VICTOR FAGAN, LPN
Finalist for Schwartz Center’s National Compassionate Caregiver of the Year Award
CARING FOR VETERANS AND THEIR FAMILIES IS AN HONOR AND A PRIVILEGE THAT EVERYONE AT VA PITTSBURGH HEALTHCARE SYSTEM TAKES TO HEART.

Every day, we strive to provide Veterans with the best health care available anywhere, whether at our Pittsburgh campuses, in our outpatient clinics or through our ever-growing array of telehealth services.

In 2017, we built upon earlier successes and implemented new programs and strategies to meet VA’s top five priorities: Greater Choice for Veterans, Modernizing Our System, Improve Timeliness of Services, Focus Resources More Efficiently and Suicide Prevention. From our Emergency Department Rapid Access Clinics—fast becoming the new standard at VA facilities nationwide—to the launch of direct scheduling services, VA Pittsburgh took great steps forward to improving Veterans’ health care.

VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System Leadership Team

Karin McGraw, MSN, FACHE
Medical Center Director

Ali Sonel, MD
Chief of Staff

Barbara Forsha, MSN, RN, ET
Deputy Director

Lovetta Ford, MSW
Associate Director

Ira Richmond, DNP, RN, NEA-BC
Associate Director for Patient Care Services
VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System

Operational Snapshot

Vital Stats

- 549 OPERATING BEDS
  - 224 H.J. Heinz
  - 325 University Drive
- 713,019 OUTPATIENT VISITS
- 13,099 ADMISSIONS (including observation)
- 27,513 VIRTUAL CARE ENCOUNTERS (see page 10 for details)

Operating Budget

$644.4 MILLION

- $539,289,475 Medical
  - $74,312,000 Prosthetics
  - $62,970,448 Pharmacy/CMOP
  - $17,570,255 Revenue
- $48,142,494 Administrative
- $57,003,076 Facilities

Additional funds

$4,013,268 OI&T

Patient Population

- 73,908 UNIQUE PATIENTS
  - 67,490 Male
  - 6,302 Female
  - 116 Unknown

Employees

- 3,744 TOTAL EMPLOYEES
  - Nearly 1/3 are Veterans
  - 920 Nurses
  - 283 Physicians

Volunteers

- 622 VOLUNTEERS
  - 54 Youth Volunteers
- 89,198.75 VOLUNTEER HOURS

Research

- $24,255,812 RESEARCH FUNDING
  - 111 Investigators
  - 289 Projects

4 GREATER CHOICE FOR VETERANS
6 MODERNIZING OUR SYSTEM
8 IMPROVE TIMELINESS OF SERVICES
10 FOCUS RESOURCES MORE EFFICIENTLY
11 SUICIDE PREVENTION
Managing Chronic Pain
Programs offer alternatives to opioids

With half of Veterans who receive VA care reporting chronic pain, VA Pittsburgh recognizes the need for alternative pain management options and responsible use of opioids.

Every year, our pain management clinic evaluates, treats and recommends safe pain-management strategies to approximately 2,500 Veterans. We offer acupuncture, yoga and chiropractic services to Veterans seeking non-drug pain-management therapy. For Veterans in need of more intense therapy, our 12-week Interdisciplinary Pain Rehabilitation Program (IPRP) teaches Veterans to self-manage chronic pain through such methods as mindfulness techniques, physical exercises and tai chi movements. Weekly outpatient sessions include a pain management group, an educational series, and physical and occupational therapies.

Our clinicians follow VA’s Opioid Safety Initiative (OSI) when prescribed opioids are necessary. OSI reduces Veterans’ reliance on opioids through education and close monitoring. Using OSI, we decreased our opioid prescribing rate by slightly more than 20 percent between 2012 and 2017. We filled 10,000 fewer opioid prescriptions in 2017 than in 2015, cutting the number of opioid doses dispensed by 1 million.

Another resource, our Opioid Use Review Clinic, guides providers in safe and effective prescribing. Through VA’s Opioid Overdose Education and Naloxone Distribution (OEND) program, we provide Veterans at risk for opioid overdose and their families with naloxone – a medication used to reverse life-threatening opioid overdoses.

20% reduction in opioid prescription rate
1 million fewer opioids dispensed since 2015

Susan Delanko, kinesiotherapist, instructs Veterans in tai chi exercises at VA Pittsburgh’s H.J. Heinz campus.
Leader in LGBTQ Healthcare Equality

VA Pittsburgh continues to build on services for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Veterans. For the fourth consecutive year, the Human Rights Campaign Foundation’s Healthcare Equality Index in 2017 renewed our designation as a Leader in LGBTQ Healthcare Equality. The designation confirms our commitment to providing knowledgeable, equitable and inclusive care to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) Veterans and their families in a sensitive and welcoming environment. For Veterans who are transgender, we created an Interdisciplinary Transgender Treatment Team whose specialists are sensitive to the wide spectrum of gender identities and have specialized training in gender-transition health care services.

Relocated Clinic Optimizes Veteran Centered Care

VA Pittsburgh in June relocated the Beaver County Outpatient Clinic from Monaca to a larger, modern space three miles away in Rochester. The 17,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art clinic is 40 percent larger than the former site, has ample parking, more handicapped spaces and is located along a public transit bus route. Its innovative design – private exam rooms surround a separate clinical area where staff collaborate – simplifies navigation while supporting VA’s Veteran-centered model of care, Patient Aligned Care Teams (PACTs).

PACTs put Veterans at the center of their individualized health care and include a provider, nurses, social workers, pharmacists, dietitians and other clinicians. To meet Veterans’ growing demand to see specialists in their communities, the clinic can accommodate as many as six private telehealth encounters at once. Telehealth uses the latest in secure digital technology to connect Veterans with VA health care providers in Pittsburgh.

Veterans and guests tour the relocated Beaver County Outpatient Clinic.
Rapid Access Clinics Expand to 26 Sites

In 2017, VA medical centers across the country adopted our Emergency Department Rapid Access Clinics model of coordinated care. VA Pittsburgh developed the clinics in 2015 to reduce waiting times and relieve Veterans of the burden of scheduling their own follow-up care.

After Emergency Department providers treat Veterans’ emergent needs, staff schedule patients for follow-up care in the RACs. Veterans receive their appointments to see specialists before they leave the Emergency Department, often within just a few days.

The clinics cut Emergency Department wait times and reduced the number of Veterans who leave without being seen from 5 to 1 percent, well below the national target of 4 percent. Helping Veterans navigate the health care system for follow-up care also reduces the likelihood of repeat Emergency Department visits.

VA recognized the clinics as a best practice. Twenty-six VA medical centers nationwide now use Rapid Access Clinics, known as the Pittsburgh Model. More will follow—every VA medical facility with an emergency department is expected to consider adopting the model.

“We’ve streamlined the process for follow-up care. With this model, specialists see Veteran patients quickly.” Dr. Ali Sonel, VA Pittsburgh chief of staff.

See the numbers on page 7.
Whole Health Renovations Promote Lifelong Healing

Renovations unveiled in September to a third-floor inpatient unit at our Community Living Center promote healing through VA’s Whole Health System. VA’s Whole Health initiative empowers and equips Veterans at all care levels—inpatient and outpatient—to achieve and maintain their best all-around health and well-being.

Unit 3B’s modern, Veteran-centric design creates an atmosphere conducive to healing, optimism, safety and speedier recoveries. It features:
- 24 private patient rooms, each with its own bathroom
- Community areas with fireplaces
- Fully functional, shared kitchen
- A quiet room with soft music
- Small, unobtrusive nurses’ stations

VA’s whole health approach allows clinical staff to spend less time taking vitals and more time helping patients achieve their greatest physical, emotional, spiritual and social well-being.
New Direct Scheduling Services

In September, we launched direct scheduling for our wheelchair and amputee clinics. Direct scheduling empowers Veterans to **schedule appointments without a primary care referral**, eliminating unnecessary trips to the facility and enabling faster access to services. Veterans can now call certain clinics directly to request evaluation for wheelchairs or scooters or prosthetics adjustments.

Direct scheduling for routine eye and ear appointments started in 2016. Veterans can directly schedule eyeglass fittings and eye exams for glasses or adjustments in vision through optometry. Hearing tests, hearing aid services, balance assessments, cochlear implant services and tinnitus evaluation and management can be scheduled directly through audiology.

**TO MAKE AN APPOINTMENT, VETERANS CAN CALL:**

- Amputee clinic, 412-822-3017
- Audiology (ear), 412-360-6400, press 4
- Nutrition services, 412-822-3000, press 5 and request a nutrition appointment
- Optometry (eye), 412-360-6700
- Podiatry, 412-822-3000, press 5 and request a podiatry appointment
- Wheelchair clinic, 412-822-2180

Primary Care Express

We laid the groundwork in 2017 for an express care clinic at our H.J. Heinz campus to enhance same-day services for Veterans with non-emergency needs and common illnesses. A nurse practitioner with on-site access to lab and X-ray services began to see Veterans for sore throats, upper respiratory illnesses, flu, allergies, rashes, cuts, headaches and more. The clinic also covers for providers who call off sick so Veterans don’t miss their appointments. With most sick visits handled within 15 to 30 minutes, the clinic saves Veterans with non-emergent needs long waits in the Emergency Department.

**Veterans: Do not report directly to the clinic.**

Call, send a secure message, or report to the registered nurse on your Patient Aligned Care Team for initial evaluation and possible referral.

**8 A.M. TO 3:45 P.M. WEEKDAYS, except federal holidays**

H.J. Heinz campus | Bldg. 71, 2nd Floor

*Our Primary Care Express clinic at the H.J. Heinz campus provides same-day health care for minor illnesses and injuries.*
**Never Say No Speeds Patient Transfers**

We enhanced the Never Say No program in 2017 to ensure the speedy transfer of clinically stable Veterans from our spoke facilities when our Pittsburgh facility can provide more appropriate care.

The program’s **one-call transfer system** lets care teams at each facility work together to determine the appropriate level of care during transport, reducing transfer delays.

**Focus on Women’s Health**

Our Women’s Health Program in 2017 ensured all women Veterans enrolled with VA Pittsburgh were provided the option to receive care from a Designated Women’s Health Provider. Trained to identify and address women’s specific health care needs on the spot, DWHPs reduce the number of referrals to specialists.

In 2017, **87 percent of VA Pittsburgh’s women Veterans were assigned to a DWHP**, the highest among the nine VA medical centers in the Veterans Integrated Service Network 4 (VISN 4).

Veterans who need quick advice for medical and mental health questions can now talk with a Pennsylvania-based registered nurse on weekdays. Our nurse triage call center connects to VA Butler Healthcare during administrative hours Monday through Friday. It connects to a Bronx-based VA call center after hours and on weekends and holidays.

**TALK TO A NURSE BY CALLING:**
1-866-4VA-PITT  
(1-866-482-7488)  
then press 3 at the prompt.
Providing Veterans with Care Close to Home

VA Pittsburgh continually adds to its already robust suite of telehealth services.

In 2017, we expanded one or more of our telehealth services to 19 different VA sites nationwide. We also brought the total number of telehealth programs available through VA Pittsburgh to 41.

Telehealth uses the latest in digital telecommunication technology to ensure all Veterans have access to qualified VA health care providers. The availability of telehealth services is especially beneficial to those in remote, rural or medically underserved areas. Telehealth eases Veterans’ time and travel burdens and opens greater access to mental health, specialty and general clinical care.

When we relocated the Beaver County Outpatient Clinic from Monaca to Rochester in June 2017, we expanded the number of rooms dedicated solely for telehealth encounters from one to four. Increasing telehealth capacity at our outpatient clinics allows us to better meet Veterans’ needs for services such as teledermatology and telemental health.

Connecting Veterans to VA Care

We published the inaugural edition of our Veteran-centered newsletter, Veterans Connect, in 2017. We publish the newsletter three times a year to familiarize Veterans with our services, highlight new programs, offer tips on healthy living, and answer questions on care and access. Every Veteran who is enrolled with us for care receives a copy in the mail. We also post digital copies to our website at pittsburgh.va.gov to encourage Veterans who are not enrolled to explore their eligibility and the services we provide.

Rory Cooper, research scientist, awarded a Samuel J. Heyman Service to America Medal: Sept. 2017 Partnership for
Creating a Crisis Lifeline

Suicide prevention is our top clinical priority. One Veteran suicide is too many.

In 2017, VA Pittsburgh trained every employee on how to recognize the signs of suicide and connect Veterans in crisis with lifesaving care. Whether their job is answering phones, taking vitals, sweeping floors, drawing blood, admitting patients, performing surgeries, delivering medications, maintaining grounds, patrolling facilities or providing bedside care, our employees are there for Veterans in crisis.

Our investigators with the Mental Illness Research, Education and Clinical Center (MIRECC) took the lead on a three-facility study of telehealth intervention as a means to prevent suicide among high-risk Veterans. Launched in 2017 and pending final results, the first-of-its-kind study is evaluating the effectiveness of daily electronic monitoring for suicide prevention in at-risk Veterans.

In September, we took our message to social media, reaching out to Veterans and their families through two Facebook videos. Our suicide prevention team went over some of the signs of suicide—increased depression, anxiety, expressing a desire to harm oneself, alcohol and drug abuse, and giving away personal possessions—and who to call for help.

60+ outreach events
Nearly 1,000 crisis calls answered
Monthly contact with high-risk Veterans

In 2017
60+ outreach events
Nearly 1,000 crisis calls answered
Monthly contact with high-risk Veterans

If you are in crisis or considering suicide, please call 911 or:
24-hour Veterans Crisis Line, 1-800-273-8255, Press 1
On the Cover:

VA Pittsburgh LPN Victor Fagan was one of six finalists for the 2017 Boston-based Schwartz Center’s National Compassionate Caregiver of the Year Award. The award honors outstanding health care professionals who display extraordinary devotion and compassion in caring for patients. An Army and Marine Corps Veteran, Fagan describes compassionate care as “making my Veterans feel valued and respected.”