Richmond Fisher House

Home is not a place; it’s a feeling. This motto guides our Fisher House employees every day. The team of two, which includes manager Wayne Walker and program assistant Willie “Mac” McDonald, creates a home away from home for Veterans’ families when their loved ones are admitted into the medical center. The goal is to bring peace of mind and comfort to all who stay in the Richmond Fisher House.

Having family support nearby can ease the recovery process and provide assurance to family members during a medical crisis. The Fisher House, located on the medical center campus, allows families to stay close to their Veterans free of charge.

The Fisher House team treats each guest as family. The house consists of 21 family suites and includes private bathrooms, dining areas, recreation and entertainment for the families to enjoy while their loved ones heal. They often host cookouts and dinners for their guests. Local businesses volunteer and sponsor meals and events, as well. The Richmond Fisher House is more than just a hotel; it offers support, care and a place of healing for the families.

The Fisher House is a major asset to the medical center, providing a vital service to our Veterans and their families. A second Fisher House will be breaking ground next to the current one, offering more lodging for families of our nation’s heroes.

Pictured: Willie “Mac” McDonald (left) and Wayne Walker

Cover photo: Nurse Practitioner Catherine Obinna was one of more than a dozen participants in McGuire’s cultural diversity celebration in the Multipurpose Room on Tuesday, July 17. Food, clothing and traditions were shared from various cultures represented by McGuire employees. More than 200 people attended the event, which is held annually at the facility.

Back photo: George Chenault, Army Veteran, performs with the Midnighters at an Independence Day celebration and barbecue at McGuire on July 4.
One out of five men age 50 or older will experience an osteoporosis-related fracture in his lifetime. Dr. Robert Adler, McGuire VA Medical Center’s chief of endocrinology, said osteoporosis has too long been wrongly stereotyped as a women’s disease.

While women experience more osteoporotic fractures throughout their lifetimes, rates among older men and women are about the same. Fracture risk in both men and women rises when hormones decline. Testosterone levels decrease more slowly and over a longer time frame than estrogen. For women, estrogen plunges quickly around age 50; risk in men peaks later, starting around age 70.


Adler has studied osteoporosis in men for more than 20 years. He said because men tend to have fractures later in life, there is less data from bone density scans called dual-energy X-ray absorptiometry (DEXA).

“The major studies to bring [osteoporosis drugs] to market are done in women,” he said. “It’s only in the last 20 or 30 years that more men have been living long enough to fracture ... so there’s always been less attention paid to fracture in men.”

The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force, an “independent, volunteer panel of national experts in disease prevention and evidence-based medicine” according to its website, makes annual recommendations for osteoporosis screenings. The latest recommendations, released this June, only call for bone density scans in women. The task force said they could not find sufficient evidence surrounding benefits and risks of DEXA scans for men.

According to Adler, however, risks from DEXA are negligible, and men would benefit, especially men at higher risk – such as men over 80, those taking steroid hormones like prednisone, or those with a history of fractures.

The amount of DEXA scans has decreased over the past several years; accordingly, so have diagnoses. Adler said this is likely due to concerns with side effects from osteoporosis drugs and a decline in Medicare and private insurance reimbursements. He thinks people’s fears surrounding risks from osteoporosis drugs – which he said are relatively rare – might be deterring people from seeking bone scans.

Adler suggests people of all ages stay as active as possible to keep their bones healthy. Walking and lifting weights are great ways to protect bones. Individuals should also be sure to include adequate calcium and vitamin D in their diets.

Ensuring home safety is also vital. Using night lights and avoiding loose rugs or extension cords will go a long way in preventing trips and falls.

“We want to reduce falls, because falls lead to fractures,” Adler said. •
McGUIRE INNOVATORS NETWORK BEGINS MONTHLY WORKSHOP SERIES

McGuire VA Medical Center’s Innovators Network recently began a monthly workshop to bring new skills and important training opportunities to employees.

Workshop topics are rooted in the principles of design thinking and human-centered design, said Suzanne Shirley, McGuire’s Innovation Specialist. Previous workshops have covered game design, problem framing, 3D printing, market research and more.

“The Innovators Network is a program designed for employees to provide them the creative opportunity, guidance and funding to design and develop innovative solutions to challenges in healthcare,” Shirley said.

At a recent workshop, Shirley spoke about the power and influence of storytelling and how it can be used to improve communication between healthcare providers and patients.

As an innovation specialist, Shirley coordinates the monthly workshops. She also works closely with employees to help them navigate the application and implementation process. Each January, funding is made available through the Spark, Seed and Spread Investment Program. Employees work with Shirley to determine if their ideas are right for the program. If so, employees will have the opportunity to pitch their innovative solutions to senior leaders during Pitch Day.

This year, six projects from McGuire received grant funding as part of the project. Three will be showcased in front of VA leadership in Washington D.C. at VA Innovation Demo Day, August 29. In addition, a local demo day will be held September 27 at McGuire to showcase all our innovations and hear from Veterans and panelists from the community.

One of the best ways to get involved is to attend a workshop or make use of Shirley’s open office hours. Each Thursday, from 1 to 4 p.m., she is available to discuss innovative ideas, funding applications, workshops and pitching to leaders. She can be reached by email at Suzanne.Shirley@va.gov.

If people have an idea or a solution, Shirley said, she will help find the avenue to achieve it. •
A braille version of the American flag has been placed on the wall outside McGuire VA Medical Center’s leadership suite, next to the public affairs office. The flag, which reads the Pledge of Allegiance, was provided by Kansas Braille Transcription Institute, a non-profit organization that serves blind and low vision individuals.

According to KBTI, America has more than 30 million blind and low vision citizens. Most recent VA numbers estimate more than a million Veterans have low vision, and numbers are expected to increase in the coming years.

McGuire’s Visual Impairment Services in Outpatient Rehabilitation (VISOR) has served about 2,000 blind and low vision Veterans in its 10 years at the facility. The program focuses on goal-oriented outpatient rehabilitation that helps individuals work towards autonomy in accomplishing tasks like reading, cooking and staying in touch with loved ones.

Rosemary Duda, chief of the program, said VISOR helps improve quality of life for Veterans who are blind and low vision. Low vision Veterans – those with vision difficulties that cannot be corrected by traditional means – make up the majority of individuals in the program. About half of the Veterans are legally blind, which means neither eye sees better than 20/200. Many are 85 years or older.

Duda said she hopes VISOR will continue to increase its service numbers. A primary goal of hers is simply getting the word out there that this help is available to Veterans.

“We continue to serve them as their needs change,” Duda said. “A lot of this is teamwork.”

VISOR has numerous options for Veterans in the program, depending on their needs. The primary categories are: specialty low vision prescription devices, orientation and mobility, computer access and technology, and assistance with daily living tasks. Some Veterans use tools like electronic magnifiers or screen readers to enlarge or audibly read type from books or newspapers. Veterans who hear well often rely on auditory methods to complete tasks. ScripTalk, an assistive technology program that reads prescription information aloud, is useful for individuals who manage their medications at home. When blind or low vision Veterans can use technology or rely on other senses to increase their quality of life, the difference is significant, Duda said.

“They feel like their world’s back open again,” she said.

According to Duda, there are not as many people learning braille as there once were – the difficulty is like learning a new language, and many find technology aids easier and more helpful. But the significance of the braille flag and the support it conveys for blind and low vision Veterans and Americans will not fade.

If you think a Veteran you know might benefit from the Vision and Blind Rehabilitation Program at McGuire, please contact Evelyn Cabrera-Heatwole of the Visual Impairment Services Team at 675-5000 ext. 5221.
FOR THE LOVE OF RICHARD: WIFE LEARNS NEW SKILLS TO BRING HUSBAND HOME

Navy Veteran Richard Cole wanted nothing more than to return to the comforts of home with his loving wife, Yvette. Richard was told his only option was to relocate to a nursing home to care for his many healthcare needs. Even though Yvette had no medical training, she was determined to learn the skills necessary to fulfill her husband’s wish.

While admitted to the McGuire VA Medical Center’s Intensive Care Unit, Richard learned his kidneys were failing. It wasn’t until registered nurse Pamela Wade, home hemodialysis coordinator, took it upon herself to help the Coles that the Veteran’s wish started to become a reality. Day after day, Yvette observed dialysis treatment procedures as the nurses cared for her husband.

“Pam has been instrumental to us,” Yvette said. “I do not know what we would do without her.”

Home hemodialysis is not a typical option for patients with advanced ALS – a progressive neurodegenerative disease that affects voluntary muscle movements. Richard needs around-the-clock care, ventilators and dialysis treatments every other day. Even though the odds were less than favorable, Wade took it upon herself to teach Yvette how to use the dialysis machine.

“There are certain criteria you have to pass to go home,” Wade said. “He didn’t fit any of them, but he wanted to go home. It is what the patient really wanted. I couldn’t say no.”

That was two and a half years ago.

Due to full paralysis, Richard’s only method of communication is through facial expressions and assistive technology. The Tobii eye tracking program he uses allows him to write and store messages to communicate with others. It takes time and effort to formulate a single word, let alone a complete sentence.

“Every time, Mr. Cole comes in with a big smile on his face,” Wade said. “He has his message stored, ready to thank me. He gets so excited; he sends them faster than the computer can say them aloud.”

Going above and beyond her normal duties, Wade helps coordinate Richard’s care to streamline the process for the Veteran and his family.

“Pam has been a godsend,” said Yvette. “I can’t say enough good things about her. I am just grateful she stepped in when she did.”
McGuire VA Medical Center hosted a cultural diversity celebration in the Multipurpose Room on Tuesday, July 17. Food, clothing and traditions were shared from various cultures represented by McGuire employees. More than 200 people attended the event, which is held annually at the facility.