



**VA**  
HEALTH  
CARE

Defining  
**EXCELLENCE**  
in the 21st Century

HONORING SERVICE  
**EMPOWERING**  
**HEALTH**

2013 Report to the Community

From the  
**Network Director**



Health care excellence is our goal each and every day. This report highlights some of the accomplishments we made in 2013, but most importantly, it focuses on the major cultural shift we've been making these past few years in how we offer care and relate to Veteran patients and their families. That is: we want to be their partners in health, providing them with personalized, proactive, patient-driven health care.

I'm happy to report this paradigm change is happening throughout the VA Sunshine Healthcare Network and indeed, all of VA.

We're being proactive and letting Veterans' desires inform their health plans. We've changed the first question we ask Veterans' from: "What's the matter with you?" to, "What matters to you?" The dynamic is changing so we can provide health care based on a patient's needs, values and how the Veteran wants to live, not only for preventing illness and disease, but also for managing chronic disease and providing caring, compassionate, end-of-life care.

But don't take my word for it. The pages of this report come alive with stories of how we're investing in new facilities, enhancing services and developing new programs to provide Veterans with the best quality health care available anywhere.

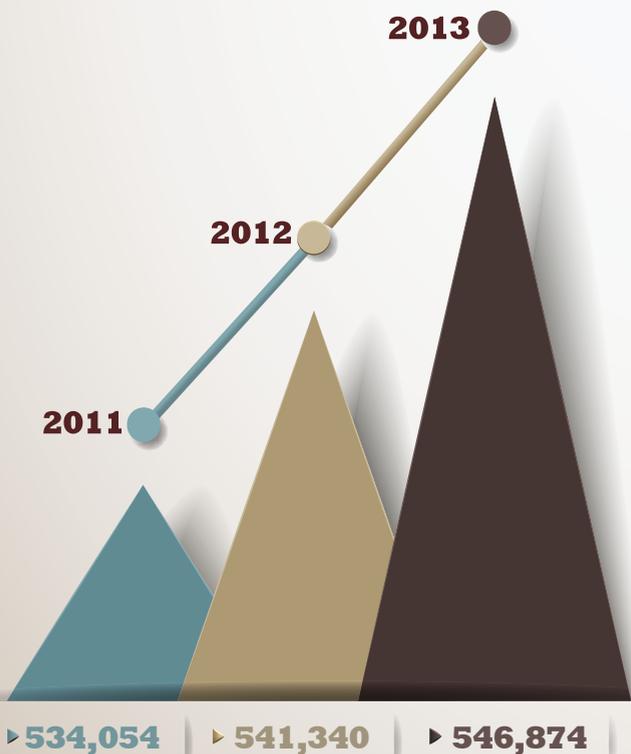
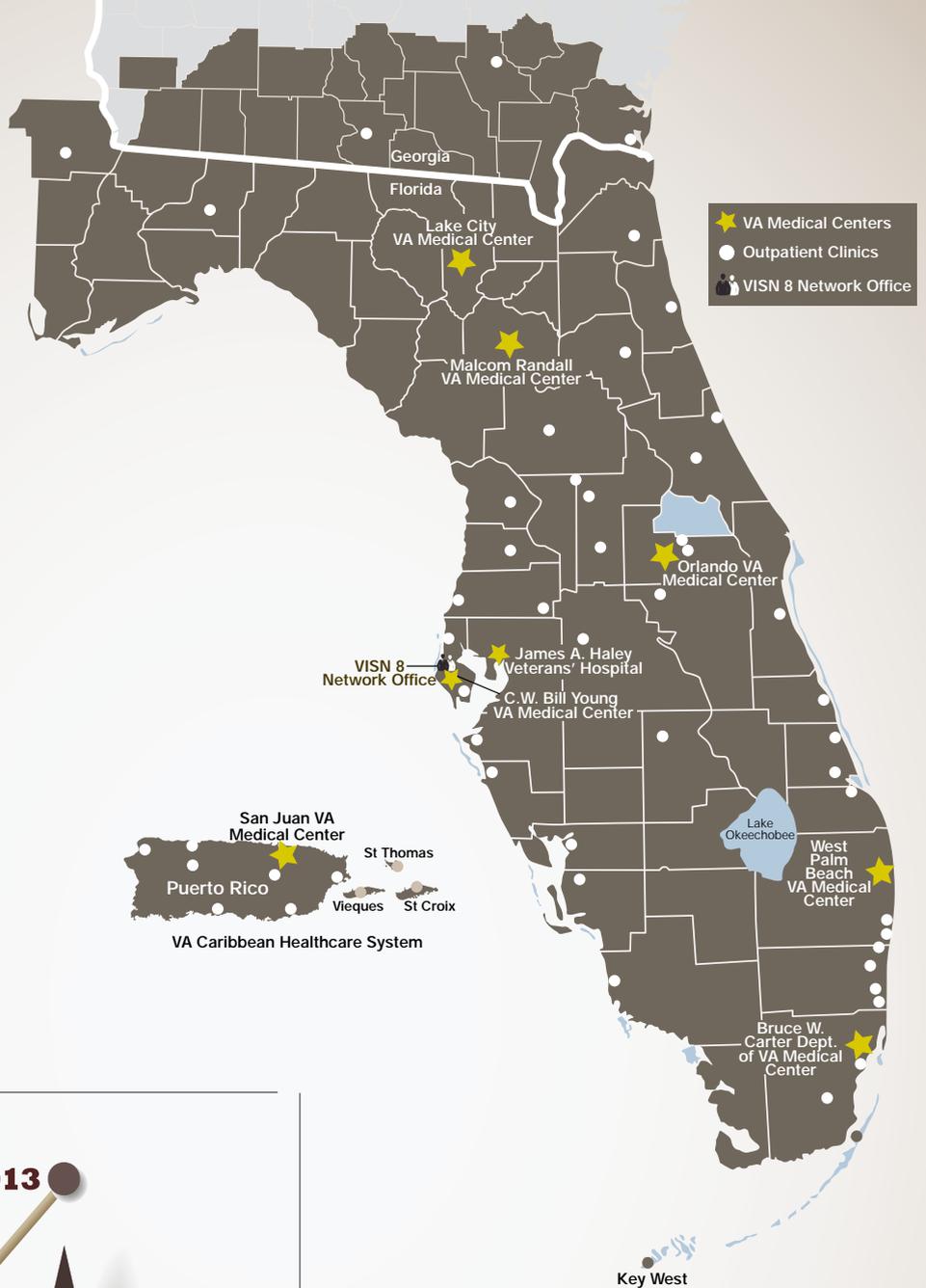
Be sure to read the personal testimonials of our employees who are wholly focused on making the patient experience the very best it can be. And hear first-hand from Veterans about what they really think of their VA care.

It is our pleasure and privilege to serve our nation's Veterans. You have my word that we will continue to work hard to create for them a culture of health and well-being that exceeds your highest expectations.

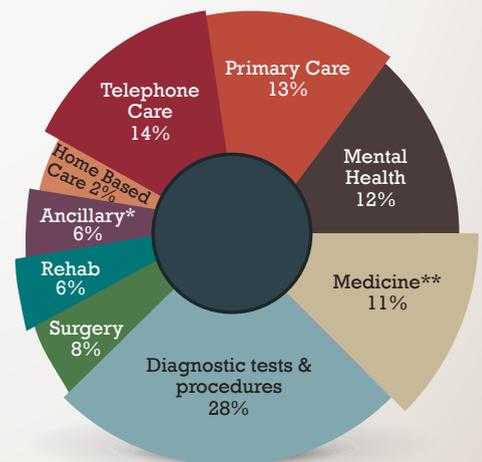
A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joleen Clark".

Joleen Clark, MBA, FACHE  
VISN 8 Network Director

The VA Sunshine Healthcare Network, otherwise known as "VISN 8" is the nation's largest, busiest VA health care network. The network spans a vast 64,153 mile area that is home to 1.6 million Veterans. Eight large VA hospitals and more than 55 clinics in Florida, South Georgia, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands provide the very best VA health care available. In 2013, 546,874 Veterans made nearly 8 million visits to our facilities.



**Veteran Patients Treated in VISN 8**



**Health Care Services in VISN 8**

\*Ancillary services include pharmacy, dental, nutrition, prosthetics, social work, chaplain and weight management.

\*\*Medicine services include allergy, cardiology, dermatology, emergency medicine, endocrinology, general medicine, hematology/oncology, infectious disease, nephrology, outreach care, pulmonary/respiratory disease, and rheumatology.

# getwell:)network<sup>®</sup>

It's More Than Just Great TV

## *Interactive Patient Care System Gets Veterans Involved in Their Health Care*

At VA hospitals across Florida and in the Puerto Rico, there's always something good to watch on television.

An Interactive Patient Care System in patient rooms and units in Florida hospitals and at the San Juan VA Medical Center in Puerto Rico is helping to educate, engage and empower patients in the care they receive.

Using an in-room television that has an easy-to-operate touch screen, hospitalized Veterans using the *GetWellNetwork* receive customized health education as well as information on hospital services, medications, patient safety and pain management, and dynamic, on-line entertainment including Internet access, television shows, movies, video games and music.

There are only a handful of VA facilities nationwide currently using *GetWellNetwork* which is being installed in all VA hospitals in Florida as well as the VA medical center in San Juan. The *VA Sunshine Healthcare Network* is the first to get the system put in network-wide in 2013.

A key element of the system is an Interactive Patient Whiteboard, a central communication exchange that helps patients, families and caregivers easily share information with each other.

"We are committed to investing in the latest technology to deliver the very best care to our Veterans," said Joleen Clark, VISN 8 Network Director. "This tool proactively engages patients and families during a very personalized hospital experience. It starts with patients knowing who is taking care of them, educating themselves on their condition, treatment plan, and the discharge planning process. And it ends with Veterans being more satisfied with their hospital stay and being better prepared to care for themselves beyond the walls of the hospital."

*"GetWellNetwork maximizes our ability to provide a great patient experience coupled with successful patient outcomes. We know this technology will be an invaluable tool to both our patients and staff, and we look forward to seeing the quality of care improvements. We believe that investing in the wellness of our Veterans is one of the wisest investments we can make."*

**Joleen Clark, Network Director, VISN 8**



Patient satisfaction is key to a better hospital experience, and using the *GetWellNetwork*, patients are able to contact their care team directly about issues like adjusting their room's temperature, tending to an environment of care issue, or providing feedback on the quality of care they're receiving. This enhanced communication enables clinicians and team members to immediately respond to their patients needs.

*GetWellNetwork* interfaces with *Vista Imaging*, the VA's enterprise-wide paperless and filmless Electronic Health Record. Besides customizing patient education, hospital staff will be able to track and record patient information directly into a Veteran's electronic medical record. Future system enhancements include access to *My HealthVet*, a free, on-line personal health record that allows Veterans to see their wellness reminders, view appointments, participate in secure messaging with their VA healthcare team and access links to federal and Veteran benefits.

We are partnering with our Veterans  
to provide them with proactive,  
personalized and patient-driven health care.

We are changing our approach from

**“What’s the matter with you?”**

to

**“What *matters* to you?”**

*“As employees, we are all part of a team that must recognize opportunities to improve the Veteran experience both inside and outside the walls of the Medical Center. For me, this means responding to unique situations like recognizing a patient in the waiting room who is cold and providing a warm blanket, helping a family member find a quiet place to make a phone call, or walking a lost Veteran to his or her appointment location. Sometimes, it can be as simple as a smile and a warm greeting. Even though my primary responsibilities lie within Radiology, I can make a difference in the Veterans’ experience here at the Medical Center – We all can!”*

**Lisa Campbell**  
**Chief Technologist, Radiology Service**  
**Bay Pines VA Healthcare System**



# Bay Pines Partners to Speed Up Claims Process for Veterans

In March 2013, the Bay Pines VA Healthcare system partnered with the St. Petersburg VA Regional Office (VARO) to implement a new pilot program to speed up the disability claims process for Veterans. The new, program, or Fully Developed Claims (FDC) Program, is an ongoing, innovative Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) initiative designed to provide swift and expeditious treatment of eligible "fully developed" compensation or pension claims.

How does it work? VA, traditionally, after it receives a claim from a Veteran, will only then provide the Veteran notification of what is required from him/her to substantiate the claim. The FDC program is unique in that it provides notification of the evidence necessary to substantiate an eligible claim at the time of application, allowing the Veteran to understand what is required at that time.

A Veteran participating in the FDC program will send the required evidence with the claim and certify that he or she has nothing further to provide. By doing this, the processing time is dramatically reduced and VA is able to process these claims far more quickly than going through the traditional claims process.

To support and streamline the program, the Bay Pines VAHCS Compensation and Pension clinical team worked with the VARO to setup a dedicated FDC office on the medical center campus. The new office was staffed by VARO FDC representatives that reviewed claims and evidence provided by Veterans to validate eligibility. If claims were deemed eligible for the program, the FDC representative then referred Veterans directly to the Compensation and Pension clinic located inside the medical center. Veterans could complete required exams the same day or were scheduled for the next available appointment.

From March - September 2013, the Bay Pines VAHCS completed 565 individual exams from FDC program referrals. On average, Veterans who participated in the program received a disability rating in 47.8 days versus the regular national average of 199.6 days. In addition, the quality of compensation and pension exams completed within the healthcare system were nearly 100 percent accurate – a true testament to the quality within the system.

Due to the success of the partnership, the Bay Pines VAHCS and VARO continue to operate the program at the medical center.

## Veterans Access to VA Health Care

87%

24,424

29,616

546,874

Veterans in Florida, South Georgia, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands with access to Primary Care and Mental Health Services within a 30 minute-drive time of their homes.

Average daily outpatient visits to VISN 8 hospitals and clinics -- #1 in the nation.

Veterans newly enrolled for VA health care in the network in FY13. More Veterans were enrolled for health care in VISN 8 this year than any other network.

Unique Veterans treated at VISN 8 hospitals and clinics in 2013.\*





## High Tech Equipment Offers Veterans Best Radiation Cancer Treatment

A new TrueBeam linear accelerator (LINAC) was installed in the Bay Pines VA Healthcare System's Radiation Oncology Center in 2013. With an investment of approximately \$3.4 million, this state-of-the-art technology will provide the highest quality radiation cancer treatment for Veterans. The Varian TrueBeam is a newer version of the Varian Trilogy which has been used in the radiation oncology clinic since it opened in March 2011. This cutting-edge technology allows physicians to specifically target tumors and cancerous tissue down to the millimeter, significantly limiting adverse effects to the patient. When the second machine is fully operational, the Radiation Oncology Clinic will be able to treat up to 50 patients per day, doubling the current patient load.



Courtesy City of Tampa

## Robotic Suits Help Paralyzed Veterans Walk Again

At the James A. Haley Veterans' Hospital Spinal Cord Injury Center in Tampa, four new robotic exoskeleton suits are helping severely injured Veterans with lower-body paralysis to walk upright, train and exercise again, warding off long-term health effects associated with an extreme sedentary lifestyle. Veterans using the high tech device experience a greater sense of independence along with enhanced self image and self esteem.

## Community Partnership Benefits Hospitalized Veterans

This year, the Orlando VA Medical Center developed a VA Inpatient Care Team of clinical professionals to care for hospitalized Veterans at the Osceola Regional Medical Center in Kissimmee, Fla. The team provides Veterans with the same hands-on, quality, compassionate care they'd receive when admitted to a VA hospital. The partnership with a community hospital allows the embedded inpatient hospitalists access to procedural suites to bring Veterans advanced care by VA physicians until the new Orlando VA Medical Center hospital opens in 2014.



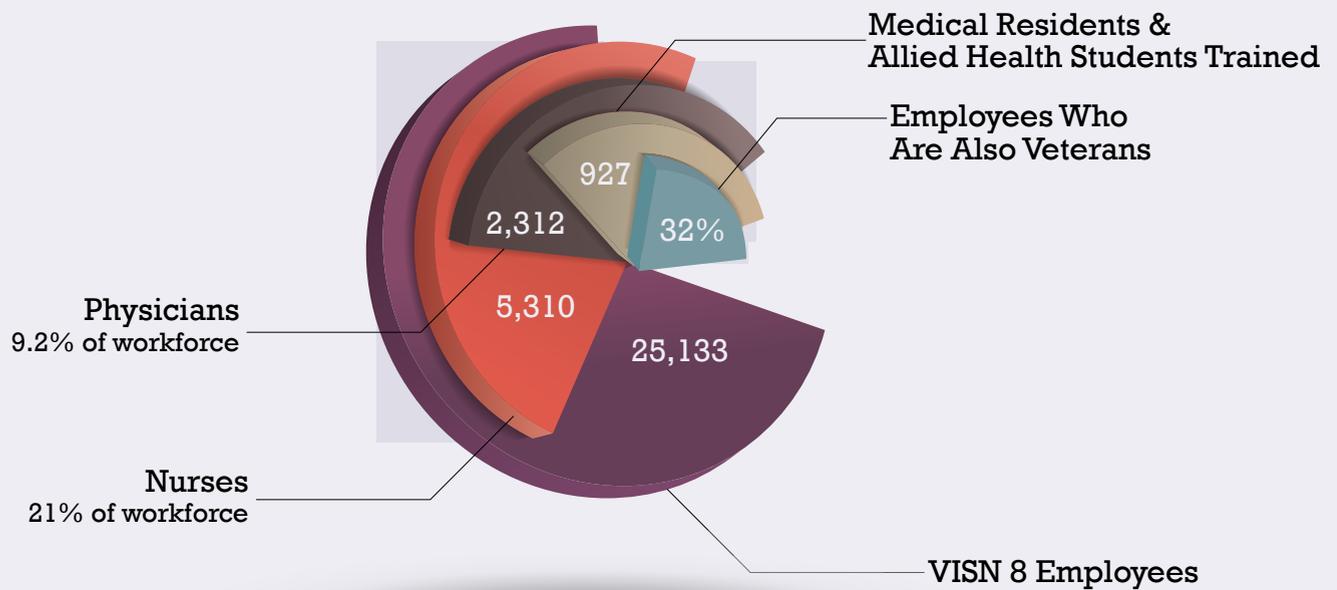
## New Hospice Unit and Mental Health Center Provide Whole Person Care

Providing compassionate palliative, end-of-life and mental health care for Veterans addresses the whole person – body, mind and spirit.

In December 2012, a new, 10-bed Hospice and Palliative Care unit within the Community Living Center (nursing home) opened on the James A. Haley Veterans' Hospital's main campus in Tampa. These services were previously provided to patients throughout the facility and in the community.

In July 2013, they also hosted a ribbon cutting for its new Mental Health complex located about two miles from the main hospital. The 22,300 sq ft building houses a mental health clinic, post-traumatic stress disorder clinic, and substance abuse treatment program. To accommodate the growth, 63 new mental health staff were hired.

# The Heartbeat of VISN 8 OUR PEOPLE



## James A. Haley Hosts 33<sup>rd</sup> National Veterans Wheelchair Games

More than 560 Veteran athletes from the U.S., Puerto Rico and Great Britain competed in the 33rd National Veterans Wheelchair Games held July 13-18, 2013 in Tampa, Fla. The James A. Haley Veterans' Hospital and the Florida Gulf Coast Chapter of the Paralyzed Veterans of America co-hosted the Games which included 18 medal-awarding athletic events including hand cycling, basketball, softball, weightlifting, track and field, swimming and quad rugby, to name a few. Exhibition tennis and adaptive water skiing, a first for the Games, were also held. This was the second time the Games were held in Florida; Miami hosted the event in 1991.



## New Admin Building in San Juan is Eco Friendly

VA Caribbean's new administrative building located on the main campus at the San Juan VA Medical Center was awarded the Gold Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) rating. The LEED System, developed by the U.S. Green Building Council, provides a set of standards for environmentally sustainable construction and healthier spaces. This new building will house important services for Veterans such as eligibility verification, enrollment for VA health care, Veterans identification cards, and release of information, among others.



### The Best Primary Care in the Nation

*"VA patients get better primary care than patients with private insurance, Medicare, or Medicaid, as measured by key performance indicators like management of high cholesterol, blood pressure and diabetes."*

From the article, "The Case for Changing How Doctors Work," October 1, 2013, the New Yorker. Author: Dr. Celine Gounder, MD, a physician and medical journalist.

### VA Caregiver Support: You're There to Support Your Veteran. We're Here to Support You.

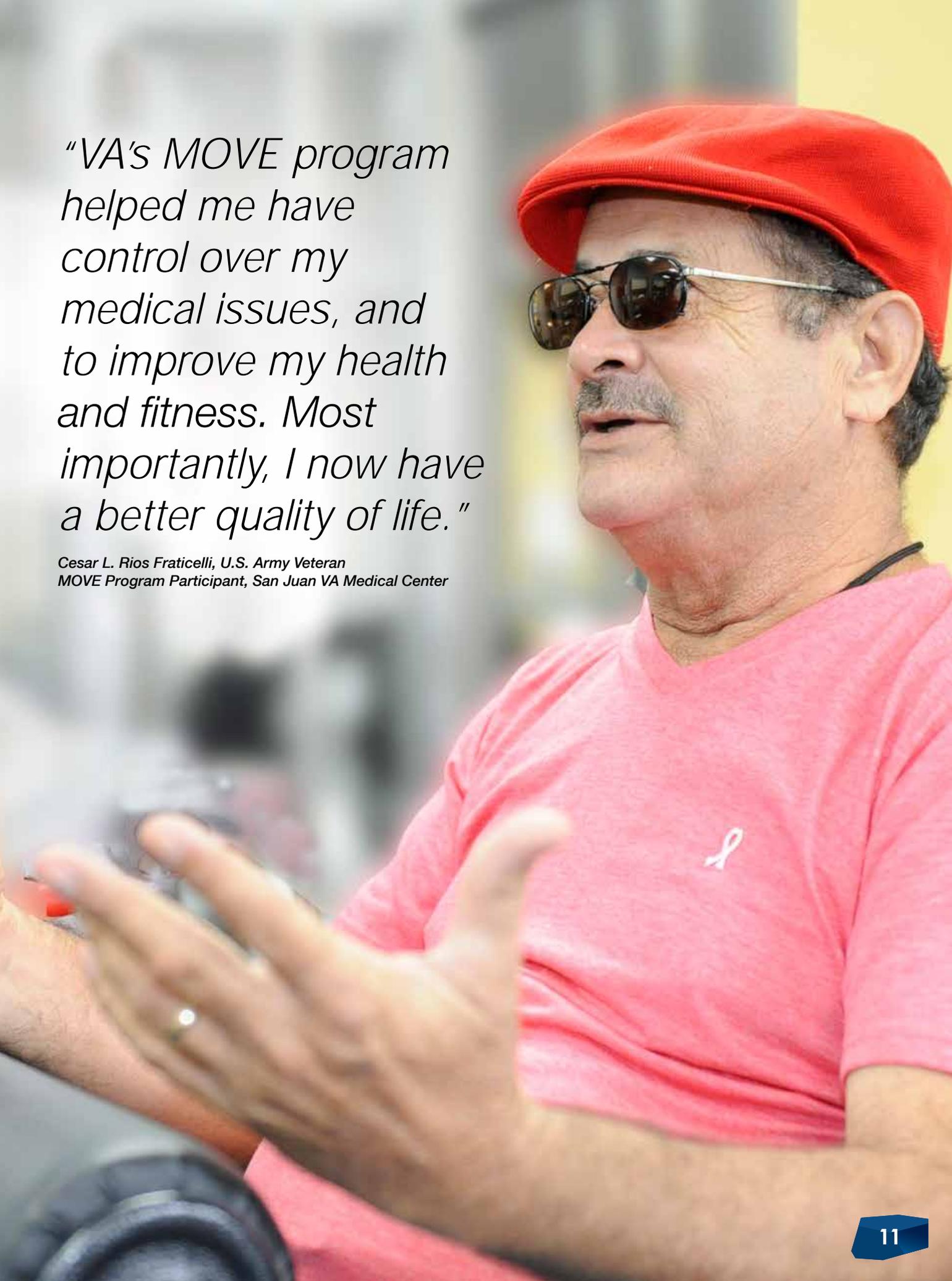
Since its inception, the Caregivers Support Program in the VA Caribbean Healthcare System has helped 353 primary Veterans' caregivers with comprehensive benefits that include monthly benefits, healthcare through ChampVA, respite care, caregiver educational training, and supportive counseling. The program has expanded through outreach efforts at the VA outpatient clinics in Ceiba, Guayama and Ponce on the island of Puerto Rico. Through this program, the VA Caribbean Healthcare System helps family caregivers take care of the Veteran they love.

*Luz E. Del Valle, Caregivers Program Case Manager at the VA Caribbean Healthcare System, interviews a Veteran and her caregiver.*



*"VA's MOVE program helped me have control over my medical issues, and to improve my health and fitness. Most importantly, I now have a better quality of life."*

*Cesar L. Rios Fraticelli, U.S. Army Veteran  
MOVE Program Participant, San Juan VA Medical Center*





*“When Agent Orange finally caught up with me and my left leg had to be amputated above the knee, the Jacksonville Outpatient Clinic prosthetics and rehabilitation service took great care of me. I prefer the medical care at the clinic above all others and recommend it to all Veterans.”*

**Herschel Allen**  
**U.S. Marine Corps Veteran**  
**Patient, Jacksonville VA Outpatient Clinic**

# TAVI Procedure Now Offered at Malcom Randall VA Medical Center

The Malcom Randall VA Medical Center in Gainesville, Fla. is one of 250 hospitals in the nation and it's the first in the VISN 8 network of hospitals and clinics in Florida, South Georgia and the Caribbean to offer the Transcatheter Aortic Valve Implantation (TAVI) procedure. The VAMC, part of the North Florida/South Georgia Veterans Health System, performed its first TAVI procedure in September 2013.



*Photo: Clinical staff at the Malcom Randall VA Medical Center in Gainesville, Fla., simulate performing the new Transcatheter Aortic Valve Implantation (TAVI) procedure during a training session in the operating room. TAVI is a minimally invasive procedure that eliminates the need for open heart surgery.*

The TAVI procedure eliminates the need for open heart surgery to replace the aortic valve via a minimally invasive approach. During the procedure, the aortic valve is implanted through a catheter that has been inserted in the femoral artery located in the leg and travels to the heart where a balloon is inflated in the aorta.

"This procedure allows patients with aortic stenosis who are not candidates for surgery due to advanced age or multiple health problems such as a prior stroke, congestive heart failure or diabetes, to undergo valve replacement to improve heart functions," said Chief of Cardiology Dr. Carsten Schmalfluss.

Malcom Randall was able to meet the criteria to offer TAVI because it has one of the VA's highest volume catheterization laboratories. Located at the facility is a hybrid operating room that provides a surgical setting with the diagnostic imaging technology needed for TAVI.

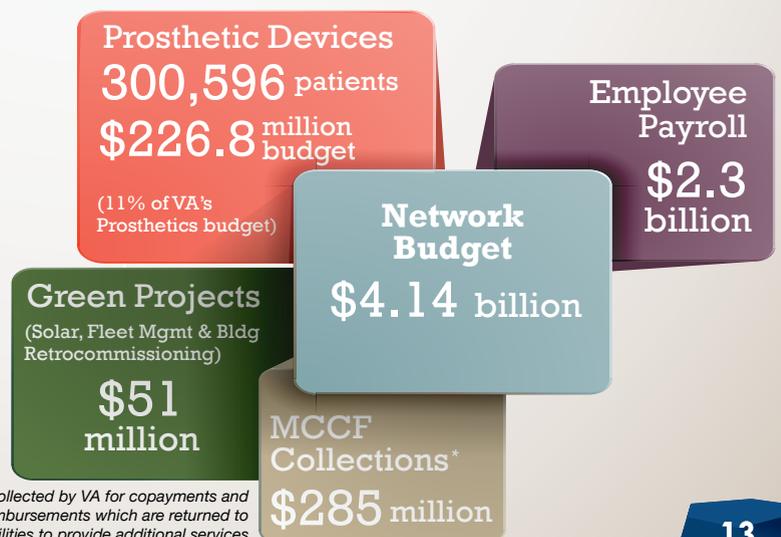
"Prior to obtaining approval to start the procedure, our staff trained with University of Florida Health staff who have been performing the procedure since March 2012. This was a true collaboration as many of the VA's TAVI team members have appointments at the VA, UF Health and teach at the University of Florida College of Medicine," said Dr. Anthony Bavry, Director, Cardiac Catheterization Laboratories.

- Heather Frebe

## Redesigning Our Processes: Reducing ER Wait Time & More



Employees throughout the North Florida/South Georgia Veterans Health System (NF/SGVHS) are focusing on eliminating waste and improving efficiency to better serve our patients. By looking at how patients "flow" from the emergency department through the inpatient units, teams were able to reduce the wait time in the emergency department for psychiatry and medicine admissions. In FY13, teams throughout the NF/SGVHS worked on 68 projects to improve processes including mental health missed opportunities and nursing education for patients.



\*MCCF are funds collected by VA for copayments and health insurance reimbursements which are returned to local health care facilities to provide additional services for Veterans receiving care at their facility.



Registered Nurse/Respiratory Therapist Brian Sturgill is breathing new life into the concept of Patient-Centered Care. As the Home Oxygen Program coordinator at the Bruce W. Carter VA Medical Center in Miami, Brian is more than a care provider, he's a one-stop VA resource for the 220 patients enrolled in Miami's program, which has been recognized as a best practice by the Joint Commission and VISN 8.

"I'm available 24/7 and my patients know it," said Sturgill. "It's about making each patient feel important and comfortable knowing that I will always be here for them."

A Veteran and lung cancer survivor, Brian connects in a unique way with the patients and their families as they adjust to new equipment and living conditions.

*"By Taking Care of Veterans, I'm Taking Care of Me"*

*Brian Sturgill, VA Employee, Veteran & Lung Cancer Survivor*

## **Caring & Sharing: Volunteers are priceless asset to the Nation's Veterans and to VA**

*"The professional, courteous, and compassionate employees at Bay Pines have changed my life. I can honestly say that I am at peace with myself and my health because of the care they've provided to me over the years. The doctors, nurses – everybody – care for the whole person. I am very happy with every aspect of my health care."*

**Timothy Horgan, U.S. Army Veteran.**

**Patient and volunteer at the Bay Pines VA Medical Center. Mr. Horgan has contributed more than 11,000 hours of his time and talents there.**



**Volunteers:**  
9,072  
(Youth  
Volunteers: 19%)

**Volunteer  
hours:**  
870,506

**Monetary  
Value of all  
donations:**  
\$22.2 Million



DoD photo

## #1 in the Nation: Providing Accessible Health Care for Our Women Veterans

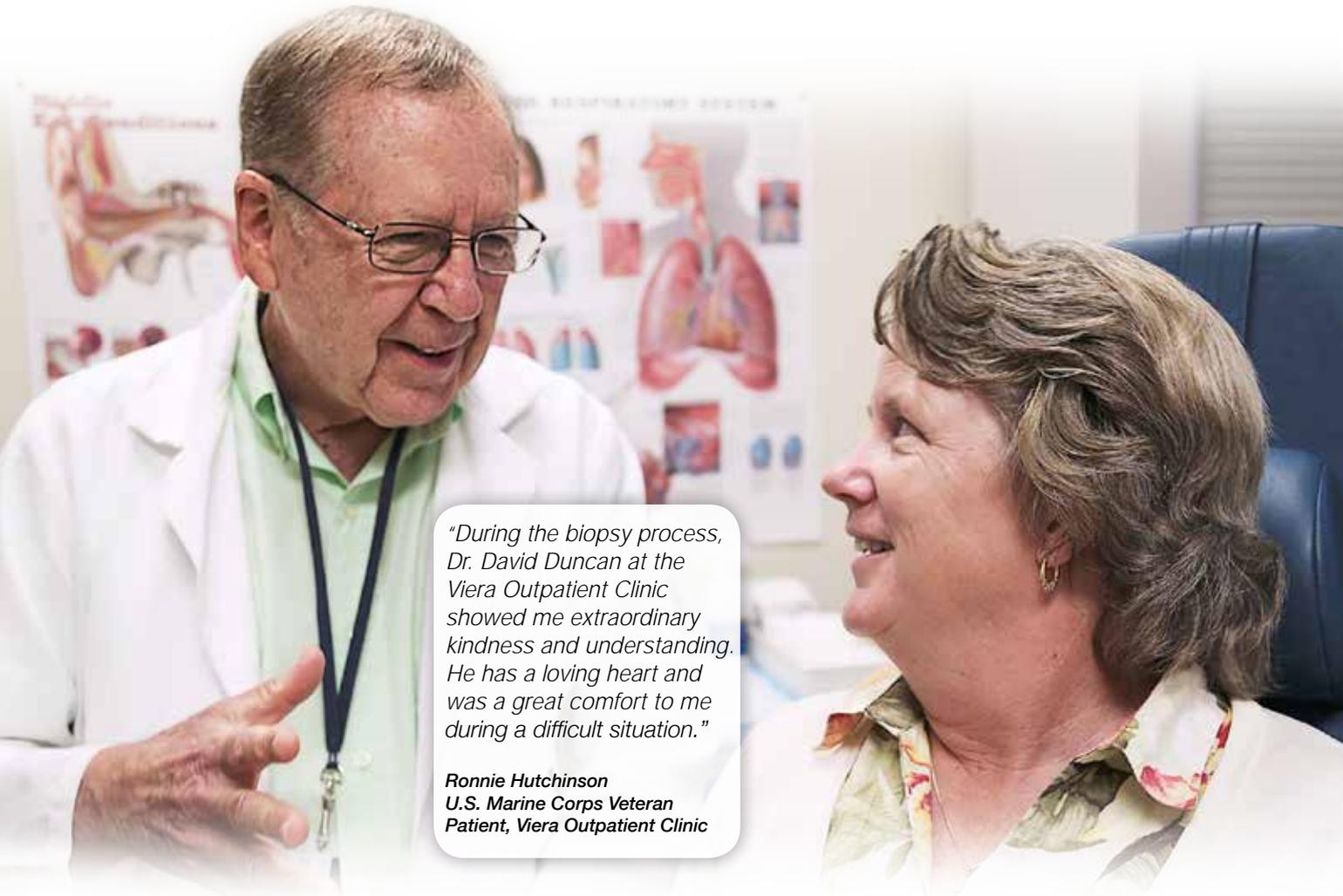
Through Patient Aligned Care Teams (PACTs), VA provides accessible, coordinated, comprehensive, patient-centered care to women Veterans. In 2013, 37,221 women received health care services at VA hospitals and clinics in Florida, South Georgia and the Caribbean—more than any other VA healthcare network nationwide. We're proud that more than 75% of women Veterans enrolled for VA healthcare in VISN 8 were seen by our providers in 2013. Providing the quality healthcare they've earned and deserve is a top priority.

## Emergency Dept and Surgical Suite Open in Miami

The year 2013 saw the opening of two significant additions to the Miami VA Healthcare System when the new Emergency Department and Surgical Suite opened at the Bruce W. Carter VA Medical Center in Miami. The Emergency Department features private rooms, expanded triage areas and better services for Veterans with mental health needs, while the new Surgical Suite includes state-of-the-art equipment that will meet the needs of patients for years to come.



**We want to be Your Partner in Health.  
We are working to create a culture of  
health and well-being that considers  
the whole person and all of his or her  
individual needs and goals.**



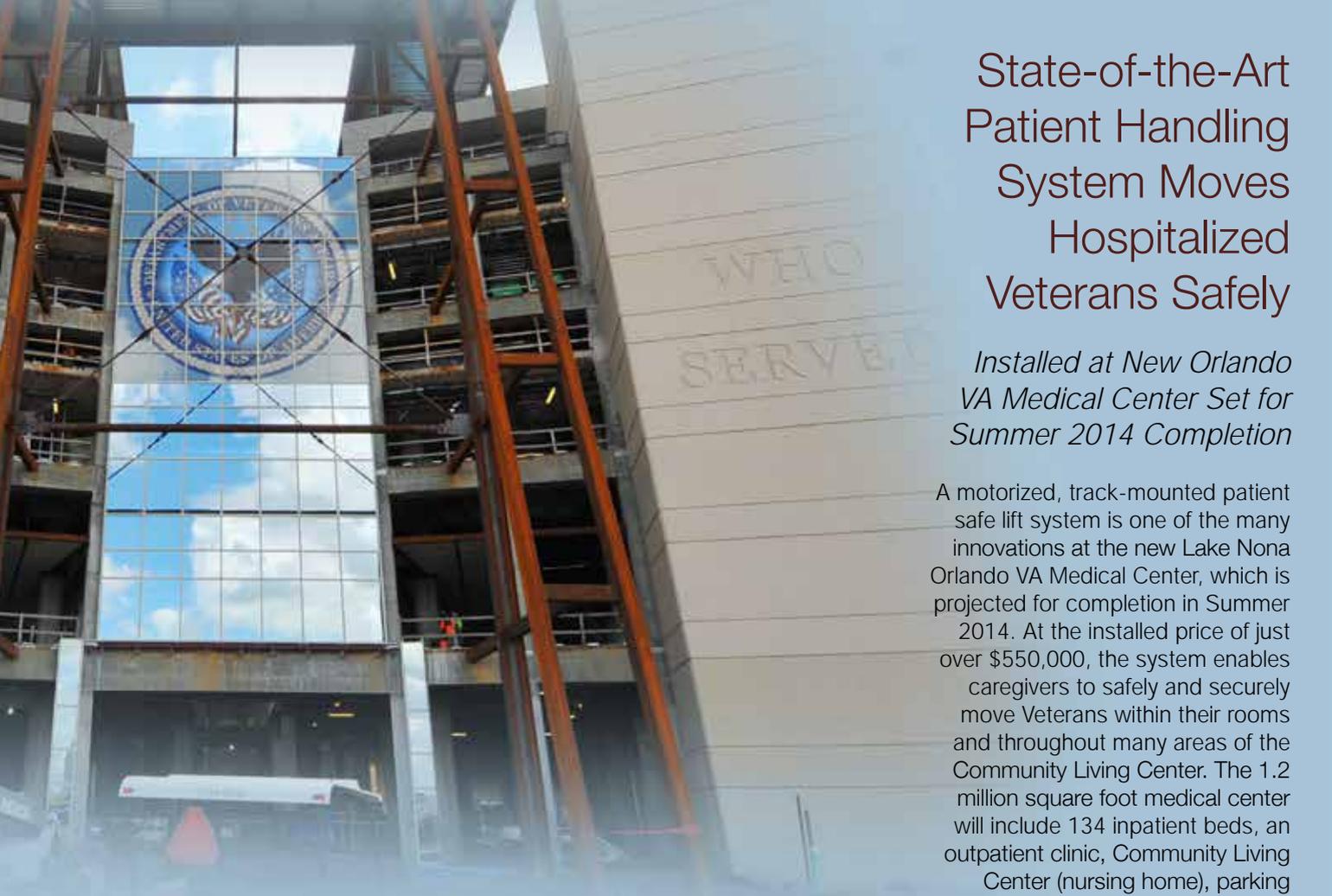
*"During the biopsy process, Dr. David Duncan at the Viera Outpatient Clinic showed me extraordinary kindness and understanding. He has a loving heart and was a great comfort to me during a difficult situation."*

**Ronnie Hutchinson  
U.S. Marine Corps Veteran  
Patient, Viera Outpatient Clinic**

## Assisted Living At Its Best

Adjacent to the Viera VA Outpatient Clinic (OPC) and built on land leased from the Department of Veterans Affairs, Viera Manor opened in Viera, Fla. on May 3rd. The facility will accommodate 102 residents in 66 studio, 14 one-bed apartments, and six, two-bed apartments. The Manor has a therapy room, a stylist and barber shop, meeting room, an ice cream parlor and even a pool table.





## State-of-the-Art Patient Handling System Moves Hospitalized Veterans Safely

*Installed at New Orlando VA Medical Center Set for Summer 2014 Completion*

A motorized, track-mounted patient safe lift system is one of the many innovations at the new Lake Nona Orlando VA Medical Center, which is projected for completion in Summer 2014. At the installed price of just over \$550,000, the system enables caregivers to safely and securely move Veterans within their rooms and throughout many areas of the Community Living Center. The 1.2 million square foot medical center will include 134 inpatient beds, an outpatient clinic, Community Living Center (nursing home), parking garages, chapel, domiciliary, and central energy plant.

## Services Expanded at \$35 Million Clinic in Jacksonville, Florida

The North Florida/South Georgia Veterans Health System dedicated the Jacksonville Replacement Outpatient Clinic in April 2013. Located in Jacksonville, Fla., the two-story, 133,500 square foot clinic provides state of the art technology and increased specialty services including diagnostics, improved laboratory facilities, expansion of women's services, minor ambulatory surgical procedures, expanded mental health telehealth services and additional audiology.



# Lending a Helping Hand to Veterans In Trouble

## *Palm Beach County Veterans Court A Model*

The Veterans Justice Outreach program seeks to avoid the unnecessary criminalization of mental illness and extended incarceration among Veterans by ensuring that eligible justice-involved Veterans have timely access to VA health care. Since the program's inception at the West Palm Beach VA Medical Center, more than 800 Veterans have been connected with VA health care. The Palm Beach County Veterans Court Team received the 2013 Davis Productivity Award for saving the community almost \$1 million. They were also selected for the Meritorious Service Award in the Criminal Justice category by the Florida Council on Crime and Delinquency.



*"The Wounded Warriors of South Florida is very proud to have a good working relationship with the West Palm Beach VA Medical Center. Personally, I am grateful for the service I get here and would urge all Veterans to sign-up and take advantage of their excellent health care."*

**Robert D. Chelberg, Lieutenant General, U.S. Army (Retired) | 1961-1993**  
**Patient, West Palm Beach VA Medical Center**  
**Board Member, Wounded Warriors of South Florida**

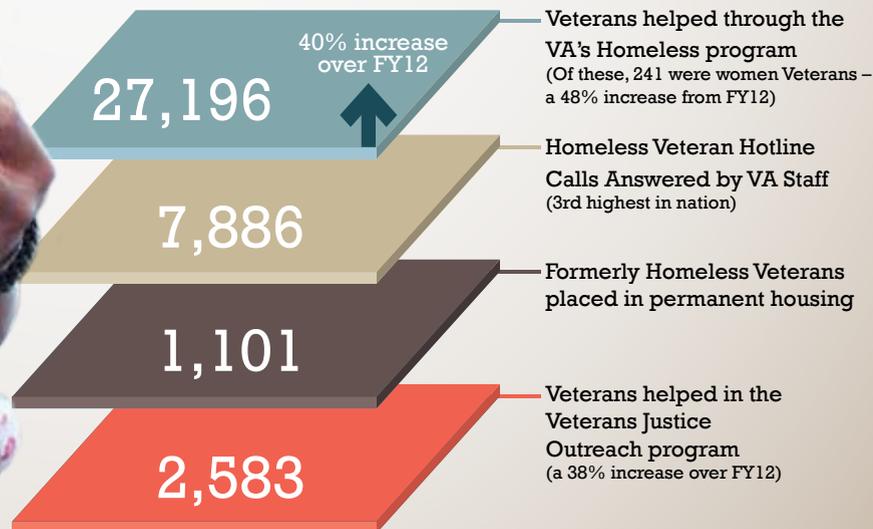


*"Veterans can expect exceptional health care in Florida. The VA has some extraordinary providers and wonderful people providing services."*

**Alex Kovac, U.S. Army Veteran**  
**Patient, Bruce W. Carter VA Medical Center, Miami**  
**Past Florida State Commander, Disabled Veterans of America**

## Helping Veterans Find Their Way Home Again

Veteran Jose Lopez-Rodriguez and daughter Kiara benefited greatly from services received through the Homeless program at the West Palm Beach VA Medical Center. In 2013, the facility activated Building 16 to provide a more welcoming environment for homeless Veterans and better maximize mental health space throughout the medical center. Forty new mental health providers now have a permanent space within the VAMC to treat our Veterans. Also, the new Veterans Resource Center provides assistance with a variety of resources including housing placement, referrals to community food pantries, help with utilities when funding is available, referrals for emergency placement and more. In the VRC, Veterans can also take a warm shower, obtain donated clothing, have access to a laundry facility and when available, obtain non-perishable groceries and toiletries.





*"I decided to protect my country, and then I decided to get help. Without the Miami VA, my life would be upside down. The Healthcare for Homeless Veterans program helped me keep my family together and gave me a second chance."*

*LaQuita Branch, U.S. Army Veteran Patient, William "Bill" Kling VA Clinic, Miami VA Healthcare System*

## **Providing Mental Health Support**

**10**

MH Summits Held

**366**

New MH Staff  
Hired

**1.1  
million**

Outpatient Visits

## Reaching Out to Returning Troops

Military & Family Members provided transition assistance

31,375 +  
10,632

Outreach Events

301

46,981

Service Members using VA health care in VISN 8  
(18% increase over FY12)



## Million Veteran Program To Help Prevent Disease, Personalize Therapies

The Million Veteran Program (MVP) is a national voluntary research program that studies how genes affect health with a goal of improving healthcare for Veterans and ultimately, for all Americans.

Funded entirely by the Department of Veterans Affairs, the goal of MVP is to partner with Veterans receiving their care in the VA Healthcare System. To do this, MVP will build one of the world's largest medical databases by safely collecting blood samples and health information from one million Veteran volunteers.

Data collected from MVP will be stored anonymously for research on diseases like diabetes and cancer, and military-related illnesses, such as post-traumatic stress disorder. MVP will facilitate developing new diagnostic tests to enable disease prevention and earlier treatment and will personalize therapies to Veteran's individual characteristics and conditions.

Veterans who receive their care at the VA Caribbean Healthcare System and the Orlando VA Medical Center are among those in VISN 8 who volunteered to participate in the program.

## World Class Scientists Improving Veterans Lives

Discovering knowledge and creating innovations that advance health care for our Veterans and the nation is the mission of VA research. There were 655 active research studies and a budget of \$30.6 million in 2013 at VISN 8 hospitals in Florida and in Puerto Rico.

**New COIN Center of Innovation for Disability and Rehabilitation Research.** VA's Health Services Research and Development Service has funded a new Center of Innovation (COIN) at two VISN 8 health care systems that will improve health outcomes for Veterans. In a collaboration, the James A. Haley Veterans' Hospital and the North



Florida/South Georgia Veterans Health System (NF/SGVHS), were chosen as a COIN Center of Innovation on Disability and Rehabilitation Research. Researchers identifying and developing strategies for improving inpatient and outpatient rehabilitation services, as well as the long term management of disability, including issues that impact family members.

### Miami Nobel Prize Winner Celebrates 50 Years of Research Excellence.

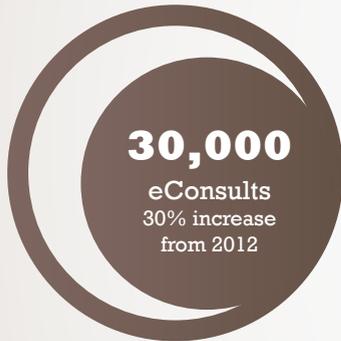
Dr. Andrew Schally joined VA in 1962 while researching the connection between hormones and cancer. In 1977, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for his work leading to breakthroughs in cancer diagnosis and treatment. In 2013, the Miami VA Healthcare System helped celebrate his 50 years of service to not only Veterans, but advancing medical research and changing the ways we treat those with cancer.



*“When I got out of the Navy, it was hard. I came to the Miami VA for a physical and they connected me with programs I didn’t know existed to help Veterans like me get back on my feet.”*

*Joseph Medina, U.S. Navy Veteran  
Patient, Bruce W. Carter  
VA Medical Center, Miami*

## Telemedicine: Right Care...Right Place....Right Time



### Virtual Health Care: A Technology Primer

Through innovative, focused use of technology, VA is providing health care services to Veterans virtually more often than ever before, making their care more convenient and accessible.

**Virtual Care:** Changes the location where health care services are routinely provided

**Telehealth:** Uses technology to improve access to care by virtual means

**eConsult:** Electronic referral for consultation by a specialty provider

**Secure Messaging:** Confidential e-mail for communication between the Veteran and the clinical team

## A New Source of Support

*Telemental health in VA is a relatively new source of support for Veterans, helping them manage their care, no matter where they happen to be.*

In 2013, there were almost 700 Clinical Video Telehealth (CVT) encounters by Veterans getting their PTSD psychiatric care virtually from VA counselors located at the Lake City or Gainesville VA Medical Centers. About 16 percent of these sessions were conducted in Veterans homes; the rest were done at NF/SGVHS outpatient clinics close to where their patients live. For their initial intake interview, all Veterans receiving therapy see their counselors in person at one of these VAMCs.

*With a largely rural Veteran population, the North Florida/South Georgia Veterans Health System is one of the busiest in the country to offer telemental health services, particularly for PTSD.*

Clinical Social Worker and the Program Manager for NF/SG's PCT program.

"As it became clearer that our centrally located PCT clinics prevented access to care for Veterans in rural locations in our large geographical catchment area, we adopted videoconferencing capability between Lake City and our most remote clinics."

Today, NF-SGVHS provides virtual PTSD treatment at the Valdosta, Palatka, Waycross, Ocala, Lecanto

and Marianna clinics. Providing home-based services as another option allows for increased flexibility in terms of scheduling and the Veteran's preference for appointment time, among other factors, according to Moser.

To further accommodate working Veterans, VA clinical staff sometimes telework, conducting these virtual sessions directly from their homes which allows them to extend appointment times past daytime hours.

Telehealth in the NF/SGVHS' PTSD Clinical Team (PCT) began about two years ago as a collaboration with the systems' Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) clinic and a Rural Health Initiative grant that enabled Veterans suffering with TBI to receive rehabilitation services in their homes.

"Because so many TBI patients also had PTSD, it was a natural extension for the PCTs to provide special PTSD care to Veterans in this manner," explained Mark Moser, a Licensed

### Genetic Testing via Telehealth

Veterans who get their care through the West Palm Beach VA Medical Center are getting state-of-the-art genetic diagnostic testing and counseling virtually thanks to an agreement forged between the West Palm Beach VA Medical Center and Genomic Medicine service, a new VA national specialty care service providing genetic consultation services out of Salt Lake City, Utah. The program has increased access for patients and VA health care providers to genetic professionals, promoted shared decision making and reduced program costs. In FY14, the VA Medical Centers in St. Petersburg, North Florida, San Juan, Miami and Tampa also plan to set up genetic testing programs via telehealth.



# Telemental Health Counseling

"When your doctor can come into your living room, it makes all the difference in the world," said 35-year-old Lisa Rodriguez who suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder. "It's so much less stress. And when you have PTSD, the last thing you needed is added stress."



*U.S. Air Force Veteran Lisa Rodriguez suffers from PTSD. Telemental health counseling provided virtually is helping her transition back to a normal life.*

Rodriguez is one of a growing number of Veterans who receive psychiatric services virtually either at a nearby VA clinic or right in their homes, connecting via a high speed Internet connection and webcam with a counselor located miles away at a VA Medical Center or directly from their homes while teleworking. For Rodriguez, who received telemental health counseling in her Valdosta, Ga. home for about eight months, the situation was ideal.

"I didn't have to travel 45 minutes away to the Lake City VA Hospital to see my counselor and I didn't have to arrange for someone to watch my daughter.

"Most importantly, at home, I'm in my comfort zone, I am more myself talking to my doctor here versus in a sterile office. I tell her about my dogs and she can see them; she even met my daughter. She sees me in my environment and it helps me know she understands," she said.

Trust is paramount when discussing the painful memories of her time overseas. It was March 2008 and the International "Green Zone" in central Bagdad was under almost daily rocket and mortar attack by insurgents. For the former U.S. Air Force Technical Sergeant, safety seemed illusive.

"The day I arrived in Bagdad, I lay down to take a nap and woke up to a bombing. From then on, it was a regular occurrence. You couldn't get a good night's sleep because you didn't know if you would sleep through the alarm or maybe it wouldn't sound and you would miss an incoming (attack)," Rodriguez said. "We lost people, including someone I was very close to."

Stationed back in the U.S. after her 6-month tour of duty in Iraq, the unseen scars of the battlefield continued to haunt her for the next several years until she left the Air Force in 2010 and returned to Washington. First treated for PTSD at the Walla Walla VA Medical Center in July 2011, she said her life then changed for the better.

"It wasn't until I started going to the VA that it was determined I had PTSD. I was actually listened to and it was a turning point for me," she said. Following a former love, a subsequent move brought her to Valdosta and treatment managed at the Lake City VA Medical Center.

"Because of the therapy I received from the VA, I am a completely different person today. In fact, I'm studying for my master's degree in counseling and hoping to work for the VA. Maybe I'll be able to help someone just like me some day," she said.

Dr. Karen Courchaine is a telemental health psychologist and member of the PTSD Clinical Team at the Lake City VAMC, part of the North Florida/South Georgia Veterans Health System. She said telemental health counseling is ideal for Veterans who live in isolated geographic areas far from a VA clinic, those who have transportation concerns, and those with physical or psychiatric limitations that make it difficult to attend psychotherapy on a regular basis.

Providing home-based services as an option provides the additional flexibility to schedule appointment times with the least possible disruption to a Veteran's work and other activities, according to Dr. Courchaine.

- Susan Wentzell

Offering Veterans  
with PTSD  
a Lifeline



*Dr. Karen Courchaine, Telemental Health Psychologist*

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