat critically ill patients in the air. Dummy patients were set up in the beds and the tour participants were given a thorough briefing about the medical capabilities of the Air Force treatment team while in the air enroute to the United States.

“It was very exciting to be in an aircraft that has actually flown injured service members home from the conflict,” Geraths said. “It made us feel very connected to these soldiers and very proud of how our military is able to provide them with top quality healthcare in this kind of environment.”

Following the plane ride, tour participants arrived at Wilford Hall Medical Center to hear briefings on the medical center’s mission, advances in trauma care, emergency war surgery and war-related mental health conditions. They were introduced to numerous medical personnel at the facility and encouraged to ask questions at all times. “I was so impressed with the Air Force servicemen and women we met, both on the plane and at the medical center,” said Dr. Steiner. “They were clearly very committed to treating our injured veterans and were extremely enthusiastic about their mission.”

The final leg of the tour included a trip across town to the Center for the Intrepid. The Center for the Intrepid is a National Armed Forces Physical Rehabilitation Center built by donations from over 600,000 Americans. The Center is a 65,000 square foot facility dedicated to providing service members with severe extremity injuries and amputations the opportunity to maximize their ability to live and work productively. The facility includes a sophisticated gait lab, two-story rock climbing wall and a computer-assisted rehabilitation environment throughout.

“Seeing the facilities available for our returning soldiers was an amazing and unforgettable experience,” said Dr. Steiner. “They use sophisticated virtual reality training to improve balance and coordination and patients really enjoy the exercises. This equipment is cutting edge and provides wonderful opportunities for research that has potential to improve care for patients with many different disabilities. It’s wonderful to know that our veterans are benefitting from this equipment and care provided at this facility. I came back to Hines after this tour, very

energized and as always, feeling very privileged to be treating our patients.”

Mr. Geraths agreed. “The VA, like the Center for the Intrepid, is dedicated to treating severely wounded military heroes whose selfless sacrifices for our Nation entitle them to the best care possible. This trip made me feel proud to be a part of the VA/DoD team treating our wounded warriors.”

VA DoD Partnership Website

Creating the future of federal healthcare through excellence in world-class patient care, customer service, education and research.

<http://www.visn12.med.va.gov/NorthChicago/VA-DoD.htm>

Introducing the VA/DoD Partnership Website!

Above listed is the link to the North Chicago VA Medical Center and Naval Health Clinic Great Lakes *Proud To Partner Website*. It includes, information on Partnership Updates, Construction News, Frequently Asked Questions, and a Sharing Timeline. This site is on the North Chicago VA Medical Center Homepage—click on the *Proud to Partner Logo*.

2008 All Employee Survey Coming Soon!

The 2008 all employee survey (AES) will begin on April 21 and end May 12, 2008.

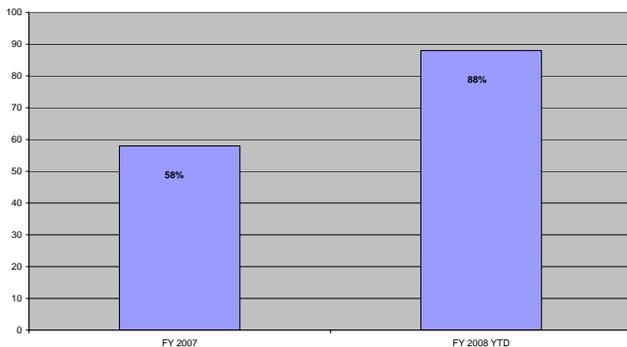
VISN 12 participation in last year’s survey was 86%, a full 7% points higher than the National average.

Participation has been exceptional due to the efforts of facility coordinators and individual supervisors encouraging staff to participate. Learn more at the AES website: <http://aes.VSSC.Med.VA.Gov/default.aspx>

Patient Safety is a Priority

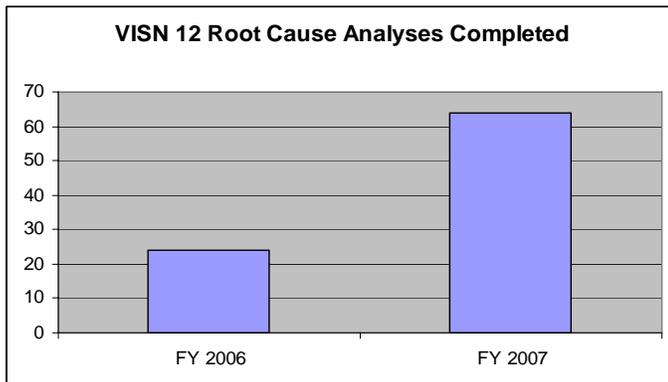
VHA Headquarters has issued a strong mandate to make patient safety a high priority, in our medical facilities, especially in the area of Root Cause Analysis (RCA). The intent of the RCA process is to foster a culture of patient safety by systematically reviewing, and evaluating our errors and to develop actions which minimize and prevent root causes from happening again. VISN 12 has made immense strides in improving on completing Root Cause Analysis (RCA's) in 45 days, and, according to recent National Center for Patient Safety (NCPS) data, is currently in 4th place in VHA, for reaching this goal.

VISN 12 Root Cause Analysis Percent Completed within 45 Days



RCA activity has increased across the Network compared to previous years. As a result of this heightened awareness in patient safety culture, during FY07, 64 RCA's were chartered and completed as compared to 24 in FY06. Although, one facility did not meet the minimal (4) standard/yr in FY06, all 7 sites met the minimal 4/yr standard in FY07.

VISN 12 Root Cause Analyses Completed



In response to the Headquarter mandate to improve patient safety, the Network identified performance improvement goals to include ongoing monitoring of facility RCA completion progress to:

- 1) Improve overall RCA quality
- 2) Increase the number of individual RCA's performed to meet the new minimum standard
- 3) Track the completion of all RCA generated actions.

The need for overall staff training in RCA's was identified and completed October 2007, and will be repeated annually.

Objectives of the staff training program include the following:

- Understand the role of root cause analysis (RCA) in creating a culture of patient safety.
- Understand the key principles for conducting a formal, systematic RCA.
- Understand how to improve the quality of RCA's, including producing stronger actions and outcomes and follow-through methods.
- Understand how to better use the Safety Assessment Code (SAC) tool.

VISN 12 NCPS data over the last period in the recent 3 year cycle has shown steady improvement. This program will focus on how to sustain current improvements and help participants use a formal, systematic process to conduct and learn from RCA's.

Congratulations to all staff who have initiated, and participated on these teams to improve outcomes and patient safety across the Network.

National Salute to Hospitalized Veterans

A variety of musical and social events were held during the National Salute to Hospitalized Veterans Week at the **Iron Mountain VAMC**. Cake was served each day to the outpatients in the first floor waiting room; these refreshments were sponsored by various service organizations. The highlight of the week was the Friends and Family event held in the Nursing Home Care Unit (see photo right).



At **Milwaukee VAMC**, representatives from all of the armed forces as well as local political officials and Members of Congress dined with patients throughout the Medical Center and domiciliaries. Tim Schneider, a Vietnam Veteran and deputy for the Disabled American Veterans at the Milwaukee VAMC, (below left) shakes hands with former Milwaukee Brewer, Larry Heisel. Below right, Archbishop Timothy Dolan, of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, saluted patients at Sunday morning Mass. Mark Topolski, a patient in the intensive care unit at the Medical Center, was one of the many patients he visited.



Patients at the **VAH Madison** were treated to an abundance of bedside visitors in celebration of the National Salute to Hospitalized Veterans. A number of organizations provided outstanding support of the event including the University of Wisconsin (UW) Athletic Department and UW Spirit Squad, U.S. Marines, Service organizations officials from the state, district and local levels, Wisconsin's Department of Agriculture, who sent Miss Alice in Dairyland, the Department's official Representative (pictured left) who visited with a number of inpatients.

February 12-18, 2008



With the help of staff, volunteers and visitors, National Salute to Hospitalized Veterans Week was celebrated at the **North Chicago VAMC**. The event hosted a number of visitors including Mayor Ken Kessler of Mundelein. The Great Lakes Naval Station was well represented by their Commanding Officer, Chief of Staff and a number of Corpsmen who volunteered to help escort veterans to celebratory activities. Coinciding with Valentine's Day, the same sentiments of caring and sharing matched the salute's purpose of expressing honor and appreciation to this nation's veterans.



Over 4,000 Valentine greetings were received and distributed by guests that included the Warrens Cranberry Festival Royalty, Little Miss and Junior Little Miss Tomah, the Ladies Auxiliary of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and Tomah Area Chamber of Commerce "Ambassadors." Pictured Left, Toby Lane, Acting Associate Director; Jerry Molnar, Acting Director, Sue Brueggeman, Nutrition and Food Service; and the Cranberry Royalty pose with the Valentine cake created by Brueggeman during **Tomah VA's** National Salute Week.

The **Tomah VA** held their veterans' art contest as part of their National Salute observance. The "People's Choice" award was presented to Michael Aschenbrenner for his oil painting, "Natural Crossing." Presenting the awards are Pat Flanders, American Legion Auxiliary; Christina Thompson, Miss Wisconsin 2007; and Glenna Busby, Help Hospitalized Veterans. The American Legion Auxiliary and Help Hospitalized Veterans are the two primary sponsors of the National Veterans Creative Arts Festival.



VISN 12 Supports Local Creative Arts Festivals



In support of the annual National Veterans Creative Arts Festival (NVCAF), a number of VISN 12 facilities sponsored local creative arts festivals, where veterans exhibit their artwork or perform musical, dance, dramatic or original writing selections. Above, **Milwaukee VAMC** festival patrons peruse the artwork exhibit.

The National Veterans Creative Arts Festivals is one of four national programs in Recreation/Creative Arts Therapy. As VA medical facilities incorporate creative arts into their recreation therapy programs, the NVCAF competition recognizes the progress and recovery made through that therapy, and raises the visibility of the creative achievements of veterans after disease, disability or life crisis.

The **Milwaukee VA Medical Center** held their local Creative Arts Festival Competition on March 3. Over 100 visual art pieces were entered in the art show, and two separate stage show performances entertained appreciative audiences of over 200.

Vietnam veteran Michael Tekiela (pictured below) was one of over 50 veterans to display their artistic talents during **Jesse Brown VAMC's** seventh annual Arts and Crafts Show on March 6. Tekiela's model ship, *The Astrolebe*, received a first-place ribbon in the Model Building-Wood Kits category.



The **Tomah VA** held their veterans art contest in concert with their National Salute to Hospitalized Veterans observance. The "People's Choice Award" was presented to Michael Aschenbrenner for his oil painting, "Natural Crossing." Presenters of the award included representatives from the American Legion Auxiliary, Help Hospitalized Veterans, and Miss Wisconsin 2007. The American Legion Auxiliary and Help Hospitalized Veterans are the two primary sponsoring Service Organizations of the National Veterans Creative Arts Festival, along with the Department of Veterans Affairs.

For more information on the annual national event, October 20-26, 2008, Loma Linda, California, go to <http://www1.va.gov/vetevent/caf/2008>.



VA Increases Its Budget and Expanded Services for Mental Health and Suicide Prevention

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has significantly increased its budget and services for mental health programs and has greatly enhanced its suicide prevention services, the VA's chief mental health official said in recent testimony before the House Veterans Affairs Committee (HVAC).

Dr. Ira Katz, Deputy Chief of Patient Care Services for VA's Office of Mental Health, testified VA will spend \$3 billion in fiscal 2008 on mental health services for veterans – a 50 percent increase since 2001. VA has hired more than 3,600 new mental health employees since 2005, bringing the current total to more than 10,000.

Testifying at the Committee's Dec. 12 hearing focusing on suicide prevention, Dr. Katz said VA has expanded its services in several ways, including the recent addition of a 24-hour, seven-day a week Suicide Prevention Hotline (1-800-273-TALK). VA now has suicide prevention coordinators at each of its 153 hospitals nationwide, and has more than 200 mental health providers whose jobs are specifically devoted to preventing suicide among veterans. In addition, VA educates veterans and family members and trains employees about suicide risk factors and warning signs of suicide.

"The Department of Veterans Affairs believes that it is our obligation to work to prevent suicide both in individual patients and in the entire veterans' population," Katz said. "Our suicide prevention activities are based on the principle that in order to decrease the rates of suicide, we must provide enhanced access to high quality mental health care and to develop programs specifically designed to help prevent suicide."

VA's suicide prevention program includes two centers which conduct research and provide technical assistance for all locations to use. The Mental Health Center of Excellence in Canandaigua, NY, focuses on developing and testing clinical and public health intervention and

serves as home base for the Suicide Prevention Hotline. The Mental Illness Research and Education and Clinical Center in Denver focuses on research in the clinical and neurobiological sciences.

Dr. Katz said the Suicide Prevention Hotline already has made a significant impact in providing immediate, crisis-oriented counseling to veterans (as well as their family members and friends) when they call. Suicide prevention coordinators follow up each call to provide enhanced treatment monitoring for veterans at risk and ensure follow up on any missed appointments. Coordinators also educate their colleagues, veterans and families about the risks for suicide to maintain awareness and care for those who have previously attempted suicide.

Since the Hotline began service in late July, it has received more than 250 calls resulting in immediate emergency services that may have helped save a life. From Oct. 7 to Nov. 10, 1,636 veterans and 311 family members called the Hotline number. Those calls led to 363 referrals to suicide prevention coordinators and 93 rescues involving emergency services.

Dr. Katz reported a preliminary evaluation of suicide rates among veterans returning from service in Iraq and Afghanistan that shows the rate of suicide for those veterans is not statistically significant different from the suicide rate for age, sex and race matched individuals from the general population. "Nevertheless, one suicide among those who have served their country is too much," Katz said and reported the population of veterans who receive care from VA have more risk factors for suicide than the general population. "Those who come to the VA for care tend to be older, less socio-economically well off, and more likely to have a mental health condition or another chronic condition, this increased need can be associated with increased risks. This, in fact, was one of the major factors leading to VA's focus on suicide prevention."

Katz said about 100,500 of the 750,000 veterans from the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have come to VA with a mental health condition since the beginning of the war, representing about 10 percent of the total number of veterans with mental health issues that the VA sees in any one year.

Multi Media Outreach Program Coming Soon!



**talk,
listen,
connect™**

Deployments, Homecomings, Changes

**Talk, Listen, Connect:
Deployments, Homecomings, Changes**

Coming April 29th!

is a new Sesame Street bilingual, multimedia outreach program designed to help support military families with young children experiencing deployments and multiple deployments or when a parent returns home injured.

Kits include:

- Two Sesame Street DVDs
- A Parent/Caregiver Magazine
- A Children's Activity Poster
- Muppet Postcards

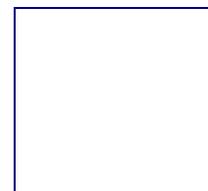


Starting April 29, 2008, order your FREE Sesame Street kit by visiting Military One Source online at www.militaryonesource.com

Or call anytime! For active duty, National Guard, Reserves (regardless of activation status) and their families.

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TTY/TDD: 1-800-346-9188
Visit www.militaryonesource.com for overseas access codes
These kits will also be available as a free download at www.sesameworkshop.org/tlc

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