



Department of
Veterans Affairs
VA BUTLER HEALTHCARE
325 New Castle Rd.
Butler, PA 16001

Story Release

For Immediate Release

April 30, 2010

“New Program Keeps Veterans ‘On The Road’”

(BUTLER, Pa.) – The ability to drive is a mark of independence, so when a patient has his driver’s license taken away it can be upsetting. The loss of driving privileges is what happens to many patients when they suffer significant injury or illness. VA Butler Healthcare Center has a new program committed to providing needed resources, tools and training to keep its veteran patients self-reliant and back on the road safely.

Kinesiotherapist Jill Umstead, a resident of Prospect, Pa.; manages VA Butler Healthcare Center’s “Driving Rehabilitation Program.” The program is the only VA program of its kind in Western Pennsylvania.

“This is a service for our veterans,” said Umstead. “Our program works with veterans determining if they are still safe to drive a motor vehicle.” The program also assists veterans to develop the skills needed if there are any special modifications needed to successfully operate their vehicle.

“If a patient has a stroke (or another health issue that may impede driving capability) it is a doctor’s duty is to report it (to the DMV),” stated Umstead. “With this program we have the ability to do a pre-assessment to see if the veteran still has adequate skills to drive and avoid losing his license.”

There are myriad causes for a patient to potentially lose his license: loss of cognitive ability, a need for prosthetics, epilepsy, etc. The Driving Rehabilitation Program not only assesses the veteran’s driving aptitude but assists him in learning new skills that may be needed to get back on the road.

The program is presented in two parts. The first part is the assessment, conducted in a driving simulator that looks very much like a “suped up” driving arcade game. After an evaluation for depth perception, color blindness, cognitive ability; the veteran gets behind the wheel of his virtual automobile. If there is special adaptive equipment that is required, the veteran can practice and learn how to use it in the safety of the virtual car.

“For example, if a person has a brace or prosthesis on his right leg,” said Umstead, “We can train them on a left foot accelerator.”

The driving simulator assesses patients or provides a safe environment to practice with adaptive equipment, but nothing replaces getting behind the wheel for real. The second stage of the program is to have the veterans transfer their simulated driving into reality with a specially-adapted training vehicle.

“We can do the practical driving here in our van,” said Umstead, “or we have gone to the veterans home to continue training there.”

Since the program’s start October 2009 over forty veterans have been referred to the program.

VA Butler Healthcare is the provider of choice for over 17,000 veterans throughout Armstrong, Butler, Clarion, Lawrence and Mercer counties; and parts of Ohio. With over 600 employees, VA Butler Healthcare provides primary care, specialty care, mental health and social supports services to our nation’s veterans. For information about VA Butler Healthcare programs and services, log on to <http://www.butler.va.gov>. Media queries and requests should be directed to David Virag at (724)-285-2576 or David.Virag@va.gov.

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