

MONTHLY REPORT FROM THE DIRECTOR

Let me start this month's message by introducing myself – my name is Ronnie Smith and I am currently the Acting Director at the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center. In mid-September, Scott Isaacks began a detail as the VISN7 Acting Director to work closely with the regional team and with the eight VAMCs across our network to build and sustain a high level of care for every Veteran. I started at the Charleston VAMC in August 2019 as the Associate Director, and while I may be new to this medical center, I bring with me almost 15 years of experience in Veterans health care, serving previously at the VAMCs in August, Georgia and Portland, Oregon, and most recently as the Associate Director of the VA Tennessee Valley Healthcare System. I am excited to be here and to continue building the strong health care delivery system of the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center.

- Adopted a standard phone greeting so that Veterans know what department they have reached and the employee's name.
- Inpatient nurse managers visit every patient every day to make sure their care is as expected, and patient advocates visit every new Veteran admitted.

While this is just a sample of how we're using Veteran feedback to improve care, I hope it provides you with an understanding of our direction and commitment to customer service and the Veteran experience at our VA.

MSA Week

During the fourth week of October, we celebrated Medical Support Assistant (MSA) Week. MSAs are a critical component of how we deliver health care—they are the team members who check Veterans in for their appointments, call to remind Veterans of their upcoming schedule, or answer the phone when a Veteran calls our VA. Some MSAs work on the front lines while others are behind the scenes taking care of the Veterans—always providing that administrative link between the patients and the medical providers.

MSAs are often the first interaction and first impression that Veterans have with our medical center. Our Customer Experience Team has been working closely with our MSAs, gathering their feedback and streamlining customer service training methods, to ensure that each interaction with a Veteran enhances the overall patient experience. It can be their friendly face, warm voice and patient attitude that encourages Veterans to continue to choose VA.

HRO Journey

Our focus on safe, high-quality care and customer service led us to be named one VA's 18 High Reliability Organization (HRO) pilot sites in February. Since then, we have been focused on building the foundation for our HRO policies and ensuring that we are creating the blueprint for other facilities to follow in the future. The HRO principles are guideposts that allow us to develop best practices that can be repeated at facilities across VA. I'm proud of the fact that VA has recognized all our hard work, and as we embark officially on our HRO journey, I know we

cont.

Customer Service

One way we are striving to improve our care is through a strong focus on customer service. We understand that now more than ever Veterans have a choice in who they see for their health care needs. To be their provider of choice we must deliver not only high-quality care, but also deliver that care in a way that is accessible, friendly and Veteran-centric. We have dialed in on our Customer Service Initiative and I want to share with you some of the methods we are using to enhance this area:

- Trained over 700 staff through VA's "Own the Moment" training, a patient experience training.
- Implementation of a tracking system to ensure that patients who call our Call Center with medical questions receive a call back from their primary care team the same day.
- Improved wayfinding, both with signage and maps, and also with our Red Vest NaV-Agators, who are a mix of staff and volunteers, to help visitors find their way around our facilities.
- Hired same-day primary care providers to see patients without appointments, and improved clinic schedules to see more patients with short or no notice to improve access.



Ronnie Smith, MSHA, MBA
Acting Medical Center Director

UPCOMING EVENTS

Charleston Veteran Day Parade

Nov. 9, 1 p.m.,
corner of East Bay St. &
Market St., Downtown
Charleston

Veterans Day

Nov. 11, Federal holiday

Veteran's Research Day

Nov. 12, 10 a.m. – 2 p.m.
VAMC Mental Health Research
Building (Building DD)

Thanksgiving

Nov. 28, Federal Holiday

SUICIDE PREVENTION TAKES EVERYONE!

#BeThere

Veterans Crisis Line:
1-800-273-8255 and Press 1

Online chat at:



VA

Ralph H. Johnson
VA Medical Center



**1,450 FAMILIES
SERVED**

are starting from a strong foundation.

It may seem like we are juggling a lot of different initiatives, but I assure you that each of these are closely intertwined with one main driver—delivering the highest quality health care at the right time in an environment that is welcoming, and where Veterans know they can trust their team.

The Rest of the Story

Last month the Post & Courier ran an article in their Home and Real Estate Section titled [“The design of a new Fisher House for sick veterans in downtown Charleston draws criticism.”](#) The article accuses our VA of disregarding the input from the Charleston Board of Architectural Review (BAR) to blend in well with the neighborhood. The rest of the story is that we worked closely with the BAR, city council and neighbors throughout the design and build process to best preserve the historic aesthetic of neighborhood, while building a new structure to accommodate the needs of our Veterans and their families who would be staying with us at our Fisher House. The entire design of [The Ralph H. Johnson VAMC Fisher House](#) was reconfigured from the typical design of a Fisher House to align with Charleston’s historic standards and blend in with the older homes in the neighborhood. The building’s architect spent months in the review process with the BAR.

Then, in early October the Post & Courier published a Letter to the Editor titled [“Demolition by neglect.”](#) This letter once again points fingers at our Fisher House design and accuses our VA of lying to neighbors and the BAR about our commitment to preserve the historic carriage house located at the back of the property. As a part of that design and review process, we agreed to preserve the carriage house that sits along

Smith St. Since opening our Fisher House in Jan 2018, we have been working diligently with Friends of Fisher House Charleston to ensure requirements are met to restore the carriage house as part of the historic community of Charleston.

I’d like to express my sincere thanks to Ret. Air Force Maj. Gen. Art Rooney Jr. from Summer-ville who responded to these accusations by submitting his own Letter to the Editor, [“Fisher House effort should be celebrated.”](#) I couldn’t agree more that through the tedious process of design and build of our Fisher House, our VA learned one valuable lesson—the generosity of our community and their commitment to caring for our Veterans is something we should always celebrate. It was a community-led effort that raised the \$4 million needed to purchase the land so that we could bring a much-needed Fisher House to Charleston; and it is through continued donations, both monetary and volunteer time, that we can provide all the extra perks to Veterans and their families who stay with us free of charge. This isn’t just a building, it’s a temporary home-away-from-home that provides solace for Veteran families during difficult times of medical treatments for their loved one—our nation’s hero. To date, we have served nearly 1,500 Veteran families in this home. We will continue to work with the city to be a good neighbor, and most importantly, we will continue on our mission to serve Veterans, because they’ve earned nothing short of 5-star treatment.

Sincerely,



Ronnie Smith | Acting Director & CEO



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VA

Ralph H. Johnson
VA Medical Center