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VA health care is the focus at first annual Louisiana Veterans Health Care Symposium

NEW ORLEANS - Close to 50 Louisiana Veteran service organization state commanders, Louisiana Department of Veterans Affairs and congressional staff came together on April 20 to discuss the state of health care for Louisiana Veterans. Hosted by Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System, this first annual Louisiana Veterans Health Care Symposium included Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) 16 Director Skye McDougall and VA medical center directors from New Orleans, Shreveport and Alexandria, Louisiana.

“This symposium brought together VA leaders and key Louisiana stakeholders to help build and foster relationships with the ultimate goal of delivering the best health care and service to our Veterans in the state of Louisiana,” said Fernando O. Rivera, Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System director.

Louisiana Veterans of Foreign Wars State Surgeon Bryan Batulis with Fernando Rivera and the New Orleans team, initiated the idea, planned the event, and worked to bring Louisiana’s key Veteran and VA leaders, local congressional delegation legislative representatives, and other veteran support organizations together for a question and answer session on the direction of health care for our state Veterans.

“All of us here in this room have pride in Louisiana’s VA system,” said Palmintier. “We had an excellent turnout today in an effort to create better communication amongst the group and to also have more education about the VA medical care for Veterans in Louisiana.”

The agenda for the symposium consisted of briefings by each of the three Louisiana VA medical center directors as well as McDougall. Louisiana Veteran service organization commanders and the four VA directors participated in an hour and a half question and answer session, followed by lunch and a tour of the new Veterans medical center currently under construction in Mid-City New Orleans. State Commanders prepared questions and Batulis and Dr. Skip Palmintier, co-chair and medical advisor for the Veterans Action Coalition of Southwest Louisiana, moderated the question and answer portion of the event.

The VSO commanders asked questions about the Choice program, mental health and traumatic brain injury care services, veteran costs for non-VA emergency room visits, as well as long distance travel for Veterans with mobility difficulties. Lafayette and Lake Charles VA clinic openings and more were discussed.

“Fairly new in my role as director at the Alexandria VA Health Care System, I found this symposium beneficial to get to know my Louisiana partners face-to-face,” said Peter Dancy, Alexandria VA Health

Care Center director. "I hope we can continue events like this in the future." Dancy highlighted the proposed opening of the new Lafayette Veterans outpatient clinic this winter and the Lake Charles Veterans outpatient clinic by spring 2017.

Toby T. Mathew, director, Overton Brooks VA Medical Center in Shreveport, stressed the dedication and efforts of his 1,500 employees and stated they are working hard to build trust with their Veterans and change the culture of the organization. "Our goal is to put Veterans first in everything we do," said Mathew. He also highlighted the opening of a new primary care expansion in Shreveport on July 7. SLVHCS Director Fernando Rivera mentioned to the group that access, activation and workforce strengthening are their three main priorities. "We have seen a seven percent growth in our workload, which is twice the national average," said Rivera. He went on to tell the group that one of the top five comments made to their patient advocates from Veterans has to do with compliments of the SLVHCS. "That makes me very proud."

The Louisiana Veterans Health Care Symposium is exactly the type of partnership and community involvement VA Secretary Bob McDonald wants to focus on through his plan and framework for modernizing the VA - called MyVA.

Secretary McDonald outlined the five MyVA strategies in a recent news release about VA's transformation. "We should be focused on customer-service excellence: improve the Veteran experience, improve the employee experience, improve internal support services, establish a culture of continuous improvement, and expand strategic partnerships."

"As a group of Veterans, we had a lot of questions for these directors," said Batulis. "This was a great opportunity for us to get those questions answered and learn about all of the programs and initiatives the VA medical centers in Louisiana are doing."

Rivera agreed. "Connecting with the VSO state commanders and local congressional representatives in a forum like this ultimately helps Veterans receive the excellent health care they have earned and deserve," he said. "Having the knowledge gained here today enables VSO leaders to give Veterans in their organization accurate and up-to-date information."

In addition to information about programs and services, each of the medical center directors provided their personal contact information to attendees. "We take our mission of serving Veterans seriously," said Rivera. "They need to know that we are here 24/7 to help resolve any Veterans' health care issues."

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