As 2018 drew to a close, VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System (VAPHS) bid farewell to two members of our leadership team, Ms. Karin McGraw, medical center director since 2016, and Dr. Ira Richmond, associate director for patient care services since 2002. For their decades of service to Veterans, we extend a heartfelt thank you to McGraw and Richmond, who has a doctorate in nursing practice. Their contributions will benefit the organization for many years.

The following pages detail our operations, advancements, achievements, initiatives, innovations and successes in 2018. This report shares the human side of health care, a focus of ours that differentiates VA health care from most other providers.

We are honored to tell the stories of our staff and volunteers whose dedicated service empowers us to provide Veterans the very best in health care, train future health care providers and conduct groundbreaking research that advances medicine for all Americans.
Honoring Service, Empowering Health

Through our Faces of Service project, dozens of Veterans who entrust us with their health care shared personal stories of service and spoke of their successes and struggles readjusting to civilian life.

“I struggled with PTSD and could have been one of the 22 a day, but I wasn’t. When I got to VA Pittsburgh, the staff showed me so much love, and that they cared about me. It was just a matter of allowing them to help. Veterans need to know that they can get help here, if they want it.”

Beverly Austin, Air Force Veteran
With her service dog, Vito
Vital Signs

BUDGET

$652.4 Million Allocation
- $551.8M Medical
- $55.8M Facilities
- $44.8M Administrative

$41.6 Million Care in the Community
Paid to non-VA providers for Veterans’ care

$26.9 Million Dedicated Collections
Revenue from third party private insurance, patient copays, etc.

NETWORK OF CARE
1 Integrated Health Care System
13-County main service area
2 Medical centers
   - University Drive (Oakland),
   - H.J. Heinz III (O’Hara)
5 VA outpatient clinics
   - Beaver, Fayette, Washington, Westmoreland counties in PA; Belmont County, OH

1 Highly Specialized Care Referral Center for Western PA
3 Primary referring VA medical centers
   - Altoona, Butler, Erie

HOSPITAL CAPACITY
549 Operating Beds
- 87 Medicine
- 78 Psychiatry
- 59 Surgical
- 225 Community Living Center
- 100 Residential rehabilitation

VETERANS SERVED

78,652 Unique Patients
   - 6.4% increase from 2017
10,237 Admissions
7,706 Surgical Procedures
   - 3.2% increase from 2017
   - 49 Kidney transplants
   - 4 Living kidney donors
   - 39 Liver transplants
737,778 Outpatient Visits
32,188 Telehealth Encounters

EMPLOYEES
3,792 Total Employees
- 285 Physicians
- 915 Nurses
- 1,243 Veterans
- 1,303 Student Trainees

TEACHING AND LEARNING
1,450 Learners
3,082 Hours of Simulation-Based Learning Completed
114 Academic Affiliations

RESEARCH
330 Active Projects
110 Investigators
$30 Million Research Funding
Advancing, Achieving, Improving

VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System is among the nation’s most innovative and forward-looking VA health care systems. We highlight selected important accomplishments below and detail others throughout this report.

Awards and Accomplishments

Achieved 4-star Strategic Analytics for Improvement and Learning (SAIL) overall quality rating when compared with VA health care systems of similar complexity and size.

Ranked among the top 6 percent of all VA health care systems in Veterans’ satisfaction with access to care and the patient experience.

Increased overall inpatient satisfaction by 14 percent after initiating a structured inpatient rounding program led by the Office of Veterans Experience.

Rebecca Harmon, Health Information Management (HIM) chief, named VHA HIM Professional of the Year.

Mary Ellen Elias, simulated learning coordinator, named 2017 VA Under Secretary for Health’s Excellence in Clinical Simulation Training, Education and Research Champion.

Partnered with community groups to effectively end homelessness among Veterans in Allegheny County, including the city of Pittsburgh.

Hosted or participated in more than 100 on-site and community events to enroll and provide Veterans with information, care and services.

Published and mailed two issues of our Veterans Connect newsletter to 70,000+ Veterans enrolled in VAPHS.

Shared hundreds of inspiring stories and successes with 10,000+ VAPHS supporters through Facebook, Twitter and VA email alerts.

Deployed four Disaster Emergency Medical Personnel System (DEMPs)-certified employees to support relief efforts for Hurricanes Maria and Florence.

Moved forward in planning phases to establish an eighth site of care. The VA Choice and Quality Employment Act of 2017 allocated $6.25 Million for a 55,000 square-foot space. Some services will shift to the new undetermined location, which is expected to open in the early 2020s.

Initiated relocation and expansion of VA outpatient clinics in Belmont County, Ohio, and Washington and Westmoreland counties in Pennsylvania to larger, modernized spaces to meet growing demand and align with a team-based health care delivery model.

Advanced permanent ownership transfer of vacated Highland Drive campus, which is no longer suitable for health care delivery. The General Services Administration is facilitating the process. The timeline for final disposition is undetermined.

Accreditations

The Joint Commission: Hospital, home care, behavioral health and opioid substitution therapy. The accreditation is a known universal symbol of quality.

Association for Accreditation of Human Research Protection Programs: Research program.

Association for Assessment and Accreditation of Laboratory Animal Care: Research program.

Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF): Behavioral health, employment, intensive rehabilitation, interdisciplinary pain rehabilitation and intermediate low vision programs. The accreditation is recognized as an assurance of quality care provided by health and human services organizations.

American College of Radiology: Radiation/oncology department.
Apps Expand Access

Mobile Apps and Online Tools Connect Veterans with Schedulers

Veterans can self-schedule primary care appointments online through My HealtheVet or request a scheduler contact them to make appointments in a handful of other clinics.

Direct scheduling for certain specialty clinics is available without a referral. Veterans no longer must see a primary care provider for a referral to high-use clinics including audiology, optometry, podiatry, nutrition and more. Eliminating the referral fast tracks specialty care delivery and frees primary care appointment slots for other Veterans.

VEText message reminders for upcoming appointments are automatically delivered to a Veteran’s mobile phone. Veterans can cancel or confirm with a simply reply text. When one Veteran cancels an appointment in advance, another Veteran can be seen in his or her place.

VEText between January and September 2018 reduced the number of Veterans not showing for appointments by 2.5 percent. It opened 12,375 appointment slots through cancellations, of which 5,209 were rescheduled to other Veterans.

Building a Specialty Care Network

In 2018, we led a collaborative effort that enabled our partnering VA medical centers in Altoona, Butler and Erie to offer certain specialty care on site. Veterans previously were more likely to receive all specialty care at Pittsburgh — the regional referral center for highly specialized care — or through private providers near home. The model places Pittsburgh-based specialists on site at the partner medical centers for in-person visits or uses telehealth modalities to connect Veterans with care.

The approach helps the region eliminate some non-VA care costs and reallocate medical appropriations to support other programs.

Some of the specialties we provide to our partnering VA medical centers include:
- Cardiology
- Dermatology
- Chemotherapy
- Diabetes
- Nutrition
- Opioid use review clinic

The model benefits Veterans by:
- Delivering VA care close to home
- Streamlining care coordination
- Promoting better health outcomes
- Improving the patient experience


### Telehealth Snapshot

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>States Served Through Telehealth</th>
<th>Individual Sites</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>22</strong></td>
<td><strong>104</strong></td>
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**32,188** Telehealth Encounters

**14,617** Telemental Health Care Encounters

**13,737** Unique Veterans Used Secure Messaging

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## Telediabetes Enhances Self-Care

Our telediabetes program is a practical alternative to in-person specialty visits for self-management of blood sugar in Veterans with type 2 diabetes.

Telediabetes speeds care delivery, reduces in-person clinic visits, and improves patients’ self-management of diabetes at home. Veterans use telehealth technology to send blood-glucose measurements to providers. Endocrinologists access patients’ clinical information via electronic consultations (e-consult) to expertly manage care, then follow up with Veterans through video teleconferencing.

Dr. Archana Bandi, clinical director of VA Pittsburgh’s telehealth services, in May 2018 reported a five-year VAPHS study showed telediabetes care is on par with traditional diabetes care.

The study found Veterans who participated in the telediabetes program had blood-glucose management results comparable to those who managed their diabetes with more frequent in-person doctor visits.

Of the 884 Veterans who participated, 442 in our telediabetes program waited just 10 days for an e-consult, versus a 37-day wait for face-to-face consultations for 407 in traditional care. Veterans in both groups started the study with a hemoglobin A1c of 10 percent. **Within one year, telediabetes participants lowered their A1c to 8.8 percent**, versus 8.6 for Veterans in traditional care.

“A large number of Veterans in rural areas do not want to travel to Pittsburgh for their care,” said Bandi. “Our telediabetes program lets them avoid round trips of anywhere from two to eight hours for each visit, while still maintaining their care with their diabetes team.”

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*Telediabetes enhances the Veteran’s experience through better care coordination and improved team relations between primary and specialty care.*

ARCHANA BANDI, MD
Clinical Director, Telehealth Services
Sharing Experiences Saves Lives

Pitt Brings Writing Workshop to VAPHS

VA Pittsburgh partners with the University of Pittsburgh to bring literature and creative writing to Veterans through therapeutic writers' workshops.

Pitt professors and graduate students in English bring the classes to Veterans who are receiving care on our University Drive inpatient behavioral health unit. The hourlong creative writing classes help Veterans gain deeper insights into post-traumatic stress, addiction and other conditions.

The program lets Pitt students work with non-traditional students and shows sometimes skeptical Veterans they can write. Veterans craft stories and poems that often reflect conditions that brought them to the unit, making it easier for them to discuss those same subjects with their therapists.

No two sessions are the same and every Veteran on the behavioral health floor is welcome to join the sessions. Many Veterans continue to write outside of the classes and later share their work with therapists. The Veterans' creative stories and poems provide therapists with deeper insight into each Veteran's condition.

Solving for Veteran "X"

Our Veteran X peer support group helps Veterans help themselves by solving the problems of a fictional Veteran. One Veteran — Veteran X — acts out a scenario with problems returning Veterans may encounter: money issues, addiction, failing relationships, etc.

Veterans in the group offer solutions based on their own shared experiences. The fictional Veteran X trusts the group's life-tested advice because its members are fellow Veterans. Together, the group's combined wisdom helps Veteran X — and every other Veteran in the room — solve their problems. In 2018, 211 Veterans participated in Veteran X.
Engaging Staff to Prevent Veteran Suicide

“Almost Sunrise” Film Explores Moral Injury

VA Pittsburgh's suicide prevention coordinators screened the documentary “Almost Sunrise” during National Suicide Prevention Month in September to help staff, Veterans and the public better understand moral injury and its connection to post-traumatic stress disorder and Veteran suicide.

The award-winning film follows two Iraq War Veterans who struggle with depression after leaving the service. The two men embark on a 2,700-mile, lifesaving hike from Milwaukee to Los Angeles to confront their inner pain and self-destructive impulses.

A panel of experts led a debriefing and discussion of the movie afterward. The panel discussed the difficulty getting Veterans to talk about moral injuries to someone who has not experienced war. Moral injuries, experts say, are extreme life experiences that “transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations.”

Chaplain Develops New Training Rooted in Reality

In 2018, we implemented a first-of-its kind suicide prevention awareness training developed specifically for chaplains.

Chaplain Gretchen Hulse developed the simulation-based training to better prepare chaplains to help Veterans who are expressing thoughts of suicide. Actors from the University of Pittsburgh's Standardized Patient Program portray Veterans in crisis, either in person or over the phone. Chaplains, or “learners,” then work to calm the Veterans and get them help.

In one scenario during a 2018 training, an actor portraying a Veteran in crisis called a chaplain to advise he was armed and considering harming himself. In another, a chaplain helped an actor who, bottle of pills in hand, threatened to harm herself during a visit to a VA medical center.

The simulations teach chaplains and others how to navigate a crisis safely and effectively. Learners are active participants in the scenarios and observe others’ experiences. Each learner assesses his or her own performance and those of fellow learners to identify what was done well. A facilitator debriefs students following every scenario.

30 chaplains, students and interdisciplinary staff participated in the training.

Chaplains are often on the front line in the fight against suicide. Offered to chaplains and interdisciplinary staff, the classes were among 43 types of simulation-based suicide prevention trainings available to staff in 2018.

Thirty chaplains, students and interdisciplinary staff went through the training in 2018. Plans call for annual or semiannual training moving forward at VA Pittsburgh. The training is under consideration for a national pilot, and Hulse anticipates presenting the idea at various conferences in 2019.
VA Helps Veteran on Transgender Path

Army Veteran Alice Rusin always felt the gender listed on her birth certificate didn’t quite get things right.

“I had always dressed up as a woman for Halloween, so it was nothing new for me. But the urge toward femininity was getting so strong that I had to do something,” said Rusin. “My spirit kept telling me to get up and do something about it.”

Six years ago, that spirit led Rusin to make an appointment to see her regular physician assistant at the VA outpatient clinic in Johnstown.

“She took me into a room and I told her I felt so feminine all my life and nowadays that feeling is so strong,” said Rusin.

“This beautiful woman looked me straight in the eye and said, ‘Jeff, you have a right to be happy in this lifetime.’ Her taking my hand let me know that I was in a good place, so now anything they wanted to do, I was wonderful with.”

Rusin saw a series of therapists who delivered a diagnosis of gender identity disorder, known today as gender dysphoria. Following evaluations at UPMC and VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System, Rusin received her first hormone therapy prescription and an appointment with a VA Pittsburgh gynecologist.

Since then, VAPHS has taken care of all Rusin’s health care needs.

Department of Veterans Affairs medical facilities all over the world now recognize the health care needs of Veterans whose gender identity differs from that on their birth certificates.

At VA Pittsburgh, a 26-member all-volunteer team of experts provides medical and psychological care to transgender Veterans.

Under the direction of a clinical psychologist, the Interdisciplinary Transgender Treatment Team provides gender transition counseling, hormone therapy evaluations, speech and other therapies. Psychologists determine the appropriate time to refer Veterans to a non-VA provider for gender reassignment surgery, but VA does not perform or pay for the surgery.

Rusin said she is forever grateful to VA Pittsburgh for the care she receives.

“If it wasn’t for VA Pittsburgh, I don’t know where I’d be today,” said Rusin. “I know a happiness that I never imagined existed.”
Whole Health Classes Empower Veterans

VA Pittsburgh in 2018 introduced Veterans to VA’s Whole Health System of health care. Whole health takes the focus off disease management and places it on an ongoing partnership between providers and Veterans that is centered on whole health. It empowers and equips Veterans to take charge of their health and well-being by focusing on self-care, skill building and support. A proactive approach that aims to transform health care from a disease-care system to a health system, whole health includes stress reduction, yoga, tai chi, mindfulness, nutrition, acupuncture and health coaching classes.

Whole health encourages Veterans to partner with providers to develop and follow personal health plans tailored to the Veteran’s individual needs. In 2018, 135 Veterans attended 16 introductory whole health classes at VA Pittsburgh. Veterans who complete an introductory class are encouraged to continue self-exploration through peer-led whole health support groups.

16 Introductory classes hosted
135 Participants
3 Veteran Peer Facilitators
2 Resource Fairs

Comprehensive Women’s Health Care

Women Veterans increasingly choose VA for their health care needs — from 10 percent of U.S. women Veterans in 2000 to 22 percent in 2015 and rising. VA Pittsburgh’s specially trained women’s health primary care providers provide comprehensive, specialized care and readjustment counseling to women Veterans. A Center of Excellence, our modern Womens Health Center on our University Drive campus ensures equal access to timely, sensitive and quality health care.

WOMEN’S HEALTH SNAPSHOT

7,453
Women Veterans
18% increase from 2017

111
New Enrollees

613
Mammograms Completed

39
Expecting Moms
Received Maternity Care

392
Referred for Gynecology
Ten VA Pittsburgh staff members and 36 volunteers accompanied 96 inpatients from our University Drive and H.J. Heinz III campuses to Sharing and Caring’s 2018 Gateway Clipper cruise in September. Sharing and Caring volunteers from 16 Veterans groups organize the annual event, which marked its 35th year in 2018.

Participating Veterans enjoyed a day outside the hospital, a fine meal and great entertainment.

Outside of us guys coming in and talking to these guys, some of them have nobody. I enjoy talking to the fellows. Every one of them has a story, but they don’t always want to talk. Because I’m a Veteran, I get them started.”

CLARENCE “CODE” GOMBERG
WWII Army Veteran
Volunteer since July 1953
TOTAL VOLUNTEER HOURS: 13,740
Rehabilitation and Recovery Through Art

Twenty-Five Veterans enrolled in VA Pittsburgh health care in 2018 entered their best creative and performing arts pieces in our annual All About the Arts show. The show recognizes Veterans’ progress and recovery through creative arts therapy in art, creative writing, dance, drama and music. Participants compete to advance to VA’s annual National Veterans Creative Arts Competition and Festival.

Creative arts and recreation therapies at VA Pittsburgh use evidence-based treatments to improve Veteran patients’ quality of life and daily functioning. Therapists work with Veterans to develop therapies with measurable outcomes based on each Veteran’s interests, family, community and lifestyle. Therapy goals can include improved physical, cognitive and social skills.

I am interested in helping Veterans by introducing yoga and meditation in a comfortable environment. Veterans can benefit physically and emotionally from this practice, and many people new to yoga tend to be more comfortable learning with those who have similar experiences.”

LAUREL CHIAPPETTA
Certified yoga instructor
Volunteer since January 2019
TOTAL VOLUNTEER HOURS: 0.5
Moving Health Care Forward

Spark-Seed-Spread Inspires Innovation

Three staff members received VA Innovators Network Spark-Seed-Spread support in 2018 to pilot, test and validate new ideas to improve Veterans’ health care locally and potentially to VA sites nationwide.

VA Pittsburgh respiratory therapist Catherine P. Abee invented a medical device to vastly improve the accuracy of blood oxygen and heart rate measurements in patients with poor circulation and breathing difficulties. The Department of Veterans Affairs in FY18 received a patent for the self-heating pulse oximeter and VA Pittsburgh is working with the Human Engineering Research Labs to develop it.

The device uses a chemical energy heating source to warm a patient’s extremity prior to measurement. Warming the extremity is important because low body temperature can return inaccurate readings.

Abee invented the device after existing pulse oximeters — which are not self-heating — failed to obtain a measurement from an elderly, frail cancer patient Abee treated at a hospital where she previously worked.

Nurse practitioner Georgia Brinit-Stiffler received support for her “All in One Breath” idea to offer same-day pulmonary function tests for Veterans receiving compensation and pension exams. Scheduling same-day tests eliminates unnecessary appointments and extra time and travel for Veterans. Spark-Seed-Spread provided funding for equipment, training and supplies to pilot the idea at our H.J. Heinz III campus. VA Pittsburgh has since adopted the practice, which could spread nationally.

Center for Health Equity Research and Promotion core investigator Leslie R. M. Hausmann received support to create a user friendly, interactive data visualization tool, or “dashboard,” to identify in real time how race, ethnicity, gender and the communities in which Veterans live affect health care access and quality of outcomes. Unlike existing dashboards, its user friendly design allows all staff to discover patterns to identify at-risk Veterans quickly and provide patient-centered care. The project is now in its second phase of development.

Suicide prevention coordinator Frank Moore received support for our suicide prevention team to explore development of a sustainable program to implement new and immediate ways to identify and engage Veterans having thoughts of suicide who are not using VA health care. Of the 20 Veterans who die by suicide each day, 14 are not under VA care.
Renovation Consolidates Medical and Surgical Clinics on Second Floor

Saves Veterans Time Through Faster Clinic Access

In September, we relocated medical and surgical specialty clinics from the fifth and sixth floors at University Drive to a single, 20,000 square-foot clinic on the second floor. Consolidating the clinics eliminates the need for Veterans to visit more than one floor for multiple appointments. The clinic’s 25 large, modern exam rooms support an average of two rooms per provider during clinical hours. The new design increases the number of patients each provider can see in a day. It also decreases wait times associated with patients exiting an exam room after a visit.

The $8 million space includes a modern check-in area, four separate patient waiting areas, improved mobility for Veterans in wheelchairs, and charging stations for mobile and electronic devices.

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In December, we relocated the Fayette County VA Outpatient Clinic to a larger space in the Fayette Plaza near Uniontown. Designed to optimize VA’s Patient Aligned Care Team (PACT) model of care, the clinic’s private exam rooms surround a separate clinic area where each Veteran’s PACT team members — a provider, nurses, social workers, etc. — collaborate on care.

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DIGITAL COMMUNICATION
SNAPSHOT

4,520
Facebook Page Likes

3,452
Twitter Followers

7,203
Email Subscribers

BE IN THE KNOW

Sign up for VA Pittsburgh email news and alerts sent directly to your inbox!

Notifications include:
• Health care news
• Veteran-focused events
• Emergencies impacting our medical facilities
• Veterans’ inspiring stories of health and wellness

Signing up is easy:
1. Visit www.pittsburgh.va.gov
2. Scroll down and to the right to “Connect with VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System”
3. Enter your email address in the box under “Subscribe to Receive Email Updates”