Bonne Santé

Winter 2012

Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System

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Pick up the phone, make the PACT call

Story by
Kimberly Gearhart

Making appointments, getting advice and connecting with your primary care provider are as simple as picking up the telephone thanks to the implementation of Patient Aligned Care Teams (PACTs).

Patients at Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System (SLVHCS) primary care clinics are assigned to a PACT – consisting of a primary care provider, registered nurse, licensed practical nurse and an administrative professional – during their initial enrollment to our health care system. PACT will help the Veteran manage his or her primary and specialty health care needs, giving Veterans a single point of contact for all their health care needs.

"Our patients have many ways to stay connected with their PACTs, but the best way is just by using the phone," said Janie McKenzie, associate chief for clinical operations at SLVHCS. "They can schedule appointments, get advice or discuss concerns."

Patients may also contact their PACT using secure email messaging through My HealtheVet, the Department of Veterans Affairs' online medical record.

"Enrolling in My HealtheVet is quick and easy," said Phaedra Pea, My HealtheVet coordinator. "Patients can enroll at home, then at their next visit complete an in-person authentication and they're ready to view appointments and lab results; request refills; and email their PACT."

By placing Veterans with a single care team, SLVHCS is guaranteeing better continuity of care. With one team tracking and monitoring each patient's care, conflicts in care are reduced and patient outcomes are improved.

The team approach has also greatly improved patient access issues. Access is measured by looking for the third available appointment for each provider. The fewer days between now and that third appointment, the better your access.

In the Baton Rouge outpatient clinic, which was the first to implement PACT, patient access for the third available appointment reached 65 days; that number has been reduced to six.

"When patients really buy in and use the tools available to them, everyone benefits. Providers can spend more time with their patients, handling quick issues by phone or email and concentrating appointments for more complex problems," McKenzie said.

In 2012, SLVHCS will move to using the PACTs for all telephone advice and appointment scheduling issues. Medication options – such as refills – will still be available to patients calling their team. Just select the "pharmacy" option.

"If you call and your team doesn't answer, just leave them a message. We're committed to returning all calls by the end of the business day," McKenzie explained.

Most clinics set aside time for making calls in the afternoon, blocking time to concentrate on handling those messages.

The use of the phone system has increased the number of patients PACTs can assist in any given day.

"You have a single point of care, and the fastest way of getting that care is a direct call," McKenzie said.

For more information about PACT, talk to your provider or clinic manager. For more about My HealtheVet, go online to www.myhealth.va.gov or contact Phaedra Pea at 985-902-5042.

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On the Cover

PACT - Veteran Howard Riggs and Registered Nurse David Zullo make the call. (Photos by Kimberly Gearhart)

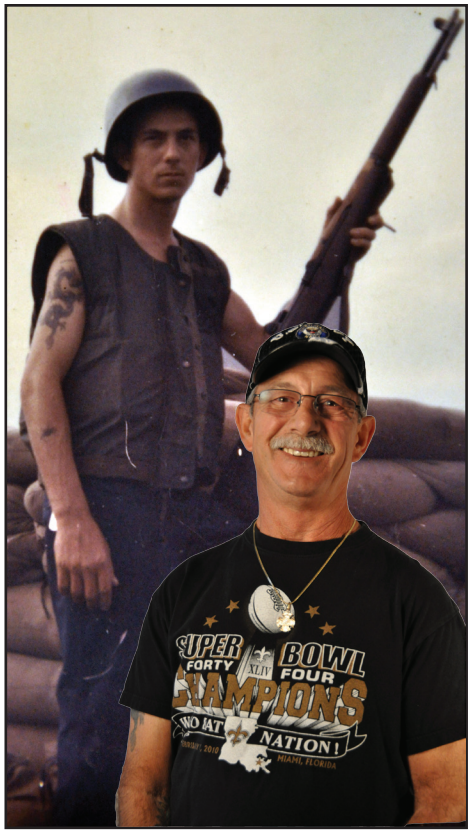
Veteran shares experiences, struggles through poetry

Story by Kimberly Gearhart

Eighteen year old Jimmy Price joined the Navy in January 1968; nearly 44 years later, he's still dealing with the consequences of that decision.

"They were drafting people into the Army for Vietnam. I wanted a choice, so I chose to join the Navy. I thought I'd be on a ship out to sea," Price said, laughing. Instead, he was stationed on the Terrebonne Parish-class tank landing ship USS Tom Green County, which, in January 1969, was stationed in the Mekong River delta – in the thick of the fighting.

On Jan. 21, 1969, Price's ship came under enemy rocket fire. The blasts took out the mess deck, injuring 28 people and killing two. In his gun turret, a frustrated Price stared at the empty shore, not allowed to fire back, listening to his shipmates' cries.



Navy Veteran Jimmy Price in 1969 and today. (1969 photo courtesy Jimmy Price. Current photo by Amanda Jones)

"The Vietnamese were using preset rocket launchers. Just two sticks in the ground, rockets leaning, propped up. A timed detonator would set them off. There was just no one there to shoot back at," Price said. "I remember footprints in blood on the deck where they were pulling the wounded out. I remember the smell of the smoke and the blood and the fire. It stays with you."

The ship sailed to Japan for repairs, giving the crew time to recover and get news and letters from home. Back in the United States, protests against the war were frequent and virulent. Price, whose friends had paid a terrible price in the war, was frustrated and angry with protesters. He turned to poetry to express himself, and his first poem, "To a Free Land," was published by his hometown newspaper.

Price would go on to serve just under two years in the Navy, but the anguish and anger he tried to voice in his poetry followed him wherever he went.

"I have a temper. I'm quick with my fists, but I thought it was just me, just the way I am," Price said.

Until one day in 2007, nearly 40 years after he left Vietnam, when Price met a Veterans Affairs employee named Mike Klavin at a fishing camp. They began talking about Price's service and experiences, and Klavin asked Price a critical question: "Have you ever heard of PTSD?"

Price laughed the question off, but when Klavin gave him a book about post-traumatic stress disorder, Price was shocked to see himself in its pages.

"It was like they'd been following me around for years. How did they know about the nightmares, the anger?" Price said. "For the first time, I looked back at my life and began to wonder if I was really just a bad guy, or was it PTSD?"

With Klavin's assistance, Price filed for VA benefits and began seeking help for his PTSD. Shortly after meeting Price, Klavin passed away, but Price kept coming to VA.

"I'm still an angry guy. I still have a temper, but they've really helped me learn to control it," he said.

Price recently completed a year-long program aimed at teaching Veterans with PTSD life skills. Dr. John Hunter, a psychologist working at the Mental Health clinic in New Orleans, found out about Price's poetry, and encouraged him to write more about his experiences.

"I'd written several poems, but only the one about the war. John thought writing about my feelings now would help me," Price said.

The resulting poems – one focused on how Price felt returning from war and one focused on his experiences with treatment – complete a trilogy encompassing over 40 years of Price's life.

"I never once thought there was something wrong with me, and I was reluctant to start treatment, but now I look forward to coming to VA. The guys in my group are my brothers, my comrades, and together we're coming out of our cocoons. We're becoming butterflies," he said.

MOVE! weight management helps Veterans get healthier

Story by Kimberly Gearhart

In March 2010, Air Force Veteran Victor Thorne tipped the scales at 319 pounds; nearly two years later, he's a positively svelte 200 thanks to a lot of willpower and help from the MOVE! program.

Thorne, like many retirees, found himself in his 60s, overweight and facing multiple health issues including high blood pressure. After an emotionally and financially difficult summer, Thorne was ready for some help in losing weight and joined the MOVE! program in September 2010.

MOVE! is the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) weight management program, which combines nutritional counseling with group support and exercise options to create a comprehensive plan for controlling weight and improving Veterans' quality of life.

"We tell Veterans to take the word 'diet' out of their vocabularies," said Susan Berryhill, Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System's (SLVHCS) MOVE! coordinator.

"We're talking about behavior modification and making a better life for yourself."

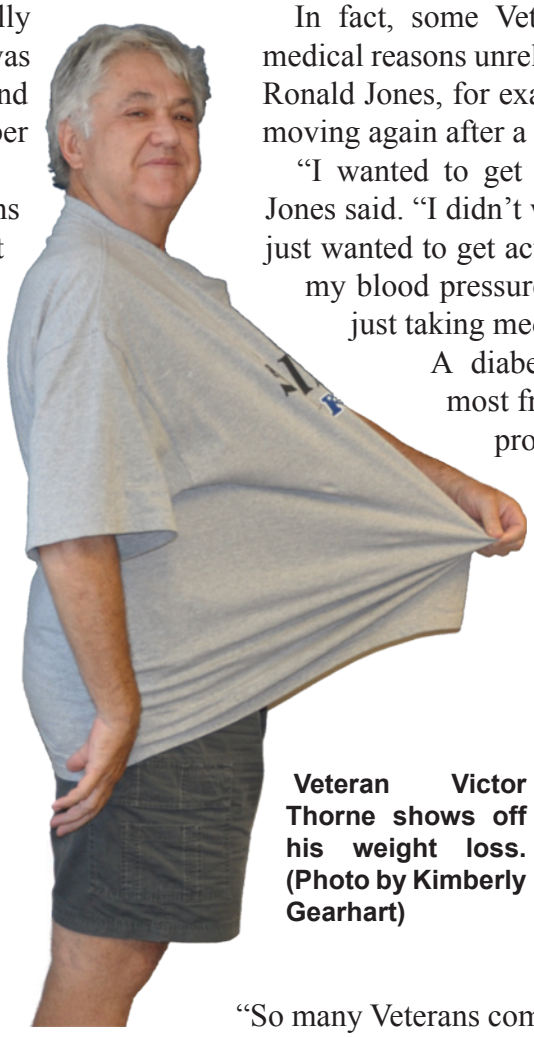
Thorne, who describes himself as "not a program type of guy" was skeptical about MOVE! and his own ability to stick with the program.

"I'm a Louisiana boy. I love my butter and my trout almondine," he said. "But for my health, I stuck with it."

In the first month, Thorne dropped 20 pounds. By November 2010 he weighed in at 261.

"Ms. Berryhill was so excited for me. She kept me motivated. Me and the other guys really bonded with each other and with her," Thorne said.

Besides excitement as his success, Thorne had other reasons to be pleased with his progress. After dropping the first 20 pounds, Thorne's provider reduced his blood pressure medication by half. A year later and Thorne is another 90 pounds lighter.



Veteran Victor Thorne shows off his weight loss. (Photo by Kimberly Gearhart)

Such positive health changes are common to successful MOVE! program participants, according to Berryhill.

"We not only focus on weight management, but we watch their blood pressure, blood sugar and cholesterol levels as well. In the five-week introduction to the program, we jump-start them on the path to better health," she said.

In fact, some Veterans join the program for medical reasons unrelated to weight. Navy Veteran Ronald Jones, for example, joined as a way to get moving again after a kidney transplant.

"I wanted to get back into the flow of life," Jones said. "I didn't want to lose a lot of weight. I just wanted to get active and learn how to control my blood pressure and blood sugar other than just taking medicines."

A diabetic, Jones said he benefits most from the nutritional advice the program offers.

"I learned to control my carbs and drink more water. That and the exercise has given me control," he said, citing his reduced need for insulin throughout the day. "I want to control it. I don't want it to control me."

Jones credits the MOVE! program with his improved strength and health and believes all Veterans should be required to participate. Thorne agrees.

"So many Veterans come in here looking for a pill to cure them. They don't realize that part of getting well and feeling better is what they do along with the pill," he said.

"I'm probably in better health now than I was 20 or 25 years ago. VA provided me with the pill I needed to get better, but they also provided me with the incentive to do something for myself. The MOVE! program did that," Thorne added.

For more information about the MOVE! program, contact Susan Berryhill at 504-566-8412 or by email at susan.berryhill@va.gov.

Veterans Day events honor America's heroes

Slidell Clinic Manager Richard Breaux, a Navy Veteran, rides in the Slidell Veterans Day Parade Nov. 6. (Photo by Eleanor Chapital)

Chief of Quality & Performance Jan LeMaire, an Army Veteran, rides in the Slidell Veterans Day Parade Nov. 6. (Photo by Eleanor Chapital)

Volunteer Jackie Cromwell, left, gives an American flag to Veteran Leo Turnbull Nov. 9 as part of SLVHCS' week of Veteran Day observances throughout the system. Cromwell, who volunteers regularly, is a family member of a Veteran, as many VA volunteers are. (Photo by Kimberly Gearhart)

Veteran Randall Cronk talks with SLVHCS Director Julie Catellier as she made rounds thanking Veterans for their service Nov. 10. "It was such a nice surprise to meet her," Cronk said. (Photo by Kimberly Gearhart)

Veteran Wilson Veller models his new hand-knitted scarf at the New Orleans specialty clinic Nov. 9. The scarves were donated by the "Knit Your Bit" program at the National World War II Museum. Learn more about the program at www.nationalworldwar2museum.org. (Photo by Kimberly Gearhart)

2011 Homeless Stand Down aids over 350 people

Story by Kimberly Gearhart

Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System (SLVHCS) helped over 350 people, 210 of them Veterans, during its annual Homeless Veterans Stand Down Oct. 22 in New Orleans.

More than 170 volunteers, including SLVHCS employees and regular volunteers, over a dozen community organizations and even the general manager of the New Orleans Voodoo arena football team came out to provide food, music, clothing, resource information, medical services and housing information for the homeless.

"Our group, the Legacy Vets, is the largest military motorcycle club in the nation. We try to come out and help Veterans anyway we can," said Brandon Sullivan, a Legacy Vet member, between packing hygiene supply kits for the homeless. Other Legacy Vets helped out by serving lunch.

Several active duty sailors from the USS Anchorage also came out to support homeless services.

"We saw a flier saying they needed people to help out Veterans, and decided it would be a great way to spend a Saturday on shore," said Chief Petty Officer Ron Umali. He and his crew were temporarily docked at Avondale shipyards.

"These are the people who served. They paved the way for us; it's time for us to give back," he added.

Umali and his supply team handed out military clothing to homeless Veterans, including military-issue combat boots.

John Kuhn, director of the VA Homeless Veterans Prevention service, came to New Orleans as part of a national push to increase awareness about VA's homeless programs. Kuhn praised the community organizations and volunteers for their assistance.

"It really does take a community to solve this problem. It is the hard work you all do that makes a difference," he said.

For the Veterans, Kuhn had even more praise, and issued a challenge to VA employees everywhere.

"They had to overcome a lot of adversity to come to this event today. They had to have some belief in us that it was worth their time to come. We have a special obligation to them to make sure those hopes are realized," he said.

A homeless Veteran organizes the military clothing supplies he received at the 2011 Homeless Veterans Stand Down in New Orleans Oct. 22. Veterans were also given health screenings and put in touch with community and VA resources. (Photo by Kimberly Gearhart)

Dental Chief Dr. Georgia McDonald, left, discusses dental care with a homeless Veteran during the Stand Down. (Photo by Kimberly Gearhart)

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Compensated Work Therapy gets Vets working

Story by Kimberly Gearhart

Vietnam Veteran Charles Taylor verifies receipt of goods at the VA warehouse in Harahan, La. Taylor is working on his interpersonal skills and gaining experience through hands-on work. (Photo by Kimberly Gearhart)

Vietnam Veteran Charles Taylor is transitioning back to work with the help of the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) Compensated Work Therapy (CWT) program.

Two years ago, Taylor came to VA for help after an emotional crisis left him hospitalized over the Thanksgiving holiday.

"I was a substance abuser, but I didn't think I needed treatment until after the crisis," Taylor said. A New Orleans native, Taylor and wife were living with his son after losing their home to Hurricane Katrina. Veterans in situations like Taylor's are considered "underhoused" and are often eligible for VA's Health Care for Homeless Veterans and CWT programs.

"We provide realistic and meaningful job opportunities for Veterans and encourage them to successfully reintegrate into the working community," said Alvin Thomas, licensed master social worker and the local CWT program manager.

The CWT program has four different components: supported employment, homeless Veterans supported employment, transitional work and vocational assistance. Each component targets a different population of Veterans and has specific eligibility requirements. For example, supported employment focuses on Veterans who have a chronic mental illness.

Veterans involved in substance abuse treatment are often referred to CWT as part of their treatment.

"The program helps complete the rehabilitation process. If a Veteran is clean and sober but doesn't have a job, he probably won't stay clean for very long," Thomas said.

Taylor had been an over-the-road truck driver most of his life, but in 2006 his health problems ended that career.

"It crushed me when they said I couldn't drive anymore because of my health," he said.

Taylor continued to look for work, but jobs were few and far between.

Now in the CWT program, Taylor works in the Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System warehouse in Harahan, La.

"I wanted to see if I could do something other than drive a truck," Taylor said. "CWT is about transitioning back to work."

Once Taylor's six-month CWT assignment is complete, he will be equipped with the job and social skills necessary to seek and secure other employment within the community.

He will also have recent experience to share with prospective employers.

"Mr. John Triplett, the warehouse manager, told me I do a good job and I can use him as a reference. That really means something to me," Taylor said.

The next step for Taylor may be a bigger one than just a job search. He's considering college.

"I really want to be a helper in my community and the best way to do that is to go to school," Taylor said. "I think I'll be ready."

VA introduces *Make the Connection*:

Shared experiences and support for Veterans

WASHINGTON – *Make the Connection*, a new campaign launched by the Department of Veterans Affairs, is creating ways for Veterans and their family members to connect with the experiences of other Veterans—and ultimately to connect with information and resources to help them confront the challenges of transitioning from service, face health issues, or navigate the complexities of daily life as a civilian.

"I have seen over and over again how important it can be for a Veteran to hear a message from another Veteran. This type of communication will be especially useful in helping to break down the stigma associated with mental health issues and treatment," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki. "VA is leveraging this powerful connection using an approachable online resource that links Veterans to personal stories from their peers, to VA resources and support, and to reliable information about mental health and resilience."

The campaign's central focus is a website, www.MakeTheConnection.net, featuring numerous Veterans who have shared their experiences, challenges, and triumphs. It offers a place where Veterans and their families can view the candid, personal testimonials of other Veterans who have dealt with and are working through a variety of common life experiences, day-to-day symptoms, and mental health conditions. The website also connects Veterans and their family members with services and resources that may help them live more fulfilling lives.

Veterans from all branches of the military and all eras can connect with each other - or just other Marines, soliders or sailors - using maketheconnection.net. (Photo by Kimberly Gearhart)

"VA is heartened by the tremendous commitment of Veterans of all service eras, genders and backgrounds who are stepping up to share their stories," said Shinseki.

"Just as they would never leave a fellow service member behind on the field of battle, they are once again reaching out to support their fellow Veterans with their compelling examples of successful treatment and recovery."

At MakeTheConnection.net, Veterans and their family members can explore information on mental health issues and treatment—and easily access support—in comfort and privacy, anywhere, anytime. Visitors can customize their online experience, connecting with content that is the most relevant to their own lives and situations.

The campaign is raising awareness through public service announcements, advertising and partnerships with Veteran Service Organizations and mental health service providers nationwide. For more information, visit MakeTheConnection.net or VA's mental health services website at www.mentalhealth.va.gov.