

How vets can navigate the health care system in and out of the VA

Due to their service, veterans and their health care needs hold a special place in the heart of this country. Men and women who have worn the uniform face special challenges in finding, accessing and using our current health care systems.

It's a popular belief that most veterans receive their health care from the U.S. Veterans Administration, or VA. And indeed the VA is vast. America's largest integrated health care system provides care at 1,298 health care facilities, including 171 medical centers and 1,113 outpatient sites, serving 9 million enrolled veterans each year.

Veterans now make up only 5% of the population, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. A study by the Rand Corporation, revealed that fewer than half of eligible veterans use VA health benefits. Those who do not use the VA, most likely seek non-military health care providers. Yet, a small study of primary care physicians in 2015 indicated that most of the doctors didn't ask patients whether they had served in the military.

So, whether you're a veteran yourself or your loved one is, it's important to let doctors know of your military background when seeking treatment. Why? Because military service can have a lifelong impact on a person's physical and mental wellbeing.

For example, here are just some of the factors that might affect the health of a someone who served in Afghanistan, according to the VA.

- Toxic chemicals or other hazardous materials in the environment, including sand, dust and burn pits.

- Extreme heat and cold, noise and explosions.

- Infectious diseases, such as salmonella and malaria.

While advances in combat medicine has saved many lives, they also may result in amputations and other disfiguring surgeries. In addition, the VA says that one in three VA patients is diagnosed with at least one mental health disorder, including post-traumatic stress disorder



Veterans now make up only 5% of the population, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. A study by the Rand Corporation, revealed that fewer than half of eligible veterans use VA health benefits.

(PTSD). To help them cope, many develop substance abuse disorders and a large number of those ultimately take their own lives.

You can see then why your civilian health care provider should know about these factors when they are diagnosing and treating physical or mental illnesses and prescribing medications. The American Medical Association is advocating for more education and training of medical personnel in veterans' health issues, but you have to speak up.

If you're advocating for a

veteran's health care, here are some things to keep in mind.

Take advantage of VA resources. For example, the VA offers a Veterans Crisis Line (dial 988 and press 1) for every veteran, whether or not they're enrolled with the VA or receiving benefits. Free, confidential support is offered 24/7 to not only veterans, but also active service members, National Guard and Reserve members and those who support them. Through the Crisis Line you can be connected to local resources.

Use the Veterans Choice

program. One criticism of the VA is long wait times for appointments. The purpose of the Choice Program is to give veterans faster access to health care through the private sector. You have to be enrolled with the VA and facing constraints such as a long wait time or distance to a VA facility.

Stay up on the news. An illness you're suffering from today may have had its roots decades ago. For example, in August, President Biden signed the PACT ("Honoring Our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics") Act, which expands access to health care for veterans who were exposed to burn pits and subsequently diagnosed with rare cancers and respiratory illnesses. The PACT Act also allows those who were exposed to toxic water supplies at Camp Lejeune,

North Carolina, between 1953 and 1987 to file claims against the government. You may have seen actor, activist and political commentator Jon Stewart lobbying for it on his Apple TV program "The Problem," social media and on the steps of the Capitol.

Use a patient advocate. The VA has patient advocates in all of its health care facilities to help vets frustrated with the quality or pace of their care. A private patient advocate with knowledge of the VA system may also help.

Source: Teri Dreher, RN, is the daughter of a career Marine who devoted his life to protecting his country. A critical care nurse for more than 35 years, she is the founder of NShore Patient Advocates, northshore.com.

SENIOR HOUSING NOTES

Centennial veteran

Bernie Nash has achieved a lot in his long life. The resident of Smith Crossing in Orland Park — who turns 100 on Nov. 7 — served in the U.S. Navy during World War II, then later served in the Naval Reserves from 1949 until 1989 when he retired as a rear admiral.

While in the reserves, Nash acted as deputy commissioner for the Office on Aging for the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare (now Health and Human Services). He also served as executive director of the American Association of Retired People (AARP) from 1976 to 1982.

Last year, Nash was honored with the President's Volunteer Service Lifetime Achievement Award — the highest honor a civilian can receive for founding the Foster Grandparent Program. Since the program's inception in 1965, seniors have volunteered more than 30 million hours helping children in school.

Honoring veterans

Veterans and their service to our nation are recognized yearly around at Terra Vista's all-inclusive memory care assisted living community in Oakbrook Terrace. A dedicated Veterans Wall on each floor of the building honors those who served via pictures of both residents and staff members in uniform.

This year, there will be a special event staged in the InnerWalk Courtyard to celebrate Veterans Day. Residents will be treated to patriotic music and refreshments while veterans are honored via a special photo opportunity. Colorful picture frames decorated by residents will feature the American flag; red, white, and blue stars; and a big Thank You.

Veterans exhibit

This year for Veterans Day, GreenFields of Geneva will

celebrate its veterans through a new permanent exhibit.

Professional photographer David Barnes will take pictures of each veteran living in the community, including his dad, Harry, who is a veteran. The Life Enrichment department of GreenFields will compile a brief bio of each veteran to accompany the photo.

Barnes, whose parents live at GreenFields, was inspired by a news story about a project named Portraits of Honor that features photographs of hundreds of World War II veterans.

"Posting veterans' photos along the hallways will remind residents of the selfless work these vets have done for our country. If nothing else, it will give them a little more insight into their neighbors' histories and perhaps make dinner conversations a little more rich," says Barnes. "We don't want to lose those histories just because time has passed and memories are fading."

Memory arts cafe

Recently, Caledonia Senior Living & Memory Care in North Riverside launched its monthly Memory Arts Cafe program led by Gary Glazner, founder of the Alzheimer's Poetry Project. Each monthly event includes an artist leading participants through interactive exercises using the method of call and response to recite poems and songs with those dealing with Alzheimer's.

These memory cafés emphasize simple poetry techniques and how they can be combined with dance, exercise, music, storytelling and visual art to facilitate a new and positive way of communicating with people in all stages of dementia. Upcoming sessions will be held at 10:30 a.m. and 2 p.m. Nov. 22 and Dec. 27. For more information, call 708-447-5092 or visit caledoniaseniorliving.org.

Fall fun

Residents at Villa St. Benedict



Above: Bernie Nash is a World War II U.S. Navy veteran who turns 100 on Nov. 7. Below, left to right: Terra Vista is honoring its veteran residents with a special photo opportunity. Caledonia Senior Living & Memory care recently launched its Memory Arts Cafe program.



in Lisle kept busy this fall with activities as part of National Assisted Living Week in September. The week kicked off with a tropical vibe as the band Callaloo performed a steel drum concert. Residents walked around



to the 2nd annual Veterans Day Car Show, complete with live entertainment and ice cream. Other activities during the week included a performance by M&M Dance Group, a game day

and a fall fashion show. The week concluded with the 9th Annual Alzheimer's Walk. Residents created inspirational signs that were posted along the route. Funds raised went to the Alzheimer's Association.