Hometown Heroes

Butler VA Health Care System 2020 Annual Report

VA
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Veterans Health Administration
Butler VA Health Care System

Courage

When facing a battle, be it a military battle or a public health crisis like the novel coronavirus, heroes exemplify courage. They confront any challenge head on (and that's what the Butler Team did this year).

In April, and with the COVID-pandemic presenting many new challenges (and fears), Kevin Amick was appointed as the new Director for the Butler VA Health Care System. Mr. Amick previously served as the associate director at the Durham VA Health Care System in Durham, North Carolina, and has been with the VA going on 11 years. He also served as a chief hospital corpsman, among other roles, in the Navy Hospital Corps during his 21-year naval career.

A Letter from the Director

Thank You Heroes

The Butler VA Health Care System's 2020 Annual Report highlights many achievements from our exceptional year—but more importantly, it showcases the everyday heroes who made this year a success despite challenges of the ongoing pandemic. ***From increasing virtual care options in support of our Veterans to implementing vigorous cleaning, screening, and testing procedures for both staff and Veterans' safety, 2020 was a year like no other.***

I encourage you to read through this year's Annual Report and discover all the ways our local health care heroes made a lasting impact in health care and in the lives of our Veteran's and their families at the Butler VA.

Thank you to everyone for your patience and support this year, and we look forward to serving and seeing you (in-person and virtually) at the Butler VA in 2021.

Kevin Amick
Director

Leading with Courage

Butler VA's Leadership Team

Kevin Amich
Director

Rebecca Wolfe
Associate Director for Operations

Sharon Coyle
Associate Director for Patient Care Services

Dr. Aref Rahman
Acting Chief of Staff

Qualities of a Hero

As a kid, we tended to identify heroes by their masks, capes, and superpowers. 2020 may not have involved capes, but masks and "superpowers" were a given for our local heroes at the Butler VA Health Care System—Veterans, military service members, health care workers, police officers, housekeeping staff, firefighters and all of the VA staff and volunteers.

Defining the qualities of a true hero may vary from person to person, but 10 of the key qualities most heroes share were exemplified this year, and are outlined in the pages to follow: courage, bravery, compassion, ingenuity, resiliency, perseverance, dedication, selflessness, confidence, and inspirational.

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Bravery & Compassion

Bravery & Compassion

Bravery is perhaps the number one quality that comes to mind when the word 'hero' is mentioned. In 2020, Butler VA's health care staff served our nation's heroes, our Veterans, as they always do. But this year, they did so during a global pandemic. Our local health care heroes deployed to hard-hit COVID areas, achieved new local successes, adapted services virtually, and remained committed to VA's mission throughout: to care for those "who shall have borne the battle" and for their families and survivors.

No one puts more compassion into the health care profession than VA nurses, and it seems especially fitting that 2020 is the "Year of the Nurse and Midwife" in honor of the 200th birth anniversary of Florence Nightingale. During this stressful and challenging year, VA nurses show up every day ready to care for our nation's Veterans. The extraordinary work of the Butler VA's 183 nurses in the face of this virus deserves its own heroic recognition.

Supporting VA's 4th Mission

Butler VA staff have been doing their part to help Veteran and civilian patients fighting novel coronavirus by serving on the frontlines of care in several hard-hit areas. To date, over 65 Butler VA staff members have stepped up to deploy through VA's Disaster Emergency Medical Personnel System (DEMPS) in areas throughout Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Arizona, totaling over 1,300 days. Over 20 of the staff who deployed extended their tours and volunteered to deploy multiple times.

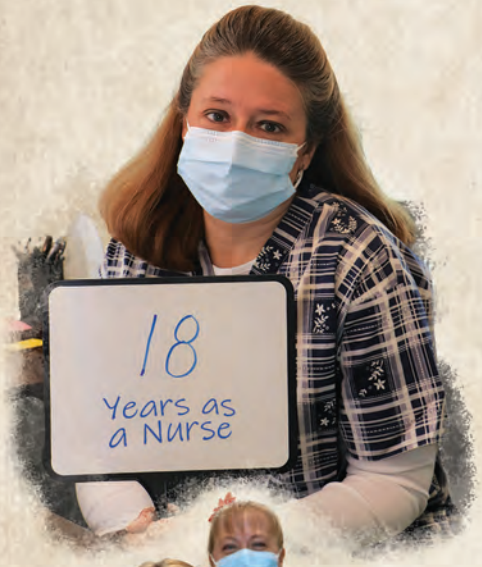
Their efforts are part of VA's national initiative to exercise its Fourth Mission of aiding local communities and health care facilities when called upon in times of a national emergency. Where VA has the capacity and the resources, it will provide beds at VA medical centers and staff for community hospitals and nursing homes. VA's decisions in supporting community health care are made after determining the actions would not negatively impact Veteran care.

Answering the Call 24/7/365

All VA health care facilities in VISN 4 utilize a centralized nurse triage call center based at the Butler VA, and VA nurses answer calls 24/7/365 to serve Veterans and their Families. 43 nurses provide daytime coverage, and 14 off-shift nurses cover additional times.

The Call Center was averaging about 3,000 calls per week, but now receives approximately 6,000-7,000 calls a week! Despite the significant call increase, Veteran Customer Service Satisfaction Results are at 100% satisfaction for First Call Resolution and Nurse Courtesy/Customer Service.

A new Tele-Urgent Care feature was also added this year, to provide Veterans quick and convenient access to care via phone or video appointments 8am-8pm, 365 days a year. This service helps Veterans get seen for acute issues in real time in the convenience of their home which has greatly helped all Veterans in VISN 4 during the pandemic.



Adapting to Support Veterans' Health and Well-being

Recreation Therapy is a key component of care for Veteran residents in the Butler VA's Sergeant Joseph George Kusick Community Living Center (CLC). With no visitors or large group gatherings allowed, the program has had to adapt to best support Veterans residing at the CLC. Smaller groups and utilizing iPads are one way the department has adjusted to the times, a new, creative pet therapy program is another.
Prior to COVID-19, the Butler VA's CLC had an extensive pet therapy program consisting of almost daily pet therapy visits. This year, therapists purchased interactive Joy for All Companion Pets – pets that look, feel and sound like real cats and dogs. They have provided comfort, calmed anxiety, provided companionship, increased social engagement, and decreased loneliness due to lack of visitors.

Veteran residents at the CLC were also treated to a special drive by parade by local fire departments, police, a reserve unit, VA staff, and most importantly their family members. Veterans whose family members participated in the parade made signs and were able to enjoy the event outside where they could see their families and well-wishers as they passed by.

Ingenuity

Being a hero is not always about who is the strongest, or who has the most dangerous job – many times, it means approaching obstacles in new and creative ways. The Butler VA's Connected Care Department utilized new virtual tools and expanded many, many others to deliver high-quality VA care this year while keeping Veterans and VA employees safe from COVID-19.

VA Video Connect (VVC) More Than Doubles!

VA Video Connect allows Veterans and their caregivers to quickly and easily meet with VA health care providers through live video on any computer, tablet, or mobile device with an internet connection. The Butler VA's VVC program doubled its growth to support Veterans at home during the pandemic (and with no co-pay!).

From February to August, VVC encounters saw a 1,295% increase (449 to 6,265 encounters). Butler VA clinical programs increased from nine to 43 service lines, spanning all areas – Primary Care, Specialty Care, Behavioral Health, etc.).

New Telederm Secure Messaging Team Launched

To maintain continuity of care in the absence of an in-person Telehealth visit, a new Telederm Secure Messaging Team was developed and launched. This new, innovative Telederm Imaging process through the Secure Messaging portal allowed for a reduction in in-person Teledermatology appointments during COVID while Veteran access to care remained seamless.

New Protocol in the Annie App Developed by the Butler VA

The Butler VA's Physical Therapy Department developed and piloted a new protocol in the Annie Mobile Application (Annie) this year to assist Veterans struggling with lower back pain. After being tested at the Butler VA, the goal is to introduce the protocol nationwide!

The Butler VA also assisted with virtual trainings (over 225 clinicians throughout VISN 4) for the new Annie Coronavirus Precautions protocol messages. The messages can help monitor viral symptoms and know when to contact a VA care team or a nurse triage line for additional care. The messages also provide general wellness tips and education on precautions to help prevent the contraction of the coronavirus.

The Butler VA has the highest number of assigned Annie App protocols in the VISN (70 total).

Leading the Nation in LinkView Usage

The Butler VA's Home Telehealth program embraced VA Video Connect (VVC) capabilities this year with the LinkView platform (and currently leads the nation in LinkView usage with close to 250 platforms in use). New, VVC-capable equipment (LinkView) was ordered and staff assisted Veterans with setup and test calls to ensure it worked well.

The Butler VA's Home Telehealth program doubled this year, providing care to over 500 Veterans. The Home Telehealth Team also monitored COVID-positive Veterans who were at-risk or needed closer connection – increasing coverage to include weekends and holidays.

Health Care Heroes

- ***Mary Spencer,*** LPN and Lead Telehealth Care Technician, partnered with the VISN 4 Secure Messaging Administrator to lead in the development, launch and management of a new Telederm Secure Messaging Team. Her efforts resulted in the continuity of care for Veterans while keeping safety of the highest priority.
- ***Lisa Sieber***, Home Telehealth Lead, implemented Butler VA's Home Telehealth (HT) Video Visit Plan by utilizing Medtronic's LinkView device. Through her efforts and these video appointments, she helped increase the patient connection during the isolation of the pandemic.
- ***William 'Curtis' Bowmer***, Connected Care Program Specialist, was instrumental in expanding access to care via virtual technology, whether it was ordering and installing new equipment or teaching Veterans how to easily and successfully utilize the new technology. His efforts allowed the Telehealth program to meet the changing, growing demands during the pandemic.

Resiliency

Whole Health is VA's approach to care that supports Veterans' health and well-being; it impacts every aspect of our health care system. During 2020, Whole Health staff collaboratively developed new offerings, adapted current offerings, and ultimately worked to cultivate a culture of resiliency during this challenging year for both Veterans and VA staff.

Piloted new Patient-Aligned Care Teams (PACT)

There are many ways a Veteran can engage in Whole Health, including exploration of their mission, aspirations, and purpose (MAP).

Several clinics focused their efforts on MAP this year, including two pilot PACTs, Pain Management Team (PMT), chiropractic, and acupuncture clinics. Identification of strong values – family, honor, country, and career – is important, and exploration of one's MAP helps provide an even deeper foundation for these values.

Moral Health Action Team Created

With increased uncertainty and daily evolution of the health care system due to COVID-19, an inter-departmental team of individuals sought to help mitigate concerns for employees and Veterans with moral distress, and to cultivate a culture of moral courage and resiliency. The Moral Health Action Team (MHAT) supports individuals to effectively navigate ethically complex, ambiguous, or conflicting situations by providing a neutral, confidential, safe forum for employees and Veterans to communicate morally distressing topics and provide a location to access clear and concise up-to-date information.

Virtual Wellness Options Now Available

With health and safety being prioritized, many Whole Health services were available virtually for the first time this year, including: Tai Chi, Taking Charge of My Life and Health, Introduction to Whole Health, Chronic Illness Support Group, Tobacco Cessation, and Health Coaching.

The Butler VA also purchased access for all Veterans to OMPractice, an online platform that offers live, two-way wellness classes—yoga, Pilates, guided meditation, tai chi, and other wellness activities tailored for individuals of all skill levels and abilities.

In addition to OMPractice, Facebook Live Demonstrations were held, including weekly fitness classes, as well as VA Video Connect weekly wellness options, including yoga, tai chi, and personal training.

Health Care Heroes

Megan Tritt & Thomas Sousa,
Butler VA Social Workers, deployed to New Jersey in support of COVID-19 efforts. During their deployment, they provided sessions related to compassion fatigue and self-care to ensure the psychological and emotional needs of the staff were acknowledged and to foster a culture of resilience in the face of adversity.
What started as simple education, evolved quickly into an acknowledgement of the suffering witnessed during the pandemic, as well as what was personally endured as a result of ongoing crisis.

Perseverance

Maintaining and enhancing mental health can be challenging at any time but add in a global pandemic, and perseverance is paramount. Our Butler VA staff remained determined to provide any and all needed support and services this year, and our Veterans embraced new technology, remained committed to recovery, and did not give up – a true test of heroism.

Increased Housing Options for Homeless Veterans

The Butler VA's Homeless Team made many program adaptations to house Veterans quickly and safely this year. The HUD-VASH program increased its vouchers to assist formerly homeless Veterans in becoming homeowners, and more transitional housing options for homeless female Veterans became available, increasing beds from one to six.

Like most VA services, VA Video Connect and technology were essential to provide continued, accessible services. Testing was also routinely completed to make sure Veterans were safe and healthy when being placed in various housing programs. VA staff worked regularly with community partners to develop robust cleaning procedures, quarantine plans, and other contingencies related to delivery of services in the pandemic environment.

Set a Record Number of Veteran Court Graduates

Utilizing a combination of technology resources, the Butler VA's Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO) program and Veteran's Court partners were able to successfully continue all Veterans' court sessions despite the pandemic – making this year a record number of Veteran graduates! Successful Veteran Treatment Court (VTC) graduations were held in Armstrong, Butler and Mercer counties this year with a total of 31 Veteran graduates.

In the spring, the Butler VA's VJO program transitioned all support groups, appointments, intakes, and assessments virtually so there was no break in services (currently offering a hybrid of in-person/virtual services) – setting a record number of VA Video Connect appointments in VISN 4!

Prior to the onset of the pandemic, the VJO program also hosted a local training for all treatment court team partners facilitated by nationally recognized speakers. Additionally, and in coordination with the Butler Bar Association, continuing education for the Judges and Attorneys in attendance was provided.

Staying Connected with SPRITE

The Suicide Prevention Population Risk Identification and Tracking for Exigencies (SPPRITE) Report is a tool to assist providers in tracking patients identified at high-risk for suicide. This report was utilized during the pandemic to reach out and engage with local Veterans at high-risk for suicide. All clinical providers in the Butler VA's Center for Behavioral Health assisted in completing this list (twice) and it was a departmental wide, multidisciplinary effort. At least three phone contact attempts to the Veterans were made if they could not be reached on the first attempt. During calls, Veterans needs were assessed and met.

Health Care Heroes

- ***Eric Walker,*** Peer Support Specialist, provided exemplary efforts to Veterans struggling with substance use disorders throughout this past year—maintaining frequent contact via telephone, ensuring resources were available early-on in the pandemic, and hosting aftercare groups via VA Video Connect.
- ***Rebecca Fulmer and Shelia Whitesides***, Nurses at the Butler VA's Domiciliary, completed successful testing of all staff and Veterans residing at the Domiciliary and TR House in ONE day to ensure the health and safety of all residents. Shelia also joined Domiciliary Nurses ***Billy Feracioly*** and ***Cherine Carroll*** on a 2-week long deployment to New Jersey to assist with the COVID-outbreak there.

Dedication

Heroes dedicate themselves to their task in order to achieve success; complete commitment. Butler VA staff worked diligently to serve our women Veterans, student Veterans, and Families during this constantly changing and challenging year.

Expanding Access to our Women Veterans

While embracing new virtual care for women Veterans amidst the pandemic, the Women Veterans Health Care (WVHC) program is also dedicated to recognizing our women Veterans for their service, and expanding and improving care for the 1,669 Women Veterans served by the Butler VA.

In January, Summer Drummond, MSN/ED RN, CCRC, CCRP joined the Butler VA team to serve as the new Women's Health Program Manager. In February, she partnered with the Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Program to host the largest (and very successful) event just for Women Veterans to date! The Butler VA hosted the "I Am Not Invisible" campaign at an event with nearly 70 Women Veterans in attendance! Mr. Gene Russell, primary photographer for the Secretary of Veterans Affairs took the photos.

In addition to hosting this event, the WVHC program received a grant funding award this year to fund additional staff members to expand access to care for women, which will ultimately include new Women-specific support groups and programs, improved care coordination for Women Veterans, and novel Women's Health research.

Supporting Student Veterans

The Butler VA's Transition and Care Management Team continued providing services to Post 9/11 Veterans both onsite and virtually throughout this past year. The team also re-focused its efforts with the Veterans Integration to Academic Leadership (VITAL) program to best support local student Veterans at Butler County Community College, Slippery Rock and Clarion University. The team remains available virtually to the schools and student Veterans to assist with any physical or mental health issues, and overall aspects of transitioning to this new student (and now virtual student) environment.

Focusing on Healthy Relationships

With people staying home more and less social interactions overall, relationships have never been more important (or more challenging). The Butler VA' Intimate Partner Violence Assistance Program (IPVAP) successfully transferred its relationship health and safety groups virtually beginning in March so that programs such as Strength at Home (SAH) and Moral Reconation Therapy could continue.

The IPVAP program also developed and hosted several trainings and presentations to staff at the Butler VA and throughout VISN 4 to provide them the necessary tools and education to better support healthy and safe relationships for our Veterans and their spouses this year.

Health Care Heroes

- ***Sonya Hauck, Jessica Moore, and Darris Allshouse,*** dedicated Butler VA Nurses, all deployed to New Jersey to support Veterans and staff amidst the COVID-outbreak there. Jessica volunteered to extend her tour to further support efforts in New Jersey. In addition to Darris' excellent care, he had some patients dancing and singing to make the hard days more joy-filled!
- ***Justin Cooper***, dedicated Butler VA Social Worker, completed the Belongings Project while deployed to the Paramus Veterans Memorial Home. Assisted by fellow Butler VA Social Workers Megan Tritt and Thomas Sousa, they located personal belongings of the deceased from all over the home—each unit, courtyards, outside, and in an outdoor storage unit. All items were organized in an outdoor storage unit and families were contacted. This emotional task was one way our team helped serve the Families affected too.

Selflessness

Family caregivers face many challenges while routinely supporting and caring for their Veteran loved ones. Their jobs have become even harder during the COVID-19 pandemic. The normal activities of Butler VA's volunteers were paused in early spring to protect patients, health care providers, and volunteers, but volunteers still found ways to give their time (and donations) during this challenging year. Our local caregivers and volunteers are the true definition of selflessness.

Virtual Support for Caregivers

The Butler VA's Caregiver Support Program, like most programs this year, turned to virtual support – increasing VA Video Connect visits, supportive phone calls, and hosting a Caregiver Summit and week-long Caregiver Resource Fair virtually. Staff worked closely with caregivers of high-risk Veterans to develop contingency plans for caregiving should they become ill.

Also new for this year, the Caregiver Support program created a Resource Section in the Butler VA Library specific to Caregivers and created and convened the first-ever Caregiver Support Steering Committee.

Birthday Calls to Veterans

From our Veteran residents in the Sergeant Joseph George Kusick Community Living Center to many 100th birthday milestones, the Butler VA has celebrated our Veteran's birthdays throughout the years in special ways. New for this year – calling all our Veterans on their birthdays!

Starting in June, devoted volunteers began making Birthday Calls to our Veterans – completing over 5,000 calls before the end of the fiscal year. The calls also serve as a way for Veterans to know that Butler VA is here for them during these uncertain times, and to ensure they have no immediate needs.

The Butler VA has six volunteers who make birthday calls - Donna Croft, Deborah Souzer, Rhonda Hockenberry, Barb Rearic, Betty Baldo, and Teirrah Hayes. ***Thank You Volunteers!***

Serving the Community

For the past five years, the Lighthouse Foundation has been working with the Butler VA's Voluntary Services program to set-up specific days and times that Veterans transported through the DAV/Volunteer Transportation Program can obtain their monthly food support. During the COVID-19 Pandemic, U.S. Navy Veteran and Butler VA Volunteer Danny Turner along with fellow volunteer James Caldwell are continuing this service several times a month, slightly adjusted, by picking up food orders from the Lighthouse and dropping off to Veterans in the community.

"We are thankful for everyday heroes like Jim and Danny who deliver food orders to VA Veterans and Grapevine (a mental health drop-in clinic) clients. To hear their stories of why people are in need of food will break your heart. We have seen a significant increase in Veterans that are using our food pantry. We are honored to provide food for those who have served our country and those who are unable to leave their homes at this time. Thank you to everyday heroes for helping get food to those in need."

—Lighthouse Foundation

Health Care Heroes

- ***Andrew (Andy) Gryskewicz,*** Butler VA Voluntary Services Specialist and Army National Guard Veteran, was one of the selfless staff members (and Veterans) who deployed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Andy served as a medic in the Army National Guard, completing two tours in Afghanistan, and still continues to serve his fellow Veterans on the front lines wherever he can.
- ***Sarah Pfabe***, Butler VA Kitchen Supervisor and U.S. Air Force, was one of the selfless staff members (and Veterans) who deployed during the COVID-19 pandemic. She deployed to the Lyons VA Medical Center in Lyons, New Jersey for two weeks as a supervisor. Their CLC was across campus from their kitchen, so they would drive there every mealtime.
- ***Dale Ordean***, Butler VA CRNP (Cardiopulmonary) and U.S. Air National Guard Veteran, was one of the selfless staff members (and Veterans) who deployed during the COVID-19 pandemic. He operates with the mentality of service before self and considering the circumstances of COVID-19 causing serious consequences to our Veterans' health status, recognized the need to volunteer.

Confidence

Facility Awards, Accreditations, Recognitions, & Statistics

Heroes are confident. Confident in their ability to meet any challenge that comes their way and succeed.

Trust in VA health care has increased 5% and trust in all of VA benefits and services has increased 19% since 2017. ***The Butler VA enjoys a current trust score of 94.7%.*** This score, along with our many awards, recognitions, and more during 2020 provides our leaders and staff the confidence to continue serving our Veterans and their Families no matter what new, changing, or challenging obstacles may come.

Butler VA's Lyme Disease Clinic Gains National Attention

The Butler VA Health Care System is the first VA facility nationwide to offer Veterans a pharmacist-run Lyme disease post-exposure prophylaxis clinic. Butler VA Pharmacist David Portman submitted an article to the Journal of the American Pharmacists Association (JAPhA) detailing the process and success of the clinic, and the article was selected for publication.

#1 in the Nation for Patient Experience

VA singled out the Butler VA in a big way this year – the overall winner nationwide for excellence in Patient Experience. Many new patient experience (VA PX) initiatives launched led to the recognition. Some of which include: The New Veteran Orientation Tour, ***"I Choose VA"*** Employee badges, the Red Coat Ambassador program, and the customer experience workshop, ***"Own the Moment."***

Butler VA Employees Recognized at the Excellence in Government Awards Ceremony

Like most in-person events and celebrations, the 2020 Pittsburgh Federal Executive Boards (FEB) Excellence in Government Awards Ceremony was cancelled. However, the Butler VA still participated in this year's recognition program and Butler VA employees were awarded a gold award, 2 silver awards, and 1 bronze award.

Congrats to

Stephen Jensen

Navika Gadhok
Dr. Daniel Fitzgerald

Dale Ordean

Additional Accolades

- *2 Successful Accreditation Surveys*

1. *Joint Commission—3-year Accreditation*
2. *Long Term Care Institute – Successful, Annual Survey*

- *Outstanding Facility Performance (100%)*

Butler met 500/500 of the performance elements. We also achieved excellence in the following:

1. *SAIL Score – 1st quintile*
   - *#1 Rating of Provider*
   - *#1 Specialty Care Coordination*
   - *#1 Healthcare Effectiveness Data and Information Set*
2. *Top 5 in the Nation for Care In The Community (CITC)*
3. *Butler leads the nation in management of unscheduled consults*
4. *Patient Safety - 100% compliance with program requirements including Joint Patient Safety Report and Patient Safety & Alert follow up, Root Cause Analysis, and Patient Safety Assessment Tool Completion.*

- *5-Star Rating for the Sergeant Joseph George Kusick Community Living Center on VA's Strategic Analytics for Improvement and Learning (SAIL) Report*

2020 Statistics

- Employees: **784**
- Employees who are Veterans: **228**
- Volunteers: **116**
- Volunteer hours: **9,443**
- Donations: **$104,076 ($19,395 COVID-RELATED DONATIONS)**
- Veterans Served: **21,751**
- Veteran Outpatient Visits: **192,299**
- Visits completed via Telehealth: **25,308**
- Operating Budget: **$140,390,748**
- Operating Beds: **126**

*This report was only able to skim the top of our list of hometown heroes. The success of what the Butler VA does daily only happens as a **team**, and all staff and volunteers are considered heroes.*

Credits:

Paula McCarl
Editor-in-Chief

Amanda Kurtz
Editor

Karen Dunn
Photographer

Inspirational

"The strength of this country isn't in buildings of brick and steel. It's in the hearts of those who have sworn to fight for its freedom!"

– Captain America

“A true hero isn’t measured by the size of his strength, but by the size of his heart.”

– Zeus

About Us

The Butler VA Health Care System, located in Butler County, Pennsylvania has been attending to Veteran's total care since 1947. We are the health care choice for over 26,000 Veterans throughout Western Pennsylvania and parts of Ohio and are a member of VA Healthcare VISN 4 under the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Butler VA provides comprehensive Veteran care including primary, specialty, and mental health care — as well as management of chronic conditions and social support services to our nation's Veterans. We proudly serve America's Veterans at our main campus on North Duffy Road, our facilities on New Castle Road, as well as at our five Primary Care VA Outpatient Clinics in Armstrong, Southern Butler County (Cranberry Township), Clarion, Lawrence and Mercer Counties.

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