

Answering the Call

Stepping Up to Serve Our Communities



Wilmington Veterans Affairs Medical Center *Annual Report 2020*

VA



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Wilmington VA Medical Center

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Our Goals to You

Putting Veterans first by providing quality care every day in every service.

Ensuring our employees have a good place to work.

Developing and sustaining a culture of safety, quality and excellence.

(Do no harm)

Walk the talk in a respectful and collaborative manner.

Leadership focused on creating a culture that is passionate about innovation and continuous learning.

A Message from Our Medical Center Director

2020 brought challenges unlike anything our nation or VA has ever faced. But, together, we learned new lessons, advanced new innovations and found opportunities to grow and make the care we deliver to Veterans safer and better. I want to thank the more than 33,000 Veterans who come to Wilmington VA Medical Center and our five Community Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOC) in Delaware and southern New Jersey for their understanding and cooperation with us over the year as we have partnered to promote safety, timely access and exceptional Veteran services.

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, we had to radically and rapidly change how we delivered health care almost overnight – from the traditional in-person model to an almost entirely virtual model. It was a true learning experience for all of us, but we did as we do and adapted and overcame and learned how beneficial and game changing it could be. As the year went on, we began to allow more foot traffic into our facilities for essential, in-person care, but learned that there are a lot of health care visits Veterans could do from home, and quite frankly were easier for the Veteran to do from home.



COVID-19 also allowed us to give back and serve the communities we live and work in by fulfilling VA's 4th Mission of serving communities in times of crisis. From the beginning, we deployed teams of VA health care professionals to long-term care facilities in the community to help fight the virus. We partnered with local health care systems and provided large-scale testing. As part of VA's Disaster Emergency Medical Personnel System (DEMPS), we had health care professionals volunteer to go service in COVID response and disaster relief across the country.

FY20 brought us closer to finishing construction projects in our CBOCs and at the medical center, each of which will allow for an increased access to care and an expansion of needed health care services for our Veterans.

We finished the construction of the new Cape May County CBOC in Rio Grande, New Jersey. The new clinic officially moved off the Coast Guard base and into the heart of the community of the Cape May region. This much needed, and long planned, project will greatly increase the health care services the Veterans of south Jersey have earned.

This year we also moved closer to the completion of the move of the Kent County CBOC to its new nearly 30,000 square foot location in the old Blue Hen Mall in Dover. The new clinic is expected to be open to Veterans in early 2021.

Lastly, we broke ground on our long awaited and much needed parking garage. Completion is scheduled for late spring of 2021 and when finished the garage will provide 370 spaces for Veterans and staff.

Moving into 2021, we hope to continue to grow our footprint in the community with our CBOC expansions so we can provide services closer to Veterans' homes. We are also going to focus on expanding our acute care services and partner with other VA medical centers to expand surgical and specialty care services. As the Veteran population of our catchment area changes, we plan on growing and changing with it and in order to meet the needs of these Veterans.

Together, we stepped up and answered the call to fight this pandemic. We remain focused on promoting exceptional healthcare where we put veterans first in everything we do. I want to again remind our Veterans to not delay essential care, especially mental health care. Our facilities remain open and safe for face-to-face care along with providing a robust virtual care service to best meet your health care needs. As we enter the next phase in the fight against COVID-19 with the new vaccines, we look to resume a sense of normalcy in our lives and the ability to better connect with you in 2021. I encourage all of you to get the vaccine when available.

Thank you for trusting Wilmington VA Medical Center with your care,

Vince Kane, Director, Wilmington VA Medical Center

2020 Operating Statistics



Workforce

Total Staff: 1,198

Physicians: 116

Nurses: 388

Veterans: 335



Veterans Served

Total: 32,612

Male: 29,718

Female: 2,894

Operating Budget

Total: \$242.1M

COVID-19 Expenses: \$9.5M

Operating Beds

Total: 90

Medical Surgery: 35

Intensive Care Unit: 8

Community Living Center: 47

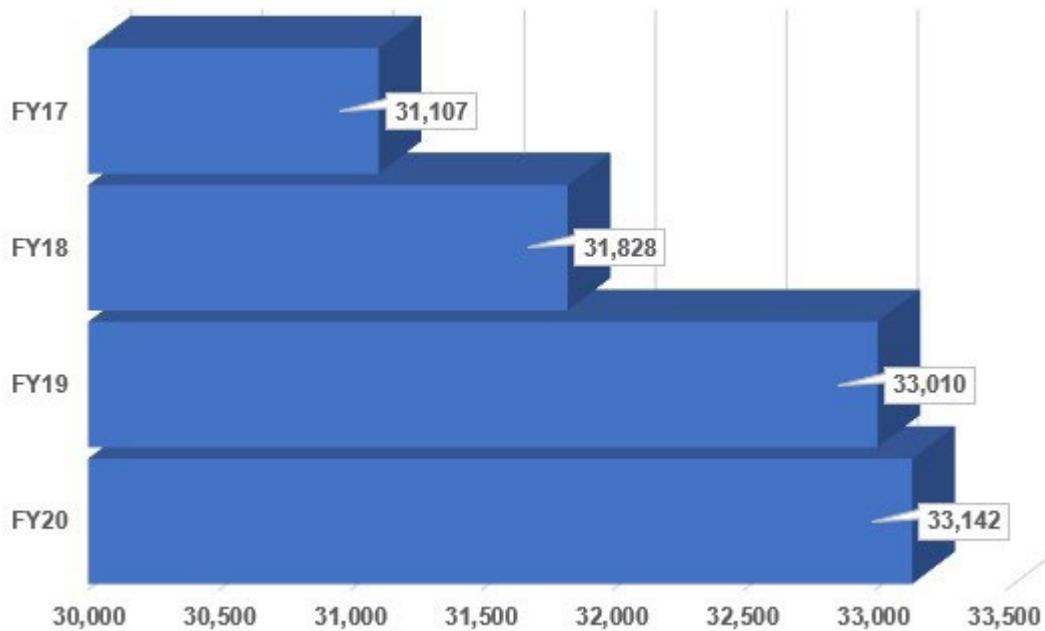
Workload

Outpatient Visits: 347,414

Admissions: 1,304

Surgical Procedures: 1,033

Four-Year Patient Expansion



Wilmington VA Utilizes Technology to Increase Access to Care

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, we worked with local health systems and local government to promote the stay at home orders and physical distancing to help flatten the curve.

We had to assess what procedures were necessary to be seen in person to ensure the health and well-being of our Veterans and staff. Because of this, we emphasized telehealth to maintain and increase access to quality care for Veterans. Although we initially limited visits and procedures to essential care, we performed an unprecedented number of telehealth/virtual care visits.

“During this pandemic, we have relied more on virtual care than ever before. We have received positive feedback and will encourage the utilization of virtual care as necessary to ensure there are no gaps in Veteran health care,” said Wilmington VA Medical Center Director Vince Kane. “As the service becomes more popular, we remain committed to providing a seamless user experience to ensure Veterans have access to care where and when they need it.”

VA is also taking strides to bridge the digital divide for Veterans who lack the technology or broadband Internet connectivity required to participate in VA telehealth services. At the national level, [VA is working with strategic partners](#), through the [VA Secretary's Center of Strategic Partnerships](#), to increase access to the technology that Veterans need to connect with their VA health care team virtually.

“Virtual care will be a part of the new normal; continuous improvement will only ensure sustainment,” said Michael Selby, Connected Care Coordinator / Nurse Manager, Wilmington VA Medical Center.

“We have the ability to offer Veterans without resources a VA-issued iPad,” Selby said. “This is done by a clinician driven consult; in which a tablet and possibly vital sign peripherals can be ordered and shipped to a Veteran. The tablet also has a host of health promotion applications and allows user to access MyHealtheVet as well. If a Veteran opts out of using telehealth, telephone consultations are offered. If a Veteran has a need that requires immediate hands-on attention, they are scheduled face-to-face appointments at the care team’s discretion.”

For information about VA’s telehealth services visit connectedcare.va.gov.

FY20 Virtual Care Statistics		
Encounter Type	Total Encounters	Increase from FY19
Telehealth	28,065	190%
Tele-Mental Health	8,035	700%
VA Video Connect	15,657	1,220%
Unique Veterans Using Secure Messaging (MyHealtheVet)	9,148	185%



Michael Selby, Connected Care Coordinator / Nurse Manager, Wilmington VA Medical Center teaches a class on utilizing technology in health care.

VA Nurses Fight COVID-19 in Southern New Jersey, Share Stories

VA nurses shared their stories after being deployed to community nursing homes in New Jersey to help assist local health care workers battle COVID-19 in the homes over the summer.

Each nurse had their own unique story on why they chose to leave their families to assist strangers in another state. But each story had a common theme: ***A sense of duty to help those in need in a time of crisis, help residents in the homes and to help fellow health care workers.***

This deployment was a part of [VA's Fourth Mission](#) of aiding local communities and health care facilities around the country when called upon in times of crisis. 50 VA nurses, from around the country assisted with operations at community nursing homes.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, teams of nurses from Wilmington VA Medical Center and other medical centers in VA's Veteran Integrated Service Network (VISN) 4 have been aiding nursing homes in southern New Jersey, as these nursing homes were seeing higher rates of COVID-19 than other homes in the country. VISN 4 provides health care to Veterans across Pennsylvania, Delaware and southern New Jersey.

Bridget Kirkner, Registered Nurse, Wilmington VAMC, deployed to Preferred Care at Absecon. "I felt the need to help care for arguably the most vulnerable population. My grandfather is currently in a long-term care facility. Just from talking on the phone with him, we know he's devastated by the isolation. Since I can't work directly with my Poppy, I wanted to be able to help ease the anxiety somewhere else in the community."

Lori Dickson. Intermediate Care Technician, Charlie Norwood VAMC, deployed to Preferred Care at Absecon. "I have always been called to help those in need, this is no exception. I am a caregiver, and that includes helping other caregivers."

Diane Grenier, Registered Nurse, West Haven VA VAMC, deployed to Elmwood Hills Healthcare Center in Blackwood. "Watching the crisis from a distance felt powerless, sad and distressing. I felt I could offer skills that would benefit as they fought the disease."

The sense of duty to help those in crisis didn't come without its own set of challenges. Through it all, compassion and understanding were the cornerstones of care.

Pamela Hargrove, Registered Nurse, James E. Van Zandt VAMC, deployed to Meadowview Nursing and Rehabilitation Center in Northfield. "Every one of these people we are caring for are someone's parent, grandparent, sibling, child, etc., and deserve to be treated and loved as we would want our own family members to be taken care of. We are their family while theirs can't be there."

Bridget Kirkner. "It's been difficult to communicate with patients and establish a real human connection because we enter their rooms all suited up, immediately making each interaction more sterile and less personal."



Bridget Kirkner and Dionne Pyle, both Registered Nurses at Wilmington VA Medical Center, deployed to Preferred Care of Absecon, N.J. to support the VA Fourth Mission of aiding local communities and health care facilities around the country when called upon in times of crisis.

But confronting these challenges provided an opportunity to get introspective and use them as learning experiences to be able to provide advice and encouragement to fellow health care workers.

Bill Hassenplug, Licensed Practical Nurse, James E. Van Zandt VAMC, deployed to Meadowview Nursing and Rehabilitation Center in Northfield. “Providing care during this pandemic has been nothing short of amazing. The advice I give to anyone working in any field of health care is again patience, patience, patience. These people are suffering, and no amount of help is unnoticed.

And, as these health care heroes reflect on their time, they will remain forever touched by answering the call and supporting VA’s Fourth Mission.

Bridget Kirkner. “I feel blessed to be a part of this fourth mission deployment, as it presents a unique opportunity to work alongside our civilian counterparts. I have tremendous appreciation for how difficult caring for patients in this type of environment.”

Pamela Hargrove. “This is the first time I have volunteered for a deployment and after just this beginning, it will not be the last. I am humbled by this experience and proud to be part of it.”

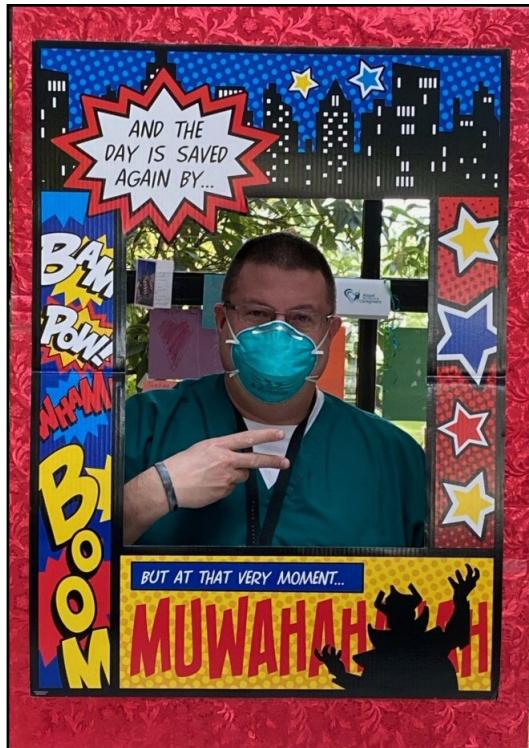
Jamila Ivy, Cardiac Monitor Technician, Pittsburgh MC, deployed to Preferred Care at Absecon. “I jumped at the chance to serve those who were in need. I was excited and humbled to do my part in this time of need. I only wish that I could do more!”

Cynthia Murray, VA southern New Jersey Strike Force Nurse Manager and Nurse Liaison for Preferred Care Absecon and Meadowview Nursing and Rehabilitation Center in Atlantic County, N.J. “It was an honor and a privilege to lead these VA nursing teams who have traveled far and wide to serve in this VA Fourth Mission in southern New Jersey civilian community nursing facilities. These nurses are a dedicated, selfless group of health care professionals.”

As part of this deployment, VA Nurses from across the country assisted in the following New Jersey community nursing homes:

- Elmwood Hills Healthcare Center in Blackwood
- Meadowview Nursing and Rehabilitation Center in Northfield
- Preferred Care at Absecon
- Premiere Cadbury of Cherry Hill
- Water’s Edge Healthcare & Rehabilitation in Trenton

To learn more about VA’s mission, vision and core values, please visit www.va.gov/about_va.



Bill Hassenplug, Licensed Practical Nurse, James E. Van Zandt VA Medical Center, deployed to Meadowview Nursing and Rehabilitation Center in Northfield, N.J. to support the VA Fourth Mission of aiding local communities and health care facilities around the country when called upon in times of crisis.

Delaware FEMA Mission

In early months of the pandemic, a team of health care practitioners from Wilmington VA Medical Center participated in a Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) mission to help health care facilities in Delaware respond to the COVID-19 crisis.

Through the FEMA mission, this group of 14 practitioners went to 96 different facilities (e.g., nursing homes, assisted living centers, skilled rehab centers, group homes, psychiatric centers) and completed more than 1,500 COVID-19 tests. Their efforts were instrumental in teaching best practices and procedures to local facilities, saving lives in the process.

Below are some photos of the team and the positive feedback from some of the facilities.



"I wanted to express my thanks for having the VA nurses visit our facility and share their expertise. They were very helpful and gave us some pointers on things we take for granted on a day-to-day basis. They were interested in speaking with our staff, which was very meaningful, they not only met with the nursing staff but also activities and housekeeping as well. They were helpful and thoughtful in their approach and they made the staff feel at ease."

"It was a pleasure having the assistance of the VA nurses for our community COVID-19 test. The presence of the VA nurses definitely assisted with streamlining the process. The nurses were extremely flexible. They fit right in with our community."



"Thank you so much for the assistance today. We were able to knock out 18 residents and everything ran like a well-oiled machine. The staff that was sent here could not have been better! They are fantastic, please pass on my gratitude. Thanks again for the help."

Sussex County CBOC and Local Partners Provide COVID Testing

Throughout the pandemic, VA health care teams rose to the challenge and led the way in providing care and assistance to the community. This is truly exemplified by the hard work and dedication shown by our Sussex County CBOC team. In May and June, when community testing sites were not as established, the team partnered with local health care systems to help stand up test sites where community members were screened, tested and given education materials.

In one instance at the Mountaire Chicken Processing plant, in the span of 14 hours, they tested, screened and educated nearly 1,800 employees. Every employee got key education on COVID-19 and were offered resources for proper isolation and what social services and mental health services are available to them. A majority of the workers we tested were Haitian and Latino.

"It was quite moving to take part in, knowing that we were testing and empowering in our most affected populations," said Dr. Romina Thomas, a VA doctor from the Sussex County CBOC. "Our volunteers, are extraordinary people and are so appreciated by the testing team for their efficiency and great attitudes. The Beebe Health System staff has expressed to me over and over what important roles they have played in the work that is being done. I am honored to work with them and grateful that the VA has given us such support in our efforts to help our community."

At each event, VA providers shared these education materials INDIVIDUALLY with EACH person tested – accounting nearly 5,000 people in Sussex county. I am very proud of the information given to all participants.

"The workers were clearly grateful for the information. Despite the cultural differences and the need for Creole and Spanish translators, their appreciation needed no interpreter's help to see."



Veterans in Long-Term Care Stay Connected, Active During COVID-19

During COVID-19, we have all had to adapt and find creative ways to stay physically and mentally active. This holds especially true for Veterans residing in the Community Living Center (CLC) at Wilmington VA Medical Center.

Tracy Dickerson, Nurse Manager of the CLC, spoke on how the medical center and her staff responded to the challenges of COVID-19.

"We acted quickly to make the tough choice to limit in-person visitations to minimize the chance of exposure to our residents and staff," Dickerson said. "We also made the Veterans aware during every change that was made. Because of our quick action and screening processes, our Veterans have not displayed any signs of COVID-19."

But, because of visitation limitations due to COVID-19, staff adjusted to overcome these challenges to keep the 40 Veterans, who call the CLC home, entertained.

"Due to social distancing measures, we have had to rethink some of our traditional activities to ensure our Veteran's safety," said Susana Cebula, CLC Recreation Therapist. "We have had to think outside of the box to provide meaningful and active therapeutic programs for our Veterans to have a sense of normalcy."

In order to continue to provide a safe environment, staff implemented video visits. Most of the residents and families who video conference, meet weekly to keep in touch.



Susana Cebula, CLC Recreation Therapist, assists CLC resident Mel Schlegel on setting up a video chat with loved ones.



Harvey Waters, a CLC resident, speaks face to face with a family member over the phone. CLC staff decorated and cleaned up the outdoor patio so help facilitate visits while ensuring Veteran and visitor safety.

"I enjoy the video chats," said Robert Hatfield, U.S. Army Veteran and CLC resident. "It's easier for both sides of the family to stay in contact with each other. It gives us an opportunity to see everyone face to face as we are all in different areas, with relatives joining from Pennsylvania, Boston and Delaware. We enjoy catching up with our weekly video sessions."

"Our team strives to provide a homelike, and compassionate environment for the residents, and recognizes the stressors brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic," said Susan Pulaski, Associate Chief Nurse – Ambulatory and Extended Care. "With the collaboration between the nurse manager, social work and recreation therapy, the residents are able to visit with their loved ones through video."

As time progressed, hospital leadership made the decision to allow Veteran residents to speak with visitors over a phone through a door or window.

"Nothing can replace in-person encounters when visiting a loved one," said Althea Hall, Social Worker, who coordinates the visits. "That is why we started our in-person visitations again. The glass provides a barrier and keeps everybody safe, but still connected. The residents really appreciate seeing their family again."

When the Veterans are not busy talking to loved ones, they are engaged in a variety of recreation therapy groups – with a physical distancing twist.

“Trivia, bingo and these special performances help to keep us busy, active and staying positive” said Gary Walker, U.S. Army Veteran and resident.

Although life is not back to normal, residents have the skills and coping mechanisms to deal the challenges.

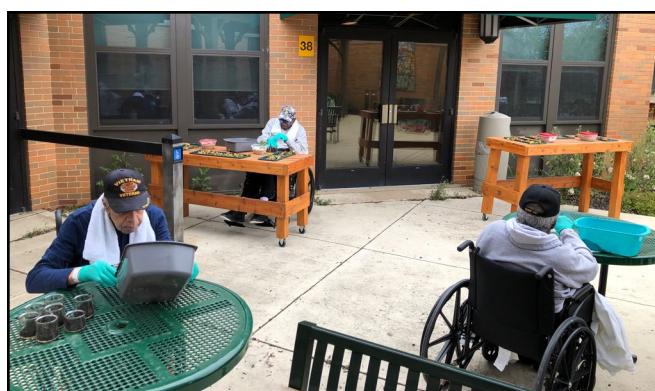
“Our Veterans are some of the most resilient people I ever have met,” said Cebula. “They continue to stay positive and look forward to remaining active.”



CLC residents tap their toes and bob their heads during a live-virtual concert performance held by the 78th Army Band. The band usually performs in-person, but they conducted a virtual concert to maintain physical distancing.



Gary Walker, a CLC resident, throws down a dunk while playing basketball in the CLC recreation area. CLC residents have found ways to stay active during the COVID-19 pandemic.



CLC residents get dirty planting their gardens. Our Veterans are eager to water and watch their seeds grow as a symbol of a fresh start during this pandemic.

Answering the Call



Our HUD-VASH (Housing and Urban Development/VA Supportive Housing) Social Work Team coordinated a meal donation to Veterans at the Pearl Center in Wilmington. The Pearl Center, part of the project-based HUD-VASH program, is an apartment complex for homeless Veterans. In all, 50 delicious BBQ meals were served to grateful Veterans.

April Filiaggi (right), a Suicide Prevention Coordinator at Wilmington VA Medical Center, bumps elbows with Lakenya Baker, the Director of Psychological Health of the 166 Airlift Wing - Delaware Air Guard, after a discussion on how their teams plan to provide joint support for Suicide Prevention Month in September.

Medical Center Director, Vince Kane and Cape May County Prosecutor, Jeff Sutherland at a VA and Veteran Engagement Forum in January 2019. The Prosecutors office gave a briefing on 100% success rate of Cape May County Diversion Program.
(Pre-COVID-19 photograph)



(Clockwise: Crystal McGee - RN, Dr. Romina Thomas, Laura Shockley - Nurse Manager and Mary Lou Kline - RN captured in action fulfilling VA's Fourth Mission of assisting the community at large during this pandemic during a joint-health care testing operation in Georgetown. **(Photos courtesy of U.S. Army National Guard Capt. Brendan Mackie)**

Stepping Up to Serve Our Communities

Battling Hunger During the Pandemic

During the pandemic, one of our proudest moments was being able to participate with local organizations to battle food insecurity among at-risk Veterans in Delaware and southern New Jersey. Proper nutrition and a healthy diet are fundamental in maintaining health. Through the events, hundreds of Veterans were provided free food for themselves and their families.



Cooking Delicious Food and Education for Veterans



This year, Nutrition and Food Services (NFS) assisted our Community Living Center Veterans with their “travel plans” by offering meals when they landed. The Veterans were able to experience authentic cuisine from approximately 20 countries during 2020, including destinations like Cuba, Singapore and Savannah, Georgia, in the USA. NFS created 60 new recipes and entered them all into our diet office software system, Computrition to support the authentic meals being created by the team. We also added monthly, seasonal specials for all meals. This too helped us to offer seasonal favorites, fresh ingredients and add more recipes to our ever expanding database.

Our goal of baking almost everything we serve was also realized this year. We worked together to create an area for baking within our operation. The program started small as we adjusted staffing and trialed the process. We kept growing, trying to give our Veterans what they were asking from us. Currently, we are baking about 45 loaves of our standard breads a week. In addition, our quick bread selection now includes favorites like blueberry muffins, banana bread, biscuits, dinner rolls and cinnamon rolls. Cookies and other sweet treats round out the baking program. All sweet treats come in regular and sugar free too.

2020 brought improvements to our equipment, like a new dish machine. This may not sound that exciting, but this new machine is able to keep our dishes, pots and pans clean and sanitized with minimal effort. The technology in our new machine also alerts for any change in temperature or need for upcoming maintenance. We were also able to add a proofing cabinet and bread slicer to support the baking efforts.

Our clinical program switched gears as the pandemic was hitting. Most care was moved to Veterans Video Connect (VVC). Over FY20, we have been growing our class options, how we reach our Veterans for Home Based Primary Care visits, and outpatient visits. We end the year just short of being first in the VISN in VVC individual appointments! We also were fortunate to start a Women’s Health program to bring unique services to our female Veterans. One the first offerings was a women’s only MOVE class. We are now on our fifth offering and have added a support group. The class is taught by a female Veteran, so there is an additional layer of connection for the participants.

The tough times in 2020 brought out creative solutions that allowed us to continue to serve those who have served us so bravely!

Voluntary Service Responds to COVID-19

During FY20, Wilmington VA Medical Center's Voluntary Service responded to COVID-19 and adjusted to the limits on in-person volunteers by assisting in procuring items to be used throughout the medical center, including PPE. They solicited the local community, Veteran Service Organizations, businesses and others to help donate items to assist in this effort. This effort allowed for new relationships being developed with corporate and community partners, which increased the positive profile of Wilmington VA Medical Center in the local communities.

FY20 Volunteer Statistics

- **Total Volunteers:** 224
(equivalent of more than 15% of paid workforce)
- **Total Volunteer Hours:** 21,785 hours
(equivalent of nearly 910 days)
- **Average Hours per Volunteer:** 97.25 hours
(nearly 2.5 work weeks per volunteer)

COVID-19 Community Donations

- Handmade Cloth Face Coverings: 6,243
- Hand Sanitizer: 30+ gallons
- N95 Masks: 5,500+
- KN95 Masks: 1,000+
- Procedure Masks: 1,000+
- Face Shields: 5 cases
- Intubation Boxes: 4

Miscellaneous

- Disposable Gowns
- Latex Gloves
- Donated meals for 4E, ICU, ED, CLC staff
- TV, stand, Facebook Portal for CLC residents

Total COVID-19 item donations at approximately

\$35,000



"Our volunteers are truly remarkable and caring individuals who help to make getting care at our facilities exceptional. We can't wait until we can have them safely return after the pandemic is under control."

Vince Kane, Director,
Wilmington VA Medical Center



Jessica Salter, a dispatcher at the medical center, sorts through donated face coverings.

Community Care Resources

With the passing of the MISSION Act in 2019, the VA greatly expanded Veterans' access to health care by allowing them to receive care in community health facilities when certain eligibility requirements are met.

Community Care Nurse Navigation teams support the medical center and are located in all Community Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOC) to facilitate local network expertise and integration with the VA Primary Care teams. The navigation teams are responsible for coordinating all community care needs, to include timely scheduling, care transition and oversight of the quality of care and veteran experience. While we continue to grow community care benefits and services, Veterans are still accessing high-quality health care at Wilmington VA Medical Center and our CBOCs.

But, in order to avoid confusion and possible delays in claims processing, the Wilmington VA Medical Center Community Care team put together some resources to assist you should you have questions about how to take advantage of these benefits and contact information to assist you in addressing any issues.

The below information can also be found at www.va.gov/COMMUNITYCARE.

Eligibility

A Veteran's eligibility for community care depends on his/her individual health care needs or circumstances. Veterans **must receive approval** from VA prior to obtaining care from a community provider, in most circumstances. Learn more about eligibility at www.va.gov/COMMUNITYCARE/programs/veterans/General_Care.asp.

Urgent Care

VA offers urgent care services to eligible Veterans at VA medical facilities or at in network urgent care clinics closer to home. Use VA's urgent care benefit to treat minor injuries and illnesses that are not life-threatening, such as colds, strep throat, sprained muscles and skin and ear infections. Learn more about urgent care at www.va.gov/COMMUNITYCARE/programs/veterans/Urgent_Care.asp.

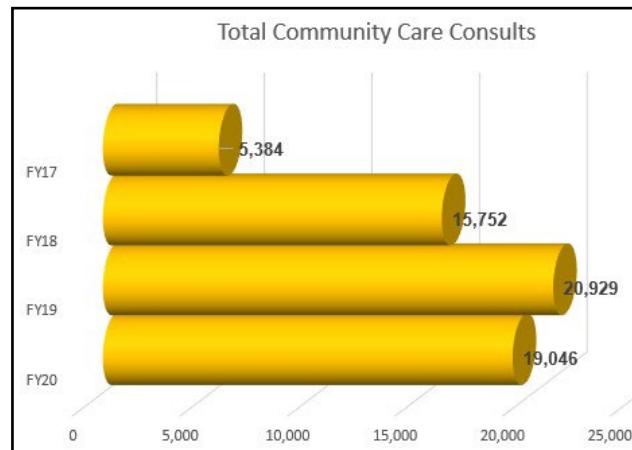
72-Hour Community Care Inpatient & ER Notification Hotline

The notification processes for emergency and inpatient care in the community changed as of June 8, 2020. All notifications of Veterans seeking emergency/inpatient care in the community will be reported to a centralized call center. Failure to report in a timely manner may impact a Veteran's eligibility for VA to cover the cost of treatment. **1-844-72HRVHA (1-844-724-7842)** | <https://emergencycarereporting.communitycare.va.gov/#/request>

Billing Issues Related to Community Care

VA's Community Care Contact Center can assist Veterans with resolving adverse credit reporting or debt collection actions resulting from authorized VA community care claims. Specially trained call center staff work one-on-one with Veterans to research and resolve collection-specific issues. Veterans should gather any letters, notices or information regarding debt collection or adverse credit reports related to authorized use of VA community care and call the number listed below between 8 a.m. – 9 p.m. **1-877-881-7618**,

Option 1



Contact the Wilmington VA Medical Center Community Care Team

For all other Community Care-related questions, please call Wilmington VA Medical Center's dedicated Community Care line below between 8 a.m. – 4:30 p.m. Please leave a message if calling Community Care after hours.

302-633-5353

Veteran Presents Flags to VA Health Care Workers



(Left) Mary Lou Kline, a registered nurse, receives a flag from Chaplain Al "Mr. Positive" Kraft at the Sussex County Community Based Outpatient Clinic in Georgetown, Delaware. (Right) A donated flag honoring Veterans Affairs health care workers is displayed in the main lobby of the Wilmington VA Medical Center.

As the COVID-19 pandemic swept through Delaware, a local Veteran found a way to honor health care workers in a very Veteran way. Chaplain Al Kraft, also known as Mr. Positive, began a mission of honoring his new heroes at Delaware health care facilities with framed American flags.

The 72-year-old Vietnam Veteran, who served 18 years (1966 – 1983), wanted to find a unique way to honor those fighting the pandemic on the front lines.

"The way many of the people in the health care field were sending their kids to other relatives so they did not have to go home with chance of infecting them, I was really impressed and motivated to do make something beautiful and inspirational for them," he said about health care workers who are giving up so much to protect the community and to show them they are American Hero's.

Mr. Positive honored his military connections by starting his mission presenting flags to the health care workers who care for our nation's Veterans at Wilmington Veterans Affairs Medical Center and its Delaware Community Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOC) in Kent and Sussex counties – in Dover and Georgetown respectively.

His time serving his country as a Navy Counselor was spent specializing in career and drug and alcohol counseling. Now a chaplain, it is clear helping others is always something he has held close to his heart.

"I have learned, in the short time that I've had the pleasure of knowing him, that Mr. Kraft has a strong heart, desire and calling to make the world a better place," said Chaplain Brynn White, Acting Chief of Chaplain Services at Wilmington VA Medical Center. "While he has already given much to this country, he continues his calling of giving back—but this time by honoring health care heroes working on the front lines. His energy to change the world one person at a time is contagious, and we are thankful for Al."

After honoring the health care workers at Wilmington VA Medical Center and its CBOCs in Dover and Georgetown, he is working on knocking out his list of other local hospitals with the hopes of starting a trend and expanding into other states.

It's an Exciting Time for the Wilmington VA Eye Clinic!

The eye clinic is expanding!

We are proud to be able to serve our Veterans, just as they have served our country! In the Wilmington VA Eye Clinic, we are fortunate to have a mixture of long-time outstanding, dedicated VA providers and ophthalmic technicians as well as an influx of new doctors that have brought new skills and the ability to care for an expanded number of patients.

The Eye Clinic is proud to provide our Veterans with an expanding range of treatment options for many eye diseases. We are pleased to be offering the latest in traditional and multi-focal lens implants for cataract surgery, a larger spectrum of surgical treatment options for glaucoma including the iStent and micropulse laser as well as new services such as retinal and oculoplastic (eyelid) surgery. Additionally, we will soon be offering basic low vision services in Wilmington and all of our clinics to our Veterans dealing with vision loss.

In a nutshell, we are ready to deliver care to more Veterans than ever before.

In addition, we are exploring how to deliver care locally to Veterans who might not be able to travel to Wilmington. The Wilmington VA Optometry Service has long been providing telemedicine photo interpretation for diabetic retinopathy. We are expanding on this excellent program by joining the VA Technology-based Eye Care Services (TECS) program to provide not only diabetic photos but also provide glasses and glaucoma management to our Veterans who live near the Sussex County CBOC.

We are also looking forward to the opening of the expanded Kent County CBOC in early 2021, which will be able to offer care closer to home for our southern Delaware Veterans. Finally, we are exploring how to deliver local care for diabetes and macular degeneration at the Kent and Cape May county CBOCs

It's an exciting time for eye care at the Wilmington VA! The optometry and ophthalmology services have never been able to offer this spectrum of care over this broad an area with this degree of sophistication.

Come check us out! See how the Wilmington VA Eye Service can help you!

Patient Advocates

During the pandemic, our Patient Advocate team quickly adapted to ensure Veteran concerns continued to be resolved in a timely manner. They became one of the first patient advocate teams to offer virtual visits. That critical virtual link to Veterans quarantined in their homes for months served to calm the Veteran's fears and reassure them that VA was still here to meet their needs.

Together the advocates accumulated almost **12,000 encounters in fiscal year 2020**. About half of those encounters were responding to the Voice of the Veteran (Veteran Signals) surveys veterans randomly receive through email after their outpatient visits. Every Veteran that responds to the survey receives an email from one of the advocates thanking them for participating. If any concerns are raised in their response, the advocate will then call the Veteran to learn what VA can do better in the future.

In addition to the surveys, the advocates speak to an average of 210 Veterans each month with a goal of resolving their concern within seven days.

Contact Patient Advocates

You can contact our Patient Advocate team at VHAWIMPATIENTADVOCATE@va.gov or by calling **302-994-2511 Ext. 5556/5436**.

Working to Prevent and End Veteran Homelessness in Delaware and Southern New Jersey

In August 2020, the VA announced it awarded 425 grants to community organizations across the country totaling approximately \$279 million under the Grant Per Diem (GPD) program.

The GPD Program provides funding to community organizations that provide transitional housing and supportive services for homeless Veterans, with the goal of helping homeless Veterans achieve residential stability, increase their skill levels and income and obtain greater self-determination.

“The GPD program is one component of VA’s coordinated partnerships of services and resources to help Veterans exit homelessness,” said Vince Kane, Director, Wilmington VA Medical Center. “No Veteran should ever have to worry whether they will have stable housing, and these grants put us one step closer to ensuring all Veterans are living in a safe and supportive environment with access to health care and other supportive services.”

In Delaware and southern New Jersey, four local organizations received grants.

Delaware

- Home of the Brave – Milford
- Warriors Helping Warriors Inc. – Middletown
- Young Men’s Christian Association of Delaware – Wilmington

Southern New Jersey

- Everywhere and Now Public Housing Residents Organizing Nationally Together Inc. – Atlantic City

More Information

The award period began Oct. 1 to support three different types of grants to address the unique needs of Veterans who are homeless:

- **Per Diem only grants** are used to provide transitional housing beds and operate service centers for Veterans experiencing homelessness.
- **Special Need grants** provide funding to organizations that incur additional operational costs to help Veterans with special needs who are experiencing homelessness, including women, individuals with chronic mental illnesses and Veterans who care for minor dependents.
- **Transition in Place grants** provide funding to community agencies that place Veterans experiencing homelessness in transitional housing while providing them with supportive services.

Information about the GPD program and a list of grantees is available at www.va.gov/homeless/gpd.asp.



Wilmington VAMC employees volunteered to assist the fight on homelessness in Delaware on January 29, 2020. Every year the Housing Alliance of Delaware hosts a Point in Time Count - a volunteer event that helps get a more accurate headcount on the homeless population in Delaware. (Pre-COVID-19 photograph)

Quick Action by Wilmington VA Police Saves Veteran's Life

On a summer night in June 2020, officers assigned to Charlie Squad of Wilmington Veterans Affairs Medical Center's police department were conducting their normal duties around the medical center campus. Charlie Squad patrolled the grounds, monitored vehicle and foot traffic and maintained general security in and around the campus buildings.

"The night was like any other, we had just finished our required checks of the medical center campus and were discussing the upcoming retirement of a fellow officer," said Lieutenant David Stroup, a Marine Corp Veteran and a VA police officer for the last seven years.

For Officer Ardell Francis, who has twice deployed to Afghanistan as a civilian with the National Geospatial Intelligence Agency and Defense Intelligence Agency as a quick reaction force specialist and has been an officer with VA for less than two years, he was using this time to learn from the elder statesmen in the group.

"I remember talking with Officer Mark Roberts about his retirement plans," he said. "I was looking forward to picking his mind that night and seeing what else I could learn from him before he retired. I remember him telling me that if I work hard and do what I have to, good things will come."

It was during this conversation when the officers of Charlie Squad responded to an alarm in the emergency department.

Lieutenant Stroup and Officer Francis recall that after responding to an alarm, they noticed several nurses walking with a Veteran toward the exit. The nurses said the Veteran was OK to go and said he was just frustrated, and that he was on his way out of the medical center.

The officers had no reason to stop the Veteran, but they knew they should speak with him and see what assistance they could offer to help this Veteran.

"I felt deep in my soul that something was wrong when I saw the Veteran was departing. I couldn't put my hand on it at the time, but my gut was telling



Officer Ardell Francis displays his VA Police Heroism Award. Francis got the award for running into traffic to save the life of a Veteran making an attempt on his life.

me to follow him and make sure he was truly okay," Officer Francis said. "Sometimes people say they are good but deep down inside they are screaming for help."

VA police officers rely on their breadth of training/experiences to prepare them for interactions like this.

"Due to my training and experience, I could tell something was off with the Veteran and wanted to exhaust every opportunity I had with him," said Stroup, who is certified in crisis intervention, a member of the Veterans Response Team, a certified mental health first aid trainer and provides mental health-focused training to Delaware law enforcement officers.

As the conversation progressed, the officers walked with Veteran to the main entrance of the medical center to see him on his way as the Veteran left for the evening. But then, the tone of the conversation shifted when the Veteran informed the officers he was homeless and declined offers connecting him with a social work team for temporary shelter options.

The Veteran then unexpectedly walked onto a busy highway outside of the medical center while verbally making a threat on his own life.

"The Veteran made a statement that he was going to cross the road, said Lieutenant Stroup. "Officer Francis and I began watching north and southbound traffic lanes as the Veteran was approaching the highway. At that moment, there was no traffic coming, and as the Veteran began to cross the road, he began walking in a straight direction, in the middle of the highway. We gave several commands for him to get out of the road, but the Veteran ignored us as oncoming traffic approached, without appearing to slow down."

With no regard for his personal safety, acting strictly on reflexes, Officer Francis ran onto the highway, narrowly missing passing vehicles, to protect the Veteran. Lieutenant Stroup and Officer Roberts followed and together, these officers of Charlie Squad saved the Veteran's life.

"When I first saw the Veteran headed towards traffic, I thought to myself this cannot be happening," Officer Francis said. "I looked up and saw that the vehicles weren't slowing down. I don't recall thinking anything in that moment. I just remember seeing the cars and reacting. It all seemed to be happening in slow motion. It wasn't until I saw the video footage that I realized just how close it truly was. At the end of the day when I'm asked what made me do it? I believe that's a simple answer. I did it because that's someone's dad, that was a Veteran who served our great country. He risked his life for us, so why not do the same for him?"

Francis says his upbringing instilled ideals in him to think of others and to protect.

"My mother and stepfather were cops," he said, "and they showed me that one person can make a difference in life. They are not here today, but if they were, I know they would have done the same thing. When you put on this badge you are representing your agency and this country. I swore to protect our Veterans whether I knew them or not. That's what we signed up to do. The reward for me is knowing that I was able to say thank you to one of our Veterans in a unique way and that means the world to me."

Officer Francis also says his actions are a testament to the team culture the department has at Wilmington VA Medical Center.

"This department takes pride in helping our Veterans," he stated. "When I was hired here, I could just feel the enthusiasm to help our Veterans running through the veins of every single police officer here. I have worked for many police departments, but none have given me such an immense sense of pride like this one. When I go home, I truly feel like I did something special. I get to hear stories from Veterans as I help wheel them to their vehicle or help when lost on campus. I go home and feel like I actually helped improve a Veteran's day. The VA is a completely different type of policing than I am used to experiencing. This police department is about being way more involved with the community you serve and knowing your craft. The more you know the more you can help our Veterans. This department does all it can to provide us with what we need to ensure that our veterans receive the best service possible. It's been a humbling experience to be a part of this caring culture."

For his actions described above, Officer Francis was awarded the National VA Police Heroism Award.

"The actions of Officer Francis define heroism and make him the ideal candidate for such an award," said Paul Woodland, Acting Chief of Police, who nominated Officer Francis for the award. "His actions were above and beyond the call of duty, but I am sure this humble officer would say he was, 'Just doing my job'. Had Officer Francis not taken this action, we would most certainly be looking at a tragedy."

Officer Francis said he felt humbled by the nomination.

"It doesn't feel real; I was honored just to be nominated," he said. "I want to say thanks to Deputy Chief Paul Woodland for nominating me for this award; I find it hard to even comprehend that I was chosen to receive this award. Truthfully speaking, my shift deserves credit as well. Lieutenant Stroup and Officer Roberts played a pivotal role in keeping this Veteran safe. One thing is for certain, I am blessed to be a part of this team!"

If you are a Veteran or know a Veteran in crisis, please call the Veterans Crisis Line at 1-800-273-8255, Press 1 or text 838255 to connect with a responder 24/7.

Parking Garage Construction

In June 2020, we began the construction process on our medical center's new parking garage. Our new four-story, 370-spot parking complex will include a covered walkway to our hospital's West entrance. This will become our facility's main entrance so Veterans have immediate, convenient access to routinely utilized services, such as: Release of Information, Eligibility and Enrollment, Billing, Patient Advocates and Veterans Transportation.

While we make these improvements, we will be prioritizing Veteran parking on our campus to help ensure that there is minimal impact to the ease of access to health care while at our facility. We have created new temporary lots and will be providing shuttle services to our entrances to for your convenience. While we are working to lessen any inconvenience to you during construction, please allow some extra time (15 minutes) when visiting the hospital for an appointment.

We appreciate your patience and understanding while we make these improvements to our facility, which will help provide you with an enhanced health care experience. We anticipate being finished with construction early Spring 2021.



New Cape May County CBOC Opens

In late FY20, we wrapped up construction and moved the Cape May County CBOC to its new location in Rio Grande, New Jersey.

The new 11,000 square foot site continues to provide Veterans with the same services that were available at the former site, including: primary care, preventative care, mental health care, women's health, laboratory services, podiatry and social work services.

In early December 2020, we opened the doors to Veterans in the new space.



"In VA, it is our mission to put Veterans first in everything we do and provide them with exceptional health care. It is our privilege to meet these needs and challenges Veterans face. These clinics are an example of that commitment."

Vince Kane, Director, Wilmington VA Medical Center

New Kent County CBOC to Open

During FY20, we made tremendous progress in the construction of our new Kent County CBOC in Dover. The new facility in the former Blue Hen Mall at 655 S. Bay Road in Dover is scheduled to open early 2021 and will increase the clinic space from its current size of 9,000 square feet to over 29,000 square feet.

The additional space will allow for the expansion of existing services such as: primary care, behavioral health, specialty services and telehealth.

The new clinic will include audiology, optometry, phlebotomy, women's health, physical rehabilitation and an expanded waiting area and conference rooms.



Recognition for Commitment to Environmental Excellence

Wilmington VA Medical Center runs its environmental management program under Green Environmental Management System (GEMS). As part of GEMS program, the facility recycles wide ranges of collected items on a daily basis.

Wilmington is consistently achieving its environmental sustainability program goals through pollution prevention, recycling, green purchasing, electronic stewardship and environmental compliance. Cardboard, paper, plastic, tin, aluminum, cooking oil, used printer cartridges, scrap metals, waste medical solvents and e-waste are collected and recycled routinely as part of waste/pollution prevention and cost-saving effort.

Wilmington VAMC received two awards in FY20 for the previous year's effort related to our commitment to environmental excellence and sustainability.

- **Practice Greenhealth (PGH) Emerald Award 2020.** Recognizes the top 20% of the highest-scoring applicants that are setting the standard in reducing waste, addressing chemicals of concern, tackling sustainable procurement, and achieving significant successes in a range of other programmatic areas. Winning hospitals have demonstrated a strong commitment to sustainability and shown leadership in the local community and in the health care sector.
- **VA Sustainability Award for Pollution Prevention.** VA Medical Center Wilmington received the 2020 VA Sustainability Award from the Energy Management Program, VA Central Office. The facility has been recognized for its successful environmental management program through pollution prevention, recycling, green purchasing, electronic stewardship and environmental compliance.



Recycling (FY20)	Tons	Equivalent
Cardboard, non-sensitive papers, soda cans, plastic	67.9 tons	5,000 Bullion bars of gold
Sensitive papers	52.7 tons	5.8 billion feathers
Construction and demolition waste	22.5 tons	7,500 standard red bricks
Scrap metal	12 tons	12 Liberty Bells
Used cooking oil	1.8 tons	56 cubic feet of seawater
TOTAL:	156.9 tons	31.5 ambulances



(Top) Shaikh A. Tayeb Environmental Engineer/GEMS Coordinator stands with the PGH Emerald Award next to "Trophy Row" with all of the medical center's previous environmental awards. (Bottom) Tayeb shows off a water sanitization system the medical center uses. This system sanitizes all incoming water before it is distributed throughout the center.



VA Video Connect

VA Telehealth

Real-Time Access to Your VA Care Team Through VA Video Connect

Conduct Visits With Your Provider Through Live Video

VA Video Connect makes VA health care more convenient for you and other Veterans and Caregivers. VA Video Connect enables you to quickly and easily meet with your VA care team through secure and private videoconferencing sessions. You can visit with your provider in a virtual medical room, from anywhere, using the camera on your phone, computer, or tablet.



Talk with your provider about using VA Video Connect if:



You live far from your VA facility or have limited access to VA facilities.



You have health conditions that make traveling to the VA specialist you need difficult.



You lack time to regularly attend in-person appointments.



You don't require a hands-on physical examination.

A Step-by-Step Guide

1. **Visit the website.** Learn more about VA Video Connect at mobile.va.gov/appstore.
2. **Get set up.** Open VA Video Connect by selecting your appointment link. VA Video Connect opens in a web browser on Android, macOS, and Windows. (Apple iPhone and iPad users will need to download the mobile app from the Apple App Store.)
3. **Test your device.** On the VA Video Connect app page, select “Visit the VA Video Connect test site” to set up your microphone and speakers. You can also ask your VA care team for a practice session.
4. **Troubleshoot technical problems. Need help?** Call the VA National Telehealth Technology Help Desk at **866-651-3180** or **703-234-4483**, Monday through Saturday, 7 a.m. – 11 p.m. Eastern Time.

Get Started Today!

mobile.va.gov/appstore | www.connectedcare.va.gov

Refill Your VA Prescriptions from the Comfort of Your Home

At Wilmington VA Medical Center, the health and safety of our Veterans is our number one priority. Our Pharmacy Service is dedicated to providing you with the best care in the safest possible way during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To reduce the time spent in the facility and to further lower COVID-19 transmission risk to all Veterans and VA staff, we have asked that all VA providers to request mail delivery when issuing routine prescriptions. We ask that you only come to the pharmacy if you need a medication the same day. Otherwise, please use the mail out option for all routine and refill requests.

4 Ways to Refill Your VA Prescriptions from Home

1. Phone

Automated Refill Line:

302-633-5484

Pharmacy Services Line:

800-461-8262 ext. 5359

2. Online

You can use My HealtheVet at www.myhealthevet.va.gov to refill your VA prescriptions and view your VA prescription history online.

3. Mail

Send your refill slips to:

Wilmington VA Medical Center
Attn: Pharmacy (119)
1601 Kirkwood Hwy
Wilmington, DE 19805

4. New Mobile App

Visit mobile.va.gov/app/rx-refill or scan the QR code below with your device's camera to learn more and to download the app.



Information on Mail-Order Prescriptions

- All medications will be processed and sent to your mailbox quickly. Please make sure your mailing address on file with the VA is correct. If you need to make a change, please visit www.va.gov/change-address or call your Patient Aligned Care Team (PACT).
- The VA does **NOT** have an automatic refill option.
- Requesting your next refill **as soon as you receive your medication** in the mail (unless it is a narcotic) results in on time delivery!
- Our Pharmacy Services is doing their best to proactively offset any delays in mail-order prescriptions through USPS. If you haven't received yours within 7 – 10 business days of the date indicated on the prescription, please contact us at **800-461-2511 ext. 5359** or through Secure Messaging on MyHealtheVet.

Please call Pharmacy Service Call Center with any questions at
800-461-8262 ext. 5359.

It is our pleasure to serve you.

Suicide Prevention is Our Top Clinical Priority

Suicide prevention is VA's top clinical priority and Wilmington VA Medical Center has adopted a public health approach to suicide prevention.

The goal of VA's suicide prevention efforts is not to get every Veteran VA care, but rather to partner with communities and Veteran Service Organizations to help Veterans get the right care, whenever and wherever they need it.

This strategy is particularly important as we battle a pandemic that has caused disruptions in how we connect and support each other on a day-to-day basis while many Veterans have delayed seeking essential mental health care including addiction services. The pandemic, stigma and delays in seeking treatment increase the risk for suicide

The Wilmington approach is consistent with the VHA model where prevention approaches cut across all sectors in which Veterans may interact, and collaborating with Veterans Service Organizations, state and local leaders, medical professionals, criminal justice officials, private employers and many other stakeholders.

Wilmington has expanded its general and specialized mental health (PTSD, chronic pain intensive case management, Veteran peer supports) and addiction services while also pushing for statewide initiatives with the Governors Office's in both New Jersey and Delaware to prevent and end suicide among Veterans. Similar to what we did in the fight to end Veteran homelessness it takes a coordinated and collaborative approach.

Put simply, VA in partnership with the community must ensure suicide prevention is a part of every aspect of Veterans' lives, not just their interactions with VA. We have to be in the community and with the community connecting Veterans to the best health care, benefits, employment, housing and other supports needed to truly promote the health and well-being of Veterans.

Scheduling a Mental Health Appointment

Do not delay essential mental health care. Veterans can schedule in-person and virtual mental health appointments by calling **1-800-461-8262 Option 2**.

Veterans Crisis Line

The Veterans Crisis Line is a free, confidential resource that Veterans, their families, and their friends can access every day at any time. Call **1-800-273-8255** and Press **1**, chat online at VeteransCrisisLine.net or text to **838255**. Trained responders — some of them Veterans themselves — are ready to listen, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.



Suicide Prevention Coordinators

Wilmington VAMC has suicide prevention coordinators to make sure Veterans receive needed counseling and services. (Calls to the Veterans Crisis Line are referred to local coordinators). You can contact our team during normal business hours at **302-275-5676** or **302-354-7052**.

Wilmington Medical Center and CBOCs Locations

Main Medical Center

Delaware Clinics

New Jersey Clinics

Wilmington VA Medical Center

1601 Kirkwood Highway
Wilmington, DE 19805
Phone:
1-800-461-8262

Cumberland County CBOC

79 West Landis Avenue
Vineland, NJ 08360
Phone:
1-800-461-8262, ext.6500

Atlantic County CBOC

1909 New Road
Northfield, NJ 08225
Phone:
1-800-461-8262, ext.2800

Kent County CBOC

Current Location
1198 S Governors Ave St. 201
Dover, DE 19904
New Location Opening early 2021:
655 S Bay Road, Dover, DE 19901
Phone:
1-800-461-8262, ext. 2400

Cape May County CBOC

3801 US 9 South – Unit 2
(County Commons)
Rio Grande, NJ 08242
Phone:
1-800-461-8262, ext.2850

Sussex County CBOC

21748 Roth Avenue
Georgetown, DE 19947
Phone:
1-800-461-8262, ext.2300

VA



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Wilmington VA Medical Center