



Health Beat

Winter 2008

News from the South Central VA Health Care Network

www.visn16.med.va.gov

VISN 16 VA Voluntary Service Volunteers Help Veterans After Deployment

By Pamela Harrion, VISN 16 Writer-Editor/Public Affairs Officer

Transitioning from a returning combat veteran to a veteran patient may be a hard task for some after deployment, especially when he or she has had the duty of protecting everyone in the entire country everyday. That is where VISN 16 Veterans Affairs Voluntary Service (VAVS) volunteers step in to provide the necessary services for veterans to help them cope with the transition.



VISN 16 VAVS volunteers provide many important functions throughout the Network and help make patients' stays at the medical centers more comfortable and enjoyable. Some of their roles include escorting patients, performing administrative duties, creating activities, such as teaching

arts and crafts and developing newsletters at medical centers.

VAVS volunteers also assist VISN 16 staff in hospice programs, outpatient clinics, home-based primary care and outreach centers. At cemeteries, volunteers provide military honors at burial services, create memorials, plant trees and flowers, build historical trails and place flags on graves for Memorial Day and Veterans Day. And, volunteers have been particularly active in supporting community programs aimed at reaching and serving the homeless, as well as assisting with national and local "showcase events" aimed at introducing people with disabilities, etc.

Many VAVS volunteers are proud to assist veterans, and have served as VAVS volunteers for a long time. One such volunteer, Ray Merrick, says he enjoys helping veterans. "It feels good and worthwhile to be able to help out," he said. Merrick volunteers at the Jack C.

Montgomery VAMC in Muskogee Oklahoma and is an escort volunteer. He began volunteering on September 18, 1983 and has over 42,466 hours of service! He also served in WWII and Korea, and earned nine battle stars from serving in the Pacific.

Ronald Butler, a retired military officer, veteran, and VAVS volunteer, who serves as receptionist in the EKG Waiting Room, says, "I'm retired military - I'm with my people; volunteering gives me a sense of being able to contribute something. These are great people to work with." He volunteers at the Veterans Health Care System of the Ozarks in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

Also a veteran, Karen Shaver treasures the opportunity to support fellow vets. "I love volunteering, because it puts warm, fuzzy smiles on people's faces," says Shaver, Women Veterans of America volunteer. "Veterans deserve our support, and volunteering here is my

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Pictured is Ray Merrick. He is an escort volunteer at the Jack C. Montgomery VAMC in Muskogee, OK.

Suicide Prevention is Everyone's Business

By William N. Outlaw, Communications Manager, VA Central Office

Suicide Prevention Is Everyone's Business - that's the message the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is sending to veterans, their family members and friends, and the general public as part of its nationwide campaign to prevent suicides among veterans.

VA has launched a series of activities to increase public awareness of the warning signs of suicide. During National Suicide Prevention Awareness Week, which took place Sept. 7-13, VA released a nationwide Public Service Announcement featuring actor Gary

Sinise, who portrayed a suicidal veteran in the movie *Forrest Gump* who was saved at the last minute. Another PSA featuring newswoman Deborah Norville, host of the television program *Inside Edition*, is being developed to target the family members of veterans.

"Preventing suicide among veterans is a top priority at VA," said Dr. Michael J. Kussman, Under Secretary for Health. "Each and every veteran suicide is a tragedy. We are committed to doing everything we can to prevent these sad events from occurring."

VA also recently began a pilot project involving an advertising campaign in the metropolitan Washington, D.C., area. Display ads on transit buses and in metro stations are designed to make veterans and their family members aware of the VA Suicide Prevention Hotline (1-800-273-TALK/8255), which makes trained mental health professionals available to speak with veterans in emotional crisis, or with their family members, around the clock.

More than 33,000 veterans, family members or friends of veterans have called the Hotline since July 2007

when it began operating. Of those, more than 1,600 have been considered rescues, and have prevented possible tragedies.

In addition, VA has sponsored two previous Suicide Prevention Awareness events and placed announcements about suicide prevention and the VA Lifeline on VA's website (www.va.gov).

VA also is distributing brochures, wallet cards, telephone stickers, bumper magnets, key chains and stress balls to veterans, their families and VA employees to promote awareness of the

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South Central VA Health Care Network, also known as VISN 16, is one of 21 Veterans Integrated Service Networks (VISNs) of the Department of Veterans Affairs. VISN 16 is comprised of 10 medical centers and 40 community-based outpatient clinics that serve veterans in all or parts of the following eight states— Oklahoma, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas, Missouri, Alabama and Florida.





VISN 16 VA Voluntary Service

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contribution.” Shaver volunteers three times a week at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center in Houston, Texas and distributes toiletries to veterans she visits.

“Calculating the amount of time that VAVS volunteers provide to veteran patients is computerized,” says Donna Moss, VISN 16 VAVS Liaison and External Affairs Executive at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center in Houston, Texas. “VISN 16 VAVS volunteers are an invaluable resource to the Department of Veterans Affairs. The time they spend in helping our veteran patients is virtually impossible to determine. Without them, we couldn’t accomplish as much as we do. They are priceless gems in the VA.”

In Fiscal Year 2008, the number of volunteers, hours, and donations throughout the Network were overwhelming. The number of volunteers on the rolls totaled 5,806. Active volunteers came to 3,668. The number of volunteer hours was 560,423. Monetary donations were \$507,334.30; and non-monetary donations totaled \$1,790,284.18.

According to Moss, monetary donations are used for the comfort and welfare of veteran patients. These items include, but are not limited to: personal hygiene products, refreshment supplies, cable television, and recreational activities.

In addition, non-monetary contributions are used to make patients' stay more enjoyable, says Moss. Some items which are accepted include current magazines, coffee, Nintendo Wii games, new or gently used clothing, and telephone cards.

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Suicide Prevention (story continued from page 1)

Hotline number and to educate its employees, the community and veterans about how to identify and help those who may be at risk.

Large posters providing the Hotline number and website are displayed at all medical facilities. They feature the slogan: **“IT TAKES THE COURAGE AND STRENGTH OF A WARRIOR TO ASK FOR HELP.”**

All VA medical centers have suicide prevention coordinators. Jan Kemp, VA’s Suicide Prevention Coordinator, said that new staff at each facility will bring the number of VA staff dedicated to the suicide prevention effort to more than 400. VA also has hired more than 3,900 new mental health employees since 2005 – bringing the total number of mental health employees to more than 17,000 mental health workers.

VA has also announced that by the end of 2009, the Department will add 61 new Vet Centers (bringing the total number of Vet Centers to 268) throughout the nation to provide more individual, group and family counseling to veterans of all wars.

The suicide prevention program includes two centers that conduct research and provide support to all locations of care. One is the Mental Health Center of Excellence in Canandaigua, NY, which focuses on developing and testing clinical and public health intervention related to suicide risk and prevention. The VA Hotline Call Center also is located in Canandaigua, and was developed in partnership with the Department of Health and Human Services’ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.

The other center for suicide research is the Mental Illness Research Education and Clinical Center in Denver, which focuses on researching the

clinical and neurobiological conditions that can lead to increased suicide risk.

VA’s efforts to identify veterans who may be at risk for suicide have also increased. All new patients at VA centers are screened to determine if they are at risk for suicide.

To raise family and community awareness of the warning signs of suicide, VA suggests that if a love one is exhibiting any of the following behaviors, he or she should seek help immediately:

- Talking about wanting to hurt or kill oneself
- Trying to get pills, guns, or other ways to harm oneself
- Talking or writing about death, dying or suicide
- Hopelessness
- Rage, uncontrolled anger, seeking revenge
- Acting in a reckless or risky way
- Feeling trapped, like there is no way out
- Saying or feeling there’s no reason for living.

Additional information is available at VA’s web site at www.mentalhealth.va.gov.



VHA Augments Resources To Provide Treatment for Substance Use Disorders

By VA Central Office of Communications

WASHINGTON – The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) is strengthening its programs for substance use disorders by adding counselors to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) teams at medical centers nationwide, increasing intensive outpatient treatment programs and conducting specialized training for providers.

Under Secretary for Health Dr. Michael J. Kussman has approved augmenting PTSD teams with drug and alcohol treatment specialists so that both problems may be addressed more effectively and efficiently.

“This integrated approach puts treatment for PTSD and Substance Use Disorders under one roof and should improve mental health outcomes for patients who suffer from both,” said John P. Allen, PhD, VHA’s Associate Chief Consultant for Addictive Disorders.

Professionals will assess PTSD patients for

substance use disorder and provide treatment in coordination with the PTSD intervention. The treatment will include continuing care and case management for patients suffering both problems and will offer preventive education to veterans with PTSD who may be at risk for developing such problems later.

Allen said substance use disorders cannot cause PTSD, and PTSD does not cause substance use disorders. However, there are advantages to addressing both disorders within the same treatment planning process. The initiative enhances PTSD services provided to Global War on Terror veterans, as well as veterans of all eras.

Adding substance use disorder clinicians to PTSD teams will cost about \$13.3 million per year. The enhanced teams should be in place at all VA medical facilities by Oct. 1, 2008.

A second recently announced initiative will

provide approximately \$17 million per year to establish Intensive Outpatient Substance Use Disorder Programs at 28 additional medical centers, bringing the total number of facilities with these programs to 105. These units provide a minimum of three hours of treatment services per day at least three times per week to veterans who have substance use disorders that may be too severe to be successfully treated in less intensive ambulatory care settings.

Research has strongly demonstrated the effectiveness of these programs. They also will feature more involvement of family members and significant others than is often possible in less intense ambulatory care programs.

A third initiative will provide specialized training for a minimum of two physicians in each medical facility to deal with substance use issues such as withdrawal, detoxification and the use of

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Rock and Roll Hall of Fame To Host Valentines for Veterans Concert in 2009: Event Expands To New Locations And Looks To Add Other Venues

By VA Central Office of Communications

WASHINGTON – When Rock and Roll Hall legends *Little Anthony and the Imperials* helped launch the 2008 National Salute to Hospitalized Veterans, Valentines for Veterans Concert in Prescott, AZ., last Feb. 14, the organizers went “out of their heads” with happiness at the success of the event.

The success of that event has led to a partnership with the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, which will feature *Little Anthony and the Imperials* as the headline act for the 2009 National Salute, Valentine for Veterans event in Cleveland, Ohio on Feb. 13. The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame also will proclaim Saturday, Feb. 14, as National Salute to Hospitalized Veterans Day at the Hall of Fame in Cleveland, and will have free admission for every veteran and member of the military in the community on that day.

In addition, concerts at two other venues have been added as part of the 2009 National Salute to Hospitalized Veterans. And organizers hope to develop more Valentines for Veterans concerts in 2009 and beyond in coordination with VA medical centers, Veterans Service Organizations and the business community.

Plans are being finalized to again feature *Little Anthony and the Imperials* and the nationally renowned Motown soul group *The Spinners* at a concert on Thursday, Feb. 12, 2009 at the Florida State Fair in Tampa.

Other concerts featuring well known national and regional musical groups will be held on Feb. 13 in Charleston, S.C., and on Feb. 14 in Prescott. The Charleston concert features *The Tams* and *The Embers*, known in the area for their southern, rhythm and blues style of “Beach Music.” The Feb. 14 concert will take place again in Prescott, with musical entertainment from *Russell Thompkins, Jr.*, and *the New Stylistics* (known for hit songs such as “Betcha By Golly Wow” and “You’ll Never Get to Heaven if You Break My Heart.”)

Help Hospitalized Veterans, a Veterans Service Organization, has promised to work with VA to develop Valentines for Veterans concerts at other venues as well.

The Valentines for Veterans Concert Initiative began last year as part of the National Salute to Hospitalized Veterans in recognition of hospitalized veterans, Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom veterans and their families, and for veterans’ spouses and family members who have lost a loved one while in service to their country.

The 2008 event in Prescott came about after Frank Cimorelli, Chief, Voluntary Service and Public Affairs Officer for the Northern Arizona VA Health Care System in Prescott, visited with a severely injured Iraq combat veteran during Valentine’s Day 2007.

“I went to pass out valentines to him and his family,” Cimorelli recalled, noting how the severely injured Iraqi veteran suffered from traumatic brain injury and could do little for himself. The veteran’s wife was in the hospital room with him, along with their three small children. She appeared both tired and afraid.

“I wondered, ‘who is looking out for his girl on Valentine’s Day because he can’t,’” Cimorelli said. “I discussed with my companion about how hard Valentine’s Day is on hospitalized veterans and young couples in which one is severely wounded. We talked about how difficult it must be on mothers and fathers who have lost a son or daughter or who have a loved one who is hospitalized or severely injured.”

Cimorelli and Sally Fine, a VHA voluntary service specialist, decided to find a way to help hospitalized veterans and their families and promote the goals and ideals of the National Salute to Hospitalized Veterans at the same time. They decided to develop a community-wide concert to take the National Salute from the VA into the community. They received support from Help Hospitalized Veterans, Inc. The business community responded, along with radio and with Veterans Service Organizations.



Soon, a radio station owner, Sanford Cohen of KPPV/KQNA radio in Prescott, agreed to promote the event. Various acts were discussed and it was decided to approach the legendary *Little Anthony and The Imperials*, who would be celebrating their 50th anniversary in show business in February 2008. Contact was made via email and soon phone conversations followed. It turned out that “Little Anthony” Gourdine is a huge World War II buff and very patriotic. He was thrilled to become involved and has since discussed the Valentines for Veterans Concert initiative frequently throughout his travels.

The concert was a rousing success and was attended by more than 1,200 people. Families whose loved ones had died in service were recognized. More than 100 hospitalized veterans were in attendance, including the Iraqi veteran and his wife that Cimorelli first wanted to help. A volunteer recruitment booth was set up in the performance hall lobby and 12 new volunteers were recruited.

“I am extremely happy to tell you that young Iraq veteran is ‘taking his girl out tonight on Valentine’s Day, and they are with us this evening,’” Cimorelli said to the group. “Please join me in giving a warm welcome to Alvis Burns; his wife, Elizabeth; and their children.”

The applause for the couple was overwhelming, and the National Salute, Valentines for Veterans Concert was launched. Next February, Alvis and Elizabeth Burns will be on hand again, along with hundreds of other veterans at other locations across America, to receive their 2009 valentine.

VA Urges Vets to Sign-up for Direct Deposits

By VA Central Office of Communications

WASHINGTON – Every month, 730,000 veterans or survivors look for their compensation or pension checks in their mailboxes. Nearly all receive them, but theft and mail delays cause problems for some veterans, which can be prevented by direct deposits.

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is urging those veterans and family members now receiving paper checks to join nearly 3.1 million others whose VA payments are safely deposited electronically.

“VA is teaming up with the Treasury Department in a new campaign to protect government beneficiaries against the theft of funds and of their identities,” said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Dr. James B. Peake. “Veterans earned -- and rely on -- the financial support we send them every month. I urge them to help VA ensure they get those funds reliably and safely by signing up for direct deposit.”

Peake cited several easy ways to sign up for direct deposit -- calling toll-free at (800) 333-1795 or enrolling online at * www.GoDirect.org. * Veterans, and family members who receive VA payments, also can sign up by contacting a VA regional benefits office or their financial institution. Information about direct deposits will be included in VA’s monthly compensation and pension envelopes throughout 2009.

The VA Secretary urged veterans to remember that direct deposits relieve worry about mail delivery being delayed by severe weather or natural disasters. The deposits also eliminate trips to banks or credit unions to deposit checks, while providing immediate access to money at the same time each month.





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We're on the web!
Visit us at
<http://www.visn16.va.gov/>



Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) 16, known as the South Central VA Health Care Network, is an integrated health care delivery system of medical centers with the primary purpose of providing care and treatment to eligible veterans. VISN 16 is one of 21 networks within the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) and includes ten medical centers, 40 associated community based outpatient clinics, six nursing homes, and one domiciliary.

VISN 16 spans 170,000 square miles and includes nearly two million veterans in all or parts of Alabama, Florida, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, Arkansas, Missouri, and Oklahoma. The network office is located in Jackson, MS.

VHA Mission:

The mission of the Veterans Healthcare System is to serve the needs of America's veterans by providing primary care, specialized care, and related medical and social support services. To accomplish this mission, VHA needs to be a comprehensive, integrated healthcare system that provides excellence in health care value, excellence in service as defined by its customers, and excellence in education and research, and needs to be an organization characterized by exceptional accountability and by being an employer of choice.

Substance Use Disorders
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medications in treatment.

Other steps being taken to bolster substance use disorder services include providing an additional 40 substance use disorder therapists to high volume Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs), and assuring that each large mental health residential rehabilitation treatment program has at least one substance use disorder specialist on staff.

“These initiatives represent important efforts by VHA to more effectively address the needs of veterans who suffer substance use disorder problems and do so in manner that is most convenient for them,” said Dr. Kussman.

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Volunteers are also well represented in the areas of transportation and cemetery services for veterans. In FY 2008, VISN 16 volunteers transported 72,082 veterans via the Veterans Transportation Network. The number of volunteer hours totaled 144,230; and the number of volunteer drivers was approximately 483. In the National Cemetery, the number of volunteers came to 69; the number of volunteer hours totaled 6,979; and the number of volunteer assisted burials was 48.

VISN 16, also known as the South Central VA Healthcare Network, depends on the goodwill of benefactors and volunteers who wish to give something back to America's heroes. VA's Voluntary Service is the largest volunteer program in the federal government. Men and women from their teens to their nineties become volunteer partners on the Department of Veterans Affairs health care team. Voluntary Service matches the volunteer to the assignment, provides orientation and training for volunteers and maintains an awards program to recognize volunteer service. Over the past 60 years, VA volunteers have donated more than 689 million hours of service worth an estimated \$12.9 billion.

The mission of the Veterans Healthcare System is to serve the needs of America's veterans by providing primary care, specialized care, and related medical and social support services. To accomplish this mission, VHA needs to be a comprehensive, integrated healthcare system that provides excellence in health care value, excellence in service as defined by its customers, and excellence in education and research, and needs to be an organization characterized by exceptional accountability and by being an employer of choice.

For more information on Voluntary Service and the available volunteer opportunities in the VISN 16 Network or throughout the VA, you may visit <http://www.visn16.va.gov/giving/index.asp>, <http://www.visn16.va.gov/facilities/index.asp>, and <http://www.volunteer.va.gov/>.



Pictured is **Ronald Butler**, a retired military officer, veteran, and VAVS volunteer, who serves as receptionist in EKG Waiting Room at the Veterans Health Care System of the Ozarks in Fayetteville, Arkansas.



Pictured is Women Veterans of America volunteer **Karen Shaver**. Shaver volunteers three times a week at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center in Houston, Texas.

Health Beat is a patient newsletter published quarterly by VISN 16. *Health Beat* gives veterans and their families insightful information about managing and accessing health care from VA medical centers within VISN 16.

