

The American Legion

System Worth Saving
January 28 – February 1st, 2024



James A. Haley Veterans' Hospital Tampa, Florida

Veteran Affairs & Rehabilitation Commission: Autrey James (CA), Chairman
Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation, National Staff: Joshua Hastings (DC), Marie Black (MD)
Department of Florida: Alan Cohen, Vice Chairman of National VA&R Commission

It is important to reiterate that The American Legion conducts site visits, NOT inspections.



The System Worth Saving (SWS) program was created to ensure the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Medical facilities are providing high quality and timely veteran healthcare. The program also looks at the Veterans Health Administration's (VHA) ability to remain equipped

with the resources and staff to meet the needs of every eligible veteran seeking healthcare, and to provide feedback from veterans on their received level of care. Facilities are selected through review and analysis of government reports, media coverage, and veteran feedback.

Purpose

The American Legion conducted a System Worth Saving (SWS) visit to the VA Tampa Healthcare system, also referred to as James A. Haley Veterans Hospital (Tampa VA), with the intended purpose of determining the quality of care provided to veterans in the catchment area of this facility. This visit was used to gain insight into how the facility serves veterans and to recognize best practices as well as identify challenges. This visit was used to gain insight into how the facility serves veterans, and to recognize best practices as well as identify challenges the facility is facing. In these visits, the American Legion representatives serve as visitors, in partnership with VA, not facility inspectors.

Scope

The American Legion conducts between 5 and 8 SWS visits per year. To choose facilities, national staff creates a list of possible locations by looking at government and congressional reporting, media stories, veteran feedback, and VA hospital public data. They synthesize the information to create a complete picture of a facility and then look at the possible impact from conducting a visit. Once approximately 10 locations have been identified, the list is reviewed again by American Legion volunteer staff who narrow down the list to make the final decision on locations for the year.

Each SWS visit follows a triangular review model. The American Legion requests data from the VA Medical Center (VAMC) via emailed questionnaires which cover 18 - 20 offices, depending on location. Also requested are reports such as the employee and patient satisfaction survey results, among others, for review. This information is then analyzed and allows the SWS team the ability to construct a comprehensive in-person questionnaire which is used during the interview sessions with the executive leadership team, department managers, and other staff.

The SWS visit starts with a town hall meeting at a local Legion post where veterans gather to tell the SWS volunteer team about the successes and obstacles in receiving care from the selected medical center. Typically, there will be representatives from the VAMC, the regional benefit office, local Legion posts, and when available, Congressional staff may be in attendance. The town hall is followed by two days of structured interviews, a facility tour, and completed with an exit brief.

Chairman's Statement



In 2003, Ron Conley, The American Legion’s National Commander visited and assessed the delivery of healthcare at over 60 Department of Veterans Affairs’ medical facilities across the country. Commander Conley wanted to assess healthcare delivered to the nation’s veterans to determine if the VA healthcare system was truly a “System Worth Saving.” The following year, The American Legion passed a resolution making System Worth Saving (SWS) a permanent program under the National Commander.

After nearly two decades, The American Legion has conducted more than 300 System Worth Saving visits to VA/VHA medical facilities in the United States, its territories, and the Philippines. Over the course of those visits, The American Legion has played an integral role in shaping federal legislation that improves the delivery and quality of healthcare at VA/VHA medical facilities. Furthermore, each System Worth Saving visit culminates with a report that informs members of the American Legion and provides additional insight to the President of the United States, members of Congress, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, and other senior leaders at the Department of Veterans Affairs/Veterans Health Administration about the challenges and best practices at VA medical centers.

Overview

While meeting with the Executive Leadership team we learned much about the facility’s history, recent modernizations efforts, and best practices. Our team was informed that the Tampa VA began construction shortly after the University of South Florida (USF) nearly 50 years ago. This was intentional and very forward thinking as it has not only assisted in obtaining qualified VA staff but has led to the creation of employment pathways for veterans.

The medical center falls under Veteran Integrated Services Network (VISN) 8 and surrounding clinics serve a total area population of 197,609. In 2023, there were 126,070 enrollees, 14,495 of which were women, leading to 1.6 million outpatient visits and 10,203 hospital admissions.

The Tampa VA’s budget is \$1.76 Billion and utilizes over 6,600 full-time equivalent employees. These numbers are expected to grow due to the facilities modernization efforts including the new 140,000 square foot Port Richey Community-Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) opened in February of last year and the Lakeland CBOC, scheduled to complete construction in early 2024. A new 245,000 square foot Bed Tower that was opened in June of 2023 with 96 patient rooms, 40 intensive care unit (ICU) beds, enrollment and eligibility offices, canteen, outdoor dining, and healing garden

Town Hall Meeting

Veterans offered a range of observations, praise and questions related to care at the Tampa VA during an American Legion System Worth Saving (SWS) town hall held on January 29, 2024. Following a new format, the SWS team gathered information ahead of the town hall through virtual interviews with VA staff. This information was consolidated by the Health Policy Team before the meeting, which was hosted by The American Legion’s U.S.S Tampa Post 5, with representatives from National Headquarters and VA: David K. Dunning, Executive Director,



David Van Meter- Deputy Director, Dr. Colleen Jakey, Chief of Staff, Dr. Kathy Hendrix- Associate Director: Sterile processing, Patient Care and Nursing Services, Melissa Sundin: Associate Director, and Anthony Moorehead: Assistant Director, were all in attendance.

The town hall meeting lasted 90 minutes and allowed veterans to voice opinions about their experiences at the Tampa VA. All parties were respectful, and veterans in attendance seemed comfortable and willing to share their concerns with American Legion national staff, volunteers, Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) staff, and facility staff. Topics raised during the town hall included specialty care visits, community care, wait times for appointments, shelters for homeless women veterans, long commutes to appointments and more. One veteran, a volunteer at Tampa VA, mentioned how she often takes time off from work to attend training required by VA to volunteer. She asked if training could be offered on the weekends. This was taken very seriously by the attending Medical Director, and thoughtful conversations were had about implementing a solution at the hospital the next day. The VA depends on the selfless service of volunteers to accomplish its mission of serving veterans and should consider adopting this as a best practice nationally. Veterans should not have to forgo work in order to take required training. This acts as a barrier to selfless service and should be eliminated.

Throughout the town hall, much praise was given to the facility. Director Dunning mentioned during the initial Executive Briefing that, “the town hall was soul changing, you have no idea how much I needed to hear that.” This was identified as something The American Legion could assist with as our post could easily help keep VA staff motivated and encouraged. It is crucial that we pass along stories of success in tandem with the challenges we are facing. Healing veterans is hard work, and helpful encouragement can go a long way to relieve burnout amongst VA employees.

Interviews

Summary

From January 10-19th, 2024, the SWS team conducted interviews with personnel from the following offices: Executive Leadership; Quality and Safety, Supply Chain; Clinical Line Managers; Women, Minority, LGBTQ+; Rural and Telehealth, Homeless Veteran, and Community Care offices; Mental Health, Suicide Prevention; Human Resources and Polytrauma. From these interviews and the facility tour, the team identified and discussed several best practices and challenges seen in the facility.

Areas of Focus

Patient Support

Patient Support Best Practice: The SWS Team was very impressed with the efforts of the Tampa VA to support their patients in variety of ways. One such best practice was a service dog named Hercules. Sadly, there are times when veterans facing the end of their life have no friends or family around to support them. To address this, the medical center allows hospice patients the option to request Hercules to lay in their bed. This is a great way to offer comfort to those who need it most.



Patient Support Best Practice: While visiting the Polytrauma Unit we were shown the innovative Post-Deployment Rehabilitation and Evaluation Program (PREP). In this program, inpatient veterans are given the opportunity to live in an apartment-style room. This offers veterans an environment of independent living where they can conduct an honest assessment of relevant activities of daily living (ADLS). This includes tasks like bathing, washing clothes, putting away laundry, cooking, and more. This allows both patient and clinician to get a clear understanding of one's ability to return home safely and helps to reduce accidental injury.

Patient Support Best Practices: We also met with Jamie Kaplan, a Recreation Therapist who informed us about JAHVH Gaming, a 350-strong gaming community made of both active duty and veterans that meet 5 nights a week. The SWS team was extremely pleased to see thought given to adaptive gaming controllers and other gaming prosthetics that can be played with a combination of available hands, feet, and even lung powered devices. These innovative approaches are a critical part of addressing the isolation felt by many veterans and can provide both support and entertainment. Autrey James, The American Legion's Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation Commission Chairman was very interested in this program and spoke to his States own efforts to create supportive veteran gaming communities. He informed Mr. Kaplan that The Department of California has even established a department Gaming Committee to help promote camaraderie, improve mental health and aid recruiting efforts at its 2023 state convention.

Innovation

Innovation Best Practices: In 2025, a new Center for Innovation will be completed, expanding space and access for the community to work together. The Office of Innovation provides opportunities for staff to bring ideas and lead projects that can enhance veteran care. The Tampa VA has created 4 new and adopted 29 innovations, the latter of which have been successfully implemented or are in progress. The facility is also a national leader in Robotic Surgery and is an Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) Center of Excellence. Moreover, they have been nationally recognized for their Lean / Data-Driven Performance Improvement Culture and are 1 of 4 Centers of Artificial Intelligence (AI) under the National AI Institute.

Innovation Best Practices: Additionally, the Tampa VA Medical Center hosted a VA/MIT Innovation Hackathon at USF Morsani College of Medicine from May 17-19, 2024, in Tampa, Florida. The Hackathon was a joint effort with MIT to present innovative ideas to the Department of Veterans Affairs that will advance the VA health care system. The VA/MIT Hackathon hosted by VISN 8, and American Legion was invited to participate. The hackathon was open to the public and VA employees, and participants were able to choose one of the 3 tracks to pitch their innovative ideas. The tracks for this event included Access to care, Suicide prevention and accelerating the VA Hiring process. Each presenter was required to cover the following criteria in each presentation, the problem, impact, business model and visual presentation. The winners of each track qualify to continue to move on to the next Hackathon.

All participants were assigned to a mentor on Friday that worked with them up until the presentation on Sunday. Mr. Tony Williams, a Department of Florida Legionnaire, dedicated his



time and represented the American Legion as a mentor on Friday and Saturday for the suicide prevention group. On Sunday, Mr. Williams was provided with the opportunity to judge the many concepts that people had in improving veterans' lives through suicide prevention. The Be the One Campaign is the American Legion's suicide prevention initiative that has had positive outcomes in the veteran community. The American Legion would like to continue to support future hackathon events with the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Collaboration

Collaboration Best Practice: This facility is unique in that it sees both veterans and Active Duty. For example, Tricare pays JAHVH to see service members from MacDill Air Force base. The majority seen are TBI patients, undergoing rehabilitation to return to active duty. While treating members of the Special Operations community, Tampa VA's Polytrauma Unit noted that having a mission driven attitude improved the effectiveness of their treatment. This was especially true when augmented with peer support. The desire to get back in the fight in combination with the support of trusted peers seems to be extremely beneficial.

Collaboration Best Practice: Moreover, the Tampa VA has completed multiple Veteran home restoration projects in collaboration with the Habitat for Humanity Veteran Restoration Team. The medical center has provided more than 500 hours of time donated by employees worth over \$12,000 in services to veterans who are at risk of losing their homes in our community.

Collaboration Best Practice: The Tampa VA's experience treating service members injured during decades of U.S. war in the Middle East encouraged The State Department to sponsor a new program that allows the Polytrauma unit to share best practices in the treatment of those suffering blast injuries with delegates from Ukraine. The Ukraine-Russia war produces hundreds to thousands of drone strikes per day, which has led to a need for treating mass casualties. The delegation sent to Tampa included 14 medical professionals and officials from Ukraine's Ministry of Health, Ministry of Veterans Affairs and the First Medical Association of Lviv, which has treated thousands of wounded patients at the Unbroken National Rehabilitation Center. The weeklong program covered a variety of topics including TBI, amputations, and innovative therapies.

Collaboration Best Practice: As a teaching hospital, Tampa VA provides a wide range of services with state-of-the-art technology, education and research. The facility is primarily affiliated with the University of South Florida Morsani College of Medicine. There are currently 15 Residency training programs offered in all major medical and surgical specialties and subspecialties. Every year the Tampa VA funds nearly 150 medical resident slots training nearly 400 students in areas such as nursing, psychology, audiology, social work, dietetics, and pharmacy.

Complementary and Alternative Treatment

Complementary and Alternative Treatment Best Practice: While visiting the JAHVH, we were shown the newly refurbished Aquatic Center boasting a heated therapy and jet pool. The pools are easily modified to accommodate differing heights using an adjustable floor that can be raised and lowered as needed. Dr. Scott mentioned that veterans really seem to enjoy aquatic therapy, as they can conduct deep stretches that would not be possible outside of the water without great



discomfort. Dr. Scott also mentioned how Aquatic therapy has also been shown to act synergistically when paired with other therapies. This is called “Blue Mind,” and uses elements of cardio, mindfulness, aromatherapy, and yoga to name a few.

Mental Health

Mental Health Best Practice: The Temple Terrace Clinic is a new 137,000 sq. ft. mental health facility that was completed in June 2023. Our SWS was shown at the clinic how numerous synergies have been achieved by co-locating their services. Having all service offerings in one location makes it easier to schedule and attend appointments, with veterans needing to simply walk up or down the stairs to get from one appointment to another. This not only makes it easier on the veteran but saves the facility money by reducing the number of missed appointments. The SWS team was also impressed with the number of programs at this facility that were designed to connect veterans with gainful employment. Of note were peer support employment pathways, resume writing workshops, culinary schools, and other opportunities for local employment.

Mental Health Best Practice: While touring the Women Veterans Facility, the SWS Team noted many signs and postings throughout the Tampa facilities aimed at addressing the culture of sexual harassment directly. A separate female-only entrance was noted as a best practice and is appreciated by the women veterans receiving care.

Transportation

Transportation Best Practice: Also discussed was the VHA Uber Health Connect Initiative. This initiative's main goal is not cost saving but to have veterans attending scheduled hospital appointments. Executive Director Dunning was kind enough to ask the program's creator Indria Sandal, PhD, MBA, to give our team an extended briefing upon hearing our interest during the town hall. In the briefing, the team learned that Uber health is currently offered at 68 VA facilities and creates cost savings by reducing the number of missed appointments. According to VA, 1.8 million missed appointments are due to transportation issues. Additionally, missed appointments create flow issues within the hospital. It is important to note that this program does not replace existing transportation but augment existing services like The American Legion, DAV, or hospital shuttles. It is also only available to individuals when there are no other available options. Veterans are encouraged to use this option if needed, but only as a last resort.

Training and Education

Training and Education Challenge: As expressed during the Town hall, there was a desire from the local veteran community to have required VA training for volunteers conducted on weekends so they would not have to call off work to attend. Facility leadership is already working to facilitate this. In a follow up conversation, Vice Chairman Cohen asked VA representatives if there were enough volunteers at their facilities. Executive Director Dunning responded, “we are always looking for volunteers, especially golf cart drivers.”

Recommendation: The American Legion will continue to urge Congress to pass legislation to address pay disparities among physicians and medical specialists, continue to develop staffing models for critical need occupations, and work more comprehensively with community partners



to fill critical shortages within the VA ranks. Moreover, The American Legion's dedication to selfless service makes addressing shortages in volunteers a challenge we can easily address by relaying the volunteer need and available positions through our State Departments.

Staffing & HR Process

Staffing & HR Process Challenges: During a virtual interview, the SWS team met with David Miller, Senior strategic business partner for VISN 8- Tampa VA, and Mr. Andre Parker, Physician Recruiter, to discuss challenges with staffing and the HR process. To begin, the timeline for hiring staff was cited as an area for improvement. This sentiment was repeated during the executive leadership meeting, and VA representatives expressed a desire to speed up the process. Our team was informed that Tampa has experienced unprecedented growth in housing costs over the past few years and is ranked in the top 3 in the US for overpriced homes, making it difficult to recruit and retain highly qualified applicants. When asked what the Legion could do to assist, VA staff suggested encouraging the Office of Personal Management (OPM) to strongly consider pay increases to stay more competitive with the private sector. Additionally, it was noted that onboarding staff may be experiencing burnout and may want a vacation before they start. Overall, the hiring actions are dependent on too many segregated HR teams and employees are over specialized to the point that it is no longer efficient.

Recommendation: Through resolution, The American Legion has resolved to advocate for improving HR. VA must take steps to decrease the onboarding time frame and streamline this process. Time to onboard is one of the most cited reasons potential new hires move on to other employment opportunities. VA may need to investigate returning the hiring processes back to a lower level to expedite new hire processing. Furthermore, the VA should consider looking at unique and innovative ways to increase benefits for staff in order to recruit and retain high quality providers. An example of this could include offering vacation time during transition to reduce employee burnout.

Homeless Veteran Program

Homeless Veteran Program Best Practice: While conducting virtual interview, the SWS team met with Harry McCurdy, Section Chief of Homeless Veterans Program and Carol McFarlane, Chief of Social Work Program. They provided an overview of current homeless veteran program practices at the Tampa VA. The main programs of note include the contract bed program, the grant per-diem program, and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) Program. Identified best practices included outreach to veteran homeless communities, placing social workers out in the field, comprehensive work therapy programs that automatically involve veterans in the housing program to help them attain employment to pay for housing, and on-site Homeless Patient Aligned Care Teams (HPACTs).

Homeless Veteran Program Challenge: The cost of living was cited as a contributing factor for homelessness. Taken with the area's moderate climate, this has exacerbated the issue, leading to bed shortages at the facility. The American Legion supported H.R. 7777, the Veterans' Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act of 2024, which was signed into law on November 25, 2024, and - to an extent - this law may help alleviate this issue. This legislation provides



military retirees and disabled veterans receiving VA benefits with a 2.5% COLA increase in 2025. This will help to ensure that upstream factors for homeless veterans, such as base living expenses for food and housing are addressed appropriately. The American Legion is encouraged by the steps VA has taken this past year to address homelessness. However, we urge VA to remain vigilant in tracking the needs of this at-risk population.

Recommendation: The American Legion will continue to urge Congress and VA to appropriate adequate funding to address upstream factors for homeless veterans. This includes expanding emergency funds for temporary housing and transportation for veterans who desire to relocate to a different state.

Telehealth Challenge: Modernization and COVID-19 drastically changed the VA's ability to conduct telehealth appointments. This was crucial in providing care during lockdowns but has led to unintended consequences for VA staff. Currently, there seems to be an overuse of telework, remote work, and compressed schedules. This led to decreases in internal and external communications, minimizing the opportunity to learn from peers. This also makes it difficult to supervise employees and leaves many disconnected from the agency.

Recommendation: The American Legion is pleased to see a growing capability of the VA to deliver telehealth service to veterans; however, additional oversight is needed to ensure the effectiveness of VA staff working remotely. While conducting interviews, VA staff raised several concerns including a lack of face-to-face interactions, reduced team cohesion, inconsistent productivity, and punctuality issues. The American Legion will continue to urge the Department of Veterans Affairs to coordinate with community and VA providers for a more integrated care approach that will merge all ancillary medical care and complement the veteran's medical needs. This is critical to ensure our veterans receive efficient and specialized care. The American Legion suggest pursuing a hybridized schedule or reducing the amount of remote work for VA employees if challenges with communication, learning, and supervising persist.

Request for Legion Support

At the end of every interview with each office the SWS team asked, "Is there anything the American Legion can do to support?" VA expressed a need for additional Peer Support Specialists at their facilities. The American Legion has long advocated for the use of peer support specialist to provide treatment, support service and readjustment counseling for those veterans requiring their services.

Recommendation: The American Legion could potentially assist by publishing a magazine article highlighting the position's responsibilities and required qualifications. This would fall in line with our current 2024 Legislative Priorities, which include strong support for Peer Support services. As a volunteer run organization, the American Legion values the time and effort that the volunteers put into this organization, and we support those who chose to volunteer at the VA as well. Becoming a volunteer at the VA should not conflict with one's family or work commitments and volunteers would benefit from weekend training opportunities rather than just weekday options.



Conclusion

In summary, veterans during the town hall, and the staff at the Tampa VA were extremely welcoming and willing to share their experiences, efforts, and challenges with us. There were many best practices identified while visiting this facility. These include patient support, mental health, transportation, and innovation. Trends identified in previous SWS site visits continue to be challenges. These include difficulties with the staffing and HR process, training and education, and resources for homeless veterans. Overall, the Tampa VA continues to be an extremely innovative medical facility and is a great example to follow.