Volunteers honored at awards luncheon

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Opening the doors of the new Veterans medical center in New Orleans is just a few months away and it is so rewarding to be a part of this historic time for Veterans in southeast Louisiana.

We’ve watched our new medical center take shape while maintaining our primary mission of providing quality health care for our Veterans. We’re continuing to improve access to excellent health care throughout all of our clinics. Plus, we are refining our Veterans Choice processes so that Veterans who qualify will receive timely care in their communities. We are making progress every day and the signs of that progress are visible around us.

On July 4, 2016, Southeast Louisiana Veterans HealthCare System hosted a flag-raising ceremony at your new medical center. More than 250 people were on hand to watch WWII Veteran Joe Loyacano hoist the flag and witness a joint military 21-gun salute to Old Glory. This ceremony was the first in which Veterans, employees, family members and the public were able see the new facility firsthand. Many of those visitors toured the completed inpatient and outpatient buildings that morning as well. It was great hearing the comments and seeing our visitors learn about the many thoughtful amenities that have been included in the medical center’s design based on Veterans’ direct input.

For instance, Veterans told us they wanted a place to get something to eat and drink, a restroom, a person to help them if necessary and a place to sit down near every patient entrance. We’ve created hubs at each of the five locations in response and will have employees and volunteers staff the hubs to answer questions and help with any issues that may arise. That’s one visible example of how we have put Veterans’ good ideas into practice.

Another case can be found inside the chapel where we re-used the old chapel’s stained glass and placed the windows at an unusual level. Unlike most windows, our chapel’s windows are placed low to minimize distractions from the surrounding areas. That was another good idea we received during our Veterans round tables.

Listening to Veterans and caring about their experiences with us are part of the reason we’ve seen an increase in actionable, regular feedback and even direct emails from Veterans. They are letting us know how we made their visits positive and memorable. I hear and see our progress from all our clinics, and it makes me proud to be a part of your health care team.

I hope your visits with our nurses and providers are always exceptional. If you have any concerns or issues, please do not hesitate to contact me. I can be reached at (504) 565-4830 or at Fernando.rivera@va.gov.

Fernando O. Rivera, FACHE
SLVHCS Medical Center Director
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The article featured in the Fall 2015 edition of the Bonne Sante titled “Abdominal Aortic Aneurysms; Are you at risk?” should have included Dr. Cathleen Baudy’s contribution to the information provided. Thank you for your support and assistance.

On the Cover
SLVHCS Director Fernando O. Rivera poses with Priscilla and Steven Lassere after they had received their Outstanding Volunteer awards at the Volunteers Awards Luncheon in Harahan, La., April 15. (Photo by Anne Marino)
New Veterans medical center nears completion in New Orleans

By Karla Marshall

Landscaping is typically one of the last things that gets accomplished after the construction of a new building. When you see trees, shrubs, plants and sod being laid, you know it’s almost time to open the doors.
That’s the case with the construction site of the new Veterans medical center in New Orleans. The gardens around the inpatient building and the main entrance are nearing completion and nearly 400 employees will have moved into their new workplaces by the end of the summer.

“With the project being more than 90 percent complete, we are making great progress toward activation,” said Stephanie Repasky, Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System associate director. “We now have staff working in the administrative building, the inpatient building, the central energy plant and in the concourse.”

For those employee moves to happen, SLVHCS first needed the main computer room to be turned over, which happened in March.

“This was an important milestone because with this central hub, which is really the brains of our communications network, we will be able to connect computers and phones to our state-of-the-art communications equipment,” said David Hollingsworth, SLVHCS information technology project manager. “Miles of cable have been placed throughout all the buildings on our new campus.”

Now, hundreds of computers and telephones are operational at the new facility.

The first major public milestone took place in the midst of this activity July 4 when the American and POW/MIA flags were raised for the first time over the new medical center. That ceremony also included tours of the inpatient and outpatient buildings for the hundreds of people who attended to witness this historical milestone for SLVHCS in New Orleans.

“This is another step toward opening the new medical center,” said Fernando O. Rivera, FACHE, SLVHCS Medical Center director. “We are fully engaged to ensure we treat our first patient at the new medical center this year.”
August is Family Health Month

The health and well-being of our families is important, so what better way to help them stay healthy than by setting a good example and take better care of yourself! Here are a few of the things that we can do:

- Eat healthier and provide healthy eating options for your family. Eat five fruits and vegetables each day, swap sugary drinks with low fat dairy products, keep healthy snacks on hand instead of junk food and serve the right portions of food. Also, set time aside to eat together as a family.
- Decrease the amount of screen time and do something together every day. Take walks together, make a game out of chores, dance to music, have the kids work in the yard with you, have a weekly sports night, and play active games.
- Avoid smoking and smoking around children.
- Keep immunizations and preventative care, such as eye and dental checkups current.

SPOTLIGHT: Brain Trust

Dr. April Foreman, Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System psychologist and Veterans Integrated Service Network 16 suicide prevention coordinator, spoke at the inaugural Brain Trust: Pathways to InnoVation April 20 in Washington, D.C. This two-day public-private partnership event brought together people from the Departments of Veterans Affairs and Defense, the sports industry, private sector, Veterans and community partners to discuss solutions for traumatic brain injuries and post-traumatic stress disorder. (Photo by Robert Turtil)
The VA Mobile Health Provider Program delivers the mobile devices and health apps you need to enhance interactions with Veterans and Caregivers, improve their care and encourage self-management.

Find out more at http://mobilehealth.va.gov/providers.

If you have general questions about the VA Mobile Health Provider Program, visit http://mobilehealth.va.gov/providers.

For technical support, visit http://help.vamobile.us or contact the dedicated Help Desk (8 a.m. to 8 p.m. ET) at 855-500-2025.
SLVHCS welcomes home Vietnam Veterans

By Karla Marshall

Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System joined with the Department of Defense, Veterans service organizations and other Department of Veterans Affairs facilities nationwide to publically thank and welcome home Vietnam Veterans March 29.

As part of the 50th Anniversary of the Vietnam War event held at American Legion Post 175 in Metairie, La., the local commemoration included patriotic music provided by the U.S. Marine Corps and speeches by Vietnam Veteran Stephen Lassere and VA leaders.

Lassere said that serving in Vietnam changed him, and his transition back to civilian life was difficult.

“If it wasn’t for my wife and the VA, I wouldn’t be standing here today,” Lassere said. “My wife put up with me and helped me, and the VA saved my life.”

During his remarks, Fernando O. Rivera, Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System director said, “I have had the honor and privilege of serving you and other great and courageous men and women – the Veterans of Vietnam. It’s my honor today to thank all of you for your service to our great country, our communities and our families.”

There are countless Vietnam Veterans who paid a heavy price for the freedoms Americans enjoy today and for the 100 Veterans and their family members present at the commemoration ceremony, the experience was bittersweet.

“Today Americans respect and honor the sacrifices you, your brothers and sisters-in-arms, and your families made on behalf of all Americans,” Rivera said.

“Our country remembers how Veterans were treated upon return from Vietnam, and we now understand the impact of that societal response and responsibility,” he continued. “We will forever be grateful and welcome you home.”
SLVHCS hosts town halls for New Orleans and Bogalusa area Veterans

By Tyler Grimes

Throughout April and May, Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System hosted three town hall meetings for Veterans, their families and others to share the progress of the new Veterans medical center, information regarding access to care and provide assistance with benefits issues.

In addition, attendees had the opportunity to ask questions and voice concerns to Fernando O. Rivera, SLVHCS medical center director, Mark Bologna, Veterans Benefits Administration New Orleans Regional Office director and Debbie Biagioli, VBA New Orleans Regional Office assistant director.

“Opportunities like these to pass information to Veterans and their families are great, but the best part is being able to interact immediately and directly with Veterans who voice their concerns and get issues resolved on the spot,” Rivera said. “We also bring program leads, like Women’s Health, Mental Health, Veterans Justice Outreach, the Transition and Care Management Program, Eligibility staff and Voluntary Service so that Veterans can go directly to the source for answers to their questions and concerns.”

Rivera discussed the services and layout of the new medical center, which will include seven floors for outpatient care with 14 specialties and the 20-bed Mental Health inpatient unit. He also told invitees about the recently established Adverse Credit Reporting Call Center for Veterans experiencing billing problems related to Veterans Choice Program claims.

“We’re a little more than 88 percent complete on the construction of the new Medical Center in New Orleans,” he said. “We have a lot of work and preparation to do between now and when we begin seeing patients there in December.”

Rivera was quick to share his appreciation for his employees’ ongoing dedication to serving those who served and for everything they do to make the new medical center a reality.

“Our employees are working hard to make sure we see our first patients in the new medical center by the end of this year, but we will not see patients until it is absolutely safe to do so,” he said.

Rivera said the safety of our Veterans, their families and employees will drive the timeline for seeing patients.

These monthly meetings have been attended by Veterans throughout southeast Louisiana in the 23 parishes SLVHCS serves.
Volunteers honored at awards luncheon

New Orleans CBOC volunteers Aaron Lewis, Landry Deorzan, Milton Red, and Thuy Le pose together during the Volunteers Awards Luncheon April 15. (Photo by Hillary Rustine)
More than 60 volunteers were honored with service pins and certificates during the Volunteers Awards Luncheon April 15. (Photo by Anne Marino)

They are reliable, remarkable and respectful. Their selfless service and generosity truly sets the standard of giving. And their work touches and betters the lives of thousands of Veterans each and every day.

For seven decades they have been part of a great legacy, giving back to the men and women who have served the United States in its armed forces. They are the more than 75,000 caring individuals who volunteer at Department of Veterans Affairs facilities nationwide.

On April 15, Fernando O. Rivera, director of the Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System, praised the volunteers, calling them “an outstanding group of caring individuals.”

Together these volunteers in SLVHCS donated more than 18,000 hours of their time.

“Some would say voluntary service is a calling, but it is a choice and each one of you has made it,” Rivera said at the Volunteers Awards Luncheon held at the American Legion Post 397 in Harahan, La.

“We are grateful to have you serve alongside us, bringing your talents, experiences and smiling faces to your work here with us,” Rivera said. “You raise the quality of our entire health care system by helping us honor Veterans and giving them the excellent care they deserve.”

More than 60 volunteers were honored at the awards luncheon, receiving service pins and certificates. Among them was long-time volunteer Linda Ray of the Veterans of Foreign Wars Auxiliary, who has donated more than 5,200 hours in her 42 years of volunteering.

“It’s a great joy to be a volunteer,” said Ray, who started volunteering in the 1970s. “There is always something to do.”

Rivera provided the volunteers with an update on the opening of the new Veterans medical center that will be dedicated on Nov. 18.

“In addition to the care you provide our Veterans at the clinics, we will have opportunities for you to participate in our activation ceremonies and the new hospital,” he said. “As more and more of our new hospital comes online, we will be expanding the volunteer opportunities and we will need an even larger volunteer corps.”

The director asked the volunteers...
Volunteers honored at awards luncheon
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be expanding the volunteer opportunities and we will need an even larger volunteer corps.”

The director asked the volunteers to recruit even more volunteers. “Please share your volunteer experiences with your family, friends, neighbors and coworkers and encourage them to consider being a part of our incredible mission,” he said.

A volunteer’s work ranges from being tour guides to coffee makers and everything in between. Every job is important and contributes to a great experience and well-being for Veterans and their family members.

In the new medical center, volunteers will serve as nurses’ aides and assistants for recreation activities, therapy programs and homeless services among many others.

“There will definitely be a place for all of you,” Rivera told the volunteers. “Our vision for the new medical center is that it will be a place Veterans can call their own and feel at home and you will play a key part in making it so.”

The awards luncheon provided SLVHCS the opportunity to express its appreciation and gratitude to the volunteers for their hard work and dedication over the past year.
SLVHCS caregiver to represent Louisiana in national fellowship

By Chris W. Cox

The Elizabeth Dole Foundation Caregiver Fellows Program recently selected a new member to represent Louisiana.

Louisiana’s 2016 Dole Caregiver Fellow is Diamond Kitchell Gordon, who has provided caregiver support for her Iraq Veteran husband, Allen, since 2011. Gordon was introduced to the caregiver program through the Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System.

The program was created to be a platform where Veterans and military caregivers nationwide could provide input to elected officials and stakeholders about their own concerns and needs in order to best take care of their loved ones. Program fellows are appointed for two years and work to raise awareness of challenges and opportunities military- and Veteran-caregivers face. Appointed Fellows also are able to advise the Foundation and help guide efforts to improve funding and aid for those who care for Veterans and military members in need of physical and emotional support.

“Being an EDF Fellow coincides with my life’s passion and goals for Veterans,” Gordon stated. “A key role of keeping Veterans strong is to provide relief, wellness and assistance to their caregivers that fight their battles for and with them.”

Gordon hopes to energize the conversation about the challenges caregivers face – physical and mental stress, hopelessness, helplessness – and help introduce legislation that will improve the plight of both the caregiver and the cared for.

“The stories and experiences of our Dole Caregiver Fellows are at the heart of our Foundation’s work,” said Sen. Elizabeth Dole. Dole established the foundation in 2012 in an effort to strengthen the services afforded to military and Veteran caregivers.

“These caregivers contribute critical first-hand perspective and knowledge, and their personal experience serves to strengthen the work of the Foundation and our partners.”

Part of that input is to provide information and perspective during RAND Corporation research projects that are in turn used to improve policy. The RAND Corporation is a non-profit academic collective that provides information and statistics to inform decision making by government and business leaders. In this case, the policy in question impacts caregivers themselves and, by extension, the men and women they care for.

A 2014 RAND report commissioned by the Foundation found that military and Veteran caregivers were in need of more effective support in order to provide for those in their care. Maintaining this level of constant attention was found to take steep personal, financial, emotional and physical tolls. In response the Dole Foundation was created leading to the Fellowship program.

To be a Dole Caregiver Fellow, applicants must devote a significant amount of their time to providing care to a wounded, injured or ill Veteran or member of the U.S. military. Since the intent is for Dole caregiver fellows to be able to advise and inspire other caregivers, they need to have experience or specialized education. In Gordon’s case, her experience providing support and care for her husband qualifies her.

For more information about the SLVHCS Caregiver Support Program, go to http://www.neworleans.va.gov/services/caregiver/.

Louisiana’s 2016 Dole Caregiver Fellow Diamond Kitchell Gordon and her Veteran husband, Alan. (Courtesy photo)
Teaching kitchen serves up healing opportunities for Veterans

Veterans enrolled in SLVHCS’ Psychosocial Recovery Program participate in a community cooking class hosted by Tulane University’s Goldring Center for Culinary Medicine in New Orleans April 13. (photo by Chris W. Cox)

By Chris W. Cox

It is no secret that many Veterans struggle with the effects of mental illness. For those men and women, navigating everyday life can be a struggle. Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System’s Mental Health Service aims to provide a support structure while also teaching Veterans how to manage their symptoms. One way is through group experiences.

One recent group event arranged by SLVHCS Mental Health staff was a six-week cooking class at the Goldring Center for Culinary Medicine in New Orleans, a component of Tulane University’s School of Medicine.

“At the Goldring Center for Culinary Medicine, we make good food that happens to be good for you and we really just teach kitchen confidence,” said registered dietician and Goldring Center chef Kerri Dotson. “Oftentimes people will come to these classes and being in a kitchen stresses them out or makes them really nervous. They’re not really sure where to begin, so we really just throw them in the kitchen and get them started.”

This particular course may have started as just another community cooking class, but it didn’t take long for the Goldring staff to figure out that the 13 Veterans approached things differently than many of their usual students.

“A lot of them have either worked in kitchens before and know the process or, once you give the directions, can easily follow them step by step,” Dotson said. “This group, once you showed them the directions, it was very easy on our part.”

The curriculum was the same as usual for the chefs – explain the recipe, break the class into groups to prepare items and then review as a group over freshly made munchies – but the benefits for these students went beyond simply learning kitchen confidence. Each week of teamwork was another shared, personal success.

Prior to starting attending PRP (VA Psychosocial Recovery Program) groups here with us, many of the Vets were struggling significantly with lack of motivation, lack of interest and isolation,” said Carly LeBlanc, licensed clinical social worker at SLVHCS who leads the program. “This gives them an opportunity to have some positive experiences with other Veterans who are experiencing similar symptoms.”

The PRP is designed to promote recovery and improved quality of life for Veterans with serious mental health diagnoses. Field trips, like the one to the Goldring Center, provide positive group experiences that contribute to personal recovery plans. Combined with other techniques the PRP offers, participants learn how to manage their illness, set goals, prevent relapses and cope with daily life made more difficult by their condition.

“The feedback has been very positive about how this experience has helped them,” she continued. “Many of them haven’t even cooked in a long time because maybe their sister or mom or spouse is doing it, They’ve got an opportunity to re-engage that and have a successful experience doing it.”

For the Veterans who completed their sixth and final class April 20, the benefits of learning how to substitute less-expensive and healthy ingredients while becoming more comfortable preparing meals is as meaningful as the new, positive memories that can be relived in their own kitchen.
Stay safe during inclement weather

By Johnathan Kimbrough, safety specialist and Robert Beverly, Emergency manager coordinator

As we enter a season of increasingly inclement weather, it is important for us all to be aware of the constantly changing conditions, and what to do when Mother Nature strikes.

During a threat of severe weather, closely monitor the weather and the latest forecasts and know the difference between a severe weather watch and a simple warning.

If a watch is issued, we should stay alert and be prepared to take action. If a warning is issued, we should take action by seeking shelter in an interior room on the lowest floor of our homes or offices, such as a closet, bathroom or hallway away from any windows. Also, cover our heads with a helmet, mattress, pillow or anything that will provide better protection than hands would from debris. Do not take shelter in a mobile home, vehicle or under a highway overpass.

If a road trip is being planned, be sure to check the forecast before departure. Listen to a local radio station for inclement weather alerts. Most smart phones also receive severe weather updates from the National Weather Service.

Consider delaying a trip if weather conditions are bad or deteriorating. Vehicles can be turned over and destroyed by weak tornadoes and high winds. It is always best to stay indoors in this situation.

June 1 to Nov. 30 is the 2016 hurricane season. We all need to make sure that we have a severe weather survival plan. Plan to lose power in your house for a few days. Plan to survive on non-perishable food items. Plan to have enough fresh water for yourself, your family and your pets if the water service is interrupted.

For more information about staying safe when severe weather strikes, go to www.Weather.gov/NewOrleans.

For more information on how to prepare to survive a hurricane, visit the Louisiana Governor’s Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness at www.GetAGamePlan.org.

Establish a streak to increase motivation

By Dr. Madeline Uddo, psychologist

Are you having difficulty getting motivated? Are you having difficulty making a change? Chris Downie, motivation expert, suggests the idea of establishing a streak to accomplish goals. He defines a streak as a small goal tracked over a defined time period. He suggests that it’s best to start with a desired behavior that you aren’t doing on a regular basis that will be easy to accomplish. These goals can run the gamut from improving personal health, job performance, or relationships and beyond.

Some examples of establishing a streak might be to eat an extra serving of fruit every day for a month or to attend a yoga class per week for three months. Keeping track of the streak is important. This can be done by using something as simple as putting a mark on a calendar each time you do the desired behavior, by developing your own spreadsheet or by finding a smart phone application that will help you track your progress. When you reach your goal, Downie suggests setting a new goal for the same behavior or starting a new behavior to focus on using the same process.

Some variations include allowing yourself a pass or two in case you miss your goal one day/one week. This may help avoid feelings of frustration and failure. If you break the streak, the important thing to focus on is being able to bounce back by re-evaluating the goal and determining how to make the streak work best for you. He suggests resetting the goal and restarting with the intention to accomplish a longer streak the next time. A couple of other suggestions include rewarding yourself for meeting your goals and sharing your goals with others. Downie states, “streaks are motivational powerhouses” and that continuing a defined streak enhances motivation and “builds confidence and momentum and fuel to your journey.”
Be Physically Active: A Healthy Living Message
http://www.prevention.va.gov/Healthy_Living/Be_Physically_Active.asp

May 2016 Resource Document: