**SLVHCS Vision Center opens in new, larger space**

In December, Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System (SLVHCS) opened a new, expanded Vision Center in New Orleans.

The new space, located at 1515 Poydras Street, suite 650, is larger and accommodates several new exam rooms. This allows SLVHCS providers to offer more appointments each day.

“We’ve managed to increase access with this new space, which is one of the Department of Veterans Affairs goals this year. We want every Veteran who needs specialty eye care to be able to get it when they need it,” said Specialty Clinic Manager James Ellis.

Overall, Veterans have been impressed with the new clinic, which boasts a spacious waiting area, separate dilation waiting area and expanded exam rooms.

“They really seem to like it much better than the smaller location” in the 9G Specialty Clinic on Perdido Street, said Dr. Rebecca Metzinger, chief of ophthalmology.

“The environment really makes a huge difference in the overall morale for patients and employees alike,” added SLVHCS Chief of Staff Dr. Paul Rosenfeld.

Because the Vision Center is located across and down the street from the rest of the specialty care facilities, SLVHCS offers shuttle service to the clinic every 30 minutes. Shuttles depart from 1601 Perdido Street, in front of the old hospital.

Chief of Staff Dr. Paul Rosenfeld (from left), Dr. Rebecca Metzinger and Director Julie Catellier cut the ribbon held by Clinic Manager James Ellis during the Vision Center’s grand opening ceremony in January. (Photo by Larry Moore)

**SLVHCS program helps homeless Veterans all year long**

Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System’s Health Care for Homeless Veterans (HCHV) helps Veterans most at risk – the homeless – through a series of programs and events throughout the year.

In October, the program hosted a Homeless Veterans Stand Down at the Urgent Care Center in New Orleans. The Stand Down is an annual event aiding local homeless Veterans and civilians. This year 233 attendees received a hot meal and critical items like clothes, shoes and hygiene products. Veterans at the event also received medical screenings and flu shots as well as enrollment processing and mental health information.

Navy Veteran Neal McKain, 29, was one of the first Veterans through the doors. He came to New Orleans to attend college, but without any help or guidance, he soon fell on hard times.

“After being in the military, some of us just aren’t ready for the civilian life. The mindset is totally different and it’s hard to transition,” he explained.

McKain is working on getting into transitional housing with help from social worker Val Hebert.

“These Veterans need stability in order to get their lives back on track, and that’s what we try to give them,” Hebert said.

In December, the HCHV program hosted its annual Homeless Holiday Party at the Elks’ Lodge in Metairie. The party offers homeless Veterans a hot meal, access to services, and a much-needed moment of peace and togetherness, according to HCHV coordinator Ken Rocky.

Special events like the Stand Down and Homeless Holiday Party supplement the HCHV program’s regular offerings and give Veterans unfamiliar with the program a chance to learn about benefits available to them.

This year, HCHV staff processed 110 Veterans through the Stand Down and nearly 200 attended the holiday party. Many were enrolled in VA health care, but not all were aware of the benefits available to them.

“When I first got here, I didn’t know anyone or anything. [HCHV] has really helped a lot of Veterans get their lives back in order,” McKain said, noting that without the help of VA employees like Hebert, he would still be sleeping on friends’ couches rather than working on getting enrolled in college.

“When you’re out on your own, it’s difficult. This program helps get people like me off the streets and transitioned back into civilian life,” he said.

Once Veterans like McKain had a chance to go through the Stand Down, non-Veterans were admitted and offered food and clothing. The holiday party was also open to anyone in need.

“Were we’re not going to turn away anyone that needs help,” said SLVHCS Director Julie Catellier. She and SLVHCS Chief of Staff Dr. Paul Rosenfeld helped out during the Stand Down, distributing water to those waiting to come into the event. Mental Health Clinic Manager Richard Breaux was on hand for the holiday party.

“We are so grateful,” one woman, identifying herself only as Mary, said of the Stand Down. “Thank you all for opening your hearts and arms to us.”

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For those interested in walking to the clinic, 1515 Poydras Street is across the street from the VA parking garage, one block closer to City Hall. The main entrance is on Poydras Street, and the clinic is located on the sixth floor. A handicapped-accessible entrance is located on LaSalle Street.

Dr. Rebecca Metzinger is one of many providers working in the New Orleans eye clinic. Appointments are by referral. (Photo by Larry Moore)

We’re now on Facebook! Join us at www.facebook.com/VANewOrleans.
Washington – The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) decided more than 28,000 claims in the first six weeks of processing disability compensation applications from Vietnam Veterans with diseases related to exposure to the herbicide Agent Orange.

“With new technology and ongoing improvements, we are quickly removing roadblocks to processing benefits,” said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki. “We are also conducting significant outreach to Vietnam Veterans to encourage them to submit their completed applications for this long-awaited benefit.”

VA published a final regulation on Aug. 31 that makes Veterans who served in the Republic of Vietnam and who have been diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease, ischemic heart disease, or a B-cell (or hairy-cell) leukemia eligible for health care and disability compensation benefits. With the expiration of the required 60-day congressional review on Oct. 30, VA is now able to process these claims.

Vietnam Veterans covered under the new policy are encouraged to file their claims through a new VA Web portal at www.fasttrack.va.gov. Vietnam Veterans are the first users of this convenient automated claims processing system.

If treated for these diseases outside of VA’s health system, it is important for Veterans to gather medical evidence from their non-VA physicians. VA has made it easy for physicians to supply the clinical findings needed to approve the claim through the new Web portal. These medical forms are also available at www.vba.va.gov/disabilityexams.

The portal guides Veterans through Web-based menus to capture information and medical evidence required for faster claims decisions. While the new system currently is limited to these three disabilities, usage will expand soon to include claims for other conditions.

VA has begun collecting data that recap its progress in processing claims for new Agent Orange benefits at www.vba.va.gov/VBA/agentorange/reportcard/index.html.

**Story and photos by Kimberly Gearhart**

Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System (SLVHCS) has entered into a new partnership with Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center (LSUHSC) to train and prepare employees for the opening of the new Ambulatory Procedure Unit (APU) in March.

The APU will allow SLVHCS to offer minor same-day surgeries and procedures – like endoscopic exams, cataract surgeries, etc. – on site for Veterans, rather than sending them to outside agencies.

LSUHSC boasts state-of-the-art simulation technology that allows participants to practice their medical skills on life-like mannequins in a controlled, safe environment. SLVHCS employees slated to work in the new APU have, for the most part, worked in operating room settings before Hurricane Katrina, but haven’t had the opportunity to practice those skills since the VA hospital closed.

“One of the reasons we went to the expense of bringing them here to LSU is because of the fact that we have so many people who have been out of the operating room for so long [due to the lack of hospital after Hurricane Katrina]. This is a way for them to practice in a safe environment where they can learn from their mistakes without any adverse outcomes,” said Loree Doyle, SLVHCS workforce development coordinator.

Employees also worked at other Veterans Affairs Medical Centers (VAMC) and clinics in the VA Gulf Coast System as part of their training.

“Those going to Pensacola receive moderate sedation training and competency validation in the endoscopy suite,” said Donna Collins, assistant chief of surgery service at SLVHCS.

Other employees went to Biloxi to work in operating rooms and post-operative care.

But training at the simulation lab allows trainers to program scenarios, which include patients giving inaccurate medical histories, mismatched paperwork or medical crises.

Doyle, who proposed the partnership, felt that SLVHCS employees would benefit both from the simulations and the expertise of those running the lab.

“Dr. Debby Garbee, Assistant Dean of Undergraduate Nursing at LSUHSC, has 20 years of experience in surgery and teaches perioperative suture at LSU. She’s an outright expert,” Doyle said.

Garbee recorded and critiqued scenarios with participants, making suggestions and offering advice for APU employees polishing their skills.

Dr. Vadyn Rusnak, an instructor in the human simulation center, controls the “patient” during scenarios, giving him a voice and responding to action – and inaction – as appropriate.

“Sometimes patients lie. Sometimes they forget. Sometimes they just don’t cooperate. We try to reflect that in training,” Rusnak said.

“With these custom-designed scenarios, we can really teach in a realistic, tailored environment. In one scenario, the patient gave the wrong birth date. In another, he lied about his history of high blood pressure. This will happen in real life, and it’s good to see how the employees will react,” Doyle said.

In Biloxi and Pensacola, APU employees worked side by side with experienced VA employees. In simulation training, they’re standing on their own and can see where they need more work or help, Doyle said.

“We’re really focused on patient safety-related issues and following VA procedure. We threw in special problems for them to solve, and this training has been extremely helpful in checking how our employees deal with those issues,” she added.

The current contract between LSUHSC and SLVHCS allows access to the simulation lab through to the opening of the new VAMC in New Orleans. As new groups of employees come on board, Doyle and the Workforce Development team will be able to schedule more training.