



Günther "Guy" Stern (January 14, 1922 – December 7, 2023)

VA

VA Ann Arbor Healthcare System

2023

Annual Report

LOCATIONS

MAIN LOCATION

LTC Charles S. Kettles VA Medical Center
2215 Fuller Road
Ann Arbor, MI 48105-2303
Main phone: 734-769-7100
Mental health care: 734-845-3471

HEALTH CLINIC LOCATIONS

Adrian VA Clinic
770 Riverside Avenue, 1st Floor
Adrian, MI 49221-1476
Main phone: 734-222-7160

Flint VA Clinic
2360 South Linden Road
Flint, MI 48532-5483
Main phone: 810-720-2913
Mental health care: 734-845-3471

Green Road VA Clinic
2500 Green Road, Suite 200
Ann Arbor, MI 48105-2073
Main phone: 734-769-7100

Howell VA Clinic
3399 East Grand River Avenue, Suite 100
Howell, MI 48843-7555
Main phone: 517-552-3700

Jackson VA Clinic
4328 Page Avenue
Michigan Center, MI 49254-1077
Main phone: 517-764-3609
Mental health care: 734-845-3471

Major General Oliver W. Dillard VA Clinic
5900 North Lotz Road
Canton, MI 48187-4331
Main phone: 734-394-4500

Packard Road VA Clinic
3800 Packard Road, Suite 120 (MHICM) and 160
(CWT, Homeless, VEAR)
Ann Arbor, MI 48108-2073
Main phone: 734-222-7600
Mental health care: 734-845-3471

Toledo VA Clinic
1200 South Detroit Avenue
Toledo, OH 43614-5903
Main phone: 419-259-2000
Mental health care: 734-845-3471

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LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

Celebrating Our Commitment to Veterans and Excellence

Reflecting on the past year, I am filled with immense pride and gratitude for each of you. Your dedication to our mission has made a profound impact on the lives of our nation’s Veterans. I want to express my heartfelt appreciation and congratulate to the VAAAHS staff on your hard work and achievements in 2023.

Despite the overall decline in Veteran population, the number of Veterans utilizing VA health care they’ve rightly earned has continued to increase. This is a testament to the reputation we’ve built as the nation’s leader in Veteran health care, and to key legislation such as the PACT Act, MISSION Act, and associated outreach efforts. These policy changes have created a dynamic business landscape, and our adaptability is key to success. Your ability to pivot, innovate, and stay ahead of the curve has been nothing short of impressive. As we continue to evolve, let us remain agile and forward-thinking, always putting our Veterans at the center of our decisions.

Our clinic expansions have been nothing short of remarkable. From rural towns like Findlay to bustling communities like Canton, we have extended our reach to ensure that no Veteran is left behind. By bringing care closer to their homes, we honor our commitment to accessibility and convenience. Let us continue to explore innovative ways to serve our Veterans, meeting them where they live and addressing their unique needs.

Our hiring initiatives have been a beacon of hope for Veterans transitioning to civilian life. By providing meaningful employment opportunities, we empower our heroes to thrive beyond their military service. Celebrating the diverse talents and experiences that each new team member brings creates a workforce that reflects the strength and resilience of those we serve.

The implementation of our new EHRM system has not been without challenges. We acknowledge the frustrations and disruptions caused during this transition. However, challenges remain one of the great teachers in life, and I am confident that our collective determination will lead us to a more efficient and integrated platform. Let us learn from these struggles, collaborate, and find solutions that enhance the quality of care we provide.

As we move forward, let us hold steadfast to two guiding principles:

1) Increasing Veterans’ access to care & benefits: our commitment to timely appointments, telehealth options, and streamlined processes ensures that no Veteran waits in uncertainty. Every interaction matters and every service we provide contributes to their well-being.

2) Improving outcomes for Veterans, their families, caregivers, & survivors: Our impact extends beyond medical charts. It reaches into the homes and hearts of those we serve. Let us measure success not only by numbers but by the positive transformations we bring to their lives.

Our core values—Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect, and Excellence—guide our actions every day. They are the compass that steers us toward our mission. Let us embody these values in all that we do, ensuring that our work reflects the highest standards of care and compassion.

In closing, I extend my deepest appreciation to each member of the VAAAHS team. Your commitment to America’s Veterans is the exemplification of the spirit and service that defines us. Together, we will continue to make a difference—one Veteran, one family, one life at a time.

With gratitude,
Ginny L. Creasman

EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP TEAM



Ginny L. Creasman *Pharm. D., FACHE*
MEDICAL CENTER DIRECTOR



Zana Bouda *MHA, FACHE*
ASSOCIATE MEDICAL CENTER DIRECTOR



Richard J. Schildhouse *MD, FHM*
CHIEF OF STAFF



Rhonda Berndt *MSN, RN, NEA-BC*
ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR FOR PCS



Jeffrey Bernhard
ASSISTANT MEDICAL CENTER DIRECTOR

Events, Openings and Dedications



VA Ann Arbor Healthcare System to Add New Clinic in Findlay, Ohio

VA Ann Arbor Healthcare System announced the location of a new Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) at 1720 E. Melrose Ave., Findlay, OH 45840.

The nearly 7,000 square foot clinic will serve Veterans in Hancock and surrounding counties in Ohio and will provide primary care, mental health, and blood draw services to more than 9,000 eligible veterans.

"The new Findlay VA clinic will be the 4th community-based clinic we've opened in the last 3 years," said VAAHS executive director Dr. Ginny

Creasman. "The new location's proximity to I-75 will greatly reduce drive times for Veteran's who were traveling more than an hour in some instances to our Toledo VA clinic. We're now better able to meet the needs of our Veterans who live near Findlay by bringing the health care they've earned right into their neighborhood."

The clinic will open in early fall 2024, once the renovations are complete. VA Ann Arbor Healthcare System chose the site based on many factors including a demonstrated need to serve more Veterans in the Hancock County area.



Dr Guy Stern Welcome Center



Welcome Center of LTC Kettles VAMC Renamed After WWII Veteran Dr. Guy Stern

The Welcome Center of the LTC Charles S. Kettles VAMC was renamed after local WWII Veteran and "Ritchie Boy" Dr. Guy Stern on January 13, 2023.

Dr. Stern, a German-Jewish refugee, came to America in 1937. His parents made the difficult decision to send their oldest child to the U.S. amid the Nazi party coming to power in 1930s Germany.

Stern was drafted in the United States Army in 1943 and was later stationed at Camp Ritchie for intelligence training. The Army utilized Stern's ability to speak multiple languages to gain intelligence information from captured German POW's.

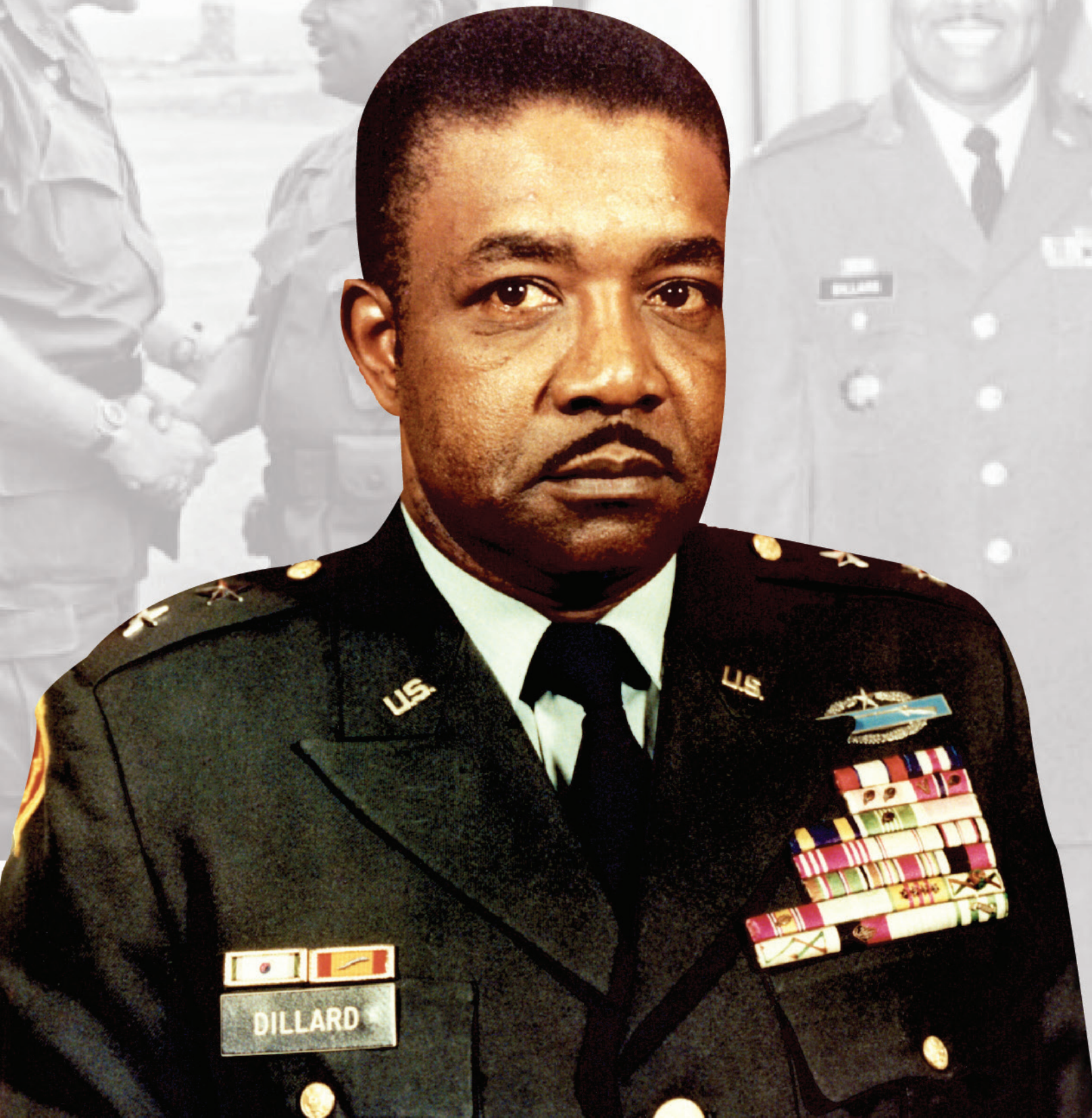
A 2022 "60 Minutes" report, of which Dr. Stern was featured, credits the Ritchie Boys with gathering more than 60% of the actionable intelligence used by the Army during WWII. Stern was awarded the Bronze Star in 1945.

"Dr. Stern's story is remarkable and unique. His service to our military, amid the uncertainty of war that his family was facing in Nazi Germany, speaks to his selflessness and service to something greater than himself," said Medical Center Director Dr. Ginny Creasman. "Now, and for many years to come, when Veterans walk into our facility, the first fellow-Veteran who will greet them is Guy Stern."

Retired Army Brigadier General Donald Schenk, now a member of the Jewish War Veterans of the United States of America, Department of Michigan, also spoke on behalf of Dr. Stern at the dedication.

After the war, Dr. Stern dedicated his life to education. He was a professor at many universities in the United States and a visiting scholar at German universities. He served as an advisor to Fisher House Michigan and remained active in the Jewish War Veterans Community. He filled various positions at the Holocaust Memorial Center in Farmington Hills, Michigan. Sadly, Dr. Stern passed away December 7, 2023. He was 101 years old.

Major General Oliver W. Dillard VA Clinic Formally Dedicated in Canton



The new VA outpatient clinic in Canton was formally dedicated to Major General Oliver W. Dillard. MG Dillard was drafted into the Army in 1945 and served for three decades until his retirement in 1980. Major General Dillard resided in Canton until his death in 2015.

"We're honored to be able to dedicate this beautiful clinic and name it after a true American hero," said VA Ann Arbor Healthcare System Director Dr. Ginny Creasman. "MG Dillard's legacy, the soldiers he served with, and those that will follow the path trailblazed by him will live on in this space that serves and provides care for our Veterans for decades."

U.S. Representative Debbie Dingell, Canton Township Supervisor Anne Marie Graham-Hudak, and Buffalo Soldiers Motorcycle Club and Troops of Michigan President Frederick "Smooth Daddy" Williams delivered remarks at the ceremony.

Congresswoman Dingell, along with Congresswoman Haley Stevens, introduced and passed legislation that renamed the clinic after MG Dillard in November 2022. That legislation was cosponsored by the entire Michigan House delegation, supported by U.S. Senators Debbie Stabenow and Gary Peters, and endorsed by Veteran of Foreign Wars Department of Michigan, the Disabled American Veterans

Department of Michigan, and the American Legion Department of Michigan.

Major General Dillard was the fifth Black officer in Army history to earn the rank of Brigadier General, the first Black officer to attend the National War College, and the first Black Intelligence general officer.

He served in WWII, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. His awards include the Distinguished Service Medal (1 Oak Leaf Cluster), the Silver Star, the Legion of Merit (2 Oak Leaf Clusters), Bronze Star (1 Oak Leaf Cluster), Air Medal, Army Commendation Medal (1 Oak Leaf Cluster), and the Purple Heart.





Women Veteran's Clinic Ribbon Cutting Ceremony.

On Thursday, April 13, 2023, VA Ann Arbor Healthcare System held an official grand opening and ribbon cutting ceremony for its new Women Veterans' Clinic. The opening of this long-awaited Women's Clinic is part of VA's ongoing efforts to ensure that women Veterans experience an environment in which they feel safe, welcome, and respected. It is our hope that this clinic will allow our female Veterans, who so often feel invisible, to receive their care from providers they trust in a space just for them, tailored to their unique physical and mental health care needs.

Special thanks to Dr. Kathleen Dussan, Women's Health Medical Director and Cheryl Allen, Women Veterans Program Manager, and the entire Women's Health Service Team for their tireless devotion to serving our female Veterans



Medal honor recipient Dr. Mary E. Walker



U.S. Air Force 2nd Lt. Ruth Lopez



U.S. Army Private Cathay Williams



In 2023, VA is celebrating 100 years of providing health care for women Veterans. Today, more than 2 million women Veterans live in America, and more than 600,000 women Veterans receive health care at VA each year. At VA, women Veterans now have access to a full spectrum of comprehensive health and gender-specific care, including fertility services, mental health care, maternity care and more.



Outreach: A Year in Review

In the past year, VA Ann Arbor demonstrated extensive community engagement by participating in 175 events, encompassing a diverse range of community hosted occasions and VA organized community outreach initiatives. From community hosted college information fairs, senior fairs, Veteran specific events, county fairs, 5ks, and ruck marches, our representation was widespread. Furthermore, we strategically organized open houses across multiple clinics and conducted targeted PACT Act information sessions across our catchment area including Flint, Adrian, Hillsdale, Findlay, Bowling Green, Monroe, Toledo, Ann Arbor, Saline, and Jackson.

Notably, our VA coordinated efforts resulted in 93 Veteran enrollments, and facilitated 207 toxic exposure screenings, underscoring our commitment to proactive outreach and impactful community service. In addition to our robust community engagement efforts, VA Ann Arbor hosted two well

attended Women's Health Town Halls last year. These events provide a valuable platform for addressing the unique health care needs of Women Veterans, fostering dialogue, and enhancing awareness. This initiative further underscores our commitment to inclusivity and comprehensive health care services for all members of the Veteran Community.

Throughout the past year, VA Ann Arbor not only actively participated in numerous events, but also fostered strong relationships with various Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs) and community partners. These collaborations have laid a solid foundation for future initiatives. Leveraging these established connections, we are confident in our ability to plan and organize multiple events in both urban and rural areas within our catchment. This strategic approach ensures that we can effectively reach and identified Veteran populations, reflecting our dedication to serve all Veterans.



EMPLOYEE & HOSPITAL NEWS



VA Ann Arbor Healthcare System Earns 5-Star CMS Quality Rating

The VA Ann Arbor Healthcare System earned a 5-star rating from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS). This is the first time CMS has included VA facilities in their annual Overall Hospital Quality Star Ratings.

Overall, 67% of VA hospitals included in the CMS annual Overall Hospital Quality Star Ratings received either 4 or 5 stars, compared to only 41% of non-VA hospitals. These findings are the latest in a series of recent evaluations showing the effectiveness of VA health care compared to non-VA health care. VA hospitals outperformed non-VA hospitals on all 10 core patient satisfaction metrics in the recent Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems Star Ratings, and a recent systematic review of more than 40 peer-reviewed studies found that VA health care is consistently as good as — or better than — non-VA health care.

“Our job at VA is to deliver the best possible care to every Veteran who walks through our doors,” said VA Ann Arbor Healthcare System Director Dr. Ginny Creasman. “While we’re very proud of these findings, there is still work to do. We will study these results, learn from them, and continue to improve until we’re delivering world-class care to every Veteran, every time.”

EMPLOYEE OF THE YEAR



Sharon Roberts is the 2023 VA Ann Arbor Healthcare System Employee of the Year. She serves as the Administrative Officer (AO) for the Major General Oliver W. Dillard Clinic in Canton, Michigan, and has been with VA for 24 years.

Throughout her time as the AO of the MG Dillard clinic, Sharon has gone above and beyond on many occasions to keep Veterans and staff informed of changes at the facility.

Her colleagues note that Sharon will step-up and help any coworker out in a time of need. She maintains constant communication with all services at the clinic to ensure operations continually run smoothly.

This support to the clinic staff allows those health care providers to administer the health care our Veterans deserve. She values everyone as a person and treats them with the same compassion and respect. Congratulations, Sharon!



Sharon Roberts
Administrative Officer
AMBULATORY CARE SERVICE

EMPLOYEES OF THE MONTH



JANUARY



Kristan Souva
Licensed Practical Nurse Cardiology Clinic
MEDICINE SERVICE

FEBRUARY



Louis Wall
Information Receptionist
OFFICE OF VETERAN EXPERIENCE AND
EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

MARCH



Edmund "Bobby" Patterson
Executive Assistant
OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

APRIL



Sharon Roberts
Administrative Officer
AMBULATORY CARE SERVICE

MAY



Cheryl Allen
Women Veterans Program Manager
AMBULATORY CARE SERVICE

JUNE



Joseph Lussier
Registered Nurse, Intensive Care Unit
PATIENT CARE SERVICES

JULY



Simona Sneatinschi
Food Service Worker
NUTRITION AND FOOD SERVICE

AUGUST



Donna Sprunger
Nurse Practitioner, Mental Health
PATIENT CARE SERVICES

SEPTEMBER



Mark Billings
Advanced Medical Support Assistant
CLINICAL ACCESS MANAGEMENT SERVICE

OCTOBER



Steven Conley
Administrative Officer
AMBULATORY CARE SERVICE

NOVEMBER



Aaron Cowell
Lead Certified Health Benefits Advisor
HEALTH ADMINISTRATION SERVICE

DECEMBER



Deborah Lammers
Nurse Practitioner, Cardiology
MEDICINE SERVICE

Patriot Award Recipient: Mark Matusik

(Supervisory Biomedical Engineer)

Mark Matusik has received the Department of Defense's Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR) Patriot Award for his support provided directly to the nominating Service member and/or their family during their military obligations. He was nominated for this prestigious award by Ryan Kuzminski, an Army Guardsman and Equipment Support Specialist Biomedical Engineering.

The Patriot Award reflects the efforts made to support citizen warriors through a wide-range of measures including flexible schedules, time off prior to and after deployment, caring for families, and granting leaves of absence if needed.

An employee serving in the National Guard or Reserve, or the spouse of a Guard or Reserve member, may nominate individual supervisors and bosses for support provided directly to the nominating Service member and his or her family.

As a supervisor of two individuals who are active in either the National Guard or National Reserve, Mark has fostered a culture in which he shows his support and value for the employment of military service members in the United States. These Guard and Reserve members could not defend and protect us at home and abroad without the continued promise of employer support back home.



Pictured Left to Right: Michael Francis - MSG E-8 USA Retired, Mark Matusik - Awardee, Ryan Kuzminski - Army Guardsman, Matt Watson - Army Reserves.



Hub & Spoke for Lung Cancer Screening

Lung cancer is the 2nd most common cancer among our nation's Veterans. VA Ann Arbor Healthcare System (VAAHS) and sister VA health care systems in Battle Creek, Saginaw, and Northern Indiana have partnered together to create a "Hub and Spoke" network that develops a scalable and sustainable infrastructure. VAAHS acts as the "hub" of the system, while the partner VA health care systems act as the "spokes". The goal of this system is to increase access to cancer screenings, cancer treatment and care, and better access to clinical trials.

There's more than 1,000,000 Veterans at elevated risk of lung cancer, but less than 1% are being screened. In December 2020, VAAHS's Lung Precision Oncology program received a huge boost in the form of a \$4 million grant. The grant aims to address 5 main issues, including developing partnerships with Federal agencies, improving VA specific lung cancer related research, and above all, improving the survivability rate of lung cancer.

The regional Hub and Spoke network is quickly trying to boost lung cancer screening numbers, as research shows utilizing a low dose CT scan to screen for lung cancer results in a nearly 25% decrease in lung cancer mortality.

The current recommendations of the United States Preventive Service Task Force specify that Veterans with a heavy cigarette smoking history of 20 pack years or greater and currently smoke, or quit smoking within the past 15 years meet the criteria to be screened for lung cancer.

Rural Veterans face more challenges receiving health care compared to their urban counterparts, mainly due to travel times and proximity to VA hospitals and clinics. Part of the \$4 million grant directly addresses this issue, primarily through the VA Video Connect (VVC).

Unsung Hero Award: Art Ticknor



VAAAHS Director Ginny Creasman & Unsung Hero Award Recipient Art Ticknor.

The Unsung Hero award exemplifies the spirit of CDCE/VAVS (Center for Development & Civic Engagement/Veterans Affairs Voluntary Services). The recipient is a person who, through their hard work and dedication, goes “above and beyond” to complete critical tasks or see projects through. The Unsung Hero consistently ensures that volunteers, community partners, facility staff, and coworkers are treated with empathy, compassion, and respect. The recipient’s overall attitude and demeanor demonstrate a genuine commitment to outstanding support and public service excellence.

Art Ticknor is a CDCE volunteer with 6 years of experience and has logged over 3,264 hours working within the department.

Art often does the job of 2-3 Volunteers. He is dependable and always comes in ready to serve our Veterans whatever the task may be. He treats everyone he encounters with empathy and compassion. He takes initiative to stay busy and finds tasks to better the department and the services we provide to our Veterans. No task is too big or small for Art. He will do whatever is asked of him. Whenever we have a new employee or volunteer, Art takes the initiative to make them feel welcome and comfortable and shows them the “ropes.”

When employees are on leave or we find ourselves short staffed, Art goes the extra mile by volunteering extra days and hours to ensure there is adequate coverage. He does this so that our service to our Veterans is never compromised. If we are ever in need of something, the item magically appears the next time Art volunteers and is always “anonymously” donated.

We had to give up one of our largest storage spaces to office space for another department. It was a stressful time for the entire department, but Art busied himself with re-organizing the comfort care items, clothing and blanket room to creatively find space saving ideas. He ended up assisting us with finding more plastic bins to maximize the space in each storage area. He continues to “magically and anonymously” find donated bins to help.

As a mechanic by trade, Art has kept many of our machines like the copier and paper folder working magically. He is the go-to whenever we have an issue. In addition to the equipment in our CDCE department, Art takes ownership by learning how to operate various coffee machines throughout the Medical Center. He ensures that the coffee supplies remain stocked, the coffee is within date and the machines are cleaned according to schedule.

In October, right at the beginning of our busiest season of the year, we received a donation of 19 cases of coffee. This was very exciting as we were getting pretty low on coffee for our coffee program. The coffee that was donated was a bit different than what we were used to and was packaged a bit more economically in biodegradable environment-friendly packaging. Unfortunately, none of the coffee had expiration dates identified. As soon as Art noticed this, he got to work calling the manufacturer and labeling each coffee canister clearly with the expiration date prior to putting it away (using first in first out). He did this without anyone asking him, he just knew the job had to get done. It took him over 6 hours to obtain the dates, mark the packages and put the coffee away properly but Art completed the task.

Art is not only a blessing to our CDCE department, he also networks and supports various departments by providing supplies and is often the go to person for so many internal stakeholders throughout our Medical Center. He treats all that he encounters with respect and is empathetic to all that he encounters. He puts the needs of the Vets above his own and is always creative when it comes to supporting their needs. He is the first person to advocate for a Veteran in need and is resourceful when it comes to finding ways to support them.

To say that he is the backbone of our volunteer department is an understatement. With that being said, we could not think of a better candidate for the unsung Hero award than Art Ticknor as he is our local VAAHS hero.

The DAISY Award

DAISY stands for Diseases Attacking the Immune System and the “DAISY Foundation was formed in November 1999, by the family of J. Patrick Barnes who died at age 33 of complications of Idiopathic Thrombocytopenic Purpura (ITP). The nursing care Patrick received when hospitalized profoundly touched his family.”

“As Patrick’s family, we brainstormed what to do in his memory. We vividly recalled the skillful and compassionate care Patrick received from his nurses during his eight-week hospitalization. We wanted to say “thank you” to nurses everywhere by establishing a recognition program, The DAISY Award For Extraordinary Nurses (The DAISY Award). Through this and other recognition programs, we honor the super-human work nurses do for patients and families every day.”

“We never imagined when we created this program in 1999 that today, there would be over 5,400 healthcare facilities and schools of nursing in all 50 states and 35 other countries and territories, committed to honoring nurses with The DAISY Award. The strategic impact of the program on nurses’ job satisfaction, retention, teamwork, pride, organizational culture, healthy work environment, and more.

Nurses are nominated by anyone in the organization—patients, family members, other nurses, physicians, other clinicians and staff—who experiences or observes extraordinary compassionate care being provided by a nurse.”



The BEE Award

The BEE (Being Exceptional Everyday) award is a VA-sponsored program in collaboration with Whole Health that recognizes and celebrates Nursing Service support staff who demonstrates excellence through their clinical skills and the extraordinary compassionate care they deliver every day.

The BEE Award was created to compliment the DAISY Award. This award recognizes the extraordinary work of our unlicensed nursing support staff. The BEE award was inspired because just as in nature bees are loyal, hardworking and cannot exist without the daisy, as neither can the daisy exist without the bee!

Do you know a Nursing Assistant, Health Tech or a Medical Support Tech who is extraordinary? Someone who demonstrates excellent clinical skills and compassionate care? Then we want to hear from you!

Who may be nominated? Nursing Assistants, Health Techs, Surgical Techs, Medical Support Techs. These vital positions hold our nursing staff together. Anyone may nominate the above listed staff members that demonstrate the Veteran Health Administration “I CARE” values on a consistent basis.

2023 FISCAL YEAR IN REVIEW

Finances

Medical Support
& Compliance



\$50.7 million

Medical
Facilities



\$79.2 million

Community
Care



\$148.4 million

Medical
Services

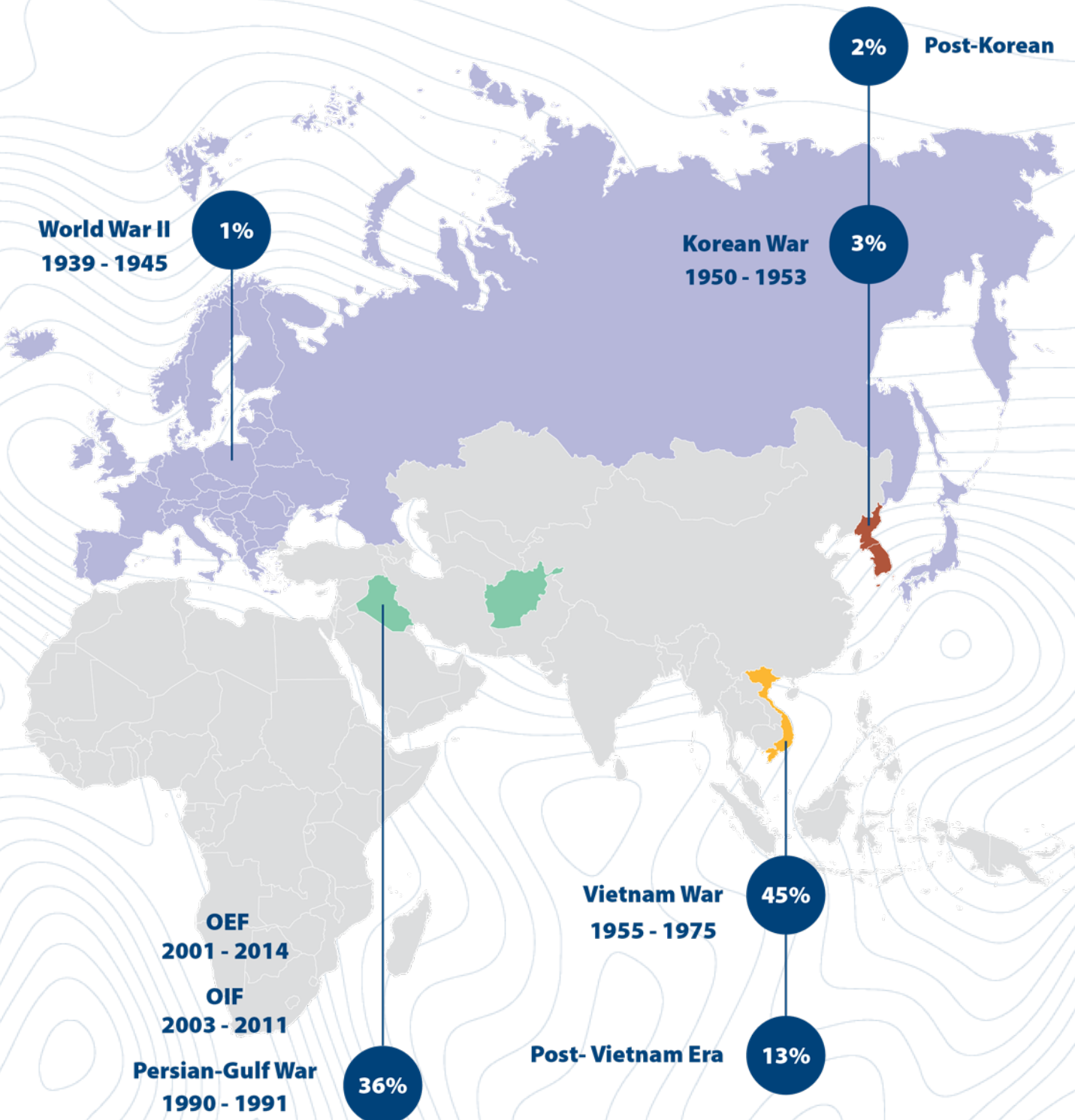


\$638 million

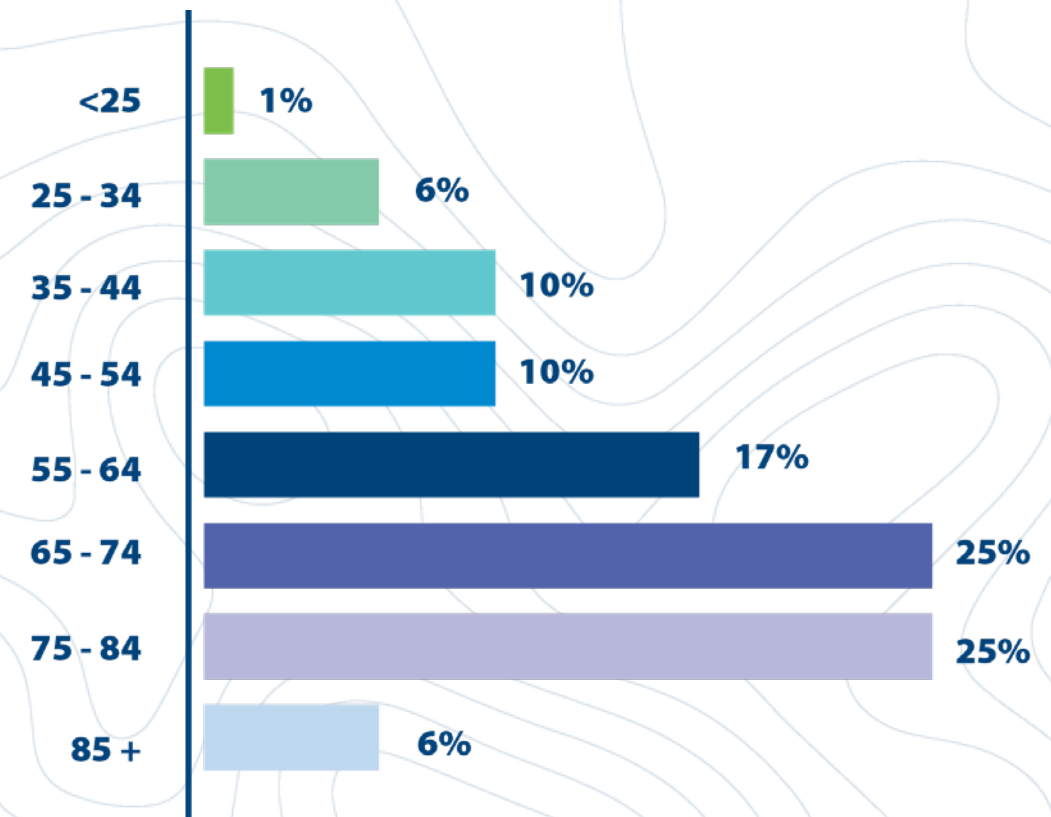
\$916.2M **FY2023**
OPERATING BUDGET

Unique Patients Served: 74,869

BY PERIOD OF SERVICE



BY AGE GROUP



Average Stay

6.4 Days



Telehealth Encounters

121,815



Outpatient Visits

694,256



Acute Hospital Admissions

4706

Fisher House



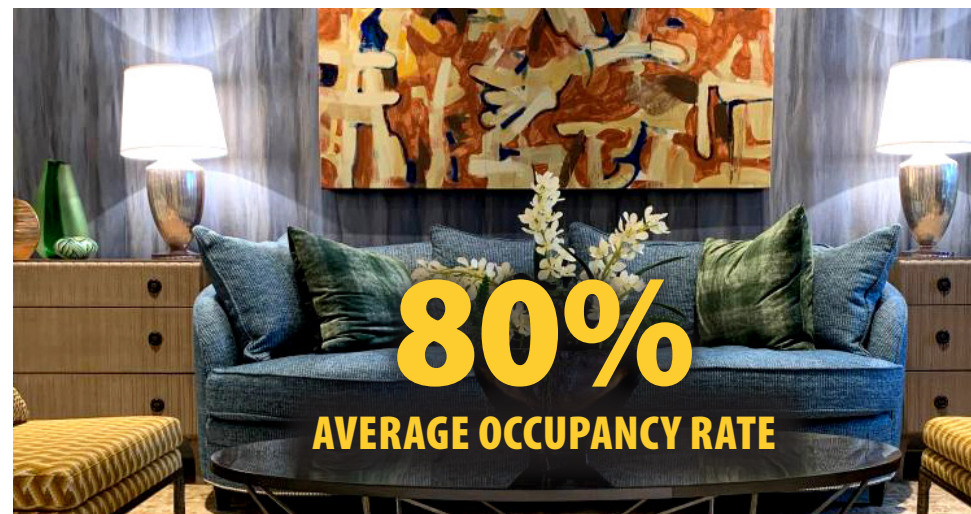
2023 PROGRAM STATS

We have served:

- 1,169 families
- 2,154 individual guests
(including 42 minors)

Occupancy:

- Average occupancy rate: 80%
- Ann Arbor's VA Fisher House tied with Charleston for the 3rd highest occupancy rate for FY23
- Average length of stay: 4 days
- With COVID restrictions lifted, on June 27, 2023 we hosted our 1st Annual Open House for VAAAHS Employees



Picture on the right: Veteran Donald Tryba and his significant other, Connie Cornman during their stay at Fisher House last summer.



Overall Program Updates



SINCE OPENING JUNE 1, 2020

We have served:

- 4,500+ families
- 8,600+ individual guests
(including 95 minors)

Our guests come from:

- 29 different states plus
the US Virgin Islands
- 5 countries: US, Canada,
Australia, France, & Mexico

We have saved families:

- Over \$2.8 million in lodging
expenses (on average \$200
per night for a hotel, food,
and incidentals)

Thank you to everyone assisting in our stay. It was a last-minute scheduled surgery, and we were able to get in with no hesitation. The hospitality and care shown to my husband and I was incredible. We didn't have to worry about anything, it was taken care of for us. My husband didn't have to worry about me staying in a hotel somewhere. Thank you for everything!

— Veteran's spouse

This place is awesome! We have been saying this since we walked in the door. Our brother (a Seabee) and Vietnam Veteran had a triple heart bypass. It was such a blessing! When we were told this was available to us. Just having a place to rest and shower was enough but to be able to walk to the hospital and get something to eat was more than we could have imagined. Everyone was so friendly and caring and made us feel welcomed. We are so grateful for the Fisher House. Thank you, a thousand times, over.

— Veteran's sisters

This is such a great place! Thank you so much. The Fisher House & staff are a huge blessing to us as we go through my husband's surgery and recovery. I am so thankful to be here during these rough times & it means so much to me to be able to just walk over to the VA. My husband has peace of mind that I will be alright, and I am thankful to be close by. You are a wonderful blessing from God. Love, hugs, and prayers.

— Veteran's spouse



Research

Sanjay Saint Earns Under Secretary's Award for Outstanding Achievement in Health Services Research



Dr. Saint, a senior research scientist at Health Services Research and Development Center for Clinic Management Research at VA Ann Arbor Healthcare System, areas of primary research focus on preventing hospital acquired infections, appropriate urinary catheter use, and provider/patient communications.

"We've been focused on how to improve communication between physicians and patients, especially related to the concept of creating a clinic milieu where sacred moments are more likely to occur," explain Dr. Saint. "Sacred moments are when time stands still when two people are interacting. When there's energy to the interaction and it tends to be memorable."

"I've had several of these taking care of Veterans and it helps me remind myself why I do what I do. "You can't put a price tag or anything else on one of these types of interactions, but once you have it, you just feel blessed that you're someone's doctor," he continued.

Dr. Saint's VA career spans more than two decades, supported by numerous grants totaling more than \$40 million in direct funding.

His award highlights his ability to understand factors affecting Veteran's health, training the next generation of VA researchers, and bringing national recognition to VA's research community through high quality research projects.

Dr. Saint's award caps off a one of the most successful years for VA Ann Arbor Healthcare System's research enterprise. Dr. Saint joins fellow VA Ann Arbor Healthcare System researchers Sarah Krein, John Piette, and Laura Damschroder, earning prestigious HSR&D awards for the 2022 year.

"I think it has to do with leadership and culture. We have a wonderful director and leadership team that understands the value of research and investing in research and, importantly, we also have close and supportive partners at the University of Michigan, an organization well known for its research prowess," said Dr. Saint.

Most of all, Dr. Saint credits the Veterans he's cared for throughout his career that has made him the doctor he is today.

"What it means for me is that I've been able to give back to Veterans. I've become a better doctor because I learned how to be a doctor by taking care of Veterans. When I was a medical student, as a resident, as a fellow, and moving up the academic ranks. I feel like things have come full circle."

A Burning Question: VA Ann Arbor Pulmonologists Chronicle Unique Diagnosis of Veteran Suffering Burn Pit Injury

A group of VA Ann Arbor Health System (VAAHS) clinicians and researchers are bringing attention to the respiratory health of deployed Veterans.

While deployed to areas of Southwest Asia, many Veterans were exposed to a multitude of respiratory hazards including military burn pits, sand and dust storms, diesel fumes, and sulfur dioxide.

The challenges associated with identifying these health problems were portrayed in The New England Journal of Medicine's "Clinical Problem-Solving" series in which two VA Ann Arbor Healthcare System staff pulmonologists describe the evaluation and treatment of a Veteran experiencing breathing difficulty years after exposure to burn pits.

The article, titled "A Burning Question," is a unique journal entry that walks the reader through the medical issues the patient is reporting, followed by the doctor's step-by-step diagnosis and treatment recommendations for the patient.

"We thought this would be a good opportunity for doctors and patients to learn about a condition that we are concerned about, that we know is out there, and is of interest to a lot of Veterans," said Dr. Alexander Rabin, co-author of the article and pulmonologist for the VA Ann Arbor Healthcare System.

The article describes a 35-year-old Post 9/11-era Veteran experiencing shortness of breath, coughing, and a burning sensation in the airways that developed following two deployments to Iraq in 2003 and 2005. During those deployments, the Veteran was routinely exposed to burning paper, cardboard, electronics, used medical supplies, tires and discarded food. The Veteran also helped burn human waste by igniting it with JP-8 in a 50-gallon drum. No personal protective equipment was used,

and the Veteran reported coughing and phlegm production while carrying out these assignments.

The Veteran was initially diagnosed with asthma and was prescribed albuterol to use before exercise but continued to struggle even with regular use of the medication.

"There's a saying in medicine, 'Not all that wheezes is asthma,'" said Dr. Rabin, referring to the Veteran's initial misdiagnosis.

Drs. Rabin and John Osterholzer, also a pulmonologist and VA Ann Arbor Healthcare System, interpreted the testing that had been performed previously on the Veteran. Compared to other people that were similar in age, the tests showed the Veteran's lungs were only working at about 60% of the normal predicted value.

"Usually, anyone that has a predicted value of 80% or above is considered normal," said Dr. John Osterholzer, co-author of the article and pulmonologist for the VA Ann Arbor Healthcare System. "It's an indication that something was wrong. The pattern of abnormalities can give us some clues of what might be wrong."

While the tests did confirm that the Veteran had diminished lung capacity, the symptoms were not consistent with asthma. A CT scan and lung biopsy were completed which showed scarring of the small airways, a condition called constrictive bronchiolitis.

Now that the doctors had a better understanding of the injuries in the Veteran's lungs, they were able to adjust his treatment by prescribing him new medications and pulmonary rehabilitation. After two years of treatment and therapy, the Veteran reported that his symptoms of shortness of breath and cough had significantly improved.



The doctors conclude their article by noting "this case underscores the importance of asking about a patient's exposures, including those during military service, and pursuing comprehensive evaluation in cases in which initial testing does not yield a diagnosis that adequately account for the clinical picture."

In August of 2022, Congress passed the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act. The PACT Act acknowledges that military deployment to Southwest Asia may have resulted in multiple types of cancer and respiratory conditions.

To acknowledge and promote the passage of the PACT Act, Drs. Rabin and Osterholzer partnered with VAAHS team members Dr. Deborah Heaney, an Environmental Health Specialist, and Program Manager Rachel Howard to publish an essay entitled "A Sacred Obligation: Meeting the Needs of Veterans with Airborne Hazard Exposures" in the journal, The Annals of the American Thoracic Society.

The essay highlights the frustrations Veterans often express when they perceive that their health concerns are not being adequately addressed. The authors

describe how the PACT Act will better acknowledge and address those concerns proactively. Rather than waiting for definitive proof linking the exposures with a list of over 20 medical conditions including cancers and respiratory diseases, the PACT Act identifies them as being "presumptive" conditions that are eligible for service connections. This and other aspects of the legislation greatly expands exposed Veterans' access to VA health care and benefits for Vietnam, Gulf War, and Post 9/11 Veterans.

Veterans who feel they were exposed to hazardous materials or smoke during their military services are encouraged to sign up and complete the questionnaire in VA's Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry.

The clinicians and researchers identified in this article participate in the Ann Arbor Site of the Post-Deployment Cardiopulmonary Evaluation Network (PDCEN). More information about the PDCEN can be found at: <https://www.warrelatedillness.va.gov/warrelatedillness/ahbpce/network.asp>



HSR&D Award x3

Sarah L. Klein, John Piette, and Laura Damschroder were recognized for their contribution to health science research by the Department of Veteran's Affairs Health Services Research & Development (HSR&D). Click the name of each researcher below to learn more about their awards and projects.

Sarah L. Krein, PhD, RN, is the recipient of the 2022 HSR&D Daniel Deykin Award for Outstanding Mentor, which is presented each year to an HSR&D researcher(s) who exhibits outstanding dedication in mentoring the next generation of researchers. Skills of importance include fostering an appreciation for the vital input provided by VA stakeholders, including policymakers and Veterans, and guiding mentees toward an understanding of the positive impact research can have on the health and care of Veterans.

Dr. John Piette, an HSR&D Research Career Scientist and part of HSR&D's Center for Clinical Management Research (CCMR) in Ann Arbor, MI, and colleagues, authored a paper titled "Patient-cen-

tered pain care using artificial intelligence and mobile health tools: A randomized comparative effectiveness trial." Published in JAMA Internal Medicine, the article reports findings from an HSR&D-funded study that evaluated a novel approach to delivering cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) for chronic pain. The authors found that AI-based CBT achieved equivalent pain outcomes compared to standard CBT, but it did so with significantly less resource use (less than half the therapist time). This study suggests that personalizing VA pain therapy using AI could dramatically increase access to evidence-based alternatives to opioids, treating up to twice as many patients with the same number of therapists.

Laura Damschroder, MS, MPH, is the recipient of the 2022 HSR&D Health System Impact Award. This award honors HSR&D- and QUERI-funded research that has had a direct and important impact on clinical practice or clinical policy within the VA health care system – and that has been successfully translated into VA's policy or operations.

William Weitzel, MD, Receives Prestigious 2023 Roger J. Grekin Research Award

In recognition of his outstanding contributions to the field of medical research, William (Rick) Weitzel, MD, has been honored with the 2023 Roger J. Grekin Research Award. This distinguished accolade serves as a testament to Dr. Weitzel's unwavering dedication and groundbreaking work.

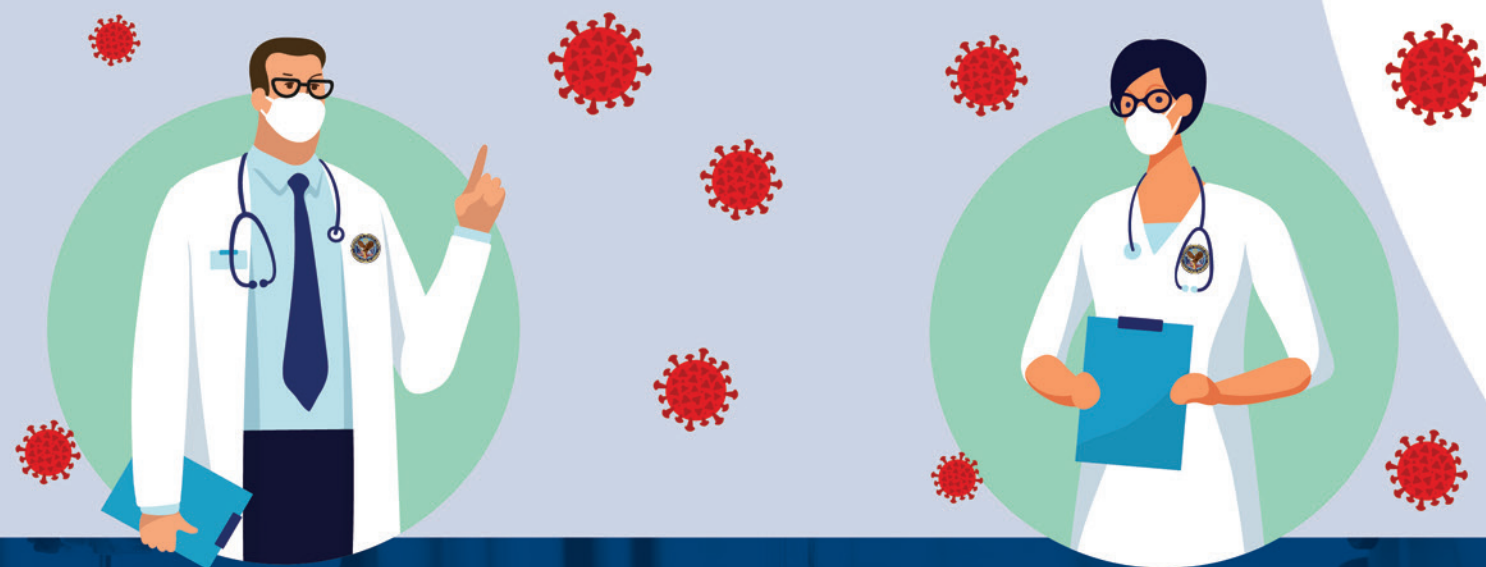
The Roger J. Grekin Research Award, named after the distinguished leader, educator, and physician-scientist, is bestowed upon individuals who have made significant advancements in their respective fields of study. This award is intended to honor a VA researcher who has shown a commitment to the values that Dr. Grekin shared with us: a commitment to serve our nation's Veterans through excellence in research, leadership, service, and mentoring.

Dr. Weitzel served as the Associate Chief of Staff for Research (ACOS/R) from 2014 to 2023. His tenure as ACOS/R was marked by strategic growth, both in research infrastructure and in the recruitment of new investigators. Dr. Weitzel continues to serve the VA and is the Director of the Technology

Transfer program at VA Ann Arbor Healthcare System. He's a recognized leader in his field of research: the development of medical devices and software driven tools for use with renal and vascular disease patients. His innovative work has not only resulted in numerous grants and publications, but also 10 patents. In addition, Dr. Weitzel is known for his compassionate care for his patients and has an established reputation as a thought leader and advisor.

Dr. William Weitzel's remarkable achievements in medical research have rightfully earned him the 2023 Roger J. Grekin Research Award. His commitment to advancing the field renal and vascular diseases, coupled with his groundbreaking discoveries, has had a profound impact on the scientific community and holds great promise for the future of medical science. Dr. Weitzel's recognition serves as a reminder of the power of innovative research in transforming lives and shaping the landscape of health care.





Adapting to the COVID-19 Pandemic: VA Hospitals Hold Several Advantages Compared to Non-Federal Hospitals

A study comparing the impact of COVID-19 on VA and non-federal hospitals showed the VA structure held several distinct advantages when adapting to the pandemic including the ability to quickly expand bed capacity, retain staff, mitigate supply shortages, and avoid financial hardship.

In a study published in the Journal of General Internal Medicine titled “Comparison of the Impact of COVID-19 on Veterans Affairs and Non-federal Hospitals: A Survey of Infection Prevention Specialists,” a team of doctors from VA Ann Arbor Healthcare System surveyed lead infection preventionists at 71 VA hospitals and 415 non-federal hospitals. Infection preventionists were surveyed as they were the “tip of the spear” when it came to creating facility COVID response plans.

The survey asked a number of operational questions ranging from the respective hospital’s pandemic response plan effectiveness, which organization each hospital relied on most for COVID-19 information, staffing and supply shortages, and the financial health of the hospital.

The study highlights how a global pandemic like COVID-19 is considered by health care experts to be a “system shock,” or an event that detracts from day-

to-day operations. As the virus spread world-wide, hospitals were forced to delay or defer many elective procedures and divert all their staff and resources to combating COVID-19.

“During COVID, a lot of elective care was appropriately deferred. While this was the right thing to do, for non-federal hospitals primarily using a fee-for-service model reimbursements subsequently dropped off dramatically at a time when the delivery of care became more expensive and more staff and hospital capacity were required. This created opposing priorities for these hospitals resulting in limited capacity, furlough of staff, and even hospital closure in some instances,” said Dr. R.J. Schildhouse, corresponding author of the study and Chief of Staff for VA Ann Arbor Healthcare System. “Federal hospitals like the VA were insulated from this dynamic as their funding comes from Congress, and this financial stability allowed much more freedom to expand or shift resources to where they were most needed.”

While many non-federal hospitals suffered severe financial constraints during the pandemic, VA received a substantial boost in funding of nearly \$17 billion via the CARES Act. Fifty-eight percent of infection preventionists surveyed at non-VA

hospitals reported financial hardships stemming from the pandemic, compared to just 7% of VA hospitals.

“Our findings support the fact that the ability to quickly shift priorities, the ability to coordinate, and the funding model really lend itself to being more durable for a pandemic response,” Dr. Schildhouse explained.

This boost in funding better allowed VA to retain staff, acquire medical supplies such as N-95 masks and other personal protective equipment, and to enact VA’s Fourth Mission. VA’s Fourth Mission allows VA hospitals to care for non-Veteran patients during times of emergency.

However, the team of VA Ann Arbor doctors suggest a more robust response of the VA’s Fourth Mission for future health emergencies that may potentially reach the scale of COVID-19, noting that the magnitude of services delivered by VA hospitals during the pandemic did not adequately meet the needs of beleaguered non-federal healthcare systems across the United States.

Researchers also note the advantages of VA’s regional resource sharing between hospitals. For instance, VA Healthcare Systems in Saginaw, Ann Arbor, Battle Creek, and Detroit coordinated different patient care services at each location for Veterans living across southern Michigan and seamless sharing of supplies and testing.

“COVID was a test that proved, when necessary, that working at a market level (either by regional VA hospitals or via non-federal hospital systems) allowed facility specialization and the most appropriate and efficient use of resources,” said Dr. Schildhouse.

The authors note that non-federal hospitals were subject to a dynamic of competing for resources and staff with the most the vulnerable being singular, small hospitals in rural areas. In order to allow them to better weather future system shock events, the researchers recommended that small, singular, or rural hospitals seek out local and regional partnerships with larger healthcare systems, state governments, and hospital associations proactively, particularly for complex services.

“The COVID-19 pandemic has provided us with a nice proof of concept that the VA can function as expected through its Fourth Mission,” said Dr. Schildhouse. “However, if the VA is expected to truly function as the nation’s safety net healthcare system for widespread global catastrophes, as opposed to just local disasters, thought needs to be given to the magnitude of the response required so that the VA can be prepared to make a much larger impact.” care.





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