

VETERANS'

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Bedford Green to House Homeless Veterans

Study Helps Veterans Age Wisely

Spouses of LGBT Veterans Now Eligible For VA Benefits

2015
BEDFORD GREEN



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Dear Veterans

A Message from the Network Director

Michael F. Mayo-Smith, M.D., M.P.H.
Network Director

Few places on earth are as beautiful as New England in autumn! We have spent the recent fall days preparing a new issue of *Veterans' Healthy Living*, which we hope you enjoy.

On page 3, you will learn about Bedford Green, a housing community for Veterans we are building on the grounds of the Edith Nourse Rogers Memorial Veterans Hospital. We expect doors to open in 2016, providing a home for 70 deserving Veterans from this area.

Another great article begins on page 4 and covers something we would all like to do: age wisely! This piece provides an overview of a 12-week class called AgeWISE and a study that sprouted from the class.

Page 6 is packed with information about the benefits now available to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) Veterans and their families. This broad range of benefits has made a huge difference in the lives of our Veterans, and we are delighted to tell you where to find more information and how to sign up.

Finally, for our younger Veterans, we are pleased to include information on page 7 about a new program that provides lactation products to the new mothers in VISN 1. So far, it is a big hit with pregnant Veterans!

As always, I wish you continued good health and hope you enjoy a fabulous fall season!

Thank you for your service. Now let us serve you!

Michael F. Mayo-Smith, M.D., M.P.H.
Network Director



Veterans' Healthy Living Editorial Board

Maureen Heard
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Public Affairs Officer

Carol Sobel
VISN 1 Public Affairs Specialist

Website: www.newengland.va.gov

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On the Cover:

VA officials and partners lay Bedford Green cornerstone.




VA Mission:
Honor America's Veterans by providing exceptional health care that improves their health and well-being.

Bedford Green to House Homeless Veterans



On June 29, Bedford VA officials and partners laid the cornerstone for Bedford Green, a four-acre supportive housing community that will provide one-bedroom apartments for 70 homeless and at-risk Veterans ages 55 and older. Overlooking the Patriot Golf Course on the grounds of the Edith Nourse Rogers Memorial Veterans Hospital, units in the complex will include dishware, utensils, bedding, utility services, and shuttle service to and from Bedford. There also will be an onsite community room, fitness center, laundry area, and computer facilities, as well as onsite case managers.

When Bedford Green opens in 2016, residents will be just minutes away from comprehensive medical and clinical services, as well as specialized care and support groups, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) treatment, substance abuse treatment, and well-being services offered at the Bedford VAMC. Most of its residents likely will be Vietnam Veterans.

“We don’t think anybody who served their country should go without permanent housing, just like they don’t go without health care,” said Michael Mayo-Smith, network director for the VA New England Healthcare System.

William Hatley, a Vietnam Veteran who was homeless just six years ago, gave a moving keynote address at the cornerstone dedication event. Hatley shared his

experiences with PTSD, substance abuse, and suicidal tendencies. He overcame those obstacles and is now a Veteran Peer Specialist at Bedford VA.

Bedford Green came to fruition through strategic partnerships with community and non-profit groups, as well as federal and state resources. The new community, developed through the VA’s Enhanced Use Lease initiative, will incorporate “green” building components. Bedford Green contributes to the VA’s mission of ending Veteran homelessness and is the first project of its kind in the country.

Hospital Director Christine Croteau said the new facility would help fill a need in the community. “It’s a lovely community, and we have some of the most comprehensive mental health services in the country. This is a great example of how partners in the community can come together with private and federal and state partners to make sure our Veterans want for nothing.”

In addition to Croteau, attendees included Congressman Seth Moulton; State Representative Ken Gordon; Town Manager Richard Reed; Selectman Margot Fleischman; Col. Michael A. Vogel, Commander of the 66th Air Base Group at Hanscom Field; Massachusetts’ Secretary for Veterans’ Services Francisco Ureña; VAMC volunteers and staff; and hundreds of other interested individuals.

For more information about Bedford Green:

- Clayton Carter at 781-687-499 or Clayton.Carter2@va.gov
- Laurel Holland at 781-687-3486 or Laurel.Holland1@va.gov
- www.BedfordGreenVeteransApts.com

Study Helps Veterans Age

There is good news and bad news when it comes to aging wisely. First, the bad news: no magic pill or potion can keep you physically and mentally robust into your golden years. The good news is Veterans have Dr. Maureen O'Connor on their side, helping them understand what normal aging is like and providing tips to keep their brain healthy at any age.



Dr. Maureen O'Connor



Dr. O'Connor shared an example of aging wisely: "One example we use is a woman named Helen, who was discussed on National Public Radio in 2011. She was a healthy, active, and social 109-year-old who lived at home. She loved chocolate truffles and her favorite beverage was Budweiser beer. Many people want to age like Helen! And Helen is only one example of adults that are aging well into their 80s, 90s, and even 100s."

Dr. O'Connor teaches a 12-week class called AgeWISE, (Aging Well through Interaction and Scientific Education). AgeWISE is part of a study she is conducting open to any Veteran over age 50. "The classes began," she said, "because I

was seeing patients in their 50s who wondered whether their memory problems were normal or the result of something like Alzheimer's disease or dementia. One of my colleagues, Dr. Malissa Kraft, was in a similar situation, with patients coming in for a comprehensive evaluation but who had normal test results." She said despite the doctors' attempts to educate patients about how brains age, patients were still anxious about misplacing keys or forgetting someone's name and wanted to know how to preserve their brain health.

"My colleague and I are runners," said Dr. O'Connor, "so over thousands of miles, we discussed how to get

Wisely

these people together in one place where we could spend more time with them than we can during office visits.” Thus, they began the class AgeWISE.

She explained in the beginning, she and her colleague simply assembled a group of patients and gave them handouts. Over time and through Veteran feedback, the group evolved into a formal class, and Dr. O'Connor began studying the effects of the class. A secondary study, now part of the Clinical Trials Network, involves interviewing Veterans and civilians to learn whether their aging experience differs.

“We also want to know what ‘aging wisely’ means to Veterans. So far, we are hearing things

like staying sharp, staying social, and being able to manage financially. I’m particularly interested in whether Veterans have different needs as they age compared to the general population and whether there are things we should address with them,” she explained. “A couple of Veterans have wondered how things like trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder affect the brain and aging, so I think some themes might emerge that show a difference between aging Veterans and aging civilians.”

Dr. O'Connor said the earlier you start working toward brain health, the better. She added it is never too late to start and offered the following advice for people of all ages.

“Exercise—at appropriate levels—is one of the best things you can do for your brain at any age,” she said. “The CDC [Centers for Disease Control and

Prevention] recommends that people get about 150 minutes a week of cardiovascular exercise of moderate intensity, which is about five days a week for 30 minutes. That seems to be just a starting point if you want to age successfully in terms of brain health.”

She said another key to aging wisely is to remain social and positive. “People with rich social networks age more successfully than others and typically have lower rates of mood disorders, cognitive decline, and death, so we encourage people to remain as socially active as possible. It is also important to maintain a positive attitude toward the aging process. A wealth of research suggests that a positive attitude about aging leads to proactive health behaviors and affects how people think and behave in everyday life.”

The youngest baby boomers (people born between 1946 and 1964) started turning 50 last year. By 2030, Americans over 65 will make up an estimated 20 percent of the population.



Spouses of LGBT Veterans Now Eligible For VA Benefits

Following the Supreme Court decision earlier this year to permit same-sex couples to legally marry in all U.S. states and territories, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) released a statement on June 29 that it would begin recognizing same-sex marriages of Veterans and extend marital benefits to their spouses.

The new policy lifted restrictions on Veterans' pensions and disability compensation, home loans, education assistance, and burial rights to name a few. For example, Veterans in same-sex marriages are now eligible as a couple to apply for a VA home loan. It also means the same-sex spouse of a Veteran can no longer be denied survivor benefits or the opportunity to be buried with a Veteran spouse in a national cemetery.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) Veterans now may designate beneficiaries of their choosing, regardless of sexual orientation, for Servicemembers Group Life Insurance (SGLI), Veterans' Group Life Insurance (VGLI), Post Vietnam-era Veterans Assistance Program (VEAP), and Post 9/11 GI Bill.

To have those benefits available now for same-sex spouses has made a world of difference for couples like the McLaughlins.

Massachusetts Army National Guard Maj. Shannon McLaughlin and her wife Casey were among the lead plaintiffs in the 2013 case that challenged treatment of gay and lesbian servicemembers and their families by the Department of Defense and VA. Their goal was to achieve equality for same-sex spouses like Casey, giving them the same military benefits and recognition as part of the family unit like opposite-sex spouses.

Maj. McLaughlin is a Navy Reserves Veteran who served during Operation Enduring Freedom and receives a modest yet meaningful VA disability. While her children—twins Grant and Grace—were able to benefit from her disability compensation, Casey was not because the VA didn't recognize her as a dependent.



Maj. Shannon McLaughlin (at right) with wife Casey and their children, twins Grace and Grant and baby boy Gabriel. (Photo provided)

"There's a reason these benefits exist," Maj. McLaughlin said. She explained that for the LGBT Veteran who is 100% disabled and can't work, his or her same-sex spouse needs that added disability compensation, health care benefit, or school stipend to better and/or support their family.

The Veterans Health Administration is committed to addressing the health needs and providing health care for LGBT Veterans and their families. This includes providing patient visitation rights for LGBT family members and respectful delivery of health care to transgender and intersex individuals.

Maj. McLaughlin said she was pleasantly surprised recently to walk into a Boston-area VA center and notice LGBT-inclusion pamphlets were readily available to aid Veterans and their spouses.

"We've come so far," she said. LGBT Veterans now can openly talk to their VA doctors about their home life without fear, and their spouses, like Casey, can accompany them to appointments without reprisal.

The inclusion is the main reason why Maj. McLaughlin agreed to stand in the gap for other LGBT Veterans on the lawsuit—the intangible VA benefits of recognition and respect.

"A ton of people have come up to me and told how they felt like they were part of the community for the first time, part of the VA family," she said.

For more information about spousal eligibility of VA benefits, go to <http://www.va.gov/opa/marriage/> or call (800) 827-1000.

To file a claim for VA benefits, Veterans can contact the VA directly or stop by a local, state, or regional Veteran service organization such as American Legion, American Veterans (AMVETS), Disabled American Veterans (DAV), Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), or Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA).

Veterans Lactation Program Now Available

Judy Kuzdeba, RN, VISN 1 Maternity Care Coordinator, has worked for the past year to help our network facilities assist Veterans who plan to breastfeed their newborns. This included coordinating the lactation program and developing a standardized list of lactation products. Her hard work paid off, and now a lactation package is available.



VA Boston Meets Leadership Status for LGBT Patient Care in 2015-2016

VA Boston Healthcare System has met all of the Core Four Criteria and has achieved 2015 and 2016 Leader in LGBT Healthcare Equality Index status!

The Healthcare Equality Index (HEI) asks healthcare organizations whether they meet four foundational criteria for LGBT patient-centered care known as the "Core Four." The annual HEI report indicates, for each rated organization, which of the Core Four criteria were met. Organizations that meet all Core Four criteria are awarded the status of "Leader in LGBT Healthcare Equality."

The HEI also provides healthcare organizations with a unique opportunity to assess themselves against 30+ additional best practices in LGBT care. Responses to these questions are returned to the participants in a comprehensive document for their use in needs assessment and strategic planning, and are shown in aggregate in the annual HEI report.

VA Boston will be featured as an Equality Leader in the HEI 2016 report online and in print. The HEI 2016 report will be released in March of 2016 during LGBT Health Awareness Week.

We thank VA Boston staff and everyone for their support! VA Boston is very much committed to LGBT patient-centered care.

According to Judy, Veterans love it! "It is a huge hit with our pregnant Veterans. Many have called or emailed expressing their

"I received the lactation package, and it is great! Thank you so much for coordinating such an awesome benefit!"

surprise that the lactation package is so nice," she said. "Their response is often that they feel special, blessed, or honored to receive such a wonderful package.

We overcame some obstacles and challenges putting the program together for all VA sites in VISN 1, but it was so worth it when I hear Veterans describe it as marvelous, fabulous, awesome, or fantastic!"

No action is required by Veterans to receive the package. A Maternity Care Coordinator will start the ball rolling. Within 48 hours, someone from Ryan Resources—

"After Ryan Resources told me what is included in the package, my jaw nearly hit the floor. I will definitely let you know when I receive it and what I think! I'm very excited."

the company providing the package—will call the Veteran to obtain size information for the maternity support belt and nursing bras that are part of the package. The kit, which Ryan Resources ships directly to the Veteran, includes a breast pump and instructional

"I spoke with Ryan Services last night, and they sent me an email confirmation of the lactation package. Thank you so much for all of your support and hard work! It's a blessing!"

video, nursing pads, and lanolin cream. Additionally, the company offers the services of a lactation consultant to help with any breastfeeding issues or concerns.

The lactation packages are one of many approved maternity services available through VA Medical Centers in the network, which range from initial comprehensive prenatal assessment to in-hospital delivery and newborn care.

Part of the Office of Rural Health grant is funding the VISN 1 Maternity Care Coordination program, which was highlighted in last year's VISN 1 research report. According to the report, the number of women Veterans using VA maternity care has increased by about 40 percent.

For more information on the Veterans Lactation Program, including tips and tricks from moms who have "been there, done that" with their newborns, go to www.veteranslactationprogram.com.

