

# Bonne Santé

Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System

Summer 2017

**SLVHCS celebrates  
July 4th with Salute  
to the Flag**

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**VA**



**U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs**

Veterans Health Administration  
Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System

# From the Director



*Fernando O. Rivera, FACHE  
SLVHCS Medical  
Center Director*

The Veterans Health Administration is undergoing one of the largest transformations in its history, and I'm proud to say that our efforts are pivotal to this transformation. Because we are focused on providing you with timely access to care, especially Veterans with needs for care right

away, same-day services are available in primary care and mental health care. We may address those health care needs by providing a face-to-face visit, returning a phone call, arranging a telehealth or video care visit, or scheduling a future appointment. Additionally, if a Veteran is in crisis or has another need for care right away in mental health, he or she will receive immediate attention from a health care professional at VA, and any Veteran new to Mental Health with a non-urgent need will receive an initial screening evaluation by the next calendar day. Veterans can also use systems like MyHealthVet to contact providers when help is needed, answer health care questions, refill prescriptions, view appointments and more. Telehealth programs also allow our Veterans to work with a specialist, often without the need to travel past the local clinic.

For many Veterans, deciding when, where and how to receive health care is often one of the most complex and challenging decisions about the entire health care process. Therefore, VA launched a new website at [www.accesstocare.va.gov](http://www.accesstocare.va.gov) with an access and quality tool to help Veterans make more informed choices. The website allows Veterans access to the most transparent and easy to understand wait

time and quality of care measures across the health care industry.

At Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System, access to care for our Veterans remains a priority. In fiscal year 2016 we conducted over 18,600 more appointments than in 2015 and we've seen a significant increase this year. We have also made significant strides to improve care to our Veterans who experience chronic pain. Our goal is safe and effective pain management. In our efforts to provide effective alternatives to opioid pain medications, we have continued to offer physical therapy, occupational therapy, psychological pain medicine services, interventional pain management injections and alternative medication treatment. Finding effective alternatives to addicting and often debilitating pain-management treatments will continue to be a priority for us.

We are still searching for quality employees to work at the new Veterans medical center in New Orleans. We have many other career opportunities and staff available to assist interested professionals. Our recruitment center is open from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., Monday through Friday at 2400 Canal Street. Human Resource employees can be reached there by calling (504) 507-7627.

Throughout all of this, we continue to move services over to the new Veterans medical center. We began seeing our first mental health inpatients July 14 and our optical shop opened August 21.

We are excited about the future of VA and our health care system. Should you have any questions, please contact me directly by email at [Fernando.Rivera@va.gov](mailto:Fernando.Rivera@va.gov), on my office phone at (504) 507-7687 or my cell phone at (202) 834-7893.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Fernando Rivera'.

# Bonne Santé

Summer 2017  
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## Submissions

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## On the Cover:

*Even with temperatures in the 90s, more than 75 people came out to this year's Salute to the Flag, where 107-year-old WWII Veteran Lawrence Brooks raised the American, POW and Louisiana flags. (Photo by Anne Marino)*

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# New Veterans Medical Center UPDATE

*By Jeff Nowakowski*

On July 14, three patients were admitted for the first time into the mental health unit on the fifth floor of the new Veterans medical center. Two more patients were admitted by the end of the month.

The 20-bed unit, housed in building D of the medical center campus, provides pharmacologic and psychosocial interventions to assist patients in the management of their illness and increasing life skills so Veteran patients can return to normal life activities.

“Our unit has received such broad support now that several more critical services have been activated within the past month,” said Director of Inpatient Mental Health, Dr.

Shamalon Johnson. “This unit will be great for our Veteran patients because this service is centralized and we now have all of the resources we need in one location.”

The mental health unit is a short term (14 days or less) unit that provides acute psychiatric services. The unit contains 14 private rooms and three semi-private rooms, which can be expanded to double occupancy if needed. A kitchen, located just below on the fourth floor, will supply meals to patients in the unit as well as the large dining room. It is also the only smoke-free unit in VA medical facilities.

“Our clinicians will work closely with the patients and their families in the assessment of psychiatric needs, development of treatment plans, and implementation of care,” said Johnson.

“And we will coordinate the discharge process to return patients to the appropriate level of care in the community,” he added.

The mental health unit was planned as an open unit with larger rooms and patient-safe bathrooms, all designed to be more aesthetically pleasing than mental health units constructed back in the 1970’s.

A treatment mall located off the unit offers group psychotherapy and psychoeducational interventions: all recovery-based programs that encourage social interaction for patients.

“Our patients feel safe and are comfortable in this environment,” said Mental Health Unit Nurse Manager Nicele Shine. “And that’s because our unit staff are patient, adaptable, and never lose sight of taking care of Veterans. We are all getting used to our new team approach for our patients and very soon we will all settle into a routine.”

The unit plans to increase its admissions capacity to ten patients by September and then expand to capacity of 20 patients by late October or mid-November.



*Nurses in the mental health inpatient unit simulate what they would do in the event of a patient fall.  
(Photo by Chris W. Cox)*

## Self-care tip: Using technology to help you **relax**



*By Dr. Madeline Uddo,  
PTSD clinical team  
program manager*

While technology may be associated with negative impacts on health and well-being, it can also enrich our lives.

For example, emerging technology may be used to make self-care easier. In particular, meditation has received widespread praise for its ability to decrease stress, improve mood and to increase physical and emotional well-being in general. Recent research suggests that even a couple of minutes a day of quieting the mind can be beneficial. There are a growing number of electronic resources that can assist in providing that important, but often elusive, downtime.



*We are changing the world  
with technology*

*~Bill Gates*

There are several popular free and user-friendly apps for meditation that can provide support and instruction for meditation novices, pros, and anyone in between. There are also some that provide instruction and structure for using conscious breathing for stress reduction. For those who don't feel that that type of meditation is a good fit for them, there are some websites that provide a chance to quiet the mind in other ways. One site, for example, encourages you to sit back and relax for 2 minutes while listening to the peaceful sound of waves and another provides the

calming sound of rain to settle the mind.

For those who prefer something a little more active, there's interactive generative art websites that encourages stress relief by engaging in freehand drawing to create interesting woven symmetrical patterns on a black screen. Some encourage relaxation by allowing you to create your own simple tune by clicking on squares that produce tones that play in a loop.

Experimenting with new approaches may help you discover new ways to tap into the benefits of giving your mind a rest.

# Two local Veterans in National Wheelchair Games

*Story and photos by  
Jamie Dannen*

Every summer, an American city is descended upon by a fleet of rolling military Veterans bent on total domination. Nothing less than their personal best will do, and the week-long action is definitely not for sissies. It's called the National Veterans Wheelchair Games—and this year's theme is: Life Without Limits.

The 37th Annual National Veterans Wheelchair Games is a rehabilitation and wheelchair sports program that empowers Veterans with spinal cord injuries, multiple sclerosis, amputations, and other neurological injuries to live more active and healthy lives through wheelchair sports and recreation. Since 1985, the games have been co-presented by the VA and the Paralyzed Veterans of America, and any Veteran with injuries that uses a wheelchair for sport and is eligible for VA care can participate.

This year's games took place in Cincinnati, Ohio from July 17-22 and more than 500 Veterans



*Julius Lee*

participated, along with hundreds of volunteers. Veterans participated in 19 major sports events. NVWG live streamed all of the games on the schedule from Tuesday through championship Saturday.

This NVWG was especially significant to us here at Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care Systems because it marks the first time since Hurricane Katrina that any SLVHCS Veteran has competed. SLVHCS was proud to be represented by Army Veteran Jerone Dabon and Air Force Veteran Julius



*Jerone Dabon*

Lee as part of the Bayou Gulf States PVA team.

Dabon competed as a novice in the javelin throw, bocchia, and air rifle shooting, and won first place in his favorite new sport, ramp bowling.

“It was exciting, I was able to learn to do different things in the wheelchair,” said Dabon. “I had never done ramp bowling before. I never thought I’d come home with a gold medal!”

Dabon credits fellow Veteran Julius Lee as the reason he went to this year's games. “He asked me to

go—otherwise I wouldn't have known," he added. "I'm going to next year's—I've got medal fever now!"

Lee competed as a senior in boccia ball, and won second place in both manual bowling and softball, took third place in the javelin throw, and his team won first place in basketball.

"It felt great to compete again," Lee said. "The last time, in 2005 I took part in the games, the week after we got home, (Hurricane) Katrina happened. Now, I got to go again to represent our new facility, and I won these medals. I'm in the same wheelchair I used last time, only this time, this chair won gold."

Of the games, Lee said, "if you can make it there, go! It's the experience of a lifetime. I guarantee if anyone went, they'd be astonished."

Accompanying Lee and Dabon were SLVHCS Physical Therapists Adam Casborn, a Navy Veteran, and Clebert Leblanc, an Army Veteran. They were at the games to make sure Lee and Dabon had everything they needed to compete successfully.

"The games were inspiring, fun, and very



*Air Force Veteran Julius Lee earned a gold medal with his team in wheelchair basketball at the 37th Annual National Veterans Wheelchair Games in Cincinnati in July. (Photo by Clebert Leblanc)*

entertaining to watch," said Leblanc. "The participants were giving it their all, and I think that the Vets who had never been there before left feeling motivated to improve. Adaptive sports are an essential element to give many Veterans the motivation to keep working hard each and every day. I am looking forward to my next opportunity to volunteer or attend another event like this."

"It was wonderful and fulfilling to see the work I do every day come to life with Veterans excelling in what they enjoy," said Casborn. "Being able to see the community of Veterans from all over the world,



*Army Veteran Jerone Dabon medaled in ramp bowling at the 37th Annual National Veterans Wheelchair Games in Cincinnati in July and competed for the first time in the javelin, boccia and air rifle shooting. (Photo by Clebert Leblanc)*

participating together in the games left me with a sense of community and passion to continue to do better and more for the Veterans we serve. The no-quit, no-surrender attitude that our Veterans display on duty, in life and at the games—let's just say it was humbling and empowering at the same time. It was an honor to represent SLVHCS."

Next year, we can expect more SLVHCS Veterans to follow the lead of Dabon and Lee as the 38th Annual NVWG will take place a little closer to home in Orlando, Florida. The theme for 2018 is "Conquer the Challenge," and you can be sure our Veterans will do just that.



# *SLVHCS celebrated July 4th with Salute to the Flag*

*By Amanda Jones and Jeff Nowakowski*

George Washington first raised the Continental Army flag in 1776, a red-and-white-striped flag with a British Union Jack where we now have the stars.

The Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System continues that tradition by honoring the American flag on Independence Day through its annual flag raising ceremony.

“It was a year ago today that we stood here and raised the flag for the first time at this new Veterans medical center,” said Medical Center Director Fernando O. Rivera. “Since opening in December, we’ve had more than 200,000 outpatient visits since then. We’ve come a long way in providing the best possible care to our Veterans in a medical center that is their own.”

Even with temperatures in the 90s, more than 75 people came out to this year’s *Salute to the Flag*, where 107-year-old WWII Veteran Lawrence Brooks raised the American, POW and Louisiana flags.

“This flag raising is a great time to be thankful for everything that we enjoy as Americans and to remember our Veterans,” said Vietnam Veteran and event volunteer Aaron Lewis. “We need to keep this foremost in our minds.”



*107-year-old WWII Veteran Lawrence Brooks poses with his family and friends after he raised the flags for the state of Louisiana, POW/MIA recognition and America’s colors during SLVHCS’ July 4 Salute to the Flag. (Photo by Anne Marino)*



*After witnessing the hoisting of the colors during SLVHCS’ July 4 Salute to the Flag ceremony at the New Orleans Veterans medical center, Veterans and their guests participated in a cookout with food, music and dancing. (Photo by Anne Marino)*

*Veterans and their guests participated in a family cook out with food, music and dancing. (Photo by Anne Marino)*

Navy Veteran Doug Thomas lead the group in the Pledge of Allegiance and SLVHCS employee Estella Cooper-Lee sang the national anthem.

Vietnam Veteran and Purple Heart recipient Stephen Lassere provided the benediction before lunch was served.

“Bless the people, the building and the staff who take care of our heroes, men and women in uniform, here and around the world,” said Lessare. “Keep and protect them from harm and let them enjoy this Independence Day.”

A traditional July 4 fare of hot dogs and chips were donated by Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 3337, soft drinks and water by the Benevolent and Protective Order of the Elks Lodge # 30 and cookies and cupcakes by VA Canteen Services.

“This ceremony is exactly as it should be,” said Marine Veteran Henry Smith, Jr. “It was very nice and straight to the point of honoring the flag and our Veterans.”

The event was a wonderful celebration of our country, the American flag, and those who protect our freedoms – the same people we serve each day in VA.



 U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

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Veterans and their families

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**Veterans Crisis Line**



••• Confidential chat at [VeteransCrisisLine.net](https://www.VeteransCrisisLine.net) or text to **838255** •••

# Veteran patients participate in *poetry in motion*

LANGuage movement workshop is first of its kind at PM&R

By Jamie Dannen

**“I study the body. The body has its own language.”**

With these words, award-winning choreographer and artistic director Jessica Lang began the day’s lesson.

The Jessica Lang Dance Company visited the Community Living Center in the new Veterans medical center, and along with the New Orleans Ballet Association, presented a special LANGuage Movement Workshop.

Almost two dozen Veterans came to participate in the free workshop coordinated by the Physical & Rehabilitative Medicine service.

Lang began the workshop by sharing with the group what dance means to her, how it has guided her life, and how she uses movement to create art.

Because dance is a visual medium, she invited the Veterans to participate and feel rather than just listen to an explanation.

She and the dancers divided the group into trios, with each dancer facing two Veterans in a triangle. The exercises began with stretches like head and neck rolls and arm stretches. Everyone’s favorite was the “jelly belly” stretch, a kind of seated twist that makes

everyone laugh because of the motion as well as the silly name.

Now that everyone was warmed up, Lang instructed the members of the triangles to act as each other’s mirrors. The Veterans were to watch and mimic their dancer’s movements without speaking— a sort of silent conversation between them. The room became alive with silent dancing.

Some Veterans were surprised at how the leader of the “dance” could change all at once, without any verbal communication at all.

One Veteran described it as, “the evolution of randomness into order.”

Lang said the group’s mirror exercise was like poetry that can’t be repeated.

“Words describe, they try to communicate, but movements allow us to feel,” she explained.

After the group exercise, Lang and her troupe performed for the Veterans.

“It was inspiring,” said dancer Milan Misko. “I like that we were in a close space together and we had the opportunity to practice with the Veterans. It was good having that non-verbal connection at the beginning. It made the performance more personal.”

After the exercise, the Veterans talked about how it felt and all agreed it was a powerful experience.

Army Veteran Edith McDonald said of the workshop, “I loved it. It was beautiful, a very trusting environment. I felt I could express myself without feeling silly.”



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*Award-winning choreographer and artistic director Jessica Lang led members of her dance company and the New Orleans Ballet Association through her special LANGuage Movement Workshop for Veterans. (Photo by Hillary Rustine)*

# Do I have the flu? What care should I get?

## A self-assessment flowchart

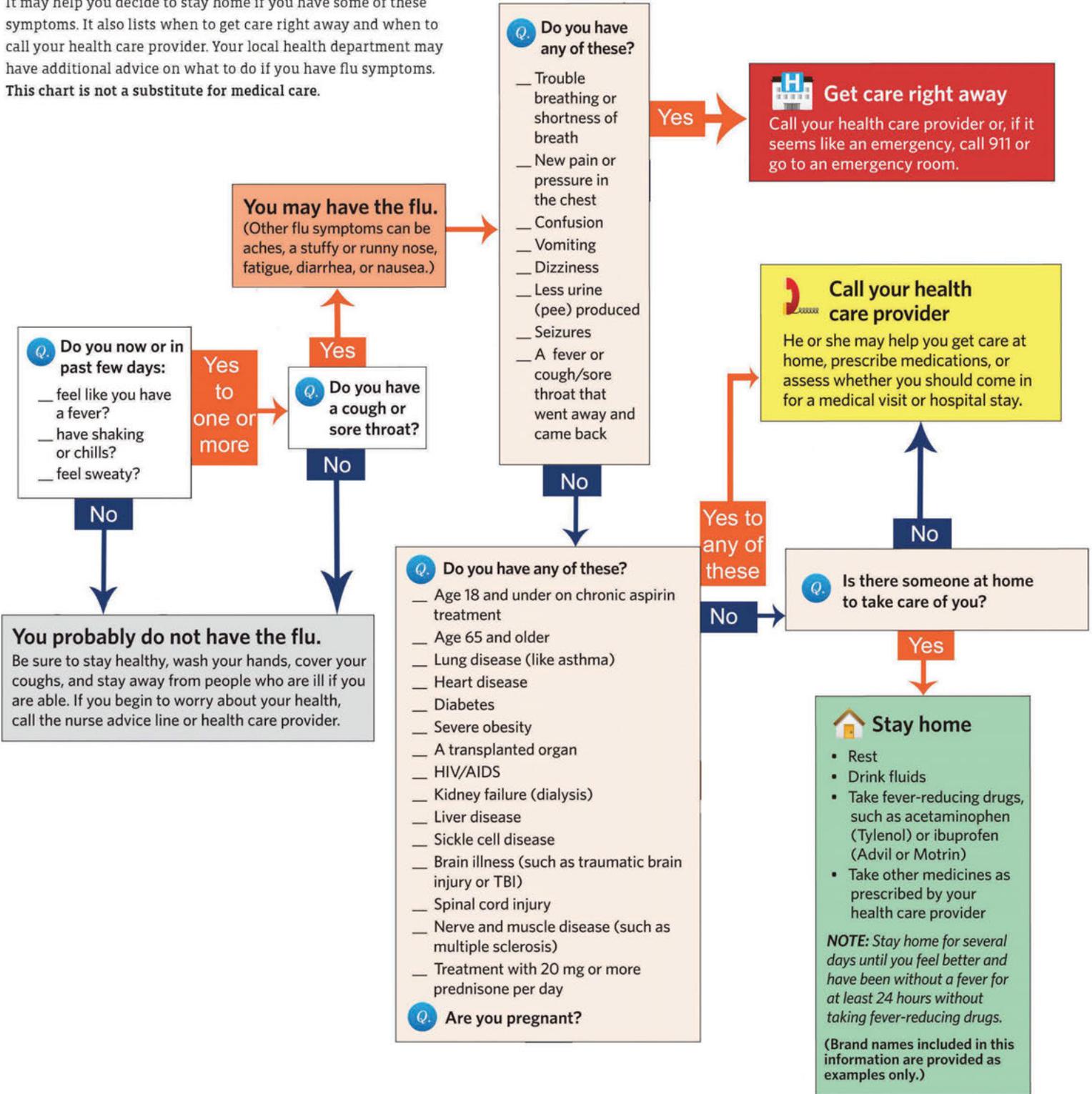
This self-assessment flowchart gives influenza (flu) symptoms. It may help you decide to stay home if you have some of these symptoms. It also lists when to get care right away and when to call your health care provider. Your local health department may have additional advice on what to do if you have flu symptoms. **This chart is not a substitute for medical care.**

Name .....

If you took your temperature, write it down: ..... degrees F

Date: ..... Time: ..... am / pm

Phone number of nurse advice line or health provider .....





*Claudia Davillier and Onyx spend quality time together during alternative mental health therapy sessions. (Photo by Teresa Jackson)*

## Alternative Therapy for Veterans



*By Karen M. Henson,  
Social Worker*

Claudia Davillier had high hopes when she agreed to participate in the new equine therapy program suggested by her VA team. She hoped to conquer her fear of horses,

to get some fresh country air and to spend some time with other Veterans.

What she didn't expect was to fall in love.

"Every week, I wait the whole week to see my Onyx," the Army Veteran said of the horse she had been paired with. "This is the best thing the VA has ever done for me."

Davillier is one of 14 Veterans who have participated in equine therapy sessions sponsored by SLVHCS' Mental Health Intensive Case Management team and the New Heights Therapy Center in Folsom over the past year.

Spearheaded by Peer Specialist Thomas Brown and Social Worker Karen Henson, equine therapy is part of a larger push by MHICM to get their Veterans involved in their community and socializing with others. The efforts are one aspect of the program's holistic, person-centered approach. Recent academic studies show that loneliness, or social isolation as the studies called it, is as much a risk factor for early death as obesity and smoking.

"We work hard to give our Veterans excellent mental health care and make sure

they get the medical care they need, so why wouldn't we address this important area, also, to improve his or her quality of life," said MHICM team leader Michelle Hebert.

What began as an experiment in 2015, has now come to be a standard part of MHICM's team-based treatment. The effort has grown to include horse therapy, cooking classes, fishing, movies, bowling, events at the Audubon Zoo and others. MHICM works with Veterans with severe mental illness, seeing them once or twice weekly in their homes.

"We're not just doing field trips," said Henson. "We

carefully choose events that can kick start the Veterans' participation in activities outside of VA involvement. We want the Veterans out there long-term on their own, not just for a day or two and not just with us."

And it is working.

"Two of the Veterans who began as participants in the equine therapy program are now going to the program by themselves two or three times a week to volunteer, often helping other Veterans. That's the kind of result we are looking for," said Erin Stanton, MHICM psychiatrist.

"You can really see the change in some of these Veterans," agreed MHICM

nurse Rachele Price. "They're more active, more engaged, in some cases less depressed and anxious."

The team has built working relationships with New Heights, which has donated the equivalent of \$24,000 in scholarships for Veteran riders, and the Audubon Institute, which has given MHICM free access to its education facilities for events and demonstrations. Staff from Tulane and Xavier Universities have participated in the activities and the team is looking to involve other community groups.

"One of the VA's national strategic goals is to build partnerships with groups in the community to get Veterans what they need," said Peer Specialist Thomas Brown. "We took that to heart at MHICM."

The Veterans are not much interested in strategic goals, but they know what works for them.

"This is the one place in the world where I feel normal," said Marine Veteran Paul Fernandez, who volunteers twice a week at New Heights. "Here I am needed, and I do good work and it's hard but it's fun, too. These people are now like friends, like family. It is the best."



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*Alternative therapies like horseback riding are giving Veterans tools to regain their confidence and socialize. (Photo by Teresa Jackson)*

# Three national Veterans service organization conventions bring visitors to the new Veterans medical center

By Jeff Nowakowski

In July and August, three major Veteran service organizations conducted their national conventions in New Orleans, and Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System was proud to support each of them with skilled hospital personnel to assist Veterans with obtaining all types of health care or a variety of any other needed services.

The 118th Veterans of Foreign Wars National Convention was held July 22-25 at the New Orleans Convention Center and reported an estimated attendance of 13,600 Veterans from all 50 states and territories. The 96th Disabled American Veterans National Convention was

held July 28 to August 1 at the Hilton Hotel with an estimated attendance of 5,300 Veterans.

The 18th Vietnam Veterans of America National Convention was held August 5-8, at the Marriott and Sheraton Hotels and Veterans from 32 states were in attendance.

In addition to supporting all three national conventions, SLVHCS hosted numerous leadership briefings.

Detailed tours of the new Veterans medical center were also provided to the national leadership of VFW, DAV and VVA.

SLVHCS supported all three conventions by providing personnel to man a first-aid station,

MyHealthVet, telehealth, volunteer services, social work services, suicide prevention and women's health booths during the conventions. SLVHCS staff assisted Veterans and family members with obtaining health care, prescription refills, health care registrations, prosthetics and a variety of other needed services – and admitted one Veteran to the inpatient unit.

Over all three national conventions, SLVHCS filled a total of 58 prescriptions for Veterans, eligibility worked with 160 Veterans, suicide prevention coordinators spoke with 67 Veterans, women's health met with 286 Veterans, the telehealth table served 765 Veterans,



*SLVHCS employees provided information, first aid, prescriptions and help with enrollment for VA health care during the VFW, DAV and VVA conventions in New Orleans during July and August. (Photo by Jamie Dannen)*

*DAV donated two vehicles to SLVHCS during their national convention. Pictured here are volunteer driver Glen Maze of Franklin, La., SLVHCS Acting Voluntary Service Chief James Tardie, volunteer driver Robert Zambrano of New Orleans, and SLVHCS Medical Center Director Fernando O. Rivera. (Photo by Anne Marino)*



MyHealtheVet served 453 Veterans, social work service met with 370 people, and voluntary service met with 394 attendees.

SLVHCS also conducted tours of the new Veterans medical center for several Veterans Health Administration senior executives who were in New Orleans to speak or present in conjunction with these national special events.

Veterans Affairs Secretary Dr. David Shulkin and Acting Under Secretary for Health Dr. Poonam Alaigh were briefed on the progress of the new Veterans medical center in conjunction with their presentations before the VFW convention.

Secretary Shulkin and Acting Under Secretary Alaigh were complimentary of the progress made at the new Veterans medical center since the ribbon cutting held in November 2016 that Dr. Shulkin attended.

Following Secretary Shulkin's briefing with SLVHCS' leadership team, Dr. Alaigh hosted an employee

*Veteran Mike Verville speaks with James Tardie and Grace Landry at one of SLVHCS information tables during the national VFW convention July 24. (Photo by Amanda Jones)*



focus group with front line staff. Immediately following the completion of the focus group, Dr. Alaigh was given a tour of the facility. In early August, SLVHCS hosted Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs Scott Blackburn with a leadership briefing and a tour of the new medical center.

Blackburn indicated that SLVHCS had the potential to be recognized as a design model for any future medical centers being built. Subsequently, this would include SLVHCS being potentially featured

as a branding tool for VA, featuring a world class facility to Veterans and why they should use VA for services.

Throughout all three conferences, SLVHCS stayed active on its social media pages. On Facebook, SLVHCS posted a total of 17 posts that reached 19,117 people, received 277 likes and received 42 new followers. On Twitter, SLVHCS made a total of 23 tweets and retweets and the Veterans we served earned 33,650 impressions and 18 new followers.

# SLVHCS receives Louisiana's first ESGR Extraordinary Employer Support Award

*By Amanda Jones*

For supporting not only those who serve Veterans, but those who continue to serve our country through the National Guard and Reserve, Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve presented the Extraordinary Employer Support Award to Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System, making it the first time this award has been given in Louisiana.

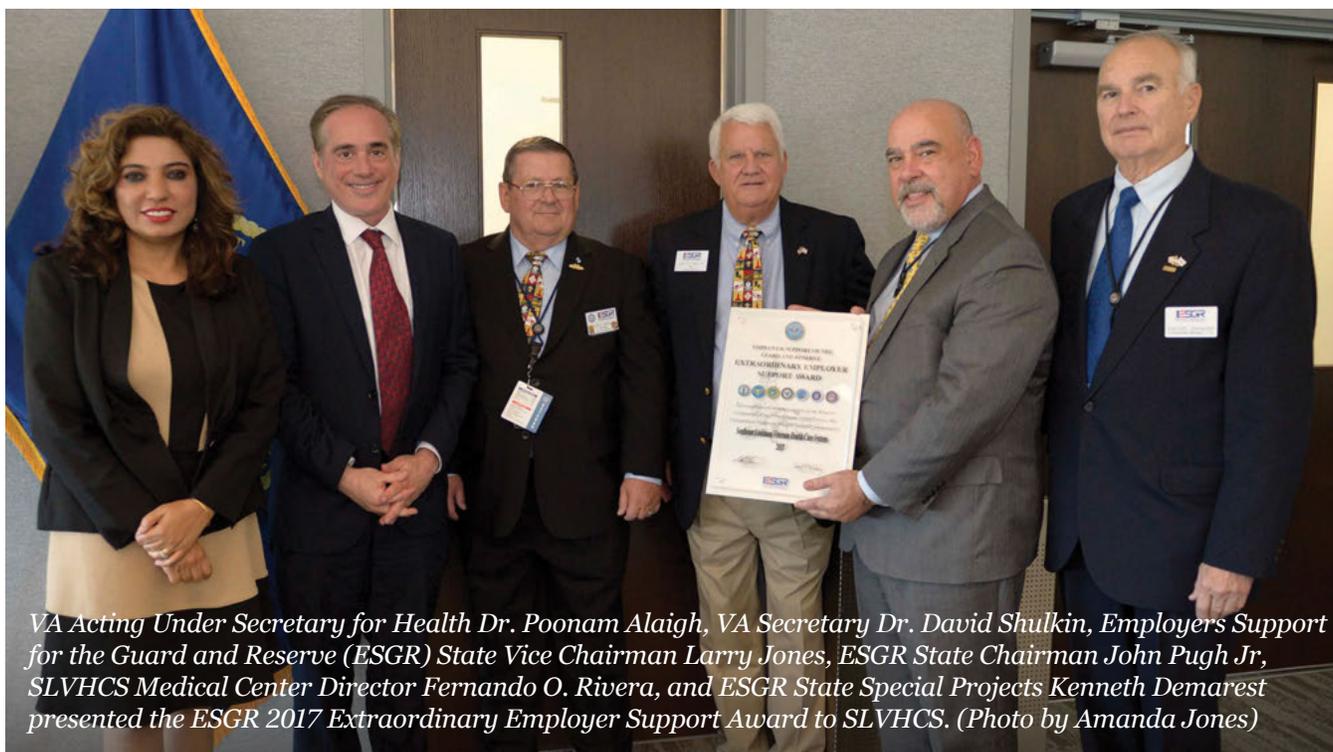
This award is the second highest award that Department of Defense presents to an employer, and this is one of only 15 given annually in the

United States. ESGR is the DOD program office whose members educate and support employers of military service members nationwide and recognize them for their encouragement and understanding of those who answer the nation's call to duty.

"SLVHCS' long history of support to Veterans and Guard and Reserve personnel earned them this award. This is the first time any employer in the state of Louisiana has received it," said ESGR Louisiana State Chairman John Pugh. "Employees of SLVHCS

who are National Guard and Reserve service members have nominated SLVHCS many times to recognize the support they receive to be able to perform their military duties. And now, Veterans have a brand new medical center in New Orleans to take care of their medical needs."

"We are so honored to accept this award," said Medical Center Director Fernando O. Rivera. "Our Guard and Reserve staff are our future Veterans, and it's important that we support them because they will be using their new Veterans medical center for years to come."



*VA Acting Under Secretary for Health Dr. Poonam Alaigh, VA Secretary Dr. David Shulkin, Employers Support for the Guard and Reserve (ESGR) State Vice Chairman Larry Jones, ESGR State Chairman John Pugh Jr., SLVHCS Medical Center Director Fernando O. Rivera, and ESGR State Special Projects Kenneth Demarest presented the ESGR 2017 Extraordinary Employer Support Award to SLVHCS. (Photo by Amanda Jones)*