VA HEALTH CARE | Defining EXCELLENCE in the 21st Century

Bonne Santé

Summer 2012

Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System

Eye Clinic, page 8

My HealtheVet connects with Vets

By Phaedra Pea

My HealtheVet is the gateway to Veteran health benefits and services, providing access to trusted health information, links to VA and other federal benefits and resources, the Personal Health Journal, and *now* online VA prescription refills.

Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System would like to use every forum available to make communicating with you easier. Please sign up for My HealtheVet and opt-in for secure messaging so that we can communicate non-urgent medical information without the hassle of playing phone tag or delay by waiting on the line.

With secure messaging you can email any non-urgent information or request to your providers 24 hours a day. You do not have to wait for business hours to contact us and possibly forget what you wanted to communicate.

Your Patient Aligned Care Team (PACT) will be able to answer your message during regular hours. You do not have to feel that you need to wait by the phone for a return call or have anxiety about possibly missing the call.

For more information, contact Phaedra Pea, MyHealtheVet coordinator, at 985-902-5042.

My healthevet

My Health, My Care: 24/7 Online Access to VA

Bonne Santé

Summer 2012
Vol. 03 No. 3

Director
Julie Catellier
Acting Chief of Staff
Kartik Thaker
Associate Director
Jimmy Murphy
Associate Director Patient/Nursing Svcs
Brinda Williams-Morgan
Assistant Director
Stephanie Repasky
Chief, Community & Public Relations
Amanda Jones
Writer-Editor
Quentin Melson

Authorization

Published under the authority of Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System Numbered Memorandum 00-1.

Submissions

Story ideas and feedback are accepted at vhanolpublicrelations@va.gov.

Circulation

10,000

On the Cover

Veteran Anthony Lucas is examined by Dr. Rebecca Metzinger. Photo by Quentin Melson

Inside this edition:

MyHealtheVet	2	Eye Clinic changes	8
Getting to know our Volunteers	3	Electronic Bene Travel	9
Project Legacy Update	4-5	Be Physicaly Fit	10
Mental Health expansion	6-7	New Lab Hours	11
		Around SLVHCS	12

Getting to know our Volunteers: Jackie Cromwell

By Debra Caesar-Winbush

Jackie Cromwell, a dedicated volunteer, contributes in many ways to the Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System.

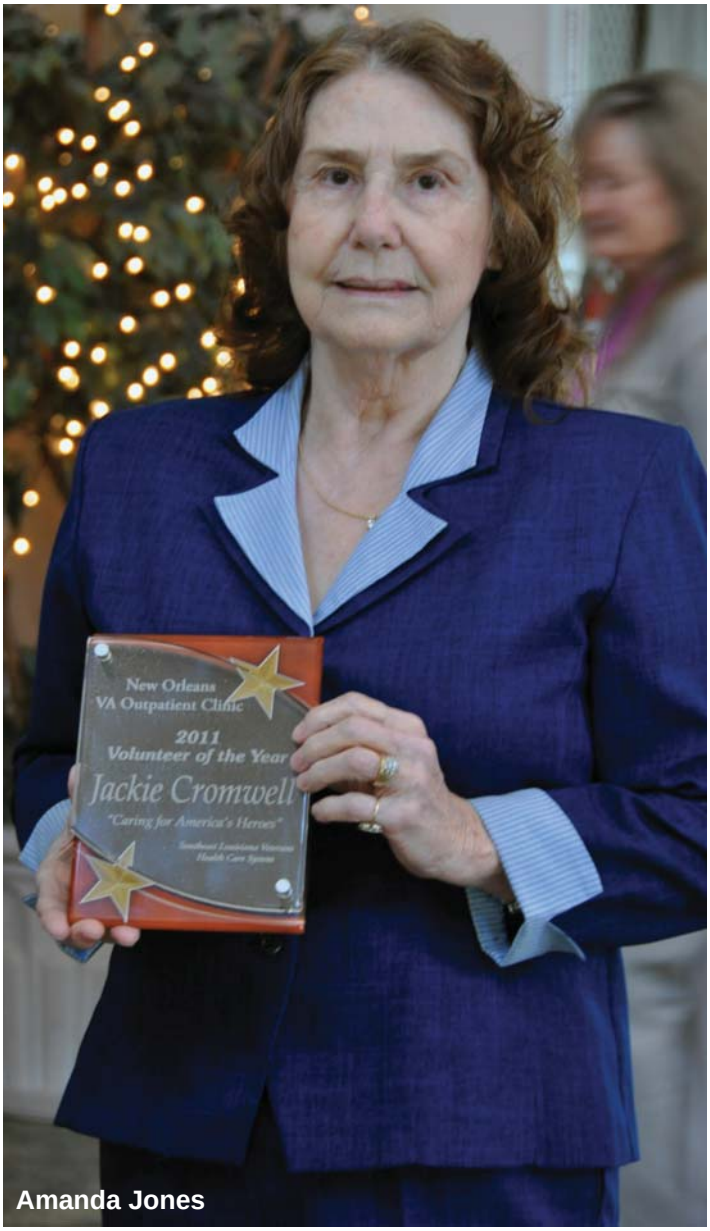
She serves on the VAVS committee as the American Legion auxiliary representative, volunteers at the VA New Orleans Community Based Outpatient Clinic and is the lead volunteer for the clothing station at the annual Stand Down. Never one to rest on her laurels, she works 25 hours a week collecting clothes, serves as a lobby greeter and helps clinic staff with various administrative duties.

Cromwell is reliable, passionate, and eager to assist Veterans because she sees the difference she makes in helping those who have sacrificed themselves for the country she loves. She said she believes they deserve support and care from every American citizen.

"Two words, THANK YOU, bring a smile of appreciation and feeling of honor to the Veterans I serve at the clinic and the Stand Down," said Cromwell.

The staff at the New Orleans CBOC know Cromwell on a first name basis and always greets her with a smile and "thank you" for the great service she extends to the staff and Veterans.

In addition to being an active member in the American Legion auxiliary, Cromwell is a member of the Veterans of Foreign War (VFW) auxiliary. She is the spouse of a retired Veteran, a mother, grandmother, great grandmother and the 2011 New Orleans CBOC Volunteer of the Year.

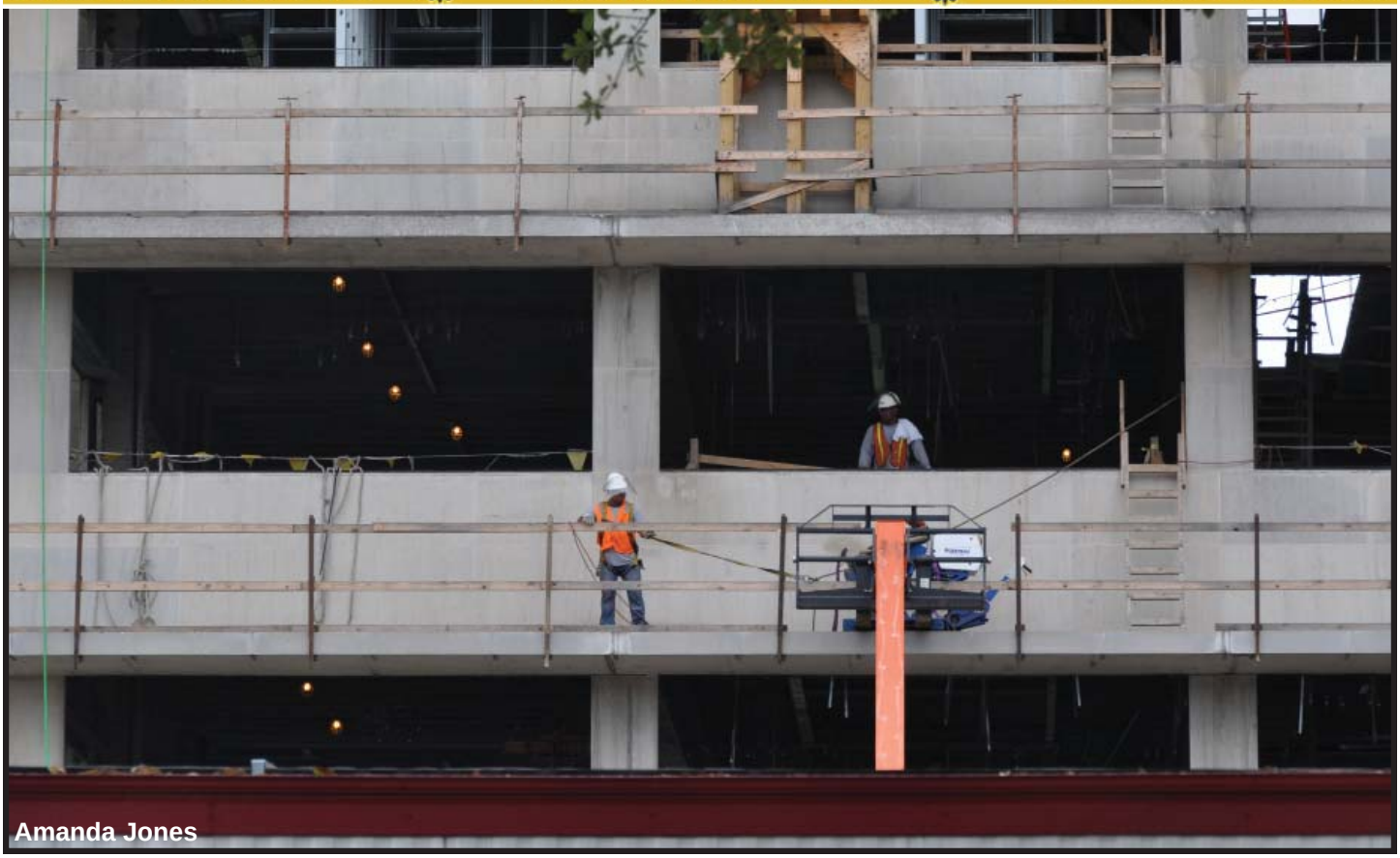


Amanda Jones

Jackie Cromwell was named 2011 Volunteer of the year.

PROJECT LEGACY

BUILDING HEALTH CARE ⚜ HONORING VETERANS ⚜ KEEPING THE PROMISE



Workers prep Pan Am's "eyebrows" (the building's overhangs) for waterproofing and new finishes.

By Karen Collins

The action at the construction site for the new medical center continues. Currently, there are about 150 workers on site each day and they've been busy.

The contractor drove the last of 753 piles for the central energy plant (CEP) on June 11. Each pile is about 150 feet long and if laid end to end, they would stretch nearly the length of the Causeway Bridge. Now that the CEP structural pile driving is complete, excavation and installation of the pile caps is underway. Pile caps are thick concrete mats used to join several piles together to increase the stability of the building's foundation.

Additionally, the tower crane needed to build the CEP and to eventually move the heavy industrial equipment inside has been erected.

The new medical center has a phased activation plan. We expect to have Pan Am completely renovated by the end of 2013 and activated in early 2014 to house administrative functions prior to the medical center's full activation. This building will serve as the recruitment and workforce development center. Mock-up tests for windows have been conducted and window installation should begin shortly. The new duct work and framing are being installed and rooms and offices are starting to take shape.

Project Legacy held the Activation Equipment Committee kick-off meeting this month. This committee has representatives from every service who will be responsible for reporting and tracking all the equipment needed for the new medical center. They will continue to work together all the way through installation and implementation. The committee will begin by reviewing and finalizing all the equipment lists. There are approximately 28,000 items (not including items like furniture and IT equipment), so the committee has its work cut out for them.

Like us on Facebook at www.facebook.com/vaneworleans

The tower crane needed to build the central energy plant and to eventually move the heavy industrial equipment inside has been erected.

Excavation and installation of the pile caps, thick concrete mats used to join several piles together to increase the stability of the building's foundation, is underway for the central energy plant.

New health care professionals available for Veterans

By Quentin Melson

The Department of Veterans Affairs is hiring 1,600 new mental health professionals nationwide this year to treat Veterans. As a result, many new mental health providers will be available in the Southeast Louisiana region.

"There has been a significant increase in the number of Veterans seeking mental health treatment," said Dr. Michelle Hamilton, Southeast Louisiana Health Care System psychologist. "This is due primarily to the returning Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans. Vietnam-era Veterans also have contributed to the increase because they are retiring, their health concerns are increasing with age, and some are even losing jobs due to the economy."

Another factor in the increase is that in 2010, VA simplified the rules for Veterans submitting Posttraumatic Stress Disorder-related claims. Under the new rule, Veterans claiming combat-related PTSD no longer need to document the specific incident that may have triggered their PTSD. Instead, they just need to be able to show they were in or near combat conditions where they would have been exposed to situations that would have made them fear for their lives.

The change was put in effect to prevent valid claims from being denied or delayed due to difficulty verifying that a Veteran was exposed to a specific traumatic event while in the military, and to also increase the chances that Veterans would try to seek treatment for PTSD. The new rule has greatly eased access to care and benefits, which in turn has contributed to the growth in demand for PTSD treatment.

"In an effort to provide better access and treatment to the increasing number of Veterans who we treat, many VA medical centers, including ours, have received new positions within mental health, including in PTSD programs," said Hamilton. "Here at the SLVHCS PTSD clinic, we received a new position in the Military Sexual Trauma program and one in the PTSD/Substance Abuse program."

PTSD is often associated with service members or police officers involved in life-threatening situations, but the disorder can be triggered by any traumatic experience.

SLVHCS Mental Health Service has a variety of programs available for Veterans who have concerns that they may have PTSD. Usually, a Veteran is referred to the PTSD program from a health care provider. This is how Aaron Handy, a Vietnam-era Veteran and New Orleans native got into the PTSD program.

"In the late eighties, I was referred to the PTSD program by a social worker," said Aaron Handy. "At first, I didn't want to admit or accept that I was a PTSD sufferer. At the time, I thought that the PTSD guys were the ones running around with guns and holding hostages. It wasn't until she explained that there were varying levels of PTSD that I realized that I had PTSD and that I needed to seek treatment."

Once a Veteran is referred to the PTSD program, a comprehensive intake evaluation is done with the Veteran.

"We find out about their life before the military, a little bit about what happened when they were in the military and how they have been doing since they got out of the military," said Dr. Madeline Uddo, SLVHCS team leader for the PTSD Clinical Team. "After the evaluation, we develop an individualized treatment plan that will best address the Veteran's needs."

The VA offers two types of evidenced-based treatments for PTSD at all medical centers: Prolonged Exposure Therapy and Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT).

Prolonged exposure therapy helps Veterans decrease distress related to their trauma. It is characterized by having the Veteran approach memories, feelings, and situations linked to PTSD in a prolonged and repeated way with the therapist. Prolonged exposure therapy helps Veterans change how they react to traumatic memories so that they are more in control of what they do and how they feel.

Cognitive Processing Therapy conceptualizes PTSD as a disorder of 'non-recovery' where the Veteran is unable to make sense of what happened and therefore avoids thinking about trauma-related memories. The primary focus of this treatment is to help the patient gain an understanding of how experiencing a traumatic event changed how they view the world, themselves, and others. Participation in CPT teaches the patient that the way they look at things affects how they feel. CPT is sometimes offered in a group format.

Dr. Michelle Hamilton discusses PTSD with Marine Veteran James Davis.

"With many of the groups it seems like the most therapeutic part of the treatment that the Veterans get is the relationships that often build among the Veterans in the group," said Uddo. "Individuals with PTSD frequently have difficulty connecting with other people. One of the symptoms of PTSD is shutting down emotionally and being distant from other people. By being in a group with other people who share similar experiences, many Veterans are able to build strong relationships and connect with other people for the first time in years."

Some groups that the Veterans are placed in are population specific. There are groups for WWII and Korean War Veterans, female Veterans, Veterans with Military Sexual Trauma, and so on. The situations confronted by Veterans from different eras vary wildly, but many Veterans share one unique experience.

"There is some research that suggests that the most traumatic or horrifying thing that a person can experience is not being wounded or seeing someone else killed or wounded, but that it is actually being involved in killing another person," said Uddo.

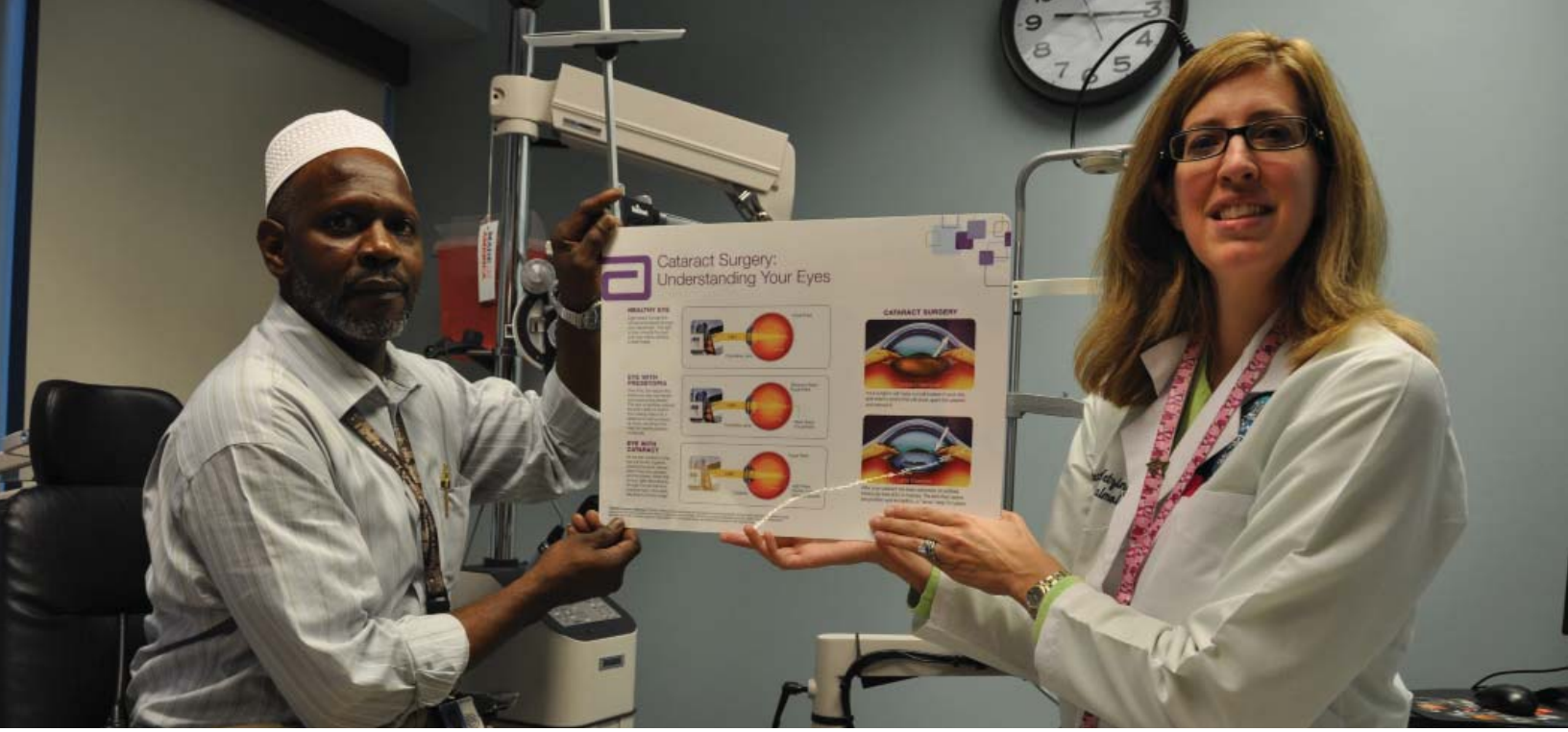
Handy agrees with this assessment.

"I went into automatic denial after my only confirmed kill," said Handy. "There were so many of us shooting at the enemy combatant at the same time that I tried to convince myself that it wasn't me that got him. But, looking back on it, after the guy we were shooting at jumped over a ridge I was the only one with a grenade launcher that could get to him. So, it had to have been me.

"When we went over the ridge to look at the guy, everyone was congratulating me. At the time it happened, we all had the attitude that we were just evening the score, but looking back on it, I realize that I did some things that I didn't have to. Looking at the face of a person that you know that you killed really gets to you."

With the assistance of therapy and staff with SLVHCS' PTSD program, Handy has been able to find ways to cope with his PTSD and live a fulfilled life with his wife and two grandkids.

"The SLVHCS Mental Health Clinic is great and the clinicians are great because they are always dreaming up different ways to treat PTSD," said Handy. "The staff with the PTSD program is very innovative and flexible. The guys that are overseas fighting for our country have a lot of good help waiting for them, if they need it."



Eye Clinic offers many services

By Quentin Melson

The Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System Eye Clinic has undergone many changes, that have allowed for a better experience for Veterans seeking eye care.

After Katrina, New Orleans lagged behind other VA hospitals in many categories, but particularly in eye clinic accessibility.

"When I got here four years ago, I was fortunate to be able to put together a team of excellent people who came up with good ideas to solve the accessibility problems that we were having," said Dr. Rebecca Metzinger, SLVHCS chief of ophthalmology.

> "We have the best eye care in the city."
> Anthony Lucas
> Veteran

Four years ago, the eye clinic was on the ninth floor of the old New Orleans VA Medical Center building. The exam lanes were spread out, there was no eye clinic waiting area and there were not enough exam rooms to treat the hundred-plus Veterans who would seek treatment every day.

"It was chaotic," said Metzinger. "The team that I was able to assemble proposed to move the eye clinic to a separate area and have all of the exam lanes in one place. The higher-ups in the administration approved the plan and we were able to move to our current location at 1515 Poydras St. in December 2010."

The new eye clinic has over ten exam rooms, a waiting area equipped with a television and coffee, and an expanded staff to handle any type of eye condition that a Veteran has.

"Whether it's correcting astigmatism or getting multifocal implants, the Veterans here are getting excellent care," said Metzinger. "It's been my goal since I got here to make sure that Veterans come here and know that they are getting just as good, and if not better, care here as they would anywhere else in the community."

One point of pride at the new eye clinic is the ability

to perform eye surgeries on site. The various eye surgeries are possible because of the full staff of eye care professionals.

"One of the nice things about this clinic is that we have multiple specialists here at any given time," said Metzinger. "When I got here, we had one retina specialist who had one retina clinic. If he had to go do an emergency retina surgery, then that meant that his patients in the retina clinic had to either wait until he came back or get rescheduled. Now that we have multiple retina specialists, we are able perform emergency retina surgeries and still treat our Veterans in the retina clinic in a timely manner."

Cataracts surgery is often required for older patients.

"When we are born, the eye is crystal clear," said Metzinger. "As we age, we get deposits called cataracts in the eye. Later in life, usually around the fifties, those deposits become apparent enough that they cause a yellowish to brownish tinting to the lens of the eye. If the deposits are particularly bad, they can cause cloudy or blurred vision. These deposits can be removed via cataracts surgery by opening up the eye membrane and taking an ultrasound device and breaking up the cataracts. We then remove the cataracts and insert an artificial intraocular lens."

Cataracts surgery, like any other surgery, has its risks; but fortunately, the SLVHCS eye clinic is equipped to handle most incidents.

"We recently had a Veteran come in who came in for a routine cataracts surgery," said Metzinger. "When I started the operation by making a conservative opening into his eye, I noticed that the Veteran had a condition that weakened the little strings that control the movement and the focus of the eye. Some of the strings were even missing. A retina specialist was needed to fix this issue. I immediately contacted Dr. Arley Jaramillo, who was able to correct the problem and we proceeded to successfully remove the cataracts from the Veteran's eye."

Metzinger is hopeful about further expansion of the eye clinic once Project Legacy is completed.

"I see us getting bigger and better in the future," said Metzinger. "When we move into our new facility, I

Travel benefits going electronic

By Quentin Melson

The Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health care System has initiated a change to the beneficiary travel pay processing procedure. Previously, Veterans who were eligible for travel pay and seen at any of the outpatient clinics in New Orleans or Baton Rouge were receiving cash payments before they departed the facility. This "pay-line" system often caused delays for the Veterans due to the volume of patients who were receiving travel pay. To streamline the process and provide better service to Veterans, all beneficiary travel claims are now paid by electronic funds transfer (EFT) or a check is sent through the U.S. mail.

"We realize this new process will be an adjustment for all, but our goal is to use our resources more wisely to serve the Veterans," said Martha Goodman, SLVHCS assistant chief financial officer. "Our objective is to increase customer satisfaction, decrease wait time at the facility and reduce congestion in the main lobby."

Under the new system, at the completion of their appointment, Veterans will be asked to sign their travel voucher verifying their address and the number of miles they traveled to receive care at that specific appointment. By law, they can only be reimbursed for the mileage they traveled from their residence, or their departure place, to the closest facility that can provide the care on that particular day. By signing the voucher, the Veteran is certifying the claim is true and valid.

After the voucher is signed, it will be sent to the Finiancial Operations Office for payment. A check will be mailed to the address listed on the voucher until the Veteran's EFT is activated and should arrive within 14 to 30 days from submittal of the voucher. Veterans who have activated EFT will receive a payment within three to five days.

This program is a national mandate and, in the very near future, all medical centers across the nation will be required to implement the new process of paying beneficiary travel by EFT. SLVHCS is one of the pilot stations selected to start using the new method. As a result of the new program, the Baton Rouge agent cashier counter closed July 27. For more information, contact the Financial Operations Office at 504-558-3650.

By Sandra Terrebonne

Most of us know that there are great benefits of being physically fit. Exercise helps us lose weight, prevent disease, feel happier and become stronger. Yet many of us are not as fit as we could be.

While it can be hard to make exercise a priority, with just a little extra effort, it can be done.

Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System (SLVHCS) has started a new program called "Be Physically Fit."

"We encourage Veterans and employees to incorporate physical activity in their health plan," said Gweneh Vilo, SLVHCS program coordinator. "The focus of the program is to formulate a partnership between Veterans and employees to engage in health promotion by being physically active."

Walking tracks have been established at five of SLVHCS community-based outreach clinics: Baton Rouge, New Orleans, Hammond, Slidell and St. John. The program hopes to increase Veteran and employee usage of the tracks by designating one day a week for Veterans to be be joined by staff to walk together.

New lab hours

Did you know…

You can get your lab work done at any of the Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System community-based outpatient clinics? No more driving to New Orleans just to get your blood drawn. The same lab work can be done at any of our locations, including:

Baton Rouge – Monday through Friday 7 a.m. - 3:30 p.m.
Bogalusa – Monday through Thursday 8 a.m. - 4 p.m.
Franklin – Monday through Thursday 8 a.m. - 3:30 p.m.
Hammond – Monday through Friday 7 a.m. - 3 p.m.
Houma – Monday through Thursday 8 a.m. - 3:30 p.m.
New Orleans – Monday through Thursday 7 a.m. - 4 p.m. and Friday 7 a.m. - 2:30 p.m.
Reserve – Monday through Friday 7 a.m. - 3 p.m.
Slidell – Monday through Thursday 7 a.m. - 3 p.m. (closed from 10 to 10:30 a.m.) Friday 7 a.m. -10 a.m.

That's right! You can go to the location closest to your home or work. You don't need an appointment. Just stop by any of the eight SLVHCS clinic locations!

SLVHCS Safety Coordinator Susan Berryhill (standing) presents to women Veteran attendees of the "Celebrate Success in Diabetes Management" event held July 28. The event was an interactive two hours filled with exercise, yoga, meditation, healthy living messages, chair massages, success story sharing, and healthy food sampling.

Be Prepared

for Hurricane Season June 1 - November 30

For urgent care needs that require continuing care while evacuated or for prescription needs please call 1-800-935-8387.

Be prepared:

- Keep 15 days of medication and supplies on hand. Do not allow your supply to go below 15 days.
- Bring prescription bottles, whether full or empty, of all medications.
- For medications that require refrigeration, have a small ice chest ready.
- Once you have returned to the Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System area, please reschedule any appointments you may have missed by calling 1-800-935-8387.

REMINDER: The Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System facilities/clinics will not serve as an emergency shelter.

Follow us on facebook and the internet for current status & updates.

www.neworleans.va.gov

www.facebook.com/vaneworleans