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**SUPPORT**

Employee spotlight

**OUTREACH**

Sail onward

**INNOVATION**

Lung transplant program

# *New England* **Veteran**

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at VA Summer Sports Clinic



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VA Health Connect is there whenever you need care

Winter 2021

# New England Veteran

**VA New England Network Director**  
Ryan Lilly

## Contributors in this Issue

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**On the Cover:** Rachel Bazile, a Veteran  
and Taunton, Mass. native.

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## Website

[www.newengland.va.gov/news](http://www.newengland.va.gov/news)

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# Message from the Network Director

A lot has happened across the VA New England Healthcare Network since our Fall 2020 issue. Fortunately, we have made great strides in combating the greatest healthcare crisis in our lifetimes. Almost 200 million Americans are fully vaccinated, which has greatly increased our ability to fight this pandemic and get our lives back to normal.

For this winter issue, we want to share some fantastic stories of what's been happening across the New England Healthcare Network in the past year. This issue features stories of Veterans keeping themselves healthy through the pandemic by participating in a variety of adaptive sports programs, innovative new medical practices, like the new lung transplant program in Boston, and new state-of-the-art Community Based Outpatient Clinics added to our network spread across six states and eight major integrated healthcare systems.

I hope you are inspired by our featured Veterans and staff who continue to show resilience throughout the pandemic. In addition to fighting this pandemic and providing the best health care possible to our Veterans, VA New England Healthcare Network staff have continued to be innovative and forward-leaning in looking to the future of VA health care.

I am privileged to be part of such a great VA New England team, and I look forward to connecting with you all in the new year.

With thanks for your service,

Ryan Lilly, MPA  
Network Director

# Right Time, Right Place

## *VA Police Chief helps a Veteran in need*

By Russ Tippets,  
Senior Editor and Writer

When VA Providence Chief of Police John Thibodeau first met a struggling Veteran three years ago, it wasn't under the most ideal conditions. Thibodeau had placed the Veteran into custody for disorderly conduct while at the VA Providence Healthcare System.

"When he realized what he did, he approached me a few days later, apologized, and asked for some guidance," said Thibodeau.

Thibodeau, a Veteran himself and a prior Marine Corps drill instructor, saw something in this young Veteran. He wanted to make sure he got all the help he deserved. He gave his business card to the Veteran and told him if he ever needed anything, to reach out.

Fast forward three years and Thibodeau received that phone call. "I lost contact with him over the last few years, but when he called me, you could tell by his mental state that he was in distress. He trusted nobody and seemed paranoid. I asked him if he was going to hurt himself and he didn't answer those questions, which usually means yes."



*VA Providence Chief of Police John Thibodeau speaks with a fellow VA police officer at the VA Providence Healthcare System. Photo by John Loughlin, Public Affairs Officer, Providence VA Medical Center*

Recognizing that the Veteran needed immediate help, Thibodeau sprang into action. "I convinced him to go to the VA in Tucson. He wouldn't give me his location because he was afraid I would call the local authorities and get him in trouble. I convinced him to go to the bus stop and get on a bus."

While Thibodeau was on the phone with the Veteran, he worked simultaneously with Dave Reaves, Acting Chief of Police, at VA Tucson. "I explained what was going on and my connection with this Veteran. I explained the kid needs help, and if we don't help, he's going to hurt himself."

The struggling Veteran listened to Thibodeau and took the bus to VA Tucson. Since the Veteran didn't trust medical providers, Thibodeau told him to go to the VA police.

The Veteran followed through. He met with Reaves and the Deputy Police Chief, Matthew Sita, and they took him out to lunch, which helped to de-escalate the situation. They then helped the Veteran get the health care and aid he needed.

As of his last check-in with the police at VA Tucson, Thibodeau said the Veteran is doing much better and getting the care he needs. "I don't think it's a big deal, it's just something we would normally do. I know any of the officers here in Providence would do something similar to make sure all Veterans get the help they need."

# Surfs Up!

## *Veterans participate in adaptive surfing at the 2021 VA Summer Sports Clinic*



*U.S. Army Veteran, Rachel Bazile, catches a wave during the National Veterans Summer Sports Clinic, September 20, 2021, in Middletown, Rhode Island.*

**Story and photos by Russ Tippets, Senior Editor and Writer**

This year's annual Department of Veterans Affairs' National Summer Sports Clinic took place at locations around the country, September 20-24, 2021, including around the New England area. For the New England VA, the first day turned out to be a perfect beach day as Veterans gathered at South Beach in Middletown, Rhode Island for adaptive surfing. The day was unforgettable with warm breezes and a hot sun, perfectly balanced by the cool, moist sand beneath the Veterans' feet.

The Summer Sports Clinic is an annual program that offers Veterans across the nation an opportunity to participate virtually or with hands-on adaptive sports rehabilitation in their neighborhoods. Nationally, more than 200 Veterans from across the country participated in the 2021 National Veterans Summer Sports Clinic. The two-day event is designed primarily for Veterans recovering from injury or who were recently diagnosed with a disability.

On day one of the clinic in Rhode Island, about 40 volunteers helped six Veterans hit the surf. They participated in leisure activities and sports featuring surfing, sailing, kayaking, cycling and adaptive fitness. New this year, Veterans could also participate virtually in yoga, meditation, nutrition, cooking lessons and creative arts. Each session was interactive and led by world-class instructors who are experts in their field.



*An AmpSurf volunteer and surf instructor gives a surf lesson to Veterans on September 20, 2021 in Middletown, Rhode Island, as a part of the National Veterans Summer Sports Clinic.*

AmpSurf volunteers teamed up with the New England Veteran Healthcare System to run this day's event. AmpSurf is a non-profit organization established in 2003 to promote, inspire, educate, and rehabilitate all people with disabilities and their families through adaptive surf therapy and other outdoor activities.

"Adaptive sports and recreation help Veterans with disabilities participate in activities they may have felt were out of reach," said Jenny Vulpis, adaptive sports case manager for the VA Boston Healthcare System. "It's a powerful experience that can build camaraderie between Veterans and lead to a lifelong passion for sports."

You could easily tell by the body language, smiles, and boundless energy of all the volunteers involved that they had a passion for working with the Veterans. While the weather was near perfect, it did make for glass-like surf conditions with wave heights peaking at about two to three feet max. The size of the waves did not matter. The AmpSurf volunteers easily got all the Veterans up and surfing.

"It definitely means a lot to me to use AmpSurf and all of the VA, especially because it helps me with my injuries," said Rachel Bazile, a Veteran and Taunton, Mass. native. "Without any of this, I would be stuck in the house, so I need the support."

To learn more about the National Veterans Summer Sports Clinic, visit [www.summersportsclinic.va.gov](http://www.summersportsclinic.va.gov). To learn more about AmpSurf and how to volunteer, visit [www.ampsurf.org](http://www.ampsurf.org).

**[Watch the YouTube video to learn more.](#)**

## Adapting to Fitness



*Veterans take a break from adaptive cross-fitness training at The Phoenix on day two of the Summer Sports Clinic.*

**Story and photo by Deirdre Salvias, Public Affairs Specialist, VA Boston Healthcare System**

During day two of the National Veterans Summer Sports Clinic, New England Veterans participated in an adaptive cross-fit training program at The Phoenix in Boston, an innovative non-profit fitness and wellness center.

"During the event, an instructor from The Phoenix went through each individual movement, showing how to adapt each exercise, if the Veteran needed it," said Jenny Vulpis, adaptive sports case manager for the VA Boston Healthcare System.

"This is a really good workout for chair users. It's safe, it's clean and it's healthy. I'm really grateful to be a part of it," said Veteran Debra Freed, a Framingham native.

Veterans interested in getting involved in VA Boston's adaptive sports programs can get a referral from their primary care physician. Learn more about The Phoenix at [thephoenix.org](http://thephoenix.org).

# All-Veteran Dragon Boat USA Sails Onward, Together

Story and photo by Russ Tippetts,  
Senior Editor and Writer

“We are all in this together, you are not alone,” said Donna Salo as the Veterans Dragon Boat USA team prepared to battle it out on the water during the Pioneer Valley Riverfront Club Dragon Boat Festival in Springfield, Massachusetts last October. While Salo said that to motivate her team, it’s also words she lives by. Salo is a co-founder of the Veterans Dragon Boat USA, an all-Veteran Dragon Boat team.

Dragon boat racing comes from a 2,000-year-old Chinese tradition. It’s now one of the world’s fastest growing team water sports. Salo, along with co-founder Anna Symington, were on a breast cancer awareness Dragon Boat team when they had the innovative idea to start an all-Veteran Dragon Boat team.

“This is the first year-long sustaining Veterans’ team,” said Symington. “Time and time again, we kept hearing from Veterans that they missed their units, and we thought how with Dragon Boating you can’t be successful unless you’re working as a unit. We also thought about all the support, camaraderie and sense of well-being you get from being together, so that seeded the idea for us to start the team.”



*The Veterans Dragon Boat USA team rows together on the water during the Pioneer Valley Riverfront Club Dragon Boat Festival in Springfield, Massachusetts in October 2021.*

Veterans who participate on the team find it very helpful as they transition from the armed forces to civilian life.

“Being on Veterans Dragon Boat USA helps with the transition because I left the Army about a year ago and so it’s been an amazing opportunity to be with my brothers and sisters at arms. I suffer from PTSD and it helps being around others, some of whom have the same ailments and issues. We get together and it’s like being among your own,” said Veteran Jacqueline Owens.

In addition to the many physical and mental health benefits Veterans get from being part of the team, they also help bring public awareness to tough topics, such as Veteran suicide. The Veteran Dragon Boat racers wear the dog tags of other Veterans in memory of them.

“There’s a correlation between Dragon Boating and Veteran suicide that popped out to us right away,” said Army Veteran Stanly Hilton. “A full Dragon Boat, including the drummer and steerer, has 22 people and the average number of Veterans who commit suicide per day is 22. That’s why each one of us wears a dog tag on the back of our vest.” Some Veterans wear dog tags for Josh’s House, a charity set up in his name to help other Veterans who struggle with PTSD, in memory of Joshua R. Pallotta.

To learn more about Veterans Dragon Boat USA, visit: [veteransdragonboatusa.com](http://veteransdragonboatusa.com).

**[Watch the YouTube video to learn more.](#)**

# Furry Friend

*New K9 program boosts morale and improves patient care*



*Sergeant Matthew Paquette of the White River Junction VA Healthcare System poses with his new K9 partner, Ripp.*

**Story and photo by Katherine Tang, Public Affairs Officer, VA White River Junction**

While attending the Leadership, Effectiveness, Accountability and Development (LEAD) program, Sergeant Matthew Paquette was inspired to introduce a K9 Police Program at White River Junction VA Healthcare System. He proposed the idea in 2020 and was blown away by the response.

“Once the word got out that we were interested in starting this program at the White River Junction VA, the K9 program received enough donations in less than a month,” said Paquette.

In November 2020, Paquette drove to Gainesville, Georgia, where he began training at Custom Canine Unlimited with his new partner, Ripp, a black

Labrador Retriever. Paquette participated in a six-week training program with Ripp, where they got to know each other and learned how to recognize each other’s cues and techniques.

“It’s a partnership that requires constant training and maintenance,” said Paquette. “He’s got the nose. I don’t know what he is smelling unless I watch his cues and body language. It’s my job to put him in productive places to find the scent.”

After Ripp and Paquette graduated from the program in Georgia, they returned to New England where they passed the American Association of Police K9 certification tests, which included drug detection and tracking. Ripp impressively completed a track in 11 minutes, that he had 40 minutes to complete.

“I have the best job and partner, hands down,” said Paquette.

In September 2021, a ceremony was held to welcome Ripp to the team, as well as to recognize and thank the donors that made the K9 Police Program possible:

- Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 2571
- Sturm, Ruger & Co., Inc.
- Wendell Veterinary Clinic
- West Lebanon Feed and Supply
- SAVES Small Animal Veterinary Emergency & Specialty
- Sig Sauer
- Bureau of Indian Affairs
- Vested Interest in K9s, Inc.

VA Police K9s are not trained with aggressive tactics, rather they are trained in tracking and drug detection. If a patient is lost, Ripp can find them faster than an officer, which increases patient safety. Ripp is a visual deterrent and force multiplier to the police department, as well as a morale booster for patients and VA staff. If the local community needs assistance from a Police K9, Paquette and Ripp can provide that support.

# New Community Based Outpatient Clinics

Story by Russ Tippets, Senior Editor and Writer

VISN 1 welcomed two new Community Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs) to Pittsfield and Worcester, Massachusetts, in early November of 2021.

The Pittsfield CBOC occupies the second floor of the Silvio O. Conte Federal Building in downtown Pittsfield. It recently underwent a \$4 million renovation to the space to create a modern, innovative, and dignified new clinic for Pittsfield's Veterans.

The move has more than doubled the patient capacity of the clinic's old home at 73 Eagle St. The former building's triangular design was too constrictive for patients and providers. The staff can now serve about 2,500 Veterans a year in the new 11,500-square-foot space.



The new VA Worcester CBOC is located at 403 Belmont Street on the campus of the University of Mass. Chan Medical School.



VISN 1 Network Director, Ryan Lilly, prepares to cut the ribbon during a celebration ceremony for the new Pittsfield VA CBOC on November 1, 2021. Pictured from left to right: VA Central Western Massachusetts Chief of Staff Seth Kupferschmid, VA Central Western Massachusetts Director Duane Gill, VISN 1 Network Director Ryan Lilly, and VA Central Western Massachusetts Associate Director Andrew McMahon.

The Worcester CBOC, located on the campus of the University of Massachusetts Chan Medical School, is a new 48,000-square-foot space providing 16,800 enrolled Veterans in Worcester County access to primary care, mental health care providers, and specialists in one location.

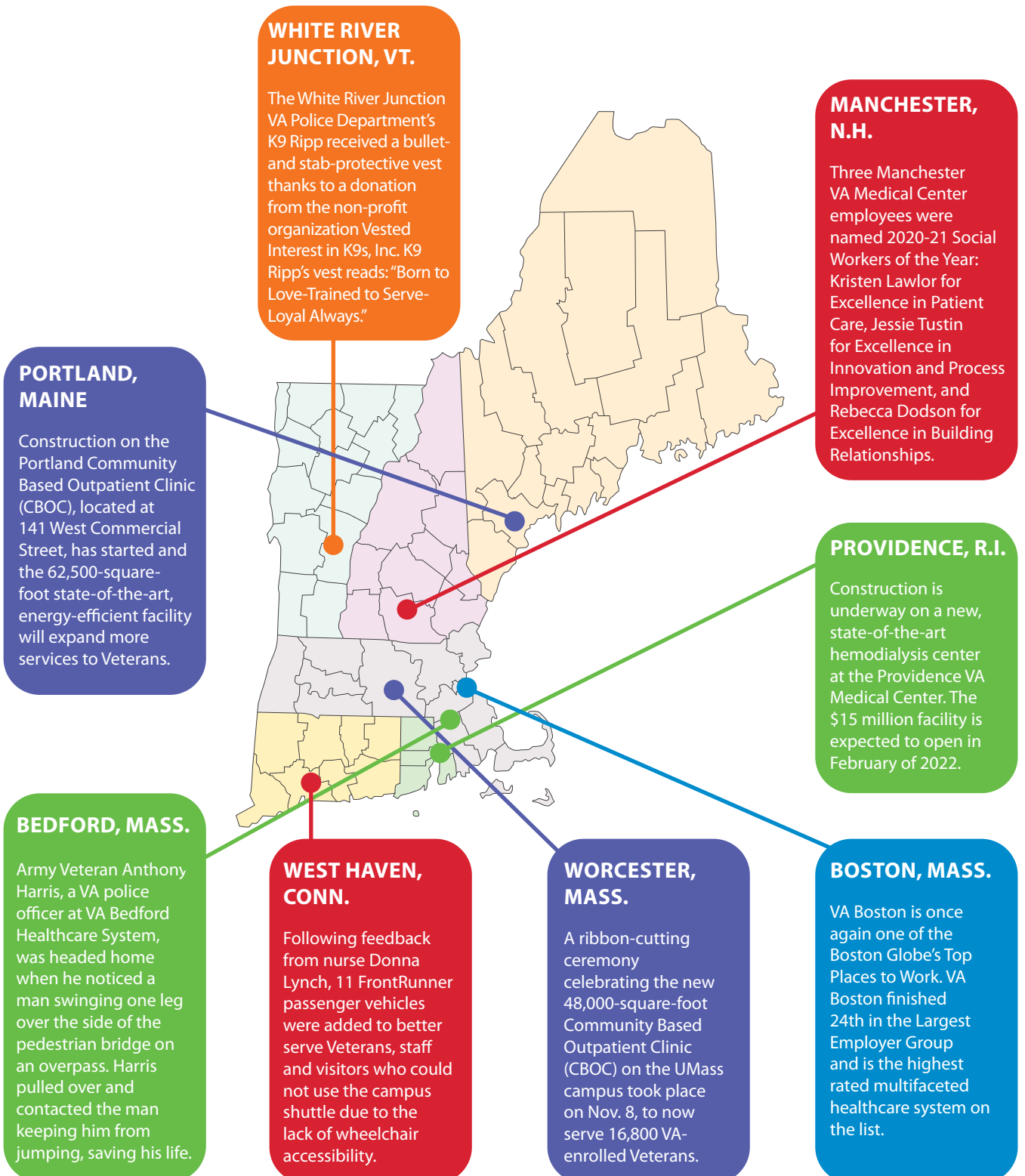
VA services occupy the first two floors that include 65 exam, consultation and procedure rooms. Veterans have access to a pharmacy and specialty care, including radiology, echocardiology, and physical and occupational therapy.

The new facility replaces the clinic at 605 Lincoln Street, and existing VA services provided at the Lake Avenue VA clinic. The VA facility opened in 2016 at 377 Plantation Street will continue operation to provide podiatry, audiology and optometry services.

The addition of these two clinics brings the total to 51 across the New England Healthcare Network, from southern Connecticut to Northern Maine, that provide comprehensive outpatient services, including health and wellness visits, mental health care and other services.



To read about each of these headline stories, visit the VA New England “News” page at [www.newengland.va.gov/news](http://www.newengland.va.gov/news)



# VA Boston Offers Life-saving Transplant Surgery



By Vincent Ng, Director, VA Boston Healthcare System

Veterans needing a lung transplant can now receive this life-saving surgery at VA Boston, in partnership with its affiliated institution, Brigham and Women's Hospital, also in Boston.

The VISN 1 VA Boston Lung Transplant Program began receiving referrals in January 2021. The program has evaluated Veterans from Texas, Illinois, Pennsylvania, New York and Massachusetts. To date, two Veterans have successfully undergone double-lung transplants: a 73-year-old Marine Veteran from Plymouth, Mass. and a Navy Veteran from Hanover, Mass., who had his transplants on his 66th birthday. Displaying the selflessness common among many of the Veterans we serve, the first patient to receive new lungs has offered to discuss the program and lung transplant surgery with any Veteran who is considering it for themselves.



Once accepted into the program for evaluation, the Veteran undergoes extensive testing and pre-operative work-up, either at their home VA healthcare system or at the Jamaica Plain and West Roxbury Campuses of the VA Boston Healthcare System. If deemed a suitable candidate and if appropriate donor lungs are identified, the Veteran undergoes the operation at Brigham and Women's Hospital.

VA Boston's team encourages early referrals before the disease progresses to the point of disqualification for consideration.

Now that Veterans and their families can lodge at VA Boston's Huntington House and Fisher House, overnight stays for out-of-town Veterans and families are more manageable.

VA Boston's Lung Transplant Team is headed by its Medical Director, Nirmal Sharma, MD and Surgical Director, John Young, MD, and coordinated by Clinical Coordinator Mary Prata, ARNP. Ronald Goldstein, MD is the Division Chief of Pulmonary Medicine for VA Boston Healthcare System and Daniel Wiener, MD is the Division Chief for Thoracic Surgery.

# Is It Sleep Apnea?



Obstructive Sleep Apnea (OSA), or more commonly known as sleep apnea, is a condition in which a person's airway sometimes narrows or closes while they sleep. OSA can disrupt sleep and the decreased airflow can strain the heart, lungs and other organs. The strain can lead to problems, such as high blood pressure, heart attack and stroke.

"Everyone stops breathing a little bit when they sleep," says Irene Watson, a medical nurse practitioner and OSA subject matter expert with the VA Providence Healthcare System in Rhode Island. "If it happens five times or less per hour, it's considered normal. If it is five to 15, it is mild sleep apnea, 15-30 is moderate sleep apnea and over 30 is severe."

Many Veterans who suffer from sleep apnea use a Continuous Positive Airway Pressure (CPAP) machine, which uses air pressure to widen the airway and help relieve symptoms.

If you suspect you or a loved one has OSA, learn more by watching the [SITREP YouTube video](#).

If you recognize the signs and symptoms in yourself or someone else, speak to your primary care physician to set up a consultation.

## New England VETERAN

# VA Health Connect

## Provides 24/7, Same-day, Virtual Health Care Services

Veterans with the VA New England Healthcare Network can now benefit from VA Health Connect, which provides 24/7 same-day, virtual health care services with advances in scheduling and administration, clinical triage, virtual care visits, and pharmacy services. VA

Health Connect creates additional access options for Veterans who need quick, reliable healthcare services, but not in-person treatment. Veterans who use VA Health Connect will continue to have access to the full range of in-person services available through their local VA healthcare facilities. This is not a substitute

for an emergency department. Veterans with medical or mental health emergencies should call 911 or the Veterans Crisis Line or go to the nearest emergency department.

For more information on VA Health Connect, visit [newengland.va.gov](https://newengland.va.gov).

