



MyVA AUGUSTA

The Official Magazine of Charlie Norwood VA Medical Center
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SAGE ADVICE

*Local high school football team visits with our Vets.
Also inside: Outreach, improved access and more*

We're working to improve access and better your experience



Fall is traditionally a time for change. The leaves turn. The air gets a little cooler. The days grow shorter and we prepare to settle in for winter.

We at Charlie Norwood VA Medical Center are also seeing change. In August, our access times in Primary Care, Specialty Care and Mental Health improved in all areas and are continuing to show promise as we continue into the winter months (page 4). We saw improvement in our Dental Service that outpaced our civilian counterparts in several areas of satisfaction. We also received praise directly from Veterans on their dental care (see our story on page 5).

On the last three months, we've seen our share of challenges and triumphs. Hurricane Matthew drove 31 Veterans from the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center for refuge in Charleston, S.C., while they weathered a furious storm. VA entered into local partnership here that will provide living spaces to 98 at-risk Veterans on our downtown campus. We focused on preventing suicide in our community

throughout September.

Throughout these busy times, one of the key things we have kept in mind is improving the Veteran experience. Every contact between Veterans and their health care is best when it is consistent and easy to access. At Charlie Norwood, we aim to make each Veteran's experience with us an exceptional one.

This experience carries through with them each step of the way through their medical appointment, to their ancillary services, to medical tests, to dispensing pharmaceuticals or prosthetic items, and in their discharge process until we see them again.

We cannot do this alone. What we do is underpinned by our relationship with our Veterans, Veteran Service Organizations, business and community leaders, and so many others who help us make every encounter at VA Augusta top notch. When we synchronize our actions and all work on behalf of the Veterans, we are fulfilling Lincoln's promise "To care for him who

shall have borne the battle ..."

As we move into the next three months, we recognize the importance of breast cancer awareness, putting a halt to domestic violence, and other observances. We'll honor our Veterans on Veterans Day by participating in the parade in downtown Augusta. We'll celebrate the holidays with family and friends, and we'll continue to deliver world-class health care underscored by our I CARE values of integrity, commitment, advocacy, respect and excellence.

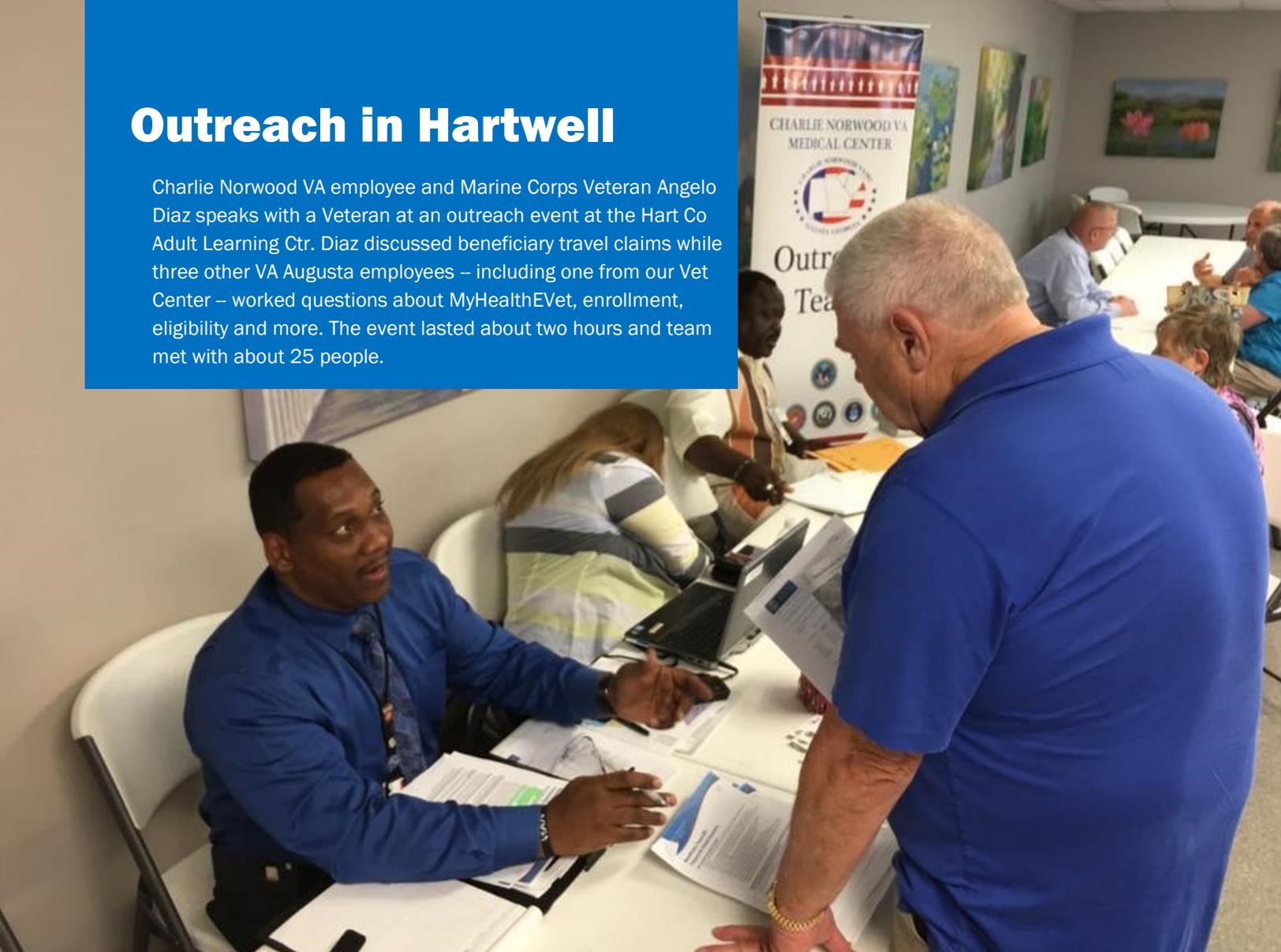
As you read through this debut issue of "My VA Augusta," I hope the excitement and enthusiasm of the 2,400+ employees at our Uptown, Downtown, Aiken, Athens and Statesboro locations shine through. I hope their commitment to the I CARE values is obvious in every word on every page. We'll bring this to you once a quarter. This Fall edition kicks things off.

Thanks for reading.

Maria Andrews

Outreach in Hartwell

Charlie Norwood VA employee and Marine Corps Veteran Angelo Diaz speaks with a Veteran at an outreach event at the Hart Co Adult Learning Ctr. Diaz discussed beneficiary travel claims while three other VA Augusta employees – including one from our Vet Center – worked questions about MyHealthEVet, enrollment, eligibility and more. The event lasted about two hours and team met with about 25 people.



Outreach

VA Augusta employees and women Veterans gather at an event June 27 at the Ronald McDonald House in Augusta. The event, created by Charlie Norwood's women's health team, covered a gamut of issues.

VA data: Augusta improves in 3 crucial access areas

AUGUSTA, Ga. — Veterans access to primary care, specialty care, mental health services at Charlie Norwood VA Medical Center all improved during July, according to data recently released by the Department of Veterans.

Made public through the Veterans Health Administration Patient Access Data web page Aug. 25, data for “Completed Appointments” showed a 2.5 percent increase in percentage of patients seen within 30 days, best in its network. In addition, wait time for mental health services decreased by more than four days and wait time for specialty care saw a one-day decrease.

Maria Andrews, medical center director for VA Augusta, said the strides her team has made are great ones, but there’s more work to be done.

“My team has done excellent work to bolster access in these areas, and my hat is off to them. We won’t rest until Veterans have the access to care they deserve. That means a multi-faceted solution including hiring more clinical and support staff, closely examin-

ing our own processes to slash inefficiencies, and raising our standards higher at every turn.

“I’m excited about our future and what we can accomplish,” Andrews continued. “We want Veterans to be able to say ‘this is my VA’ proudly about their access to care and every other facet of this organization.”

In July, 24,707 appointments – almost 94 percent – were completed in 30 days or less. Average wait time in primary care was about nine days; in specialty care about nine days and

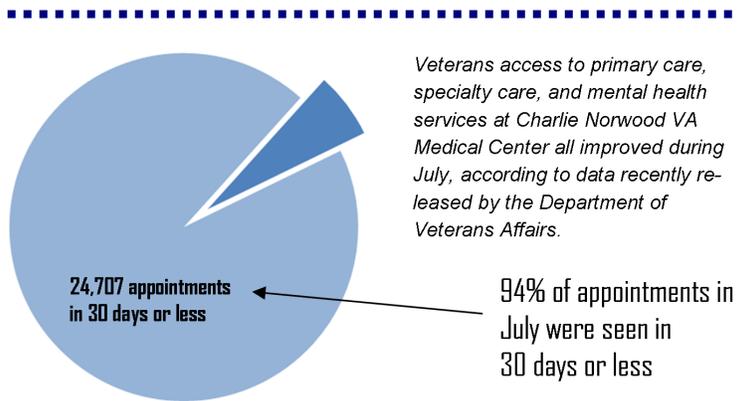
mental health average waiting time was about two and a half days. In the past three months, VA Augusta has averaged about 29,000 appointments each month.

At the Aiken, S.C., clinic, more than 97 percent of appointments were completed in 30 days or less. At the Athens clinic, that number was above 95 percent.

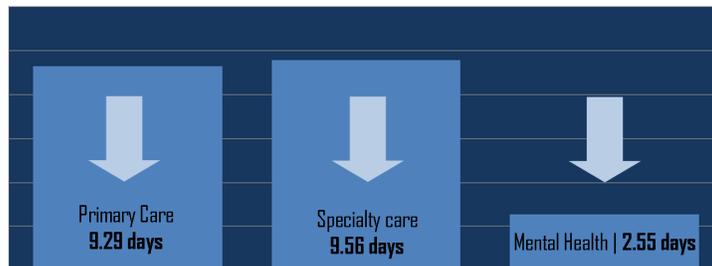
“My teams have made great strides to get this effort moving in the right direction,” said Dr. Oladipo Kukoyi, VA Augusta chief of staff. “These num-

bers translate into the ability to serve more Veterans in a timely manner when needed and, as we know, we serve people and not numbers.”

Nationally, the VA completed more than 57.46 million appointments from Aug. 1, 2015 through July 31, about 172,000 appointments each day, and an increase of 825,601 more appointments completed during the same time period a year before. Regularly updated patient access data is available at <http://www.va.gov/health/access-audit.asp>.



Wait times reduced in three areas



Source: <http://www.va.gov/health/access-audit.asp>



New DAV vans

Medical Center Director Maria Andrews (center, left) accepts the keys to three new vehicles donated by the Disabled American Veterans from Georgia DAV commander Johnny Patterson Sept. 9. The vehicles will be used to transport up to 600 Veterans each month to and from medical appointments. Additional volunteer drivers are always needed. If you can help, call 706-733-0188 ext. 5959.

CSRA Vets sink teeth into good dental care

AUGUSTA, Ga. – On the heels of improving access-to-care scores for completed appointments, Charlie Norwood VA Medical Center’s dental program is also receiving some of the highest marks in the network from Veterans, and in some cases, higher than its national non-VA dental counterparts.

In a report released by Veterans Integrated Service Network 7 on Sept. 7 titled “Dental Patient Satisfaction Survey Report,” Charlie Norwood dentists received an 88 percent satisfaction rating, eight points higher than the national VA average and 29 points higher than the national (non-VA) benchmark. The service is rated in four “global ratings” and two “composites.”

The service’s global ratings for “Dental Care” and “State-of-the-Art Dental Care” were on par with the VA national average and still well above the non-VA care average. The 97.4 score for “Dental Care from Dentists

and Clinical Staff” and “Access to Dental Care” was also higher than VA and non-VA averages.

“Dental Care from Dentists and Clinical Staff” reflects that Veterans feel they are treated with respect, that staff go the extra mile to make them comfortable and that the veteran feels staff listen to them and spend enough time with them. “Access to Dental Care” reflects getting routine and urgent appointments as soon as the Veteran wants as well as the amount of time spent in the waiting room and being informed of delays. The ratings period for this report ran from April 2015 to March 2016.

Dr. Ashley Roach, chief of the dental Service here, said she and her team have worked hard to ensure Veterans get the best dental treatment, and continue to strive for improvement.



Going for Gold

Central Savannah River Area Veterans receiving care at the Charlie Norwood VA Medical Center earned 16 medals during the National Veterans Wheelchair Games in Salt Lake City, Utah, this year. The tally for the Augusta Veterans was eight gold, two silver and six bronze, including a gold medal in weightlifting for local Veteran Charles "Buddy" Mays. The Veterans receive care from the medical center Spinal Cord Injury Unit's, one of just 25 such units within the VA. The games wrapped-up July 3.





Off they go!

Medical Center Director Maria Andrews (photo, right) helped hand diplomas to more than 50 graduates of the summer intern program here July 28!



CSRA Vet scores 2 silvers in Golden Games

The team at Charlie Norwood VA Medical Center congratulates Dennis Preston, who competed in the National Veterans Golden Age Games in Detroit. The games were held in July and open to Veterans aged 55 and older (and receive health care from the VA). The games are the premiere senior adaptive rehabilitation program in the United States and the only national multi-event sports and recreational seniors competition program designed to improve the quality of life for all older Veterans. Preston competed in four events – nine ball, bowling, shuffleboard and horse-shoes – and won two silver medals. (Photo by Chris Harper/VA)



A Home Run with CSRA Veterans

Story by Jason Tudor
Photos by Chris Harper

Major League Baseball umpire Jerry Layne has been behind the dish for some of baseball's greatest moments. The Barry Bonds' record-breaking 71st home run. Fernando Valenzuela's eye rolling no-hitter in 1990. Two World Series. Three All-Star Games.

He also stands behind the nation's Veterans. Each year, when the Boys of Summer bound back onto the diamond, Layne makes an annual visit to the Charlie Norwood VA Medical Center in Augusta, Georgia. The visit June 28, sponsored by Disabled American Veterans, brought the Prospect, Ohio, native here between games one and two of a three-game series between the Cleveland Indians and Atlanta Braves.

"I look at the efforts of every

(Veteran) coming in here and their lives," Layne said. "What little I can do is go around and say thank you for what they've done to make the country the way it is."

Layne visited with Veterans in Augusta VA's Blind Rehabilitation and Spinal Cord Injury programs. All told, Layne shook hands, took photos, and talked with about 50 Veterans, handing out autographed photos, baseball cards and making time for conversation.

Tasha Baker-Boone, chief nurse at the Spinal Cord Injury unit, said Layne's visit was something special.

"It means Americans care about the Veteran population," Baker-Boone said. "They appreciate and care about the service our Veterans have provided to this country."

Baseball, Layne said, is "all I've ever known," and as a young man,

military service wasn't in his wheelchair.

"When I graduated high school in 1976, we were just happy to be out of the Vietnam War era and downsizing the military," said Layne. "We didn't even have a recruiting officer come to our school."

Layne slid into umpire school at age 18. For a dozen years, he called balls and strikes for minor league baseball before being called up to "The Show" in March 1988. He's been a major league umpire ever since.

He started this process of being a DAV volunteer after discovering a now-retired American League umpire colleague, Larry Barnett, also paid visits to Veteran medical centers. Barnett grabbed Layne and asked if he wanted to come along.

"I told him that I didn't know if I

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On the Calendar

October

Oct. 31 Halloween!

November

Nov. 6 Daylight Saving Time ends (Standard Time returns!)

Nov. 8 Election Day

Nov. 9 Telehealth Education Delivered mobile unit, location TBD

Nov. 10 Veterans Day commemoration, Uptown

..... Marine Corps Birthday

Nov. 11 CNVAMC marches in Veterans Day Parade, Augusta, GA

Nov. 14 World Diabetes Day

Nov. 17 Great American Smokeout

..... National Rural Health Day

Nov. 24 Thanksgiving!

Nov. 25 Native American Heritage Day

December

Dec. 1 World AIDS Day

Dec. 5 International Volunteer Day

Dec. 24 Hanukkah begins (sunset)

Dec. 25 Christmas Day

Dec. 31 New Year's Eve

On the Cover

Football players from Lakeside High School in Evans, Ga., huddle around U.S. Army and Vietnam Veteran John Rangle Jr., during a visit to the Uptown Division Sept. 16. About 75 students visited with the Veterans Uptown and Downtown for about two hours. Rangle – who took time following his outpatient care at Charlie Norwood – brought the students in, told stories and provided encouragement to them during their off week. (Photo by Brian Rothwell)

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could do it or not. I didn't know if I could handle standing over a bed with someone who was not long for the world. I thought something like this would take a special person," Layne said. "I didn't know if I was that kind of a special person."

Fortunately, he was.

"When I got involved, and I went to the hospice units and people's rooms who are in their final days, I felt good that I could make a difference for that person on that particular day. I really enjoyed it."

The night before he came here, Layne got injured. During the 8th inning of the first Indians vs. Braves game in Atlanta, a foul-tipped pitch caught Layne on the right side of the head. Fearing he might have a concussion, MLB replaced him that inning.

Despite the injury less than 24 hours before, he made the two-hour trek to the Central Savannah River Area. In doing so, he noted that baseball and military service are, in many ways, tied together throughout the history of the game.

"That's why we've always considered baseball like Apple Pie," Layne said, "Major League Baseball has always understood the Veterans. It knows major baseball stars have spent time off the field being on active duty. Ted Williams, for instance. Veterans have always been an important group to baseball going back a long ways to troops abroad and overseas listening and watching baseball games from back then to now."

Mental health care summit draws community, VA together

Mental health care for Veterans took center stage during an annual event at the Charlie Norwood VA Medical Center gathering VA employees and members of the community Aug. 24.

The MyVA Community Mental Health Summit for 2016 drew participants from the VA, Augusta Warrior Project, Georgia Department of Labor, the National Alliance on Mental Illness Lake Oconee, and Augusta University School of Nursing. Much of the VA mental health team, including social workers and others, were on hand for the event.

The half-day summit included presentations on mental health care access, presentations by community partners, suicide prevention, and several breakout sessions discussing how VA and the community work to serve Veterans.

"We wanted to bring together key stakeholders in the community with the goal of enhancing access to mental health services and addressing the mental healthcare needs

of Veterans and their family members residing in the Central Savannah River Area," said Dr. Yekeen Aderibigbe, mental health service line chief.

The summit addressed issues with homelessness and included a family/caregiver forum. The VA hospital's chief doctor said events like this matter for the VA and the community.

"Meetings like this help us get in sync with our community partners and help us align our resources," said Dr. Oladiipo Kukoyi, Charlie Norwood VA Medical Center chief of staff.

Medical Center Director Maria Andrews praised the efforts of everyone involved in the summit. "Bringing together our community partners for events like these really helps crystalize the importance of Veteran care in the community. We can't do this alone. We have to rely on our partners in various areas to make it work. We're grateful for the opportunity to work with them and learn together how we can best serve Veterans," Andrews said.

Registry open for Burn pits, hazards

VA's Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry allows eligible Veterans and Service Members to document their exposures and report health concerns through an online questionnaire.

Eligible Veterans and Service Members include those who served in:

- Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation New Dawn
- Djibouti, Africa on or after September 11, 2001
- Operations Desert Shield or Desert Storm
- Southwest Asia theater of operations on or after August 2, 1990

Check your eligibility and sign up by going to <https://veteran.mobilehealth.va.gov/>

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For more information, call the public affairs office at 706-733-1088 ext. 1733



OMG!



Charlie Norwood using text messages to help curb no-shows, save taxpayer \$\$\$ in 17 areas

Charlie Norwood VA Medical Center's effort to improve the Veteran experience has entered the world of OMG, LOL and emojis.

Text messaging as a means of reminding, keeping and canceling appointments is running as a pilot program at VA Augusta. Initial capability started Aug. 8. Charlie Norwood VA Medical Center is one of three VA health care organizations across the country using a text messaging system for appointments; Loma Linda, Calif. - which developed the local software - and Fayetteville, Ark. are the others.

The system is confidential and relies on one of three responses from a Veteran: "yes," which means the Veteran will make the appointment time; "no," which means the Veteran will not; and "stop," which means the Veteran no longer wants to receive texts. The only information passed through the messaging system to the Veteran is the phone number (needed for the text) and the date of the appointment.

The goal of the text messaging pilot is to improve the Veteran experience and make the appointment process more efficient, said Dr. Oladipo Kukoyi, VA Augusta chief of staff.

"At Charlie Norwood, we aim to make each Veteran's experience with us an exceptional one. This experience carries through with them each step of the way through their medical appointment, to their ancillary services, to medical tests, to dispensing pharmaceuticals or prosthetic items, and



in their discharge process until we see them again," Kukoyi said. "This text messaging program is part of that effort and so far, it's going very well."

For Fiscal Year 2015, there were about 48,000 no-shows, about 136 per day, at Charlie Norwood. In the same time period, the "missed opportunity rate" (no shows by Veterans) for all clinics was about 14 percent. The hospital's goal is to have a no-show rate of less than 12 percent. Through August - which had the lowest monthly overall rate of the year at 13.26 percent - the rate was 13.72 percent.

"Though we realize it will be difficult to impact a year's average with eight weeks [of the text messaging pilot program], the results can give us momentum moving into FY 2017," according to Cary West, a program analyst for the chief of staff who oversees the text messaging pilot.

The program started with five focus areas, but expanded to 17. They include clinical pharmacy, ear, nose & throat, gastroenterology, mental health (individual and group), optometry, physical therapy, PTSD, substance abuse, women's health (*Note: seven others were added just before press time*). All told, West said the 17 focus areas represent about one-third of all "no shows" at Charlie Norwood. In FY 2015, there were 14,500 no shows in 10 of the 17 focus areas amounting to a loss of about \$3.6 million.

Improvements ranged from 1 percent in women's health

Continued on page 12

to an 18 percent improvement in mental health individual clinic. Three others had 7 to 10 percent improvements. Overall, average improvement for five focus-area pilot group was 9.5 percent. West said optometry has a significant improvement going from a 15 to 10 percent no show rate. Other factors affecting current rates include Tropical Storm Hermine, which passed over Augusta Sept. 2, triggering many no shows across the board and skewed data.

According to West, Veterans want text messages, adding that “consistent feedback has shown that Veterans want this as part of the overall experience.” According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s “National Health Interview Survey,” 91 percent of adults own cell-phones. When last measured by Pew Research Center in 2013, 81 percent of cellphone owners used text messaging.

Veterans say they want the text messages, too. Army Veteran Nicole Cartwright gets care at Charlie Norwood and said the digital reminders would help her in receiving care.

“It would help a lot. I have a tough time remembering things, so this would be helpful,” Cartwright, who served from 2008 to 2015, said. “Other businesses have already integrated that technology into the way they do business. If the VA would use [text messaging], that would be pretty awesome.”

While West said the pilot is successful so far, he said there are still challenges to integrate the more forward-leaning texting capability and the more traditional ways Charlie Norwood schedules and cancels Veteran appointments.

In Memorium



We are saddened share the news of the passing of one of our superstar volunteers, Len Palguta (shown here with our Medical Center Director Maria Andrews). Len was a faithful volunteer at our Uptown Main Information Desk Mondays and Wednesdays. He also served on our VAVS Executive Committee and was the Marine Corps League Representative on our VAVS Committee. He started volunteering here in 2002, serving more than 8,500 hours. As a direct result of Len's volunteer involvement, during the last four years, Marine Corps League donations have totaled more than \$92,000 and the group has volunteered more than 12,000 hours. All of this was accomplished under Len's leadership. Len was 80 years young and completed his last day of volunteer service on Aug. 1. Gone—but certainly not forgotten! Thank you Len Palguta for your service to this Nation and to the Veterans of the CSRA.



Refuge from Hurricane Matthew

Charlie Norwood sent two buses to Charleston to retrieve Veterans Oct. 6. All told, CNVAMC assisted with 31 Veterans, who began their return journey home Oct. 11. Charleston VA returned to regular operations Sunday, Oct. 9. In addition to support from Augusta, VA medical centers in Columbia, S.C. and Dublin also played a part in serving evacuated Veterans.

How to reach us:

(706) 733-0188 | **Twitter:** @VAAugusta | **Facebook:** facebook.com/VAAugusta



Our Locations

Downtown Division
950 15th Street
Augusta, GA 30904

Uptown Division
950 15th Street
Augusta, GA 30904

Our Clinics

- **Aiken Community Based Outpatient Clinic**
951 Millbrook Avenue
Aiken, SC 29803
- **Athens Community Based Outpatient Clinic**
9249 Highway 29 North
Athens, GA 30601
- **Statesboro Telehealth Clinic**
658 Northside Drive East
Statesboro, GA 30458



Key web sites

Official Public Web site: www.Augusta.VA.gov
MyHealthVet: www.myhealth.va.gov
eBenefits: www.ebenefits.va.gov/

Informational web sites:

Agent Orange www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/agentorange/benefits/registry-exam.asp

Burn Pits www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/burnpits/registry.asp

Patient Advocates

Have a question about your care? Our customer relations team and patient advocates are here to help. The advocates are: Daphne Freeman, Uptown, ext. 6899; Shereen Hughes, ext. 6156; and Marilyn Jones – Downtown, exts. 3963/2229.