Ribbon Cutting Ceremony at new VA medical center
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On November 18 we cut the ribbon for the new Veterans medical center during a ceremony with approximately 1,200 guests in attendance. The program was a celebration of serving Veterans and expanding our services by using a state-of-the-art Veterans medical center. The ribbon cutting ceremony is one way we honored the thousands of heroes who live in southeast Louisiana.

We opened with the presentation of the colors by a Joint Services Color guard, followed by our national anthem sung by one of our former nurses, Olivia Cooper. My VA Community Council co-chairs Larry Jones and Bill Detweiler led us all in the Pledge of Allegiance and Most Reverend Gregory M. Aymond, Archbishop of New Orleans, gave the invocation and benediction. We heard inspiring words from guest speakers New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu, Louisiana Governor John Bel Edwards, Senator Bill Cassidy, Dr. David Shulkin who was then the VA Under Secretary for Health, and keynote speaker Robert A. McDonald, who was then the VA Secretary.

Senator Cassidy said it best when he said, “Veterans helped drive this facility…it was your advocacy, it was your input that put together a facility that provides a wonderful built environment as dedicated to your health as the aides, the nurses, the doctors and the technicians.”

Following the ceremony, we cut the ribbon, symbolizing the opening of this new facility that will serve more than 70,000 enrolled Veterans annually, pledging to keep Veterans at the core of our work.

The event was a great kickoff to the phased activation and activities that followed, including staffing the main entrances to the medical center November 21, beginning the Pharmacy call center operations November 22 with approximately 500 calls handled daily, piloting Mental Health outpatient services November 22, hosting a sponsored Thanksgiving lunch for 100 patients November 23 and a sponsored Giving Tuesday lunch for 80 Veterans, and seeing our first patients on December 5.

Like Louisiana Governor Edwards said at the ribbon cutting, “We ask our Veterans to risk everything, literally everything, so that our nation might remain free. And because we ask everything of them, the least we can do is give them the very best care and respect in return.”

We will continue to carry out our sacred mission, “to care for him who have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan,” and we will do it with pride in this new facility.

Fernando O. Rivera, FACHE
SLVHCS Medical Center Director

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Town halls enhance communication with Veterans

by Jeff Nowakowski

Veterans from across southeast Louisiana gathered over the past several months to learn about activations at the new Veterans medical center, receive information on health care benefits and learn about a wide variety of other topics during Veteran town hall meetings.

Meeting at St. Matthew Apostle Church in River Ridge were Veterans like Navy Veteran Rodney Abadie.

“This was the first time I’ve ever come to one of these town hall meetings,” he said. “But this was very helpful to me because I had a question about my claim. And I was pleased to see someone from the Benefits department was here.”

SLVHCS Medical Center Director Fernando Rivera began the meeting with a brief presentation that included updates on the new medical center, which began seeing Veterans in the outpatient clinics in December 2016.

Veterans also learned that SLVHCS’s application for a Fisher House near the new medical center campus had been approved and is now under review by the Fisher Foundation for possible funding sometime in 2017.

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Veterans in Houma gathered in February to hear about a prescription medicine co-pay change and new technologies designed to make health care easier for Veterans.

One of those new technologies is the VA is modernizing its Veterans Experience Contact Centers so that all phone numbers for different information and locations nationwide are now combined into one toll-free phone number: 1-844-MyVA311.

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SLVHCS’ medical director Fernando Rivera reviewed updates on several important subjects at the newly opened medical center during a meeting with Veterans in Houma. (Photo by Anne Marino)

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New Orleans is a city known for its exciting nightlife, amazing culture, delectable food and incredible music. It is also a city of friendship, acceptance, community service and volunteerism. The people of New Orleans help one another during hardships, large and small, and this hospitable nature might be the reason the Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System’s Stand Down for Homeless Veterans gets bigger every year.

This year, SLVHCS hosted the Stand Down at the new Veterans medical center on South Galvez Street on Oct. 22 from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. The event served 286 homeless Veterans, more than ever before. In addition, 130 of those Veterans received a flu shot.

Veterans were treated to coffee and a light breakfast, musical entertainment and a hot lunch to go with the other items they received. Veterans were offered free haircuts, manicures and clothing, receiving a large duffle bag and a backpack full of gear.

“It’s like going to CIF (clothing issue facility), but better,” said Army Veteran Paul Zowolski. “I never thought I’d carry that big green duffle again.”

Veterans also received limited health care screenings and assistance with claims and eligibility.

Zowolski was surprised to learn that he qualified for housing assistance.

“I have been sleeping in my grandpa’s garage or out in the open when I didn’t have enough money for a motel,” he said. “You don’t know how great it will be to have a place of my own again.” (continued on page 15)
Father Laboon Memorial

Many SLVHCS employees expressed remembrances inside the new Veterans Medical center chapel in memory of Father Joseph Daniel Laboon, who died on August 31, 2016. (Photo by Hillary Rustine)

A traditional New Orleans jazz funeral procession led employees from the chapel into the main concourse. (Photo by Hillary Rustine)

SLVHCS employee Bennie Hooker led the memorial service with an invocation. (Photo by Hillary Rustine)

SLVHCS employees quietly reflect on Father Laboon’s legacy to Veterans during his memorial service. (Photo by Hillary Rustine)
Veterans Day

Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System Medical Center Director Fernando O. Rivera joins in the groundbreaking for Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 8973's new headquarters expansion in New Orleans Nov. 11. (Photo by Chris W. Cox)

Dr. Stephanie Repasky poses with a Veteran inside the 10G clinic in New Orleans while handing out Veterans Day tokens of appreciation. (Photo by Anne Marino)

SLVHCS employees gather to celebrate Veterans Day at a Pep Rally in the new Veterans medical center Nov. 10. (Photo by Anne Marino)

Director Fernando O. Rivera joined Mayor Belinda Constant and the city of Gretna in their Veterans Day celebration Nov. 11. (Photo by Amanda Jones)
The Veterans Health Administration reached a historic milestone Nov. 18 in New Orleans when Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System celebrated the opening of the new Veterans medical center on a bright, unusually warm morning.

Hundreds of Veterans, family members, government officials and current and former VA employees from across the nation began gathering in front of the medical center’s main entrance as early as 8 a.m. in anticipation of the ribbon cutting ceremony for the new facility.

As part of the celebration, a joint military color guard with service members from the Louisiana National Guard, Marines, Navy, Air Force and Coast Guard helped open the event. For many of the Veterans in the crowd, seeing younger versions of their brothers and sisters in arms...
Newest VA medical center opens for Louisiana’s Veterans

Members of the joint service color guard and dignitaries on salute the nation during the singing of the Star-Spangled Banner at the SLVHCS medical center ribbon cutting ceremony in New Orleans Nov. 18. (Photo by Anne Marino)

helped SLVHCS demonstrate its understanding of the value of their sacrifice and service.

“Our program today is a celebration; an awakening,” said SLVHCS Medical Center Director Fernando O. Rivera during the ceremony’s introduction. “We’re here today to formally celebrate the return of a VA Veterans medical center and bringing back hospital care to the thousands of heroes who live in southeast Louisiana and the Gulf Coast region.”

“This is indeed a very special day for many of us as it reflects the vibrant character and strength of New Orleans, as well as southeast Louisiana’s commitment to our Veterans,” he stated. “It conveys the sure message that we are a dedicated and determined team with much perseverance and passion for Veterans and the care that they so richly deserve.”

Rivera was joined on the ceremony’s stage by Catholic Archbishop Gregory Aymond; New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu; West Point graduate and Army Veteran, Louisiana Gov. John Bel Edwards; Sen. Bill Cassidy, R-La., who was trained by VA doctors as part of his medical education; (continued next page)

Then VA secretary Robert McDonald, then VHA undersecretary Dr. David Shulkin, Louisiana Senator Bill Cassidy, Louisiana Gov. John Bel Edwards, New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu and New Orleans Archbishop Gregory Aymond wait for their cue to speak during the Veterans medical center ribbon cutting ceremony in New Orleans, Nov. 18. (Photo by Teresa Jackson)
then VHA undersecretary David Shulkin; then VA secretary Robert McDonald; and Bill Detweiller and Larry Jones, the co-chairs for the local My VA Community Council. Landrieu was the first to speak after Rivera’s brief introduction.

“First of all, as so often has been said, freedom is not free,” he began. “The cost is borne every day – sometimes by the ultimate sacrifice and sometimes by pain and suffering that lingers after duty is done and families and individuals live with that for the rest of their life. Fernando said it really quickly, if you fight for the country, you should never have to fight for first-class health care. So this building, in so many ways, is a testament to a promise made and a promise kept.”

The new medical center, once it is fully operational, will allow Veterans to receive complex care closer to home with fewer personal expenses and significantly less inconvenience for themselves and their families.

More than a day just for Veterans, this ceremony marked a significant event in the lives of SLVHCS employees too. Many of the current and former employees in attendance worked at the old Perdido Street VA hospital before and during the storm, in its aftermath or in the years spent building up to this day. Their

107-year-old Lawrence Brooks was recognized during the ribbon cutting ceremony Nov. 18. (Photo by Anne Marino)
anticipation for this moment was visible, according to Shulkin.

“Just look at the pride on our staff’s faces, how happy they are that they have the resources now to perform their duty and mission to serve Veterans. People have been waiting a long time, but no one has been waiting longer than a gentleman I got to meet this morning,” he said. He and McDonald met many Veterans before the ceremony, but one in particular made an impression.

107-year-old Lawrence Brooks in his front-row seat has been receiving VA health care in New Orleans since 1945.

“Now that it’s opening, it feels wonderful. It feels great,” said the World War II Army Veteran.

This new facility in New Orleans is now the newest physical representation of America’s promise to care for Veterans’ health and welfare in exchange for the honorable service they performed when they were younger men and women.
Local Veterans gathered with city and state elected officials in front of Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System’s new Bogalusa Community Based Outpatient Clinic Dec. 6 to cut the ribbon and celebrate the official opening of their newly relocated and larger clinic.

The new CBOC is located at 521 Ontario Avenue in Bogalusa – less than a mile from the former clinic. SLVHCS moved to the new clinic location because of the need for increased space to offer more services and to expand existing services and programs. The new clinic will continue to provide primary care, mental health, laboratory services and pharmacy consultation, as well as dietary consultation and women’s health to its more than 1,200 Veterans.

“As we prepare to open this new clinic, let me encourage you to welcome this new chapter of our health care system with much hope, optimism and dedication as we work to meet the health care needs of our Veterans,” said SLVHCS Medical Center Director Fernando O. Rivera.

The three-month construction renovation project began in the summer of 2016 and was a partnership between SLVHCS and Valor Healthcare, the clinic’s managers. The project’s goal was to optimize and provide state-of-the-art medical treatment services for Veterans in the Bogalusa area.

It was the culmination of a group idea that began about a year ago. Together with its partners, SLVHCS worked to create a new facility that can provide a wide array of services and capabilities to Veterans in a clinic that is sensibly designed for the comfort of Veterans.

“I’m excited for the city of Bogalusa and the fact that we’re going to have room to grow more services for our Veterans,” said Bogalusa Mayor Wendy O’Quin-Perrette. “And I want to thank all of the Veterans here this morning for their service.”

With this new space comes ample parking and the 5,000 sq. ft. medical facility greatly expands SLVHCS’s capabilities to analyze, refer and monitor Veterans’ health because it offers dedicated space for health care tools, such as telemedicine and telehealth.

The new telemedicine area allows the performance of retinal scans for diabetes and a telehealth area for Veterans to discuss medical issues, such as gastrointestinal care, with specialists who are located throughout the health care system.

These two technologies increase Veterans access to specialists, improve health outcomes from early diagnosis and treatment, and reduce costs and time for Veterans because it minimizes travel to other SLVHCS locations for care.

For the female Veterans who use this clinic, SLVHCS is also working toward having a designated women’s health provider onsite.

“This is a great, new platform for services where we can provide exceptional care to our Veterans,” said Dr. Alan Schonfeld, Valor Healthcare regional medical director. “We’re excited to be here, and we’re excited to provide more expanded services to Veterans.”
Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System continued the activation of more outpatient services at the new Veterans medical center in December and January.

Since December 5, 2016, thousands of Veterans have been seen in the outpatient clinics in the new Veterans medical center.

“We reached another milestone in the activation of our new Veterans medical center,” said SLVHCS Medical Center Director Fernando O. Rivera, FACHE. “We began the intensive physical activation of some of our outpatient services, and next month will bring us more progress on clinic activations in the new Veterans medical center.”

One of the busiest clinics during the month of December was the Eye Clinic.

“It’s great to be in the new building with new equipment and more room to be able to perform procedures,” said Optometrist Dr. Nicole Abrashoff. “I’m really impressed with how well the clinic has been built and outfitted,” said Optometrist Dr. Steve Gill.

The clinic has enough room to grow that managers are projecting a 25-percent increase in general eye services before the end of 2017.

“With this amount of space, top-of-the-line equipment, and a great staff; we can clear up any overbookings and easily increase our clinic load,” said director of Glaucoma Services Jared Vincent.

Just two floors up, the Dental Clinic has also been busy.

“The equipment is modern and up-to-date and it provides a lot more flexibility in treating our Veterans,” said Dental Assistant Claire Quinette. “A lot of our patients like the educational monitors that are in each exam room,” said Dental Assistant Sharon Waters.

“The monitors, combined with the 3-D technology we have, has impressed a lot of our patients.”

In January, more health care services were activated, including Primary Care, Women’s Health, Medicine services, Audiology, Speech and Dermatology.
The patient lies on his back on a gurney waiting for staff to move him to the diagnostics and treatment clinic for a procedure. He’s alert, breathing easily, and all vital signs are normal. But he’s a dummy. Honestly.

He’s a $75,000 life-like adult patient simulator the Simulation Laboratory uses to conduct live simulation training with the staff at Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System to improve Veteran safety, prepare medical teams, reinforce clinical skills, and enhance problem solving.

“Staff may know procedures, but here in the simulation lab you have to demonstrate procedures,” said Simulation Program Manager Julie James, RN Educator. “The simulations create anxiety, but it’s a good kind of stressor that promotes thinking on a higher level so that staff can perform well under pressure in a clinical setting.”

James can control all of his vital signs, eyes and sounds from a laptop in an adjoining classroom. The laptop allows James to see what actions the staff performs on the mannequin and in what order.

“He can breathe, blink, and pretty much do whatever a ‘real’ patient can do,” said James. “He can also sweat, bleed and cry.”

The new simulation laboratory was finished in mid-November 2016 and more than a dozen new nurses have completed the three-day training program. James created a series of medical situations that foster a safe, non-threatening teaching and learning environment.

“Studies show hands-on training in your everyday work environment is the most effective way to train an individual,” said James. “This is the place to make mistakes rather than on an inpatient floor.”

On this particular day, former operating room nurse Shontell Foley was in the lab to complete nursing orientation training. She interacts with the mannequin as if he is a real patient.

“Even though it was a robot, it felt real in there,” said Foley. “He had a pulse and you could see he was breathing. Nursing schools need this. A lot of new nurses could benefit from this.”

The simulation program was developed as an innovative teaching strategy for health care providers at the hospital that can support patient safety and quality of care delivered to the Veteran.

“I think we achieved what we wanted today,” said James. “The staff was able to practice intervening for a Veterans change in condition, problem solve, work as a team, and use state-of-the-art patient care equipment. The staff now has a better understanding of their surroundings and their roles in caring for Veterans. And that makes it a success.”
Perhaps the best part of the Stand Down is that all goods and services at the event were donated and free of charge to the recipients. Hundreds of volunteers and donors helped make this important day a success, giving their time and money and lending their skillsets to others in need.

“We had a major increase in volunteers over last year,” said Voluntary Service Specialist Cynthia White. “We had about 380 volunteers who acted as escorts, way finders, barbers, manicurists, clothing issuers, non-perishable goods distributors, and other social service providers. And we had three bands.”

The volunteers came from Veterans service organizations, faith-based groups, community groups, universities, and good hearted individuals. Fleur De Lis Catering, Sun Ray Grill, Coca-Cola, Canes, and the Elks provided some very gracious donations.

“In many ways, these homeless Veterans are our first patients at the new Veterans medical center,” SLVHCS Medical Center Director Fernando O. Rivera said. “They are among our most vulnerable patients and it’s only right that they are the first to receive care here.”

If you would like information on opportunities to make a difference in a Veteran’s life, contact Voluntary Services at ext.4857 or email vhanolvoluntaryservice@va.gov.