



## CAVHCS Expanding Services in Wiregrass Region

In direct response to Wiregrass Region veteran community concerns, Central Alabama Veterans Affairs System (CAVHCS) will open a new contract to operate the existing Community Based Clinic in Dothan, Ala. to prospective contract providers, while simultaneously entering into an agreement with Lyster Army Health Clinic to begin the operation of a VA primary care clinic on Fort Rucker, Ala. around the New Year.

“This simultaneous maintenance and expansion of services to veterans in the Wiregrass Region is a direct result of a concerted effort to identify and resolve veteran needs, while remaining responsible stewards of our nation’s resources,” said CAVHCS Director, Robert Ratliff. “The level of



CAVHCS Director, Robert Ratliff signs a sharing agreement that will result in a VA Primary Clinic aboard Ft. Rucker, as Lyster Army Health Clinic Commander, Col. Michael S. Kaminski looks on.

teamwork, expertise, communication and dogged willingness to overcome obstacles necessary to realize this expansion of services - are a direct reflection of the ‘can do’ spirit that has served this nation so well.”

The result of today’s announcement means that many of the

veterans in the Wiregrass Region will soon no longer have to drive to CAVHCS’ Medical Centers in Montgomery, Ala. or Tuskegee, Ala. for primary services like X-ray, laboratory work, ophthalmology consultations or pharmacy support. “One of the goals we identified during the meetings and town halls conducted with Wiregrass Region stakeholders leading up to today, was getting veterans off the road,” explained Ratliff of the 125 to 200 mile roundtrip veterans were previously required to make. “We are going to ultimately provide those basic

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## ‘Best Care Anywhere: Why VA Health Care is Better...’

WASHINGTON — VA’s health care delivery system is a model for the rest of America and offers solutions to the country’s health care crisis, according to the author of a recently published book entitled “Best Care Anywhere: Why VA Health Care Is Better Than Yours.”

“I believe that within 10 years, the evidence-based, patient-centered, VistA-driven model of care pioneered by the VA will be the delivery device by which most Americans and many foreigners as well receive their care,” said Phillip Longman, the book’s author and a former economic journalist who is now a resident scholar at the Washington-based think tank, New America Foundation.

In a recent speech, Longman told a meeting of VA Central Office employees that VA faces a number of challenges in the years ahead, most notably the possibility of competition for funding from other programs such as Social Security and Medicaid and from the private sector.

“Despite these challenges, I believe that VA’s glory days are still ahead,” Longman said.

While doing his research, Longman read a number of articles praising VA for the innovations the Department had made in the last ten years. Pursuing the issue further, he discovered that VA had completely changed its image

from what the public saw through vehicles such as the movie, “Born on the Fourth of July.”

Longman noted that in recent years VA health care has received numerous accolades from well-respected independent expert organizations, including the American Consumer Satisfaction Index and the Innovations in Government Award from Harvard University.

In conducting his research, Longman visited a number of VA facilities and talked with numerous doctors, nurses and other VA employees. Among those he interviewed and featured in the book were the so-called “Hard Hats,” a loose underground network of pioneering VA doctors, pharmacists and technicians who, beginning in the 1970s, wrote the software that became VistA, the VA’s world class system of electronic health records.

“VistA is a process, not a product,” Longman said, noting that one of the chief reasons for the system’s success is that the ideas for the computer programs were developed by doctors and other medical professionals.

Longman said the “hard hats” represented a

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# From the Director

**Robert W. Ratliff, PH.D., FACHE**

**Editor's Note:** VACO recently released a story highlighting some of the achievements of this year's class of Summer Interns. CAVHCS has a similar story.

In today's information-driven society if you want to learn about something a common first step is to "Google" it. When you Google "intern" one of the first results that comes up is a definition the reads, "An intern is one who works in a temporary position with an emphasis on on-the-job training rather than merely employment." However, for one fourth-year pharmacy intern in Biloxi, Mississippi, in 1976, that on-the-job training cemented a desire that resulted in a 30 year career.

"I went into the internship with a deep respect for the VA, because the Biloxi VA Hospital had taken such good care of my father," explained Robert Ratliff, whose father was a 100 percent service-connected U.S. Air Force veteran. "When I was a 17-year-old high school senior, my father was diagnosed with Lou Gerhig's Disease at the age of 37. We cared for him in our home for 15 years with the assistance provided by the VA. My family received every benefit the VA provides, from health care, prosthetics, a VA home loan and an adapted automobile.

"In fact, those same Veterans' benefits allowed me to attend pharmacy school on my father's GI Bill, the first year of graduate school, and yes I even completed part of my clinical training as a Summer VA Intern in 1976."

While Ratliff may have had a deep respect for the opportunities the VA had provided, it was his internship that determined his future. "That summer I learned how to work and the importance of our mission," said Ratliff. "I decided then - that I wanted to work for the VA."

Even though Ratliff may have wanted to work for the VA he would have to leave home to do so. "After I graduated there were no pharmacy openings in the local VA," explained Ratliff. "I went all the way to San Diego to start my career as a full time VA Pharmacist in 1979."

However, the strong call of Mississippi beckoned and he soon moved back home to Biloxi to serve as a

Pharmacist and was quickly selected as Employee of the Month. "Some of the same people that helped me during my internship, continued to mold me once I got back" said Ratliff. "Of course I was happy about the recognition, but I was also encouraged, because it meant that I was on the right track professionally."

During Ratliff's VA career his pursuit of continued education has been a constant that almost everyone could emulate. "The importance of education was something I learned from my parents," said Ratliff. "Along the way I have served at many VA's where I've been allowed me to work educational tours of duty. And, I was able to use the balance of my fathers GI Bill to start a Masters Program in Health Care Administration, which I completed in 1981. In 1992 I completed a PhD from Texas A&M University."

Today, as the Director of Central Alabama Veterans Health Care (CAVHCS), Ratliff looks back on a career that has not only taken him across the country, but has also enabled him to shape young interns and possibly future VA leadership. "We're all shaped by those who lead us in some way," said Ratliff. "To this day - I remember 'Dangerous Dan' McGrew and the little things he taught me about being a professional when he took me under his wing during my internship. That experience is part of the reason why I go out of my way to support any program the VA has that ultimately develops leadership. I now serve on the board of the VA's Graduate Healthcare Administrative Training Program (GHATP) and have the opportunity to train and mentor many residents and interns.

After all - my career started as an intern."



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EMPLOYEE OF THE MONTH

## NEWSLETTER

### The Beacon

Mr. Ratliff has, for the past three months, provided the primary consult for unit-dose drug distribution expansion. This has allowed several to assist community hospitals in his own time to research decentralized drug distribution. Also, he has given an extra effort to provide involved housing services personnel with on-site education on unit-dose, some of which was done outside of his regular tour of duty.

The results of Mr. Ratliff's efforts will be improved care to the veteran through:

- Increased pharmacy involvement in clinical activities
- Improved inventory control
- Fewer missed doses
- Better space utilization

Mr. Ratliff has also been able to continue his academic education having recently completed the requirements for a master's degree. He took leave without pay to return to the campus of Southwest Texas State University where he was recently awarded a Master of



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### The CAVHCS Salute

The CAVHCS Salute is produced by the Central Alabama Veterans Health Care (CAVHCS) Public Affairs Office. CAVHCS Salute is an unofficial, internal communications publication.

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## EMPLOYEE OF THE MONTH

Montgomery Campus

Ms. ALANE LOVE

Librarian



Just ask anyone who has ever met Ms. Alane Love and they would agree she is a dedicated employee

who works late many evenings to complete requests, a promoter of information and a customer service advocate, for both staff and patients.

As the Librarian for CAVHCS, she has an opportunity to work with employees at all levels of the facility hierarchy in addition to serving our nations heroes, the veterans.

Since Alane has been at CAVHCS, she created and frequently updates the Library webpage which is available on the computer to all CAVHCS employees. Other evidence of her workmanship has been exhibited through handouts, e-mail information briefs, brochures, articles and the library newsletter.

She continuously advertises the services to increase employee awareness of the available resources to support their jobs and is never too busy to assist when asked. Many reports and presentations have been prepared with Alane's assistance and others could attest to tapping into her vast knowledge as well.

Although Ms. Love is a VISN employee, I believe she possesses the attributes which qualify her for the Employee of the Month, as she has been nothing short of exemplary in her level of service to this facility.

## EMPLOYEE OF THE MONTH

Tuskegee Campus

Mr. LUTHER BRIDGES

Management Assistant/Analysis  
Logistics Management



Helped develop the "My HealtheVet" customer service card that is currently being issued to all CAVHCS veterans plus other specialty printings and materials to assist customer service/patient care.

Member of the Culture-of-Change Committee, CAVHCS Veteran's Nursing Home. Arranged for the donation of military art and flags for the building as well as daily newspapers for the residents and other improvements.

Veteran's Representative on the Major Medical Committee for disabled veteran benefits such as wheelchairs and car lifts.

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Has represented Logistics on the Environment of Care Team for the Tuskegee Campus & Columbus CBOC for the past two years to insure that hospital conditions and equipment issues are addressed in all areas of patient care.

Helped to establish the new Mental Health Clinic in Dothan and assisting with the transition of the Dothan CBOC to Fort Rucker.

Responsible for the VA Southeast Network Hazardous Recalls/Alerts for CAVHCS which impacted all areas of patient care from the pharmacy to food services.

Active in support of the White Cane Program for blind veterans.

A poster for the Hospital Heroes Contest. The top half has a blue background with the text "Hospital Heroes Contest!" in white. The bottom half has a yellow background with text in blue and black. It lists questions for nomination, contact information for CAVHCS Human Resources, and a deadline of November 1, 2007.

**Hospital Heroes Contest!**

**For more information:**  
**Contact CAVHCS Human Resources**  
for details and a copy of the Nomination Form

**Do you work with a HERO?**  
Does this HERO go beyond the call of duty?  
Does this HERO make a difference in your community?  
Does this HERO improve your organization or the health of patients in your organization?

**IF SO, YOU SHOULD NOMINATE THIS INDIVIDUAL FOR ALABAMA'S HOSPITAL HEROES CONTEST.**

**The deadline for making a nomination is November 1, 2007.**

The Alabama Hospital Association is the sponsor of the 2007 Hospital Heroes Contest. Winners will be selected at the local level and considered for statewide recognition.

# Veterans History Project to include VHA

More than 50,000 veterans nationwide have contributed their recorded stories to the Veterans History Project at the Library of Congress. Now, VHA and the Library have started a pilot project at VA's Maryland Health Care system, which will add the stories of VHA employees to the collection.

"Everyone has a story to tell," said Susan Kern, the voluntary services program manager who oversees VA's initial project. The employee aspect of the project may be expanded to other sites in the future.

Expanding the project to include employees will help VHA

establish a record of the agency's history, to include groundbreaking discoveries by VHA clinicians and researchers. For example, breakthroughs in areas such as prosthetics, heart disease and diabetes have benefited veterans and millions of other Americans.

Jeffrey Lofton, public affairs specialist for the Veterans History Project at the Library of Congress, said interviews are kept in unedited form. Interviews have been recorded with veterans from all American wars in the 20th and 21st Centuries.

"Our emphasis is on collecting stories of older veterans from World

War I and II before it is too late," Lofton said. The Library has digitized about 4,000 of the interviews, which can be accessed via the Veterans History Project Web site at [www.loc.gov/vets](http://www.loc.gov/vets).

Veterans and VHA employees are encouraged to have their one-of-a-kind story recorded at their local facility. If their site does not have a Veterans History Project, they can arrange an interview through voluntary services. Individuals interested in conducting the interviews may contact the Voluntary Service Office at their site.



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services where veterans live instead of asking them to drive so far."

Leading up to this agreement CAVHCS researched potential area locations and opportunities. However, at the end of the day, the best fit was the agreement with Lyster Army Clinic. "With the changing of the mission at what was once Lyster Army Hospital – Lyster Army Health Clinic had medical spaces that were already Joint Commission certifiable," said Ratliff. "Everywhere else we looked required costly new construction. Plus, when you factor in the opportunities for joint utilization and the economies of scale those opportunities represent, well...all roads lead to Fort Rucker.

"That said; nothing could have been accomplished if it weren't for the foresight and willingness of Army leadership like Col. Michael Kaminski the Commanding Officer at Lyster Army Health Clinic," Ratliff quickly added. "He and I, as well as our respective staffs, were able to identify and overcome obstacles that normally might have prevented us from being able to realize what I consider to be the true definition of a win-win situation."

"Establishing the VA Outpatient Clinic here at Lyster is a major step forward in the right direction," said, Col. Kaminski. "It will clearly maximize existing infrastructure and create a framework for Soldiers transitioning from the Military Health Care System to the Veterans Health Care System. The central location of Fort Rucker will benefit a significant number of underserved Wiregrass veterans. In addition, further collaboration can lead to only further expansion of services to our Soldiers and Veterans."

An additional driving factor for the expansion of service in the Wiregrass Region was the fact that the veteran population had outgrown the current Community Based

Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) in Dothan, Ala. However, operation of the Dothan CBOC will continue as normal until the new contract is awarded. "The new contract to operate an outpatient will be open to all bidders, and it will continue to serve the Dothan community," explained Ratliff. "No matter which company is awarded the new contract, support will continue seamlessly."

Once the VA Clinic at Lyster Army Health Clinic becomes operational new Wiregrass Region veteran enrollees will be directed to enroll there, while current enrollees from throughout the entire region will have an opportunity to enroll at The VA Clinic at Lyster Army Health Clinic as well. "The Wiregrass Region is growing and our expansion efforts are designed to keep up with the veteran population in the entire region," said Ratliff. "We feel that when veterans see that they can get direct support right here in the region, they'll vote with their feet. More of them will eventually want to receive their primary care at The VA Clinic at Lyster Army Health Clinic."

If veterans do indeed vote with their feet and seek treatment at The VA Clinic at Lyster Army Clinic, the DoD/VA team aboard Fort Rucker will be ready. "The 2003 Defense Authorization Act required that DoD and VA establish a Joint Incentives Program, which in turn created a DoD-VA Health Care Sharing Incentive Fund," explained Kaminski. "The intent of the program was to identify, fund and evaluate creative local, regional and national sharing incentives. We have a \$2.9 million renovation currently under consideration, which will result in expanded services to active duty soldiers and our veterans."

"But we're not going to stop there," added Ratliff. "We're going to keep finding common ground where we can realize mutual benefits. For us at the VA it's about providing services closer to where our veterans live. These are clearly decisions where everybody wins."

# September good time to ask: Are you Prepared?

September is National Preparedness Month. This nationwide coordinated effort is sponsored by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security each September to encourage Americans to take simple steps to prepare for emergencies in their homes, businesses, and schools.

The goal of National Preparedness Month is to increase public awareness about the importance of preparing for emergencies, including natural disasters and potential terrorist attacks and to encourage individuals to take action to prepare themselves and their families.

“It is vital that Americans take steps to prepare for emergencies at home, work or school,” said Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff. “Personal preparedness is paramount to effectively reacting to the effects of a disaster. By preparing yourself, your family, and your businesses, you allow first responders to prioritize efforts and aid.”

CAVHCS recently conducted

its second Pandemic Flu Tabletop Exercise. These exercises are designed to strengthen VA preparedness and response to pandemic influenza by exercising relationships with response partners



Drs. Pradhan and St. Onge (l-r) follow the flow of discussion during CAVHCS' second Pandemic Flu Tabletop Exercise held recently on the Montgomery VA Medical Center campus.

across VA and in CAVHCS' respective communities in addition to exercising selected aspects of the VA national and CAVHCS facility plans for pandemic influenza.

Pandemic Flu occurs when a flu strain new to humans quickly emerges and causes widespread illness.

These new strains are dangerous because humans have little

pre-existing immunity to them, because vaccines may be less effective than for seasonal flu. Past influenza pandemics have led to high levels of illness, death, social disruption, and economic loss.

National Preparedness Month, is also a good time to complete the Web-based VA course, “Preparing for Emergencies and Disasters: All Hazards.” The interactive training is available on the VA Intranet at [www.vcampus.com/valo](http://www.vcampus.com/valo), and instructions for use are available at [vawww.sites.lrn.va.gov/vacatalog/cu\\_detail.asp?id=22542](http://vawww.sites.lrn.va.gov/vacatalog/cu_detail.asp?id=22542). The course provides a toolbox of tips for employees, focusing on common strategies and procedures critical to reducing risks and protecting themselves, their co-workers, and their families during emergencies and disasters.

For more information about Pandemic Flu, visit VA's website at [www.publichealth.va.gov/flu/pandemicflu.htm](http://www.publichealth.va.gov/flu/pandemicflu.htm). For more information about National Preparedness Month, visit [www.ready.gov](http://www.ready.gov) and [www.listo.gov](http://www.listo.gov).



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## ‘Best Care’

revolution from below that set the stage for the decision to implement VistA throughout VHA that was led by Dr. Kenneth Kizer when he became Under Secretary for Health in 1995. Longman said Dr. Kizer's legacy is a model system veterans groups and health care experts now applaud.

He said that in addition to its innovative use of technology for medical purposes, VA is successful because it has a near life-long relationship with its patients, beginning when they leave the service and lasting until the end of life – including long-term nursing home care.

This gives VA incentives for investing in prevention, evidence-based medicine and effective disease management that are weak or lacking in other health care systems.

For example, if VA does not effectively manage its diabetes care, patients may require expensive care such as dialysis or amputations. This provides a financial incentive for preventive care.

“These incentives for quality care are lacking

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**“After seeing what the VA can do, I believe the health care crisis is solvable”**

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elsewhere in the health care system,” Longman said.

Outside VA, the benefits of investing in electronic medical records or in preventive medicine wind up going not to the health care system but to other competitors. In short, from the provider's view, there is little or no business case for quality.

Longman said VA has proven it can be successful because its system of care gives the provider a stake in the patient's long-term interest.

Longman's book lays out a plan—his own, not the Department's—to expand the VA model of care, first to cover all veterans and then to cover all their family members. He said there is a good case for merging the military health care system into the VA, which could be expedited because of plans to close some military bases and hospitals.

Longman's long-range plan would be to expand the system to other target publics, such as those on Medicaid or Medicare, and providing coverage for the 47 million people in the United States who do not have health insurance.

“After seeing what the VA can do, I believe the health care crisis is solvable,” Longman said.

