IN THIS ISSUE

Director’s Message .....................2
Improving Access to Care ..........2
VA Priority Groups .....................3
Connect to Your Care .................4
Faces of Service ......................5
Healthy Living ..........................8
Employee Spotlight ...................9
Women’s Health .......................10
Veterans Q&A ..........................11
Upcoming Events ......................12
Dear Veterans,

Welcome to our first issue of VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System’s Veterans Connect newsletter for 2018. As we enter the publication’s second year, I am happy to report many Veterans called or wrote to tell us the newsletter is a great help to them for navigating VA health care services. Others who had forgotten they were enrolled in VA health care said the newsletter is a welcome reminder to take advantage of the health care benefits they so justly earned.

In this issue, you will find several pages dedicated to introducing you to some of your fellow Veterans through our Faces of Service project. We undertook the project to learn more about the individuals we serve every day, and to let those Veterans tell their personal stories of military service in their own words. Each Veteran participated voluntarily, and for that, I am grateful.

These Faces of Service profiles represent only some of the 30 Veterans who so graciously talked with us. Others appear online on our social media pages for Facebook and Twitter. We recently displayed the Veterans’ portraits and stories at our University Drive and H.J. Heinz campuses. Plans are also underway to hold a second Faces of Service event so we can get to know even more of you, the Veterans we are honored to serve.

Elsewhere in this issue, we cover VA priority groups, Military Sexual Trauma and the public focus on sexual assault, tips for healthy eating, new online scheduling of primary care appointments with a My HealthVet premium account and a short story on three VA staff members who deployed to Puerto Rico to help with hurricane relief efforts.

Sincerely,

Karin L. McGraw, MSN, FACHE
Medical Center Director

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IMPROVING ACCESS TO CARE: WAIT TIME UPDATE

The wait times listed below are the most recent available for our University Drive and H.J. Heinz sites from VA's Access and Quality in VA Healthcare tool as of publication.* The online resource at www.accesstocare.va.gov is easy to use and breaks down data at each of our two main sites and five outpatient clinics.

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<tr>
<th>UNIVERSITY DRIVE</th>
<th>H.J. HEINZ</th>
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<td>8 DAYS Primary Care</td>
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* Data presented is for return appointments for established patients as of April 23, 2018. Wait time data previously published here and elsewhere since June 2014 was drawn from www.va.gov/health/access-audit.asp, which will continue to update every two weeks. The two sites present data through different, but meaningful, data definitions.
When you enrolled in VA health care, VA placed you in a priority group. But what are priority groups, and what does it mean for your care? VA assigns each Veteran to one of eight priority groups. Priority groups ensure health care benefits are readily available to all enrolled Veterans.

The priority group assignment determines which health care services VA will provide to you, the Veteran, as well as how much, if anything, you will pay toward your care. Assignments are based on a number of eligibility factors, including household income and service-connected disability ratings. Veterans with service-connected disabilities are assigned the highest priority group for VA health care. Veterans who earn a higher income and who do not have any service-connected disabilities will rate a lower priority group.

Household income is a determining factor for each Veteran’s priority group assignment, in addition to service-connected disabilities. VA is required by law to verify Veterans’ self-reported household income with the Internal Revenue Service and Social Security Administration annually.

Questions about your priority group assignment? Has your household income changed significantly since you first enrolled or tried to enroll?

Our Enrollment and Eligibility team can answer your questions and help you submit the proper documentation to request a priority group review or update.

For more information, contact Enrollment and Eligibility at 412-360-6993.

You can also go online to learn more about VA priority groups:

- www.va.gov/HEALTHBENEFITS/resources/priority_groups.asp
- www.vets.gov/health-care/eligibility

Know Veterans who do not receive VA health care?

Ask them to call us!

Some Veterans do not know they are eligible. Others who tried to enroll in the past may now be eligible because of changed circumstances.
Connect to Your Care

**Audiology:** Hearing, tinnitus and balance disorders. 412-360-6400

**Behavioral Health:** Consultation, evaluation and treatment. 412-360-6600

**Caregiver Services:** Help at home and someone to listen. 412-822-2364 or 1-855-260-3274

**Center for Treatment of Addictive Disorders:** Outpatient and residential treatment for the misuse of alcohol, prescribed medications or other substances. 
Residential: 412-360-6611
Outpatient: 412-360-6092

**Chaplain Services:** 412-822-1551

**Community Based Care:** Services to help chronically ill or disabled Veterans of any age remain in their homes. 412-822-2910

**Connected Care:** Telehealth, VA Mobile and more. 412-360-3235

**Critical Care:** Inpatient care for life-threatening injuries and illnesses. 412-360-6215 (CCU, ICU, etc.)

**Dental:** 412-822-2130

**Emergency Department:** 24-hour emergency health care, including mental health services. 412-360-6322

**Eye Clinic:** 412-360-6700

**Environmental Registries:** 412-822-1707

**Homeless Veterans:** Transitional and permanent housing, case management, dental and medical care. 412-822-1272

**Help for Homeless Veterans**
*-line: 877-4AID-VET (424-3838)

**Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Veterans:** Culturally and clinically competent care for LGBT Veterans. 412-360-1210

**Military Sexual Trauma:** Help for any Veteran who experienced sexual assault or sexual harassment during military service. 412-360-1040

**My HealtheVet:** Online access to health records, electronic messaging and prescription refills. www.myhealth.va.gov 412-360-6838

**Pathology and Laboratory:** 412-360-1572

**Patient Advocate:** 412-360-3614 or 412-822-1562

**Pharmacy:** Refill prescriptions by phone, mail or the internet. 412-822-3140

**Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation:** Inpatient and outpatient physical, occupational, and kinesiotherapy, low vision and blind rehab services. 412-822-2111

**Primary Care:** Annual checkups, nutrition counseling and more. 412-822-3000

**Podiatry:** 412-822-3000, press 5

**Prosthetics:** 412-822-3728

**Radiology:** X-ray, ultrasound, CT, and MRI. 412-360-6216

**Rainbow Clinic:** 412-360-6242

**Research:** Improving lives through health care discovery and innovation. 412-360-2386

**Speech Pathology:** Treatments for speech, language, voice, cognitive communication, swallowing impairments and training for stroke patients. 412-360-6400

**Spinal Cord Injury:** 412-822-3000

**Surgical Services:** Same-day surgery, neurosurgery and cardiothoracic, hand, ophthalmology, orthopedic, otolaryngology, plastic and vascular surgery. 412-360-6700

**Transition and Care Management Program:** Health care tailored to post-911 Veterans. 412-822-2362

**Travel Office:** 412-360-3620 or 412-360-6783

**Vet Centers:** Counseling and referral for combat Veterans, their families, and any Veteran who was sexually traumatized while serving. 
Pittsburgh: 412-920-1765
Wheeling: 304-232-0587
White Oak: 412-678-7704

**Veterans Crisis Line:** Confidential help for Veterans in crisis and their families and friends. www.veteranscrisisline.net 1-800-273-8255 (press 1) Text to 838255

**Voluntary and Recreation Services:** 412-822-3098

**Women’s Health Services:** 412-360-6289

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Not all Veterans are eligible for every service listed.

For a more comprehensive list of services, visit www.pittsburgh.va.gov/services
FACES of SERVICE

Veterans inspire us. In war or peace, draftees or volunteers, all share lifelong bonds of service and camaraderie. Through our Faces of Service project, Veterans share their stories.

“I’ll answer my son’s questions about my service as he gets older, but I won’t bring it up to him. Service is greater than you. You don’t flaunt it. You don’t brag about it. You do it for your country, and it has to be selfless.”

—Christopher Reed, Army
Serving in uniform teaches you to be an adult. You learn right away that you have responsibilities and you are held accountable for doing what you are supposed to do. And you develop a sense of patriotism that is different than those who don’t serve.”

— Gerald Fowler, Navy

Derrick Clark, Navy

Renee Dorsey, Air Force

Ross Trovato, Army

Nancy Kunkel, Air Force

Bill Podvasnik, Marines

VAPHs employee
“I’m proud of everything we did in Vietnam, but when we came home to the protests, it seemed nobody else was proud of it. It’s gradually changed. The first time anybody welcomed me home was in 1983, at the Vietnam Wall. That’s quite a span of time. It choked me up. Now, I get a lot of welcome homes.” – Jerry Baylor, Marines

“I had been told my whole life the military was for people who couldn’t get real jobs, or were low income, and that it was a way for them to get out of that situation. I found the complete opposite. I could not have got where I am in life now without the military.” – Brenda Keitzer, Air Force

Dennis Hughes, Army
Elaine Berkowitz, Army Reserve
Dennis Missouri, Army
FOCUS ON HEALTHY LIVING

Spring to a New You

Make a fresh start this spring! To help you set and reach healthy goals, VA Pittsburgh’s MOVE! coordinator, Melanie Erskine, rounded up some of her favorite dietary tips.

Eat breakfast. The best way to start your day is with a healthy breakfast. Balance is the key – include a lean protein, whole grains, fruits and vegetables.

Fill half your plate with fruits and vegetables. Aim for 2 cups of fruit and 2 1/2 cups of vegetables daily. Fresh is best, but frozen and canned varieties are tasty alternatives.

Mind your portion sizes. Use measuring cups and spoons to limit portions to recommended serving sizes. Use smaller plates and glasses to keep portions in check.

Stay active. Physical activity lowers blood pressure and helps your body control stress and weight. Consider taking daily walks or talk to your primary care provider about starting an exercise program.

Snack healthy. Prepare healthy snacks in advance to curb cravings between meals. Combine lean proteins, healthy fats, fiber and carbohydrates.

Talk to a dietitian. See a VA Pittsburgh registered dietitian for expert nutrition advice to help you lose weight, eat well and reduce your risk of chronic disease.

Try home cooking. Cooking from scratch at home is healthy, rewarding and cost-effective. Start by learning kitchen basics, like how to dice and chop vegetables or how to store herbs and spices.

Strategize when dining out. Choose foods carefully. Check the restaurant’s menu for grilled, baked, broiled or steamed items. Select lean meats, poultry, fish, vegetables and fruit.

Drink more water. Choose water over calorie-laden, sugary drinks to quench your thirst. Water regulates body temperature, transports nutrients and oxygen to cells and carries away waste products.

Want to learn more? VA Pittsburgh’s MOVE! program helps Veterans meet diet and fitness goals. Contact Melanie Erskine at 412-822-3114.

Source: Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics

Springtime Asparagus, Strawberry & Arugula Salad

Ingredients:
- 15 spears asparagus, woody end trimmed, cut into 2-inch pieces
- 3 tsp extra virgin olive oil, divided
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
- 2 tsp lemon juice, freshly squeezed
- ½ tsp country Dijon mustard
- ½ tsp honey
- 2 big handfuls baby arugula
- ½ cup strawberries, hulled and sliced
- 2 tbsp crumbled blue cheese
- 1 tbsp toasted almonds, sliced

Directions:
Preheat oven to 400°F. Toss asparagus pieces with 1 tsp olive oil and season to taste with salt and pepper. Arrange in an even layer on a baking sheet. Roast until tender, about 15 to 20 minutes. Meanwhile, make the dressing: combine the remaining 2 tsp olive oil, lemon juice, mustard and honey. Whisk until emulsified; season to taste with salt and pepper. Toss the arugula with the dressing, and then gently toss in the sliced strawberries and asparagus. Top salad with blue cheese crumbles and sliced almonds.

Source: www.keyingredient.com
Called to Care

Staff Deploy to Puerto Rico  

By Liz Zemba

Employees set up a field hospital inside a sports coliseum.

VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System sent Disaster Emergency Medical Personnel System (DEMPS) volunteers to Puerto Rico in October to set up and staff a federal field hospital.

They included psychiatrist Dr. Shaun Stanley, physician assistant Davis Lewis and registered nurse Glen Buzzelli. All said despite the Caribbean island’s slow progress rebuilding after Hurricane Maria, its residents displayed amazing resiliency and gratitude.

“They were very friendly, gracious and kind during a time of great upheaval in their lives,” said Stanley. The three provided health care services while with a Federal Medical Station set up in Manati, a town on the island’s northern coast. Stanley said roads were passable, but the countryside was “decimated, with broken trees and debris everywhere, and power out to both main hospitals and most homes.”

Lewis said more than 1,300 patients received care at the 170-bed field hospital during his two-week rotation, including infants, the elderly and hospice patients. Some just needed medication refills. Others were admitted because they needed generator-powered ventilators.

“Most of them had lost everything, but not once did they say thank you for helping me – they always said thank you for helping us,” said Lewis. “Our friends in Puerto Rico are very caring, beautiful people.”

Buzzelli said he will always remember an elderly couple who sought shelter and medications at the field hospital after both had nearly drowned in the storm. The wife told of how she had floated her husband in a hammock to keep his head above water as their home flooded. The water was up to her neck when they were rescued.

“Theyirs was just one of many stories of survival,” Buzzelli said. “It just tore your heart out.”

Buzzelli said he is grateful to his co-workers who stayed behind in Pittsburgh so he and other VA Pittsburgh employees could lend a hand in Puerto Rico.

“They held the fort down so we could go without compromising care for Veterans,” Buzzelli said. “They were an important piece of the puzzle, and for that, I am grateful.”

The Federal Emergency Management Agency/Health and Human Services activate DEMPS, which sends VA staff to emergencies or disasters. VA medical center directors must approve deployments. VAPHS has 59 DEMPS volunteers.
FOCUS ON WOMEN’S HEALTH

MST and Current Events

If public discussion of sexual harassment and assault has brought long-buried memories of military sexual trauma to the surface, VA has confidential services to help survivors—women and men—recover. VA uses the term Military Sexual Trauma, or MST, to describe sexual assault or repeated threatening sexual harassment during military service.

MST occurs when a Servicemember—male or female—is an unwilling participant in sexual activity. It can occur on or off duty, or on or off base. Examples include threatened negative consequences for refusing sexual advances, implied better treatment in exchange for sex, nonconsensual sex, physically forced sex, unwanted touching or grabbing, offensive remarks about a person’s body or sexual preferences, and threatening or unwelcome sexual advances.

MST can cause nightmares, irritability and even post-traumatic stress disorder.

Other symptoms include:

- Strong emotions, including depression and anger
- Feeling numb or unable to experience happiness or love
- Trouble sleeping
- Difficulties with attention, concentration and memory
- Problems with alcohol or other drugs
- Difficulty with things that remind you of your sexual trauma
- Relationship difficulties
- Physical health problems

People are remarkably resilient to life-changing trauma. Many recover without professional help. Others mostly function well, but react strongly in certain situations. Some Veterans are immediately impacted, mentally and physically. Others experience no symptoms until many years later.

Fortunately, every VA health care facility provides free, effective services for Veterans recovering from MST—regardless of when they seek help.

To learn more about our MST-related services or to begin your own recovery journey, contact VA Pittsburgh’s MST coordinator, Roksana Korchynsky, at 412-360-1040.
VetQ&A
Answering Your Important Questions

Q. Why does VA ask for my private health insurance information?
A. VA is required by law to collect health insurance coverage information. We use the information to bill private health insurance providers for medical care, supplies and prescriptions for treatment of non-service connected care. Money collected from health insurance reimbursements for non-service connected care is returned directly to the medical center. We use that money to enhance health care services, purchase new equipment, hire staff and offset your VA copayment. Please keep in mind that Veterans are not responsible for any unpaid balances, outside of their VA copay, that are not covered by their private health insurance.

Q. Who do I contact to set up a medical appointment?
A. To request an appointment with your VA Pittsburgh primary care provider, call the primary care call center at 412-822-3000. For some clinics, Veterans who already receive care with us can now use our direct scheduling service without first obtaining a referral from their primary care provider.

- 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

Q. Does VA provide me with transportation to and from my medical appointments?
A. VA provides round-trip transportation services only to eligible Veterans from their home to their nearest VA medical center. For non-emergencies and only with preauthorization, VA may provide an ambulance or specially equipped vehicle for eligible Veterans who are bedbound or use a wheelchair.

Mileage reimbursement may also be available to eligible Veterans who travel to VA facilities for medical care. To see if you qualify for VA transportation services or other travel benefits, visit www.pittsburgh.va.gov/services/beneficiary-travel.asp. Not all Veterans who qualify for VA health care will qualify for transportation or travel reimbursement benefits.

Veterans Connect strives to deliver health care news and information of interest to area Veterans.
Please send suggestions, comments and requests to VAPHSEditor@va.gov.
NEVER MISS AN APPOINTMENT

VA Pittsburgh now offers VEText. VEText sends appointment reminders via text messages. Veterans can cancel appointments with a simple reply, opening slots for other Veterans. VEText replaces VA’s current text-message appointment reminder system. Details: Next issue and on Facebook and Twitter.

Save the Date!

2018 Veterans Town Halls at VA Pittsburgh campuses
- Sept. 28 at 10 a.m.
  University Drive campus
- Dec. 12 at 1:30 p.m.
  H.J. Heinz campus

2019 Veterans Town Halls at VA Pittsburgh campuses
- March 18 at 10 a.m.
  University Drive campus
- June 26 at 10 a.m.
  H.J. Heinz campus

For more details, visit www.pittsburgh.va.gov/calendar.asp

Post 9/11 Care

Are you a Post 9/11 Veteran? Do you need help navigating VA care?
Our Transition and Care Management team helps returning Servicemembers with post-military health care—even those still on active duty or activated members of the National Guard or Reserve.

For details, call 412-822-2362

VA Online Scheduling

Too busy to call to schedule a primary care visit? Just go online! VA Pittsburgh now offers online scheduling of primary care visits. All you need is a My HealtheVet premium account.
Get started today!
To learn more, call 412-360-6838 or visit www.myhealth.va.gov