Million Veteran Program Now Enrolling

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We’ve made a lot of progress at the new Veterans medical center during the most recent quarter of this year.

I want to provide you with an update on our women’s health program. Women Veterans are the fastest growing population of Veterans in the Veterans Health Administration (VHA). At Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System (SLVHCS), we serve about 4,400 women Veterans with over 5,500 enrolled for care. VA’s approach to care is unique for women Veterans. We provide our women Veterans with a full complement of health care services, including primary care, gynecology, social work, pharmacy and primary care/mental health integration all in our Women’s Clinic. Throughout our health care system, we also provide women’s specific health care and we work in close partnership with community providers for services we do not provide, such as breast imaging, uro-gynecology and obstetrics.

At SLVHCS, we are in the top 25 in VHA for preventative health screenings for women Veterans. Women Veterans most often come to us for hypertension, post-traumatic stress disorder, lower back pain, diabetes and counseling and we are here to support them with all of their health care needs.

We know that there are close to 15,000 women Veterans in our catchment area, so we are working to engage them through multiple avenues. Recently, we conducted our annual Ladies Night, which was a fantastic opportunity to connect them with not only the services we offer, but our community partners who share information about how they can support our women Veterans as well. We also hold women Veteran focus groups and have dedicated women’s health representation at each of our monthly town hall meetings. But we still need your help in letting women Veterans know about the services available to them.

Historically, many women Veterans report feeling invisible and unrecognized, not only in their communities, but also within VA facilities. We want to change that! We want all women who have served to proudly call themselves Veterans. We’ve taken many steps to ensure women Veterans feel included and supported in all that we do. Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Robert Wilkie recognizes the importance of this as well.

Although the total Veteran population in Louisiana is projected to decline through 2026, the women Veteran subset of this population is projected to experience a 14 percent growth. To continue to meet our Veterans’ needs, we are growing our program with staff dedicated to women’s health.

The future is looking brighter; we are excited about implementing the VA MISSION Act of 2018, which will consolidate VA’s community care programs into a new Veterans community care program by getting them the right care at the right time from the right provider. Over the next year, VA will need to develop regulations to implement the new law, while also developing policies, training staff, and awarding contracts to furnish care. Veterans and their families can expect continued improvements to be made in how Veterans navigate and receive care in the community.

Connect with us through Facebook, Twitter and our recently launched Instagram page (keyword: VANewOrleans) for updates on these and other happenings throughout our health care system.

Should you have any questions, please contact me directly by email at Fernando.Rivera@va.gov, on my office phone at (504) 507-7687 or my cell phone at (202) 834-7893. Please feel free to contact me anytime you feel I can be of assistance to you and/or our Veterans.

Fernando O. Rivera, FACHE
SLVHCS Medical Center Director/CEO
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On the Cover:
Veteran Hardy Goings submits a sample to the SLVHCS Million Veteran Program that seeks to create a database of health information from more than one million Veterans that may one day lead to new ways of preventing and treating illnesses. (Photo by Jeff Nowakowski)
Town halls enhance communication with Veterans

By Jeff Nowakowski

During the second quarter of 2018, Veterans learned about recent activations at the new Veterans medical center, received new information on health care benefits and heard about new VA priorities during Veteran town hall meetings conducted at different locations across southeast Louisiana.

SLVHCS Medical Center Director Fernando Rivera began each meeting with a brief presentation on the new medical center.

“We’ve completed several more milestones at the new Veterans medical center and we are offering expanded health care choices,” said Rivera. “As we continue to bring additional services to the new Veterans medical center, we need to recruit and retain the best and the brightest to provide our nation’s heroes with safe, high quality care.”

The Veterans town hall meeting held on New Orleans Westbank was well attended and heard about new VA priorities for 2018, and new technologies designed to make health care easier for Veterans.

“I really appreciated all of the new information about the VA from this meeting,” said Air Force Veteran Ralph Gaspard. “I’m very encouraged now about how they are working to resolve my claim.”

In May, SLVHCS conducted a Veterans town hall meeting in Franklin where Veterans’ learned how the health care system can serve them.

“I thought I was at a standstill, but this was a fabulous meeting for me and other Veterans to hear that VA is working on our issues,” said Marine Corps Veteran John Fore. “This was really helpful to me because now I have options.”

Town halls are held each month throughout southeast Louisiana. Check us out on Facebook and Twitter for more information.
New Veterans Medical Center Update

First corneal cross-linking procedure performed

By Jeff Nowakowski

The Eye Clinic performed the first corneal cross-linking procedure at the new Veterans medical center for patients suffering from keratoconus.

Corneal cross-linking (CXL) is a fairly new procedure and SLVHCS eye specialists are excited to be able to offer this procedure inhouse.

Keratoconus, often referred to as ‘KC’, is a non-inflammatory eye condition in which the typically round dome-shaped cornea progressively thins and weakens, causing the development of a cone-like bulge and optical irregularity of the cornea. This causes ‘static’ in a patient’s vision and can result in significant visual loss and may lead to corneal transplant in severe cases.

Corneal cross-linking procedure stiffens the cornea by combining the use of ultra-violet light and special eye drops to slow the progression of the keratoconus.

There is no known cause for keratoconus. It is a gradual, slow moving disease, which typically starts in the late teens to early twenties and may continue for several years.

In the early stages, contact lenses or eyeglasses are an effective treatment for most cases of keratoconus.

As keratoconus progresses, other treatments may include surgical options to repair the irregular shape of the eye. However, laser surgery is not an option, as there is a high probability of further damaging the cornea.
PET-CT nuclear medicine exams activated

A 65-year old Army Veteran underwent the newest nuclear medicine procedure for the first time as part of a study his physician had ordered.

A positron emission tomography (PET) and computed tomography (CT) scanning procedure, better known as PET-CT, was used to see if PET may detect the early onset of disease before it is evident on other imaging tests.

PET uses small amounts of radioactive materials called radiotracers, a special camera and a computer to help evaluate organ and tissue functions. This particular PET/CT scanner uses lutetium oxyorthosilicate (or LSO) scintillation crystals to detect the radiotracer. After approximately 60 minutes, the radiotracer travelled through the patient’s body to be absorbed by the organ or tissue being studied. Total scanning time was approximately 30 minutes and the patient returned to family members with no side effects.

First continuous renal replacement therapy performed

Another major milestone at the new Veterans medical center was achieved recently when a critically ill patient underwent an eight-hour procedure that allowed him to gain enough strength and return to his regular schedule.

For the first time, Nephrology performed continuous renal replacement therapy (CRRT) dialysis on a 68-year old Veteran patient in the Medicine inpatient unit who’s blood pressure was crashing and was not in good shape to withstand regular dialysis.

CRRT is used to treat critically ill, hospitalized patients in the intensive care unit (ICU) over a much longer period of time than standard dialysis. This slow, extended dialysis, known as SLED, took eight hours to complete.

This was an excellent example of teamwork between the dialysis team, critical care nursing corps and the ICU staff to perform this procedure for the first time in more than a decade.

The patient improved dramatically following the CRRT procedure and has returned to his regular dialysis schedule.

This successful treatment will now allow us to support larger, more complicated surgeries in the future.
Veteran Hardy Goings volunteered to submit a blood sample to the Million Veteran Program as soon as he saw a poster promoting the program in the outpatient clinics of the new Veterans medical center “because with no research we won’t be any smarter at defeating diseases.”

“My wife passed away from cancer five months ago and my dad died several years ago from the same thing,” said Goings, who also had a cancerous growth under an eyelid that was removed two years ago.

“I believe in research and anything we can do to improve health care for everybody, then I want to help.”

The Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System is one of only a handful of VA medical centers in the country that is participating in this ambitious genetic research study that seeks to enroll more than one million Veterans and create one of the largest databases of health information that may one day lead to new ways of preventing and treating illnesses in Veterans.

The genetic research study, known as the Million Veteran Program (MVP) was launched at SLVHCS in June of 2017, seeks to learn more about how genes affect health and to improve health care for Veterans.

SLVHCS has completed documentation and site start-up preparations, including regulatory approvals, hiring, logistics, and an office located in the Surgery clinic on the third floor of building J has begun specimen collections. One of SLVHCS’s goals is to recruit at least five Veterans each day in order to have a meaningful impact with this project.

“This is a very simple, 15-minute enrollment process for our Veterans,” said MVP Research Coordinator Eric Cousins. “We’re seeing our Veteran patients enrolling now based on positive feedback from our Veteran employees that have already joined the project.”

VA hopes to enroll one million Veterans nationwide into the research program within the next five to seven years.

The data gathered from MVP will be stored indefinitely and will be used for future medical research.

For more information about MVP, visit www.research.va.gov/mvp. Or call, toll-free, (866) 441-6075.
SLVHCS recognized the efforts of hundreds of volunteers at a luncheon as part of National Volunteer Week for their contributions to caring for Veterans at the new Veterans medical center and the system’s community-based outpatient clinics. (Photo by Salah Ahmed)

By Debra Cesar-Winbush

More than 100 volunteers, guests, and staff gathered May 1 at the American Legion Nicholson Post 38 in Baton Rouge, La. for the annual Volunteer Appreciation Luncheon. The event was planned to coincide with National Volunteer Recognition Week.

This year’s top community based outpatient clinic honorees were: Gloria Vutera, Baton Rouge North CBOC; Paul Raven, Baton Rouge South CBOC; Glenn Maze, Franklin CBOC; Steve Lanier, Hammond CBOC; Samuel Bailey II, Houma CBOC; Jayne Vickery, New Orleans medical center; and Alexis Vernon Nicholas, St. John CBOC.

SLVHCS’ 355 volunteers donated 20,642 hours of time in fiscal year 2017. Hours were put into programs such as July 4th, Ladies Night, Homeless Stand Down, and Veterans Day.

The person receiving honors for the most years volunteering was Linda Ray with 44 years. Ms. Ray is a member of the Veterans Foreign Wars auxiliary and serves as a Veteran Affairs Voluntary Service committee representative.

Also receiving recognition for their volunteerism was Gloria Vutera, who received the top award for the most number of hours, 10,059.

This year’s celebration was notable in the addition of a special ‘above and beyond’ award given to Larry Jones. Jones donated numerous hours assisting staff in finding town hall locations, leading the My Va Community Council and leading participants in the Pledge of Allegiance at many events.

Baton Rouge volunteer George Edmonson led the Pledge of Allegiance, SLVHCS Chaplain Bill Hatch gave the invocation and benediction, and SLVHCS Acting Voluntary Service Chief James Tardie gave welcome remarks.
SLVHCS Medical Center Director Fernando Rivera gave opening remarks, and congratulated award recipients as he presented them with their awards.

Other awards presented included: hours pin, hours and years certificates, and a new award recognizing volunteers number of years of service. Award recipients were introduced by SLVHCS leadership members, including Brinda Williams-Morgan, Dr. Logan Davies, Dr. Michael Landry, and Dr. Jamie Buth.

“Volunteer for a cause, volunteer for a purpose, volunteer because it motivates you,” said Acting Voluntary Service Chief James Tardie, during his welcoming remarks. “Whatever your reason is, just volunteer because it does make a difference.”

To donate or become a volunteer, call 1-800-935-8387 ext. 62105 or email VHANOLVoluntaryService@VA.gov.
As local southeast Louisiana female Veterans walked into the second annual Ladies Night in early May, they were welcomed to SLVHCS with more than two dozen vendors providing a wide range of female-only services, special gift bags, delicious food, and great music.

This was the second year of this special celebration for female Veterans to help them learn more about VA services offered to them.

After their trip along the first-floor concourse to the photo booth, more than 300 female Veterans were able to visit a variety of brightly decorated tables to learn about job opportunities, benefits and health care services available just for female Veterans. They had the opportunity to meet the women’s clinic staff, suicide prevention coordinator, and military sexual trauma coordinator, all while enjoying each other’s company.

More than 300 gift bags and more than 400 MyHealthVet bags were given out during the two-hour celebration.

By the end of the night, more than 50 gift baskets were given away to female Veterans who held a special gold ticket found in their gift bag.

“We want to ensure that all female Veterans feel welcome and make sure their health care needs are addressed here in the new Veterans medical center and more specifically in our dedicated Women’s Health clinic,” said Women Veterans Program Manager Tanya Bertke. “This annual event is a great opportunity for female Veterans to learn more about the services the VA offers, see the new facility, meet the staff, and feel more comfortable in this beautiful environment.”

Ladies Night organizers are already planning to offer more services at next year’s extravaganza.
Special gift prizes were given women Veterans if they had the golden ticket inside their gift bag during the second annual Ladies Night. (Photo by Amanda Jones)

Women Veterans received a checklist to ensure they stopped at all of the information tables at the second annual Ladies Night. (Photo by Arthur Castle)

Women Veterans received materials at dozens of informational tables lining the main concourse during the second annual Ladies Night. (Photo by Amanda Jones)
Veterans at our two Baton Rouge clinics are seeing a wide range of improvements as we’ve completed several projects over the summer; all designed to improve health care service for our patients and their family members.

Several large projects, such as flooring replacement at Baton Rouge North, installing signage and extensive painting at the Baton Rouge South clinic have been completed.

At the Baton Rouge North clinic, we’ve redesigned the phlebotomy specimen collection space. The building’s owner is preparing to paint the lobbies, waiting areas, and hallways.

Later this fall, we are scheduled to begin renovations of the physical medicine and rehabilitation area in the Baton Rouge South clinic.

Our Facilities Management Service, which is overseeing all the projects, continues to work with clinic management, staff, and the building owners to complete these much-needed improvements.

Contracting crews completed flooring replacement at the Baton Rouge north clinic as part of major improvement project at both clinics. (Photos courtesy of Chief of Projects William Baker)
Horticultural Therapy for “Our Veterans”

By Loretta Shepherd, Peer Support Specialist

Planting an organic garden is an activity typically reserved for bougie hipster types who have the time, money and training to get behind the cause, but for one Veteran, it is making a significant impact on him living in Baton Rouge.

Veteran Sammy Schafer Smith, who resides at the Raven’s Outreach Center-Transitional Housing, is utilizing his childhood skills and approach in establishing a well-tended residential garden to reveal how his life has been transformed by horticultural therapy.

Horticultural therapy is a time proven practice. The therapeutic benefits of gardening have been documented since ancient times. Dr. Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and recognized as the “Father of American Psychiatry” was the first to document the positive effect working in the garden had on individuals with mental illness.

In the 1940’s and 1950’s, rehabilitative care of hospitalized war Veterans significantly expanded acceptance of the practice.

Smith came to Baton Rouge in December of 2016 from Colorado where he was “going panning,” better known as trying to find gold, as a means of sustaining himself after leaving the military. While in Colorado he experienced some great challenges, and decided it was time for a change. He only had a limited amount of funds, which allowed him just enough money to purchase a ticket to Baton Rouge.

Smith spends many of his days at the Baton Rouge South Clinic sharing his military experiences with other Veterans. After searching for ways to deal with his challenges after military life, Smith began tilling and digging the dirt at Raven’s with his bare hands without any tools or shovels.

The garden currently has three hills of cantaloupe, three rows of zucchini, four hills of squash, two rows of okra, one row of tomato plants started by seeds, two rows of asparagus, one row of broccoli, two plants of jalapeno, red and green bell peppers.

Mr. Sammy, as he is well known, describes the garden as a place of identity and independence, and an example of a growing movement toward his recovery efforts.

“The garden is not mine,” said Smith. “I just take care of it.”

The practice of horticultural therapy has expanded beyond treatment for mental illness, and has been embraced and accepted for a wide range of diagnosis and therapeutic options. It is now widely used within a broad range of rehabilitative, vocational, and community settings.
The Whole Health for Trauma Recovery program is offered through Psychology at SLVHCS. The program consists of nine modules designed to help Veterans improve their well-being in a holistic way. One of these modules focuses on relationships.

Trauma can have significant impacts on Veterans’ relationships, including relationships with spouses, family members, friends, and co-workers. Surviving a traumatic experience can result in a range of symptoms that may negatively impact relationships. Some of these symptoms are irritability, emotional detachment, social withdrawal, hypervigilance, sleep problems, and nightmares. The Family, Friends, and Co-Workers module is designed to help Veterans begin to understand these symptoms and how they may manifest in their own lives and impact their relationships with others.

In addition to helping Veterans understand their own symptoms, this module provides Veterans with resources to begin improving their relationships by communicating with others about their experiences, symptoms, and goals.

Veterans learn that although they may have experienced trauma alone and may come to appointments alone, they live in relationship with many other people and that these people can be allies in their recovery. Throughout the module, Veterans are assisted with developing a system of individuals who understand them and support their ongoing recovery. This support system can be especially helpful for Veterans who have experienced trauma and who may be isolated due to past difficulties in relationships. The Family, Friends, and Co-Workers module offers Veterans an alternative way to approach their recovery and helps Veterans build relationships that enhance their quality of life.

The Whole Health for Trauma Recovery program is open to Veterans in the PTSD program after they have been referred by a member of the PTSD staff.
The VA nationally has developed an approach to health care, Whole Health, that empowers Veterans to take charge of their own health care and to ensure their care is specifically tailored to their individual life circumstances. Here at SLVHCS, the Whole Health for Trauma Recovery program was created last year following this multi-dimensional approach and applying it to recovery from traumatic experiences.

One of the eight modules in this program, titled “Fueling Your Body,” blends two Whole Health areas of “Food and Drink” and “Working Your Body.” This group module begins with education and awareness of how what we put in our bodies (i.e., food and drink) and what we do with our bodies (i.e., exercise or lack thereof) can impact one’s mental health, specifically trauma-related symptoms. With this education, the Veterans then develop personalized goals to improve their overall health by determining what is important to them and what they are willing to change. Lastly, they get a chance for hands-on learning of ways to improve their relationships with food and exercise by cooking healthy meals in the new cooking kitchen with Wellness Dietician Ross Kennedy and by going into the Veterans’ therapeutic gym and learning simple exercises with Employee Wellness Coordinator Nathan Fedor. Fedor, using his clinical exercise physiology background, adapted an employee health curriculum into a “moving your body” program for the Veterans participating in the module.

The idea behind this hands-on learning is to encourage better eating habits by learning to cook healthy meals at home and to jump start their own activity routine. The feedback from the Veterans in the program thus far has been positive and encouraging as they have all enjoyed both the educational and practical pieces of the module and voiced plans to continue growth in these areas.

The Whole Health for Trauma Recovery program is open to Veterans in the PTSD program after they have been referred by a member of the PTSD staff.
VA is changing the way health care is provided to Veterans dealing with PTSD. It’s called the whole health initiative.

In Whole Health care, providers look at all areas of the Veterans life. On pages 14 and 15, we discussed two other modules as part of the Whole Health Initiative.

Research shows that approximately 70 – 75 percent of trauma survivors report problems with insomnia (Krakow et al., 2007, North et al., 1999). The whole health recharge module addresses this problem by focusing on sleep, rest, and relaxation – three areas critical to our ability to function more efficiently on a daily basis.

A majority of the strategies utilized in the recharge module are modeled directly from the strategies detailed in The Post-Traumatic Insomnia Workbook (Thompson & Franklin, 2010) and are specifically geared toward more restful and restorative sleep for individuals with trauma-related insomnia.

An important distinction made in this module is that the goal of this treatment is to help veterans achieve better quality sleep as opposed to quantity. Specifically, this module teaches Veterans how to achieve better quality sleep by: 1) preparing body and mind for sleep by establishing a bedtime wind down routine; 2) minimizing environmental and lifestyle factors that may be interfering with quality sleep; 3) engaging in the 15-minute rule to teach the mind that the bed is for sleep; and 4) calculating and establishing individualized sleep schedules.

In addition to the strategies mentioned, Veterans are also taught several relaxation techniques, such as progressive muscle relaxation or calm breathing to use in times of stress or to prepare the body for sleep.
Many Veterans who have experienced trauma struggle with trauma-related symptoms, difficulties with emotions, and problems in their relationships. Skills Training in Affect and Interpersonal Regulation (STAIR) is offered at SLVHCS to help Veterans address these concerns.

“STAIR is a great treatment for those who struggle with identifying and managing their emotions and who experience difficulties in relationships,” said SLVHCS psychologist and STAIR therapist Dr. Jessica Walton. “STAIR also serves as a great alternative intervention for those who are interested in trauma-focused treatments but currently lack the emotional resources to engage in those treatments. STAIR provides these individuals with critical emotion regulation strategies that make them better equipped to handle the increased distress they may experience during an intensive, trauma-focused treatment,” she added.
The line dance contest attracted a big crowd as each dance team from their respective service, dressed in costumes, had three minutes to impress the judges on their knowledge of the “I Always” campaign through dance. (Photo by Amanda Jones)

Care Experience for Patients (SHEP) survey and its impact on the Strategic Analytics for Improvement and Learning (SAIL) report, and to increase the “always” responses and the survey return rate from Veterans.

That means Veterans can expect our employees to provide them with the safe, compassionate health care any time they need it and Veterans can expect us to continue to make improvements.

In addition to nurses wearing red that day, the event also featured educational tables from telehealth, employee wellness, human resources as well as hand hygiene and health promotion.

Organizers of the I Always Jazz It Up promotion were encouraged by the employee participation in the day’s events as it was reflective of the staff’s investment in improving the health and well-being of our Veteran patients. They are now working on another campaign promotion for the next quarter.
DAR donates artwork to Veterans medical center

Representatives from the Spirit of ’76 chapter of the National Society of Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) joined with SLVHCS leadership to review the new presentation wall in the patient and visitor parking garage that displays a commemorative plaque surrounded by five pieces of artwork representing the U.S. flag. The artwork, created by students from St. Scholastica Academy in Covington, represent their sincerest appreciation for the sacrifices made by our military service men and women to insure our country’s freedom and safety. Following the presentation, the members toured several inpatient rooms that display other DAR-donated artwork.

Inpatient mental health celebrates one year of service

This July, it was one year ago that the inpatient mental health unit was activated in the new Veterans medical center. The mental health unit is a short-term (14 days or less) unit that provides acute psychiatric services. The unit assists patients in the management of their illness and increasing life skills so Veteran patients can return to normal life activities. In one year, we have treated almost 330 patients, offering group psychotherapy and psychoeducational interventions in addition to medication management. Our experienced and compassionate providers and nursing staff allow patients to feel safe and comfortable in this environment.
By Tramel Garrett

It was a warm and sunny day in New Orleans as the Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System honored the American flag with its third annual Salute to the Flag ceremony.

“It was two years ago today that we stood here and raised the flag for the first time,” said Medical Center Director Fernando Rivera. “We’ve come a long way since then in providing the best possible care to our Veterans in a medical center that is their own,”

With temperatures over 90 degrees, more than 150 people came out to this year’s Independence Day event, where 94-year-old Dr. Jack Castrogiavanni and 92-year-old George Mazzeno, both WWII Veterans, raised the American, POW-MIA and Louisiana flags.

“I’m very proud to be an American Veteran and honored to represent millions of other Veterans who have given their lives for this country,” said George Mazzeno.

“The American flag means that this country is a free country and we have to honor our flag,” said Castrogiavanni.

VA Volunteer and Veteran Jay Walsh lead the Pledge of Allegiance and 88-year-old Marine Corps, Korean War Veteran Faust “Al” Navazio sang a beautiful rendition of God Bless America to the delight of the SLVHCS employees, guests and Veterans in the crowd.

“It was an honor. I’m a Veteran and I appreciate all that Veterans do for me and this country,” said Faust “Al” Navazio. “I wanted to sing my heart out. Whenever I get a chance to support my Veterans I will be there.”

The American Legion Post 377 Band provided music and the Louisiana National Guard performed a gun salute to the flag. In addition, The Benevolent Protective Order of the Elks Lodge #30 and Lucky Dogs provided a traditional lunch of hotdogs, chips, soft
Veterans and employees enjoyed a traditional July 4 cookout of hot dogs, chips and soft drinks donated by Lucky Dogs. (Photo by Arthur Castle)

A gun salute, performed by the Louisiana National Guard, was part of the third annual flag raising ceremony this year. (Photo by Josh Avist)

WWII Veterans Dr. Jack Castrogiavanni (l) and George Mazzeno (r), raised the flags during the annual July 4th Salute to the Flag. (Photo by Josh Avist)

Korean War Veteran Faust “Al” Navazio sang God Bless America. (Photo by Josh Avist)

Veterans and employees enjoyed a traditional July 4 cookout of hot dogs, chips and soft drinks donated by Lucky Dogs. (Photo by Arthur Castle)

WWII Veterans Dr. Jack Castrogiavanni (l) and George Mazzeno (r), raised the flags during the annual July 4th Salute to the Flag. (Photo by Josh Avist)

Korean War Veteran Faust “Al” Navazio sang God Bless America. (Photo by Josh Avist)

A gun salute, performed by the Louisiana National Guard, was part of the third annual flag raising ceremony this year. (Photo by Josh Avist)

Veterans and employees enjoyed a traditional July 4 cookout of hot dogs, chips and soft drinks donated by Lucky Dogs. (Photo by Arthur Castle)

drinks and water after the ceremony.

This event was a celebration of our country, the American Flag and those who protect our freedoms. The VA continues to serve these men and women every day and are passionate about giving the best care possible.

“I’m very happy with the VA medical services especially now that the new hospital is open,” said Mazzeno. “I tell other Veterans that they need to check the new hospital and see how great it is.”
SLVHCS Medical Center Director Fernando O. Rivera pinned a commemorative pin on a Vietnam Veteran as part of VA’s 50th anniversary marking the Vietnam War. (Photo by Arthur Castle)

SLVHCS Chief of Staff Dr. Ralph Schapira (r), assisted by volunteer Martha Bauman, congratulates a Vietnam War Veteran for his service with a commemorative pin as part of SLVHCS’s 50th anniversary marking the Vietnam War. (Photo by Arthur Castle)
SLVHCS tennis duo off to California tennis workshop

By Jeff Nowakowski

After six months of training and playing with friends, Veterans Cynthia Andry and Dalhia Tate-Rainey are off to California to participate in a week-long tennis workshop underwritten by Wounded Warriors.

“I can finally get the ball across the net just about every time I swing at it,” said Andry.

“I can really feel a difference,” said Tate-Rainey. “My back doesn’t hurt any more when I play or go exercising.”

That’s a long way from when both female Veterans started playing tennis by participating in a workshop at the Veterans medical center last fall sponsored by the Louisiana Tennis Association (LTA) from Baton Rouge. The LTA donated the time of a tennis professional instructor, twenty rackets, two cases of lower-velocity tennis balls, and reduced size nets to support the workshop.

Andry and Tate-Rainey were two of ten Veterans who participated in all eight weeks of the tennis workshop.

“These Veterans showed a lot of promise in learning this game,” said LTA tennis instructor James Branche. “You can see how quickly they developed to now move on to the next level of training.”

The workshop was considered such a success, SLVHCS conducted a second workshop that ran from February to March.

“Our Veterans will tell you they really enjoyed the tennis workshops because it’s a new activity for them,” said Recreational Therapist Glenis Thompson. “They tell me it’s all been worth it.”

Now, both have been accepted into the Wounded Warriors tennis camp in San Diego. There were only 60 open slots for the tennis camp and both Andry and Tate-Rainey were chosen. Wounded Warriors covered the cost of their flight, hotel, and new equipment.

“We’re so excited to be a part of this workshop,” said Andry. “We had to jump at this opportunity. We might even need more lessons before we go,” added Tate-Rainey.

Veteran Cynthia Andry (l) and Veteran Dalhia Tate-Rainey (r) were ready to work on their forehand strokes at the tennis workshop in California underwritten by Wounded Warriors. (Photo courtesy of Cynthia Andry)
The first Veterans creative arts competition at Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System “was a fantastic event that exceeded our expectations,” according to organizers from our recreation therapy program that coordinated the local art display and award ceremony in the recreation center.

A total of 16 Veterans participated in the local arts contest and submitted 24 pieces of artwork in 13 different categories. Deputy Associate Director of Patient Care Services Dr. Ruth Davis awarded ribbons and certificates to Veterans who placed first, second, and third in the ceremony.

The first place winners will now have their entries submitted as digital images of their art pieces to the national art competition, where they will be judged to determine national awards to be displayed at the National Veterans Creative Arts Festival that will be held in November in Des Moines, IA.

“There is a lot of talent, sometimes hidden, in our Veterans that comes out when we offer this type of project,” said Recreation Therapist Tom Petterson. “I think that once word got out about what we were doing, a lot more Veterans decided to submit their artwork.”

The contest was open to Veterans who are enrolled at SLVHCS before entering the local competition. The competition included 51 categories in the visual arts division that range from oil painting to leatherwork to paint-by-number kits. In addition, there were approximately 100 categories pertaining to music, dance, drama and creative writing.

“I am a studio art major at the University of New Orleans so when I heard about this event, I
knew I had to get involved,” said Navy Veteran Nora Filos. “And I had a photograph I had taken recently that I knew I could use for my entry. Now, I want to see more Veterans get involved.”

SLVHCS is working to incorporate creative arts into its recreation therapy programs to further the rehabilitation for both inpatients and outpatients. This annual competition recognizes the progress and recovery made through that therapy and celebrates the creative achievements of Veterans after disease, disability or life crisis.

“When I’m painting I’m in a different world,” said Navy Veteran Nat Williams. “It’s more than therapy for me. Somehow, when I focus on what I’m doing it’s like energy flows through the paints onto the canvas and it always manages to come out right.”

Veterans exhibited their winning artwork and original writings during the three-day festival exhibition.

**Creative Writing Division**

1st Place: Poetry/Inspirational, In and Out by Tanya Whitney

1st Place: Poetry/Patriotic, I Flew by Tanya Whitney

1st Place: Poetry/Other, I Didn’t Cry in Vietnam by John Baye

1st Place: Personal Experience/Humorous, How to Know If You Have Combat-related Stress by Alma McWilliams
1st Place: Black & White Photography, Untitled by Anthony Bauer (Photo by Salah Ahmed)

1st Place: Watercolor Painting, Freedom by Terry Waite (Photo by Salah Ahmed)

1st Place: Leather Carving/Tooling, Louisiana Clock by Roger Thomas (Photo by Salah Ahmed)
1st Place: Woodworking, Picnic Caddy by Robert Caudill (Photo by Salah Ahmed)

1st Place: Mixed Media/Applied Art, Leather & Wood Clutch by Robert Caudill (Photo by Salah Ahmed)

1st Place: Mixed Media/Fine Art, These Boots Are Made for Marching by Geneva Hebert (Photo by Salah Ahmed)
Social Media Compliments

James Scott My primary doctors and nurses at the New Orleans VA are the best. The doctors and nurses care about me and have saved my life several times. I get prompt appointments. The New Orleans VA really has it together.

Shelia Acker is feeling positive at New Orleans VA Medical Center. 18 hrs · New Orleans, LA · This facility is very nice... clean well staffed and very efficient Mark said he felt treated with respect! Feeling thankful!!

Shelia Acker Yes indeed a very pleasant experience!

Steve Barnes This is a fabulous facility with an outstanding staff. Thank you.

Henry King Great news, I love my New Orleans VA Medical Center! Keep up the good work!

James Paul We appreciate all y'all are doing to help us. Thank you all.

Cynthia LeCount Best care anywhere.