Aleda E. Lutz VA in Saginaw Shares State of the VA Facility-Specific Information

The Aleda E. Lutz VA Medical Center in Saginaw, Michigan, is excited to share information on initiatives and programs intended to improve the Veteran experience at the Medical Center, or one of its nine Community Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs) currently located in Alpena, Bad Axe, Cadillac, Cheboygan County, Clare, Gaylord, Grayling, Oscoda, and Traverse City.

“This week, Veterans Affairs Secretary David Shulkin clearly stated the challenges facing the Department of Veterans Affairs, during a briefing at the White House. Let me explain what is happening here, at the Aleda E. Lutz VA Medical Center in Saginaw and our CBOCs to improve care and services to our Veterans," stated Dr. Ginny Creasman, Medical Center Director.

Quality of Care - Currently, the Aleda E. Lutz VA Medical Center is rated a 5-Star facility, which is the highest rating possible, on a VA measure of quality patient care across inpatient and outpatient service.

Greater Choice for Veterans - Through the Choice Program, we currently have attained 293 signed Provider Agreements across 35 counties. This includes multiple health care systems which employ diverse health care providers such as Munson Healthcare, McLaren Health Care Corporation, Mid-Michigan Health, Ascension Health, and Covenant Healthcare. Approximately 713 additional provider agreement packages have been sent and are currently under consideration with healthcare providers and organizations throughout Northern and Eastern Michigan. In addition, the required annual renewal of provider agreements is ongoing. Approximately 250 additional provider agreement packages will be sent throughout Northern and Eastern Michigan. Across the State of Michigan there are 1,168 available provider agreements for use, including multiple Health Care Systems.

Infrastructure Updates – The VA is nearing completion of parking lot construction near the Community Living Center, as well as a new pavilion which will provide a welcoming venue for Veterans to enjoy recreational activities, along with volunteers, visitors, and employees. Soon the main medical center will undergo several months of renovations.
to each floor, upgrading walls and flooring, restructuring space, and more. The Community Living Center’s Palliative Care Unit is currently undergoing construction to allow for private bathrooms, with a future goal of all inpatient rooms and bathrooms being private as well. Additionally, we are in the process of selecting a site in Traverse City to construct a new 22,000 foot Community Based Outpatient Clinic.

**Modernize Our Systems** – The VA continues to enhance information technology and processes. The following provide highlights of a few of those initiatives:

- **Vista Scheduling Enhancements (VSE)** provides a resource management dashboard, an aggregated clinical schedule and a single queue of request lists. The Veteran should experience better access due to better utilization of provider resources, reduction of no-shows, and better continuity of care without loss of continuity of information, or unacceptable delays due to administrative issues.

- **Veteran Appointment Request (VAR)** enables Veterans to self-schedule primary care appointments and request assistance in booking both primary care and mental health appointments. VAR app is an easy tool for Veterans to self-schedule routine primary care visits and request mental health support via most internet connected devices such as laptops, tablets, or mobile phones. VAR is now available at more than 60 VA locations, and positive feedback is starting to roll in. U.S. Marine Veteran and VA employee Gerry Carbone says it is, “a great addition to the resources that Veterans have to schedule and keep track of appointments.” To learn more about VAR, check out the app and its related resources at [https://mobile.va.gov/app/veteran-appointment-request](https://mobile.va.gov/app/veteran-appointment-request).

- **Medical Appointment Scheduling System (MASS)**, is a commercial-off-the-shelf (COTS) outpatient medical appointment scheduling solution. If deployed, MASS would replace the VistA Scheduling application. MASS is currently being piloted, and will be evaluated alongside the current VistA through VSE.

- **Beneficiary Travel (Travel Cost Reimbursement for Veterans)** - We are enhancing the Beneficiary Travel System which will streamline the request, processing and timeliness of processing Beneficiary Travel for the Veteran; reducing the timeframe from request to payment.

- **Consult Tracking** - We have initiated use of a Consult Tracking Manager to facilitate tracking and processing of patient appointments and are averaging two days to schedule a consult after receipt of the consult.

- **Dedicated Call Lines** - We have successfully created call lines within all Community Based Outpatient Clinics, allowing Veterans to directly contact their Community Based Outpatient Clinic during business hours, which promotes Veteran satisfaction and enhances individualized customer service.

**Focus Resources More Efficiently through Accountability and Speed of Hiring:**
**Accountability** - Accountability of employees and staffing vacant positions are high priority issues for Medical Center Leadership. They engage in proactive rounding and actively respond to risks or concerns identified by employees, Veterans, and other stakeholders to evaluate and address them as appropriate. Some issues are determined to be opportunities for improvement when processes can be changed to create a better experience for our Veteran patients. Others can involve corrective measures with employees, which in some instances may result in disciplinary action. The resulting actions for those that rise to the level of discipline will vary depending on items such as the egregiousness of the action, employees past discipline, and other potentially mitigating factors. For Fiscal Year 2017, the Medical Center had 22 instances which warranted disciplinary action. Another aspect of accountability is employee performance. Leadership is currently engaged in a project to strengthen the performance program at the facility. Performance training is being given to assist managers and supervisors of the Medical Center. The training helps managers and supervisors determine appropriate performance measures, how to reward good performance, and how to address underperforming employees.

**Staffing** - Strategic recruitment is another significant focal point. In order to fill positions more efficiently and meet legal requirements, the Medical Center is piloting the “Hire Right Hire Fast” process. This process is a proactive approach where positions are announced and candidates are ranked in anticipation of a future vacancy. The Medical Center is currently testing the process with Medical Support Assistants and in the early stages of a trial “Hire Right Hire Fast” process for Saginaw Primary Care Registered Nurse positions. Traditionally positions are announced after a vacancy exists, with the applicant selected following an announcement period, and then the pre-employment process is completed prior to starting. Using the “Hire Right Hire Fast” process, several steps will be completed prior to a position becoming vacant, in turn reducing the time a position is vacant.

All Community Based Outpatient Clinics currently have physicians on board or in-processing. Additionally, a Gynecologist was brought on board at the VA Medical Center. These efforts continue to decrease travel time for Veterans by providing care closer to their homes. Recruitment efforts are ongoing for many clinical positions to ensure we are providing quality, safe care to Veterans whenever possible.

**Improve Timeliness of Services** – We continue on a daily basis to create access for Veterans to obtain the care they need when they need it. Currently, 97 percent of the time, we schedule Veterans within 30 days of their preferred/requested date across all clinical services. The average wait time for Primary Care is two and a half (2.5) days or less. The average wait time for Mental Health is two (2) days or less. The average wait time for Specialty Medical Services is five (5) days or less. The Access and Quality Tool can be found at [www.accesstocare.va.gov](http://www.accesstocare.va.gov)
We now have same day services available for Primary Care and Mental Health. This care may be delivered as a face-to-face appointment, telephone, secure message, or telemedicine/virtual care appointment.

We have increased Veterans’ ability to directly request, schedule, and receive Optometry and Audiology appointments. Our VA will pilot direct scheduling with Podiatry and Nutrition services in the near future. Direct scheduling eliminates the requirement to coordinate these types of services through their Primary Care clinic.

We have improved Audiology access by providing group education and instruction regarding hearing aids.

We are a national leader in the provision of clinics via tele medicine technology, ranging from Primary Care to Mental Health, Audiology, Dermatology, and Retinal exams; this allows us to easily reach more Veterans across our 35 counties and reduces Veteran travel.

**Suicide Prevention** The Suicide Prevention Program is currently staffed by a Suicide Prevention Coordinator and Suicide Prevention Case Manager. The program currently case-manages an average of 45 Veterans identified as high-risk for suicide. The Veterans who are on the high-risk list receive enhanced care to include four follow-up visits within 30 days of discharge from an inpatient hospitalization and/or placement of a high-risk flag, safety planning (a crisis management plan developed with the Veteran and the provider), means restriction counseling (with a focus on firearm safety), and telephonic contact by the Suicide Prevention Team. The facility has been very engaged in the REACH VET Program which utilizes data to identify Veterans at high risk for suicide, notifies VA providers of risk, and allows providers to reevaluate the Veteran’s care which has resulted in re-engaging several Veterans into mental health care. The facility has 100% of employees trained in “Operation Save” which is a gatekeeper program intended to train all staff how to act with care and compassion if they encounter a Veteran who is in suicidal crisis. The facility truly embraces the philosophy that suicide prevention is everyone’s business in the care they provide Veterans and the collaborative manner for which they engage with the facility’s Suicide Prevention Program.

It is important we help as many Veterans as possible to prevent suicides. One such effort is “Getting to Zero” where VA will engage our community partners in reaching out to Veterans in crisis and helping them get care through the VA or help them obtain care in a community health care facility. Recently, the VA has changed eligibility for Veterans who are in emotional crisis. Any Veteran, regardless of their type of discharge on their DD-214, can and will be treated for an emotional, mental health crisis at any VA facility. However, this change in eligibility applies to mental health needs only.

“As you can see, the VA staff have been very busy working on these programs to make a difference in the care of the Veteran, as well as employee development and work satisfaction. We are truly proud of our accomplishments, with many more on the
horizon. It is our priority to do whatever we can to continue to serve the men and women who served with dignity, respect, and compassion,” stated Dr. Ginny Creasman.

The Aleda E. Lutz VAMC in Saginaw, Michigan operates an 81-bed skilled nursing and rehabilitation Community Living Center, with an additional 8-bed acute medicine and telemetry wing. It provides care to over 35,400 Veterans in a 35-county geographic area, from mid-Michigan to the Mackinac Bridge. Veterans also receive care at one of our nine VA Community Based Outpatient Clinics located throughout Michigan. More information about this VA can be found at www.saginaw.va.gov.

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