

## Worship Duty VA volunteers vital to church services

By LORI DUDEKEagle Correspondent

A stay in the hospital is never fun. And for some patients, being unable to attend church brings even more of an emotional strain.

But because of a network of volunteers, patients and residents at VA Butler Healthcare can continue to worship on Sundays.

The volunteers assist in moving veterans between their rooms and the worship location in the building's main floor auditorium.

If not for the volunteer efforts, many patients would be unable to attend the services, which include an ecumenical service at 9 a.m. and a Catholic Mass at 10 a.m.

"It's huge," said the Rev. Bob Smith, chief chaplain at the center in Butler Township. "I don't know any other term to use, except that it's a huge asset — mainly because it frees the staff to take care of those who stay behind."

"The nurses and staff there can get them ready, but they can't bring them down. They can't leave the floor," said Betty Bauer of Mount Chestnut, coordinator of the volunteers who provide both mobility assistance and music for the ecumenical service.

Bauer said a volunteer pool from 14 churches helps with the Sunday services.

"Some churches just provide music, some provide wheelchair volunteers, and others provide both. I'd say about 60 percent provide both," she said.

The volunteer duty is scheduled on a rotating monthly basis. Each church takes a different month in the schedule, with Boy Scout Troop 20 also assisting. Those services are officiated by Smith or the Rev. Gary Clise.

According to the Rev. Bill Ritzert, a retired priest from St. Matthias Roman Catholic Church who says the weekly Mass, those volunteers are not formally scheduled, but a small, dedicated group arrives weekly to escort patients.

Volunteers are called upon to help patients with any mobility needs, from pushing a wheelchair to simply offering a steady hand.

Patients like Joe Hays of Prospect look forward to the service each Sunday. Faith has clearly been an integral part of the 89-year-old's life and also his family history. He's a member of Prospect Presbyterian Church and tells how his great-great grandfather was a founder of the Mount Nebo Church. He served as a sergeant in the Air Force from 1944 to 1946.

Since arriving at the VA three months ago, he has missed only one Sunday service.

"I can go there myself," said Hays, who walks with a cane. "But there are about 12 or so people who are in wheelchairs."

"A lot of our veterans are ambulatory," said Paula McCarl, voluntary services specialist/public affairs. "But our volunteers still assist as needed."

McCarl said the center's new facility, currently under construction, will include a multipurpose room to be used for a service site. The facility will be on one level.



Pat Angerett, a volunteer from Mount Chestnut Presbyterian Church, helps VA Butler Healthcare patient Joe Hays of Prospect go to a church service on the morning of March 21 in the hospital's main floor auditorium. Volunteers from 14 local churches are vital in helping the facility offer an ecumenical worship service and Catholic Mass to patients and residents every Sunday.  
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"We'll still need the volunteers. It will just be easier," she said.

The presence of the volunteers helps keep the patients connected with both the outside world and also with their inner spiritual needs. Smith said the services are an important part of the VA's overall outreach.

"(Veterans') comments generally are that they really look forward to the service and they can't wait for Sunday to come around," he said. "They value it very highly."

He said the services also meet a spiritual need for long-term patients, "especially those who are looking at very difficult medical situations or recovery from addiction situations," Smith said.

Ritzert agreed.

"They let the nurses know about it if they don't get them up," he said of the eight to 10 patients who attend weekly Mass. "Some of them are very serious about their religious obligation."

Bauer, who with her husband George has been providing music for the center's ecumenical service for more than 40 years, said it's clear how much the veterans appreciate the services by the effort they go through just to attend.

"To get there at nine o'clock in the morning, they have to get up very early — 2½ hours early," she said. "These guys are in bed, and they get up, get dressed, and have something to eat. ... It would be easy to turn over and go back to sleep. They make it down for that hour, and I'm sure they are tired when they get back. But they make the effort and they do it. And it astonishes me that they do," she said.

Like the other volunteers, Bauer said she doesn't regret putting time into the program and considers her efforts a small gesture of thanks.

"These are our veterans," she said. "I mean, we go and do a couple of songs. Are you kidding? That's nothing for what they do for us."

## **VOLUNTEERS MAKE IT HAPPEN**

About 200 volunteers from various community churches help with Sunday services at the VA Butler Healthcare, according to coordinator Betty Bauer. Participating churches and organizations include:

- Christ Community United Methodist Church, Butler Township
- Butler Church of the Nazarene, Butler Township
- Community Alliance Church, Center Township
- First Baptist Church of Butler, New Castle Street
- Homeacre Chapel, Butler Township
- Meridian United Presbyterian Church, Meridian
- Mount Chestnut Presbyterian Church, Franklin Township
- Nixon United Methodist Church, Penn Township
- Saint Andrews United Presbyterian Church, East Jefferson Street
- St. John's Reformed Church, Butler Township
- St. Mark's Lutheran Church, West Jefferson Street
- Trinity Lutheran Church, Center Township
- Trinity Presbyterian Church of Butler, Staley Avenue
- Westminster Presbyterian Church in America, North Main Street
- Boy Scout Troop 20 of Trinity Presbyterian