Chapter 177 Commander Richard O'Brien.

The work of the pharmacy staff, "said MOPH deserves, so it's a good thing to be here to praise for Veterans.

Award for their excellence in customer service Rouge pharmacy staff with a Special Recognition Heart (MOPH) Chapter 177 honored the Baton

Story and photo by Kimberly Gearhart

MOPH Chapter 177 honors Baton Rouge pharmacy staff

Offering services within the VA network is also fiscally responsible, reducing costs and increasing the type and amount of care available to southeast Louisiana’s Veterans. The savings can be significant; in fiscal year 2010 alone, SLVHCS spent over $86 million paying for care at non-VA facilities.

The 2237 Poydras Street location will also house several non-APU services. The pain, gastrointestinal (GI) and audiology clinics have also relocated to the space. The expanded space will allow providers to better serve specialty care patients.

"Even as we work to construct a world-class medical center for Veterans along the golf coast, SLVHCS will continue to improve the services available locally for Veterans. The APU is just one example of our commitment to provide the 'best care anywhere' for our nation’s heroes,” Catellier said.

"I’ve never seen a group that so cheerfully performed their duty as these people. They’ve gone beyond the call of duty, as those of us in the military have,” Almond said.

He noted that because of his hearing problems, it is sometimes difficult to get assistance or understanding from others.

"But they have always graciously helped me with a big smile," Almond explained.

For the award to be granted, Almond submitted a nomination to the chapter, which then reviewed and voted on the nomination.

"We had to agree with his assessment. Sometimes one of us is well-served, and others are not. I can tell you that this nomination was voted 100 percent in favor," O’Brien said.

The award was presented to Oscar Wood, Baton Rouge pharmacy supervisor, and a group of pharmacy employees. For the staff members present, it was an emotional event.

"It’s certainly an honor. We don’t get a whole lot of recognition, and coming from an elite group of heroes like you guys, you can’t imagine how proud we feel right now," Wood said.

The plaque presented to the Baton Rouge pharmacy staff reads “Special Recognition Award... For your dedication and continued support to America’s Combat Wounded Veterans.”

"We’ll display this, and people will see it and think about what you guys have done,” Wood added.

“People should be proud. We’re grateful for what you do,” O’Brien said, thanking Wood and the Baton Rouge pharmacy staff.

The assembled members of MOPH Chapter 177, including their youngest, OIF Veteran Zachary Choate, and Almond, their oldest, rendered a salute to the pharmacy staff to close the presentation.

Pat Almond, a member of the MOPH and one of the few surviving Marine Raiders who fought on the Pacific front during World War II, nominated the pharmacy staff for the award, which had only been given to a medical unit or group once before in the chapter’s history. He was very clear about why he did so.

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Outreach aims to educate OEF/OIF/OND Veterans

Story by Kimberly Gearhart

In March, Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System’s (SLVHCS) Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation New Dawn (OEF/OIF/OND) team attended a Yellow Ribbon Program (YRP) event for the Army National Guard at the New Orleans Convention Center. Over 2,000 service members and their families attended the event.

“We participate in Yellow Ribbon Program events as part of the ‘Seven Touches of Outreach,’” said Eleanor Chapital, OEF/OIF/OND program manager for SLVHCS. The Seven Touches of Outreach is a VA initiative aimed at reaching National Guard and Reserve troops and increasing their awareness of available VA benefits and services such as health care and education assistance.

Each “touch” is an opportunity to educate Veterans and future Veterans about the VA.

“It’s important to get out there and talk to these Veterans. We put a face on the VA and let them know we really are here for them,” said Outreach Coordinator Pam Pitcher, who helped organize SLVHCS’ participation in the event.

Recently separated OEF/OIF/OND Veterans are eligible for five years of medical care for problems related to their service. This includes a six month dental benefit. The five year clock begins upon separation, not upon enrollment, so enrolling early is crucial.

“Many Veterans just don’t know what is available. We’re trying to change that,” Chapital said. SLVHCS’ was represented at the YRP event by the OEF/OIF/OND staff and several members from the Eligibility Center and Mental Health.

Social worker Val Hebert conducted breakout sessions for attendees, covering topics such as substance abuse and couples’ communication issues. Veterans enrolled in VA health care can seek further assistance for the same and many other topics as a part of their covered benefits.

“We’re all working together to take care of Veterans, and making sure the Veterans are educated about their benefits is an important first step,” Chapital said. For more information about benefits available to recently separated Veterans, visit http://www.neworleans.va.gov and click on “Returning Service Members” or call program manager Eleanor Chapital at 504-566-8478.

SLVHCS volunteers recognized during annual awards banquet

Story by Kimberly Gearhart

Volunteers and their families turned out in April for the annual Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System’s (SLVHCS) Volunteer Awards Banquet. Each year, the banquet location changes, rotating through the towns that host SLVHCS clinics. This year’s event was held in Houma, La.

Over 200 names grace SLVHCS’ volunteer rolls, but a core group of about 75 people volunteer on a regular basis. Some only serve an hour or two a year, others log thousands of hours over several years of service.

One volunteer from each clinic was named Volunteer of the Year and given a special plaque commemorating their service. Volunteers of the Year are selected by the clinic volunteer liaison.

If you would like to become a volunteer at SLVHCS, call 504-565-4857 to find out about volunteering opportunities in your area.

Veterans Justice Outreach program launches, needs Veteran mentors

Story by Lilia Valdez-Lindsley

Our local Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO) program has teamed up with the Orleans Parish Criminal Court to launch the New Orleans Veteran Treatment Court.

The Treatment Court offers Veterans with substance dependency or mental illness who have been charged with non-violent criminal offenses the opportunity to seek court-ordered treatment rather than traditional court processing.

Eligible Veterans are identified through specialized screening and assessments, and voluntarily participate in a judicially supervised treatment plan developed by a team made up of court staff; health care professionals specializing in Veterans health, mental health and substance abuse; and Veteran peer mentors.

Upon admission to Veterans Treatment Court, the court staff and mentors assist the Veteran with an array of stabilization and other services. Mentors are selected from candidates, who are also Veterans, who volunteer to assist with the VJO program.

Peer mentors are essential in engaging justice-involved Veterans throughout treatment, mentors increase the likelihood that the Veteran will remain in treatment and improve his or her chances of sobriety and law-abiding behavior.

After piloting the Veterans Treatment Court in Orleans parish, VJO hopes to expand the efforts to other southeast Louisiana parishes.

For more information, contact VJO Coordinator Lilia Valdez-Lindsley at 504-571-8352.

Interested in being a Veteran Mentor?

**Duties and responsibilities:**

- Attend court sessions with justice-involved Veterans when scheduled
- Participate in and lead mentoring sessions with Veterans when assigned by the judge
- Be supportive and understanding of the difficulties Veterans face
- Assist the Veterans in resolving their concerns about Veterans court procedures as well as their interactions with the Department of Veterans Affairs.
- Be supportive and helpful to the other mentors in the Veterans Treatment Court

**Requirements:**

- Be a Veteran of one of the branches of the United States Military or their corresponding Reserve or Guard branches.
- Adhere to all the Veterans Treatment Court policies and procedures
- Commit to program participation for a minimum of six months
- Complete the required training procedures
- Participate in additional trainings as necessary

**Desirable qualities:**

- Good listener
- Encouraging/supportive

Volunteers of the Year were selected from each clinic. Pictured are (from left to right): Sheri Birk, slidell; Dean Cancienne, Houma; Shelby Bland, Hammond; Donald Siegel, New Orleans; Ernest Holtt, St. John; Junior Lee, Baton Rouge; and Roy Mitchell, Franklin. (Photo by Amanda Jones)