

WELLNESS

Telehealth connects

SUPPORT

New London CBOC

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Hope after disaster

INNOVATION

Headache relief

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NEW TREATMENT

New stroke procedure in
White River Junction

BLAST FROM THE PAST

Blanket commemorates a
bygone era

WALL THAT HEALS

Mobile Vietnam Wall rolling
into Bedford

**MIND
OVER
MATTER**



Summer 2022

New England Veteran

VA New England Network Director
Ryan Lilly

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Message from the Network Director

It's the best time of year to be in New England. I hope you are taking advantage of the great weather to exercise and spend quality time with family and friends outdoors. Spring was a busy, yet productive time for us here at the VA New England Healthcare Network.

Right before we went to press for this issue, we received some great news. Starting this summer, Veterans and their loved ones will have a new way to reach 24/7 crisis support.

The Veterans Crisis Line's (VCL) new number—Dial 988 then Press 1—went active July 16, 2022. This will make accessing the VCL even easier for Veterans and their loved ones during times of crisis. With the launch of this new three-digit number, I hope Veterans in crisis can easily connect with care and support during their time of need.

Read in this issue about how surgeons at White River Junction have started offering a less invasive procedure for Veterans susceptible to stroke. Revolutionary advancements would not exist in health care without research, flexibility, and the drive to continue to be the best for those we treat. Science is constantly evolving and at the VA New England Healthcare System, we strive to provide the best care possible to our Veterans.

Lastly, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (VVMF) announced "The Wall That Heals" national tour will visit VA Bedford in 2022. "The Wall That Heals" exhibit includes a three-quarter scale replica of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial along with a mobile Education Center.

You can find all these great stories and more in this summer issue.

With thanks for your service,

Ryan Lilly, MPA
Network Director

Vietnam patch blanket on display at local museum

By Mark Matthiessen, Blind Rehab Specialist at Eastern Blind Rehab Center in West Haven, CT

Patches from military service, sewn onto a blanket—both a Veteran's own and those they traded and collected during their tour of duty—are a classic form of American folk art dating back to the Civil War that peaked with GIs returning from World War II. Almost every returning soldier brought home a government-issued "olive drab" wool blanket and a variety of patches. Mothers, wives, and sweethearts—seeking to commemorate the service of their loved ones and as an expression of patriotism—often sewed them on the blankets.

Most such blankets were never intended for display, but for use, and thus few have stood the test of time. Those that exist today are coveted treasures displayed in military museums or carefully preserved in private collections.



Mark Matthiessen (second from left) pictured with (far left) West Haven Mayor Nancy Rossi, Col. Gerald Lukowski (Ret.), and State Representative Dorinda Borer at the dedication ceremony. Photo courtesy of B. Kerns.

During a tour of the West Haven Veterans Museum in 2015, I saw a well-crafted World War II patch blanket, festooned with patches and accompanied by a photo of the soldier who inspired it. I wanted to know more about the tradition it represented.

While researching patch blankets, I was surprised I couldn't find a single example from the Vietnam War. I realized this was due to the political and social climate during and after the war which discouraged Vietnam Veterans from openly discussing their war-time experiences.

The absence of even a single blanket commemorating Vietnam troubled and intrigued me. A traditional form of spontaneously-produced folk art—of pure, classic Americana and a unique sub-genre of historical militaria—seemed to have disappeared entirely after having been embraced for over a century. I decided in 2015 to create my own Vietnam patch blanket—to celebrate and honor the men and women who served there from 1946-1975—and to revive a forgotten art form.

Over the next five years—from Veterans, auctions, estate sales, fellow collectors and during a 2018 trip to Vietnam—I gathered 750 patches and located a 1967-issue GI blanket on which to display them.

The blanket will be displayed at the West Haven Veterans Museum for the next year. Unlike similar blankets from earlier wars, this is not intended for use. It is a relic—a consecrated shroud for a generation and nation forever transformed by the events it memorializes.

Mind over matter

VA Connecticut Headache Center of Excellence provides headache relief

By Russ Tippetts,
Senior Editor & Writer

While June may officially be Migraine and Headache Awareness Month, the team at the VA Connecticut Headache Center of Excellence (HCoE) focuses on treating Veterans suffering from migraines and headaches every day of the year.

The mission for the HCoE team is to provide quality headache care to Veterans. They take a holistic approach to treating Veterans, which can include physical therapy, exercise, diet and nutrition changes, Botox injections, medications, and other advanced therapies.

VA Headache Centers of Excellence were approved by a Senate Appropriations Committee after the committee recognized that over 350,000 Veterans sustained traumatic brain injury (TBI) during the Global War on Terror and that chronic migraine/post traumatic headache is the signature symptom of TBI.



Leading the charge in the fight against headaches at VA Connecticut is the HCoE Medical Director Dr. Emmanuelle Schindler, who has been with the VA full time since 2016.

“I would tell Veterans, if you are getting headaches regularly, tell your primary care physician and from there you can be referred to the HCoE,” said Schindler.

Post-traumatic headaches occur in up to 92 percent of military personnel who have sustained mild TBI and is associated with chronic daily headaches. The prevalence of chronic daily headaches in returning soldiers after a deployment-related concussion is 20 percent higher than that seen in the general U.S. population. “It’s been very rewarding working at the VA. I’ve had several patients who, when I first met them, weren’t able to work and didn’t have much of a life due to their headaches. While we haven’t gotten these patients down to zero headaches, we have been able to make their headaches manageable so they can enjoy life,” said Schindler.

**New Veterans Crisis
Line number**



At the HCoE's satellite office, located at the VA CBOC in Newington, Conn., Dr. Adlakha Ashish runs what he likes to call a headache boot camp. "Officially, it is a multi-disciplinary clinic we run every week to treat patients. I work part time in the private sector as well, and I can confidently say that what we offer here, with a multi-disciplinary approach to treating Veterans with availability to different doctors, treatments and medical devices, is unique to the VA and you will not find that level of care in the private sector," said Ashish.

The national HCoE's strategic plan to treat Veterans suffering from headaches and migraines includes a four-pronged approach, utilizing clinical care, education, research, and innovation to treat Veterans. At its helm is the National HCoE Program Director, Dr. Jason Sico.

"One of the reasons I love neurology is that our brain, our nervous system, makes us who we are in large part. When people have headaches, it impairs their quality of life. It can be disabling, and it can prevent them from doing the things they love most like spending time with family, friends and loved ones. That's one of the many reasons why I'm drawn to treating patients with headaches," said Sico.

Almost half of all adults have had a headache at least once within the last year. In 2017, approximately 380,000 Veterans sought care in the Veterans Affairs system for a headache disorder.



Members of the VA CT Headache Center of Excellence hold a banner announcing that June is Migraine and Headache Awareness Month. From left to right: Pharmacist Alex Guirguis, Nurse Practitioner Maxine Coore, Dr. Adlakha Ashish and Dr. Emmanuelle Schindler.

"When you look at the numbers, for patients under the age of 55, headaches are one of the most disabling neurological conditions in the world not just the United States," said Sico. "When you look at that age group, you could argue that's when people are most productive. This is when people are having families and managing careers. When you look at such an important time of life, how could you not want to help those people? What I really love most about the VA's Headache Center of Excellence program is it really demonstrates the VA's commitment to caring for and serving the Veterans living with headache disease."

The HCoE program started with seven centers. The program has been so successful that there are now 19 centers across the country and at least one in every VISN. Over the next year, Congress has asked the VA to grow that to at least 28 centers total.

If you suffer from headaches, contact your primary care provider for a consult. You may be referred to a VA HCoE.

Advancing stroke care

By Katherine Tang, Public Affairs Officer, VA White River Junction

In the world of health care, everything is evolving and advancing. At the White River Junction VA Healthcare System, the vascular surgeons successfully performed a newer procedure called Transcarotid Artery Revascularization or TCAR.

The carotid arteries are the major blood vessels that deliver oxygenated blood to the brain. It is also where many people check for a heartbeat, as it is easily felt just under the jaw on either side of the neck. Those seeking a procedure like the TCAR typically have carotid artery disease. This is when fatty deposits or plaques create a narrowing of those major blood vessels.

Historically, the procedure given to treat carotid artery disease is the Carotid Endarterectomy, which is when a surgeon makes an incision in the front region of the neck to expose the affected carotid artery. The surgeon will then open the artery enough to remove the plaque build-up, allowing unrestricted blood flow to the brain. This, in turn, reduces the chances of a stroke.



From left to right, Radiology Technologist Kara Latchaw, Physician Assistant of Vascular Surgery Alexis Cascadden, Section Chief of Vascular Surgery David Stone, and Vascular Surgeon Jesse Columbo, stand in the Vascular Surgery Suite at White River Junction VA Healthcare System (WRJ VA). This team helped bring the TCAR procedure to the WRJ VA.

With the TCAR technique, patients with blockage in their carotid arteries will have the surgeon make a small incision at the base of the neck near the collar bone and place a tube directly into the carotid artery to transiently reverse the flow of blood from the affected blood vessels. This provides cerebral protection or, more simply, prevents a piece of plaque from embolizing (clotting) to the brain.

This procedure helps blood flow through the tubing system where any material that may be displaced will be filtered outside the body. Once flow is reversed via the tubing system, the surgeon can safely place a stent across the carotid artery blockage, opening the vessel while also stabilizing the plaque. After the stent is secured, blood flow is restored to normal forward-flowing circulation.

New London CBOC relocates

This technique allows clinicians to treat patients at risk for a stroke with carotid artery disease who may be at high risk for the more conventional carotid artery surgery, Carotid Endarterectomy. Recovery is relatively quick and patients can expect only 1-2 nights in the hospital.

Dr. Phil Goodney and Dr. David Stone of the White River Junction VA Healthcare System performed the first TCAR at the VA Medical Center in Vermont on March 8, 2022. The procedure was successful and the team continues to review patient cases for appropriateness.

Revolutionary advancements would not exist in health care without research, flexibility and the drive to continue to be the best for those we treat. Science is ever evolving and at the White River Junction VA Healthcare System, we strive to provide the best care possible to our Veterans. Thank you to the team of vascular surgeons who continue to advance their practice for the benefit of, not only the Veterans, but health care worldwide.



McGuirk sons Stephen, Peter, and John (center) cut the ribbon officially dedicating the John J. McGuirk VA Outpatient Clinic.

Story and Photo by Pamela Redmond, Public Affairs Officer, VA CT Healthcare System

On April 18, 2022, the John J. McGuirk VA Outpatient Clinic officially celebrated its relocation. The original clinic opened on the grounds of the Coast Guard Academy in 1994. The clinic relocated to 4 Shaw's Cove in New London, Conn. in 2004 and was renamed in honor of John McGuirk, a WWII Navy hardhat diver.

The new location at 6 Shaw's Cove is part of a 20-year, \$7.8 million lease that expanded the clinic to 15,000 square feet, allowing VA Connecticut to enhance services and increase the number of providers. New London County has the highest Veteran population in the state.

Three sons of the clinic's namesake attended the celebration, hosted in the lobby. Sons of John McGuirk, Stephen and John, shared memories of how their father advocated for a VA clinic in the New London area.

In addition to the McGuirk family, ceremony attendees included Senator Richard Blumenthal, Congressman Joe Courtney, former Congressman Rob Simmons (who wrote the legislation to rename the clinic) and VA New England Healthcare System Director Ryan Lilly.

A spark of hope

Community residential care team helps Veteran residents recover from fire

By Kyle Toto, Public Affairs Specialist, VA Boston Healthcare System

In the early morning hours of Feb. 22, 2022, a fire broke out at the Acorn Hill Home in Middleboro, Mass., because of an unattended candle in a bedroom.

Staff quickly awoke and sprang into action, ensuring the Veterans and the other residents were evacuated safely. Everyone made it out, although one person needed emergency hospital care.

The results could have been far worse, if it wasn't for Massachusetts State Trooper John Hagerty, who used a ladder from the property to rescue a resident who had been trapped by flames on the second floor.

Damage from the fire was so bad the insurance company quickly deemed the structure a total loss. All 13 residents, including seven Veterans, lost their home.

The home has been a long-standing VA Community Residential Care partner, which the VA often refers to as CRCs. The CRC program is a VA-subsidized initiative designed for Veterans who do not need acute hospital care but cannot live alone because of medical or mental health needs.



The raging fire at the Acorn Hill Home in Middleboro, Mass. on Feb. 22, 2022. Photo courtesy of the Lakeville Fire Department photo.

About two years ago, Margret Gudmundsson purchased the property after she had seen it on her commute to her coffee shop, Café Milano, which she still owns and operates. She was initially unfamiliar with the CRC program, but quickly found that getting to know the Veterans and seeing their smiles has been the best part of working with them.

“We get to know the details about them, what they like for fun and what food they like,” Gudmundsson said. It wasn't long before she hosted bingo nights for the Veterans and made daily runs to the local Dunkin' Donuts with them.

The Veterans appreciated the camaraderie, as well.

OUTREACH



The Acorn Hill staff were presented with an ICARE Award on Monday, May 23, 2022, for exhibiting VA's core values of Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect and Excellence, in helping Veterans residents recover from a fire. From left to right: VA Boston Healthcare System Social Worker Jason McCall, VA Boston HCS Peace, Acceptance, Transformation and Honor Program Coordinator Grishelda Hogan, Acorn Hill Staff Member Sheila Offley, Acorn Hill co-owners Olafur Petursson and Margret Gudmundsson, Assistant Director for the VA Boston HCS Brockton Campus Elena Buckley, Acorn Hill residents and VA Boston HCS Veteran patients James Scannell and Richard Davis, and VA Boston HCS Social Worker Susan Morales. Photo by Kyle Toto of VA Boston HCS.

"I enjoy the friendship that I have with other Veterans," explained Navy Veteran William Kenney, who lives in the home and served in South Korea in the late 1960s.

After the fire was controlled, Gudmundsson and manager Sheila Offley immediately began working to ensure the displaced Veterans would have hotel rooms, and eventually trailers, so they would have a place to stay.

Despite losing many of their own possessions in the fire, as well as several pets, Gudmundsson and her staff placed the needs of the residents above their own.

"There was still soot on their hands when they were helping the Veterans," said Jason McCall, a social worker who works for VA Boston's CRC Program.

In the hours and days that followed, Gudmundsson and her team worked with VA staff, the American Red Cross, and local Veteran Service Officers to get the residents the medical supplies, clothes and food they desperately needed. On March 9, just over two weeks after the horrendous fire, the Veterans returned to their home, featuring freshly painted walls and ceilings, as well as brand-new furniture.

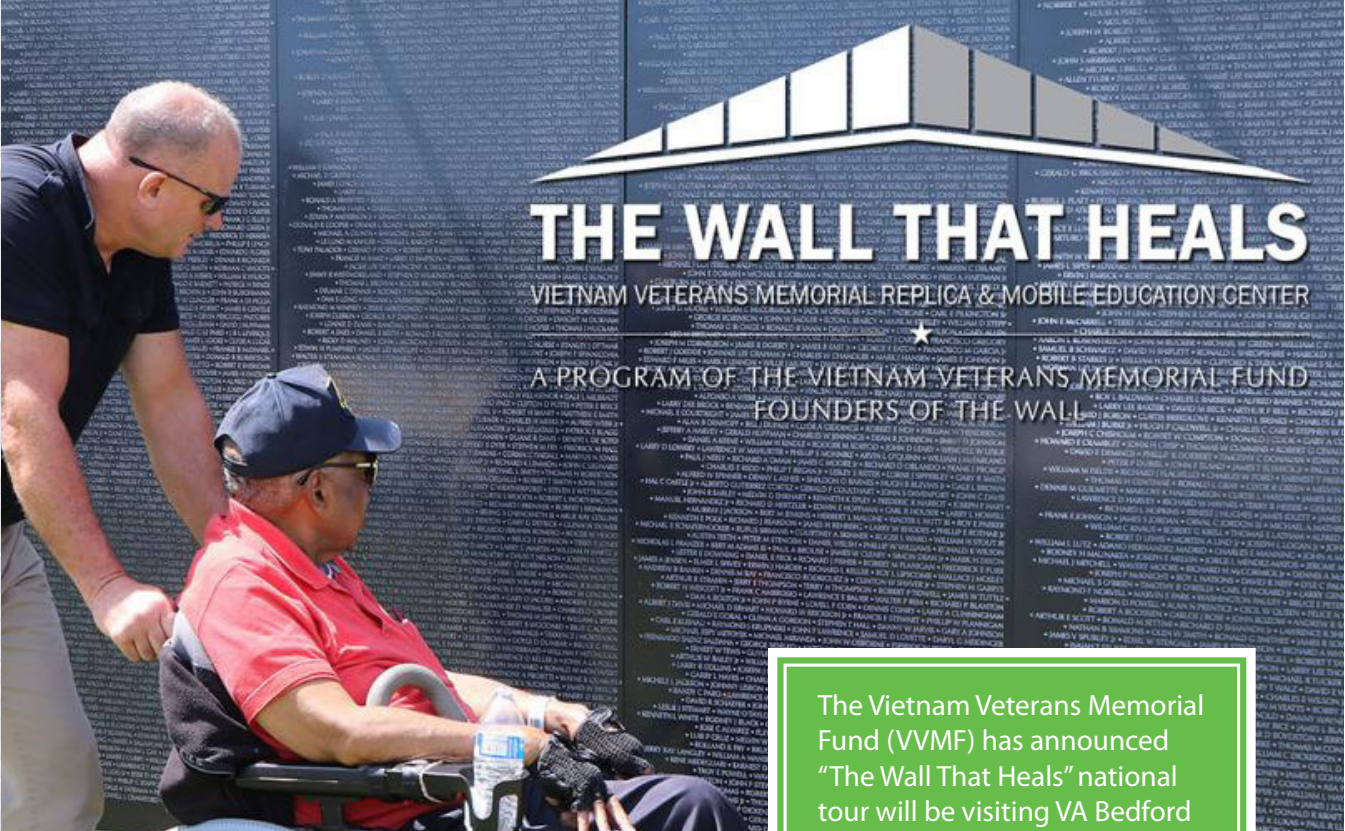
"Throughout our entire time working with Margret, there has been a spirit of partnership with them, and the recovery from the fire was no different," said McCall.

On Monday, May 23, 2022, staff from the VA Boston Healthcare System, including Elena Buckley, assistant director for the Brockton VA campus, McCall, and Grishelda Hogan and Susan Morales from the CRC Program, presented Gudmundsson and the Acorn Hill Home with a VA ICARE Award. This is given to those who exhibit VA's core values of Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect and Excellence.

"I think Margret and Acorn Hill showed every ICARE value in their response to this fire. Their resilience over the past few months has been extraordinary," said Buckley.

Learn more about [VA CRCs](#).

Vietnam Veterans Memorial comes to VA Bedford



The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (VVMF) has announced "The Wall That Heals" national tour will be visiting VA Bedford in 2022. "The Wall That Heals" exhibit includes a three-quarter scale replica of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial along with a mobile Education Center.

The traveling exhibit honors the more than 3 million Americans who served in the U.S. Armed Forces in the Vietnam War. It bears the names of the 58,281 men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice in Vietnam.

Each year, VVMF receives more applications to host the exhibit than can be accommodated. For the 2022 tour schedule, preferential consideration was given to cancelled sites from the 2020 tour that reapplied for 2022.

“The Wall That Heals” 2022 Tour dates include:

- Bedford, Mass., September 22 to September 25 at VA Bedford Healthcare System
- Methuen, Mass., September 29 to October 2

Since its debut in 1996, the exhibit has been on display in nearly 700 U.S. communities, in addition to an April 1999 tour of the Four Provinces of Ireland and a visit to Canada in 2005. “The Wall That Heals” is a program of VVMF, the non-profit organization that built the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. in 1982. The “Wall That Heals” is the only traveling exhibit affiliated with The Wall in Washington, D.C. and includes the largest Wall replica that travels the country. Two VVMF staff members lead volunteers on site, educate visitors and students, and ensure the reflective atmosphere of The Wall. For more information or to make a reservation to see the Wall, please visit: [VA Bedford Welcomes The Wall That Heals | VA Bedford Health Care | Veterans Affairs.](#)

About The Wall replica

The three-quarter scale Wall replica is 375 feet in length and stands 7.5 feet high at its tallest point. With the replica at this size, visitors can experience The Wall rising above them as they walk towards the apex, a key feature of the design of The Wall in D.C.

Like the original memorial, “The Wall That Heals” is erected in a chevron-shape and visitors can do name rubbings of an individual service member's name on The Wall. The names are listed in order of date of casualty and alphabetically on each day.

Beginning at the center/apex, the names start on the East Wall (right-hand side) working their way out to the end of that wing, picking up again at the far end of the West Wall (left-hand side) and working their way back in to the center/apex. The first and last casualties are side by side at the apex of the Memorial.

The replica is constructed of avonite, a synthetic granite, and its 144 individual panels are supported by an aluminum frame. Modern LED lighting from the top of The Wall provides readability at night.



New England **VETERAN**

Mental health providers give Telehealth high marks



A recent study published in the journal *JAMA Network Open* by researchers at the VA Boston Healthcare System, Harvard Medical School, and Boston University, found mental health clinicians highly rate the telehealth care system.

The study surveyed 866 mental health, primary care and specialty care clinicians across eight medical centers in the VA New England Healthcare System.

Results showed that, compared with primary care and specialty care clinicians, mental health providers rated the quality of video care highest and were more likely to prefer video over telephone care when treating patients remotely. It was noted that mental health providers typically conduct significantly more of their visits using video telehealth, when compared to primary and specialty care providers.

Dr. Samantha L. Connolly, a clinical psychologist at the VA Boston Center for Healthcare Organization and Implementation Research, and an assistant professor at Harvard Medical School, demonstrates a telehealth call at her desk with co-author Dr. Christopher J. Miller, who is on the computer screen and also a VA Boston psychologist and assistant professor at Harvard, June 1, 2022, at the VA Boston Jamaica Plain campus. Photo by Deirdre Salvas, Public Affairs Specialist, VA Boston HCS.

