

Veterans' health matters

Families: Key Caregivers of Injured Vets

Today, thousands of military personnel are returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, wounded and scarred in ways that would have proven fatal in earlier wars. The types of wounds they suffer, largely caused by explosions of enormous force to which they've been exposed, have led to such previously unfamiliar terms as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Polytrauma, and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). These injuries are often so severe and complex that they require lengthy and constant care – care which is largely becoming the primary role of family members.

In response, the VA has a number of programs to help these family members care for their wounded and injured spouses and children. These programs include: Fisher Houses; the Readjustment Counseling Service (or Vet Center Program), and the OEF/OIF Family Services Program.

Fisher House

A Fisher House is “a home away from home” for families of patients receiving medical care at major military and VA medical centers. Currently, there are 38 Fisher Houses, including one at the VA Palo Alto Health Care System.

Don Thompson came to Palo Alto from his home in Louisiana

several months ago to be close to and help care for his 21-year-old son, Cory, who was in a coma after suffering a brain injury. Don reports that Cory is now making great progress, thanks in large part to the Polytrauma Rehabilitation Center.

Don has been living at Fisher House, where he also serves as the unofficial “sous chef.” “It’s the least I can do,” he says. “The folks here are doing such a great job for my son that I just try and give back any way I can.”

These programs, covering hospice and palliative care, spinal cord injury, organ transplant, PTSD and TBI, are critical programs and family members often visit and comfort their loved ones during rehabilitation that requires treatment lasting six months or longer. Most cannot afford the \$150 per night average hotel accommodations in Palo Alto.

However, more than just a free place to stay, the Fisher House also serves as a haven for many of the families. For example, the wife of an injured Marine, just 21 years old, was eight months pregnant with their first baby when her husband was badly injured in Iraq. She arrived at Palo Alto knowing no one, but the other families at the Fisher House literally adopted her.

VA ensured she had prenatal

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a word from our director

Sheila M. Cullen
Director, VA Sierra Pacific Network (VISN 21)

A Look to the Future

It was an honor to be appointed as Network Director of the VA Sierra Pacific Network – VISN 21, a network I've been a part of for almost 20 years. In this position, I have the opportunity to direct one of the most vibrant and innovative health care networks in VA.

VA has consistently been ranked higher than many private health care systems in quality of care measures and is a leader in customer satisfaction surveys. In our network, we have not only exceeded (inpatient and outpatient) satisfaction thresholds, but our employee satisfaction scores are among

the highest in the country. This means we have a dedicated and satisfied workforce, committed to ensuring that the care veterans receive is of the highest quality.

As we move forward, access to care for all veterans will continue to be a primary focus, with special emphasis placed on ready availability of services for our newest generation of veterans and those living in rural areas. We're also greatly expanding access to mental health services at all sites, supporting a comprehensive array of specialized care, including: PTSD, substance abuse, homelessness, suicide prevention, serious mental

illness, and traumatic brain injuries, as well as ensuring 24/7 mental health coverage in emergency departments.

Finally, we will continue to ensure a safe and energy efficient environment of care by maximizing the effectiveness of our capital and technological infrastructure.

This is an exciting and challenging time for VA, and the VA Sierra Pacific Network is poised to continue to make outstanding clinical and scientific contributions in a compassionate and deliberate manner. ■

My HealthVet Receives Awards

My HealthVet – the web-based portal that enables veterans to create and maintain a personal health record – has received two major awards from organizations that focus on effective use of Internet Technology.

The VHA's Office of Information has been selected to receive one of the prestigious 2008 "CIO 100 Awards" in recognition of its innovative use of information technology at its My HealthVet web site (www.myhealth.va.gov). The CIO 100 award program recognizes organizations around the world that exemplify the highest level of operational and strategic excellence in Information Technology.

VA developed My HealthVet to be a one-

stop location for veterans of all eras to receive critical medical and benefits information and to provide ways for veterans to input and view some of their own medical records online.

Earlier this year, My HealthVet was selected as the Gold Award winner for Best Practices in Consumer Empowerment and Protection Awards in the Category of Patient /Consumer Safety by the Utilization Review Accreditation Committee (URAC). URAC is an independent nonprofit group known as a leader in promoting health care quality through its accreditation and education programs.

"These awards demonstrate how VA and its leaders continue to provide innovative Information

Technology solutions to enhance veteran and employee health, and improve the quality of care VA's health care system provides," said Dr. Michael J. Kussman, VA's Under Secretary for Health. "I encourage America's veterans and others to log on to My HealthVet and forge a new partnership with us to make their health care decisions."

Recent system upgrades include an Active Duty Center for newly discharged veterans, a new calendar option, and Military Health System (MHS) learning modules featuring online courses developed with the Department of Defense. Another upgrade coming soon will allow veterans to view their appointments and certain lab results. ■

VA National News

VA Announces Online Claims Applications

The VA has announced that online applications are now accepted from veterans, survivors and other claimants filing initial applications for disability compensation, pension, education, and vocational rehabilitation and employment benefits, without requiring a signed paper copy of the application.

Effective immediately, VA will process applications received through VONAPP, its online application website (www.va.gov/onlineapps.htm), without the claimant's signature. The electronic application will be sufficient authentication of the application. Normal development procedures and rules of evidence will still apply to all VONAPP applications.

Veterans, survivors and other claimants seeking compensation, pension, education, or vocational rehabilitation benefits can apply electronically without the constraints of location, postage cost, and time delays in mail delivery. The online application also provides a link to apply for VA health care benefits and much more.

Summit Brings Renewed VA Drive for Women Veterans

An aggressive push to ensure women veterans receive the highest quality of care in VA medical facilities was pledged by Secretary of Veterans Affairs Dr. James B. Peake at a recent VA National Summit on Women Veterans' Issues. "We're expanding our women-centric focus," he said, "to initiate new programs that meet the needs of women veterans."

These programs will focus on women's needs in prosthetics and rehabilitation, hiring women's advocates in VA medical centers, developing quality measurements specifically for women patients, purchasing more state-of-the-art, specialized women's health care equipment, and expanding medical education in women's health for VA care providers.

VA recently established a work group whose goal is to ensure every female veteran enrolled in VA care has a women's health primary care provider, especially to meet gender-specific needs.

VA, Monster Partner for Veteran Job Seekers

To help veterans find jobs, the VA has partnered with Monster Government Solutions, a division of Monster Worldwide, Inc., which markets online employment services to employers and job seekers. Monster, in partnership with VA's Center for Veterans Enterprise, provides veteran-owned small businesses the opportunity to post job openings for veterans, including service-disabled veterans, at a large price discount.

To participate in Monster job listings, veteran business owners must be listed in VA's online Vendor Information Pages (VIP) maintained by the Department's Center for Veterans Enterprise at <http://www.VetBiz.gov>.

VA's National PTSD Center Deputy Honored

Dr. Paula Schnurr, deputy executive director for VA's National Center for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), has received the third annual Ladies Home Journal "Health Breakthrough Award"

for her work with PTSD and women veterans.

The study led by Schnurr for the VA was the largest clinical trial of individual psychotherapy for PTSD ever conducted. The findings led to VA supporting a national training program in "prolonged-exposure therapy," which had not previously been widely used.

Schnurr has been serving veterans at VA for 19 years and is responsible for program development, consultation on research projects, and strategic direction of the activities at the seven sites that make up the National Center for PTSD.

New Sports Clinic for Newly Injured Veterans

One hundred recently injured veterans from around the country will participate in a unique rehabilitative sports experience this fall in San Diego. The VA-sponsored National Veterans Summer Sports Clinic will take place September 28 through October 3 at several venues in the San Diego area. Events include sailing, cycling, surfing, kayaking and track and field events.

The event is open to recently injured veterans who have spinal cord injuries, traumatic brain injuries, certain neurological conditions, amputations, other mobility impairments, and/or post-traumatic stress disorder. For many injured veterans, this event will provide their first exposure to recreational sports and other activities after being injured.

For more information, visit the clinic website at www.summersportsclinic.va.gov. ■

VA facility highlights

central california

Vietnam Veterans Honored

On June 14, 2008, VA Central California Healthcare System unveiled a new Vietnam War Monument located prominently at the front entrance to the Medical Center in Fresno. The dedication ceremony attracted nearly eight hundred in attendance to observe bagpipers, singers, the release of 100 white doves, a rifle salute and several dignitaries, including U.S. Congressman Jim Costa and Lt. Colonel Tom Richards, National Commander,

Legion of Valor and Navy Cross recipient, representing the Governor's office.

The Vietnam Veterans of America Fresno Chapter # 933 donated the black granite monument to the VA. The front features a laser etched colorized map of Vietnam, its adjacent countries and the South China Sea. On the reverse side of the seven-foot monument is the famous Vietnam Wall 'Reflections' poster, which has been reproduced with exquisite detail.

Rick Hanniford, Vice President of the Fresno VVA Chapter, stated,



"We wanted to have something for local veterans; this is for our generation, to show where we served." Immediately following the ceremony, veterans began making their way up to the monument to reflect on time served and share combat experiences with family and friends. ■

northern california

Meeting the Needs of OEF/OIF Returnees

The VA Northern California Health Care System has a team standing ready to welcome all Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) returnees and to facilitate their families' transition to the VA while helping to coordinate their care. Our team consists of Darcie Henning, Program Manager; Jo Ann Pinotti, Case Manager; and Ryan Feil, Transition Patient Advocate.

Our patient advocate serves as a focal point of contact for transitioning OEF/OIF veterans and their families. Ryan's position is dedicated to serving severely injured returnees, giving veterans a personal advocate as they move through the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) system. Ryan also has a hands-on approach for every OEF/OIF veteran referred to him.

He connects with these veterans and their family members wherever they need him, whether

it's when they come into the Medical Center or if they need him to meet with them in their homes. He goes above and beyond to make sure our veterans feel connected to our programs, and have a face to reach out to with questions and concerns.

Each member of the OEF/OIF team stands ready to provide health care, and meet the unique needs of our newest veterans returning from combat deployments. ■

palo alto

New Patient Check-In Kiosks

VAPAHCS is pleased to announce new Self-Service Patient Check-in Kiosks. Seven kiosks are currently operating at the Palo Alto hospital, and there are plans to place them at the Livermore Division and the San Jose Clinic in the future.

The kiosks allow veterans to speed up their clinic check-in process and make sure their personal information is correct.

After the veteran swipes the Veterans Identification Card through a card reader and answers a few questions, the kiosk will send an electronic notification to the clinics and print a receipt, which instructs the veteran to proceed to his or her clinic appointment and provides date, time, and location of the appointment. Once the veteran arrives at the clinic, he or she simply hands the receipt to the clinic staff and has a seat in the waiting room. Should the veteran feel changes are

required to pre-registration information, the system will instruct the veteran where to go for assistance.

Use of the kiosks is voluntary. Current clinic check-in processes remain unchanged and will continue to offer personal check-in and pre-registration service. ■



Taking Steps to Improve the Environment

The San Francisco VA Medical Center (SFVAMC) has taken a major step in its efforts to reduce petroleum consumption by installing an ethanol (E-85) fueling station, and is one of only six VA Medical Centers in the country to construct this kind of fueling station on campus.

The project construction started in September 2007 and was completed in July 2008. It consists of a 2,000-gallon capacity storage tank.

Ed Safdie, Acting Medical Director, SFVAMC, addressed the significance of this fueling station during the ribbon-cutting ceremony held on July 21, 2008. "We're proud to be a leader in the reduction of petroleum consumption. The installation of fueling stations such as this serves as a great example to



the rest of VA and will have a huge impact on the reduction of greenhouse emissions. We're very proud of our accomplishment."

The San Francisco VAMC's vehicle fleet consists of 46 vehicles, of which 26 are flexible fuel vehicles, averaging 350,000 miles per year. Use of the E-85 fuel will reduce the greenhouse gas emissions by as much as 20 percent relative to gasoline. The Medical Center will not only serve as an ethanol resource for VISN 21, but will also pursue partnerships with other federal agencies. ■

PIHCS Offers New Family Oriented Mental Health Programs

In collaboration with the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), family members and friends of veterans will have the opportunity to utilize two important family based resources. This is a great opportunity for family members to learn from other family members who have learned how to cope, and gained a greater understanding of mental illness.

Family-to-Family Education Program is a 12-week program providing current information about illnesses of the brain and their treatment, and includes, among others, a section on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and addictive disorders. There are also sections on coping skills for the caregiver, and the power of advocacy.

Family Support Group meets regularly to discuss timely issues regarding mental health treatment and services, housing,

employment and transition to civilian coverage. The support groups offer a venue to share common experiences within the system, within our families and to bolster one's capacity to keep hope alive for ourselves and our loved ones.

For more information, please contact the Spark M. Matsunaga VA Medical Center, Andrew Dahlburg, Local Recovery Coordinator, at (808) 433-0332. ■

One of a Kind!

Early one morning, retired officer Dick Rhyno was leaving the VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System when he spotted a car with steamed up windows and asked the woman occupant if she had spent the night in her vehicle. It turned out she and her children had slept in the car while their husband/father was in the ICU unit at the Medical Center. They had no ability to stay anywhere else. That's when Rhyno and co-founder Chuck

Fulkerson decided to launch what became the Veterans Guest House. Opened in 1994, the small bungalow housed four or five people. Its mission then and now is to provide temporary lodging for veterans and family members while the veteran is receiving medical treatment in the Reno/Sparks area. In 2004, a new 4,700-square-foot home was built, with 12 beds, a full kitchen and a TV room. Guests must be independent and self-reliant or



have a caretaker with them.

During 2007, nearly 3,000 guest nights of lodging were provided. The number of guests continues to grow and, unfortunately, some are turned away on the busy nights.

Family members come from all over the world to be with their loved ones.

For more information, visit www.veteransguesthouse.org, email info@veteransguesthouse.org, or call 775-324-6958. ■

A Laughing Matter: A Moving Speech

Eleven people, 10 men and a woman, were lifted to apparent safety from the roof of a burning building by grabbing a rope dropped by a rescue helicopter. However, as the chopper labored to gain altitude, it quickly became clear that the rope they were holding wasn't quite strong enough to carry 11 people, and they realized one had to let go, or they'd all perish.

They were unable to decide on who'd make the ultimate sacrifice by letting go, and there were no volunteers. Finally, with everyone clinging tightly to the rope, the woman gave a very touching speech. "I'll let go," she said, "because, as a woman, I'm used to giving up everything for my husband and

kids, or for men in general, and for always making sacrifices with little in return."

As soon as she finished, all the men began clapping their hands. ■

California Survey on Women Veterans

The California Commission on the Status of Women has asked the California Research Bureau to prepare a report for state policymakers to assist them in identifying and meeting the needs of California's women veterans, given their increasing numbers and unique issues. The report, "Meeting the Needs of California's Women Veterans," will describe specific issues, service needs and existing gaps. This report is expected to be published in late summer 2008. ■

WORD SEARCH

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| <input type="checkbox"/> RECOGNITION | <input type="checkbox"/> KIOSK | <input type="checkbox"/> TEMPORARY | <input type="checkbox"/> GREENHOUSE |
| <input type="checkbox"/> TECHNOLOGY | <input type="checkbox"/> ENDURING | <input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATION | <input type="checkbox"/> SUPPORT |
| <input type="checkbox"/> FAMILY | <input type="checkbox"/> MISSION | <input type="checkbox"/> CONSTRUCTION | <input type="checkbox"/> WELCOME |

Caregivers

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health care at Stanford Hospital, where she also delivered her baby. Afterward, she said, "I had so much attention, there was never a time I was sad or lonely. I wish everyone could have had the kind of family I had at the Fisher House. I felt so loved."

Chaplains are also available to provide comfort and counsel to family members. "We constantly watch for people in distress," says Tram Le-Nguyen, Fisher House Manager in Palo Alto, "so we can refer them to our chaplains if they so desire. Just having someone to listen to them can be a great stress reliever."

Vet Centers

The stated mission of the Vet Center program is to "welcome home war veterans with honor by providing quality readjustment counseling in a caring manner. Vet Centers understand and appreciate veterans' war experiences while assisting them and their family members toward a successful post-war adjustment in or near their community."

The program covers all combat veterans, including federally activated Reserve and National Guard personnel and their families. Services available at the 232 Vet Centers include: individual, group and marital/family counseling; bereavement counseling; medical referrals; assistance in applying for VA Benefits; employment counseling, guidance and referral; alcohol/drug assessments; information and referral to community resources; military sexual trauma counseling and referral; and outreach and community education.

Because of the highly sensitive and confidential nature of the program, the Vet Centers are located away from VA medical

centers, typically in storefront facilities in downtown areas. Many of the Vet Center personnel are combat veterans themselves.

Sunny Morgan, MSW, is the Team Leader at the Vet Center in Chico, California. "Our programs," she reports, "are very inclusive of families and of the entire community. For example, we regularly host 'We Care' meetings for family members of personnel serving in combat zones, and we offer programs for the spouses of personnel suffering from PTSD."

Other Resources

The VA also offers other programs specifically geared to returning service members and their families. Gail McBride, LCSW, is the Supervisory Social Worker who heads up the OEF/OIF Family Services Program, based in Menlo Park. "The program," she reports, "is geared toward OEF/OIF returnees. It includes counseling and educational services for them, as well as for their parents, spouses and other family members."

Among the family-oriented VA resources is the recently introduced Sesame Street Kit. The kit is a bilingual, multimedia outreach program designed to help support military families with children ages 2-5, experiencing deployments, multiple deployments, or a parent returning home who has been changed due to a combat-related injury.

The title of the kit is: *Talk, Listen, Connect: Deployments, Homecomings, Changes* / Hablen, Escuchen, Conecten. All VA libraries now have a copy for circulation, and the call number to locate the material in the libraries is: WS 105.5 .F2 T146 2008. ■

Sacramento Valley National Cemetery to Expand

The VA has awarded more than \$18 million to two Sacramento, Calif., companies to develop the next phase of the Sacramento Valley National Cemetery in Dixon, which opened in October 2006. VA anticipates the project will be completed in the fall of 2011 and provide 10 years of burial services.

The expansion encompasses 60 acres and will include installation of 6,900 pre-placed crypts, approximately 4,900 conventional gravesites, as well as 8,000 columbaria niches and 5,200 in-ground cremain sites, both for cremation remains. Buildings will include two committal service shelters, a public information center, an administration building and a maintenance complex.

Veterans with a discharge other than dishonorable, their spouses and eligible dependent children can be buried in a national cemetery. Other burial benefits available for eligible veterans, regardless of where they are buried, include a burial flag, a Presidential Memorial Certificate and a government headstone or marker.

Information on VA burial benefits can be obtained from national cemetery offices, from the Internet at <http://www.cem.va.gov>, or by calling VA regional offices toll-free at 1-800-827-1000. To make burial arrangements, call (800) 535-1117.

For information on the Sacramento Valley VA National Cemetery, contact the cemetery staff at (707) 693-2460. ■

Kerri Childress, Editor
VISN 21
3801 Miranda Avenue
Palo Alto, CA 94304-1290
www.visn21.med.va.gov

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Where to find us!

VA MEDICAL CENTER SAN FRANCISCO

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4150 Clement Street
San Francisco, CA 94121-1598
(415) 221-4810

DOWNTOWN S.F. VA OPC

401 3rd Street
San Francisco, Calif., 94107
(415) 551-7300

VA EUREKA OPC

714 F Street
Eureka, CA 95501
(707) 442-5335

VA SAN BRUNO OPC

1001 Sneath Lane
San Bruno, Calif., 94066
(650) 615-6000

VA SANTA ROSA OPC

3315 Chanate Road
Santa Rosa, CA 95404
(707) 570-3855

VA UKIAH OPC

630 Kings Court
Ukiah, CA 95482
(707) 468-7700

VA NORTHERN CALIFORNIA HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

VA SACRAMENTO MEDICAL CENTER

10535 Hospital Way
Mather, CA 95655
(916) 843-7000

VA MARTINEZ OPC

150 Muir Road
Martinez, CA 94553
(925) 372-2000

VA REDDING OPC

351 Hartnell Avenue
Redding, CA 96002
(530) 226-7555

VA CHICO OPC

280 Cohasset Road
Chico, CA 95926
(530) 879-5000

VA MCCLELLAN OPC

5342 Dudley Boulevard
McClellan Park, CA 95652-1074
(916) 561-7400

VA MARE ISLAND OPC

201 Walnut Avenue
Mare Island, CA 94592
(707) 562-8200

OAKLAND MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE PROGRAM

Oakland Army Base
2505 West 14th Street
Oakland, CA 94607
(510) 587-3400

VA OAKLAND OPC

2221 Martin Luther King Jr. Way
Oakland, CA 94612
(510) 267-7800

VA FAIRFIELD OPC

103 Bodin Circle, Bldg. 778
Travis AFB, CA 94535
(707) 437-1800

VA PALO ALTO HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

VA PALO ALTO DIVISION

3801 Miranda Avenue
Palo Alto, CA 94304-1290
(650) 493-5000

VA MENLO PARK DIVISION

795 Willow Road
Menlo Park, CA 94025
(650) 493-5000

VA LIVERMORE DIVISION

4951 Arroyo Road
Livermore, CA 94550
(925) 373-4700

VA CAPITOLA OPC

1350 N. 41st Street, Suite 102
Capitola, CA 95010
(831) 464-5519

VA STOCKTON OPC

500 W. Hospital Road
Stockton, CA 95231
(209) 946-3400

VA MODESTO OPC

1524 McHenry Blvd., Suite 315
Modesto, CA 95350
(209) 557-6200

VA MONTEREY OPC

3401 Engineer Lane
Seaside, CA 93955
(831) 883-3800

VA SAN JOSE OPC

80 Great Oaks Boulevard
San Jose, CA 95119
(408) 363-3011

VA SONORA OPC

19747 Greenley Road
Sonora, CA 95370
(209) 588-2600

VA CENTRAL CALIFORNIA HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

VA CENTRAL CALIFORNIA HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

2615 E. Clinton Avenue
Fresno, CA 93703-2286
(559) 225-6100

VA SOUTH VALLEY OPC

1050 North Cherry Street
Tulare, CA 93274
(559) 684-8703

VA CASTLE OPC

3605 Hospital Road, Suite D
Atwater, CA 95301-5140
(209) 381-0105

VA SIERRA NEVADA HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

IOANNIS A. LOUGARIS VA MEDICAL CENTER

1000 Locust Street
Reno, NV 89502-2597
(775) 786-7200

VA LA HONTAN VALLEY OPC

345 West A Street
Fallon, NV 89406
(775) 428-6161

VA SIERRA FOOTHILLS OPC

11985 Heritage Oak Place
Suite #1
Auburn, California 95603
(530) 889-0872

VA CARSON VALLEY OPC

925 Ironwood Drive, Suite 2102
Minden, NV 89423
(775) 786-7200 Ext. 4000

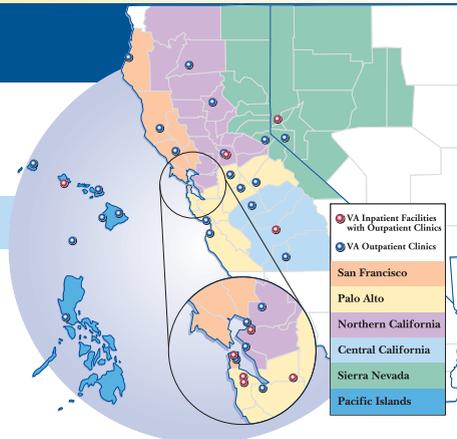
VA PACIFIC ISLANDS HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

SPARK M. MATSUNAGA VA MEDICAL CENTER

459 Patterson Road
Honolulu, HI 96819
(808) 433-0600

VA PTSD RESIDENTIAL REHABILITATION PROGRAM

459 Patterson Road
Honolulu, HI 96819
(808) 433-0004



VA MAUI OPC

203 Ho'ohana Street, Suite 303
Kahului, HI 96732
(808) 871-2454

VA HILO OPC

1285 Waiuanue Ave., Suite 211
Hilo, HI 96720
(808) 935-3781

VA KONA CBOC

75-377 Hualalai Road
Kailua-Kona, HI 96740
(808) 329-0774

VA KAUAI OPC

3-3367 Kuhio Hwy, Suite 200
Lihue, HI 96766
(808) 246-0497

VA GUAM CLINIC

US Naval Hospital
Wing E-200, Box 7608
Agana Heights, GU 96919
(671) 472-7250

VA AMERICAN SAMOA CBOC

Fiatele Teo Army Reserve Building
Pago Pago, American Samoa 96799
(684) 699-3730

VA REGIONAL OFFICE & OUTPATIENT CENTER MANILA

United States Department of
Veterans Affairs
PSC 501
FPO, AP 96515-1100
(011) 632-523-6300