Voluntary Service

They say you are never fully dressed without a smile. Voluntary Service is warming the halls of the medical center one smile at a time. Did you ever wonder who are the folks in the bright blue shirts and red coats lending a hand with a smile and ready to help? The answer is our volunteers!

VA Voluntary Service is a department at McGuire VAMC that offers service to all Veterans, families, staff and guests who visit. They work tirelessly to ensure everyone’s visit is a supportive and enjoyable experience.

In 2017 the team of 491 volunteers and 5 employees launched several programs to assist everyone in the medical center. The team initiated the shuttle van service and the ambassador program. The coffee carts initiative has volunteers greeting each visitor with a free cup of coffee every morning. In total, volunteers have contributed over $2.9 million of donated hours and goods to the medical center.

The Voluntary Service team believes some of the greatest gifts you can give is your time and a smile, along with genuine thanks for your service. We are grateful to this dedicated team for their commitment to serving our Nation’s Heroes.

Clockwise from top left:
Gerald Westry, Barbara Strange, Janell Giles, Tomeka Graham, and Keishonna Barrett
Sen. Mark Warner recently visited McGuire VA Medical Center and left with high praise for the facility and its staff. On April 13, he visited the Spinal Cord Injury (SCI) unit, the Prosthetics Lab, and the Polytrauma Transitional Rehabilitation Program building.

Much has changed since his previous visit to the medical center in 2014, and he was able to see some of the advances in patient care and technology.

The visit began in the SCI unit, where he watched Marine Veteran Josh Burch walk with the assistance of an exoskeleton suit.

Dr. Timothy Lavis, chief of SCI at McGuire, said the exoskeleton technology research helps to improve bone strength, cardiovascular health and quality of life for paralyzed Veterans like Burch.

Next, Warner visited the Prosthetics Lab, where Orthotist Prosthetists William Lovegreen and Konrad Walz demonstrated some of the equipment they design to assist Veterans. There, Senator Warner learned about brain-computer interface technology, which is used to allow movement of prosthetics through brain waves, and viewed the BiOM ankle foot system, the only lower leg prosthesis that offers a powered push-off to help the user move forward.

The last stop on the tour was the Polytrauma Transitional Rehabilitation Program, where Veterans and active duty servicemembers recover from traumatic injuries and prepare to return home.

Melissa Oliver, program director of Assistive Technology at McGuire, and rehabilitation engineer Brian Burkhardt showed the Virginia senator some devices that had been designed and created at McGuire to help improve quality of life for Veterans.

Before his departure, Warner emphasized it was important for the VA and congress to work together to provide the highest quality care to Veterans.

“I think it’s very important that we in Washington do our job to make sure you get the funding and the flexibility you need to service and honor our Veterans,” he said.

He also congratulated McGuire VA for last year’s Strategic Analytics for Improvement and Learning (SAIL) rating, which showed a significant improvement over 2016’s scores.

“I want to commend all the employees here at the hospital and congratulate them on the four-star rating they’ve received,” he said. “Keep on doing a great job.” •
McGUIRE UNVEILS NEW WHEELCHAIR TRAINING AREA

In March, the McGuire VA Medical Center unveiled a unique training area dedicated to helping Veterans with spinal cord injuries. Hospital leadership, Veterans and representatives from the Paralyzed Veterans of America cut the ribbon on the latest addition to the facility’s extensive services in Spinal Cord Injury & Disorder (SCI&D). The new space gives Veterans a dedicated location and therapeutic resources to allow them to be more independent in the community, said Dr. Timothy Lavis, Chief of SCI&D at McGuire. The area will give Veterans confidence to overcome barriers many people take for granted.

In the general public, people are more hesitant to attempt something they are unsure of, or feel at risk of falling, Lavis added. The area houses many of the common obstacles found in society in close proximity to the spinal cord unit, hidden out of view of the public, which gives Veterans more confidence to navigate certain obstacles in the presence of a therapist who can help to educate and redirect Veterans as they learn new skills. The 5,200-square-foot area features two different ramps, a short staircase, curb sections of various height, and several surface textures that include gravel, rock, grass and pavement.

“It allows the patient to experience situations they will face in life upon return home,” said Ricky Hawkins, physical therapist at McGuire. Hawkins worked closely with Marine Veteran Josh Burch during a demonstration of the new area during the opening. “Patients have really enjoyed the area,” Hawkins said about the space since it opened. “It was definitely needed for wheelchair training and makes training safer and more effective.” To the untrained eye, the new addition may seem somewhat ordinary. For a Veteran learning to adjust to life after a spinal cord injury or disorder, descending the steep non-ADA ramp can be a challenging task. ADA refers to the Americans with Disabilities Act, which is a civil rights law passed in 1990 (revised in 2010) that regulates accessibility standards for state and local governments, public accommodations, and commercial facilities.

“Nothing is ADA in the city,” Burch said lightheartedly about Richmond. “When by myself, it was difficult. So, I usually have a friend with me to help bump me up a curb or something like that.” Burch said the new space will serve as a great learning opportunity for those who are adjusting to their new injuries. Accessibility is always a concern, he added.

The SCI&D unit at McGuire VA continues to expand its space and services to meet the growing number of Veterans in central and northern Virginia.

From left: Robert Satterwhite, Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA); John A. Brandecker, Director at McGuire; Dr. Timothy Lavis, Chief of Spinal Cord Injury & Disorder; Dr. Ajit Pai, Chief of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation; Peter S. Gayton, Associate Executive Director of PVA.

Marine Veteran Josh Burch navigates a short staircase with the assistance of Ricky Hawkins, a physical therapist at the McGuire VA Medical Center at the unveiling of a wheelchair training area for Veterans, March 19.
Navy Corpsman Malik Jones, 22, has always enjoyed playing billiards. For years, he played every weekend with his friends. That changed, as with most everything else in his life, on July 29, 2017. While stateside in Virginia Beach, Jones suffered a traumatic brain injury and was left paralyzed on the left side of his body.

Jones, who enlisted at age 19, is still on active duty. However, his treatment and rehabilitation is being coordinated in partnership with the Department of Veterans Affairs. When he arrived at McGuire VA Medical Center’s Polytrauma Rehabilitation Center in Richmond, Jennifer Vass, a Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialist, immediately started working to engage him back into recreational activities he enjoyed. He wanted to play pool, but trying to manage a traditional pool bridge and the pool stick was virtually impossible.

Vass heard about the 3-D printed rolling pool bridge the Assistive Technology (AT) Rehabilitation Engineering team had developed, so she tried it with Jones. The rolling pool bridge clips onto the pool cue and provides stability, allowing Jones to play with one hand. It holds the tip of the cue a couple inches above the felt playing surface, and rolls from front to back.

It acts as a replacement for a bridge stick, which is traditionally used to extend a player’s reach when the ball is far away. “He picked up on it really quickly and immediately had strategy on how to use it,” Vass said. “It is awesome!” said Jones. “How far away the cue ball is will determine where I place the rolling pool bridge on the pool stick.” The device is the brainchild of Seth Hills and adaptive sports recreational therapist Nicole Shuman.

“Nicole came up with the concept by putting a toy train on the pool stick to see if it would work, and it did,” said Hills, an AT rehab engineer. “She asked us to further develop the idea.”

There is a similar product on the market, but it is too narrow to get on and off the pool cue. Hills designed the concept, which took about five hours to print in nylon using the AT program’s 3-D printer. “We went through three versions before finally coming up with the one that Malik is using,” said Vass. “Malik is really excited to play again.”

Motivated by this, Jones is doing much more than playing pool. He’s working hard with staff of the Polytrauma Transitional Rehabilitation Program to regain his lost strength and skills. He takes regular trips into the community for both leisure and community reintegration, and he recently enrolled in the VA’s Driver Rehabilitation Program with the goal of regaining the skills to drive a car again.

“I am so happy with the progress that I see with Malik,” Vass said. “His speech and comprehension are great, and he is walking every day. He has made tremendous physical progress and maybe more importantly, he is far more outgoing and happy these days. Working hard with the right attitude makes all the difference in the world - for all of us.”

ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY:
SMALL THINGS MAKING BIG IMPACT FOR VETERANS

Navy Corpsman Malik Jones, who is recovering from a traumatic brain injury, is able to play pool again thanks to a device built by an assistive technology rehab engineer at the Richmond VA Medical Center.
More than 4,000 people attended the Ninth Annual Richmond Bluegrass Jam April 14, which benefited the Richmond Fisher House. Held at the Cultural Arts Center at Glen Allen, the festival featured more than 30 bands, who volunteered to play one-hour sets for donations. All donations benefited the Richmond Fisher House. Since its inception, the event has raised more than $140,000. According to Wayne Walker, manager of Richmond Fisher House, the money will help support the home as well as help fund the construction of a second Fisher House in Richmond. Phillip Gravely, Assistant Vice President for Communication and Digital Engagement for the University of Richmond, oversees the annual festival.

A growing number of local breweries and food trucks have also joined over the years. “It is a family friendly event,” Gravely said. “We invite the audience to bring their own instruments and join in with the bands and it becomes a huge party.”

“Donating to the Fisher house is just a small way to give back to the families and Veterans that have given so much,” Gravely said. “The families in the Fisher house already have to go through so much; this is just a small way to help.”
Recently, medical instrument technicians (MITs) in McGuire’s dialysis unit had the opportunity to showcase their knowledge and bring their technical expertise to the forefront during Dialysis Technician Skills Day 2018.

Using a variety of displays ranging from the components of the water treatment system to the processes of cleaning and disinfection, the MITs passionately presented their talents and demonstrated their technical proficiency.

“It’s their week,” said Lisa Meade, a registered nurse who works in dialysis. “It’s their time to shine.”

The unit buzzed with excitement as nurses, clinical staff and physicians walked around to observe the presentations. All were impressed, some were fascinated and even a few learned something they didn’t know before.

For McGuire’s dialysis unit, the high-quality care provided to Veterans is a sign of their commitment and dedication to service. The process for ensuring a safe and successful dialysis treatment begins in the early hours of each day and ends long after the unit is closed.

What many patients may not know is that MITs purify water here at the medical center. It goes through a rigorous process, including reverse osmosis and multiple filtering systems to achieve optimal water quality. Dialysis patients are exposed to ten times as much water as someone who’s not undergoing dialysis treatment, so it’s imperative to have the highest water quality possible.

A team of MITs constantly works behind the scenes to make sure the quality of the water treatment system is top notch, the dialysis machines are functioning properly, and every measure is taken to ensure safety from start to finish.

Thank you to all the members of the dialysis team who work to ensure the safety and wellbeing of our Veterans.

By Thomas Powell, Medical Instrument Technician