Dental services expand for homeless Veterans

Story by Kimberly Gearhart

Nearly 137,000 Veterans in the United States are homeless.

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) plans to change that.

In November 2009, Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric K. Shinseki laid out a five-year plan to end homelessness among Veterans. The plan includes aggressive outreach, medical services, education and dental care.

Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System’s (SLVHCS) Health Care for Homeless Veterans (HCHV) program served over 1200 enrolled Veterans in Fiscal Year 2011.

It is estimated that in the Orleans and Jefferson parishes alone, between 1,500 and 2,200 Veterans are homeless. Through outreach and educational efforts, the number of enrolled Veterans continues to expand.

Newly-enrolled homeless Veterans are offered a full array of medical services, including a full dental exam and treatment. Dental services had previously been handled through three small clinics located in Mandeville, Metairie and Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

“We see about 100 homeless patients in a year, and getting them to those outlying clinics can be difficult, so we were looking at more convenient ways to provide medical care,” said Nathan Dion, RRT and pulmonary supervisor.

“We use a continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) machine. This helps keep the airways open so the patient can breathe, but it’s not a cure,” Pace explained. Rather, using the CPAP machine since spring of 2010, and he notices a big difference.

“In November 2009, Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric K. Shinseki laid out a five-year plan to end homelessness among Veterans. The plan includes aggressive outreach, medical services, education and dental care.”

Home care options help Veterans suffering with sleep apnea

Story by Kimberly Gearhart

Are you tired during the day or have trouble concentrating? Does your spouse complain about your snoring? You may be suffering from a condition known as sleep apnea.

Sleep apnea is a common disorder that causes a person to stop breathing or breathe shallowly during sleep. This often disturbs the sleeper and available care. At the time, home tests were not reimbursable through any insurance program, including Medicaid and Medicare.

In 2007, Dion received $20,000 to purchase five home testing units. Within four months, the testing backlog had been cleared and Veterans in need were being treated.

“When you consider that it can cost over $2,000 per patient to outsource a sleep test, we saved hundreds of thousands of dollars. But we also needed an alternative,” said Dr. Georgia McDonald, chief of dental medicine for SLVHCS.

In response to that geographic challenge, SLVHCS opened a new specialty care dental service in New Orleans in July. A dentist serves homeless Veterans three days a week.

“We’ll be much closer to the other homeless services VA offers and also very near several of the community shelters. We should be able to better serve the Veterans most in need of our help,” McDonald said.

With the new clinic, SLVHCS will also be able to better use a $250,000 homeless dental initiative grant.

“A lot of that money had been spent on fee-based exams. Now we can do them more affordably in-house, freeing funds for lab work and more complex fee-based care,” McDonald explained.

Army Veteran Sandy Broussard, a homeless Veteran enrolled in HCHV, appreciates the new dental clinic location.

“I love coming here to see Dr. McDonald. It’s close to my other appointments and everyone is so good to me,” Broussard said.

For more information, visit www.va.gov/homeserv or call local HCHV Coordinator Ken Rocky at 985-690-6903.
**Mental Health Consumer Council seeks new members**

*Story by Kimberly Gearhart*

The Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System’s (SLVHCS) Mental Health Consumer Council needs your help.

The council, made up of Veterans Service Organization representatives, Veterans who use SLVHCS mental health services and their families, acts as a liaison between patients and mental health leadership. By gathering input from Veterans and formally presenting requests to management, the council serves to improve mental health care for Veterans.

“Veterans are our number one reason for being here. We want them to get the best care possible and see that they’re treated appropriately,” said Carol Lance, who serves on the council with her husband Robert, a Marine Veteran of both the Korean and Vietnam era.

The council currently needs members as well as input on Veterans’ needs and desires in regards to their mental health care.

“This is a group of Veterans working for Veterans,” said the council’s employee liaison Dr. Baris Konur. “They have been involved in making a number of improvements both to the services being rendered to Veterans here and in the physical make up and layout of the clinic.”

In addition to local advocacy, the council has participated in national events as well. During the national Veterans Mental Health Council conference hosted in New Orleans this fall, the SLVHCS council served as the opening presenters.

“The New Orleans council is an excellent example of how a Veterans Mental Health Council can forge a positive relationship with the local facility,” said Dr. Peggy Henderson, who works at the national level in the VA Office of Mental Health Services. Terry Waite, a Vietnam era Army Veteran and newcomer to the New Orleans council, was similarly impressed with the direction and focus of the group. Waite previously served with a similar council in Biloxi, Miss.

“I really like where this council is going. We need to get the word out that we’re here, that somebody cares,” he said.

If you would like to join or to learn more about the council, they meet on the second and fourth Thursday of every month at 3500 Canal Street, room 115 in New Orleans. You may also contact Konur at 504-571-8269 or baris.konur2@va.gov.

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**SLVHCS opens flu season with free vaccines for Veterans**

*Story by Kimberly Gearhart*

Influenza (flu) is a respiratory illness caused by a variety of viruses such as seasonal or H1N1 flu. Flu occurs each year and spreads easily from one person to another.

“Getting a flu shot goes a long way toward protecting yourself and your family,” said Julie Catellier, Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System (SLVHCS) director. “Flu is no joke. Thousands of people die from flu every year.”

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), on average, 226,000 people are hospitalized and 36,000 people die from seasonal flu complications annually in the United States.

Flu shots are especially important for people at high risk, including pregnant women, young children, people with chronic health conditions and people 65 years and older.

This year we are offering one vaccine, which covers both seasonal flu and the H1N1 flu virus. The injectable vaccine is safe for women who are pregnant and those who are nursing. The nasal vaccine is not recommended for women in any stage of pregnancy and is not being offered.

**Flu shots are an easy way to protect your health.** (Photo by Kimberly Gearhart)

It is critical that health care workers and those who care for loved ones at high risk be vaccinated.

“We encourage all our employees to get vaccinated. We have a duty not to expose our patients to our own illnesses,” said Jan LeMaire, quality and performance manager.

Frequent hand washing helps slow or stop the spread of many viruses, including those that cause flu.

“You should cover your cough or sneeze with a tissue and use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer,” said Debbie Vicknair, infection control manager.

“Preventing disease is much easier than curing it, that’s why we suggest vaccinations,” said Dr. Jamie Buth, associate chief of staff for clinics.

Veterans may receive flu shots during regular visits to any clinic location or on a walk-in basis during the Veterans Mental Health Council conference hosted in New Orleans this fall, the SLVHCS council served as the opening presenters.

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**MOPH honors Baton Rouge mental health doc**

*Story by Kimberly Gearhart*

The Military Order of the Purple Heart Chapter 177 honored Dr. Johnny Simpson, a psychiatrist at the Baton Rouge clinic, with a Special Recognition Award Aug. 9.

“We decided to express our appreciation, not only saying thanks for the fine service you’ve rendered to us but also to other Veterans,” said MOPH member Roosevelt Gipson. Gipson and fellow MOPH member Royce Hempel nominated Dr. Simpson for the award.

Gipson went on to credit his faith and Dr. Simpson’s guidance in leading him through difficult times.

“I don’t think I would be here today if it wasn’t for you and the Lord,” he said.

That sentiment was echoed by Hempel.

“If it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t be here today. We really appreciate what you do for us,” he said.

Dr. Simpson, who has been with Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System for nearly 20 years, expressed his gratitude and thanked his colleagues for all the support they offer in serving Louisiana Veterans.

“It’s a prestigious honor, awarded by our country’s finest warriors. But while the award was directed at me, I am fortunate to work with a great team of special professionals who provide excellent care to our Veterans,” he said.

Dr. Johnny Simpson, center, poses with Veterans Roosevelt Gipson, left, and Royce Hempel, right. (Photo by Kimberly Gearhart)

“Working at the VA has given me the opportunity to learn and grow as a clinician while treating those who have given so much.”

This is the second award the MOPH has bestowed upon SLVHCS providers this year.

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The CPAP machine, which sits at their bedside, was so quiet she couldn’t hear it either.

The CPAP machine records Santalla’s nightly use and keeps track of any apnea episodes he may have. The goal is to get him down to five episodes of apnea per hour per night.

During a follow-up visit in August, RRT Karen Armour found that Santalla is experiencing less than three episodes an hour.

“He’s doing really well and using it consistently. That’s why he feels so much better. It’s great,” Armour said.

For more information about sleep medicine or home diagnostics, contact Dion at 504-412-3700 ext. 8483 or by e-mail at Nathan.dion@va.gov.