



Veterans Health Administration
Southeast Louisiana Veterans
Health Care System

Press Release

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VA supports staff and Veterans impacted by Louisiana floods

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“The safety of our patients and our team is a priority.”

On a Sunday afternoon August 14, 2016, it was a clear path forward from SLVHCS Director Fernando O. Rivera for the nearly 30 team members on the conference call.

For the last 24 hours, rain had been steadily falling and rivers were overflowing their banks, forcing roads and interstates to close. Homes were flooding and emergency shelters were being set up in the local communities.

“I can’t make it to the clinic,” said Hammond Clinic Manager Gina Hontiveros. “Every path there is flooded, but I know the clinic is fine.” The clinic secretary lives nearby and was able to check it out.

The Baton Rouge Clinic story was similar – safe but inaccessible.

“For the safety of all, I think it’s best if we close both clinics tomorrow,” said Rivera.

But the next morning, a few roads had cleared and several team members showed up for work anyway, spending the majority of their day either calling to check on patients, or seeing walk-ins and refilling medications lost in the flood.

“Despite their losses, the majority of the staff presented to the clinic to provide care to Veterans,” said Stephanie Slaughter, nurse manager at the Baton Rouge clinic. “On August 15, 44 employees reported for their tour of duty.”

“Because of our hard working staff who want to be here to care for our Veterans, we have determined that both of the Baton Rouge and Hammond clinics will be able to open tomorrow for any patient who needs to be seen,” Rivera said in a message to employees.

It was just a one day closure for the clinics. And throughout this time, our hospital command center had been fully operational and Mental Health staff and social workers had been visiting shelters to assess the needs of any Veterans temporarily residing in them.

“They kept bringing in more and more busses with people until they were filled,” said Dr. April Foreman, SLVHCS psychologist, who went to work in shelters right away.

Jennifer Hannon, social worker, was at another shelter helping to organize things.

“I got word from Jennifer on Facebook that she showed up and it was way less organized than it is today,” said Foreman of another shelter. “She organized the medical triage.”

Together, they called in some additional resources, assessed the needs at the shelter, and met there to help those in need.

“I had to leave my house in a quick second,” said Veteran Louis Gray, who made it to a local shelter. “I didn’t have time to get my meds – the water was rising. But the VA, Dr. Howard, a volunteer [at the shelter], saw me earlier and sent me over there to get my prescriptions lined up. They’re going to deliver them to me tomorrow.”

“I’ve been here since 2008,” said Baton Rouge clinic RN Mary Spring. “We’ve done outreach for the homeless and helped during hurricanes at the VA, but this is the first time we’ve done anything like this.”

Within SLVHCS, teams of police officers, Pharmacy and Nursing staff traveled to the clinics each day to support the teams there, as at least 70 of our staff were impacted by the floods in some way, 37 of which had flooded. Eleven of our team members were called up for duty with the Louisiana National Guard as well.

“The staff has been very supportive of one another through prayers, hugs, and assistance with cleaning and gutting of homes,” said Stephanie Slaughter, clinic nurse manager. “The Baton Rouge Community-Based Outpatient Clinic stands unified as a whole and have truly exemplified an ‘I CARE’ approach when caring for SLVHCS Veterans and fellow employees.”

Staff actively reached out to reschedule more than 230 appointments. With continued rain and flooding, cancelled school and road closures, some patients were understandably cancelling appointments as well. Our Health Administrative Services team worked closely with the Choice Network, who assessed the status of all Veterans Choice appointments in the impacted areas and rescheduled as needed to ensure our Veterans were cared for. We’ve reached out to our extended care patients, such as Home Based Primary Care and Hospital at Home, to assess their situations and ensure their health care needs are being met. We’ve checked in with nursing homes that house Veterans in the impacted areas and found that they are fully operational with no flooding.

“I’m proud to say that, with few exceptions, all of our patients have been contacted. With such conditions as widespread flooding, street and school closures and intermittent cellular availability, this is no small feat. We have a strong and resilient team who is supportive of each other and committed to our mission of serving Veterans,” said Rivera.

“And as we move forward, we have to understand that people are going through a very difficult time and we have to connect with our patients,” Rivera continued. “I think we did a fantastic job and we have to always look at what else we can do to help our Veterans get the care they need.”

The flooding across Louisiana is being called the largest natural disaster since Hurricane Sandy, with an estimated 40,000 homes damaged due to flooding. By August 19, there were 20 emergency declarations, more than 2,000 animals evacuated, more than 30,000 people rescued and 110,000 people signed up for disaster assistance with FEMA. Forty shelters opened across 11 parishes and at the height of the flooding, more than 11,000 people were sheltered in them.

After more than a week, Louisiana is still recovering from this natural disaster that deposited more than 7.1 trillion gallons of water throughout the region, according to the National Weather Service. SLVHCS continues to provide the best health care to Veterans.

“We’re just over a week past the start of this, but our area is not out of the woods yet,” said Robert Beverly, SLVHCS emergency manger. “The use of our command center is winding down because our clinics are fully operational, but our patients still need assistance and we’re going to continue to be available for them.”

“We are still working this every day. And throughout everything, we never took our eye off of our patients,” said Rivera.

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