

VA campus expands care, programs Facilities constructed, revamped

By Kelly B. Garrett
Eagle Staff Writer

BUTLER TWP — Across New Castle Road from both Butler Commons and Butler Crossing shopping centers is the 88-acre Veterans Affairs campus.

Home to VA Butler Healthcare, the campus and the health care center are undergoing major changes, including building a new nursing home and revamping many major programs.

Patricia Nealon, VA Butler Healthcare director, said construction began in 2007 and will continue for several years.

The VA also is undergoing some changes to its programming, expanding outpatient services and making room for more veterans.



Construction workers carry supplies March 10 to the roof of a building under construction on the 88-acre Veterans Affairs campus in Butler Township. Home to VA Butler Healthcare, the campus is undergoing major changes, including building a new nursing home and revamping many programs.
JUSTIN GUIDO/BUTLER EAGLE

Growing up and out

Nealon said the VA is looking to have someone build a new hospital in the region the VA will then lease.

She said VA Butler has received funds for the construction of a 180,000-square-foot facility that would ideally be built on 25 to 30 acres to ensure the ability to grow.

"The VA has found this method to be a money saver for the department, and even though we recently expanded services here, we still need more room," Nealon said.

The VA used this method last year by leasing a space in Cranberry Township for its newest outpatient clinic.

Nealon said what will happen with the old hospital building is still being determined, including housing the administration and other offices.

Construction to continue

The nursing home, known on campus as the community living center, brings patients to a single level building instead of having them spread on separate floors in the original hospital building, which was built in 1933 as a tuberculosis sanitarium.

The hospital building was empty until it was taken over by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs for use in World War II.

The community living center is to be built in phases with the first 30 beds scheduled to be completed in 2011.

Nealon said the VA is spending \$8.8 million in federal stimulus money on this project as well as electrical system upgrades, replacement of boilers, improvement of site drainage, renovation of the water tower and replacement of windows in Building I.

An additional \$8 million is being spent on demolition of old buildings, sanitary plumbing upgrades, main loading dock renovations, HVAC upgrades, elevator replacement and fire protection upgrades.



Construction crews work on a new building on the Veterans Affairs campus in Butler Township. A nursing home, known on campus as the community living center, is to be built in phases with the first 30 beds scheduled to be completed in 2011.
JUSTIN GUIDO/BUTLER EAGLE

Nealon said construction on apartments on the former baseball diamond in the rear of the property will begin this spring.

The apartments will replace the old domiciliary that is used for drug and alcohol rehabilitation for veterans.

"It is very institutional, but the apartments will house 56 residents who will share apartments in groups of two or three," said Dave Virag, a VA Butler spokesman.

Each resident will have his own bedroom, but share living and kitchen areas.

Other than that, the rehabilitation programming will remain the same.

Program to expand

The VA wants to expand its mental health and rural health programs.

The importance of mental health care in the VA has grown as military operations continue in both Iraq and Afghanistan, with an emphasis on treating post-traumatic stress syndrome, drug and alcohol addiction, and help veterans who have served time in civilian prison.

For veterans who live in rural settings, who might not be able to make it into the VA clinic as regularly as someone living closer, the VA now provides telemetry units to take home.

The units, called Health Buddy, not only can transmit blood pressure and other health monitoring methods back to VA hospitals over telephone land lines, but also have a mental health program that asks questions and interacts with the patient's answers.

Nealon said the VA is looking to add additional programs such as the Women Veterans Team to address the needs of female veterans.

"The secretary wants us to reach zero homelessness for veterans, so we are working to get to them just before they become homeless," she said.

Addressing the needs of returning veterans and expanding services to Vietnam War veterans also are being introduced.

Virag pointed out the VA now wants all veterans who were in-country and in brown waterways in Vietnam tested for free at a VA facility for exposure and illness from the defoliant Agent Orange.

"We want veterans to know that we provide high quality care and that the caliber of our staff and their commitment to veterans just keeps rising," Nealon said.

CLOSER LOOK

WHAT: VA Butler Healthcare

ADDRESS: New Castle Road, Butler Township

EMPLOYEES: 634

VOLUNTEERS: 607

VOLUNTEER HOURS: 46,130

VETERANS SERVED: 17,666

OUTPATIENT VISITS: 127,545

INPATIENTS TREATED: 949

BUDGET: \$94.320 million for 2009 fiscal year