

VA PITTSBURGH HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

# VETERANS CONNECT

{ ISSUE 10 | 2020 }

## Focus on COVID-19

Keeping you healthy.  
Keeping you safe.

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VA



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Veterans Health Administration  
VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System



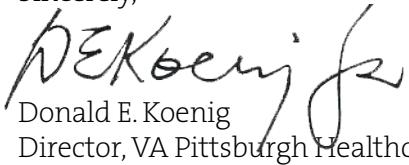
## Dear Veterans,

If you have an urgent or emergency medical concern, do not hesitate to come to us for care. We continue to perform urgent procedures, so don't delay in contacting your care team with medical concerns. If you are severely ill or need care immediately for a life-threatening condition, there is no substitute for in-person care. We are here, ready and able to handle your health care needs. When clinically appropriate, we also provide care through telehealth and phone visits to promote physical distancing.

Some of you might be concerned about the safety of coming to us because of COVID-19. Our primary goal is to keep you healthy and safe. We've adopted practices to provide safe care during the pandemic, including screening everyone who enters our facilities, promoting physical distancing, and requiring face coverings or masks. Remember: Your mask protects me. My mask protects you.

We are expanding in-person care where it is safe to do so and are closely monitoring local, state and federal guidance. We will put your and our employees' safety first in determining whether to continue to expand, or temporarily reduce, some in-person services. You gave us a trust score of 92.5% in 2019. We will continue to earn your trust by doing the right thing and putting your health and safety first.

Sincerely,

  
Donald E. Koenig  
Director, VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System



## VEText Mobile Check-In

Use VEText Mobile Check-In to check in for appointments from the safety of your vehicle at our University Drive and H.J. Heinz III campuses. VEText is VA's appointment reminder system. It works with the mobile number in your health record. After you park:

- 1 Text "here" to 53079 to check in.**

- 2 Wait for text reply before going inside.**  
Enter building to check in if: You receive no text reply after 20 minutes or your appointment was scheduled in the past 24 hours.

**Need more help?** Call the number on your appointment letter or 866-482-7488 and press 0.

**Deactivated VEText?** Text "START" to 53079. **New mobile number?** Call 412-360-6993 to update.

# Stay Safe from COVID-19

Protect Yourself and Others



The best way to prevent COVID-19 infection is to avoid exposure to the coronavirus. You can take simple steps to protect yourself and others and help slow the spread of infection.



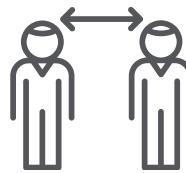
## WASH YOUR HANDS OFTEN with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, especially:

- Before touching your face or eating
- After using the restroom or leaving a public place
- After blowing your nose, coughing or sneezing



## USE HAND SANITIZER that contains at least 60% alcohol if soap and water are unavailable:

- Cover all surfaces of your hands
- Rub together until dry



## STAY 6 FEET FROM OTHERS and wear a face covering or mask in public that:

- Covers your nose and chin
- Presses gently on your nose bridge
- Is washed daily



## CLEAN AND DISINFECT high-touch areas such as tables, doorknobs, light switches, phones and keyboards by:

- Cleaning first with soap and water
- Disinfecting with a household disinfectant



For more tips, visit Coronavirus FAQs: What Veterans Need to Know at  
[www.va.gov/coronavirus-veteran-frequently-asked-questions](http://www.va.gov/coronavirus-veteran-frequently-asked-questions)

# Connect to Your Care

## 24/7 Nurse Call Center:

412-822-2222, press 3

**Audiology:** Hearing, tinnitus and balance disorders. 412-360-6400

**Behavioral Health:** 412-360-6600

**Caregiver Services:** Help at home and someone to listen.

412-822-2364 or 1-855-260-3274

## Center for Treatment of Addictive Disorders:

Residential: 412-360-6611

Outpatient: 412-360-6092

**Chaplain Services:** 412-822-1551

**Community Based Care:** Services to help chronically ill or disabled Veterans of any age remain in their homes. 412-822-2910

**Connected Care:** Telehealth, VA Mobile and more. 412-360-3235

**Copays:** Online at pay.gov, by phone at 1-888-827-4817, or in person at any VA medical center.

**Dental:** 412-822-2130

**Emergency Department:** 24-hour emergency physical and mental health care services. 412-360-6322

**Eye Clinic:** 412-360-6700

## Environmental Registries:

412-822-1707

**Homeless Veterans:** Transitional and permanent housing, case management, dental and medical care. 412-822-1272

**Help for Homeless Veterans hotline:** 877-4AID-VET (424-3838)

## Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and

## Transgender Veteran Services:

412-360-1210 or 412-360-6645

## Military Sexual Trauma Support:

412-360-1040

**My HealtheVet:** Online access to health records, electronic messaging and prescription refills. myhealth.va.gov  
412-360-6838

## Pathology and Laboratory:

412-360-1987

## Patient Advocate:

412-360-3614

**Pharmacy:** Refill prescriptions by phone, mail or the internet.  
412-822-3140

## Physical Medicine and

**Rehabilitation:** Inpatient and outpatient physical, occupational, and kinesiotherapy, low vision and blind rehab services. 412-822-2111

## Podiatry:

**Primary Care:** Annual checkups, nutrition counseling and more.  
412-822-3000

## Prosthetics:

**Radiology:** X-ray, ultrasound, CT, and MRI. 412-360-6216

## Release of Information:

412-822-1135 or ROIPGH@va.gov

## Research:

**Speech Pathology:** Treatments for speech, language, voice, cognitive communication, swallowing impairments and training for stroke patients. 412-360-6400

**Spinal Cord Injury:** 412-822-3000

**Surgical Services:** Same-day surgery, neurosurgery and cardiothoracic, hand, ophthalmology, orthopedic, otolaryngology, plastic, transplant and vascular surgery. 412-360-6700

## Transition and Care Management

**Program:** Health care tailored to post-9/11 Veterans. 412-822-2362

**Travel Office:** 412-360-3620 or 412-360-6783

**Vet Centers:** Counseling and referral for combat Veterans, their families, and any Veteran who was sexually traumatized while serving.

Pittsburgh: 412-920-1765

Wheeling: 304-232-0587

White Oak: 412-678-7704

**Veterans Crisis Line:** Confidential help for Veterans in crisis and their families and friends.

veteranscrisisline.net  
1-800-273-8255 (press 1)  
Text to 838255

**Voluntary and Recreation Services:** 412-822-3098

**Women's Health Services:**  
412-360-6289

## IF YOU ARE HAVING A MEDICAL EMERGENCY:

**Call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room right away.**

If it is not a VA facility:

- Request transfer to a VA facility when medically stable.
- Call **844-724-7842** to notify VA **within 72 hours of presenting** to a non-VA emergency department.

*Not all Veterans are eligible for every service listed.*

For a more comprehensive list of services, visit [www.pittsburgh.va.gov/services](http://www.pittsburgh.va.gov/services)

{EMPLOYEE Spotlight }

# Four of VA Pittsburgh's Best Recognized

## VA Acting Deputy Secretary Presents Coins

VA Acting Deputy Secretary Pamela Powers on June 24 presented challenge coins to four members of VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System's staff.

Powers presented the coins at the Human Engineering Research Laboratories (HERL), where she visited to observe the design and manufacture of COVID-19 testing products. The coin presentations are a nod to military challenge coins that signify membership in a particular unit or recognition for a job well done. The challenge is never to be caught without your coin when another service member calls for a coin check.



**Todd Guarnieri**

As chief of Facilities Management Service, Guarnieri led staff in quickly converting three isolated wings of the medical center to negative-pressure areas with anterooms for the safe treatment of COVID-19 patients. Under his leadership, staff also modified 95 individual patient rooms, five Emergency Department rooms and made system adjustments to the lab to increase COVID-19 testing capacity.



**Dr. Patrick Strollo**

An Air Force Veteran and chief of VAPHS' COVID-19 Incident Command Planning section, Dr. Strollo steered the facility into early adoption of on-site COVID-19 testing and development of testing supplies. He acquired two in-house testing machines to quickly identify positive patients and played a key role in partnering with HERL to produce testing swabs locally to avert shortages.



**Allison Schanck**

VAPHS' associate chief nurse for Surgical Services, Schanck directed implementation of drive-through COVID-19 testing at University drive and coordinated testing at the H.J. Heinz III campus and the state-run Southwestern Veterans' Home. She also helped VAPHS Human Resources temporarily reassign over 400 employees to alternate locations to ensure adequate staffing in case of an influx of patients.



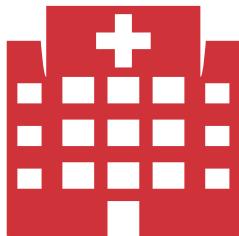
**Andrew Chambers**

An Air Force Veteran and supervisory prosthetist/orthotist, Chambers worked to bring a new prosthetic product to VAPHS that dramatically reduces the wait time between amputation and the start of rehabilitation. In its first use, Chambers built a below-the-knee prosthesis leg on-site at VAPHS for a Marine Corps Veteran in three hours.

# Focus on COVID-19

Keeping you Healthy. Keeping you Safe.

**Our top priority** during the COVID-19 pandemic is your safety. Keeping you safe includes keeping you healthy. Changes we made to keep you safe and healthy include:



## ON-CAMPUS SAFETY

### SCREENING

We screen all entrants for COVID-19 symptoms and take temperatures. Our optional smartphone-based prescreening tool expedites the process: When you arrive, text "SCREEN" to 53079; scan the QR code on signs at entrances (scan QR code below to try it now); or go to [va.gov/covid19screen](http://va.gov/covid19screen). Answer the questions, show our screener the results and have your temperature taken.



### CLEANING/SANITIZING

We follow CDC guidelines on cleaning and sanitizing.

### PARKING SAFETY

We eliminated valet service at University Drive and expanded parking for Veterans. We have staff on call at 412-360-1117 until 5:30 p.m. weekdays to help you with wheelchairs, etc., once you arrive.

We also let you check in to your appointment from the safety of your vehicle using VEText (page 2).

### STAGGERED APPOINTMENTS

We stagger appointments to limit the number of people in our buildings at any given time.

### SNEEZE GUARDS

We installed sneeze guards at reception desks to protect you and our staff.

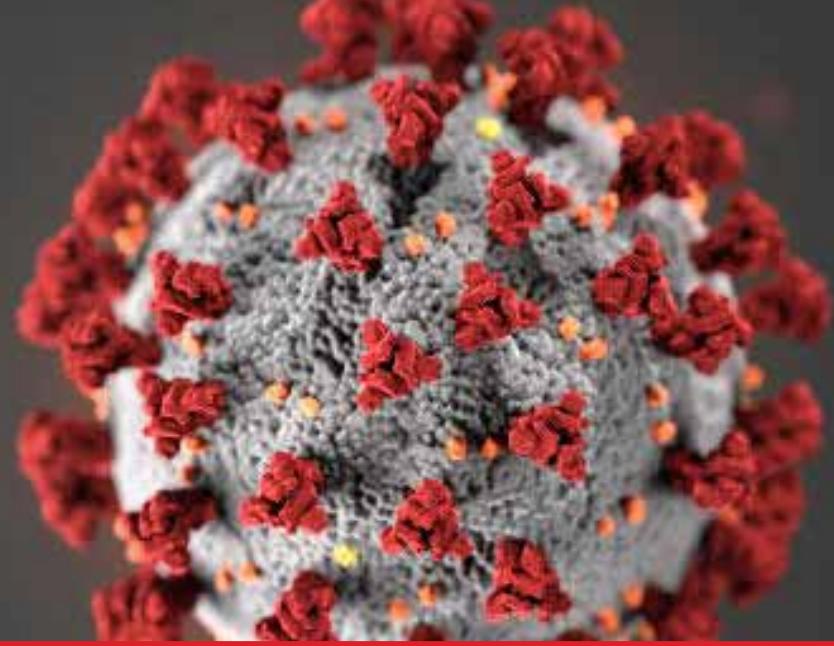
### MANDATORY MASKING

We require everyone to wear a face covering or mask while in public areas or within 6 feet of another person. We allow exceptions if you have a documented medical condition. No face covering? We'll provide one for you.

We provide clinical staff with N95 respirators, eye protection and face shields as appropriate for their duties.

### PHYSICAL DISTANCING

We placed signs and floor stickers reminding everyone to observe physical distancing. We limit elevator occupancy. We maintain 6 feet between chairs in waiting areas.



## VIRTUAL CARE

### VIDEO VISITS

We limit inpatient visitation but arrange for video visits with hospitalized Veterans at University Drive and the Community Living Center on the H.J. Heinz III campus. Families download the Google Duo app on their internet-connected devices to see and talk with loved ones via Wi-Fi-connected tablets. Staff assist patients and clean and disinfect the shared tablets after each use. Contact your loved one's care team for details.

### OUTPATIENT ESCORTS

We limit outpatient escorts to one support person per patient, if necessary and approved by the care team. Support persons must be 18 or older and may accompany patients for outpatient care at University Drive and the H.J. Heinz outpatient clinics only between 6 a.m. and 6 p.m.

### PREREGISTRATION

We call to preregister you for in-person appointments to limit your contact with support staff as much as possible.

### PHARMACY

We mail all but urgently needed prescriptions to your home and use overnight shipping if medically necessary. Urgently needed prescriptions are medications that you cannot wait until the next day to start.

To request an urgently needed medication, contact the pharmacy to arrange for pickup:

- Call 412-360-3389 between 7:30 a.m. and 9 p.m. on weekdays or between 7:30 a.m. and 4 p.m. on weekends.
- Send a secure message in My HealtheVet to "Ask a Pharmacist."

### EXPANDED TELEHEALTH SERVICES

We expanded secure telehealth, VA Video Connect and phone visits as clinically appropriate so you can see or talk with your provider from the safety of your home or anywhere you choose. We:

- Conducted **over 32,000 telehealth encounters** with more than 16,000 Veterans from October through July.
  - » Over 14,000 via VA Video Connect, an 829% increase compared to the same time last year.
- Completed **over 35,000 telephone visits** since March.

# Volunteers Deploy to Fight COVID-19

Thirty VA Pittsburgh employees recently deployed around the country to help fight the coronavirus. Of those, 20 were detailed (reassigned temporarily) and 11 served with VA's Disaster Emergency Medical Personnel System (DEMPS). DEMPS allows VA to send staff to help in emergencies or disasters. It is an integral part of VA's fourth mission—to help non-VA medical facilities in need.

The experience left lasting impressions on each volunteer.

Registered nurse Shea Murray was detailed to the Menlo Park Veterans Memorial Home in New Jersey. Working alongside the National Guard allowed her to witness a special moment at the state-run home.

"I had a resident who was alone and in her final days," said Murray. "I asked one of three guardsmen to stay by her side in her final moments, and the next thing I

knew, all three were by her side, ensuring she was not alone for the rest of the night. I offered to relieve them and their response to me was 'We don't leave one of our own behind."

Environmental Management Services foreman Mary Johnson helped at New Jersey's badly hit Paramus Veterans Memorial Home. She worked to give the demoralized cleaning crew "back their power," instructing them in effective cleaning techniques and developing standard operating procedures. Johnson's reward was seeing the workers trust and act on her guidance.

"Now they are moving forward instead of in circles," Johnson said.

Respiratory therapist Angelica Howell found it difficult to be without her four children, including one who has autism, to help at the Washington DC VA Medical Center. But it was worth it.

"My most rewarding moment was helping a patient make a phone call to his daughter after we took him off a ventilator," said Howell.

Police Officer Dawn Frejkowski was detailed to the Corporal Michael J. Crescenz VA Medical Center in Philadelphia. She best summed up the reason VA staff volunteer to help elsewhere in times of need.

"It's important for other VAs to know if they need help, people are willing to temporarily leave their families to assist," Frejkowski said.

Among those who deployed were 18 registered nurses, five respiratory therapists, four police officers and one psychologist, nursing assistant and Environmental Management Services foreman each.

 To learn more about DEMPS, visit [www.va.gov/vhaemergencymanagement/cemp/cemp\\_demps.asp](http://www.va.gov/vhaemergencymanagement/cemp/cemp_demps.asp)

**“** Now they are moving forward instead of in circles.”

*Mary Johnson (center) deployed to New Jersey to help at a state-run Veterans home.*



# New Center Simplifies Notification

You can now quickly and easily notify VA of a visit to a non-VA provider for emergency care.



A new centralized notification center makes it easy to report a visit to a non-VA emergency department. During a medical emergency, you do not have to check with VA before calling an ambulance or going to a community emergency department. In most instances, you are eligible for VA-authorized emergency care at an in-network community facility if you notify VA within 72 hours of presenting to the emergency department. To simplify and streamline the notification process, VA in June established a national centralized notification center.

The Emergency Care Centralized Notification Center allows you, your representative, or your community provider to notify VA of times you receive care at a non-VA emergency department.

## NOTIFICATION CAN BE MADE:

Via email at [VHAEmergencyNotification@va.gov](mailto:VHAEmergencyNotification@va.gov)

By phone to VA's 72-hour Notification Hotline at [844-724-7842](tel:844-724-7842)

To the appropriate VA official at your VA medical facility\*

The person notifying VA should be prepared to give case-specific information such as your name, Social Security number, treating facility and reason for the visit. If the person does not have all the information, VA will contact the appropriate parties to gather it.

The case-specific information VA will need is detailed in VA Form

10-10143g, Non-VA Hospital Emergency Notification, available online at [www.va.gov/vaforms/form\\_detail.asp?FormNo=10143g](http://www.va.gov/vaforms/form_detail.asp?FormNo=10143g)

For more information on community emergency medical care, visit [www.va.gov/COMMUNITYCARE/programs/veterans/Emergency\\_Care.asp](http://www.va.gov/COMMUNITYCARE/programs/veterans/Emergency_Care.asp)

\* If notification is made to your local VA medical facility, the notification will be referred to centralized intake for action.



# Intimate Partner Violence

Relationship health and safety is always a priority for all of our Veterans, significant others, caregivers and employees at VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System, but it is particularly important during this stressful time. Quarantine, job loss and financial stress increase the risk for intimate partner violence. If you are experiencing increased tension in your relationship, VA is here to help.

## VA and Vet Center Resources

- VA Pittsburgh Intimate Partner Violence Assistance Program  
412-822-2359
- VA Pittsburgh individual and couples counseling | 412-360-6600
- Vet Center individual and couples counseling  
1-877-WAR-VETS (1-877-927-8387)

## County Resources

### PENNSYLVANIA:

#### Allegheny

- Women's Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh  
412-687-8005
- Crisis Center North Hotline  
412-364-5556

#### Beaver

- Women's Center of Beaver County, 724-775-0131

#### Washington/Fayette County

- 800-791-4000

#### Westmoreland County

- Blackburn Center, 888-832-2272

### OHIO AND WEST VIRGINIA:

#### Belmont County

- Tri-County Help Center  
740-695-5441

#### Brooke and Hancock County

- 304-797-7233

#### Marshall County

- YWCA Family Violence Prevention Program  
1-800-698-1247

#### Monroe County

- Family Refuge Center  
304-772-5005

TO YOUR  
GOOD  
HEALTH



## Free Unlimited Whole Health Classes

Livestream classes through Ompractice include yoga, tai chi, meditation and Pilates.

Join via two-way video from the comfort of your home. Get instant feedback and support from your instructor! Beginner or expert, they have a class for you.

### TO SIGN UP:

- Go to [ompractice.com/veteransaffairs](http://ompractice.com/veteransaffairs)
- Click "I'm a Veteran," then click "Sign up now" under Pittsburgh, PA. (If you are both a Veteran and VA employee, please choose Veteran.)
- Click "Sign up now" to add the free membership to your cart, then click "Proceed to checkout" (cart should show \$0).
- Enter your basic information and click "Sign up now."

**Veterans can attend classes through Jan. 31, 2021.**

 To learn more about Whole Health at VA Pittsburgh, join an **Introduction to Whole Health class any Monday at 11 a.m.** Get the details: [tiny.cc/fhsksz](http://tiny.cc/fhsksz)

# VetQ&A

## Answering Your Important Questions

VETERANS  
CONNECT

Issue 10 |  
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**Q.** I visited a community provider for non-service-connected emergency care between April 8, 2016, and Sept. 9, 2019. I used other health insurance, but VA denied my claim for reimbursement of my coinsurance and deductibles. I believe that under the Wolfe v. Wilkie U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims (Veterans Court) September 2019 decision, VA must now reimburse my costs. When will I know if VA will reimburse my costs?

**A.** Following the ruling, VA now reimburses Veterans for certain emergency care received in the community when other health insurance pays a claim that results in cost share, coinsurance and/or deductible liability for the Veteran. VA is also re-adjudicating previously denied claims for reimbursement and began mailing notification letters in April to Veterans affected by the ruling. If you have questions about whether you are entitled to a reimbursement, you can call 1-877-466-7124. *Note: VA will not reimburse copayments. VA is legally prohibited from paying copayments owed under a Veteran's health insurance, including private insurance and Medicare.*

**Q.** If VA is not seeing patients because of COVID-19 precautions, why can't I see a community provider?

**A.** We want you to safely receive the care you need when you need it. VA Pittsburgh clinics are screening and scheduling Veterans for various care options, including virtual. Community Care Clinic staff are reaching out to community providers and Veterans to schedule appointments if available. You must still meet eligibility requirements for community care, distance, wait time or best medical interest. However, care access in the community can be somewhat limited during this time. If you want to be seen in person or using telehealth but are unable to schedule an appointment due to COVID-19 restrictions, call your provider to ask about other options, which might include being seen in the community, if appropriate.

**Q.** I am eligible for VA health care but am not service connected. Should I seek care elsewhere to free up appointments for combat-injured Veterans?

**A.** No. The more Veterans who use VA services, the more funding we receive so we can serve all Veterans. Every Veteran who uses VA services helps secure care for other Veterans.

**Veterans Connect delivers news and information  
of interest to area Veterans.**

Please send suggestions, comments and requests to [VAPHSEditor@va.gov](mailto:VAPHSEditor@va.gov).



**VA****U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs**Veterans Health Administration  
VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System

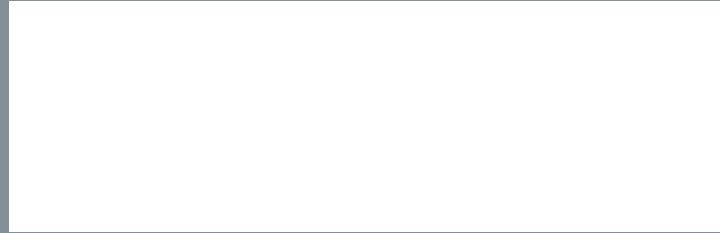
University Drive | Pittsburgh, PA 15240

[www.pittsburgh.va.gov](http://www.pittsburgh.va.gov)

412-822-2222 | 866-482-7488

# VETERANS CONNECT

## Issue 10 | 2020



### COVID-19 TESTING FOR VETERANS

Veterans with a **sore throat, dry cough, shortness of breath or fever** should call **412-360-6000** and select option #3 to speak to a nurse before visiting our facilities or to schedule an appointment for drive-through testing at University Drive. Do not report to the Emergency Department for testing. Do not report for testing without an appointment.

## Don't Miss a Thing!



### Save the Date

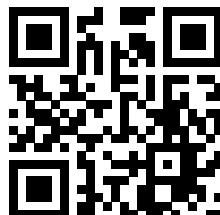
#### Veterans Town Hall

#### Sept. 16 at 10 a.m.

Location to be decided or may be held online. For updates, like us on Facebook @VAPHS, follow us on Twitter @VAPittsburgh or subscribe to receive emails.

**To subscribe to emails:**

1. Scan this QR code with the camera on your internet-connected smartphone.
2. Tap the pop-up window.
3. Enter your email address at the prompt.



VAPHS



VAPittsburgh



### Free Flu Shots

A flu shot is a simple, safe and effective way to keep you and your loved ones healthy during this flu season.

Starting late September, get your free flu shot:

1. **During your regularly scheduled VA Pittsburgh appointments**, including those at our outpatient clinics.
2. **Walk-in clinics** available weekdays from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. at both campuses—no appointment necessary.
3. After hours and weekends in our **Emergency Department** at our University Drive campus.

We may also offer flu shots during drive-through clinics. Details are pending. Check [www.pittsburgh.va.gov](http://www.pittsburgh.va.gov) for updates.