Annual VA report shows Gulf Coast VA improvement over past year in quality of services to Veterans

WASHINGTON — Using an annual web-based report scorecard that measures, evaluates, and benchmarks quality and efficiency at its medical centers, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs recently released data that showed significant improvements at the majority of its health care facilities.

Gulf Coast Veterans Health Care System was one of the facilities that made positive strides in the benchmarks and is striving to continue progress. GCVHCS improved .55 percent since last year.

“We are moving in the right direction in improving the quality of services for our Veterans,” Bryan C. Matthews, GCVHCS director, said. “We have a lot of work to do, but we’ll continue to identify opportunities to improve. I’m extremely proud of our employees and the progress they have made, and we appreciate all Veterans who have chosen GCVHCS for their health care needs.”

Compared with data from the same period a year ago, the July 2018 release of VA’s Strategic Analytics for Improvement and Learning (SAIL) report showed 103 VA medical centers (71 percent) have improved in overall quality. The largest gains seen were in areas where there were VA-wide improvement initiatives, such as mortality, length of stay, and avoidable adverse events. Seven VA medical centers (five percent) had a small decrease in quality.

Improved

• Standardized mortality
• Admission reviews met
• Mental health continuity of care composite

“This is a major step in the right direction to improving our quality of services for our Veterans,” said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. “Over the past year, we were able to identify our problems and implement solutions to fixing the issues at 71 percent of our facilities. I’m extremely proud of our employees and the progress they have made to raise VA’s performance for our nation’s heroes.”

Of the 15 VA medical centers placed under the Strategic Action for Transformation (STAT) program, an initiative that monitors high-risk medical centers and mobilizes resources to assist the facilities, five VA medical centers (33 percent) are no longer considered high-risk and 11 VA medical centers (73 percent) show meaningful improvements since being placed under STAT in January 2018.

The quarterly SAIL report, which has been released publicly since 2015, assesses 25 quality metrics and two efficiency and productivity metrics in areas such as death rate, complications, and patient satisfaction, as well as overall efficiency and physician capacity at 146 VA medical centers. It is used as an internal learning tool for VA leaders and personnel to pinpoint and study VA medical centers with high quality and efficiency scores, both within specific measured areas and overall. The data is also used to identify best practices and develop strategies to help troubled facilities improve.

Top-15 VA performer

• Care transition in relation to patient satisfaction
• Length of stay
• Patient satisfaction with hospital stay
• Readmission rates
Blind Rehabilitation Center excels in national accreditation survey

By TONY SALMON
VA Volunteer, Contributing Writer

BILOXI, Miss. – Department of Veteran Affairs Gulf Coast Veterans Health Care System’s Blind Rehabilitation Center achieved the highest possible assessment from a commission that surveys and accredits rehabilitation facilities nationally and internationally, July 23-25.

“We aced it,” Debra Gilley, GCVHCS chief of blind rehabilitation, said about the BRC staff’s performance during the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF) survey. “We do this naturally because our Veterans and their families continually inspire us to do better, and this survey and accreditation ensures that we keep aspiring to give only the best care and rehabilitation to those who have served our country.”

In a rare finding of zero recommendations for the BRC, CARF surveyors praised numerous aspects of the program. Less than three percent of all facilities that CARF accredits receive a zero findings and recommendations assessment.

CARF specifically highlighted the following areas of the program:

- Staff dedication and commitment to providing safe, quality services to Veterans
- The dignity and respect shown to Veterans during all interactions
- The esteem in which the BRC is held throughout GCVHCS
- The high praise that the program earns from Veteran’s family members
- The feedback from written surveys from both Veterans and their family members rated the BRC and its programs at exceptionally high standards (97-99 percent)
- The strong sense of identity of pride in excellence in Veteran care within the medical system

Gilley said the blind rehabilitation program is “not just a job” for the managers and staff, but “what we are most passionate about.”

“It is a living, breathing thing for us to daily see hope become a reality for our Veterans and their families,” she said.

Gilley stated that a periodic survey and accreditation by CARF dynamically serves the BRC’s staff in their vision of constant state of the art improvement toward having world class technology, proven techniques for living with vision loss and a highly trained and certified staff.

CARF is an independent, nonprofit organization focused on advancing the quality of services for the facilities it surveys and accredits. CARF provides accreditation services worldwide at the request of health and human service providers.

The BRC provides visually impaired Veterans with comprehensive rehabilitation services including private rooms, meals and health services. The BRC’s numerous programs are designed to allow the Veteran maximum restoration of independence and a healthy attitude toward themselves, their needs and their future. Programs include orientation and mobility, computer access and skill training, visual skill training for those with limited vision, living skills training, manual skills training, recreational therapy, and family member training.

The Blind Rehabilitation Center gathered to celebrate the successful survey.
SEPTEMBER IS SUICIDE PREVENTION MONTH

Gulf Coast Veterans Health Care System Suicide Prevention Coordinators Lynn Worley (left) and Carrie Musselwhite, spend a majority of their time participating in outreach events, supporting high-risk Veterans, and training other VA staff. (Courtesy photo)
GCVHCS suicide prevention coordinators offer helpful tips to Veteran families, friends

By JERRON BARNETT
Gulf Coast Veterans Health Care System Public Affairs Specialist

Department of Veterans Affairs Gulf Coast Veterans Health Care System suicide prevention coordinators urge family members and friends of Veterans to pay attention to the warning signs of Veterans in crisis, as often those people are in a prime position to help Veterans get the support they may desperately need.

Common stressful family situations often lead to Veterans in crisis in the Gulf Coast region, Lynn Worley, GCVHCS suicide prevention coordinator, said. “For Veterans we’ve served, there are times when relationship trouble or family discord has driven them to a crisis state,” Worley said. “Substance abuse or dependency, homelessness, dealing with chronic pain and certainly mental illnesses are also contributing factors.”

“Veterans who are dealing with these situations will often exhibit the common warning signs of crisis in their social circles,” Carrie Musselwhite, GCVHCS suicide prevention coordinator, said. “There are some common signs that you would see in any person going through those tough situations, such as hopelessness, anxiety, anger, even an increase in their alcohol or drug use,” Musselwhite said. “Those behaviors may lead to isolation from family and friends.”

Worley offers advice to Veterans’ families and friends if they notice changes. “Talking with the Veteran, being open and supportive really helps,” Worley said. “Let the Veteran know that you are concerned, and you are here to help.”

Worley added that if for any reason the family member/friend suspects the Veteran is considering harming themselves, they can be very direct with the Veteran in asking that question. “You really want to know what’s going on with that Veteran,” Worley said. Taking that direct approach debunks a common myth that asking a person about thoughts of suicide will create suicidal thoughts in a person, Musselwhite said. “[The direct approach] actually gives the Veteran an opportunity to talk about what led them to that point,” she said. “Take what they say seriously and try not to be judgmental.”

“If a Veteran expresses a desire to harm themselves, stay with the Veteran, and the next step should be to get the Veteran to the nearest medical professional immediately,” Worley said. “VA may not always be the closest, but a medical professional can really assess what is going on,” Worley said. Walk-in behavioral health care for those situations is available at all five GCVHCS sites.

“The Veterans Crisis Line (1-800-273-8255, then press 1), chat online at www.veteranscrisline.net or text 838255 are recommended options available to Veteran families and friends too,” Musselwhite said. The routing of VCL calls will lead to any necessary follow-up care and support from the Suicide Prevention team closest to where the Veteran is located. Other helpful online VA resources can be found here: https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide_prevention/
VA Community Mental Health Summit strengthens partnerships, educates Veteran community

By JERRON BARNETT
Gulf Coast Veterans Health Care System Public Affairs Specialist

MOBILE, Ala. — On Aug. 8, Department of Veterans Affairs Gulf Coast Veterans Health Care System officials joined with their mental health community partners to find ways to better serve Veterans with mental health issues during the annual VA Community Mental Health Summit.

The event was held at the GulfQuest Museum, with this year’s specific focus on improving access to mental health care of Veterans and their families.

More than 110 people attended the event, highlighted by a peer-support presentation from Bob Curry, founder and president of Dryhootch of America. Curry’s mission is to provide Veterans with a social gathering place that is free of drugs and alcohol. The beverage of choice at a Dryhootch location is coffee.

Curry, a Vietnam Veteran, also gave a historic account of his life during and after military service, when he battled post-traumatic stress and addiction issues. Curry said he struggled to readjust to civilian life and often turned to alcohol to cope.

Today, Dryhootch locations have served approximately 10,000 Veterans a year over the last five years, Curry said during his presentation.

Throughout the Summit’s agenda, GCVHCS representatives gave the audience detailed briefings on a variety of topics, such as suicide prevention, evidence-based treatment, and an update on GCVHCS’s effort in managing Veteran homelessness in the region. There was even a tai chi demonstration, giving Veterans an alternative way to manage chronic pain.

In all, the education and networking felt worthwhile for attendees.

“It’s always important to me to support these events, especially because I’m a Veteran myself,” Vanessa Hall, executive director of the Southern Alabama Health Education Center, said. She is a key sponsor of the annual Summit events when they are held in Mobile.

“All the education for the community health care providers is equally as important too, to help them treat and recognize the issues that our Veterans face.”

GCVHCS Mental Health Recovery Coordinator Leigh Ann Johnson, who served as the event emcee and coordinator, felt positive about the event’s outcome.

“The event was well attended this year, and we are very appreciative of AHEC’s and the contributions of our other community partners,” Johnson said. “It’s something we always look forward to doing each year.”
Audiology and Speech Pathology officials at the Department of Veterans Affairs Gulf Coast Veterans Health Care System are pleased to announce the availability of audiology services for Veterans at the Panama City Beach VA Clinic.

Veterans are now able to schedule appointments for hearing tests, hearing aid fittings and more. Walk-in service for hearing aid adjustment and repair is available from 1-2:30 p.m. daily.

The PCB VA Clinic is located at 2600 Veterans Way, located along Magnolia Beach Road. It is open 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday. It is closed on federal holidays and weekends.

Any Veteran who is eligible and enrolled for VA care is eligible for these services at the PCB VA Clinic, according to Dr. Margaret Peak, GCVHCS chief of audiology and speech pathology service.

Initially, PCB VA audiology staff will provide support and follow-up care for existing patients who have had to travel to the Joint Ambulatory Care Center in Pensacola to receive audiology services, Peak said. New audiology patients may still be referred to the JACC, as well as patients who need more complex testing and/or treatment options.

“We are over the moon to be able to provide these services to Veterans,” Peak said. “Panama City Veterans have waited a long time for these types of services, so we are very excited to get started.”

Up to this point, Veterans receiving VA care who needed audiology services frequently had to travel to the JACC to receive those services or receive VA-purchased care in the community. But since the new PCB VA Clinic opened in December 2016, Peak and her staff worked with other clinic officials behind the scenes to build, equip and staff an audiology clinic in the facility, bringing much needed care closer to where Veterans live — a long-standing and ongoing goal of VA care nationwide.

Peak said the clinic has recently hired a staff audiologist and will soon hire a audiology health technician to handle 1,000 to 1,800 patients she believes they will serve in the new clinic’s first year of operation.

Dr. Lee Helen Weeks, PCB VA’s new staff audiologist, looks forward to serving Veterans in Bay County.

“The sacrifice that Veterans have made for me, my family, and my country continues to drive me to provide the utmost quality of patient-centered care possible,” Weeks said. “I am elated to be a part of the new services that the Panama City will be offering.”

One of the exciting new features of VA care is telehealth. Using this technology, Peak foresees the ability to offer Panama City Veterans tinnitus management, remote hearing aid adjustments, even cochlear implant mapping services via tele-audiology.

“We are striving to provide better service to Veterans in that area, including those who live in the [Clifford C.] Sims [State] Veterans’ Home,” she said.

To schedule an audiology appointment in the PCB VA Clinic, existing VA patients receiving care in PCB should call 850-636-7000. New VA patients should visit the facility to enroll for VA care. Veterans can learn more about VA health care enrollment at: https://www.va.gov/HEALTHBENEFITS/apply/
Panama City Veteran couple Joe and Jill Rodgers know what it’s like to hit rock bottom in a marriage. They’ve been there. Their communication issues and circumstances nearly wrecked their family. They knew they desperately needed help to salvage their marriage.

Now, after celebrating 31 years of marriage in early September, they want to use their own life experiences, along with the relationship skills they gained from a recent Department of Veterans Affairs Gulf Coast Veterans Health Care System’s Warrior to Soul Mate (W2SM) facilitator’s course to help couples like them across the coast.

The W2SM workshop, facilitated by GCVHCS Chaplain Jo Kirkendall with help from her husband, Jim, is designed to help couples renew and reconnect to their spouses and partners through the development of communication skills. Couples learn to understand the emotional jug and how to empty it, untangle a love knot, and many other skills.

Roughly halfway through their marriage, the Rodgers realized that things were negatively changing in their marriage. Communication between them was eroding, if it was even happening at all, especially during Joe’s 15-month Operation Iraqi Freedom deployment with an Army communication unit in 2003.

“I started to see him change, his attitude and anger, while he was deployed,” Jill said. “So, the less contact I had [with him], the better. Our communication started splitting then.”

Not only did their communication start to split, Jill said Joe was starting to separate himself from their three teenaged children. Things got worse when he returned home.

“When he got home, he was drinking a case of beer a night,” Jill said. “[Joe] was staying in the room, sleeping on the floor.”

Joe acknowledged his seemingly odd behavior, but to him it wasn’t odd at all.

“I was doing those things, but to me, I was just doing what was normal,” Joe
Either we commit to each other, or we go our separate ways...

It was the most emotional weekend I ever had...

We saw other couples going through the exact same thing. We weren’t alone...

said. “As a noncommissioned officer, I was dealing with soldiers who were coming back who had the same issues as I did, but I was dealing with their [issues], I wasn’t dealing with mine. I struggled with dealing with issues in the house, too.”

Joe often turned to alcohol to help him cope with all that was on his shoulders.

 “[The beer] numbed me,” Joe said.

Soon after, Joe left the Army due to medical issues, and the family moved from Fort Riley, Kansas, back to their native state of Tennessee for three years.

Then they moved to Panama City in 2009. As life can do, it took a few more unfortunate turns for the Rodgers. This was the point where they both agree their marriage approached rock bottom.

Joe said his brother, a Gulf War Veteran, took his own life in 2010. Joe was struggling to hold down jobs during this time too.

“When he was removed from his last job in 2011, it really put him . . .”, Jill’s voice trailed off, “It was gone. We were gone.”

Joe also had what Jill describes as an emotional affair with another woman in 2011. On the day after Christmas, Jill found out about Joe’s affair. Jill lost her job the following March. Between December and March, Joe tried to commit suicide once; Jill tried several times.

“Yes, that was rock bottom,” the couple agreed.

The couple felt they were at a crossroads at that point.

“I said either we commit to each other, or we go our separate ways,” Joe said.

“We were empty; we were numb,” Jill said. “But we put all we had into trying to make it work, and we didn’t have much.”

Jill credits the support from their church community in Panama City that turned things positive for the couple. In 2013, Joe saw a W2SM flyer in the VA clinic, contacted Chaplain Kirkendall, and attended the first W2SM retreat event in June in Mobile, Alabama, that year.

“It was the most emotional weekend I ever had,” Joe said.

“It was CRAZY emotional,” Jill said, “but the best thing about it was that we saw other couples going through the exact same thing. We weren’t alone.”

When the couple returned home, they immediately starting using the new tools they learned in W2SM, particularly the daily temperature readings and emptying your emotional jug.
Local Veteran athletes do well in 2018 Golden Age Games

By TONY SALMON
VA Volunteer, Contributing Writer

Congratulations to the Gulf Coast Hurricanes, a team of 10 Veteran athletes representing the Department of Veterans Affairs Gulf Coast Veterans Health Care System, who competed and brought home 15 medals from the National Veterans Golden Age Games in Albuquerque, New Mexico, Aug. 3-8.

The Hurricanes competed in 44 events against more than 1,000 fellow Veterans during the NVGAG. They won eight gold medals, five silver medals, and two bronze medals, as well as fourth and fifth place finishes.

Department of Veterans Affairs denotes the annual NVGAG as the premier senior rehabilitation program in the United States. As a multi-event sports and recreational seniors competition, NVGAG is designed to better the quality of life for older Veterans, including those with a wide range of abilities and disabilities. This provides one of the most progressive and adaptive rehabilitative senior sports competitions in the world.

Married couple and Hurricane teammates George and Roberta Hults each took home several gold medals. The Hults won first place in the age 75-79 Boccia Doubles competition. George also grabbed gold in the 85-89 Boccia Open Singles competition, and Roberta landed the silver medal for age 75-79.

Roberta secured a first-place finish in the 75-79 Women's Shuffleboard competition, and second place in the 75-79 Women's Powerwalk 800m competition. George also won gold in the 85-89 Pickleball Doubles Open.

George served in the Army as a coxswain on landing craft during the Korean conflict. Roberta, an Air Force Veteran, served her country as an administration clerk from 1961 to 1964. This is the couples’ second year participating in the NVGAG.

“It was fun,” Roberta said about the 2018 NVGAG. She is excited to compete in the 2019 NVGAG in Anchorage, Alaska.

Garfield Adams, a 22-year Air Force Veteran who served as a medical group logistics and supply technician during Operation Iraqi Freedom, took first place in both the 55-59 Table Tennis Open event and the 55-59 Men’s Pickleball event. Adams has been playing table tennis since he was 14 years old and won five base competitions while serving in the Air Force.
But, Adams said he was relatively new to the sport of pickleball. He began playing pickleball a few years ago, but now tries to promote the sport up and down the Gulf Coast.

“I’ve seen how this sport changed people’s lives, making them healthier and more active,” Adams said.

Other winning athletes include:
- Don Souder, who took home silver medals for the 80-84 wheelchair open, the 80-84 Men’s Shuffleboard Wheelchair and the 85-89 Men’s Bowling Wheelchair
- Jacque Gresham, who took home the silver medal in the 55-59 Women’s Pickleball
- Larry Bagley, who took home the gold medal in 65-69 Men’s Horseshoes Wheelchair, bronze medals in the 65-69 Men’s Bowling Wheelchair and the 65-69 Men’s Boccia Wheelchair
- Bruce Brookshire, who placed fourth in 70-74 Men’s Pickleball
- Gary Yarberry, who placed fifth in the 60-64 Men’s Basketball Free-Throw
- Veterans Mike Taylor and Rodney Gresham completed the 10-person team

Biloxi VA Medical Center’s Recreation Therapist Scarlet Cox and Recreation Assistant James Brock coached the Hurricanes. Cox praised the team’s efforts.

“They traveled cross country, played wholeheartedly with skill and athleticism and all with great sportsmanship and character,” Cox said. “Way to go, Hurricanes!”

Jill said the couple started to recognize when they had to empty their jugs and just listen to each other, and they didn’t always try to fix what was “wrong” with the other person.

“It was constant work and there were still a lot of trust issues,” Joe said.

Several months after attending the W2SM event, and after Joe fully committed to Christ, the positive changes were evident and happening. Hollow words were being replaced with positive action, a very important change for Jill.

“Words didn’t mean anything to me at that time,” Jill said.

“The collision of attending W2SM and having Jesus in their lives were the Rodgers’ saving grace,” Joe said.

From that time to present day, the Rodgers have been assisting Chaplain Kirkendall and Jim with facilitating W2SM workshops across the Gulf Coast, until the opportunity to become facilitators themselves presented itself in mid-August in Fort Walton Beach, Florida.

In that event, Kirkendall, a national trainer, trained a dozen or so GCVHCS employees, VA volunteers, and the Rodgers to share the W2SM tools with other couples they support. The Rodgers plan to share the knowledge with Veterans through their Reboot Combat Recovery program, which is a faith-based course designed to help Veterans address “wounds” to their soul.

Kirkendall speaks about the Rodgers like a proud teacher would speak about her most prized pupils.

“They have grown, and they have developed the confidence and abilities themselves, as presenters and teachers,” Kirkendall said. “Because they have lived it and worked it, they model it so beautifully for others [to learn from].”

Kirkendall has facilitated W2SM for approximately 60 couples over a dozen events since she began W2SM in the region in 2013. It is open to Veterans, Reservists, National Guard members and their spouses and partners.

For more information about the program and future workshops, call 228-523-5730.
VEText system helps Veterans keep, cancel their VA medical appointments

By Jerron Barnett
Gulf Coast Veterans Health Care System
Public Affairs Specialist

Veterans receiving care from Department of Veterans Affairs Gulf Coast Veterans Health Care System — do you want to help your fellow Veterans get care they deserve at a faster pace? If so, then GCVHCS officials recommend you take advantage of VEText, VA's automated text messaging appointment reminder system.

Introduced in March nationwide in 138 VA facilities, VEText reminds Veterans of upcoming health care appointments, allowing them to easily confirm or cancel the appointment via their cell phone. Veterans who have previously used the VA health care system, and have a cell phone number listed in their electronic health records, are automatically enrolled in VEText. Veterans can update their phone numbers during the check-in or check-out process for an appointment, at any kiosk, or if they have a My HealtheVet Premium account at https://www.myhealth.va.gov/mhvportal-web/home.

VEText is integrated with VA’s electronic health records system and does not require manual action by VA staff. Appointments are automatically scheduled and canceled via text message, freeing staff to provide more personalized care to Veterans.

“Every missed appointment represents a lost opportunity to provide faster access to care for a Veteran in need,” said VA’s Acting Secretary Peter O’Rourke. “VEText underscores VA’s commitment to digital modernization and represents a milestone in putting more user-friendly capabilities in the hands of Veterans.”

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Flu shots are available to Veterans at all Gulf Coast VA facilities

Veterans receiving health care services from Department of Veterans Affairs Gulf Coast Veterans Health Care System can now get their flu shot at any one of the health care system’s facilities.

All GCVHCS outpatient clinics are closed on federal holidays and weekends. Veterans can walk in on the following dates and times to receive a flu shot:

**Biloxi VA Medical Center**
9 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., Monday through Friday

**Mobile VA Clinic**
8 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., Monday through Friday

**Joint Ambulatory Care Center, Pensacola**
9 a.m. to 1 p.m., Monday through Friday

**Eglin VA Clinic**
8 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., Monday through Friday

**Panama City Beach VA Clinic**
(2600 Veterans Way)
8 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., Monday through Friday

Veterans are also encouraged to request a flu shot during any scheduled appointment.
According to the Veterans Health Administration’s Office of Veterans Access to Care, as of July 9, more than 3.24 million patients have received VEText messages and canceled 319,504 appointments, freeing up time slots for other Veterans to use.

Locally in GCVHCS, VEText is working.

“Veterans receiving physical therapy care [in Pensacola, Florida] have expressed that they are in fact getting the text messages, and appreciate the notifications,” Dennis Thomas, supervisory physical therapist at the Joint Ambulatory Care Center, said. “It seems to have helped decrease some of the no-shows too.”

GCVHCS Assistant Chief of Medical Administration Service Michael Thomas added that Veterans who aren’t interested in receiving the reminders can text “STOP” at any time, or “START” if they would like to resume. The only cost associated with VEText participation for Veterans is from their cellphone service provider, if applicable, for text messaging.

“VEText has changed the way we communicate with our Veteran patients,” said John Ullyot, VA Assistant Secretary for Public and Intergovernmental Affairs. “Veterans appreciate the convenient, user-friendly system and understand this technology not only helps them, but their fellow Veterans as well.”
Know Your Provider

Jan V. Truong, DC
Staff Chiropractor
Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation
Biloxi VA Medical Center

How long have you worked for VA?
Since April 2018.

What attracted you to work for VA?
Working for VA is a rewarding opportunity for me to serve as a part of a multidisciplinary team committed to the Veteran population that has served our country. Chiropractors are integrated into interdisciplinary care teams to deliver a proactive, personalized, patient-driven approach to our Veterans daily. I want to be a part of transforming the future of care for our Veterans.

How does serving Veterans each day impact you personally?
I find it very rewarding to be able to provide care to our Veterans that have dedicated their service to our country. It has enriched my knowledge and practice. It’s also enlightening to have our Veterans share their medical and military experiences with me.

In your opinion, why should Veterans choose VA for their health care?
VA has a proposed delivery system, incorporating physical care with psychosocial care focused on the Veteran’s personal health and life goals. Our Veterans will be able to experience seamless medical care, to help achieve and maintain their best all-around health and well-being.

What are you most grateful for?
Very grateful to be able to practice as a chiropractor at VA, to have the privilege to work with Veterans daily and work within a team equally committed to their jobs and the population we serve.
Submitted by Mary Nelson
Gulf Coast Veterans Health Care System Public Affairs

BILOXI, Miss. — Gulf Coast Veterans Health Care System Volunteer Bob Snyder is often seen wearing his red ambassador jacket at the Biloxi VA Medical Center, spending time with visiting Veterans, helping them and their families find where they need to go for their appointment. He also helps facilitate the GCVHCS ambassador program orientation.

But in times of natural disasters, Snyder trades his red ambassador jacket for an American Red Cross red and white vest. Snyder was activated to deploy to the Carolinas Sept. 14 to help with Hurricane Florence relief efforts.

Snyder is the Emergency Response Vehicle coordinator for the Biloxi-Gulfport, Mississippi, area. An ERV is a Red Cross vehicle that resembles an ambulance and is used to provide mass feeding and supplies into areas affected by disasters.

Snyder was up to the challenge of becoming an ERV driver.

“While deciding what area of the Red Cross I wanted to train for, I noticed that an ERV driver had a long list of training qualifications, and I accepted the challenge of being an ERV driver,” Snyder said.

After receiving the activation call, Snyder and his fellow driver drove the local ERV to Macon, Georgia, to be staged in preparation for going into the Carolinas. Once in Georgia, they were deployed to South Carolina while other ERVs were sent to North Carolina.

“While serving in Florence, South Carolina, we provided snacks and water to Red Cross shelters and first responders,” Snyder said. “In addition, we delivered full-course meals prepared by The Salvation Army and Southern Baptists Disaster Relief Crews to these shelters. Also, I thought it was strange that I wound up in Florence, South Carolina, for Hurricane Florence!”

Snyder said his experience in South Carolina was a rewarding one, and he offered perspective on what his path forward through the Red Cross might look like.

“Would I go back? I might have to as workers are rotated in and out, but, at the moment, I am concentrating on qualifying as a Red Cross instructor for the ERV class called Ready, Set, Roll,” Snyder said. “Besides, just knowing that you helped someone during a trying time in their life is reward enough for me.”
Join more than 5,250 Veterans and family members who are first to receive the Inspire! newsletter by subscribing at the link below.

Enjoy the convenience of having it delivered to your email address:

https://www.biloxi.va.gov/inspire.asp