

VA PITTSBURGH HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

VETERANS CONNECT

{ ISSUE 11 | 2020 }

Contact-Free CLC Visits

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U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Veterans Health Administration
VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System



Dear Veterans,

We at VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System (VAPHS) are committed to providing you with exceptional and safe care during the COVID-19 pandemic. Part of our commitment is ensuring that you, our Veteran patients, receive the best and most appropriate level of care for your health care needs.

As COVID-19 research advances, we adapt to updated guidance for treating and preventing the disease. One change we made early on to prevent the spread of COVID-19 was to discontinue valet service at University Drive. With that change, we needed to find a way to free up spaces for patient parking.

As of mid-September, we now require some staff to park in an off-site lot and ride a shuttle to University Drive. For their safety and yours, shuttle riders follow COVID-19 safety protocols: They wear face coverings and practice physical distancing and proper hand hygiene.

The additional parking for patients allows us to schedule more in-person appointments at University Drive while keeping COVID-19 safety protocols in place. We continuously monitor COVID-19 trends when deciding whether to increase, or decrease, the number of daily appointments. We also continue to provide our very successful VA Video Connect and phone appointments to serve you in your home, as appropriate.

Thank you for choosing VAPHS for your health care. As always, we look forward to serving you.

Sincerely,

Donald E. Koenig
Director, VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System

Front cover: Army Veteran Kathy White greets her son, George, during a contact-free Community Living Center visit. A glass door between the two protects both from the coronavirus, allowing Kathy White to remove her mask.



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.

File Travel Claims Online

New System Replaces Kiosks



As of Nov. 2, you can now file and track your travel reimbursement claims using the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) new Beneficiary Travel Self-Service System (BTSSS).

BTSSS is a web-based portal that changes how eligible Veterans claim mileage reimbursement for travel to and from VA health care or VA-authorized, non-VA health care. You can access it at your convenience on any internet-connected computer or mobile device. Although it replaces the use of kiosks to file claims, you will still have the option to file in-person and hard-copy claims.

WITH BTSSS YOU CAN:



Submit and track claims online 24/7/365



Initiate claims from the privacy of your home for any completed appointments



Use self-help tools to make claims submission fast and easy

Eligible Veterans, their caregivers and beneficiaries can use BTSSS to submit travel claims for reimbursement of costs from a personally owned vehicle, common carrier, pre-approved meals and/or lodging and other travel-related expenses such as tolls, parking and luggage. When filing community care claims, be sure to upload provider verification of your appointment.

 For questions about beneficiary travel at VA Pittsburgh, call 412-360-6162 or 412-822-2049.



To access BTSSS:

- 1 Go online to access.va.gov
- 2 Choose "I am a Veteran"
- 3 Click on "Veteran Travel Claim Entry"
- 4 Log in with your DS LOGON

Need a DS LOGON? Go to myaccess.dmdc.osd.mil

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: 412-360-6700

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

Prosthetics: 412-822-3728

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

Release of Information:

412-822-1135 or ROIPGH@va.gov

Research: 412-360-2386

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.va.gov/pittsburgh-health-care/health-services



Cancer Survivorship Program

Support After Treatment Ends

“I learned a lot about the cancer I had, what is out there to help me and how to be on the lookout for it coming back.”

If you receive cancer care at VA, you might be eligible for our Cancer Survivorship Program. We brought this national VA program to VA Pittsburgh to provide you with continued support after you complete cancer treatment. It is an essential part of the quality care we provide.

As a program participant, you will meet with a survivorship provider to discuss diagnosis issues, treatment and a survivorship care plan. The survivorship provider might share relevant information with your primary care provider and refer you to additional clinics or specialties to address other health issues, as needed.

To keep you safe during COVID-19, we also now offer the program by telephone or through VA Video Connect (VVC). VVC lets you quickly and easily meet with your VA health care providers

through live video on any computer, tablet or mobile device with an internet connection. Learn more at mobile.va.gov/app/va-video-connect.

Veterans give the Cancer Survivorship Program high marks.

“I was hesitant at first because I thought I didn’t need it,” said one Veteran in response to an anonymous survey. “I’m glad I went. I learned a lot about the cancer I had, what is out there to help me and how to be on the lookout for it coming back.”

You might be eligible if you:

- Are diagnosed with stage I, II or III cancer and completed your treatment, including surgery, radiation and medical oncology.
- Received treatment within VA. Community Care is excluded

unless you returned to VA for a follow-up appointment.

- Completed treatment within the last six months and are not currently on hormone therapy. If you are on hormone therapy, we can extend eligibility to 18 months.
- Received treatment for curative intent for initial cancer occurrence.

 To learn more about the program, call **Lisa Denk at 412-360-3139** or **Jeanne Green at 412-360-6195**.

CREATIVE ARTS THERAPY

Creative arts therapies are powerful tools for healing mind and body. Our therapists can help you manage stress, improve memory, cope with PTSD, alleviate pain, build self-esteem and more. Most have advanced degrees/licensure in professional counseling and are trained in suicide prevention and to be sensitive to trauma triggers.

“Creative arts therapists are mental health care providers,” said Jamie Sloan, recreation and creative arts supervisor. “The term ‘therapist’ in their title refers to psychotherapist, as in art psychotherapist or dance/movement psychotherapists.”

Our music, art, drama and dance/movement therapists can see you as an outpatient either in person or through telehealth. They also provide clinical care to inpatients, including in our Community Living Center. Therapy sessions typically last 45 to 90 minutes and are a key component to Whole Health.

To give you a better understanding of creative arts therapies, we asked our therapists to tell us about their work **IN THEIR OWN WORDS.**



SECOND LADY VISITS HEINZ

Second Lady Karen Pence and Secretary of Veterans Affairs Robert Wilkie visited our H.J. Heinz III campus on July 29 to learn about our programs for creative arts therapies and suicide prevention. Pence heard from Veterans who receive care at VAPHS and our creative arts therapists.





“Dance/movement therapy helps us heal when words can’t tell our stories. Movement is accessible to all; rarely resembles traditional dance forms from any one culture or people; and includes how we walk, breathe, hold ourselves in a chair or bed, notice tension in our bodies and present ourselves to the world. It uses the body and its movement to heal, foster connection and build resilience.” —*Brianna Martin, dance/movement therapist*



“When a Veteran with Parkinson’s who had difficulty speaking, shallow breathing and a stutter said he used to sing and knew many Peter, Paul and Mary songs, I played guitar and we sang the trio’s songs together. Through just a few sessions, his breath deepened, his voice grew louder, and his lyrics were smooth with no notice of the stutter. At the end of our time he was speaking better and left Heinz with a lighter heart.” —*Virginia Dougherty, music therapist*



“We play many roles in our lives from the dreamer, the friend and the caretaker to ones we dislike such as the victim, the witness and the lost one. Through role-playing, storytelling and creative writing, drama therapy is a safe place to learn how the roles came to be, their purposes and strengths. It helps Veterans embrace roles they can’t change and discover new ones to help them cope with life’s challenges.” —*Rosimar Hernandez, former VAPHS drama therapist*



“For Veterans who have had experiences or emotions that are challenging to talk about, either because they can’t describe it or feel no one would understand, the art-making process is a way to communicate and express one’s feelings without words. There is no right or wrong answer, no good or bad art, and no judgment on one’s process or creation. The goal is self-expression and meeting therapeutic goals.” —*Krystal Neal, art therapist*



Contact-Free CLC Visits

Balance Safety with Visitation

Seeing family through a glass barrier seemed demeaning at first to Vietnam Veteran Thomas Deasy, a resident of VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System's Community Living Center (CLC). But after his first contact-free visit with a cousin, he's anxious for more such visits with loved ones.

"We touched hands against the glass, and while that seems so strange, it gives comfort," said Deasy, a former Army infantryman who fought during the 1968 TET Offensive. "It was such a warm, emotional experience."

VA Pittsburgh started the contact-free visits in August. In-person visitation had been restricted since March to keep COVID-19 out of the CLC on its H.J. Heinz III campus in O'Hara Township.

CLC Medical Director Dr. Kawita Vichare said the 15-minute visits balance safety with bringing loved ones together.

"It's critical for Veterans to see their families, and we want to provide as much access as possible," Vichare said. "But we're still on high alert because it takes just one person to start an outbreak."

For safety, visits are scheduled in advance and limited to two visitors per Veteran. Visitors await their turn in their vehicles, are screened for COVID-19 symptoms before approaching the glass door, wear masks and observe physical distancing.

Participants talk through the glass, with personal cell phones or a VA-provided landline or walkie talkies. Staff clean and sanitize the glass

door and everything on both sides before the next visit. Staff assist on both sides of the glass but leave upon request for privacy.

The number of weekly scheduled visits depends on many factors. VAPHS suspends all visits when necessary for COVID-19 safety.

George White, of Pittsburgh, welcomed the opportunity in September to visit with his mother, Army Veteran Kathy White. It was their first in-person visit since February, when the two had celebrated her 65th birthday.

"It's good for their psyche because when you are not able to see your loved ones, one can become very frustrated, and even depressed," he said. "Seeing your loved one, even through glass, lets them know you still care about them." ■



“Seeing your loved one, even through glass, lets them know you still care about them.”

– George White, son of Army Veteran Kathy White

George White, left, greets his mother, Army Veteran Kathy White, through a glass door during a contact-free visit. A VAPHS staff member who wore a face mask and practiced physical distancing is partially visible to Kathy White's right. The glass door separating mother and son allowed White to safely remove her mask for the visit.

WHY I CHOSE VA PITTSBURGH'S CLC

Army Veteran Thomas Deasy resides in our CLC on our H.J. Heinz III campus in O'Hara Township. A Vietnam Veteran, he chose VA Pittsburgh for long-term care after carefully weighing the pros and cons of our CLC versus several civilian facilities that he visited.

Tell us a little about your military service.

I was a corporal in the Army from 1966 to 1968. I was a grunt in Vietnam, and I was there for the TET Offensive. I was proud to serve but disappointed when I came home because we didn't deserve that. It was extremely upsetting, how we were treated. When our country called, we answered and went.

When you were considering long-term care facilities, why did you choose VA Pittsburgh?

I looked at four other nursing homes. I even spent a weekend at one place. It had everything, a swimming pool, sauna, masseuse, things like that. But it didn't have a physician on board all the time. I wouldn't get the same medical treatment I get here. Here, you have a nurse, and your aides, and I can't speak enough about them. You have (ones) who go overboard to do things for us, and that makes our day.



Vietnam Veteran Thomas Deasy enjoys some sunshine in our Masonic Pavilion.

Would you recommend VA Pittsburgh and its CLC to other Veterans?

I would. I'm happy and feel blessed to be here. The treatment here is superior, and they listen to you. Sure, you have flaws, but you'll have that everywhere. I try to improve on those kinds of things, and I've been successful.



Are you eligible for a Community Living Center?

VA provides CLC care if you meet certain eligibility criteria involving your service-connected status, level of disability and income. To learn more, talk with your social worker or any member of your VA care team.



VAPHS COVID-19 Research

National and international COVID-19 research projects at VA Pittsburgh include:

Contributing data to **Operation Warp Speed** for prioritizing effective treatments and vaccine development.

Evaluating medications for either treating symptoms such as inflammation in all COVID-19 patients or preventing infection in elderly, long-term care nursing home residents who were exposed to the virus.

Studying short- and long-term **impacts of VA clinical care** on recovered COVID-19 patients compared to nations with low fatality rates.

Contributing to an **anonymous registry** of outcomes of recovered COVID-19 patients with rheumatic diseases.

Analyzing the effectiveness of treating COVID-19 patients with **convalescent blood plasma** donated by recovered COVID-19 patients.

Assessing the pandemic's impact on **medication adherence** in Veterans with serious mental illness.

Evaluating use of **remote monitoring** of Veterans with COVID-19.

Studying **kidney injury and dialysis** in COVID-19 patients.

Hypothyroidism in Women

Many women (and men) experience problems with their thyroid. Understanding more about your thyroid can help you better understand your overall health.

The thyroid is a small, butterfly-shaped organ in the front of your neck. It releases thyroid hormone. Thyroid hormone is very important for many different aspects of health, especially during pregnancy.

Hypothyroidism is a medical condition in which the thyroid does not release enough thyroid hormone. It has several causes. People with hypothyroidism may feel cold, sluggish or constipated. They may have unexplained weight gain or dry skin. Women might notice changes to their menstrual periods. Most people with hypothyroidism will feel more than one of these symptoms.

i **If you have symptoms of hypothyroidism**, talk with your provider. They may recommend a blood test to check for hypothyroidism.

If you are diagnosed with hypothyroidism, your provider may treat you with a thyroid hormone replacement. You might have to take the hormone supplement for the rest of your life. Fortunately, this medication is very safe and will help improve the symptoms of hypothyroidism.

It is important to take thyroid hormone supplements on an empty stomach. Your provider will check your blood work periodically to make sure your dose is correct. If you become pregnant, let your provider know right away so your dose can be adjusted for a healthy pregnancy.

VetQ&A

Answering Your Important Questions

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Q. How do I request to be assigned to a new VA primary care provider?

A. If you decide you want to change to a different primary care provider, request a Change of Provider form from your Patient Aligned Care Team or the patient advocate at your VA medical center.

Q. I have a question about my VA benefits. How do I contact a representative from the Veterans Benefits Administration's (VBA) Pittsburgh Regional Office?

A. VBA's Pittsburgh Regional Office now gives you the choice to visit with a representative either in person or virtually. Both types of visits are by appointment only. To request an appointment:

- Call **412-360-2832**
- Email **pcu.vbapit@va.gov**
- Call PA Serves at **1-855-838-7744**

Q. What support is available to my family caregiver?

A. On Oct. 1, VA's Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers (PCAFC) expanded eligibility to include Veterans who sustained or aggravated a serious injury or illness in the line of duty on or before May 7, 1975 (WWII, Korean War and Vietnam Veterans). It previously served only post-9/11 Veterans. In two years, VA will expand the benefit to all Veterans. The program provides family caregivers of eligible Veterans with benefits that include training, enhanced respite care, counseling, technical support, beneficiary travel, a monthly stipend payment and access to health care. In addition, anyone who identifies as a Veteran caregiver can participate in our Program of General Caregiver Support Services (PGCSS).

For more information on PCAFC eligibility, PGCSS enrollment, and other VA services for caregivers, call **412-822-2364** or **855-260-3274** or visit **www.caregiver.va.gov**.

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

Please send suggestions, comments and requests to **VAPHSEditor@va.gov**.





U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Veterans Health Administration
VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System

University Drive | Pittsburgh, PA 15240

www.pittsburgh.va.gov

412-822-2222 | 866-482-7488

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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!



Sign Up for 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.



Introduction to Whole Health | Mondays, 11 to 11:45 a.m.

VA's Whole Health program is transforming health care by putting the patient's goals first. To register, call **412-360-3262** or use your premium My HealtheVet account to send a secure message to **PITTSBURGH-WHOLE HEALTH_WH**.



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.

GET YOUR FREE FLU SHOT:

1. During your regularly scheduled **VAPHS appointments**, including outpatient clinics (call clinics if you only need a flu shot).
2. **Walk-in clinics** available weekdays at both campuses — no appointment necessary.
3. After hours and weekends in our **Emergency Department** at our University Drive campus.
4. Through **Community Care Network** retail pharmacies and urgent care locations. Visit **www.va.gov/COMMUNITYCARE/flushot.asp** to learn more.

Got your flu shot at a non-VA site? Call your VA provider or send a secure message via My HealtheVet with all the details.