MOBILE MEDICAL UNITS COME TO GREAT BEND

The Dole VA has begun offering Kansas Veterans in the Great Bend area twice-monthly visits from a pair of wheeled clinics the size of Greyhound buses.

The two mobile medical units (MMUs) are equipped with exam rooms, labs, and satellite-connected Telehealth consoles that can connect directly to Physicians and Specialists at the Dole VA main campus.

One of the MMUs also will focus on delivering Women’s Health support. There also will be staff onboard who can check for Veteran benefits and register qualified patients for VA care.

Public Affairs Officer Jeff Herndon said the new service saves Great Bend Veterans from a 2.5-hour round trip to the nearest Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs) in Salina or Hutchinson.

“We also want to gauge the demand from Veterans for additional health care services,” Herndon said.

The first visit for the program was at the Barton County Fairgrounds on July 8-9, 2021.

Future visits will be at Veterans Memorial Park because it is more centrally located and offers better access to power for the mobile medical units.

Interested Veterans can call (888) 878-6881, extension 41020, for information on upcoming visits.

Appointments are offered 9 a.m. – 3 p.m. First-time patients should block about an hour to work with benefits personnel and get signed up.
We received our first COVID-19 vaccine shipment in late December 2020 — and Kansas Sen. Jerry Moran (below) opened our first box! — and we administered the first shots that very same day.

And in April of this year, the Dole VA was honored with a visit from the Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs, Denis McDonough (below). He toured the facility, spoke with staff and Veterans, and praised what he called our “unbelievable job.”

We have fully vaccinated nearly 10,000 Veterans and staff at our main campus and five Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs) in Hays, Salina, Parsons, Hutchinson, and Dodge City.

Speaking of the CBOCs, we’ve expanded our Telehealth services at each site to include Specialty Care visits with providers at the Dole VA main campus. We also have begun seeing Veterans in Great Bend twice a month with our mobile medical and women’s health units.

Amid the coronavirus crisis, we expanded our capabilities by increasing the number of private inpatient rooms, completing construction of our Substance Abuse Rehabilitation and Recovery building, and renovating our Oncology, Telehealth, and Home-Based Health Care services. The main entrance to Building One was upgraded with a new ADA-approved wheelchair ramp and a gorgeous solid bronze VA seal embedded in the new marble flooring.

It is an honor and a privilege to serve Kansas Veterans with such a skilled, enthusiastic, and motivated staff that cares as much as I do about our shared mission: serving those who have served our country.
The Dole VA is seeking Veterans who receive care and services at the Robert J. Dole VA Medical Center — plus their families — to serve on the Veteran and Family Advisory Council. Assistant Medical Center Director Sharon Lien said the Council gives the Dole VA an opportunity to learn directly from our Veterans and partner with them to improve the services they receive.

“Our Veterans and their families deserve the highest quality health care and excellent customer service, and this Council with allow us to work together as a team to make sure that happens,” Lien said.

Council members assist the Dole VA in ensuring:

- Veteran feedback is integrated throughout the organization.
- Information is shared with others about the changes happening at the Dole VA.
- Hospitalwide events are promoted and attended.

If you have solid communication skills and seek opportunities to collaborate with leadership on finding solutions, then you would be a great addition to our Council!

As a member of the Advisory Council, you will share your unique patient and family perspective on our programs and services, and you will work in partnership with our health care staff to identify areas where we can improve the Veteran experience.

Council Member Howard Hutchinson said he is looking forward to the opportunity to influence the overall mission of the Dole VA.

“I’m sure we can bring value by sharing our experiences on Veterans’ needs,” he said. “We can shed light on what the Dole VA can do better.”

The Council meets monthly to discuss issues throughout the facility.

If you are interested in joining the Dole VA Veteran and Family Advisory Council, please contact Chief of Voluntary Services Shawn Hinkle at (316) 685-2221, Ext. 57937, or by email at Shawn.Hinkle@va.gov.

“I’m very excited about the potential to bring together, connect, and have leadership appreciate what we can contribute,” Howard Hutchinson said.
You may have noticed members of the Dole VA Housekeeping staff wearing grey polo shirts as they keep our facility spick and span.

Those folks are enrolled in **Compensated Work Therapy** (CWT), a program that helps Veterans remove barriers to employment by giving them on-the-job training and work experience while being supported by clinical staff.

Peter Daniels runs the program with Philip Plume, and he said there are reasons a Veteran might struggle with employment.

“Some Veterans could be getting back on their feet from being homeless, or they might struggle with substance abuse, or maybe there’s a mental health issue,” Daniels said. “It could be a need for training. These factors make job searches difficult.”

The six-month program helps Veterans ease back into employment by placing them in various services on the Dole VA campus or in the private sector while training in topics like writing resumes, practicing interview skills, and working well with others.

Army Veteran Carlos Solis served 13 years as an infantry soldier. He said he had difficulty finding employment in the civilian world, and he has come to appreciate his housekeeping duties. He especially likes how his position at the Dole VA allows him to be among fellow Veterans who understand his experiences in the service.

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“You just feel kind of different out there,” he said, pointing to the world outside the walls of the Dole VA.

“Being around other Veterans makes me feel more comfortable because I don’t have to explain myself. They already know. They’ve been there.”

Wichita native Steven Turner served in the Navy for 15 years as a Mess Management Specialist. He said he felt like employers in the private sector didn’t value his military service, but at the Dole VA he feels his experiences are an asset in his job.

“It seemed like no matter what you did or how good you were, you were expendable,” Turner said, shaking his head. “Here I feel appreciated, and I have learned a lot about patience.”

The Compensated Work Therapy (CWT) Program gives participants a chance to develop fresh references and make new connections with local businesses looking to hire Veterans.
The Dole VA is eight months into adopting the upgraded Beneficiary Travel Self Service System (BTSSS). The website can be accessed by internet-connected computer or smart phone and streamlines the process of entering a travel claim.

Chief of Transportation and Beneficiary Travel John Snapp said Veterans can submit claims 24/7, track their claims, and see their complete claims history.

“BTSSS gives more control to the Veteran,” said Snapp, who refers to the system by its nickname BTS3. “Once the claim is entered correctly, it gets processed quicker so they get their money faster.”

This solution provides an intuitive interface for claimants such as Veterans and caregivers to submit and track their beneficiary travel claims. BTSSS also provides capabilities for beneficiaries to receive payments by electronic funds transfer, and it also helps eliminate fraud, waste, and abuse.

Once a travel claim is approved, it will process quicker than the 7 to 10 days it can take outside of BTSSS. The reimbursement then will be sent to the claimant’s bank through direct deposit.

Instructions on how Veterans can enter a claim themselves are available at each check-in desk throughout the Dole VA Medical Center facility.

In the future, the Dole VA will be creating an onsite Travel Center as a one-stop shop for travel pay. Transportation Assistants will be there to guide Veterans in completing the new BTSSS forms, answer questions, and process travel claims in person.

Toll-free calls can be made to (855) 574-7292 for assistance in using the BTSSS system.
Herb Duncan – a Veteran of the Vietnam War and volunteer for Kansas Honor Flight – once stood up at a Dole VA Town Hall meeting and made an interesting request.

He asked for a flagpole.

Mr. Duncan explained, “We would come to the Town Hall meetings, and I would tell my wife, ‘I’ve got to get a flag out there so people driving on Kellogg and the kids in school buses going past can see a huge American flag and think of patriotism.’”

In a ceremony on Friday, July 2, 2021, Mr. Duncan’s request became a reality. With support of a color guard from McConnell Air Force Base and bugler John Noonan, a garrison flag with a 20-foot hoist and a 38-foot fly was raised on the new 100-foot flagpole on the south lawn of the Dole VA campus.

After welcoming more than 175 attendees, Medical Center Director Candace Ifabiyi conveyed the significance of the occasion.

“This flag-raising ceremony is symbolic of our goals to honor and serve our Veterans with world-class care and superior customer service,” she said.

“Every single day is Veteran’s Day at the Robert J. Dole VA. Each day is an opportunity for us to honor our Veterans and ensure we thank them for giving life and limbs to ensure the liberties we enjoy in this country,” Ms. Ifabiyi said.

Getting the flagpole installed was no easy matter. Mr. Duncan’s original request was made five years ago.

“I was like a thorn in their side,” Mr. Duncan said, then he chuckled. “I would end every Town Hall meeting by saying, ‘Where’s our flag?’ And now here it is today!

“I was a Navy Seabee, and we had a motto: Can Do. Well, we did, and there it is,” said Mr. Duncan, as he gestured proudly toward the flag 100 feet above him.
**Veterans Ride Free** is celebrating the more than 30,000 free bus rides it has given to Veterans since launching in late July 2020.

The two-year pilot is a partnership between the Dole VA, United Way of the Plains, and Wichita Transit that allows any Veteran to travel free between bus stops on any route in the Wichita metro area.

Homeless Program Supervisor Suzanne Jenkins said giving Veterans without transportation the opportunity to get from one place to another has been a game changer.

“When you have little to no income, like a lot of the Veterans we serve, how do you navigate the world?” said Jenkins, who spearheaded the program. “It’s almost impossible. Having access to transportation is a life-changing event for our Veterans.

Navy Veteran David Sinnett has used Veterans Ride Free often and said it has given him freedom.

“I got to Wichita about two-and-a-half years ago, and I had no transportation,” Mr. Sinnett said. “It was really difficult to make appointments at the Dole VA, and I ended up missing a lot of them without a ride. I had no ID, so I couldn’t get a job or an apartment, and I couldn’t even get to the place to get an ID. I was stuck.”

Mr. Sinnett tried bicycling places for a while, but his severe back problems made the trips excruciating.

Since the Veterans Ride Free program took off, however, many of the obstacles holding him back have been erased.

“Now I can go anywhere I want,” he said. “I go shopping for food at the grocery store. I make all the appointments I need at the Dole VA. I finally got an ID, which helped me get an apartment, and that proof of residence helped me get a license.”

Mr. Sinnett was even able to save enough money to buy a car, his first in more than 10 years. He credits the Veterans Ride Free program for helping him reach that goal.
Applying for Veterans health care benefits may seem like a daunting task for some, but Dole VA Health Care Benefits Supervisor Keith Hall said it’s easy if you come to your first visit prepared with the right paperwork.

“There are two very important documents that all Veterans need,” Hall said. “The first is the standard military discharge papers or DD-214. The second is the 10-10EZ, which has information about the Veteran’s demographic, family, and income.”

For Veterans who have lost track of their DD-214, the Benefits Office can assist Veterans with contacting the National Records Center, which allows Veterans to request copies of their DD-214, military service records, and military medical records, all of which are crucial for establishing a service connection to any health issues. You can also visit [www.va.gov/records](http://www.va.gov/records) and click on the Request your military records (DD-214) link.

You can download 10-10EZ forms by visiting [www.va.gov/health-care](http://www.va.gov/health-care) and clicking on the How to apply link.

“A lot of our younger Veterans have grown up using the internet, so many can do all this paperwork themselves before coming into our offices for the first time,” Hall said. “Others may not be as familiar with computers and smart phones, so we can walk them through the process in person.”

Hall cautioned that delays related to COVID-19 can make the in-person process, which normally takes 3-4 weeks, run nearly two months. Using the various World Wide Web resources can be much faster, he said.

An important thing for Veterans to remember — especially those who are not service connected and are applying for benefits based on income — is the Health Eligibility Center in Atlanta compares records at the Internal Revenue Service and Social Security Administration with what is submitted on the 10-10EZ form.

“If a Veteran’s 10-10EZ form shows a gross income from the year before that is not correct, the application is put into a holding pattern,” Hall said. “If this happens, we can no longer assist the Veteran with the process because the Health Eligibility Center takes over. It’s always best to come see us and let us walk you through it.”