



Historic Hurricanes Wreak Havoc

Caring for Veterans—And Each Other

By Susan Wentzell

Millions were affected by Hurricanes Irma and Maria, storms that occurred at the height of the 2017 hurricane season that set astounding records and impacted every VA hospital and community clinic in the VA Sunshine Healthcare Network's 64,000-mile service area in Florida, South Georgia, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

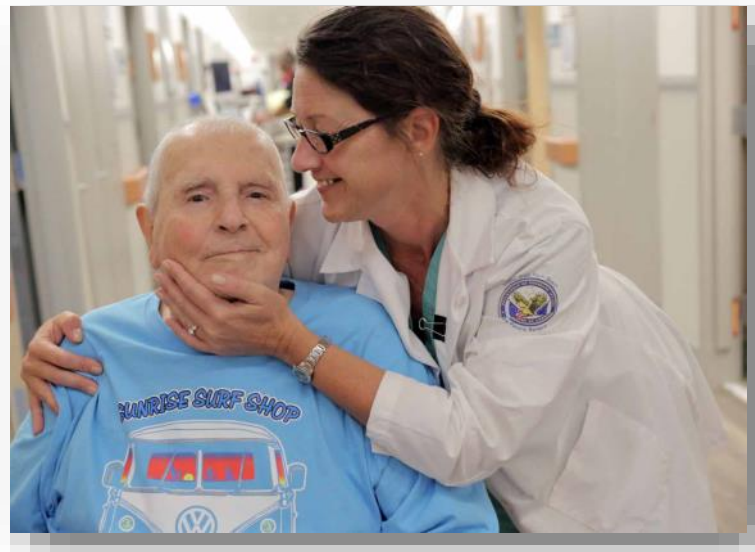
Despite the destruction caused by these monster storms, Veterans continued to receive vital health care and other support, thanks to the selfless efforts of thousands of dedicated VA employees who rallied together to provide around-the-clock care for patients sheltered-in-place in the eight large, hurricane-constructed VA hospitals and to get services back up and running in dozens of outpatient clinics impacted in the Southeast corridor of the U.S. and the Caribbean.

Hurricane Irma: Construction-Hardened VA Hospitals Fare Well

On Sept. 6, Hurricane Irma intensified to a Category 5 storm with the first impacts to St. Thomas, the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico, where the eye passed just north of the island as a Category 5 that evening. Although the island missed the worst of the storm, it sustained some damage from the heavy rain and powerful winds with widespread power outages affecting nearly 900,000 of the island's 3.5 million people.

Fortunately, the San Juan VA Medical Center was prepared, had backup generator power, plentiful supplies and only minor damage. Operations soon returned to normal at its main campus and clinics on the island and beyond, with the exception of the St. Thomas Community Outpatient Clinic, which still remains closed.

On Sept. 10, the hurricane made landfall on the U.S. mainland in the Florida Keys as a Category 4, traveled to Marco Island as a Category 3, and moved up the state as a Category 1, leaving Florida on Sept. 12 as a tropical storm.



Sheltered from the Storm - Lynn Warren, a registered nurse at the West Palm Beach VA Medical Center, tenderly cares for her patient, Veteran Thomas Vucina during her regular nursing rounds in the facility's Community Living Center on Sept. 11. At the height of the Hurricane Irma emergency response, over 300 essential VA staff members provided compassionate, continuous around-the-clock care for Veterans sheltered-in-place at the medical center. VA photo by Joanne Deithorn

Hurricanes — continued from the cover



AHEAD OF THE STORM

As Hurricane Irma approaches and as a precautionary measure, on Sept. 9 about 100 patients prepare for transfer from the C.W. Bill Young VAMC in St. Petersburg to sister VA facilities in Tampa, Orlando, Lake City and Gainesville, Fla. After the storm passed, the Veterans were safely returned to Bay Pines..

“Located in the heart of Hurricane Alley, if there’s one thing the VA Sunshine Healthcare Network is – it’s prepared.”

Irma spent 8.5 days as a major hurricane, the second most in the satellite era (since 1966) and trailing only Hurricane Ivan in 2004, according to the Tampa Bay Times.

All of Florida’s VA hospitals weathered the storm well with only minor damage. One reason is that the exterior buildings, roof and windows of all VISN 8 hospitals are constructed to withstand hurricane force winds ranging in intensity for their specific locations.

Located in the heart of Hurricane Alley, if there’s one thing the VA Sunshine Healthcare Network is – it’s prepared.

Before the storm hit, already robust emergency plans were activated and validated. Emergency Operations Centers stood up at each of the main hospitals and at the networks’ Emergency Management Coordination Center. Tim Liezert, Orlando VAMC Director and the Acting VISN 8 Director, served as Incident Commander while the response and recovery effort was coordinated by Victor Ramos, VISN 8 Emergency Manager.

A minimum of seven to 10 days of fuel to support emergency generator backup power, boiler operations and water provided the lifeblood of VISN 8 hospitals during the hurricanes as it enables us to maintain the level of care for our patients for a specified amount of time – regardless of the state of commercially-provided water and utilities, according to officials.

Over 50 community clinics were closed to ensure VA staff remained safe until the storm passed.

And while all VAMCs continued to operate during the storm, the C.W. Bill Young VA Medical Center in St. Petersburg—which was in an evacuation zone—transferred more than 100 of their most vulnerable patients on Sept. 9 to sister VA facilities in Tampa, Orlando, Gainesville and Lake City, Fla. After the storm passed, those patients were safely returned to the Bay Pines VAMC.

Continued on next page

Watch for a special ‘Surviving the Storm’ E-Magazine highlighting VA employees and operations during Hurricanes Irma & Maria.



ALL HANDS ON DECK – Within minutes of receiving the first of several tornado warnings, Miami VA staff quickly move more than 224 patients away from the windows and into interior hallways during Hurricane Irma. Employees at network hospitals worked around-the-clock for several days to ensure their Veterans were safe and well cared for. In Miami, about 500 staff were on duty during the most severe weather.

VA Ramps Up – Hurricanes, continued from pg 2

During the height of emergency operations, VA staff deemed essential spent several days “living” at the VA Medical Centers in order to provide seamless care for their patients sheltered-in-place. Family Support Centers were set up inside the hospitals to temporarily house families of essential staff who wanted to be there for their patients, but didn’t want to leave their loved ones behind.

As the storm passed, damage was assessed, Veterans were contacted to reschedule appointments, and within a week, most VA facilities were operating normally except for those in the hardest hit areas. And there were some very hard hit areas with significant road blockages, water damage and flooding. Just in Florida, over 13 million lost power, making this the biggest outage in the state and one of the largest in U.S. history.

Disseminating Vital Information: Missed Appointments, Prescriptions & Status Reporting

Providing impacted and displaced Veterans and VA employees with vital information on what to do about missed medical appointments and procedures, prescription refills and, especially for staff, reporting their status, was a top priority during the storms.

The VA’s Pharmacy Disaster Relief Plan was activated. Eligible Veterans who needed an emergency supply of medications could go to any retail pharmacy open to the public for a refill. The VA National Employee Accountability Hotline was also stood up as a resource for displaced employees to report their status and for Veterans to obtain vital information.

And VISN 8 Telcare, normally an after hours Nurse Advice line, began operating 24/7 to assist displaced Veterans and employees alike seeking information.

Information was disseminated using all available communication channels including social media, the internet, and the news media.

To bring services directly to Veterans impacted by the storm, to include VA clinics, several VA Mobile Medical Units, a Mobile Vet Center, and a 33,000 pound Multi-Use Vehicle were deployed to provide primary care, mental health services and mobile command/control capabilities.

The VA’s fourth mission is to provide emergency management support to non-Veterans in times of disaster. The Miami VA Healthcare System provided medical care, services and supplies to the Florida Keys as part of the federal emergency response in Monroe County.

And in San Juan, VA Caribbean Healthcare System staff were part of a team of federal, state and local partners that coordinated the patient reception, medical triaging and relocation of evacuees from other parts of the U.S. Virgin Islands impacted by Hurricane Irma. Evacuees were transported to the San Juan VA Medical Center and community hospitals in Puerto Rico.

Unfortunately for San Juan, the crisis was not over yet.

Hurricane Maria: ‘Like a Nuclear Bomb Went Off’

While many in Florida and elsewhere seemingly dodged a bullet, on Sept. 20, barely two weeks after Irma struck, Hurricane Maria ravaged the island of Puerto Rico as a Category 4 storm with 155 mph sustained winds, the strongest storm to ever make a direct hit on the U.S. territory in almost a century.

The hurricane slammed the territory with such intensity that it reportedly broke two National Weather Service radars there, according to CNN.



SUPPORTING FAMILIES OF ESSENTIAL EMPLOYEES

How do you entertain several hundred children stuck inside because of a hurricane for almost four days? With imagination! Run by the West Palm Beach VAMC’s Social Work Service, employees arranged games, set up a mini bowling alley and hosted movie nights for families. VA photo by Joanne Deithorn

“VISN 8 Telcare, normally an after hours nurse advice line, began operating 24/7 to assist displaced Veterans and employees alike seeking information.”



Hurricanes Irma & Maria

Responding to Disaster
Caring for Our Veterans

.....In This Together



Maria Slams Puerto Rico — Hurricanes, continued from pg 3

The island lost complete power, the AP reported that 85 percent of 1,600 cellphone towers were down, and almost 90 percent of above-ground and under-ground phone and Internet cables were knocked out. Worst of all, extreme flooding, toppled power lines and roads blocked by debris made reaching people—and assessing damage—extremely difficult. Other than satellite phones and a few spotty cell phones, nearly all communication was cut off. Water and food were scarce with cash-only as the only accepted currency on the island.

“It was like a nuclear bomb went off across the island. The trees have no leaves. Houses have no roofs,” noted Cosme Torres-Sabater, Emergency Manager for the VA Caribbean HCS.

During and after the storm, the San Juan VA Medical Center continued to operate on backup generator power. Over 300 patients were sheltered-in-place and about 800 employees hunkered down overnight for five days, caring for their charges. The island’s VA clinics didn’t fare as well, with several severely damaged.

Despite the hurricane’s thrashing that flooded the city with over 20 inches of water, the damage to the hospital was limited to minor flooding in the cafeteria and in a few hallways. The clinics didn’t fare as well.

“As a result of our preparations for Irma, we were operationally ready for Maria,” said Torres-Sabater. He added that the staff is working hard to meet Veterans’ needs. Mental health and spiritual services are being provided to Veterans and any employee who may need them.

“Morale is very high. Employees are happy to be here to take care of our Veterans. They want to work despite their personal situations,” the 15-year VA employee and retired U.S. Army Reservist, said.

Puerto Rico’s challenges are not over, however. Recovery efforts are ongoing across the island, the living environment is primitive, and infrastructure repairs could take months, if not years, according to officials.

As of this writing, because of challenging communication and resource issues, medical services at the San Juan VAMC were limited. Some outpatient clinics have opened and others, badly damaged, remain closed.

Help On The Way

Meanwhile, the VA is working with the Federal Emergency Management Agency and Department of Defense coordinating the ferry of water, food, medical supplies, mobile communications and other equipment to Puerto Rico as part of U.S. Government relief efforts there.

More than 100 VA staff from across the country—and that number continues to grow—volunteered to travel to Puerto Rico to provide services there as part of the Disaster Emergency Medical Personnel System (DEMPS), the Veteran Health Administration’s deployment program for clinical and non-clinical staff in an emergency or disaster situation.

To provide care to those hardest hit in PR, Mobile Medical Units from the VA hospitals in Orlando and Tampa are also deploying to the island as is a large Mobile Medical Shelter from the West Palm Beach VAMC. A Mobile VA Pharmacy, Vet Center and other units are also in the works.

This chapter in Puerto Rico’s history is still being written, however, one thing is certain: these destructive storms are a reminder of what a positive difference people can make.

Hats off to the many selfless, generous and caring VA employees across our network who despite the storms and the havoc they caused—remained—and still remain— at their patients’ sides, ever vigilant and committed to accomplishing our #1 mission: Caring For Those Who Have Borne the Battle.

“It was like a nuclear bomb went off across the island. The trees have no leaves. Houses have no roofs,”

- Cosme Torres-Sabater, Emergency Manager, VA Caribbean HCS

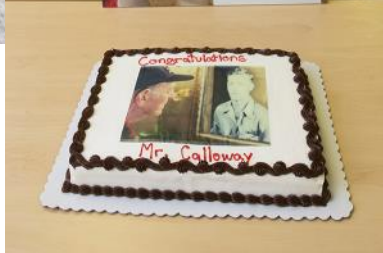


ARECIBO CLINIC DAMAGE - A look at the damage inside the Arecibo VA Community Based Outpatient Clinic in Puerto Rico. The clinic remains closed as Hurricane Maria recovery continues.



Signing Party

A 'Signing Party' for World War II Veteran Buddy Callaway (*above*) was held by staff July 17 at the Community Living Center (nursing home) on the campus of the C.W. Bill Young VA Medical Center in St. Petersburg, Fla. Mr. Callaway appeared on the cover of [Veterans Health Matters magazine's Summer 2017 issue](#). In the photo (*below, left*), Mr. Callaway gazes at a younger version of himself as an 18-year-old soldier. The highly decorated 91-year-old participated in the Invasion of Normandy and other key WWII battles. A second Signing Party was held at the Lake City VAMC in September where Mr. Callaway was temporarily sheltered during Hurricane Irma.



Congratulations Buddy!



Bay Pines Cuts Ribbon on New Mental Health Center

155,000 SF facility to provide state-of-the-art services in one location

The [Bay Pines VA Healthcare System \(VAHCS\)](#) cut the ribbon on its new 156,000-square-foot state-of-the-art Mental Health Center on September 22 at the C.W. Bill Young VA Medical Center campus in St. Petersburg, Fla.



Public tours of the new building followed the ceremony's ribbon cutting, musical performances and traditional military tributes. Tours were open to Veterans, their families and friends, and other guests. Featured speakers at the event included Bay Pines VAHCS Director Suzanne Klinker; Acting VISN 8 Network Director Tim Liezert; U.S. Rep. Charlie Crist; and VA's Acting Principal Deputy Undersecretary for Health, Dr. Miguel LaPuz, who gave the keynote address.

A crowd of nearly 600 gathered to watch the monumental event and listened as leaders spoke to the importance of the new facility and the positive impact it will make in the lives of thousands of Veterans in southwest Florida.

"The activation of the new Mental Health Center at the C.W. Bill Young VA Medical Center is an example of VA's nationwide modernization priorities, demonstrates significant progress as it relates to our [strategic objective to transform delivery of care](#), and is a major accomplishment for Bay Pines, and more importantly, the more than 108,000 Veterans who seek care from the healthcare system each year," said Ms. Klinker.

"The opening of this beautiful new facility will allow our dedicated mental health professionals the opportunity to deliver state-of-the-art, integrated, and Veteran-centered mental health services to America's heroes in a convenient and accessible location," she said.



RIBBON CUTTING — VA and community leaders cut the ribbon on the new Bay Pines Mental Health Clinic at the C.W. Bill Young VA Medical Center on Sept. 22.

When completely activated, the new Mental Health Center will bring most mental health programs and services together in one location.



AES TROPHY WINNER. On Sept. 6, West Palm Beach VA Medical Center Director Donna Katen-Bahensky (*center*) and members of her leadership team are presented the All Employee Survey trophy by Acting VISN 8 Director (and Orlando VAMC Director) Tim Liezert (*second from left*). The traveling trophy is awarded yearly recognizing the Medical Center with the top AES response rate in the network. West Palm’s rate for the 2017 survey was 77.1 percent.

West Palm Takes Top Award in Facility All Employee Survey Response

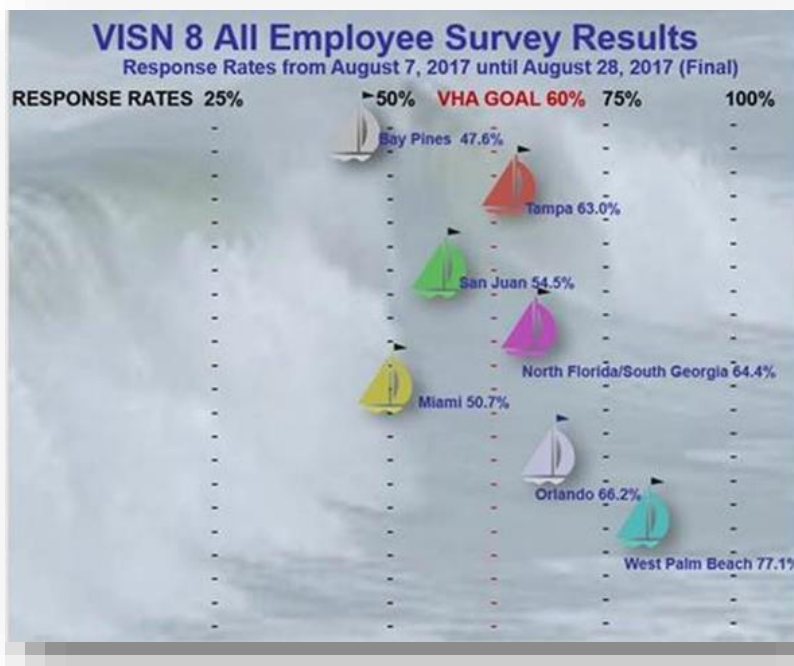
by Mariseli Vega-Perez

Thank you to all VISN 8 employees who participated in this year’s All Employee Survey (AES) which took place August 7 to 28. We value your opinion and how we can make your work place the best it can be. Participating in this survey was one important way in which your input will be used to make positive changes in your workgroup.

VISN 8 utilizes critical feedback from tools like the AES not only to better understand the needs of our workforce, but also to determine if we are on the right track in terms of improving our work environment, according to Troy Seidl, Ph.D., the supervisory Organizational Development psychologist for the network. Now onto the results.

VA and VHA’s national response rate goal was 60 percent and as a whole, the network slightly surpassed that with a 60.4 percent response rate.

VISN 8 Network Office had an unprecedented 82.4 percent response rate, as well as our facility winner, the West Palm Beach VAMC which had a 77.1 percent response rate. The Orlando VAMC – last year’s winner of the Race to the Finish – passed the AES trophy in a special recognition event held at the West Palm Beach VAMC on Sept. 6.



The graph on the left provides facility results.

By mid-October we will have our organization and workgroup level data. We’ll be sharing the results with you and action planning will commence. Please remember your survey responses remain confidential and anonymous. Thank you for all you do and for your help to make our organization a great place to work!



How the VISN 8 Organizational Health Team Uses AES Data

By Troy Seidl

Supervisory Organization Development
Psychologist, VISN 8

VISN 8 utilizes critical feedback not only to better understand the needs of our workforce, but also to determine if we are on the right track in terms of improving our work environment. The VISN 8 Organizational Health Team supports clinical, administrative and executive teams across the system to help with understanding and utilizing AES data as a way to improve their work environments.

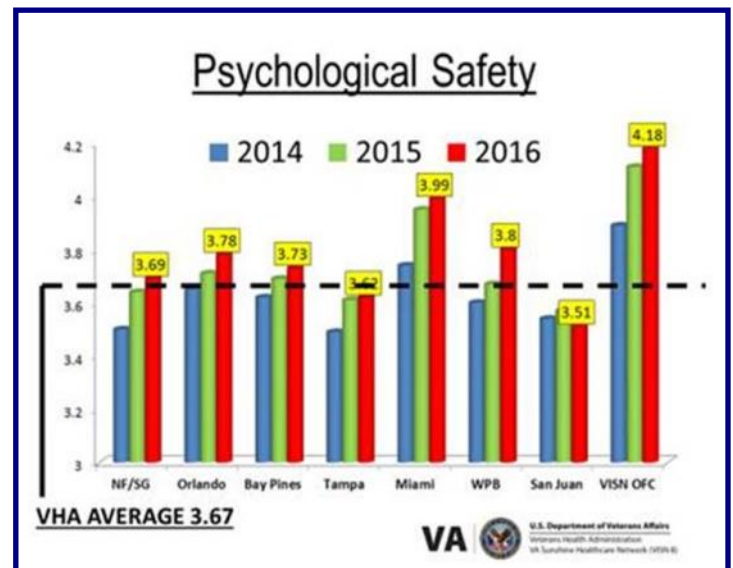
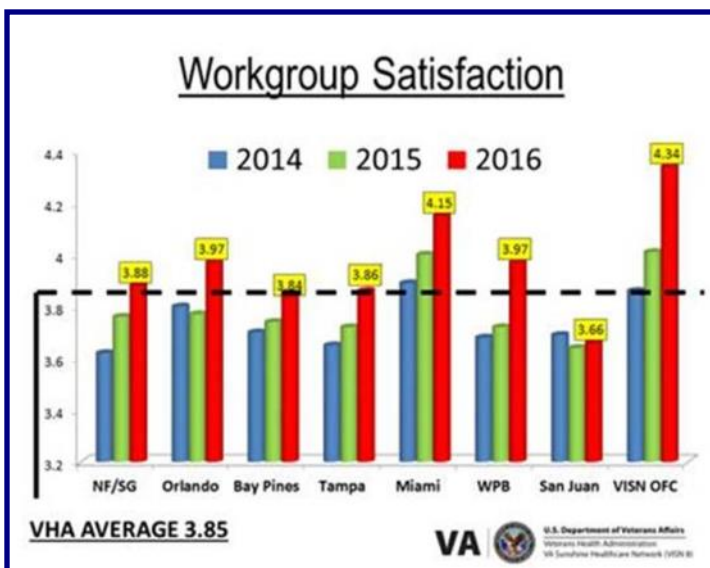
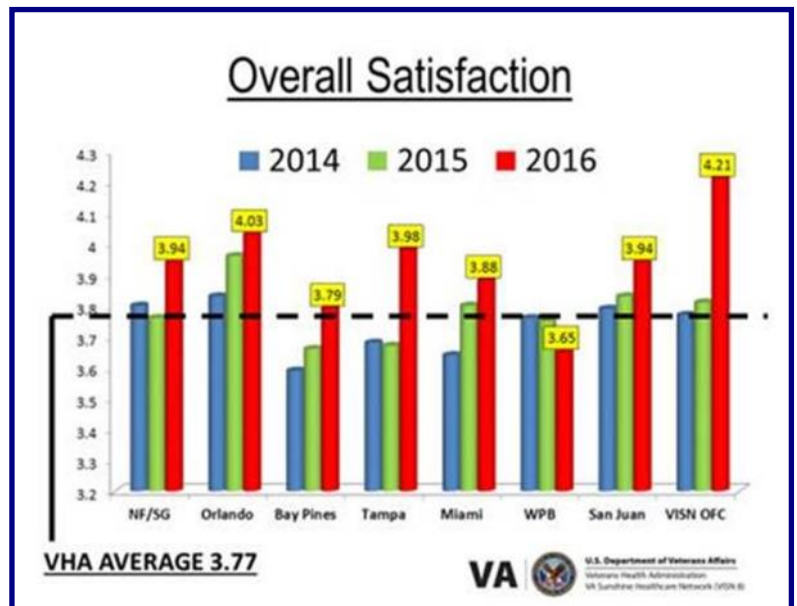
Several key elements of the All Employee Survey are identified and discussed before and after working with groups across the system. A comparative analysis of these key elements over time provides a picture of how we are either improving or declining in our scores.

In the three graphs shown on this page for the years 2014-2016, there is an improvement for nearly all facilities in

Overall Satisfaction, Psychological Safety and Workgroup Satisfaction. As a result of the efforts involving employees across the system to improve their work environments, the level of satisfaction is not only improving over time for our network, but we are also surpassing the VHA national average for Overall Satisfaction in nearly every one of our hospitals.

Research from the VHA National Center for Organization Development (NCOD) suggests that a result of a more satisfied workforce is a more satisfied customer. The 2017 All Employee Satisfaction results will be released in October and allow us to continue assessing where we are in terms of Employee Satisfaction.

“As a result of the efforts involving employees across the system to improve their work environments, the level of (employee) satisfaction is not only improving over time for our network, but we are also surpassing the VHA national average for Overall Satisfaction in nearly every one of our hospitals.” - Dr. Troy Seidl



Travel Update: You Have An Emergency: Now What?

By Patricia Salsberg, Travel Coordinator, Bay Pines VA Healthcare System

Greetings! With the rash of natural disasters befalling us lately, it seems appropriate to run this repeat column on “What to do In Case of an Emergency While on Official Travel!”

Hurricanes, tornados, floods -- we’ve seen them all in our VISN 8 service areas—and soon it will be winter and with it comes all types of oddball weather conditions. This column will provide some guidelines for employees on what to do in case of an emergency while you are on official travel. Types of emergencies may include the following:

- An incapacitating illness or injury that occurs suddenly while on travel.
- Catastrophic event at an employee’s official station, temporary duty travel (TDY) location, or stopover, such as fire, hurricane, or other natural catastrophe.
- Death in the family.
- Missed flight connection due to unforeseen circumstances.
- Other miscellaneous identifiable causes.

Traveler’s Responsibility and Documentation:

- Travelers who are incapacitated due to an illness or injury, or who have been informed of an emergency that interrupts their TDY travel, must contact their Approving Official (AO) or supervisor, or one of the Employee Travel Coordinators for instructions on how to proceed. In VISN 8, the **Approving Officials** are James Pasquith and Dale Willever, and the **Travel Coordinators** are Patricia Salsberg and Donna Tyler. If the traveler cannot make timely contact, then they must notify their AO or Employee Travel as soon as practicable.
- Travelers must attach a statement to their travel voucher explaining the reason required for the emergency travel. The AO will review the statement and either approve or deny the request.

At the Airport:

- If you are bumped from your flight or missed your flight due to delays beyond your control, the airline you are booked on must make new reservations for you to fly to your destination. If the airline cannot get you out on another flight until the next day, they are required to put you up overnight in a hotel and provide you with a meal voucher at no expense to you. This is not claimable on your travel voucher, and your travel authorization will need to be amended to reconstruct your travel as it actually occurred.

Death or Family Emergency While on Official Travel:

- If you are notified of a death or family emergency while on TDY travel, you must notify your immediate supervisor immediately and also contact one of the Employee Travel Coordinators for assistance.
- Since it’s most likely you will be traveling to a destination other than your home airport, you will need to cancel your return trip to your home station. To do that, notify Duluth Travel at 1-866-779-6612.

- You will then need to purchase a nonrefundable ticket through an on-line booking engine (such as Expedia, Yahoo Travel, and Orbitz) or through an airline website to your new destination. The VA will reimburse you up to the amount of the one-way ticket that was paid to fly you to your TDY destination. A paid itinerary must be provided with your travel voucher to qualify for reimbursement upon your return to duty. Your travel authorization will need to be amended to show reconstructed travel days and expenses (all receipts and airline e tickets will need to be uploaded to CGE).

Other Unforeseen Circumstances at TDY Site:

- While on TDY, if you are forced to remain due to national emergency, catastrophic weather, or any other reason beyond your control, the VA will pay your per diem allowances until you are able to secure transportation back to your duty station. Transportation can be via air, train, or rental car. Receipts must be furnished for additional lodging, transportation, and you will be reimbursed at the approved MI&E rate for your TDY site. Your travel authorization will also need to be amended to account for all days on TDY. **Additional Guidance/Assistance:** Additional guidance may be found in the official VA policy entitled *Travel Under Special Circumstances, Office of Financial Policy, Volume XIV—Chapter 5 dated April 2011*, and by clicking on this link: <http://www.va.gov/finance/docs/VA-FinancialPolicyVolumeXIVChapter05.pdf>



West Palm Beach VA Medical
Center
Breaks Ground
On New Mental Health Domiciliary
Sept. 6, 2017

VA Photos by Joanne
Deithorn



**BAY PINES VA TEAM RECEIVES NATIONAL
GREEN AWARD FOR RECYCLING EFFORTS**

The C.W. Bill Young VA Medical Center has received a VA Sustainability Achievement and Green Routine Award for its Recycling Outreach Team's efforts to raise awareness and improve recycling at the facility. The employees recognized have gone above and beyond not only to reduce environmental impact, but also to help VA better serve its mission and operate more efficiently. *Pictured from left: Crystal Wilson, Shannon Williams, Chris Lovett and Nora Joan Quinn.*



TAI CHI



TAI CHI CLASSES AT WEST PALM – The West Palm Beach VA Medical Center offers a variety of classes to help Veterans combat stress and lead healthier lives. Here, Tai Chi Instructor and blind rehabilitation outpatient specialist Lauren O’Farrell (*front, left*) guides a group of Veterans through a Tai Chi class which provides meditation and improves strength, flexibility and balance. *Pictured, front to back and left to right:* Instructor Lauren O’Farrell; Bonnie Clay, U.S. Army 82nd Airborne, Vietnam Veteran; Michael Lange, Sr., U.S. Army Veteran; Salvador Jolorte, U.S. Navy Veteran; Lawrence Quijas, U.S. Army Veteran; and Leonard Pilgrim, U.S. Army Veteran.

Photo by Joanne Deithorn

One-Stop Shop for Information & Reporting Incidents

Got a question about a course of action or want to report an incident?

VISN 8 has an information-rich section on the [network Intranet](#) where you can find topics including Compliance & Business Integrity, Ethics, ORM, Quality Management/ Patient Safety, Research, Information Security, OIG/General Counsel, Joint Commission and Whistleblower.

Each facility has its own specific reporting methods, however, regardless of where you work in the network, you can also report an issue or incident through this Communication vehicle.

To visit the site,:
[Click Here](#)

About the VISN 8 VOICE

The **VISN 8 VOICE** is an e-Newsletter published by the [VISN 8 Office of Communication](#) for Network Office employees. Send comments, story ideas and articles to the Editor, [Susan Wentzell](#).

We're on the VISN 8 Intranet!

