

VOICES OF VISN 6

— Excellent Care — Earned by Veterans — Delivered Here —

Hero in our Midst



Inside This Issue

- 2 Alexander Succeeds Departing Hampton Director Collins
- 3 NIH Selects Richmond VA Doctor To Review Potential Medical Breakthroughs
- 4 Veterans Affairs Deputy Secretary Pam Powers Meets with Duke University
- 5 Hero in our Midst
- 6 Persistence, Patience and Team Spirit
- 8 Durham VA Introduces the Balance Initiative
- 9 Virtual Women MilVets Summit October 15
- 11 Caring For Tomato Plant Help Veteran Through the Pandemic

In the fall of 1944, 19-year-old Private Earl Levinson's latest mission was to take the high ground on an opposing ridge from German forces. But this time, when he reached the designated location, his unit had continued to advance forward. He found himself separated from them. He set out to find his unit with half a dozen other U.S. soldiers, but found enemy forces instead. They began taking on fire from German soldiers.

Private Levinson was rendering first aid to a fellow troop who had been shot when he looked up to discover he had been surrounded by the enemy, with weapons pointed at him. Now prisoners, he and his cohorts were marched south, to Stalag 7 POW camp in Moosburg, Germany.

Mr. Levinson's keen memory revealed the conditions in the camp: "thousands" of POWs in harsh conditions, with inadequate food and extreme cold in the winter. "We were sometimes sent out on work details and we gathered sticks and anything we could to make a little bundle to burn to keep warm back in our barracks. When we were transported out of the camp to work in the village, we would get better food, so we wanted to be on a detail." Mr. Levinson is Jewish, further segregating him within the POW camp. Thankfully, he reports he was not physically abused.

TOP PHOTO: Private Earl Levinson during the years of his military service in World War II.

STORY CONTINUED ON PAGE 5

Message from the Network Director



Fall is here and October is full of pumpkin spice-scented and flavored delights, sweater weather and Halloween preparations. October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month. On September 22nd the Acting VA Deputy Secretary Pamela Powers visited Durham and met with leaders from Duke University about partnering to create a national Women's Oncology Care system of Excellence. The occasion was exciting for so many reasons. The work Dr. Micheal Kelly is doing as Durham VA's Chief of Hematology and Oncology, and as Director of VA's Precision Oncology Program is cutting edge AND the foundation of the new partnership between Durham VAHCS and Duke University Medical Center's Duke Cancer Institute. Ms. Powers said the program will help move VA's interest to advance development of a national breast cancer program exponentially. It should

pair nicely with VA's Breast Cancer Registry. As a breast cancer survivor, I am so pleased that VA has adopted this mission for the thousands of women Veterans and millions of affected civilians who will benefit from what it will accomplish. Currently, 76 percent of women Veterans age 40-49 receive mammograms through VA. VA recognizes the importance of expanding access to onsite mammograms, ensuring Veterans receive age-appropriate breast cancer screenings. As I said, October is about women, and so another aspect of our observances this month lies in the effort to prevent intimate partner violence. October is Domestic Violence (DV) Awareness Month. VA cares about Veterans affected by DV and intimate partner violence (IPV). One third of women Veterans experience IPV in their lifetime, compared with less than a quarter of civilian women. The movement uses

two colored ribbons to signify the issue.

Purple ribbons signify those who pledge to end domestic violence and white ribbons pronounce the men who pledge to help end intimate partner violence. VA uses the Intimate Partner Violence Assistance Program to ensure that Veterans, their partners and VA employees directly impacted by IPV are supported by a network of comprehensive services, and they are treated with respect. I urge you to find out more about what we're doing and how you can help. Thank you for your interest in our nation's Veterans. Have a great month, and remember to mask up and keep your distance!

— **DeAnne M. Seekins**
VISN 6 Network Director

Alexander Succeeds Departing Hampton Director Collins

ASHEVILLE, N.C. — Hampton VA Medical Director Dave Collins stepped down from his role as director on Sept. 25. Even though this news saddens staff and Veterans in Hampton and throughout the VISN, Network Director Seekins commended him for knowing when it was time to turn his attention to his family and personal life. Mr. Collins has dedicated his life's work to serving our great country, both for the U.S. Navy and VA for 38 years. Changing course midstream is never easy. He and his team have done amazing work this past year, as indicated by Seekins when she said to him, "You can depart VA knowing you made a difference."

She added that VA is a team, "and our mission will continue, even stronger, as Mr. Collins has worked hard to develop his leadership team. I have asked the Chief of Staff, Dr. Shawn Alexander, to act as the

interim director while I begin the search for a new Medical Center Director. I am very confident that Hampton will continue to be in good hands."

Dr. Alexander began his VA career as a Hospitalist at Hampton VAMC in 2009, and was later selected as the Assistant Chief of Medicine Service. He was appointed Chief of Staff effective May 24, 2020. Dr. Alexander is a graduate of Wake Forest University, then completed graduate studies in Clinical Microbiology at Duke University and earned his Doctor of Medicine from East Carolina University, Brody School of Medicine. Dr. Alexander has worked diligently to provide excellent care to the Veteran population. He embraces all the Process Improvement, Medical Informatics and Patient Safety as VA pillars upon which to build a solid foundation for an ever-changing healthcare field.



TOP PHOTO: Hampton VA Medical Director Dave Collins stepped down from the position in September. Dr. Shawn Alexander will serve as interim director.

HRO News: HeRO Awards Medical Breakthroughs



Sept. 18, Network Director Seekins participated in the 2020 National HeRO Award Ceremony, hosted virtually by Executive in Charge Dr. Richard Stone, and attended by VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. Ms. Seekins presented two of the 11 scheduled awards to Dr. Kenneth Goldberg and Dr. Chad Kessler, National Director for Emergency Medicine and HSS.

The HeRO Recognition Program celebrates VHA staff members for their contributions to VHA's Journey to High Reliability. The National HeRO Award is the highest level of High Reliability Organization (HRO) recognition available within VHA and is reserved to honor employees who advance VHA's Journey to High Reliability through demonstration of VHA's HRO Principles in action. Recognition is made in five categories: Clinical or Non-Clinical Individual From a VISN or Facility; Clinical or Non-clinical Team From a VISN or Facility; and Individual or Team From VHACO.

Qualifying as a Clinical Individual from a Facility, Dr. Kenneth Goldberg reacted to early challenges of COVID-19 screening. The process created a backup when employees arrived for work each morning. Dr. Goldberg worked to streamline the process with a local app developer — who also happened to be his son. Their app was submitted and approved by the VHA National Innovation group. Deferring to the expertise of his son, Dr. Goldberg exhibited sensitivity to operations and dedication to Veterans and frontline staff in his efforts to streamline the process.

As COVID-19 surged in New York, New Orleans and Detroit, Dr. Chad Kessler and Mr. Josh Geiger identified a need to quickly communicate lessons learned through firsthand field experience. As a VHA CO team, they quickly

PHOTO ABOVE: Network Director Seekins presents a National HeRO Award to Dr. Chad Kessler and Mr. Josh Geiger for their effective work together in managing the COVID-19 crisis.

PHOTO BELOW: Dr. Kenneth Goldberg worked with his son to develop an app that helped to streamline the COVID-19 screening process for employees upon arrival each morning.



answered the need with their "COVID in 20" biweekly virtual roundtable. Many VISN 6 staff have heard of the calls and attend the sessions. Kessler and Geiger exhibited Deference to Expertise by bringing in frontline staff members who shared the processes they quickly adapted during the surge. This commitment to resilience and employee health during a stressful time is likely one of the things that keeps program attendance at more than 600 attendees per session. The sessions enable quick information sharing on the front lines.

"I've always known we have a remarkable team at Durham, and I'm proud others recognize it as well," Ms. Seekins stated. "COVID-19 has challenged the entire health care community, and even during these unpredictable times, these recipients have dedicated themselves to continuous improvement to ensure VHA delivers the best care possible. Veterans have a champion on their side when it comes to both Dr. Kessler and Dr. Goldberg."

NIH Selects Richmond VA Doctor To Review Potential Medical Breakthroughs

By Megan Kon

Breakthroughs in the scientific community rarely happen overnight. It takes rigorous, yet necessary, peer reviews by researchers in the field to vet new proposals. These reviews go hand-in-hand with scientific and medical breakthroughs. After thousands of pages, multiple peer reviews and many trials, a theory could become a new industry standard that may improve humanity.

The National Institutes for Health (NIH) houses many Institutes including the [Center for Scientific Review](#). Within this Institute, a section named the [Clinical and Integrative Cardiovascular Sciences](#) (CICS) reviews patient-oriented research involving the cardiovascular system and related organ systems.

Dr. Jose Huizar, from Richmond's Central Virginia VA Health Care System (CVHCS), received a six-year CICS appointment to perform reviews of different research proposals in search of an NIH grant. These peer-review groups make recommendations to the NIH for funding.

When asked what drives him, Huizar responded, "Clinicians impact one patient at a time; professors impact hundreds through their students and trainees; researchers impact humanity."

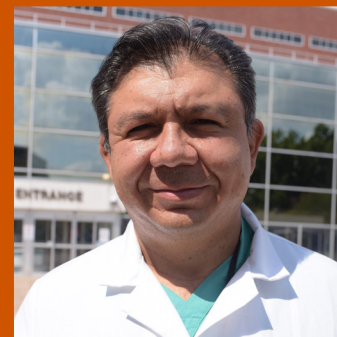
Huizar has served as the Director of the Arrhythmia and Device Clinic at CVHCS since 2006. He is trained in cardiology and cardiac electrophysiology. After attending a medical school in Mexico on a full scholarship, Huizar immigrated to continue his education. He completed his internal medicine internship and residency at the MetroWest Medical Center affiliated with University of Massachusetts.

"A number of physicians at CVHCS serve as members on NIH study sections, advancing science outside of VA and serving as examples of the commitment VA has to medical research," said Dr. Michael Climo, Chief of Medicine for CVHCS. "This is well deserved."

Research interests for Huizar include ventricular and phrenic nerve stimulation in cardiac resynchronization therapy, atrial fibrillation, ventricular arrhythmias and consequences of premature ventricular contractions.

Huizar has been recognized for his contributions to science in the *Heart Rhythm Journal* and *the Journal of the American College of Cardiology*. He is board certified in cardiovascular diseases and clinical cardiac electrophysiology, and is a fellow at the American College of Cardiology, American Heart Association and the Heart Rhythm Society.

PHOTO RIGHT: Dr. Jose Huizar poses in front of the South Mall Entrance of the Central Virginia VA Health Care System (CVHCS). Huizar was appointed to the Clinical and Integrative Cardiovascular Sciences Study Section at the National Institutes for Health to review patient-oriented research involving the cardiovascular system and related regulatory organ systems.



Salisbury VA Health Care System Adds Research Study for Veterans With COVID-19

By Todd Goodman | SALISBURY VAHCS PUBLIC AFFAIRS

PTC299 TARGETS TWO COMPONENTS OF COVID-19

Medical facilities, researchers, and pharmaceutical industry companies across the world are working tirelessly to identify effective new treatments and vaccines to help understand, treat, and even potentially eliminate COVID-19. As a part of this effort, the Salisbury VA Medical Center has added a new research study to offer patients the research drug PTC299 vs. placebo in a clinical trial.

This therapy, also being tested in treating acute leukemias, targets two key issues of COVID-19: the virus replication and reduction of the inflammatory response. PTC299 has been evaluated for the treatment of oncological conditions in nine completed clinical studies, with more than 300 individuals treated, and is now considered a promising new

potential treatment for COVID-19. Newly authorized by the FDA for testing and evaluation as a COVID-19 treatment in June, the Salisbury VA Medical Center is one of the first facilities in the United States to be able to offer this option. This treatment for hospitalized patients is in pill form and will be administered over 14 days.

In addition to the newest treatment option, doctors at the medical center began using convalescent plasma therapy in the fight against COVID-19 in April. Led by the Mayo Clinic, Expanded Access to Convalescent Plasma for the Treatment of Patients with COVID-19 already has shown promising results. Preliminary unofficial results show that patients who received convalescent plasma had 7-day death rates that dropped from 15.4 percent to 6.6 percent. This difference persisted even out to 30 days, with the

patients receiving convalescent plasma having higher survival rates. As of July 30, 2020, VA has transfused 1,038 units of COVID-19 convalescent plasma. Salisbury VA has performed the transfusion on six patients since May, and it is one of 80 VA facilities participating in the Mayo Clinic research.

The Medical Center continues to collaborate with outside institutions to offer new options in the treatment against coronavirus. “With the growth of coronavirus cases throughout the State of North Carolina, these research drugs offer our Veterans a promising option over the current standard of care therapies” said Salisbury VA Director Joseph Vaughn about the Medical Center’s newly opened research study. “I’m proud to have Veterans at the forefront of this new treatment option.”

Department of Veterans Affairs Deputy Secretary Pam Powers Meets With Duke University to Develop Oncology Partnership

RALEIGH, N.C. — The Deputy Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs, Ms. Pamela “Pam” Powers, met with Duke University Vice President and Secretary of Duke University Health System Dr. Monte Brown and Durham VA Health Care System (DVAHCS) Executive Director Mr. Paul Crews on Tuesday, Sept. 22 in Durham, N.C., to discuss development of another joint venture between the two healthcare organizations — a national Women’s Oncology Care system.

Through VA’s current affiliation with the Duke University, Veterans receive care from many of the country’s leading cancer care minds as a result of dual employment between Duke University Medical Center’s Duke Cancer Institute (a National Cancer Institute designated, “Comprehensive Cancer Center”) and DVACHS.

The DVAHCS has always been on the forefront of ensuring world-class health care options for female Veterans. “We were one of

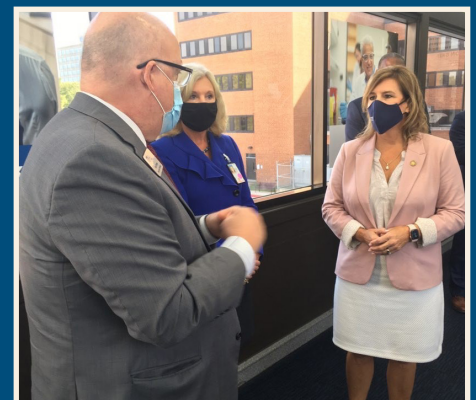
the VA’s first Comprehensive Women’s Health Care Clinics in the nation in 1994,” said Mr. Crews. “We are excited about this partnership and the possibility of adding to the robust health care options we are already providing to more than 8,000 female Veterans annually across 27 counties in North Carolina.”

According to Deputy Secretary Powers, “I am steadfast in our pledge to develop the highest quality, national breast cancer system, accessible to women regardless of ZIP code, through a combination of groundbreaking research and teleoncology innovations. A VA and Duke partnership will move us exponentially forward in that direction.”

Annually, almost 50,000 Veterans are diagnosed with cancer. The VA is committed to providing world-class cancer care. VA has partnerships with several leading oncology organizations, including Bristol Meyers Squibb Foundation, the Prostate Cancer Foundation, and Sanford Health. Partnering

with Duke University to develop a Women’s Oncology System of Excellence is an example of one more quality partnership to provide Veterans with best-in-class oncology care.

For more information, please contact Yves-Marie Daley, at yves-marie.daley@va.gov.



Deputy Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs Pam Powers, meets with Duke University Vice President and Secretary of Duke University Health System Dr. Monte Brown and Durham VA Health Care System (DVAHCS) Executive Director Mr. Paul Crews in Durham, N.C.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Hero in our Midst

U.S. Forces liberated approximately 76,000 Allied Forces Prisoners of War on April 29, 1945, on Mr. Levinson's 20th birthday. "It was the best birthday present I ever got!" It took him several weeks to get home to Norfolk, Va. after liberation. He's been a resident of Norfolk ever since.

He credits a cousin and fellow Army veteran for encouraging him to apply for VA benefits and healthcare after all these years. Hampton VA Medical Center Compensation and Pension (C&P) Medical Examiner and Nurse Practitioner Kerry Beasley was notified of Mr. Levinson's existing claim in May. That original claim for disability compensation, filed in 1946, was denied. It had been 74 years. In 1946 there were no presumptive conditions or formalized examination protocols for VA Compensation and Pension specific to Prisoners of War. Now there are 17 different presumptive conditions for POWs.

The timing of Mr. Levinson's case presented unique challenges, including the risk of

COVID-19 during an in-person appointment, as a C&P protocol dictates that for POWs, examinations must be performed face to face. His exam was completed with safety measures in place, and his service connection status awaits him.

"It's an honor to be able to meet and service a Prisoner of War," says Ms. Beasley. "I think about my father and how I would want someone to treat him if he had come home and needed help accessing his benefits."

A kinship of heart exists between them. Kerry Beasley is a retired U.S. Navy Nurse Corps Officer. Her father, Maj. Wayne Brown II, was declared missing in action (M.I.A.) after ejecting from an F-4 Phantom during the Vietnam War.

While the National POW/MIA Recognition Day was observed on Sept. 18, 2020, please remember those who served in captivity and those that have not returned home whenever you can.



Veteran and POW Earl Levinson is now receiving the benefits and treatment initially denied him after World War II.

LIKE FAMILY: Charles George VA Medical Center Gets Top Marks for Patient Experience

By Vance Janes | WNC VA HEALTH CARE SYSTEM PUBLIC AFFAIRS

When it comes to patient experience, Charles George VA Medical Center is on the shortlist of top performers nationwide.

So says the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, which released its star ratings July 31. Of the 3,478 hospitals rated by CMS, the medical center's five-star rating was among the best, along with only 265 other hospitals.

CMS, the federal administrator of the nation's major healthcare programs, assigned a patient experience star rating — ranging from one to five stars, with five being the best — to the hospitals based on the Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems scores collected from Jan. 1 through Dec. 31, 2019.

Hospitals are rated on performance such as how well doctors and nurses communicate with patients, how quickly staff respond to call buttons, how well they explain medications and the overall cleanliness of the facility.

Linda Nauman, Western North Carolina VA Health Care System Patient Experience Officer, said the hospital's accomplishment is an important one because the overall hospital quality star rating shows how well CGVAMC performed, on average, compared to other hospitals in the U.S.

"This is such a high honor to me, as this considers the sum of all interactions that influence our Veterans' perceptions of their healthcare journey here," Nauman said.

"To make it into this elite group of only 266 hospitals around the nation tells me we're meeting our mission to provide this consistent, exceptional experience."

Nauman said that not only is it a direct reflection of the entire staff's commitment to providing the best possible patient care for Veterans, it's also a reflection on the culture at CGVAMC.

"Here at Charles George, we not only address physical health, we're very focused on whole health, and the Veteran's emotional well-being," Nauman said. "I feel our caring staff here play a huge part in achieving this 5-star recognition."

"Staff truly have compassion for patients and treat them as a person," she added. "I see this every day. We love our Veterans and will do whatever we can for them — they're like family."

Editor's note: According to the CMS website, ratings are the result of survey responses across all types of medical conditions. The surveys are given between 48 hours and six weeks after discharge. To receive a rating, hospitals must have received at least 100 completed surveys over the course of a year.



Salisbury VA Health Care System Holds Food Drive for Local Organizations

By Amanda Reilly | SALISBURY VA HEALTH CARE SYSTEM PUBLIC AFFAIRS

During these challenging times, there are countless people in our communities facing financial challenges, including many of our Veterans. In addition to the numerous assistance programs the Salisbury VA Health Care System offers for those in need, the Salisbury VA Medical Center (VAMC) and Kernersville Health Care Center (HCC) held food drives, collecting non-perishable food and other requested items to donate to non-profit organizations in their local communities throughout the month of August 2020.

“Our partnership with the Salisbury VA spans decades of serving some of our most vulnerable citizens,” expressed Kyna Grubb, Executive Director for Rowan Helping Ministries.

“We are grateful for the personal efforts of VA employees to make sure that our neighbors have the food they need during this pandemic.”

For this food drive, the Salisbury VAMC’s donations to Rowan Helping Ministries Food Pantry amounted to approximately 300 lbs., while Kernersville HCC’s donations totaled 142 lbs. of food and other items that were donated to Kernersville Crisis Control Ministry. Both organizations were eager to accept these generous contributions from VA staff to distribute to those who may have been wondering where their next meal would come from. Some non-food items that were donated included soap, shampoo, cleaning wipes, reusable masks and helpful household items such as sandwich bags, aluminum foil, etc.

The Salisbury VA Health Care System looks forward to future collaborations such as these to ensure that our communities know we are here to assist in times of need.

PHOTO ABOVE: The Salisbury VA Medical Center employees donated approximately 300 lbs. of food to Rowan Helping Ministries Food Pantry. (Photo by Luke Thompson, Medical Media Photographer)

Persistence, Patience and Team Spirit

By Vance Janes | WNC VA HEALTH CARE SYSTEM PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICER

ASHEVILLE, N.C. — There’s nothing puzzling about the Puzzler Master’s Club at the Charles George VA Medical Center Community Living Center. Despite physical distancing, masks and other COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, it has proven to be an opportune situation for a group of folks with a precocious propensity for puzzling.

According to Kristie King, Charles George VA Medical Center Geriatrics and Extended Care chief nurse, the Veterans have taken to puzzling as a way to pass the time — and they do so with gusto.

The staff on the unit caught onto the hobby of one particular Veteran, and his pastime rapidly spread, developing into a competitive sport of sorts for a small group of Veterans here.

And these aren’t simple puzzles — no, sir. These puzzles are always more than 500 pieces. If you were to walk into the facility, you could see it for yourself.

“The living room in the CLC as well as a widely spaced series of tables in the CLC-2 dining room includes puzzles in a variety of stages of completion,” King said. “The ability to be so focused and to demonstrate persistence, patience and team spirit is uplifting in a rather challenging time period.”

The puzzling has even led to some new artwork on the wall at the CLC-2, as several of the very complex puzzles are now framed and on display.

As word of the Veterans’ new recreational activity got out, others outside the CLC got involved and were on the lookout for puzzles to help the CLC keep up with the demand.

“The wonderful Voluntary Services staff heard about this, and they started the search for the preferred type of jigsaw puzzle — including the number of pieces and brand,” King said. “They found some — and now we have puzzles everywhere!”

King said that apparently a lot of people sequestered at home have taken to puzzling, so the puzzles were hard to find, but VSO did it and more.

“The Volunteers also had caps made for the Puzzler Master’s Club, and those have been distributed,” she said.

At the end of the day, the Veterans have found something very satisfying and substantial to help with the confines created by COVID-19, and that’s something King said is very worthwhile.

“One Veteran told me that it is ‘mind soothing,’” she said. “And that’s something we all need.”



Competitive puzzling has become quite the craze at the Charles George VA Medical Center Community Living Center in Asheville, N.C. With all of the precautions being taken to protect Veterans, it provides a substantial and satisfying activity for Veterans. http://www.asheville.va.gov/features/Persistence_Patience_and_Team_Spirit.asp

Hampton Conducts Virtual Veteran Visits During COVID-19

By Ashley Montgomery | HAMPTON VA RECREATION THERAPY

Since COVID-19 adjustments began in March, Hampton VA Medical Center's Community Living Center (CLC) has been on lockdown to protect resident Veterans. Previously, CLC residents had many visitors throughout each day, from Volunteers to Family and Friends. Once the lockdown started, staff knew that residents were going to miss the regular social interaction. Recreation Therapists, including Andrew Hunter, CTRS, already used an iPad for groups, and it had video capability.

They downloaded the popular Zoom meeting app from the Internet, and started calling families to offer a video call, either by using Facetime or Zoom. They have been able to contact many Veterans' families since then. At the end of March, a colleague from another VA facility shared that The Fisher House was donating Facebook Portals and TVs on rolling carts to Community Living Centers. They quickly reached out to the Voluntary Service Department to submit a request for the Hampton CLC.

In June, The CLC received a Facebook Portal and quickly began using that as another way to video chat. Knowing that family members wanted to see their loved ones "in person," but were unable to due to COVID, staff decided to utilize a very large glass window in the CLC's main hallway. The outside is accessible for families and

Veterans can be taken to the large window with staff assistance. "Window Chats" commenced with the idea. Veterans can physically see their loved ones and talk on the phone while having the glass window as a barrier to protect them.

Through these virtual and window chats, Hampton CLC Veterans have celebrated their birthdays with friends and family, seen their newest great grandchild (20th great grandchild for one of the Veterans), and most importantly, stay in contact with family members and friends through these tough times. It has become so popular that staff has been forced to develop a schedule, Monday-Saturday, for organized virtual and window chats, averaging 35 per week.

Working with Airmen from Langley Air Force Base, the staff's next initiative is "Virtual Chats." The idea is to "Buddy up" Veterans with Airmen to keep them socially engaged. None of this would be possible without the Hampton nursing staff. Each day during morning report, the team lists all the calls/window chats, with times scheduled. The nursing staff ensures that Veterans are up and ready for their calls/visits on time. This has been an uplifting and positive experience for each of the Veterans participating during this pandemic.



TOP-BOTTOM: Lafayette Riddick, Airforce Veteran, using Facebook Portal to keep in touch with his daughter, Garnette, and grandchildren. **LEFT-BOTTOM:** John Rogers, Army Veteran, having a Window Chat with his wife, Mary Etta.

Va. Tech cadets honor Salem CLC WWII Vet

WWII Veteran Coy Shaffner lives in the Community Living Facility at the Salem VA Medical Center. Mr. Shaffner is seen here watching a video sent by members of Delta Company, of the Virginia Tech Corps of Cadets, thanking him for his service and sacrifice. According to Dr. Vivien Osuorah, Mr. Shaffner "was very pleased. One of the female cadets was on a horse, and he told us he also rode horses. He enjoyed seeing the cadets in their uniforms and groups."

Mr. Shaffner is one of 12 patients in the Salem VA Health Care System catchment area who are listed as former POWs. Another is Vietnam Veteran David Harker whose story can be found here: https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/79008/army-veteran-recalls-time-pow-vietnam/?fbclid=IwAR20phXiCwslPHJp2F-2b2LhC6COx_YFYgiRWI2RqbOokAkUiNT-Tz3oWPJw



(Photo of Mr. Shaffner by Dr. Vivien Osuorah)

Durham VA Introduces the Balance Initiative | By VISN 6 Public Affairs

Durham VA HCS officials recognized a need they have to fill. Since March, the facility has been challenged with the safety and functionality of its staff. According to Peter Tillman, Acting Associate Director at the facility and Marri “Nicki” Fryar, the organization is making a significant, purposeful investment in its people to successfully survive the challenges of the Coronavirus disease pandemic.

Medical center leaders developed the Balance Initiative to help employees find resources that help identify, locate and share resources that are essential to family life and functionality. Durham managers recognize that staff members are balancing personal lives with their careers. But they also realize that it requires a great deal of creativity and innovation as community resources became more limited, but the work remains. “We are

with you and we are open-minded with new ways to balance the world here, but we need to bring it to practice in real ways that help parents who have one foot at work and the other at home,” Tillman says, stressing the need to be practical in looking for solutions.

The facility leadership enlisted Social Work, Human Resources and others to address issues including child-care subsidies and leave options, child-care and schooling, among other major topics. They began the program with an online introduction, using several presenters.

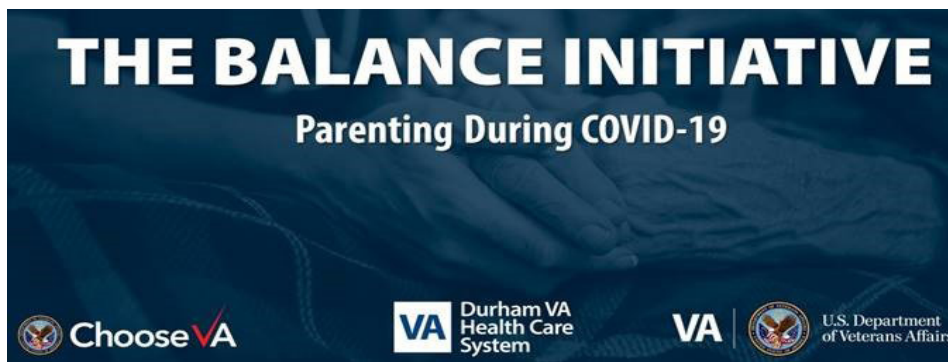
Medical Center Director Paul Crews has used online audio “Table Talk” discussions since the start of our pandemic response in March. The Balance Initiative became another featured topic in the series. He says, “We’re here to support you to make sure you can do

the best you can for Veterans, but also that you can do the best you can for your family.”

Crews alluded to the need to support the work/life balance that so many staff members struggle with daily under normal circumstances, that has been complicated by the social restrictions under which people have been operating, to help mitigate the spread of COVID-19. “We are such a large organization that sometimes we don’t know a benefit exists until someone brings it to our attention,” Tillman says.

The Balance Initiative discussion offered news about VA support programs along with resources and links to community support organizations; a list of staff members who are ready to help, and reference to an online sharing resource for staff through its Microsoft Teams site.

The message conveyed during the talk was that the solution to managing during COVID-19 isn’t simple, singular or ending short-sighted. The session served as an incubator for ideas and involvement. Tillman touched several times on how solutions would come most likely from community thinking and contributions. Continuity offered by the sharing resource magnifies innovation by making ideas being shared available to anyone who wants to access the site.



VISN SGM Experts Speak at GLMA Conference

By Stephen Wilkins | VISN 6 PUBLIC AFFAIRS

September is Suicide Awareness Month, and October is LGBT History Month, and many people will ask why it might be important to consider connections between the two observances. This month, Doctors John Hall, Lori Hall and Tiffany Lange-Altman will be presenting virtually to a meeting of the Gay Lesbian Medical Association (GLMA). Their talk will help explain the importance of the connection, not just for people in general, but why it is also critical to address the connection in VA.

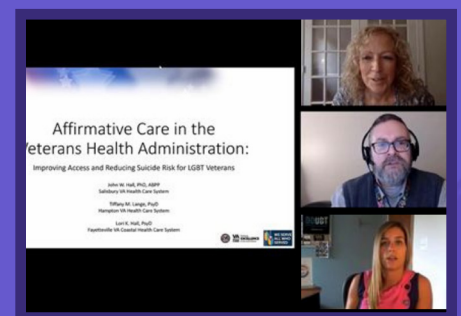
More than 2 percent of active-duty troops identify as a sexual minority. Already, military personnel are 1 ½ times as likely to commit suicide than non-military personnel. It is estimated that sexual minorities are more likely to commit suicide at much higher rates than

their straight counterparts. In fact, one study showed that “in 2015, more than 4.5 times as many Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual (LGB)-identified high school students reported attempting suicide in the past 12 months compared to non-LGB students (29.4 vs 6.4 percent).” So, it can be deduced that the likelihood that a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or other sexual minority (LGBTQ+) Veteran will attempt suicide is much higher than other Veterans, and even more likely when compared with non-military persons. So it helps to understand their triggers, and better understand how we can help them feel safe.

Dr. John Hall, who is based at the Charlotte CBOC said the national Patient Care Services office for LGB&Transgender Veterans has helped VA to adopt national policies that guarantee supportive and Veteran-centered care for all Veterans, regardless of their sexual orientation, or gender identity or expression.

He went on, saying that it’s been terrifically important to get the word out to the community that may have already given up on the VA. “As recently as the last five years,” Hall said, “as I’ve been at the seven pride celebrations in the Salisbury catchment area, transgender and LGB Veterans have openly wept to see the VA there. Some take pictures to send to their fellow Veteran friends to show that the VA may not be as unwelcoming as they had assumed.”

According to Dr. Lange-Altman, “The anniversary of the Repeal of Don’t Ask Don’t



Virtual Women MilVets Summit October 15

COVID-19 has made it tough for North Carolina Department of Military and Veterans Affairs has held a Women MilVets Summit annually for several years, so the social restrictions currently in place to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 really dejected organizers in the spring when they realized that the event could be compromised. But they worked quickly to come up with an alternative, and the group was successful. The event will still happen this year, virtually.

Of course, this event will not offer all of the bells and whistles that have enriched past conferences, like vendors or breakout micro-sessions. But the one-day agenda slated for Oct. 15, 2020, from 9:00am-12:00pm promises a full, meaningful presentation of experts and stakeholders who will offer the latest developments in military women's issues, transitioning and perpetual.

Dr. Mandy Cohen and Dr. Michelle Laws from the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services will be joined by North Carolina Governor Roy Cooper, Shenekia Williams-Johnson and others for the abbreviated event. Much of the agenda will focus on pandemic-related challenges, but as always, the goal is to encourage female Veterans to stay connected and informed, to empower and enable them to thrive no matter what.

Registration is now open at www.milvets.nc.gov/events/2020/

SAVE THE DATE: October 15, 2020

2020

NC Women MilVets
Virtual Summit

EDUCATE. EMPOWER. ENRICH.

STAYING CONNECTED STAYING INFORMED

VIRTUAL 9:00a - 12:00p

PRESENTED IN PARTNERSHIP:

- DMVA
- NC DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
- VA U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
- AARP Real Possibilities

Registration opens September 1, 2020:
www.milvets.nc.gov/events/2020/

DOMESTIC
STOP
VIOLENCE

Tell (DADT) is Sept. 20, and less than 8 percent of Veterans expelled from the military under DADT policy have applied to upgrade their discharges to honorable.” She said that many do not know they are or could be eligible for VA care, so being invited and featured at such a prestigious conference sends a strong message that “affirmative care happens at the VA, and that it occurs at many facilities. Pretty cool stuff.”

GLMA is a national organization committed to ensuring health equity for LGBTQ+ and all sexual and gender minority (SGM) individuals, and equality for LGBTQ/SGM health professionals in their work and learning environments. Over the past three decades, GLMA has tackled many initiatives and projects. Originally open only to physicians, residents and medical students, in 2002, GLMA expanded its mission and now represents the interests of tens of thousands of LGBTQ health professionals of all kinds,

as well as millions of LGBT patients and families.



Doctors Lori Hall, John Hall and Tiffany Lange-Altman will be presenting virtually to a meeting of the Gay Lesbian Medical Association (GLMA) this month.



MUSTANGS HELP VETERANS: A novel Equine Therapy program for PTSD Treatment

By Hampton VA | RECREATION THERAPY AND VISN 6 PUBLIC AFFAIRS

PTSD is characterized by avoidance, hyper-vigilance, emotional numbing and anxiety after witnessing or being involved in a severely traumatic event. Complementary and integrative health methods can improve outcomes of PTSD treatment. Currently a handful of equine therapy programs use horseback riding to help with PTSD treatment. Equine-Assisted Service (EAS) facilitators believe horses are especially receptive to those with PTSD, given their status as prey animals. However, few equine therapy studies have been conducted, so there is no standard practice. Despite this, Kay Kerr, a recreation therapist at the Hampton VA Medical Center created and continues one of the first groundwork [standardized] EAS programs for Veterans, which has been successful -with no Veteran injuries. She works with Steve Edwards, J.D., a Natural Horsemanship Trainer since 2013. Kay is an accomplished horsewoman, who has worked with a wide variety of students for 39 years. Approximately 322 veterans have completed the Hampton VAMC Equine Therapy program for free, offering adaptation and modeling opportunities nationwide.

The Equine Therapy groundwork program is held year-round in Smithfield, Va. at Mill Swamp Indian Horses and Gwaltney Frontier Farm, weekly. Conducted in a natural environment per Veterans' request, participants brave the elements in all seasons, except extreme weather. The program is based upon Natural Horsemanship principles. PTSD can interfere with interpersonal relationships, possibly affecting work and personal lives. On the trip to the farm, Kay reviews protocol, explains horse communication, the "all for one concept" and explains how group experiences help heal trauma. Upon arrival, Steve Edwards and a group of volunteers greet and hold horses for groom-

ing to get veterans acclimated to environment and distressed. The comradery, "All for one concept," similar to the military concept, "No one left behind," helps struggling veterans to push thru their stuck points and offers emotional healing. The hypothesis is that by working with horses, due to their gentle and sensitive nature, Veterans may experience reduction in anxiety and emotional numbing, improved mastery of their fear responses and reduction in hyper-vigilance in a natural learning environment.

The program includes homework, consisting of 4 written modules: 1. "Fight or Flight," 2. "Bonding," 3. "Who's in charge?" and Lastly, 4. "Hypervigilance."

The program causes participants to reevaluate the concept of trust, which is significant. As the horses begin to trust them the veterans begin to trust the horse and themselves. This is what helps veterans succeed in life! To quote a veteran, "it is a great

experience to be able to turn your back on an animal of that proportion and allow it to walk up behind you."

Some of the program horses are Banker Colonial Spanish Mustangs, born in the wild on the islands of N.C.'s Outer Banks. They were removed from the wild because of illness or other issues, then rehabilitated at Mill Swamp Indian Horse and Gwaltney Frontier Farm. The veterans feel akin to the wild mustangs, who have survived for centuries due to their toughness and have also been rehabilitated. Other wild horses in the program include Choctaw, Shackelford, Marsh Tacky and BLM (bureau of Land Management, a mix of several horse types).

Further research is needed, but in conjunction with other evidence-based therapies, this approach provides a holistic, positive method of assisting the healing process.

For additional program information contact: Katherine.Kerr2@va.gov.



CARING FOR TOMATO PLANT

Helped Veteran Through the Pandemic

By Todd Goodman | SALISBURY VA HCS PUBLIC AFFAIRS

COVID-19 has made it tough for some of the residents of the Community Living Center (CLC) at Salisbury VA Medical Center. With the strict no-visitor policy, keeping a positive outlook can be challenging. For Army and Vietnam Veteran Verlin Stanley, having something to do during this trying time has made all the difference.

It came in the form of a tomato plant he received as a gift from a nurse when it was no more than eight inches tall. He kept it in his room and tended to it until it had grown to about a foot-and-a-half. By the first of April he planted it outside the CLC, and that is when it really took off.

Every day Stanley would go outside and water and check on his plant.

"It made me feel good," he said.

He used a process he called suckering, whereby he broke off the leaf that comes out from the main stalk. According to him, it helped the plant grow and develop bigger and better tomatoes.

"That thing got to roaring and it started developing nice tomatoes on it," he said. "It grew to a good seven feet tall."

Looking at the plant, it's hard to imagine that it's all one tomato plant. It's as wide as it is tall. It bushed out and the limbs bend toward the ground, heavy with tomatoes.

"I've never witnessed one this big that produced this many tomatoes," he said. "I'm proud of that ... I really am."

And thus far it's showing no signs of slowing down.

"It's still blooming, and little tomatoes are still coming on," he said. "I get out to tend to it every day, but I don't do too much anymore. I just go out there sometimes and pull on it or break a few leaves or talk to it a little bit. I just say, 'You're looking good, baby.'"

Stanley grew up on a farm and gardening is second nature to him. He has taken good care of that plant, but the plant, in a way, has returned the favor.

"It helped me through all of this, I think," he said. "I didn't sit in my room and get so

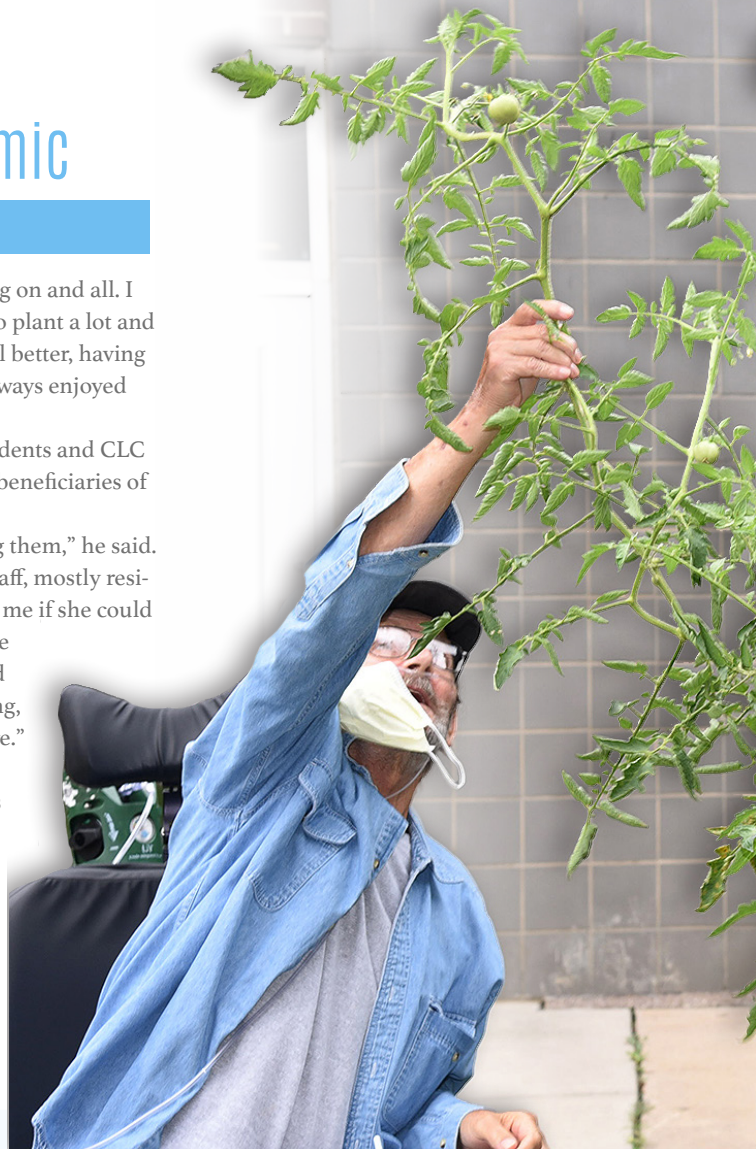
depressed about COVID going on and all. I got outside around the tomato plant a lot and took care of it. It made me feel better, having something to do like that. I always enjoyed having a garden."

And Stanley's fellow residents and CLC staff members have been the beneficiaries of his gardening talents.

"Everybody's been eating them," he said. "I've given a lot away. Some staff, mostly residents. A lady yesterday asked me if she could she get a couple tomatoes. She went in and washed them and ate them while I was exercising, telling me how good they were."

As tomato season winds down, Stanley already has his next project. A poinsettia now sits in his room.

"It's getting big and I hope to have it blooming really red by Christmas," he said.



CLC resident Verlin Stanley shows just how tall his tomato plant has grown. The Army Veteran has used caring for the plant to stave off boredom and depression during the pandemic.



PHOTO-RIGHT: Army Veteran Verlin Stanley shows Recreation Therapist Whitney Mickens what to look for to make plants grow big and healthy.

VISN 6 Sites Of Care & VA Vet Centers

MEDICAL CENTERS

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828-298-7911 | 800-932-6408
www.asheville.va.gov

Durham VAMC

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Durham, NC 27705
919-286-0411 | 888-878-6880
www.durham.va.gov

Fayetteville VAMC

2300 Ramsey Street
Fayetteville, NC 28301
910-488-2120 | 800-771-6106
www.fayettevilleenc.va.gov

Hampton VAMC

100 Emancipation Dr.
Hampton, VA 23667
757-722-9961 | 866-544-9961
www.hampton.va.gov

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1201 Broad Rock Blvd.
Richmond, VA 23249
804-675-5000 | 800-784-8381
www.richmond.va.gov

Salem VAMC

1970 Roanoke Blvd.
Salem, VA 24153
540-982-2463 | 888-982-2463
www.salem.va.gov

Salisbury VAMC

1601 Brenner Ave.
Salisbury, NC 28144
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www.salisbury.va.gov

OUTPATIENT CLINICS

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Elizabeth City, NC 27909
252-331-2191

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18 Doctors Cl., Units 2 & 3
Supply, NC 28462 | 910-754-6141

Charlotte CBOC

8601 University East Drive
Charlotte, NC 28213
704-597-3500

Charlotte HCC

3506 W. Tyvola Rd.
Charlotte, NC 28208
704-329-1300

Charlottesville CBOC

590 Peter Jefferson Pkwy
Charlottesville, VA 22911
434-293-3890

Chesapeake CBOC

1987 S. Military Highway
Chesapeake, VA 23320
757-722-9961

Clayton CBOC

11618 US Hwy 70 Business Highway West,
Suites 100 & 200
Clayton, NC 27520

Danville CBOC

705 Piney Forest Rd.
Danville, VA 24540
434-710-4210

Emporia CBOC

1746 East Atlantic Street
Emporia, VA 23847
434-348-1500

Fayetteville HCC

7300 So. Raeford Rd
Fayetteville NC 28304
910-488-2120 | 800-771-6106

Fayetteville Rehabilitation Clinic

4101 Raeford Rd. Ste 100-B
Fayetteville NC 28304
910-908-2222

Franklin CBOC

647 Wayah Street
Franklin, NC 28734-3390
828-369-1781

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Fredericksburg, VA 22401
540-370-4468

Fredericksburg at Southpoint CBOC

10401 Spotsylvania Ave, Ste 300
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540-370-4468

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Goldsboro, NC 27909
919-731-4809

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Greenville, NC 27834
252-830-2149

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Hamlet, NC 28345
910-582-3536

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Jacksonville 2 VA Clinic

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910-353-6406

Jacksonville 3 VA Clinic

4 Josh Court
Jacksonville, NC 28546
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1695 Kernersville Medical Pkwy
Kernersville, NC 27284
336-515-5000

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434-316-5000

Morehead City CBOC

5420 U.S. 70
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252-240-2349

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Raleigh, NC 27610
919-212-0129

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Raleigh, NC 27604
919-755-2620

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919-775-6160

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Staunton, VA 24401
540-886-5777

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Tazewell, VA 24651
276-988-8860

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244 Clearfield Avenue
Virginia Beach, VA
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1705 Gardner Rd.
Wilmington, NC 28405
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Wytheville, VA 24382-2363
276-223-5400

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Raleigh, NC 27617
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VA Dialysis Clinic Fayetteville

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704-549-8025

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2301 Robeson Street
Fayetteville, NC 28305
910-488-6252

Greensboro Vet Center

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Greensboro, NC 27403
336-333-5366

Greenville Vet Center

1021 W.H. Smith Blvd.
Greenville, NC 27834
252-355-7920

Jacksonville, N.C. Vet Center

110-A Branchwood Drive
Jacksonville, NC 28546
910-577-1100

Norfolk Vet Center

1711 Church Street
Norfolk, VA 23504
757-623-7584

Raleigh Vet Center

8851 Ellstree Lane
Raleigh, NC 27617
(919) 361-6419

Roanoke Vet Center

1401 Franklin Rd SW
Roanoke, VA 24016
540-342-9726

Virginia Beach Vet Center

324 Southport Circle, Suite 102
Virginia Beach, VA 23452
757-248-3665

VISN 6 Newsletter

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Questions or comments about the newsletter, email stephen.wilkins2@va.gov or call 919-956-5541

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