

# Veterans' health matters

## Technology: Playing a Key Role in Rehab Programs

**I**t made its worldwide debut in September 2006, five years after Nintendo designers and engineers began work on the Japanese company's fifth home video game console. Given the unusual name of Wii (pronounced "we"), it was an instant success, being swept off store shelves as soon as it became available.

Aimed primarily at video game fans, the Wii gaming system has taken on a different and evolving therapeutic role. Today, the Wii has become a fun part of the rehabilitation process and a form of "therapy" for veterans and returning service members at the VA Palo Alto Health Care System (VAPAHCS) Polytrauma program.

### **VA's Mission**

The Polytrauma Unit, which cares for severely injured service members with Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and other serious and often life-threatening injuries, has introduced the Wii system during Recreation Therapy treatment sessions.

Polytrauma refers to the complex patterns of injury commonly seen in personnel injured during Iraq and Afghanistan deployments. Polytrauma typically results from blast injury caused by improvised explosive devices or rocket-propelled grenades. The combination of high-pressure waves, explosive fragments,

and falling debris produce multiple injuries, including brain injury, amputations, burns, wounds, fractures, blindness and hearing loss.

The magnitude of these injuries, and the circumstances in which they occur, can cause additional psychological stress to patients and their families. Consequently, reports Richard K. Smith, Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialist and Recreation Therapy Supervisor, their care requires a full complement of medical, surgical, rehabilitation and mental health personnel and services.

From a recreation therapist perspective, Smith reports, the emphasis and treatment goal of using the Wii may include increasing the patient's hand-eye coordination, improving balance, strength and movement, and overall safety in their environment. The activities are something patients enjoy and benefit from and continue using when they go home. From the patient perspective, it's all about "having fun." While bowling, a patient mentioned that he never knew "therapy" could be such fun.

"The beauty of the Wii and adaptive technology," Smith adds, "involves other applications, such as social networking sites on the Internet. It helps patients get back into communicating

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# VA Says Goodbye to Dr. Wiebe



**R**obert Wiebe, M.D., M.B.A., M.P.H., Director of the VA Sierra Pacific Network 21 since 1998, has left VA to serve as Chief Medical Officer for Catholic Healthcare West System.

Dr. Wiebe managed your network that serves veterans in 36 locations in northern and central California, northern Nevada, Hawaii, Philippines, and other islands in the Pacific Basin. He was also co-chair of the national VHA Finance Committee.

Throughout his dedicated service, Network 21 has been

one of the top performing VISNs throughout VA. His contributions during his 22 years of VA service are far too numerous to list.

“I am extremely grateful for the privilege of working with and learning so much from Dr. Wiebe,” wrote Lisa Freeman, Director of VA Palo Alto. “I am even more fortunate to have benefited from his mentoring and from witnessing his exemplification of a true leader. I thank him for all he has done in service to our veterans.”

Dr. Wiebe said: “This decision was incredibly difficult for me.

I have spent my entire professional life with VA, including the last 11 years as your Network Director. To be able to provide health care is a special gift; to be able to provide health care to veterans is truly a noble mission. I leave VISN 21 with an enormous sense of pride.”

The new VISN 21 director is Sheila Cullen, the former director at the VA San Francisco Medical Center. The next issue of *Veterans' health matters* will include a profile of Ms. Cullen and her VA career. ■

## Rehab Technology

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and socializing with their families, friends and comrades in other locations. The virtual togetherness is a great way to help them in their recovery and rehabilitation process.”

The inpatient Polytrauma program currently has three recreational therapists, who meet with patients during individual and groups sessions. “Using the Wii system and gaming can enhance part of the treatment session,” Smith says, “Arm movements during boxing and recreation therapy sessions can also address issues brought up in other areas, such as physical therapy.”

Bed-bound patients are also involved in recreation therapy during bedside treatments sessions; a computer or gaming system can be rolled directly to patients' rooms.

### **Outpatient and Transitional Programs**

Much of the responsibility

for the transitional outpatient Recreation Therapy programs is in the hands of Susan Feighery, Lead Recreational Therapist. “Much of our work,” she says, “involves applying current technology to meet the clinical needs of our recently wounded combat service personnel.”

For example, the program uses the Wii Brain Academy game to increase cognition, memory, mathematical and visual scanning skills with head-injured patients. In addition, the Wii Sports program allows patients, families and friends to compete athletically, while the recreation therapist measures and monitors the physical recovery process.

The recently released Wii Fitness program teaches other mind/body fitness skills through innovative activities, such as yoga and hula hoop contests.

Additionally, all Wii programs, when clinically utilized, can address specific patient deficits via interventions involving behavioral, social, physical and

cognitive applications, which can then be directly transferred to the patients' home environment when they return to their local communities.

“Keeping up with rapidly changing technology can be quite a challenge,” says Feighery. “There's a huge learning curve, but tools such as Wii and the XBox360 make treatment sessions enjoyable for both patients and clinicians. In using gaming technologies, we're breaking new clinical grounds, as we develop new treatment strategies.”

“With clinicians, patients and families working as a team, we certainly put the ‘WE’ in adaptive WII technology,” stated Feighery and Smith.

“We're constantly learning from our patients and their families,” Feighery says. “But there may be veterans out there with strong gaming skills who can assist us in the development of future adaptive technology and gaming programs.” ■

# VA National News

## VA Announces Insurance Premium Reductions

Veterans who served in combat since November 11, 1998, including those who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, are now eligible for five years of health care and medications exempt from copays (regardless of income level), for treatment of conditions a VA clinician determines are possibly related to combat military service. This initiative increases a two-year limit that had been in effect previously.

VGLI premium rate reductions, ranging from 4 to 12 percent, will apply for veterans aged 30 to 64. Premium rates for those under age 30 are already competitive. The reductions will ensure that VGLI remains highly competitive with similar insurance offered by commercial insurers.

More than 400,000 veterans currently participate in the VA-managed VGLI program. To obtain more information, or to view a table with the new VGLI rates, visit the VA insurance web site at [www.insurance.va.gov](http://www.insurance.va.gov).

## Five Years of Care for Recent Combat Vets

Military veterans who served in combat since November 11, 1998, including veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan, are now eligible for five years of free VA medical care for most conditions. This measure increases a two-year limit that had been in effect.

Veterans may apply at any time after their discharge – even decades later – for medical care for service-connected health problems.

The new provision applies to care in a VA hospital, outpatient clinic or nursing home. Combat

veterans discharged between November 11, 1998 and January 16, 2003, who never took advantage of VA's health care system, have until January 27, 2011 to qualify. The five-year window is also open to activated Reservists and members of the National Guard, if they served in a theater of combat operations after November 11, 1998 and were discharged under other than dishonorable conditions.

## VA Awards Nearly \$65 Million for California Veterans Homes

To continue construction of three major projects in California, while launching major renovations at a fourth facility, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has awarded the state nearly \$65 million. Grants totaling \$55.3 million will help pay for ongoing construction in West Los Angeles for a 396-bed state veterans' nursing home, and 60-bed state veterans' homes and adult health care facilities in Ventura and Lancaster. A \$9.4 million grant will pay for improvements to the California veterans' home in Yountville.

In addition to Yountville, the California Department of Veterans Affairs operates veterans' homes in Barstow and Chula Vista. The homes are open to state residents who are honorably discharged veterans of ages 62 and above. The age limit can be lowered for disabled veterans.

This year, VA expects to spend more than \$7.6 billion in California on behalf of its 2.1 million veterans. VA operates 10 major medical centers in the state, along with nearly 50 outpatient clinics, 11 nursing homes and 21 Vet Centers.

## New Travel Nurse Program Launched

To deal with a nationwide shortage of nurses and to improve the quality of care for veterans, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has created a "Travel Nurse Corps" to enable VA nurses to travel and work throughout the Department's medical system.

The Travel Nurse Corps is beginning a three-year pilot program. Initially, it will place as many as 75 nurses at VA medical centers across the country. The goals of the program are to improve recruitment, decrease turnover and maintain high standards of patient care.

The program is also designed to establish a potential pool for national emergencies and serve as a model for an expanded VA travel corps with nurses who have varying specialties.

## VA Increases Travel Reimbursement

Effective February 1, 2008, the Department of Veterans Affairs has increased the beneficiary travel mileage reimbursement rate from 11 cents per mile to 28.5 cents per mile for travel to VA medical facilities.

As mandated by law, VA also equally increased the deductible amounts applied to certain mileage reimbursements. The new deductibles, which may be waived if they cause financial hardship to the veteran, are \$7.77 for a one-way trip, \$15.54 for a round trip, with a maximum of \$46.62 per calendar month. ■

# VA facility highlights

## pacific islands

### Exercise and Rehab Classes with a Difference

The VA Pacific Islands Health Care System's Spark Matsunaga Veterans' Clinic offers a unique collection of classes that help veterans with exercise and rehabilitation. Voices of the Drums is a drum and dance exercise group that uses old rock and roll to set the beat. It is a fun alternative to traditional aerobics.

Drumming involves physical, psychological, emotional and

social wellness. There is laughter with every class. This exercise can be adjusted for all disabilities.

Voices of the Drums leaves participants feeling energized, yet centered and relaxed.

The clinic also offers Stretching with Selina. The "Get Fit for Life" DVD from HealthierUS Veterans is used.

One veteran stated he didn't know where he would be

without these classes. He couldn't stand up from his chair and now he can push up.



Two classes at the Tripler Army Medical Center gym are also offered in combination with our mental health team: "Working Together, Making Music Together, Moving Towards Health!" ■

## sierra nevada

### The New Rage in Rehabilitation

Wii is the newest rage getting veterans active in the Community Living Center (CLC) at the Reno VA Medical Center. It started with two donations. The first came from Steven Tometczak, age 20, the son of CLC's Charge Nurse, Terry Wycoff. The second came from Alex Baker, a 14-year-old student at Coral Academy who did a fundraiser as a school project. Both

donations came as a result of all the publicity in the media related to the benefits of Wii in rehabilitation.

Since the invention of the Wii, many surprises with the veterans' capabilities have occurred. One resident who never engages in activities and has a short attention span started talking and engaging with others. Another resident who has difficulty with arm movements suddenly started swinging his arm. Mark Amstrup, a veteran at the CLC, commented, "This is the

best recreation activity around. It helps me move and keeps my mind working."

Recreation Therapy has incorporated Wii as an intergenerational activity known as Wii Wednesday, which is run by youth volunteers. According to Joanne Farris, the Recreation Therapist in the CLC, "The Wii is a great way to get people using their minds and bodies in a fun and challenging way. It gives veterans an opportunity to play sports they never thought they could play again." ■

## san francisco

### SFVAMC Opens New Simulation Center

The San Francisco VA Medical recently opened a new high-tech Simulation Center that creates realistic medical scenarios to allow clinicians to improve and refine their medical skills and techniques. Staff participate in hands-on educational programs specifically

designed for physicians, nurses, and other health professionals with a focus on healthcare team training. These



exercises provide a simulated environment to imitate a real-life patient care setting in a non-threatening environment.

The simulator has a full-size SimMan, which is a computer controlled mannequin whose major body

systems have been programmed to respond realistically to the environment, medicines, and other interventions. SimMan can be changed to appear to have incisions, broken bones, injuries, or certain diseases.

The mannequin may be used to practice a number of physical examination techniques or medical procedures. Other simulator devices train staff in airway management, chest tube placement, and central line placement.

"We're very excited about the opening of the Simulation Center," said Center Director Richard Fidler. "We've created a confidential, non-judgmental environment where our clinicians can learn better clinical management skills and improve the way we all function as a member of a team." ■

palo alto

## Cancer Survivors Day Set for August

The VA Palo Alto Health Care System (VAPAHCS) Cancer Care Committee is dedicated to providing quality care to our cancer patients by providing them with a supportive care system. The committee, in conjunction with the American Cancer Society (ACS), will host the second Cancer Survivors Day Celebration, to honor and recognize the courage and strength of our veteran cancer survivors.

Our veterans with cancers are among nearly 10 million cancer survivors in the United States. To honor our survivors and their families locally, the committee will host a celebration on Friday, August 22, 2008 at the Palo Alto Canteen Courtyard, including educational activities and resources, luncheon served by cancer healthcare providers, and entertainment. Registration begins at 10 a.m. and the event will conclude at 2 p.m. Please contact the Cancer Program

Office, 650-493-5000, ext. 67912, for information.

To promote cancer prevention and awareness, the VAPAHCS offers programs such as the Cancer Support Group for survivors and families, that meet at the hospital to discuss cancer, treatment options, and survivorship issues. To help you get started to a healthier you, VAPAHCS Healthier US Vets Committee is hosting an outdoor Farmer's Market from 10 a.m. – 3 p.m. on Wednesdays. Call 650-493-5000 ext. 69933 for more information. ■

central california

## VA Staff Support Local Programs with Relay

VA Central California Healthcare System held up its long-standing tradition of participating in the American Cancer Society Relay for Life. "Strike Back" was the inspirational theme for the 2008 Relay, which was filled with music and camaraderie during the weekend of April 26-27 at Fresno State University.



The 2008 VA Team fielded the largest contingent in the competition by presenting three

separate teams composed of seventy VA employees, families and friends. VA teams took a hard-fought second place in both the running and competitive walking events. In all, Team VA raised more than \$5,000 in donations to

support cancer research.

Merna Fletcher and Annmarie Wyderko, the 2008 Team Co-Captains, said, "It's a physically demanding 24 hours and now highly competitive, but it's really worth the efforts we put into doing well. While we didn't bring home the Most Miles Run Trophy (VA has won it four times from 2001 to 2005), we delight in the opportunity to give back to our community, and also help support our own VA Employee Wellness Program." ■

northern california

## TBI Screening at VANCHCS

The Traumatic Brain Injury program at Northern California Health Care System (VANCHCS) is an evolving, comprehensive evaluation and treatment program serving our veterans. Our system evaluates and treats veterans from any of the four Polytrauma Network Centers nationwide, but predominately from the VA Palo Alto, as well as veterans who live in our catchment area.

VANCHCS has instituted a brief screening for all returning veterans from the Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom theaters in order to screen for veterans with possible TBI that was not previously identified. More than 90 percent of the registered OEF/OIF patients in our system have been screened for TBI and, of these, a total of 584 consults for an initial complete evaluation has been accomplished. Approximately 70 percent of these patients are expected to need further treatment by a neuropsychologist. Currently

the Martinez campus is seeing some consults via admission to the Center for Rehabilitation and Extended Care.

Our workload statistics currently project that in four years we will have approximately 946 unique patients, which is a 30 percent positive TBI screening rate. Our plan is to extend the program from the 12 to 15 patients in Sacramento currently having one visit a week to ideally having three visits a week, which will allow for a more intense therapy program. ■

# A Laughing Matter: Wedding Anniversary

**E**d was in big trouble. He'd forgotten his wedding anniversary, and his wife was really furious. She told him: "Tomorrow morning, I expect to find a gift in the driveway that goes from 0 to 200 in six seconds – AND IT HAD BETTER BE THERE!"

The next morning, Ed got up early and left for work. When his wife woke up, she looked out the window and,

sure enough, there was a small gift-wrapped box sitting in the middle of the driveway.

Confused, she put on her robe and ran out to the driveway and brought the box back into the house. When she opened it, she found a brand new bathroom scale.

Funeral services for Ed have been scheduled for Friday. ■

# WORD SEARCH

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# New Benefits Handbook Updates for Veterans and Dependents

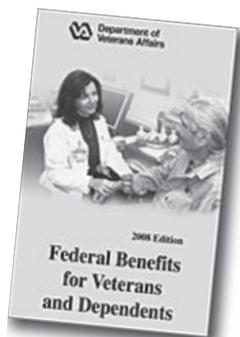
**T**he Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has announced the release of the 2008 edition of the popular handbook *Federal Benefits for Veterans and Dependents*. This new edition updates the rates for certain federal payments and outlines a variety of programs and benefits for American veterans.

Most of the nation's 24 million veterans qualify for some VA benefits, which range from health care to burial in a national cemetery. In addition to describing benefits provided by VA, the 2008 edition of the 153-page booklet provides an overview of programs and services for veterans provided by other federal agencies.

*Federal Benefits for Veterans and Dependents* includes resources to help you access your benefits, with a listing of toll-free phone numbers, Internet addresses and a directory of VA facilities throughout the country. You may download the handbook at no cost from VA's Web site at [www.va.gov/OPA/vadocs/current/benefits.asp](http://www.va.gov/OPA/vadocs/current/benefits.asp).

The handbook is one of the top selling consumer publications of

the U.S. Government Printing Office (GPO). GPO accepts credit card orders for the publication at 866-512-1800 (toll-free) for a cost of \$5 each to U.S. addresses, or \$67 for bulk orders of 25 copies. It can be ordered by mail from the GPO at Superintendent of Documents, P.O. Box 979050, St. Louis, MO 63197-9000 (stock #051-000-00233-4), or online at [www.bookstore.gpo.gov](http://www.bookstore.gpo.gov).



In addition to health-care and burial benefits, you may be eligible for programs providing home loan guaranties, educational assistance, training and vocational rehabilitation, income assistance pensions, life insurance and compensation for service-connected illnesses or disabilities. In some cases, survivors of veterans may also be entitled to benefits.

The handbook describes programs for veterans with specific service experiences, such as prisoners of war or those concerned about environmental exposures in Vietnam or the Gulf War, as well as special benefits for veterans with severe disabilities. ■

## Health Tip for Travelers with Disabilities

The U.S. Transportation Security Administration (TSA) has established a program for screening of air travelers with disabilities and their associated equipment, mobility aids and devices. Additionally, TSA permits prescription

liquid medications and other liquids needed by persons with disabilities and medical conditions.

For more information, visit the TSA web site at [www.tsa.gov/travelers](http://www.tsa.gov/travelers) and click on the link to "Travelers with Disabilities & Medical Conditions." ■

## Exercise Video on YouTube

**A**s part of its ongoing HealthierUS Veterans campaign to get veterans to become more physically fit, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has posted a video clip from its "Get Fit for Life" exercise DVD on the YouTube web site. It can be seen by individuals who conduct searches using the key words: veterans, health, fitness, obesity or diabetes.

The complete DVD features exercise segments veterans can use as part of their workout, along with exercise tips, myths and facts about exercise and healthier living. Presented at different levels – beginner and intermediate – the DVD enables individuals to follow the exercises best suited for them.

It features Heather French Henry, Miss America 2000, who introduces key exercise principles called FITT, which stands for:

- **Frequency:** the goal is physical activity five or more days per week.
- **Intensity:** the goal is to work hard enough so that the activity results in a light sweat or breathing a little harder than normal.
- **Time:** the goal is aerobic activities for 30 minutes per day, which can be broken down into three 10-minute segments.
- **Type:** the goal is to learn more about how to properly conduct activities such as aerobics, strength, balance and stretching.

Copies of the DVD may be obtained at VA medical facilities from MOVE! coordinators and points of contact for HealthierUS Veterans. Additional information about the HealthierUS Veterans campaign can be obtained at [www.healthierusveterans.va.gov](http://www.healthierusveterans.va.gov).

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## Where to find us!

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#### VA MEDICAL CENTER SAN FRANCISCO

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 (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  
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#### 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  
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#### VA REDDING OPC

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

#### VA CHICO OPC

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#### 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  
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#### VA MENLO PARK DIVISION

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#### VA MODESTO OPC

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 (209) 557-6200

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#### VA CENTRAL CALIFORNIA HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

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#### VA SOUTH VALLEY OPC

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 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

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 Reno, NV 89502-2597  
 (775) 786-7200

#### VA LA HONTAN VALLEY OPC

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 Fallon, NV 89406  
 (775) 428-6161

#### VA SIERRA FOOTHILLS OPC

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 Minden, NV 89423  
 (775) 786-7200 Ext. 4000

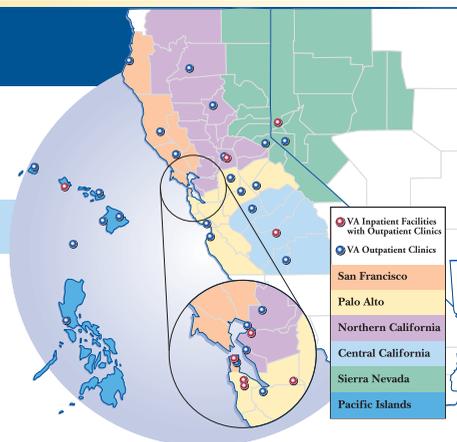
### VA PACIFIC ISLANDS HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

#### SPARK M. MATSUNAGA VA MEDICAL CENTER

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

#### VA PTSD RESIDENTIAL REHABILITATION PROGRAM

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 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 Waiuanuenue Ave., Suite 211  
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 (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  
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 (684) 699-3730

### VA REGIONAL OFFICE & OUTPATIENT CENTER MANILA

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