what’s inside?

celebrating over 200 groups

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In January, Butler VA staff celebrated the Partnership for Public Service Best Places to Work in the Federal Government rankings, where VA ranked sixth out of 17 large federal agencies!

The Butler VA held a Great American Spit Out Event to encourage (and support) Veterans to quit tobacco in February. The Butler VA’s Tobacco Cessation Lead Clinician shared resources to help Veterans quit and stay quit.

The Guitars For Vets program at the Butler VA celebrated its second graduate of the program in December. Congratulations to Air Force Veteran David Laughrey. For more information on the Guitars for Vets Program, please call 878-271-6484.

U.S. Senator Bob Casey visited and toured the Abie Abraham VA Clinic (HCC) this winter. His visit included learning more about the Butler VA’s hydrotherapy tub.

The Butler VA’s Health Promotion & Disease Prevention Program organized its annual Healthy Living Food Drive throughout January to support local Veterans in need. This year, more than 1,400 items were collected.

On National Wear Red Day® the Butler VA hosted its annual Winter Women’s Wellness Event for all women Veterans for a day of education and relaxation – including lunch, a hands-on healthy recipe, and painting activity.

The Butler VA celebrated its Veterans all week long as part of the annual National Salute to Veteran Patients during the week of February 14. For one of the special events, Veterans in the Community Living Center had a special lunch “date” with volunteers.

For the third year in a row, Veterans at the Community Living Center collected toys to donate to the annual U.S. Marine Corps Reserve Toys for Tots Program. Veterans, employees, and family members donated over $2,000 in toys this year!

Members of the Pittsburgh Pirates Organization visited Veterans in the Butler VA’s Community Living Center this January. U.S. Army Veteran Bob Wagner, the great nephew of “Honus” Wagner who played for the Pirates, was just one of the Veterans visited that day.
Dear Veterans, fellow employees, volunteers and friends of VA Butler,

I’m grateful for the end of winter, and the coming warmer weather, and I’m especially grateful to everyone who has helped make my first five months at the Butler VA so great.

I encourage you to read through this issue of Living Better to learn more about some of the new programs, recent events, and important health resources at the Butler VA. I also encourage you to meet with me if you ever have any questions, concerns, or suggestions. I look forward to serving and seeing you soon at the Butler VA.

Jon, Director

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VA U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Veterans Health Administration
Butler VA Health Care System
This past fall, the Veteran “X” Program at the Butler VA Health Care System celebrated its 200th group! Since the inception (November 5, 2014) of the Veteran “X” Program, 699 Veterans have participated in the group.

Cary Adkins, a U.S. Army Veteran and Peer Support Specialist at the Butler VA, first started the program and serves as the Veteran “X” Group Coordinator. “What makes this group so special (and successful) is that it is Veterans helping Veterans.” The Butler VA’s program has continuously been recognized as a top performer in the nation.

“This group saved my life,” shared U.S. Marine Corps Veteran Nate Sommers. Sommers first started attending Veteran “X” in November 2015 and has attended 107 groups. The group helped him find the camaraderie that was missing in his life since getting out of the Marine Corps. “Veteran ‘X’ has taught me how to properly advocate for myself. I’m fortunate enough to be in a position to be able to help others with what I’ve learned at Vet ‘X’.”

Mike Martinez, a U.S. Air Force Veteran who has attended 102 Veteran “X” meetings since first coming in December 2015 echoes Sommers’ comment on comradery. For him, comradery and just being able to assist other Veterans in this group have been the most enjoyable aspects.

Rick Johnson, a U.S. Army Veteran has been attending Veteran “X” meetings since it first started at the Butler VA. He has attended 133 meetings.
“Being around Veterans again – laughing, joking, hugging—and, learning each week how to navigate the extensive VA system and how to advocate properly for ourselves is what I find most helpful.”

U.S. Navy Veteran Robert Sheppeck started attending Veteran “X” from the very beginning as well, and has attended 183 meetings. What he wants other Veterans to know about this group: “This group is here to help them and show the benefits the VA can offer.” Sheppeck has enjoyed seeing all the Veterans come through this group over the years, and watching them succeed with help from the program.

The Veteran “X” Group is really a group for Veterans by Veterans. Veteran participants serve as the treatment team for a fictitious Veteran “X.” Veteran “X” has a number of challenges similar to those faced by the group’s participants. While helping Veteran “X” to solve his issues, participants gain valuable skills and information to resolve their own issues.

Veteran “X” focuses on providing Veterans the opportunity to take an active role in choosing treatment goals and finding solutions to problems they may be facing.

The hands-on process of Veteran “X” engages Veterans in their treatment, resulting in a Veteran-centered treatment plan. Each week Veterans address a new or ongoing problem/concern for Veteran “X,” often times enlisting the assistance and support of a VA staff member.

In January, Veteran “X” held its 4th Annual Commencement/Awards Ceremony, and the founder of Veteran “X,” Mr. Tom Pratt, attended to make a National Promotion to one of the group’s top Veterans.

“It’s an honor to see the group grow, succeed, and really heal in their recovery with help from Veteran “X,”” added Adkins. “I look forward to celebrating many more commencement ceremonies with this great group of fellow Veterans.

Veteran “X” meets every Monday from 6 to 8 p.m. To learn more about the program, contact Cary Adkins at (724) 996-8892 or Jackie Cannon at (724) 285-2293.
The American Music Therapy Association says that music therapy has been a practice since the early 19th century, but it wasn’t until more recently that it became a prioritized form of treatment. In 2005, the VA began integrating this therapy more, doubling the number of music therapists at its clinics across the country to better treat Veterans.

Although the Butler VA Health Care System does not currently offer a formal music therapy program, music is regularly a part of special events and various programs. For example, last year a local chapter of the Guitars for Vets program began in Butler and has since graduated two Veterans. All lessons are held at the Butler VA, and currently four Veterans are enrolled in the program.

One of the newest (and frequent) programs Veterans, families, and staff can participate in to add music to their life is the monthly “Music is Medicine” program. Each month, the Butler VA hosts an hour of music by a volunteer(s) performing songs, playing instruments, and sometimes both. The performance is held in the main lobby of the Abie Abraham VA Clinic and all are encouraged to take some time to relax and enjoy the power of music.

“Music can help put anyone in a better mood. For a Veteran coping with a mental or physical health problem, music can be even greater,” said Karen Dunn, the Butler VA’s Health Promotion & Disease Prevention Program Manager who started the “Music is Medicine” program. “The Butler VA has been growing its music offerings as part of its Whole Health program and plans to add even more music programs in the future.”

VA’s Whole Health approach lets Veterans take charge of their health based on their priorities with the support of their health team. Often times, music, yoga, art, or other creative outlets is a priority for Veterans, and the Butler VA works with Veterans to make these offerings a reality.

Since Karen started the “Music is Medicine” monthly program, eight individuals and groups have volunteered their time to perform for an audience at the Butler VA. A special thank you to: Tim Amerson, Kathryn Eberle Cotter, Tom Panei, Donny Eozzo, Rickie Cartwright and Larry Miranda, Slippery Rock High School Chamber Singers, and Colin Houk.

“Another great thing about this program – it’s done completely by volunteers. It provides our local community an opportunity to really share their passion for music, all while giving back to our military Veterans,” added Dunn.

“Music is Medicine” is held on the fourth Wednesday of each month from 11:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Free coffee also is provided for all attendees by the Butler VA’s Voluntary Services.

Anyone interested in sharing their love of music with our Veterans and staff is encouraged to volunteer. To learn more, or to volunteer for an upcoming “Music is Medicine” hour, please call 878-271-6484.

If music is not your gift, but you are interested in giving back to our Veterans, learn more about other volunteer opportunities by contacting our Voluntary Services Office at 878-271-6957 or visiting www.butler.va.gov/giving.

Veterans also are encouraged to check out some of VA’s national music programs, such as the annual National Veterans Creative Arts Competition & Festival co-presented by VA and the American Legion Auxiliary, as well as national music therapy retreats hosted by VA and the nonprofit organization Operation Song.

Learn more about each of these programs by visiting: www.blogs.va.gov/nvspse/national-veterans-creative-arts-festival/ and www.operationsong.org, or by talking to your health care team.
For the approximately 8.7 million Americans who use smokeless tobacco, quitting can be extremely difficult. This February, the VA's Better Starts Today campaign worked to encourage Veterans to think about the many reasons to quit smokeless tobacco. For example, people who use dip, chew, and snuff increase their risk for cancers of the lip, tongue, floor, and roof of mouth; can pass down unhealthy behaviors to their family members; and drain money from their pockets. Fortunately, VA has the tools to treat smokeless tobacco use and can help Veterans build a plan to quit for good.

The Great American Spit Out held on February 21 provided a perfect opportunity for Veterans to take strides toward quitting smokeless tobacco and beginning a tobacco-free journey. The Butler VA's Tobacco Cessation Lead, Megan Tritt, provided an educational event for Veterans and their families for the Great American Spit Out in an effort to encourage Veterans to quit, while also sharing the many, many resources the Butler VA has to help them in their quit efforts.

“Better really can start today. If you’ve thought about quitting smokeless tobacco but haven’t picked a date, or if you’ve tried before and are ready to make the change for good, now is the time,” Tritt said. “We know that quitting can be challenging. The best approach to quitting tobacco is to understand your reasons for wanting to quit, pick a quit date, and come up with a quit plan.”

The Butler VA can help Veterans develop a quit plan that may include medications, individual counseling, group classes, or telephone counseling.

How you quit is up to you, and the Butler VA offers many kinds of support to choose from.

- **Quit VET:** Speak with a tobacco cessation counselor to make a quit plan and to receive ongoing support and counseling after your quit date by calling 1-855-QUIT-VET (1-855-784-8838). Quitline counselors are available between 9 a.m. and 9 p.m. eastern time, Monday through Friday.
Quitline counselors offer continued support through follow-up calls and counseling.

- **SmokefreeVET**: Sign up for VA’s text-messaging program to receive three to five text messages a day of support, advice, and encouragement when you are quitting tobacco. You can sign up for the program by texting the word VET to 47848 from your mobile phone or by visiting smokefree.gov/VET. You can text the keywords URGE, STRESS, and DIPPED anytime to get an immediate tip for coping with an urge to use, stress, or a slip.
- **Stay Quit Coach**: This mobile app helps Veterans quit smoking, with tools and information specifically addressing the needs of Veterans with PTSD. It’s available for free to download from the App Store and Android Apps: https://mobilehealth.va.gov/app/stay-quit-coach
- **Butler VA Tobacco Cessation Class and Support Group**: We have a Tobacco Cessation Educational Class that meets monthly and a Tobacco Cessation Support Group that meets twice a month. All Veterans are encouraged to attend regularly for help with quitting and staying quit. Please contact the Tobacco Cessation Lead Clinical at 878-271-6173 for more information on the class and/or support group. Veterans are encouraged to attend the educational class before beginning the support group.

- **Medications**: Tobacco contains nicotine, a highly addictive chemical. When you stop using tobacco, you’ll likely experience withdrawal symptoms. Using FDA-approved medications can help you manage nicotine withdrawal symptoms and cope with the urge to smoke. Consult your VA health care provider to decide which type of medication, or combination of medications, will work best for you.
- **Counseling**: A health care provider or counselor also can help you make behavioral changes to break free of tobacco. Tobacco cessation counseling involves talking about your tobacco use and the role it plays in your daily routine. For example: If you smoke with your morning coffee, your counselor may suggest drinking your coffee in a smoke-free environment, such as a restaurant or workplace kitchen, or switching to tea instead.

Did you know that quitting tobacco is the single most important thing you can do to improve your health and protect the health of your family members? Of Veterans who have ever smoked and who are enrolled in VA health care, 71 percent have successfully quit smoking, showing that quitting is possible, especially with a treatment plan that includes counseling and medication. Let Butler VA Health Care System help you quit!
**VA’s Public Health Approach to Suicide Prevention**

*We can all do something.*

At **VA**, preventing suicide among the nation’s 20 million Veterans is one of our top priorities, and we recognize that we can’t do it alone. Only about half of Veterans use VA services, and only one-third received VA health care in the past year. By taking a public health approach to suicide prevention, VA has broadened its focus to reach all Veterans, even those who do not — and may never — seek care within our health system.

The public health approach to suicide prevention is about more than improving access to mental health care. It is about delivering resources and support to Veterans earlier, before they reach a crisis point. Preventing Veteran suicide requires a collective effort within VA facilities and among community partners, which is why VA is building partnerships and empowering the people who interact with Veterans every day to provide lifesaving support.

Watch this video to learn more about VA’s Public Health Approach to Suicide Prevention: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=U1I02OQoWBs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U1I02OQoWBs).

And remember, you don’t need to have special training to support the Veterans in your life. We all can do something to help a Veteran who is going through a difficult time. Even seemingly small actions, can have a huge impact.

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**Helping Student Veterans through VITAL**

The **Butler VA** Health Care System and Slippery Rock University (SRU) are partnering to better serve student Veterans through a program called Veterans Integration to Academic Leadership, or VITAL. With VITAL, Butler VA staff will make regular campus visits to better serve student Veterans and refer them to VA services. In addition to directly serving student Veterans, part of the VITAL program also is to meet with and educate faculty and staff in their support of student Veterans.

There are similar VITAL programs across the country, but the Butler VA’s initiative is the only such VA outreach program in Pennsylvania and the Butler VA is in the process of serving other colleges and universities as well.

The Butler VA and SRU have partnered before for events such as the annual Salute to Military and First Responders at SRU home football games. Additionally, SRU was one of the first institutions to offer Telehealth programs to its student Veterans through the Butler VA.

For more information about the VITAL initiative, contact 1-800-362-8262 (ext. 6164 or 6119).

Check out the recent article by SRU Writer Justin Zackal at [www.sru.edu/news](http://www.sru.edu/news) to learn more about this program.
**Telephone Lifestyle Coaching – Coming Soon!**

**With Telephone Lifestyle Coaching (TLC), Veterans can connect, one-on-one, with a health and wellness coach over the phone to help them achieve important health goals. Veterans choose the goals they would like to work on—including striving for a healthy weight, eating wisely, being physically active, limiting alcohol, and managing stress.**

To learn more, contact the Butler VA’s local TLC site lead at 1-878-271-6484.

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**Virtual Flu Clinic Now Available**

**Do you have** a fever, headache, cough or sore throat? Does your body ache, and are you feeling tired or weak? Would you like your symptoms evaluated without leaving your home or office?

If you are experiencing flu-like symptoms, turn to us for a prompt diagnosis and comprehensive care. We’ll provide you with individualized treatment recommendations based on your unique needs, and we’ll even phone in a prescription to the pharmacy.

For more information about treating your flu symptoms or to speak with one of our experienced nurses, contact us for a same day, virtual appointment. We’re available Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., and no co-pay is required. Call 1-800-362-8262 and press 3.

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**Lyme Disease Post-Exposure Prophylaxis Clinic for Veterans**

**Spring is here!** With Spring and warmer weather, come ticks. There is more tick-borne disease in Pennsylvania than any other state in America according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (and Butler County has had the highest number of Lyme Disease cases the last two years in a row!). The Butler VA can help! If you have been bitten by a tick, the Butler VA’s Pharmacy offers a Lyme Disease Post-Exposure Prophylaxis Clinic for Veterans. A VA Pharmacist will walk you through the simple process to evaluate your need to start preventative treatment within 72 hours of tick removal. If needed, medicine may be prescribed to help prevent the onset of Lyme Disease.

If you are bitten by a tick, contact your Primary Care Team or the Pharmacy Department today.
Go Red

One in three women die from cardiovascular diseases and stroke each year, killing about one woman every 80 seconds. Ninety percent of women have one or more risk factors for heart disease or stroke. The Butler VA joined the American Heart Association again this past February to Go Red for Women. We encourage women Veterans to take control of their heart health by adopting heart-healthy habits to lower their risk of heart disease.

On National Wear Red Day® (February 1, 2019), the Butler VA hosted its annual Winter Women's Wellness Event just for women Veterans. This annual event provides an opportunity for women Veterans to learn more about their health, specifically heart health as well as the many programs and resources available at the Butler VA to support them. Most women tend to put others ahead of themselves. But, we want women to make their health a priority, and we can help them do so!

This event also provides women Veterans a chance to relax and enjoy camaraderie with other women Veterans. This year’s event included a painting activity (gratitude rocks), an interactive recipe activity, a light lunch, and more.

VA provides a whole health approach to care that treats the entire woman, not just the symptoms. Because early heart disease may not cause any symptoms, VA encourages women Veterans to get regular checkups with their providers and to know their numbers. Talk to the Butler VA’s Women Veterans Healthcare Program Manager today for any questions or concerns you have about your heart (or overall) health: 1-800-362-8262, ext. 6989.

www.butler.va.gov/services/women

Veterans Serving Veterans

VA operates one of the largest health care systems in the U.S. VA employs highly trained professionals who are dedicated to providing quality health care to Veterans, and many are Veterans themselves! Currently, over 30% of VA Butler Healthcare’s employees are Veterans.

“I chose to work at the VA because after 20 years in the Navy, I felt my experience would best serve the Veteran community and I love interacting with my fellow Veterans.”

Hey Veterans! Share your stories with us in Vet Chat. Email Amanda.Kurtz2@va.gov. We’d love to hear from you!
Influenza (flu) is a contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses. Think you know all there is to know about the flu? Test your knowledge below. And remember, the best way to prevent flu is by getting vaccinated each year.

1. A flu vaccine can’t give you the flu.
   a. True   b. False

2. The “stomach flu” and influenza are the same thing.
   a. True   b. False

3. Getting a flu vaccine in December or later is not too late.
   a. True   b. False

4. Flu viruses change constantly, which requires a new flu vaccine to be produced each year.
   a. True   b. False

5. Washing your hands is the best thing you can do to protect against the flu.
   a. True   b. False

6. The flu is typically spread through coughs and/or sneezes.
   a. True   b. False

7. The flu is not a serious illness.
   a. True   b. False

8. You can spread the flu to others before you have symptoms.
   a. True   b. False

Correct Answers:
1) A  2) B  3) A  4) A  5) B  6) A  7) B  8) A

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
HEALTH TECH – TAKE CONTROL OF YOUR SLEEP ONLINE
Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Insomnia (CBT-i)

The beginning of the year is the perfect time for a fresh start, and one of the best ways to begin is by getting a good night’s rest.

Difficulty sleeping is a serious issue. The lack of sleep and constant fatigue affects your everyday life and can contribute to mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and even suicidal thoughts.

Sleep disorders include a range of symptoms and types, such as narcolepsy, shift work disorder, and sleep apnea. Insomnia — difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep long enough to get sufficient rest — is one of the most common sleep challenges among Veterans. Research shows that over 90 percent of active duty personnel with PTSD have insomnia that is considered clinically significant, and about half of all Veterans who are enrolled in VA care have significant insomnia symptoms.

If you think you may have insomnia, consider using the Path to Better Sleep (PTBS) — a free, self-guided online course. Path to Better Sleep was developed by experts in web design and insomnia treatment, in addition to feedback from Veteran mentors. It is different from tips for better sleep that are commonly found online. It uses a specific technique called Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Insomnia (CBT-i) that is proven to be highly effective in treating insomnia.

PTBS can be completed — anonymously — in six weeks. It can be used as a stand-alone treatment or in combination with treatment from a health care provider.

Features of the course include:
• Accessibility on desktops as well as mobile devices
• A Sleep Check-Up screening tool, when you’re not sure if you have insomnia or a different sleep disorder
• A user-friendly sleep diary for tracking important sleep data, such as total sleep time and sleep efficiency, to help you understand personal sleep patterns
• A personalized sleep plan, based on your diary entries, that you can adjust as needed
• The ability to take the course at your own pace and revisit content

After completing CBT-i, one participant noted, “I am more alert. I am not cranky.” Another said, “I rest better than I used to.” To learn more about the benefits to participants, check out this video, and join them on the path to better sleep today. To access the course, visit www.veterantraining.va.gov/insomnia.

PTBS was created by VA’s Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention (OMHSP) in collaboration with the Durham VA Center of Innovation to Accelerate Discovery and Practice Transformation (ADAPT) and the VISN 6 Mental Illness Research, Education and Clinical Centers (MIRECC).
Health Tastes – Fluffy Peanut Butter Dip

Ingredients

- 1/3 c of creamy light peanut butter
- 1 container light vanilla Greek yogurt
- 1/2 c thawed, frozen light whipped topping
- apple wedges, strawberries, celery sticks, pretzel or graham crackers sticks

Serving size = 2 Tbsp

Directions

Place peanut butter and yogurt in a small bowl and whisk until smooth. Add whipped topping to the peanut mixture and mix well. Serve with your choice of dippers.

Tip: Add 1 Tbsp cocoa powder for a chocolate peanut butter dip.

Source: VA Nutrition and Food Services

Fat: 4g ★ Calories: 64 ★ Carbohydrates: 6g ★ Protein: 3g

Crossword

Consider Starting a Crossword Puzzle Habit

Each December 21 is National Crossword Puzzle Day, in honor of the first crossword puzzle published on December 21, 1913, in the New York World Newspaper. Today crosswords are available online, in daily newspapers, in countless puzzle books, and in our quarterly Butler VA Magazine!

Research suggests crosswords may provide many benefits for your mental and physical wellbeing, so consider starting a new (healthy) habit – Crossword Puzzles!

HEALTH TIP—DE-STRESS WITH MEDITATION

The bad weather, work, the upcoming tax season...if you find yourself stressing a lot this winter, try meditation. In addition to stress-relief, meditation also may help lower blood pressure, boost immunity, and more. The Butler VA offers meditation classes; learn more by calling 1-878-271-6484.

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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 25,000 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. The Butler VA provides comprehensive Veteran care including primary, specialty and mental health care – as well as management of chronic conditions and social support services for our nation’s finest, America's Veterans.