

VOICES OF VISN 6

— Excellent Care — Earned by Veterans — Delivered Here —



I CARE VALUES SHINE THROUGH DURING STORM



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FEATURE COVER STORY |

BY HAMPTON VA PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICE

On Sept. 10, the National Hurricane Center classified Hurricane Florence as a Category 4 hurricane; North and South Carolina, Virginia and Maryland each declared a state of emergency.

A category 4 hurricane has winds of 130 to 156 mph on the Saffir-Simpson Scale of Hurricane Intensity. The most recent category 4 storm to hit the U.S. was Hurricane Maria, which plowed into eastern Puerto Rico with winds of 155 mph. The storm killed as many as 3,000 people and left the entire island without power for weeks, and in some locations, months.

On Sept. 11, the governor of Virginia ordered people in Zone A, low-lying areas, to evacuate. Seated directly across from the Chesapeake Bay, within Zone A, VA leadership made the call to close the Hampton VA Medical Center.

In less than 24 hours, Hampton staff transferred 201 patients to six facilities within the VA and community, accompanied by 113 staff who volunteered to leave their own homes and families behind to ensure patients made it to safety. Those transferred were patients in the long-term care, spinal cord injury and Domiciliary units.

(TOP PHOTO) On Sept. 11, in anticipation of Hurricane Florence, a category 4 hurricane, 41 of Hampton VA Medical Center's Spinal Cord Injury inpatients were transferred to surrounding VAs.

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Message from the Network Director

Just after Labor Day the VISN 6 emergency planning team pulled together.

A storm was headed in our direction and appeared to be threatening incredible damage to the North Carolina and Virginia coast. We conferred with emergency teams at each of our facilities and in Washington, to make sure everyone was prepared to deal with whatever conditions the storm left.

As time went by and the storm meandered, leaving us uncertain about its exact path and target, we made careful plans to transfer patients, shift workloads and move equipment. We began contacting our outpatients, who may have been scheduled for care, and coordinating volunteers who would help with recovery. As the storm known as Florence hit the Southeast Corner of North Carolina and lower, into South Carolina September 13 And 14, our staff braced for the worst.

We'd evacuated more than 200 inpatients from the Hampton VA, which sits literally on the coast of Southern Virginia. That wasn't a small task. Among the group were Spinal Cord Injury patients and Mental Health patients, dialysis patients, all with special, unique transportation and

treatment needs who couldn't go just anywhere, or be handled by just anyone. We couldn't expect all their needs to be met by staff at the transfer locations, who'd already been challenged by bulging workloads of patient flow. So, we needed to plan for staff accommodations. Where would they stay and how would they eat? How could we transport them? In the end, our team was ready and the plan was executed perfectly. The transfer was successful, out and back.

However, the aftermath was our real focus. We had to make sure our staff and patients were as safe and secure as we could make them during the storm, but the real challenge became delivering care to Veterans after the storm, and many of them, along with many of our staff would find themselves in compromised positions. We needed to make sure staff knew how to reach us and what to do if they were unsafe or unable to make it in to work. We set up hotline numbers for Veterans and staff to dial for information and to let us know their circumstances. We arranged for Veterans to refill prescriptions, if they needed them. We sent assessment teams and social workers to scour the affected areas to offer us appraisals of the conditions and find Veterans in need.

All the time, we stayed in constant contact with each other, our staff, our Veterans and stakeholders. As we reopened the community clinics to safely see patients, we set up a compound in Havelock, N.C., for those in need around the Morehead City area. The Wilmington Health Care Center was also slow to reopen, and the reinforcements our planning team had set in motion prior to the storm came through; so we had Mobile Medical Units set up in those two locations. VA volunteers; doctors, mental health professionals, and social workers have been on hand since the storm hit, thanks to our planning team, who have helped us recover and will continue for a while to help us reduce the backlog of almost 20,000 appointments our facilities face now.

I am so thankful for my team and the emergency managers VA has trained and placed in the field for our support. Everyone came together and pitched in over long hours and consecutive days so that Veterans in need received the service we are committed to deliver. I can't even begin to describe how PROUD I am of the VISN 6 staff.

I CARE Values Shine

(Continued from page 1)

"During this storm our staff showed a 'putting others before self' attitude," said Dr. Taquisa Simmons, Hampton's Associate Director for Operations, and the incident commander during the storm.

An incident commander is the person responsible for all aspects of an emergency response; including quickly developing incident objectives, managing all incident operations, application of resources as well as responsibility for all persons involved.

"When tough decisions are made, it takes a team effort to execute those decisions and the Hampton team acted promptly and successfully," said Simmons.

While clinical staff were preparing patients, Hampton support staff, such as Food Service, Environmental Management, Engineering, and Fiscal Service, to name a few, were also hard at work.

Unbeknownst to some, Hampton Food Service is the hub to the region's food preparation and distribution, which provides meals to



(TOP PHOTO) The Honorable James Byrne, Acting Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs, shakes hands with Scott Brown, Hampton VA Medical Centers Chief of Engineering who helped secure the facility in anticipation of Hurricane Florence, a predicted category 4 hurricane.

seven VA facilities. In anticipation of possible impact, Hampton prepared more than 35,000 meals, enough to support each facility for up to seven days.

Environmental Management Service helped coordinate VA bus drivers and buses for patient transportation to the Richmond, Salem, Martinsburg, Salisbury and Durham VA Medical Centers and well as transportation to community centers. They also ensured that everything was shut down and sanitized properly to prevent any sanitation or hygiene issues.

Engineering Service walked the grounds ensuring that all facilities would be secure during the storm to include equipment that powers the facility. They also worked with contracting to ensure that all current projects would be prepped and secured. There were 11 total.

Fiscal Services worked to ensure that all staff would have the financials needed while on travel, as well as secure hotel rooms for the various locations.

It doesn't end there. Hampton reached out to their home care patients and ensured that they had support and oxygen supplies, while the Outreach team worked closely with state agencies to ensure that homeless Veterans would have a place to shelter. Medical Service brought all dialysis patients in to ensure that they were taken care of before the storm.

Pharmacy Filled XXXXXX

The region and national VA provided support in any way possible, to include the establishment of the emergency pharmacy resource, a 24-hour hotline for Veterans and staff and ongoing communication. The stories are endless.

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(RIGHT-TOP) The Fisher House Foundation and Richmond VA Medical Center broke ground on a second Fisher House, Sept. 26. From left: Wayne Walker, Richmond Fisher House Manager; David Coker, President of Fisher House Foundation; Leo O'Donnell, Richmond Fisher House Foundation Board Member; Levar Stoney, Richmond City Mayor; Alan Lombardo, Associate Director, Richmond VA Medical Center; and three generous benefactors who support Fisher House and its construction. (Photo by Mary Beatty-Brooks)

Second Richmond Fisher House Breaks Ground on Founder's Birthday

By Sydney Dudley

PUBLIC AFFAIRS VOLUNTEER

Since 2008, Richmond Fisher House has provided housing for more than 7,000 families of Veterans receiving treatment at McGuire VA Medical Center. Although the house in Richmond is only 10 years old, the Fisher House program has supported military and Veteran families for nearly 30 years all across the country and overseas.

Zachary and Elizabeth Fisher were avid supporters of the military, though Zachary was unable to serve due to an injury sustained as a young bricklayer. Determined to give back to his nation in other ways, the Fishers established the Fisher House program in 1990. The

network of homes has grown tremendously with 78 Fisher Houses, 36 of which are located on VA hospital grounds.

Ten years ago, the Fisher House Foundation funded a house at McGuire. Wayne Walker, manager of the Richmond Fisher House, enthusiastically described how it has evolved since its construction.

"When the house was first built, we had 80 percent occupancy," Walker said. "Now, we are almost always at capacity and there is sometimes a waiting list."

Demand for lodging at Richmond Fisher House has increased so much that groundbreaking for a second facility occurred Sept. 26, the 108th birthday of the late Zachary

Fisher. Walker, who served for 25 years in the Army, advocated for this date to serve as a symbol of how the Fishers' legacy continues to provide places of comfort and compassion for Veterans' families.

A second Fisher House will double the current capacity. Walker said he looks forward to the creation of additional housing, and that he is always trying to provide the best customer service to our Veterans.

The second house is expected to be completed in about 14 months. The Richmond Fisher House Foundation provides invaluable services for the families of Veterans. For more information about house and its mission, visit richmondfisherhouse.org.

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By Sept. 14, Hurricane Florence had been downgraded to a category 1 and Virginia's governor lifted the mandatory evacuation. By Sept. 19, all Hampton patients and staff returned to the facility, safe and unharmed.

"During this time, our staff's decision-making reflected our I CARE values," said J. Ronald Johnson, Hampton Medical Center Director, in a letter addressed to staff. VA values include: Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect and Excellence.

"As I met with patients and family members [who were part of the evacuation], they could not have been more complimentary of Hampton's caring efforts."

Acting Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs Thanks Hampton VA Staff for Efforts in Preparation for Hurricane

The Hampton VA Medical received a visit from the Honorable James Byrne, Acting Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Sept. 19. The visit was to personally thank the 113 VA staff who unselfishly deployed with the more than 200 patients who were transferred to area VA's in anticipation of Hurricane Florence. "What you accomplished is a big deal," said Byrne. "We appreciate that you stepped up when you were needed a true reflection of the VA's mission and values (Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect, Excellence)."

(RIGHT-TOP) On Sept. 11, in anticipation of Hurricane Florence, a category 4 hurricane, 41 of Hampton VA Medical Center's Spinal Cord Injury inpatients were transferred to surrounding VAs. **(RIGHT-BOTTOM)** On Sept. 11, the Hampton VA Medical Center stood up their incident command center, with Dr. Taquisa Simmons as the lead, and began transfer of all inpatients to surrounding VA facilities due to a mandatory evacuation in anticipation of Hurricane Florence, a category 4 hurricane.





Fayetteville VA's Wilmington VA Health Care Center Reopens in Wake of Florence

By Steve Wilkins | VISION 6 PUBLIC AFFAIRS

FAYETTEVILLE, N.C. – Smiles abound September 27, as the Fayetteville VA Medical Center's Wilmington VA Health Care Center opened its doors for the first time since September 12 after being forced to close in advance of Hurricane Florence.

"We wanted to be sure that staff and Veteran patients were safe to enter the building," according to Richard Trotta, Wilmington VAHCC chief of staff. Trotta said that staff have gone above and beyond already, in trying to provide the continuity of care Veterans deserve during this time of crisis.

"Our pharmacist [A.J. Vitt] made sure that patients got their critical medications, by calling those patients to come meet him in the HCC parking lot, where he delivered them so they wouldn't run out," he said.

"Although the building lessor has had a team in here making essential repairs and evaluations, we have also had teams in here to work in minute detail on bringing the building back to standard," declared the HCC's chief administrator, Deborah Caruso. Caruso said that many of the areas in the facility are ready for business and operational now. So, they started seeing patients again today.

Primary Care, Mental health, Pharmacy, Lab and radiology services will be available in the clinic with mobile medical units being set up in the parking lot at the Health Care Center's 1705 Gardner Road location for use.

To ensure complete safety, VA inspectors in Inspection Control, Patient Safety, Industrial Hygiene and Environmental Safety made detailed inspections of the building structure, supplies, peripherals and equipment. Their reviews of plumbing, electrical and air

systems, according to national occupational safety and health standards, ensured Veterans and staff would again occupy a facility that is comfortable and safe, from the start.

"In preparing for Hurricane Florence and in the days immediately afterward, we had to cancel quite a few appointments, so we are excited to get this chance to begin seeing patients again at [the HCC] as well as our other sites," said James Laterza, Director of the Fayetteville VA and Coastal Healthcare System.

Ultimately, about 8,000 appointments were cancelled during the closure, and staff have already been on the phones to reschedule them. In fact, staff, including Disaster Emergency Medical Personnel System (DEMPS) volunteers from across the country are offering clinics Saturday, so that Veterans who have been waiting for care will wait less.

"I am so glad they're open," claimed Veteran George Ballard, who came for an emergency prescription refill. Ballard said he hadn't even been able to see his home yet, in White Stocking, N.C. near Burgaw because it was still inaccessible. "I haven't been able to get my mail yet either," he added, since the roof fell in at the Burgaw post office during the storm.

Wilson Cooksey's experience was similar. "This pharmacy is a life-saver," he declared. Cooksey doesn't live too far from Wilmington, in Rocky Point, N.C., but he couldn't get here, he said. The back roads between his home and Wilmington just opened. So, he is very glad to come in to refill his meds.

But staff were also hit hard. Some lost their homes and are still occupied with recovery activities, like working with assessors and insurance companies. Yet, many of them are

(TOP-LEFT PHOTO) Veterans George Ballard and William Cooksey wait for their prescription refills as the Wilmington HCC reopened for service Sept. 27 following closure due to Hurricane Florence Sept. 12. (TOP-RIGHT PHOTO) TVeterans register at the intake desk to receive care at the now-reopened Wilmington Health Care Center

back and working happily. This was my first hurricane, chimed Jillian Ellis, a medical support assistant (MSA) who moved recently from New Jersey. Unlike her co-worker George Evans, Ellis stayed in her home through the storm and says she regrets her decision. Through the worst of it, "I prayed to Jesus through my tears," she recalled. The damage to her property was minor, relative to others, Ellis said.

Her co-worker Evans, also an MSA, got his mother to safety, then spent a number of days in shelters with his two dogs.

Evans was not only glad to be back at work, but glad that many of the patients he tracks were able to return for treatment. He explained that "They have my number because I check in with them to keep track and make sure they're doing okay." He was happy to share the good news with them.

Caruso said teams will continue to serve Veterans, as the restricted areas of the facility are repaired. She added that as the work is completed, those sections will be brought on line for service. They are committed to, as Laterza says, "get to yes," in making positive things happen to bring the facility up to 100 percent.

So, with DEMPS volunteers, who are doctors, social workers, psychologists and others, HCC leaders are implementing plans outside the proverbial box, to see and treat as many patients as they can, as soon as they can. Trotta expects it will take about a month to get back to normal and clear the backlog.

Patients at all Fayetteville VA clinics are being contacted to reschedule cancelled appointments.

Fayetteville VA Medical Center and City of Fayetteville Host Community Homeless Stand Down

FAYETTEVILLE, N.C. — Area homeless Veterans and anyone facing the threat of homelessness was offered the chance to find help when the Fayetteville VA Medical Center, the City of Fayetteville and Volunteers of America hosted a Community Homeless Stand Down Aug. 23 at Festival Park near downtown.

The event was designed to give people access to agencies and services that could make a difference in their lives. Services provided included housing assistance, NC Works employment assistance, medical screening, Veterans' services, community services and more. Food was served and free haircuts/manicures were available. FAST (Fayetteville Area System of Transit) graciously offered transportation to/from the event.

Although some services were restricted to Veterans, the event was open to all area homeless. Military surplus items were restricted to homeless Veterans.

Fayetteville VAMC and its community-based clinics have participated in, and hosted, numerous stand down events in areas they serve, and welcome partnerships with the City of Fayetteville and likeminded

groups such as Volunteers of America and the Cumberland County Continuum of Care on Homelessness, said Maurice Smith, certified peer support specialist, HUD-VASH Program, Fayetteville VAMC.



“By partnering with our communities, stand down events streamline access to homeless programs and resources, and reduce barriers to these services,”—Smith said.

“Stand Down” is a military term that refers to the time when troops are brought back from the battlefield for rest and recuperation.

(Photo Above) Demonstrating his resiliency and desire to move past his recent troubles, 44-year old Army Veteran Luis Martinez realized a goal when he opened a Thrift Store last October in Wilmington, N.C., that occupies two storefronts.

VA Doctor Recognized for Compassionate Care

“ABOVE AND BEYOND”

By Steve Wilkins | VISN 6 PUBLIC AFFAIRS

A VA clinician was recently recognized for his passionate commitment to Veterans by a Charlotte organization dedicated to helping the nation's wounded warriors regain their independence in life.

The Independence Fund, situated in Charlotte, N.C. (TIF), feted Thomas Rapisardo, M.D. Sept. 21 as the organization's inaugural Healthcare Hero. Rapisardo is a primary care doctor in the W.G. “Bill” Hefner VA Health Care System. The Healthcare Hero award recognizes a VA healthcare provider each year, “who goes above and beyond the call of duty,” according to TIF.

Begun in 2007 by Wounded Veteran wife Sarah Verardo, The Independence Fund is committed to empowering our nation's severely wounded, ill or injured Veterans to overcome physical, mental and emotional wounds incurred in the line of duty.

U.S. Congressman Richard Hudson (R-N.C.8 Dist.) offered remarks before the award presentation. VA Board of Federal Appeals' Chairman Cheryl Mason gave the keynote address.

Rapisardo, who served in the U.S. Public Health Service Indian Health Centers in Milwaukee, Wis., and Phoenix, Ariz., before entering private practice in a career that led, ultimately, to his work in VA, is proud to receive the recognition. “I'm honored,” said the 11-year VA provider, adding, “Certainly there are 20 or 30 other people I can think of who also meet the ideal.”

The humble doctor said he thinks his work to introduce new, young Veterans to VA and help them learn to navigate the system may have been a focal point TIF leadership appreciated in his practice of care to Veterans. “They're trying to help VA work better for Veterans,” according to Rapisardo, who admits that in today's medical world, life isn't much better in the private sector.

Verardo's thoughts about Rapisardo aren't quite so muted. She declared, “Dr. Rapisardo exemplifies the compassion and commitment to service that our organization was looking for in its first recipient, and we received countless recommendations from wounded Veterans about direct instances in which he did much more than what was considered his job.”

“The primary care doctor has to be everything to these warriors, to get them connected with the varied services they need. Having organizations like The Independence Fund can only help,” Rapisardo said.



Virtual Reality for Pain Management

By Caitlin Rawlins | CGVAMC NURSE

As part of CGVAMC's new and largely successful Enhanced Recovery After Surgery Protocol (ERAS) initiated in November 2017, the workgroup began considering other modalities to help alleviate post-operative pain/improve quality of patient experience. In December 2017, Caitlin Rawlins, registered nurse on CGVAMC's surgical ward, began working with Dr. Christopher Nagy, chief of orthopedic surgery, and Wellovate LLC, to bring virtual reality (VR) therapy to the hospital's surgical patients with the program WayaVR. This is being utilized initially as a pilot program specifically with post-operative patients,

with plans to grow the therapy program in the future.

VR is a three-dimensional, computer-generated environment with which an individual interacts in a seemingly real or physical way. This technology is part of the future of healthcare, and will play a significant role in research and care delivery while providing an avenue for alternative and adjunct therapies. CGVAMC is the first of the VHA medical centers to utilize VR for post-operative patients as a distraction therapy with the intention of decreasing discomfort, anxiety and stress while improving quality of overall patient experience.

In July 2018, the first veteran trialed this innovative therapy at CGVAMC, two days after he'd undergone a total knee arthroplasty. Throughout the experience the veteran exclaimed how realistic the graphics are, stating "it's like high-quality photographs, very realistic." After the standard 30-minute session, the veteran completed a short survey embedded in the program, which allows for data collection during the pilot study. After this inaugural session, the patient told staff and doctors present that he "barely felt any pain" in his post-operative knee during the experience and found the therapy very capable of distracting from discomfort and stress. Another veteran to use VR stated, "I didn't think about my pain as much and, as a result, needed less [pain] meds or at least less frequently." Thus far, 100 percent of participants agree or strongly agree that VR reduced their stress and discomfort, was a positive distraction, and would recommend the therapy to fellow veterans.



Where Compassion Meets Courage

Salem Va Medical Center Continues To Deliver Exceptional Health Care To Our Nation's Heroes From Hampton Va Medical Center



Salem VA Medical Center received the remaining 12 Veterans transferred from the Hampton VA Medical Center, on Virginia's coast. Starting Monday, Sept. 10, 2018, the Salem VA Medical Center welcomed Veterans

around the clock who were located in the path of Hurricane Florence.

Compassionate health care professionals at Salem VA Medical Center provided clothing, food, personal hygiene kits, and a bed to sleep in to the Veterans, just like the environment they left in Hampton.

Health care is being delivered to help these Veterans feel safe and secure, and that their health care needs are being met in a compassionate way.

"Ensuring the safety of our Veterans and staff remains a high priority," said Rebecca Stackhouse, medical center director. "Our staff has worked extremely hard and sacrificed their time away from home and their families to ensure our Nation's Heroes from Hampton VA Medical Center are well taken care of. Through their hard work, our staff is deliv-

ering exceptional and compassionate health care while understanding what each Veteran is going through."

Salem VA Medical Center will continue to care for our Nation's Heroes, who were transferred from Virginia's coast, as long as they need us.

"We want to ensure their transfer back to Hampton VA Medical Center is safe and that Hampton will be able to resume the same level of care they had received at Salem," said Anne Hutchins, chief of staff.

The Salem VA Medical Center's Executive Leadership Team, along with the medical center's Emergency Management Team, continues to closely monitor the hurricane and the potential for severe weather and flooding in southwest Virginia.

Any Port in the Storm

By Joshua D. Edson

Homeless Veterans in DVAHCS catchment area had a new port of call as Hurricane Florence paid an unwelcome visit along the Carolina coast. Thanks to the dedicated staff at DVAHCS Homelessness Program, Veterans without stable housing had a dry place to sleep. Additionally, Veterans in transitional and low-income housing were also given additional resources to help weather the storm.

"We've been reaching out to our shelter network to make sure they have room and facilities to take care of our Veterans without stable housing," said Ellecia Thompson, DVAHCS Homelessness Program Coordinator, of the program's efforts. "For example, we've helped Urban Ministries increase their shelter capacity with cots for an additional 17 men and 13 women. We've also touched base with shelters within our catchment areas to make sure they have emergency measures in place."

This wasn't as easy as it sounds. The DVAHCS catchment area includes some 27 North Carolina counties, from Alamance

County to the west to the Carolina coast communities, that were most affected by the recent weather. Naturally, Veterans displaced by Hurricane Florence moved further inland, and finding them adequate shelter was a daunting task.

"We've received incredible help from non-profits, especially the faith-based community," explained Thompson at the time. "Churches in the coastal communities have helped evacuate homeless and displaced Veterans using their own vans. That's really helped make this huge logistical task all the much easier."

At the Friday Center, a conference and education center belonging to the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, some of those Veterans from the coast found a temporary home. In this case, social workers from the DVAHCS partnered with the Red Cross, who oversee emergency operations at the center. When a Veteran walks through the doors, they are checked in and sent to speak to DVAHCS



Demonstrating his resiliency and desire to move past his recent troubles, 44-year old Army Veteran Luis Martinez realized a goal when he opened a Thrift Store last October in Wilmington, N.C., that occupies two storefronts.

staff on call, who ensure that they have the service they need and have earned.

"I was surprised to see people here from Veterans Affairs," says Timothy*, a Marine Corps Veteran from Havelock, N.C. "To be honest, I really didn't expect the VA to really be all that concerned with us Vets on the coast. I've been through a lot in the last 48 hours, and I'm happy to see that the VA actually cares about my situation and wants to help."

