



Stakeholders 'Focus' on Improvements

Few are more passionate when it comes to improving healthcare provided to veterans than Veterans Service Organizations (VSO) and members of the Veterans Affairs Healthcare Administration (VHA). So when these two groups got together recently in Birmingham for an Alabama Stakeholders meeting, discussions were both passionate and focused on improvement.

"Each month, I visit every VA Medical Center in our VISN (Veterans Integrated System Network) which spans from South Carolina through Alabama," explained Network Director, Dr. Lawrence Biro during his opening remarks. "And, while I'm there, I talk to a lot of veterans on a one-on-one basis. Most of them tell me we're doing an excellent job, but we know that there are also patients who feel we're not meeting their needs. We count on Veteran Service Organizations to identify those individuals."

Stakeholder meetings in Alabama are actually nothing new. There are annual

One VA stakeholder meetings that discuss issues addressed by the Veterans Benefits Administration, the National Cemetery Administration as well as the VHA. However, during this stakeholder meeting the topics of discussion were exclusively focused on the VHA, and attendees were broken into focus groups that addressed three key areas of Access; Customer Service and Quality.

"We operate by fulfilling three promises," explained Biro. The first is, 'Quality second to none.' We want to be a veterans' provider of choice. The second promise is, 'Expand services to veterans.' And the third promise is to 'Ensure each patient is personally satisfied.'"

"Alabama's veterans health care is truly second to none," said State of Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs Commissioner W. Clyde Marsh, who also



Stakeholders led the flow of conversation focused on Access, Customer Service and Quality during a recent VHA/Stakeholder meeting in Birmingham.

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Veterans Day more than One Day at CAVHCS

When your mission is to serve and care for veterans, Veterans Day takes on a special meaning. So while Central Alabama Veterans Health Care System (CAVHCS) celebrated Veterans Day weekend along with the rest of the nation, CAVHCS also honored veterans throughout the week before conducting a traditional ceremony at the Montgomery VA Medical Center at 11:00, on the 11th day of the 11th month.

"We've been celebrating Veterans Week for some time now," said CAVHCS Director Robert Ratliff. "But this was the first time I've been able to enjoy the parade since coming here. Interaction between young people and our veterans is always something to

see. But, to watch those young ROTC members who are in awe of being able to speak with someone who has served their country is amazing. And the veterans...they lit up...their spirits absolutely soared."

The 58th Annual Veterans Day Parade at the Tuskegee VA Medical Center kicked off CAVHCS celebration earlier in the week with participants ranging from local military units, area schools, college bands and beauty queens to drill teams, marching units, veteran and military organization floats.

Also included on the list of CAVHCS Veterans Day events were a special Women Veterans program on Friday and the Russell County Girl

Scouts who visited Tuskegee to pass out flags to patients Saturday.

Culminating the annual celebration of our nation's heroes was the traditional Veterans Day ceremony held at the Montgomery VA Medical Center Sunday morning at 11:00. The ceremony featured the Presentation of the Colors, a 21-Gun Salute and the playing of taps by the Maxwell-Gunter Color Guard from nearby Maxwell AFB. The guest speaker, Brigadier General Jimmie C. Jackson Jr., Commandant, Air Command and Staff College, Maxwell AFB, represented the longstanding spirit of DoD/VA cooperation in Central Alabama.

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From the Director

Robert W. Ratliff, PH.D., FACHE

Earlier this month I attended a stakeholder meeting in Birmingham that focused on quality, access and customer service. During this meeting we broke into focus groups and identified specific concerns. While the process of these VHA-specific stakeholder meetings will continue with identified action plans being announced to resolve specific issues, I recognized two underlying themes found in almost every suggestion and concern expressed; trust and communications.

We at CAVHCS have seen marked improvement in terms of quality. However, one area we will be targeting in the upcoming months is customer service. As we strive to improve we will try to use these same underlying themes as a roadmap. We will find as many ways possible to speak directly to improving our veterans' trust as well as bolstering our lines of communications. This will be an "All Employee" effort.

In the meantime, one of the initiatives we have adopted to achieve this goal is the establishment of **Service Line Customer Service Agents (CSA)**. Our goal is to have staff available in all patient care areas to resolve veterans' concerns and/or problems on the spot at the initial point of contact. In addition, we want to expand our customer service to become one in which every employee considers him or herself an advocate for patients and for excellent customer service.

To further enhance our customer service and engage as many employees as possible, we will be rotating the appointments of the CSA's. This is a collateral duty. We will do this every two years to maintain high motivation and involvement in our customer service activities.

Each service line is asked to appoint a new CSA at either the service level or at individual treatment teams or work unit levels. Although only one person will be officially designated for each clinical/administrative section, all employees are encouraged to take part in our

facility's dynamic customer service program. We welcome existing, previous or new nominations for this important role.

The appointee will be charged with promoting customer service within his/her section by being a champion for excellence in customer service. This individual will identify and address issues that might result in diminished customer service, track patient complaints in the Patient Advocate Tracking System (PATS) web-based program, and provide guidance and instruction within his/her section on customer service practices. The CSA will also work to resolve

complaints and issues as needed and work collaboratively with other services to resolve issues when necessary.

Service Line CSA's will be required to attend all mandatory customer service training, meetings and activities. Managers are expected to support the Service Line CSA's and provide them with the time and opportunities to meet the responsibilities of this role.

If you're interested in serving as a CSA be sure to let your supervisor know. Recommendations will be

submitted to LaDonna Golden, RN, MSN, Assistant Chief, at extension 4421 or Susan G. Barfoot, DSW, Chief, Customer Service, at extension 4661, or no later than November 26.

Finally, from our recently installed MRI, which is a result of a sharing agreement with Maxwell AFB and our new Primary Care Clinic due to open after the New Year aboard Fort Rucker you have undoubtedly noticed

an increase in our efforts to find more opportunities to work together with our Department of Defense counterparts and deliver more services closer to where veterans live. We are actively turning our attention to expanding services in the Columbus, Ga. area as well. To that end we have recently met with the mayor of Columbus and our DoD counterparts at Fort Benning. It is our hope to continue to find ways to deliver services closer to where veterans live.



VISN 7 Director Lawrence Biro and pause for a photo just before kicking off a recent VHA-specific Stakeholder meeting in Birmingham.



Dr. Ratliff shares a map of veterans population density with Columbus, Ga. Mayor Jim Wetherington during a recent visit to the Mayor's office.



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EMPLOYEE OF THE MONTH

SHARON PAYNE-FINLEY

Mental Health
Tuskegee Campus



Ms. Finley was recently observed during a telephone interaction with a veteran who was distraught and anxious about an appointment. Ms. Finley explained to the veteran that while she could not schedule the appointment she would get him to the right person. She then began to do the “leg work.” She had to make several calls and repeated the same explanation over and over again before she was able to get someone to actually schedule the patient.

Her intervention saved this patient unnecessary frustration, stress and time. During this whole episode, Ms. Finley kept going back to the veteran who was on hold to let him know she was still working and reassuring him. After getting the appointment scheduled, she informed veteran of date, time, place, and contact person, along with her number in the event he needed additional help. This is typical of how Ms. Finley goes the extra step in helping veterans and family members who wander into her office or call her number as this patient did looking for help.

Another example of Ms. Finley going beyond the call of duty was recently demonstrated by her volunteering to help with preparation for a Mental Illness Awareness Week Program. This was not a part of her regular duties and most of the preparation was done during her off time. She prepared the banner, Certificates of Appreciation and took the initiative to get the appropriate signatures on them. She prepared the programs and had them reproduced and ready to distribute. The program would not have been a success without her effort and assistance. She made by job less stressful as she took responsibility for what may appear to be small tasks but can be monumental when putting on program without other assistance. Her assistance on this project was priceless, but what was most appreciated was her positive attitude and genuine willingness to help. She models what we at CAVHCS strive to achieve in regards to customer service and performing beyond our work assignments.

DR. RICHARD ARNOTT

Acute Care
Montgomery Campus



Dr. Arnott is a highly dedicated cardiologist who always goes an extra mile for quality patient care. During his tenure, he has been the only cardiologist on many occasions. He has provided continuous service that includes all weekends and nights.

Many patients have called Acute Care to thank CAVHCS for a wonderful cardiologist. Emergency Department physicians have expressed happiness for providing excellent cardiology care.

He truly exemplifies what a physician should be by continuously putting his patients first. He is a strong advocate for patients and their families, and serves them with the best of his ability while constantly improving his skills.

He provides excellent patient education. He helps on weekends as an ACLS instructor. He has given much in-service training to our medical staff and nursing staff. He chairs the Critical Care Committee, and is helping to prepare CAVHCS Rapid Response team. He is truly a dedicated physician and leader who never complain and make himself available all the time for highest quality care. He is always willing to add clinics when the demand exceeds capacity.

CAVHCS Represented at Conference

Submitted by Bonnie Dyck, RDH, MPH

Mr. George D. Howard, Education Specialist, in the Education and Learning Resources Service and Ms. Estela B. Atkinson, Administrative Support, in the Food and Nutrition Service represented CAVHCS at the International Conference on Communication in Healthcare, held October 9-12, 2007, in Charleston, SC.

This international conference series is the largest gathering of researchers, educators and administrators from around the globe brought together to focus on improving communication and patient-provider relationships in healthcare.

Mr. Howard presented his work on the CAVHCS Driver & Patient Safety as a Communications Issue, and Ms. Atkinson presented her work on CAVHCS Satisfaction Survey: Understanding the Patients Perspective as part of the conference poster sessions.



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attended the meeting. “But what really pleases me is that the Medical Center Directors have a fire in their bellies to take care of veterans. If they have the means to provide it – they do.”

“At CAVHCS we recently received word that we’ve improved in our quality measures by 21 percent,” said CAVHCS Director Robert W. Ratliff. “And, while we intend to continue to deliver on all three of our promises, I can tell you we’re going to really focus our attention on Customer Satisfaction in the upcoming weeks and months.

“We’ve got a unique challenge,” added Ratliff. “We have thousands of veterans currently traveling as many as 100 miles one way to receive basic services. We recognize that traveling that far puts us at a disadvantage. So, we’ve been working to expand services (Promise #2) where veterans live. We’ll open a new Primary Care Clinic aboard Fort Rucker shortly after the New Year, and we’ve been actively engaged with Fort Benning and the Mayor of Columbus, because we know we’re going to have to grow in that area as well.”

The VHA-specific stakeholder meetings produced a list of items ranging from specific complaints to systemic concerns. “The focus groups produced some concerns that we should be able to address in the short term – like Focus Cards (to be included in the letter sent reminding veterans of their appointment); Increased Mental Health Support; Support Groups; Cross training of staff to minimize wait times and an increased use of VSO to communicate benefits. Ratliff said. “Other concerns included getting more female providers and customer service resolution at the lowest level possible. Those issues are more systemic, but we’re actually already working on providing solutions to those as well.”

On November 8, the Director of the VA Southeast Network received the Presidential Rank Award, with Meritorious Executive distinction, at VA Central Office in Washington, D.C.

For the second time in his public service career, Lawrence A. Biro was recognized by the President of the United States for his outstanding success and dedication to our nation’s veterans, while serving as Director of the VA Rocky Mountain Network. In 2004, the President honored Biro with the Distinguished Executive Award, during his tenure as leader of the VA Stars and Stripes Healthcare Network in Pennsylvania. Today, Biro heads the VA Southeast Network, serving the ninth largest veteran population in the nation, encompassing the tri-state region of Georgia, Alabama and South Carolina.

The Presidential Rank awards are conferred upon senior federal executives who have achieved the highest positions in career public service, and are among the highest of honors presented by the President of the United States. The Meritorious Executive Rank is awarded for sustained accomplishment, with only five percent of Senior Executive Service (SES) career officials receiving this award. Senior career employees make up less than one fourth of one percent of the federal workforce.

In accepting the award, Biro stated that he was privileged to do so on behalf of the hundreds of thousands of veterans in the Southeast, as well as the thousands of dedicated VHA employees of the VA Southeast Network.

“Throughout my public service career with the Department of Veterans Affairs, I have led by my three core principles: 1) To provide care—second to none; 2) To maintain and expand veterans’ services; and 3) To ensure that each and every veteran we serve will be personally satisfied with the care they receive, based on the quality of outcome,” Biro said. “I am honored that I can look into the eyes of the many veterans I encounter each day, and know that the dedicated workforce I am proud to lead are living by those principles and standards each and every day, making a real difference in our veterans’ lives here in the Southeast.”

Further information on the Presidential Rank Award is available at <https://www.opm.gov/ses/presrankaward.asp>.

'V-Day'

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Women veterans render honors during the singing of the national anthem during the 10th Anniversary Ceremony of the Women's Memorial Dedication at Arlington National Cemetery, Nov. 3, 2007. Defense Dept. photo by Cherie A. Thurlby

November

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * American Diabetes Month * Lung Campus Awareness Month * National Alzheimer's Disease Awareness Month * National American Indian Heritage Month * National Hospice Month * National Pancreatic Cancer Awareness Month 					1	2
4	5	6	7	Veterans Day Parade Tuskegee VAMC 3 pm	Women Veterans Program Tuskegee VAMC 9 am	 US Marines Established 1775
Veterans Day	Veterans Day observed		Champions Challenge 100 miles in 100 days	Great American Smokeout 		
18	Perioperative Nurse Week Lung Cancer Awareness Week					
25					Computer Security Day 	

The CAVHCS Community Calendar is not intended to be an all-inclusive, official calendar. It is intended rather to provide a medium for CAVHCS Salute to share upcoming events.

If you would like to add a CAVHCS event please email details directly to alan.bloom@va.gov. Submissions are not guaranteed to be published. Considerations will be made for propriety, promptness and print space.