

PROUDLY SERVING THE UNIQUE HEALTH CARE NEEDS OF MARYLAND'S VETERANS

For Veteran patients of the VA Maryland Health Care System

SUMMER 2019

Visit us on the web: maryland.va.gov



LET'S CLEAR THE AIR FOR EVERY VETERAN

The damages of tobacco are clear. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), cigarette smoking causes about one of every five deaths in the U.S. each year, which is more than 480,000 deaths annually, including deaths from secondhand smoke.

Cigarette smoking causes premature death:

- Life expectancy for smokers is at least 10 years shorter than for nonsmokers.
- Quitting smoking before the age of 40 reduces the risk of dying from smoking-related disease by about 90%.

Exposure to secondhand smoke causes an estimated 41,000 deaths annually among adults in the United States:

- Secondhand smoke causes 7,333 annual deaths from lung cancer.
- Secondhand smoke causes 33,951 annual deaths from heart disease.

Get the help you need to quit today! For assistance, visit: www.smokefree.gov

VA Joins the Country with Smoke-Free Facilities

The VA Maryland Health Care System, along with all VA medical centers across the country, is changing our tobacco policy to further our commitment to provide a safe and healthy environment for patients, visitors, vendors, volunteers, contractors and employees. The policy covers all tobacco products and smoking materials, including, but not limited to:

-  Cigarettes
-  Matches
-  Lighters
-  E-cigarettes or electronic cigarettes
-  Lighter fluid
-  Cigars and/or pipes
-  Any other form of tobacco

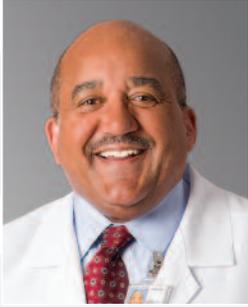
Beginning October 1, 2019, tobacco use of any kind will no longer be permitted on any of our VA campuses for patients, visitors, vendors, volunteers and contractors. Veterans are strongly encouraged to leave all

tobacco and smoking materials at home. To reduce the risk of ignition near oxygen or other flammable gases used in VA facilities, some areas may require materials to be stored during your visit.

“We are not alone in recognizing the importance of creating a smoke-free campus,” said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. “As of 2014, 4,000 health care facilities and four national health care systems in the U.S. have implemented smoke-free grounds.”

The VA Maryland Health Care System offers tobacco treatment services for Veterans. If you would like more information about tobacco treatment, please contact your Primary Care Team.

Seeing Your Doctor is the Key to Staying Healthy: A Message from the Director



For many Veterans, the lasting impression of military service drives their approach to life, including how they maintain their households, how they dress, how they work, and how they seek health care. In the military, service members were expected to complete an assigned mission at any cost—even at the sacrifice of their own health. This sacrifice often left physical and mental ailments untreated until they were unavoidable.

At the VA Maryland Health Care System, part of our mission is to help Veterans understand the importance of preventive care. As in the military, others are counting on you to be healthy and ready for a new mission. Regular visits with a VA primary care provider are critical to getting and staying healthy. An annual check-up is an opportunity to discuss health concerns, review your health history and learn about appropriate screenings for potentially preventable conditions, such as diabetes.

In this edition of Veterans HealthWatch, you will learn about the benefits of regular health care visits, increased access to care in the community thanks to the new VA Mission Act, and how a Veteran diagnosed with diabetes turned his life around. You will also get a glimpse of the new Eastern Baltimore County VA Outpatient Clinic that recently opened in Rosedale, Maryland.

Preventing an illness before it starts is key to helping our Veterans live the productive lives they deserve.

Sincerely,

Adam M. Robinson, Jr., M.D.

Adam M. Robinson, Jr., M.D.

Director, VA Maryland Health Care System
VADM, MC, USN, (RET)
36th Surgeon General, USN

VA Care from Virtually Anywhere!

Did you know that you can meet with your VA provider from the comfort of your own home over video and avoid the hassles of long commutes, congested parking, child care, bad weather and scheduling conflicts? With VA Video Connect, you can meet with your provider using a smart phone, tablet or laptop computer. Ask your VA provider about VA Video Connect and how to get started. It's easier than you might think.



Reach Your VA Care Team Over Live Video with
VA Video Connect



**Real-time access to
VA care in a way that
works best for you!**

VA Video Connect enables you to conduct visits with your doctor in a virtual medical room, using the camera on your phone, computer, or tablet.

Talk with your provider about using VA Video Connect if:



You live far away from your VA facility.



You're dealing with health conditions that make it difficult to travel to the specialist you need.



You lack time to attend an in-person appointment.



A hands-on physical examination is not required.

Get started today!

Learn more about VA Video Connect at mobile.va.gov/appstore.



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

Access to Health Care at your Finger Tips.

See prescription refills and scheduled appointments, even communicate with your health care team online using **My HealtheVet**. Consider these three simple tips to maximize your **My HealtheVet** experience.

1. Registration. Registering for My HealtheVet is just the first step in accessing the features on the website. To access all the links, including prescription refill, appointments, Secure Messaging, labs, test results and medical records under the Blue Button, you must have a premium account. Premium access requires in-person identity verification. You can get this verification done at any VA facility when you present a valid ID.

2. Change of Address. You are not able to change your address through My HealtheVet. To change your address, call the VA Health Benefits Center at 877-222-8387 Monday through Friday between 8 a.m. and 8 p.m., or provide the information when you check in for your next VA clinic appointment.

3. Secure Messaging. Secure Messaging was designed to handle routine or non-emergency situations. Clinicians have up to three business days to respond to a Secure Message. If you are having a medical emergency, call 911. If you are having a mental health crisis, call the Veterans Crisis Line at 800-273-8255 and Press 1.

Selecting the wrong team to message. When using Security Messaging, make sure your provider's name appears in the "To" line of the message. If it doesn't, do not ask for your message to be forwarded to your provider. For assistance, please contact the **My HealtheVet** Coordinator at 410-605-7045.



Visit myhealth.va.gov

Why I Choose VA: Accomplishing Goals



**Gary Warren, U.S. Navy Veteran,
Gerofit Participant and National Veterans
Golden Age Games Athlete**

At every doctor's visit, Gary Warren's VA primary care provider encouraged him to join VA's Move! program. "I had a beer belly even though I didn't drink alcohol," he said. "After a year, I decided to go ahead and do it to get rid of my gut." But Gary didn't stop there. When the VA Maryland Health Care System started offering a new program designed specifically for older Veterans, called Gerofit, he didn't need any encouragement this time. "I signed up and started going to class every Monday, Wednesday and Friday," he said. "I lost a whole bunch of weight and I feel 100 percent better." Today Gary proudly wears his size 34 jeans and he recently competed in the National Veterans Golden Age Games. More important, he's living and loving life, and is able to keep up with his 12-year old grandson, Conner.

The VA is on a Mission

The VA is strengthening its ability to provide access to timely, high-quality care to Veterans with a network of providers under the VA Mission Act.

Launched on June 6, 2019, the Mission Act is a law that helps VA deliver increased access to care in the community. This means Veterans get the care and services they need, where and when they need them.

Eligibility:

Veterans are eligible to choose to receive care in the community if they meet any of the following criteria:

- 1) You need a service that is not available at a VA health care facility.
- 2) You live in a U.S. state without a full-service VA medical facility.
- 3) You qualify under the “Grandfathering” provision related to distance eligibility for the Veterans Choice Program.
- 4) VA cannot provide care within designated access standards.
- 5) It is in your best medical interest.
- 6) A VA medical service line does not meet certain quality standards.

Access:

Average drive time to a specific VA medical facility:

- 30-minute average drive time for primary care, mental health care, and non-institutional extended care services (including adult day care)

- 60-minute average drive time for specialty care
- Drive time standards are calculated by VA using geo-mapping software

Appointment wait time at a specific VA medical facility:

- 20 days for primary care, mental health care, and non-institutional extended care services, unless you agree to a later date in consultation with your VA health care provider
- 28 days for specialty care from the date of request, unless you agree to a later date in consultation with your VA health care provider

Care in the community must be authorized in advance by the VA, with the exception of Urgent Care.

Please remember that your VA primary care provider is available to help guide you through this new benefit and to help determine if you qualify for community care under this new law.

For more information about the VA Mission Act, visit www.missionact.va.gov.

URGENT CARE

The VA Mission Act also includes a new urgent care benefit, which provides eligible Veterans with greater choice and access to timely, high-quality care. Urgent care providers treat injuries and illnesses that require immediate attention but are not life-threatening. The benefit supplements care Veterans may also have access to at a VA medical facility.

When using the urgent care benefit, **Veterans must go to an urgent care provider in VA's network.** Upon arriving, Veterans must state they are using their VA urgent care benefit. The urgent care provider will verify the Veteran's eligibility before providing care.

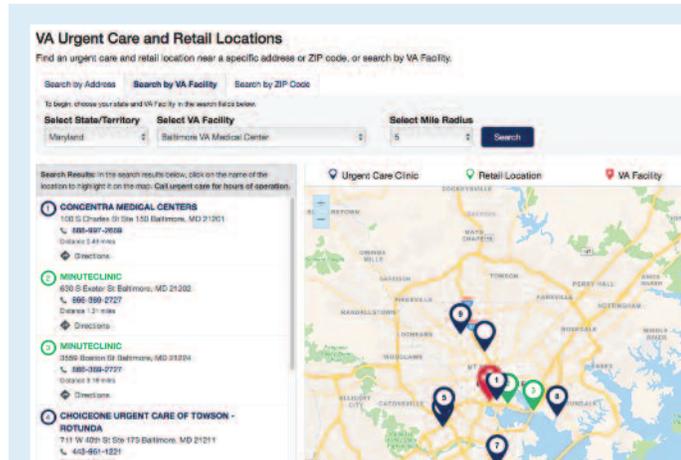
To find an urgent care location in VA's contracted network, or for information on filling Urgent Care Prescriptions, please visit <https://vaurgentcarelocator.triwest.com/> and search by zip code or VA facility.

Veterans can also find a participating urgent care location by calling **866-620-2071**.

If a Veteran arrives at an urgent care network location and has any difficulty receiving care, they can call **866-620-2071** to receive assistance.

Veterans may be billed by VA separately for a copayment when using the urgent care benefit, depending on their assigned priority group and the number of times they use the urgent care benefit in a calendar year.

VA can only pay for urgent care if the provider is part of VA's contracted network. Veterans who go to an out-of-network urgent care provider may be required to pay the full cost of care.



Four Steps to Urgent Care

- 1 **Find a provider:** The eligible Veteran finds and travels to an in-network urgent care provider.
- 2 **Confirm eligibility:** The Veterans states he or she is using the VA benefit and the urgent care provider confirms the Veteran's eligibility.
- 3 **Receive care:** The Veteran receives urgent care and medication is prescribed, if needed.
- 4 **Billing:** The urgent care provider bills VA's Third-Party Administrator (TPA) and VA may bill the Veteran the applicable copayment.

For more information about the urgent care benefit, visit www.va.gov/COMMUNITYCARE/programs/veterans/Urgent_Care.asp.

What's YOUR Risk of Falling?



According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), millions of adults ages 65 and older fall each year due to surprisingly routine but overlooked conditions. If you or a loved one have any of the conditions below, keep reading for the steps you can take to be sure-footed.

► **Conditions that may increase your risk of falling:**

- Lower body weakness
- Difficulties with walking and balance
- Use of medicines, such as tranquilizers, sedatives or antidepressants. Even some over-the-counter medicines can affect balance and how steady you are on your feet.
- Vision problems
- Foot pain or poor footwear
- Home hazards or dangers such as
 - broken or uneven steps, and
 - throw rugs or clutter that can be tripped over

You can recover from a fall with nothing more than a few scratches and a bruised ego, but some falls can lead to more serious injuries like a head trauma or broken bones. With more than 3 million visits to the emergency room from elderly adults falling each year, it pays to know how to lower your chances of falling.

► **Talk to Your VA Health Care Provider:**

- Tell your provider if you fall or worry that you're going to fall.
- Evaluate your risk for falling and talk with health care providers about specific things you can do.
- Review your medicines to see if any might make you dizzy or sleepy. This should include prescription and over-the-counter medicines.

► **Do Strength and Balance Exercises**

- Strengthen your legs and improve your balance with specific exercises, such as Tai Chi.
- Lack of exercise can lead to weakness, which increases your chances of falling.

► **Have Your Eyes Checked**

- Have your eyes checked at least once a year.
- Update your eyeglasses if needed.

If you have bifocal or progressive lenses, you may want to get a pair of glasses with only your distance prescription for outdoor activities, such as walking. Bifocal and/or progressive lenses can sometimes cause things to look closer or farther than they are.

► **Have Your Feet Checked**

- Ask your health care provider to check your feet once a year.
- Discuss appropriate footwear.
- Get checked for neuropathy (pain or numbness in feet).

► **Use the Assistive Devices Your Provider Recommends**

- Walker
- Cane
- Wheelchair

► **Make Your Home Safer**

- Remove items that you can trip over from stairs and areas where you walk.
- Install grab bars inside and outside your tub or shower and next to the toilet.
- Put railings on both sides of stairs.
- Use non-slip mats in the bathtub and shower.
- Make sure your home has lots of light by adding more or brighter light bulbs.

About 29 million falls annually represents the leading cause of injuries and deaths among older Americans. As Baby Boomers age, falls will continue to rise unless we take the necessary precautions to lessen them.

A Maintenance Schedule for Your Body



No matter your age, health or activity level, everyone can benefit from preventive care.

Preventive care involves measures you and your primary care provider take to keep you healthy, to prevent you from getting sick, and to keep health issues from getting worse or leading to other conditions. That means going to the doctor not just when you are sick, but on a routine basis, even when you are feeling perfectly fine.

Would you buy a new car and then expect it to last and perform well for years without any maintenance? Think of preventive care like a maintenance schedule for your body. As your mechanic would check your car's brakes, tires, fluids, etc., routine checkups enable your primary care provider to check your height, weight, blood pressure, cholesterol, glucose and heart rate. Based on these numbers, your primary care provider may make recommendations for lifestyle changes, like quitting smoking, improving diet or increasing physical activity.

As your mileage increases, you may need more frequent visits and more extensive checks. That is where health screenings come in. Health screenings look for disease before it starts or progresses. With most cancers, for example, early detection increases the chances of a cure. Breast, cervical, colorectal, skin and other cancer screenings are crucial for beating the disease. Health screenings can also look for diabetes, Hepatitis C and mental health conditions like depression. Depending on age and the time of year, preventive care may also include vaccinations against ailments like the flu and pneumonia.

When it comes to preventive care, how often you see your primary care provider is unique to you. Your provider can recommend what is personally best for you.

Whatever the frequency, convenient access to primary care can help you keep up with your personalized preventive “maintenance schedule.” In addition to our primary care clinics at the Baltimore, Loch Raven and Perry Point VA Medical Centers, the VA Maryland Health Care System operates five community based outpatient clinics throughout the state to offer primary care services close to where Veterans live and work. Enrolled Veterans can choose the VA health care facility that is most convenient for them. You can learn more about our newest clinic, the Eastern Baltimore County VA Outpatient Clinic, in this issue of HealthWatch (on page 7).

You know that sound your car makes when something is wrong? Don't wait until your body does the same! Make it a priority to keep your health in check so that you are running as smoothly as possible in the future.

▶ **If you are not enrolled for VA health care**, there is no better time than now to apply. You can apply online at www.va.gov (click on “Apply Now for VA Health Care”), by calling **877-222-8387**, or in person at any one of our medical centers or outpatient clinics (listed on the back of this newsletter or online at www.maryland.va.gov).

▶ **If you are enrolled**, but it's been a while since your last primary care visit, call the Appointment Center at **410-605-7333** to schedule an appointment. And then make sure you show up! Missed appointments don't help you and they prevent other Veterans from using your appointment time.

▶ **If you are enrolled and receiving routine care**, you can encourage other Veterans to take advantage of the benefits they've earned through their service in the armed forces by applying for VA health care so that they can start on the path to better health through prevention.

NEW Outpatient Clinic Now Seeing Patients

The VA Maryland Health Care System officially opened its new Eastern Baltimore County VA Outpatient Clinic in March 2019. The new clinic, which replaces the former Fort Howard VA Outpatient Clinic that closed in March 2016 as a result of water damage, is located at 5235 King Avenue in Rosedale, Maryland.

The new 14,000 square foot facility features spacious exam rooms, comfortable patient waiting areas, and state-of-the-art medical technology. Additionally, the new Eastern Baltimore County VA Outpatient Clinic is conveniently located close to major highways (I-95, I-695, U.S. Route 40, and Maryland Route 7) and mass transportation.

The new clinic provides outpatient primary care, mental health care, women's health care, social work assistance, preventive health and education services, various medical screenings, and referrals to specialized programs throughout the VA Maryland Health Care System. The clinic, which is open Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., also has a free weekday shuttle service to and from the Baltimore VA Medical Center.

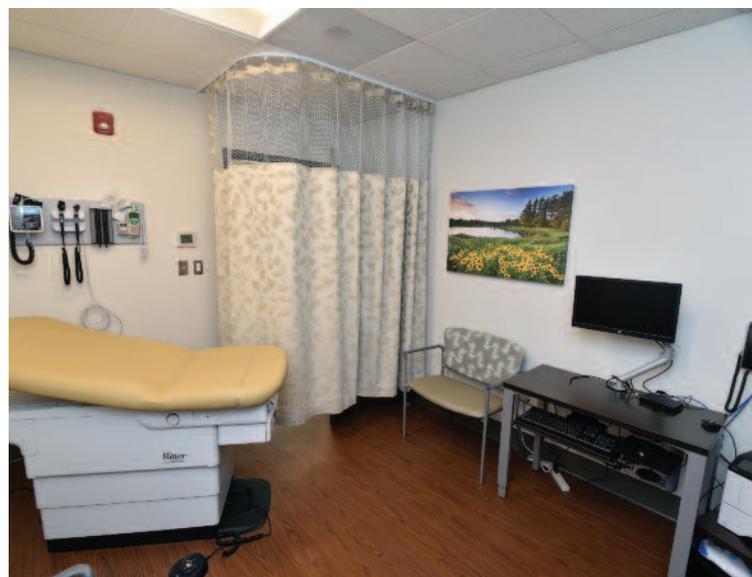
For additional information about the new clinic, please visit www.maryland.va.gov/locations/EasternBaltimoreCountyVAOutpatientClinic.asp.

Become a patient at the Eastern Baltimore County VA Outpatient Clinic



Veterans already enrolled for health care with the VA Maryland Health Care System can transfer their care to the new clinic and schedule an appointment by calling the Appointment Center at **410-605-7333**. Veterans who are not yet enrolled for VA health care can apply online at www.va.gov (click on “Apply now for VA health care”), by calling **877-222-8387**, or by visiting the new clinic Monday through Friday between 8 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. To reach the Eastern Baltimore County VA Outpatient Clinic, please call **443-730-2020**.

Eastern Baltimore County VA Outpatient Clinic
Franklin Square Professional Center
5235 King Ave, Suite 200
Rosedale, MD 21237



Reduce Your Pharmacy Waiting Time

To help reduce your pharmacy waiting times, please use one of the following **four** options to refill your prescriptions: **ask your provider at the time of your visit, by phone, by mail, or online.** New prescriptions, if needed on the day they are issued by your provider, can still be filled at the outpatient pharmacy window at the Baltimore or Perry Point VA Medical Centers.



REFILL BY PHONE

- Step 1** Call the Prescription Refill Line at **410-605-7395**.
 - Step 2** After hearing the greeting, enter your full nine-digit Social Security number followed by the “#” (pound) sign.
 - Step 3** Press option “2” for Pharmacy Information.
 - Step 4** Press option “1” to order prescription refills (press option “2” if you want to check on the status of your prescription refill).
 - Step 5** Enter your prescription number, followed by the “#” (pound) sign.
- If at any time you need to speak directly with a Pharmacy staff member, enter 8 followed by the “#” (pound) sign. *All refills ordered by phone will be mailed directly to the Veteran’s home address.*



REFILL BY MAIL

If a Veteran obtains an initial prescription from the VA Maryland Health Care System and is eligible for refills, he or she will be issued a refill request form and a return mailing label with their prescription. Simply fill out and sign the refill slip and use the label provided to mail the slip back to one of our two outpatient pharmacies:

Pharmacy Service
VA Medical Center
10 North Greene Street
Baltimore, MD 21201

Pharmacy Service
P.O. Box 1015
VA Medical Center
Perry Point, MD 21902

Please **allow 14 days** for processing if you mail in your prescription request.



REFILL ONLINE

The VA’s My HealthVet system offers a secure online prescription refill service. The refill is sent directly to your home. To access the prescription refill service, users must register for My HealthVet at myhealth.va.gov.

NO REMAINING REFILLS?

1. If your Primary Care team prescribed your medication:
 - a. Contact your team on the telephone number provided on your Clinic Check Out Sheet.
 - b. Use the Secure Messaging option on the My HealthVet online service to send a message to your primary care team.
2. If the medication was prescribed by a specialist, contact the specialty provider listed on the prescription label.
3. Call the Telephone Care Line for the VA Maryland Health Care System at **800-865-2441** and select the option for “Prescription Refills or Questions About Your Medications” using a touch tone phone.

NEW PRESCRIPTIONS

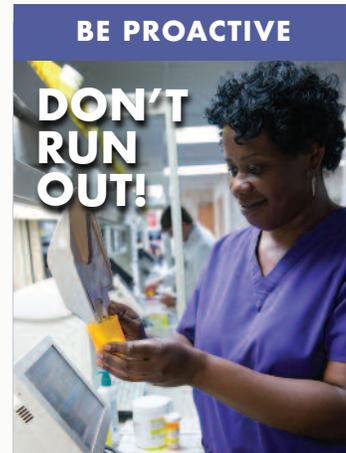
If you were seen by a non-VA physician and need a new prescription, please obtain documentation and/or records from that physician’s office and then contact your Primary Care Team Nurse.

PRESCRIPTION COPAYS

If you have any questions about prescription copays or charges, please contact a billing representative at **866-393-0006**.

MEDICATION SAFETY

Please note that each prescription is handled with individual care and concern. To maintain accuracy, the VA Pharmacy staff uses state-of-the-art technology and system safety checks.



To receive your medications on time, you must order your refills at least 14 days before your medicine runs out. *It’s best to order your refills as soon as you receive your medication in the mail so that the next refill will be shipped to you before you are scheduled to run out.*

Be sure we have your current address. The next time you schedule, confirm or check-in for an appointment, confirm your mailing address.

Have You had the “Talk” Yet?



‘Life Sustaining Treatment Decisions’ – A VA Patient and Family-Centered Initiative

A 92-year-old patient struggles with worsening dementia. He’s stopped eating, talking, and now struggles with daily selfcare. A large pressure ulcer on his lower back exposes his bone. His wife, also aging and overwhelmed with her own health issues, finds it increasingly difficult to care for him and brings him to the hospital. Because the couple has already discussed his health care wishes before his dementia set in, she knows his preferences: he doesn’t want to be bed-bound for the rest of his life or have any heroic measures involving life sustaining treatments. Unfortunately, he failed to complete an Advance Directive during his healthier years, and his wishes—undocumented in any health record—are ignored as his wife becomes embroiled in a conflict with other family members who insist that everything possible be done to keep him alive, including breathing and feeding tubes.

Although hypothetical, variations of this scenario play out daily in hospitals across the country. The VA wants to change this by eliminating confusion and conflict over treatment plans when patients cannot communicate their wishes. The VA’s Life-Sustaining Treatment Decisions Initiative is a new, nation-wide effort incorporating features of both the Advanced Directive and Medical Orders for Life-Sustaining Treatment to ensure that patients’ goals, values and preferences for life sustaining treatments are documented and honored. **At the VA Maryland Health Care System, the initiative began in May 2018 to include a progress note titled “Life Sustaining Treatment” in patients’ electronic health**

records. This note is completed only after patients and providers discuss health care goals, which result in treatment plans reflecting their preferences. Documenting such conversations gives both families and care providers a vital road map to follow when patients cannot decide or speak for themselves.

- **Advance Care Planning** allows patients to consider if they’d want aggressive medical care (regardless of the circumstances), comfort care, or if they’d prefer something in between, such as limited aggressive care if there is a probability of improving. With treatment wishes documented, patients relieve family members and care providers of decision-making burdens.
- **Traditional Advance Care Planning** involves the completion of both the Advanced Directive and the Medical Orders for Life-Sustaining Treatment.
 - **The Advanced Directive** is a three-part document that is signed by the patient and reflects individual health care wishes. The three parts consist of Selection of Health Care Agent, a Living Will indicating general treatment preferences in the event of severe illness, and Signature & Witnesses. Typically, less than 20 percent of Americans complete an Advanced Directive and those who do, sometimes leave the ‘Living Will’ section blank, or check the option that states: “I do not know, it would depend on the circumstances.”
 - Similarly, the **Medical Orders for Life-Sustaining Treatment** consists of a set of

orders that are signed by health care providers after discussions with patients about their life sustaining treatment preferences. Life sustaining treatment refers to treatments such as blood transfusions, artificial nutrition, hemodialysis, breathing support from a ventilator, and cardio-pulmonary resuscitation. The Medical Orders for Life-Sustaining Treatment is completed only in certain situations, such as prior to transport to an assisted living facility or a nursing home.

With VA’s Life-Sustaining Treatment Decisions Initiative in place, Veterans—healthy and otherwise-- can ask their care providers to document their care goals in the electronic record using the Life-Sustaining Treatment note, verifying their preferences to avoid confusion or speculation over the Veterans’ wishes. Once completed in the electronic health record, this note is easy to find, and best of all, easily updated at any time based on the patients’ wishes. Plus, patients can ask for a copy of their Life-Sustaining Treatment note to check that their goals have been appropriately recorded. Patients have a right for their values, beliefs and goals to be documented accurately in medical records.

At the VA Maryland Health Care System, patients are encouraged to talk about their goals and wishes with their providers so that their preferences can be documented.

Veterans already know: preparation is the best defense.



Giving Veterans *a Place to Call Home,* and So Much More

Last summer, 75 formerly homeless Veterans (and some of their families) found a place to call home and a place where they can receive the VA health care and support services they need to regain and rebuild their lives. This was made possible thanks to the opening of the new HELP Veterans Village on the campus of the Perry Point VA Medical Center.

Through the VA Maryland Health Care System's collaboration with multiple state and federal agencies, corporations, Veteran Service Organizations, and developer HELP USA, old and vacant houses on the campus were transformed into a community of homes, available to Veterans through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the Department of Veterans Affairs for Supportive Housing (VASH) HUD-VASH program.

One year later, residents of the HELP Veteran Village are thriving. While working toward their own best health, they have also come together as a true community, forming a council to take on mutual projects like planting a community vegetable garden. Now part of a group, each Veteran living in the Village embodies a unique story. Here are two of them:



the VA's Compensated Work Therapy program, working with the medical center's grounds crew. When the HELP Veterans Village

SCOTT: During his service in the U.S. Marine Corps as a rifleman in Afghanistan, military doctors gave Scott opiates to treat his lower back pain. When he returned home, he battled an addiction that cost him his leg. In residential treatment at the Perry Point VA Medical Center, he began using a prosthetic leg and entered

opened, Scott was one of the first Veterans to move in. His strong work ethic caught the eye of the community's developer, HELP USA, and they recruited him as an assistant property manager. Today, the self-described "country boy" feels at home at Perry Point, where he lives, works, receives care and enjoys recreational activities.



SARAH: Sarah and her 11-year-old son struggled with homelessness for nearly two years, fighting to receive assistance from multiple organizations while staying with family members and living in hotels. The back injury she sustained while serving in the U.S. Army added to her challenges. When another Veteran gave her the number for

the national homeless Veterans line, she called and was connected with a VA Maryland Health Care System social worker. Shortly thereafter, she and her son moved into the HELP Veterans Village. "Not only did they give me a home, but they gave me pillows, blankets, dishes and cleaning supplies. It was like Christmas in August," she said. "I'm hoping that being in a stable environment will help me get back on my feet. Maybe I can move from here one day, and someone else can use this house who needs it as much as I've needed it. That would be my ultimate goal."

If you or someone you know is a Veteran struggling with or at risk for homelessness, help is available. And, like Sarah, it can start with a phone call to the National Call Center for Homeless Veterans: 1 877 4AID VET (1 877 424 3838).

HUD-VASH is a collaborative program between HUD and VA that combines HUD housing vouchers with VA supportive services. Through the program, HUD provides rental assistance vouchers for privately owned housing to Veterans who are eligible for VA health care services and experiencing homelessness. In addition to the 75 Veterans living in the HELP Veterans Village, more than 1,100 Veterans have found housing through the HUD-VASH program at the VA Maryland Health Care System.

Getting Serious About Diabetes

Because symptoms of type 2 diabetes and prediabetes come on gradually, the disease may not be evident until it has already done damage. A combination of symptoms like frequent urination, increased thirst and hunger, vision problems, slow wound healing, tingling, numbness or pain in hands or feet, patches of dark skin, itching, or a spike in yeast infections may indicate diabetes. Often the diagnosis comes as a shock. Just ask Army Veteran Erik Benford, 54, whose routine physical resulted in a diabetes diagnosis.

“I was surprised when the results came back with my A1C extremely high,” he said. “I had no symptoms, no sign of diabetes, no idea until the test.”

Benford, a lifelong “meat and potatoes man,” found all the lifestyle changes his doctor recommended as shocking as the diagnosis. “I had to give up my Pepsi habit,” he said.

Benford embraced the lifestyle changes diabetes forced on him and joined the TeleMOVE! program that required a daily weigh-in on a VA-connected scale and a daily check-in phone call from a nurse. “The daily phone calls were motivating,” he said. “I looked forward to that morning call.”

For Benford, the diagnosis of diabetes “truly became a pathway to a healthier lifestyle. I’m grateful for my VA experience because everyone there made me feel as if they were on the journey with me,” he said. “They got excited about my successes and offered support at my setbacks.”

For Navy Veteran Peter Moss, 68, diagnosed with diabetes at age 58 when he still worked and relied on his job-related health care insurance, the VA Maryland Health Care System’s Endocrine Clinic became a vital resource after he lost his job, his insurance, and as a result, his A1C “got out of whack.”

“Diabetes is a progressive disease. I managed it well and kept my A1C under control until I lost my health care plan. I luckily got into the VA health care system,” said Moss, who realized through his interaction with VA clinicians that he had to decide “to stop acting like a fool about what I ate” when it came to managing diabetes.

Marine Veteran Wyler McKoy, 65, was diagnosed with asthma after he retired from his 14-year-long Marine career. “In the military, I always exercised, but after the asthma diagnosis and all the prednisone and other medications to manage it, I gained weight,” McKoy explained. After he began showing symptoms of diabetes, his mom, a nurse, advised him to go to the VA to get screened.

McKoy, indeed, screened positive for diabetes, and at the VA, clinicians helped him manage both the diabetes and the asthma.

“Once you’re in the door at the VA, you learn that the VA’s door is always open,” he said. “But you’re the one that has to take the first step toward going through that door to get the help you need.”

Kristin Silva, a nurse practitioner in the Endocrine Clinic at the Baltimore VA Medical Center, advises Veterans to be sure to get their annual check-ups, which includes lab work that would identify diabetes, pre-diabetes and other issues. “Getting those annual check-ups is important as are the preventative lifestyle changes such as being careful about what you eat by avoiding concentrated sugary foods, by keeping an eye on your weight, and by regularly exercising.”

Outcomes of Uncontrolled Diabetes



“You can have diabetes for 10 years before getting diagnosed,” said Dr. Lois Freeman, a nurse practitioner who works in the Primary Care Clinic and treats patients with diabetes, educating them about how to better manage the disease. That’s why it’s important to consider prediabetes and diabetes, she said emphasizing that “It’s best to get tested and learn to manage it.”

She lists an array of reasons for Veterans diagnosed with diabetes to stay in compliance.

- 1 Uncontrolled diabetes causes an absence of feelings in the feet and hands. “If they step on something, they won’t feel it, and that can lead to infections,” she said.**
- 2 Also, poor circulation due to uncontrolled diabetes means blood cannot easily flow through the veins, causing ulcers and gangrene in the extremities that can lead to amputations.**
- 3 Unmanaged diabetes also impacts kidney function. “That’s the one that scares people most because they will need dialysis three times a week,” Freeman said.**
- 4 “Uncontrolled diabetes causes heart failure and other cardiovascular issues, strokes, and nerve pain.”**

Uncontrolled diabetes can impact quality of life, especially if blood glucose levels remain high. “It is best to get screened and get the A1C test which is used to diagnose and monitor diabetes,” Freeman said. “It’s the complications of uncontrolled diabetes that will kill you.”

For Veterans age 55 and older who have been diagnosed with diabetes, a diabetes clinic is offered in the primary care setting and through the Home Telehealth program. Appointments to be seen in this clinic can also be scheduled through the Appointment Call Center at 410-605-7333.

To get on track with your annual checkups and to be screened for diabetes, call the Appointment Center at 410 605 7333 to make an appointment with your VA primary care provider.

VA



HealthWatch

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Veterans Health Administration
VA Maryland Health Care System

Public & Community Relations (135)
10 N. Greene Street
Baltimore, MD 21201

Published for the Veteran patients of the VA Maryland Health Care System. This newsletter is offered to provide reliable health information. It is not intended to take the place of medical advice, which should be obtained directly from your health care provider. If you have questions or comments about *HealthWatch*, please call 410-605-7098.



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Important Phone Numbers

Please report a change of address to the Enrollment Center at 410-605-7324

Appointment Center
410-605-7333

Automated Appointment Line
410-605-7395 (Press Option 1)

Beneficiary Travel
Baltimore VA Medical Center:
410-605-7318

Perry Point VA Medical Center:
410-642-2411, ext. 26895

Billing Information
866-393-0006

Burial Information & Benefits
Baltimore National Cemetery
410-644-9696

State Veterans Cemeteries
410-923-6981

Care in the Community
410-642-2411, ext. 26924

Caregiver Support Program
410-605-7000, ext. 54143

Eligibility & Enrollment Center
410-605-7324

Long-Term Care Information Line
410-642-1121

Medical Records/Release of Information
Baltimore VA Medical Center
410-605-7348

Perry Point VA Medical Center
410-642-2411, ext. 26028

My HealthVet Coordinator
410-605-7045

Patient Concerns & Compliments
Baltimore VA Medical Center,
Baltimore VA Annex and Glen
Burnie VA Outpatient Clinic
410-605-7099

Perry Point VA Medical Center
and Cambridge & Pocomoke City
VA Outpatient Clinics
410-642-2411, ext. 25097

Loch Raven VA Medical Center,
Fort Meade and Eastern Baltimore
County VA Outpatient Clinics
410-605-7542

Prescription Refill Line
410-605-7395 (Press Option 2)

Returning Veterans
(Transition Care Management)
410-605-7259

Telephone Care Line 800-865-2441

VA Benefits
Veterans Benefits Information Line
800-827-1000
Maryland VA Service & Benefits
Program 800-446-4926, ext. 6450

VA Maryland Health Care System Facilities

Baltimore VA Medical Center
410-605-7000

Loch Raven VA Medical Center
410-605-7000

Perry Point VA Medical Center
410-642-2411

Cambridge VA Outpatient Clinic
410-228-6243

Eastern Baltimore County
VA Outpatient Clinic
443-730-2020

Fort Meade VA Outpatient Clinic
410-305-5300

Glen Burnie VA Outpatient Clinic
410-590-4140

Pocomoke City VA Outpatient Clinic
410-957-6718

Vet Centers

Annapolis Vet Center 410-605-7826

Baltimore Vet Center 410-764-9400

Dundalk Vet Center 410-282-6144

Elkton Vet Center 410-392-4485

Veterans Crisis Line
800-273-8255, Press 1

Women Veterans Services
410-605-7275

CLIP AND SAVE