



VA Rolls Out New Clinics and Mobile Pharmacies

The VA extends its dedication to “providing the best in health care,” said VA Secretary James Peake, as he announced on March 20 plans to open 14 new community-based outpatient clinics (CBOCs) in seven states. In addition, just two days earlier, the VA announced the deployment of three mobile pharmacy units (MPUs) that will provide prescription medications to patients in the event of a major emergency, including a natural disaster.

The new CBOCs are scheduled to be built and begin operating some time this year in the following locations: Phillips County, AR; Coles County, IL; Scott County, IN; the counties of Carroll, Christian, and Graves in KY; Stillwater, OK; Bolivar and the counties of Campbell, Dyer, Roane, Sevier, and Warren in TN; and Lewis County, WA. The exact locations, opening dates, and health care services planned for each clinic are still to be determined.

The VA stated that many of the new clinics were designated a priority under the Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services (CARES) plan. Since its inception in 2002, CARES has aimed to identify gaps in service and locate infrastructure that can be utilized or consolidated to improve VA health care services. The VA has approved a total of 64 new clinics to become operational in 2008.

An assessment of the VA’s response to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005 was a catalyst for the development of the agency’s first MPUs. First exhibited in September 2007 at VA headquarters in Washington, DC, the MPU is a 40-ft, solid steel trailer able to withstand winds of a category 3 storm. Each

unit contains a satellite connection to the VA Consolidated Mail Outpatient Pharmacy (an automated prescription mail delivery system that can process more than 1,000 prescriptions per hour) and includes separate work and sleep quarters for pharmacists as well as a patient entrance. The VA plans to station the MPUs in Dallas, TX; Murfreesboro, TN; and Charleston, SC and expects to acquire a fourth unit for placement in the western United States.

VA’s Travel Nurse Corps Set to Take Off

With a loss of nearly 23,000 registered nurses projected through fiscal year 2012, and three quarters of VA facilities using contract nurses to meet staffing needs, the VA unveiled the Travel Nurse Corps (TNC) on March 11. A main focus of the three-year pilot program is to recruit new hires, with hopes of assimilating them into permanent VA positions. The program addresses “supplemental staffing needs, while also ensuring...a continued commitment to quality and safety,” stated VHA Chief Nursing Services Officer Catherine Rick.

Currently headquartered at the Carl T. Hayden VA Medical Center (VAMC) in Phoenix, AZ, the TNC will start by sending up to 75 nurses to VAMCs across the United States, where they will fill staff vacancies and reduce the use of contracted employees. Assignment lengths will vary from several weeks to several months, according to needs of the facility. The TNC also will serve as a reserve pool of experienced nurses should a national emergency arise.

Once employed by the VA as part of the TNC, nurses will receive one

month of standardized new hire training and one week each in training as a current employee and in emergency response. While TNC employees are required to accept assignments as needed, most assignments will be in close proximity to the nurses’ permanent residence. TNC employees are eligible for such compensation as salary, lodging, travel expenses, and incidentals. They are not eligible for benefits, however, or salary beyond hours actually worked.

The TNC program will be subject to oversight for cost and challenges and will be expanded as appropriate. The VA hopes the TNC can serve as a future model for meeting the supplemental staffing needs for physicians, pharmacists, and therapists.

Free VA Health Care for Recent Combat Veterans Extended

As announced on February 28, military veterans—including reserve and National Guard members—who served in combat since November 11, 1998 are now eligible for five years of free care in a VA hospital, outpatient clinic, or nursing home for most medical conditions. Included in the National Defense Authorization Act of 2008, which was signed by President Bush on January 28, this provision extends the period of free care from the two years previously available. The five-year deadline applies only to veterans with non-service-related conditions; those with service-related injuries may apply for VA health care benefits any time after honorable military discharge. The VA also has extended dental benefits from 90 to 180 days postdischarge. ●