



**2013**

**ANNUAL REPORT**

VA Wilkes-Barre Annual Report

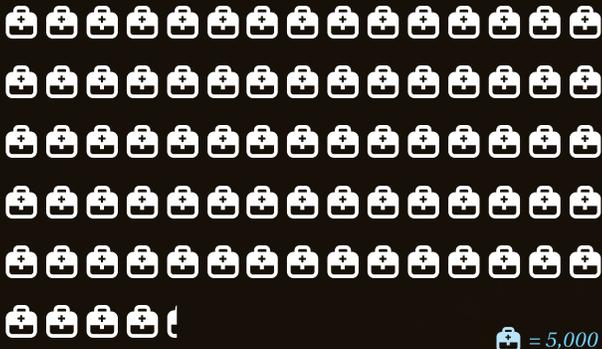
*Medical Care Budget*

**\$245,206,000**

<i>Facilities</i>	<b>\$18,144,000</b>
<i>Administrative</i>	<b>\$15,868,000</b>
<i>Non-Recurring Maintenance</i>	<b>\$27,229,000</b>
<i>Medical Services</i>	<b>\$183,960,000</b>

Outpatient Visits

**396,746**



by Location

Wilkes Barre  
**280,111**

Allentown  
**71,546**

Sayre  
**19,436**

Williamsport  
**15,071**

Tobyhanna  
**1,454**

Berwick  
**4,124**

Northampton  
**4,913**

Unique Patients



**39,168**

Full-Time Employees



**1,115.3**

**1,879**

Women  
Veterans

**3,115**

OEF/OEF/OND  
Patients

**170**

RN Full-Time

**90**

MD Full-Time

Veterans Using Telehealth Modalities



Home Telehealth

**776**

Clinical Video Telehealth

**1,019**

Store and Forward Telehealth

**4,853**

Secure Messaging

**6,361**

E-Consults

**246**

Remodeled Space (FY2013)



**60,000 SQ. FT.**

**\$ 40M**

in Maintenance  
Projects Awarded

2013

**ANNUAL REPORT**



1111 East End Boulevard  
Wilkes-Barre, PA 18711-0026  
Call (570) 824-3521  
or Toll Free at 1-877-928-2621

[www.wilkes-barre.va.gov](http://www.wilkes-barre.va.gov)

Visit any one of our  
sites of care:

**Allentown Outpatient Clinic**

3110 Hamilton Blvd.  
Allentown, PA 18103  
(610) 776-4304  
Toll Free: 1-866-249-6472

**Sayre Outpatient Clinic**

1537 Elmira St.  
Sayre, PA 18840  
(570) 888-6803  
Toll Free: 1-877-470-0920

**Northampton Outpatient Clinic**

Phoebe Slate Belt Nursing Home &  
Rehabilitation Center  
701 Slate Belt Blvd.  
Bangor, PA 18013-9341  
(610) 599-0127

**Tobyhanna Outpatient Clinic**

Tobyhanna Army Depot, Bldg. 220  
Tobyhanna, PA 18466  
(570) 615-8341

**Columbia County Outpatient Clinic**

Alley Medical Center  
301 West Third St.  
Berwick, PA 18603  
(570) 759-0351

**Williamsport Outpatient Clinic**

Campus of Divine Providence Hospital  
Werner Bldg. 3rd Floor, Suite 304  
1705 Warren Ave.  
Williamsport, PA 17701  
(570) 322-4791

Photography by Edward T. Shudak  
and Larkin Harris.

**Like Us:**

[www.facebook.com/VAWilkesBarre](http://www.facebook.com/VAWilkesBarre)



*Being homeless, or at risk of homelessness, is one of the most difficult things any Veteran can face.*



Veterans in on-site transitional housing garden and cook meals with their home-grown produce.

## REACHING OUT TO HOMELESS VETERANS

Community and national partnerships make a difference for Vets needing shelter.

The Wilkes-Barre VA Medical Center, and VA as a whole, offers a wealth of resources to help homeless Veterans. Wilkes-Barre VA is helping to meet Secretary of Veterans' Affairs Eric K. Shinseki's goal of ending homelessness among Veterans by 2015.

"During 2013, we hired two additional workers to increase our outreach to homeless Veterans," explains William "Bill" Mericle, Chief of Wilkes-Barre VA's Social Work Service. "We're very aggressive in going out into our communities to look for them. There are not too many Veterans out there we don't know about."

Wilkes-Barre's task would be impossible without the assistance and cooperation of many community agencies. In the last few years, Mericle estimates that the facility and its outpatient clinics worked with approximately 600 homeless Veterans. The facility's staff receives referrals from many sources, both within and outside the VA system, including the VA National Homeless Hotline that Veterans can access at all times.

In 2013, Wilkes-Barre received 25 additional vouchers under the Department of Housing and Urban Development-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) program, bringing the total number of vouchers the facility administers to 160. Under the program, HUD provides VA with housing vouchers for homeless Veterans and their families, allowing them to rent privately-owned

housing. VA provides these Veterans with health care and other supportive services. Since the inception of this program, the medical center has placed more than 150 Veterans in permanent housing.

Wilkes-Barre also expanded its Compensated Work Therapy (CWT) program from 10 to 15 slots in 2013. CWT is a vocational rehabilitation program that matches and supports work-ready Veterans in competitive jobs, and consults with business and industry about specific employment needs. Two Wilkes-Barre VA staff members help homeless Veterans find jobs by taking them to interviews, helping them prepare resumes, and offering other help.

"Every day, homeless Veterans come in, and we do what we need to do for them," explains Mericle. "Communities know to call us if they find a homeless Veteran, and we are always looking for ways to improve our outreach, and make our staff more productive."

"We've put every voucher to use," he continues. "We've put many Veterans and their families into housing, and in a pinch we can put people in shelters or hotels. We help Veterans get around and get to employment through transportation vouchers."

"We've definitely made a difference," he concludes.



*We've definitely made a difference.*



**William Mericle**  
Chief of Social Work Service



WBVAMC hosted the first Mental Health Summit in September of 2013 which brought together many community agencies and stakeholders to start a dialogue of how to improve Veterans' mental health and well-being.



*Approximately 92% of Wilkes-Barre patients now have mental health treatment coordinators.*

## MAKING QUALITY MENTAL HEALTH CARE MORE AVAILABLE

Wilkes-Barre makes significant progress in caring for patients with mental health diagnoses.

In August 2012, President Obama issued an executive order aimed at improving access to mental health services for Veterans, service members, and military families. According to Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki, VA made "strong progress" to expand Veterans' access to quality mental health services in 2013. The Wilkes-Barre VA Medical Center is at the forefront of that effort.

According to Timothy Lomauro, PhD, Chief of Psychology Service, Wilkes-Barre has made significant progress in meeting VA's requirement that all patients admitted to acute psychiatric care units receive follow-up calls or visits within seven days after their discharge from the hospital. At the beginning of Fiscal Year 2012, the facility was not meeting VA's performance goal in this area: now, the percentage of patients receiving follow up is the highest in VISN 4.

During Fiscal Year 2013, Wilkes-Barre established the psychology service as a separate entity. Psychology staff increased at the hospital, the Community Living Center, and at the Allentown Outpatient Clinic. The hospital also hired its first marriage and family therapist, John Cattich, PhD, to support Veterans, their spouses, and families who are having difficulties in their marriages or family life.

In October 2013, Wilkes-Barre established four Behavioral Health Interdisciplinary Program (BHIP) teams: teams of professionals focused on every aspect of a Veteran's mental health care, with the Veteran himself or herself at the center. These teams, which are similar to VA's Patient Aligned Care (PACT) teams for primary care, include

a registered nurse, a licensed practical nurse, a clerk, a psychologist, a social worker, and a psychiatrist.

The teams use face-to-face appointments, secure messaging, telehealth technologies, and an interdisciplinary approach to engage Veterans with mental health issues in decisions about their care. One of Wilkes-Barre's teams was selected to represent VISN 4 in VA's national collaborative for the program. "It's a nice recognition for our team," explains Lomauro.

In 2014, says Lomauro, Wilkes-Barre hopes to fully implement the BHIP program, and to continue to improve access to care using telehealth. The facility will work remotely with the VISN 4 telehealth hub, based in Pittsburgh, and with a psychiatrist based at VA's New York Harbor Health Care System, who will work half time with facility staff.

"We've extended the ability of mental health patients to access our care," he concludes. We also now have 'open access' in our psychiatry service. Veterans can now walk in to the service between 8 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. without an appointment, and can still be seen."



*We're really making improvements in our patients' abilities to access mental health care—and we want them to be aware of what we're doing.*

**Dr. Timothy Lomauro, Ph.D.**  
Chief of Psychology Services

Throughout the next 5-7 years, virtually every clinical space in the Wilkes-Barre VA Medical Center will be renovated to provide a healing environment for Veterans. The facility completed renovations on 60,000 square feet of the facility in fiscal year 2013.

**2013**

# Construction Time

**FEB. 2013**



## **PATRIOT BREW CAFÉ**

The new Patriot Brew Café opened near the main entrance in February 2013. The new café not only enhanced amenities for visitors, but also created a more homelike atmosphere in the main lobby to make Veterans more comfortable while waiting for rides home. In addition, complimentary Wi-Fi is now available in the café.

**JUNE 2013**

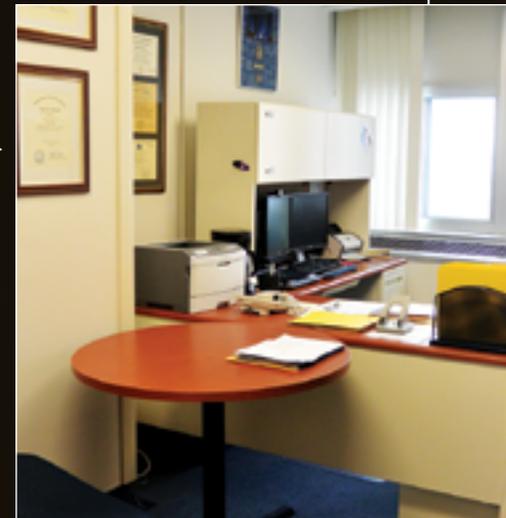


## **SLEEP LAB & SOCIAL WORK**

In June 2013, a brand-new, state-of-the-art sleep lab was opened on the eighth floor of the main building. The lab contains special equipment to measure sleep and other phenomena related to sleep, and has been described as the nicest overall facility of this kind in the region.

Renovations of the eighth floor also included providing renovated offices for Social Work Service.

**JULY 2013**



## **CONTRACTING**

Administrative areas on 6 west were renovated to provide office space for Contracting.

# line



**AUG. 2013**



## **BUILDING 2**

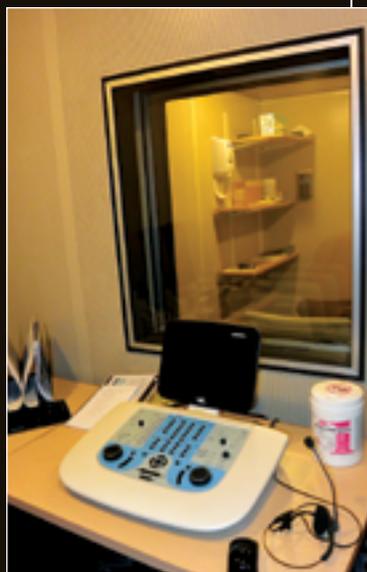
To provide additional administrative space for the medical center's Business Office, building 2 was renovated and reopened in August 2013.

**SEPT. 2013**

## **ULTRASOUND SUITE**

In mid-September of 2013, Wilkes-Barre opened a new suite to serve Veterans requiring ultrasound examinations on the second floor. The new suite allows the facility to expand its services, and provides patients with additional privacy.

**NOV. 2013**



## **AUDIOLOGY**

Audiology moved to the 8th floor in November of 2013. The brand new suite offers a waiting room and audiology booths that accommodate Veterans with disabilities.

**2014 & Later**



## **FUTURE UPGRADES AND EXPANSIONS**

Women's Clinic

Emergency Department

Blood Draw

Oncology

Compensation and Pension Suite

Voluntary Service Suite

Surgical Clinics

## STAYING IN TOUCH

Access to primary, specialty clinics improves for new and established patients

The Wilkes-Barre VA Medical Center is working hard to improve Veterans' access to both its primary and specialty care clinics. According to Bina Ahmed, MD, Chief of Primary Care, "if an established patient (someone who has already been seen at Wilkes-Barre) walks in to our hospital or our clinics and wants to be seen the same day, we never refuse to give them an appointment."

In 2013, the facility set aside two appointment slots every day in each primary care provider's schedule exclusively for the use of new patients. "Every provider now sees two new patients, every day," explains Ahmed. Newly enrolled Veterans now can be seen at an intake clinic exclusively for their use—and all newly enrolled Veterans are seen within two weeks of the day they wish to be seen.

Established patients who don't need to be seen on the same day they call are accommodated within seven days of the day they choose for outpatient visits.

Wilkes-Barre VA now offers group visits for smoking cessation, chronic pain, stress management, and sleep management. According to Ahmed, the facility is currently working to expand those group clinics.

Wilkes-Barre clinicians frequently offer the option of speaking by telephone with Veterans to answer questions about their health and to check in on how they are doing. Providers are encouraged to enroll Veterans in home telehealth programs, if the Veteran is interested. Patients with uncontrolled diabetes or blood pressure, and those with congestive heart failure or other illnesses can be closely monitored at home with specialized equipment, and can be called in to visit the medical center if their health status changes.

Like other VA facilities, Wilkes-Barre VA fully embraced a new way for Veterans to communicate with their primary care providers. Called Secure Messaging, a feature in VA's MyHealthVet web

portal ([www.myhealth.va.gov](http://www.myhealth.va.gov)), allows Veterans to send and receive electronic messages related to their health using a safe and secure system.

To use the system, Veterans need to "opt-in," or enroll, at the MyHealthVet portal, and have their identity authenticated in-person. "We started secure messaging two years ago," says Ahmed. "The Veterans who are enrolled really like it, and they use it a lot. We'd like to enroll more Veterans, though."

"Secure messaging is a very good means of communication," she continues. "I personally get lots of messages, and it's so easy to respond back quickly. It's a much faster process than even telephone consultations."



*VA's standard is to ensure the majority of our patients get an appointment with a specialist within fourteen days of referral from their primary care provider—and our numbers for October and November 2013 are very, very good!*

**Nabeela Mian, MD**  
Chief of Medical Services

Nabeela Mian, MD, Chief of the facility's Medical Service, explains how e-consults work. "If a primary care doctor has a simple question and the subspecialist does not need to see the patient to get more detailed information, the subspecialist can review the patient's record and answer the question right away. We complete the process within five working days."

"We look at our access data every month to see where delays are, and how we can improve our service. We do a very deep analysis to ensure we meet our access measures and plan to continue to keep very close watch over these things," she concludes.



*E-Consults allow primary care physicians to review patients' records with specialists electronically – keeping patients from having to travel to see those specialists in face-to-face visits.*

*Secure Messages Sent Using MyHealthVet*





Teleretinal cameras allow for a high-tech consultation through the telehealth program.

## BRINGING IT ALL BACK HOME

Telehealth programs move world-class care closer to patients

Telehealth, the delivery of health-related services through telecommunications technologies, makes a real difference in the lives of thousands of Wilkes-Barre VA patients.

New in 2013, according to Thomas Patts, Wilkes-Barre VA's telehealth coordinator, was the development of a communications link with the Parkinson's Disease Research, Education, and Clinical Center (PADRECC) at the Philadelphia VA Medical Center, "so that our patients with Parkinson's disease will not have to travel to Philadelphia." That link is not only available at Wilkes-Barre, but at all of the hospital's six community-based outpatient clinics (CBOCs).

Several Wilkes-Barre staff members have been trained by the PADRECC to provide clinical assessments, such as range of motion and gait assessments, to support the PADRECC's work. Some patients with Parkinson's disease are participating in a program called "IP to home," in which they use cameras on their home computers to communicate directly with specialists in Philadelphia.

In 2013, Wilkes-Barre also expanded tele-dermatology services to all of the facility's

CBOCs. In this program, specially trained readers quickly interpret dermatology images from remote locations. In addition, the facility is in the process of beginning participation in a "tele-mental health hub" within VISN 4. A new center located in Greentree, Pa. (a suburb of Pittsburgh) hired mental health professionals to provide services and additional resources to VISN 4 facilities.

In Fiscal Year 2014, the facility will be expanding its participation in VA's "IP to home" program. In a pilot program, six Veterans have installed software on their computers, called "JABBER," enabling them to take part in secure video discussions via their webcams with their health care providers. "This will be particularly useful for Veterans who work during the week, and have difficulty getting time off to visit their health care providers," explains Patts. "They can be seen via video instead."



*I would opt for that myself if I had the choice.*



**Thomas Patts**  
Telehealth Coordinator



*More than 5,000 Veterans participated in one or more telehealth modalities during Fiscal Year 2013.*



*The service hopes for significant increases in both the number of volunteers it has, and the amount of received donations.*



American Red Cross volunteers unload a donation of items valued at over \$4,000.00 in August of 2013.

## VOLUNTEERS MAKE IT HAPPEN!

Wilkes-Barre Volunteers donate time and money to support those who have served



*Our volunteers at Wilkes-Barre already give an amazing amount. They give more per person when compared to other facilities.*

**Gail Benner**  
Chief of Voluntary Service

VA's Voluntary Service Program is one of the largest centralized volunteer programs in the Federal Government. Volunteers enable VA to extend the scope and reach of the health care the Department provides and enhance the personalized service.

"The number of our regularly scheduled volunteers increased at our facility in Fiscal Year 2013," says Gail K. Benner, Wilkes-Barre's Chief of Voluntary Service. "Throughout the year, we had 515 volunteers give back to Veterans. "

"That's not counting our occasional volunteers, who gave us more than 6,000 hours of support this year," she continues. "The total number of volunteer hours were around 54,000-also an increase over Fiscal Year 2012." Giving each volunteer's work an hourly rate set by a private sector company, the value of Wilkes-Barre volunteers' work during the fiscal year exceeded \$1.2 million. Volunteers contributed the same amount of hours as 36 full-time employees.

During Fiscal Year 2013, the facility began an e-donate program, enabling those who wish to contribute to the medical center to support Veterans to do so online, safely and securely. Monetary donations to the medical center during the fiscal year exceeded \$76,000; the value of "gifts in kind" (actual goods and services donated to the facility) was

approximately \$106,000; and \$89,000 was given to sponsor activities such as bingos and parties.

"Our total donations exceeded \$272,000, which was incredible," Benner marvels. She notes that one of the largest donations during the year was a replacement van for the facility's DAV transportation program, one of 15 the program uses. "We're very grateful to DAV for providing that."

Besides regular volunteer recognition programs such as a banquet during Volunteer Recognition month, Voluntary Service began a new tradition in 2013 - to send each of its volunteers a thank you card on their birthday month.

The service hopes for significant increases in both the number of volunteers it has, and the amount of donations it receives.

Benner urges anyone interested in volunteering to call her office at 570-821-7237. She speaks to all prospective volunteers about their skills and abilities and what they hope to do at the medical center and then matches them with one of the many volunteer opportunities the hospital offers.

"We can always use more help," she concludes.



Staff and Veterans gather for a karaoke session in the Community Living Center.



*Over 23% of staff participated in staff engagement sessions, which will continue through 2015 until all staff attend.*

## CENTERING ON VETERANS' NEEDS

Making patient centered care a reality at Wilkes-Barre VA

The Department of Veterans Affairs is transforming the way in which it provides health care by becoming a system where VA health care facilities partner with Veterans to optimize their health in service of what matters to them. The Wilkes-Barre VA Medical Center is at the forefront of that transformation.

In 2013, Wilkes-Barre became one of the first facilities in VISN 4 to partner with the Office of Patient Centered Care and Cultural Transformation field-based implementation (FIT) team and complete a five-step cycle to patient centered care. The facility's executive leadership team first attended a four hour session to create a vision of "patient centered care" and committed themselves to bring that vision to reality.

Then the facility and FIT partners conducted hour-long information sessions to explain the concept to staff, volunteers, Veterans, and Veterans' family members to inspire them to get involved; organized focus groups to understand the facility's current status of care; and held leadership engagement sessions to prepare service chiefs and supervisors to lead the initiative and be champions of patient centered care.

The facility began holding day-long retreats, called "staff engagement sessions," to create an awareness of patient centered care among staff members and to inspire them to be part of the journey.

Finally, focus groups were held with Veterans and staff at the Wilkes-Barre facility and the Allentown Community Based Outpatient Clinic. These focus groups identified strengths and achievements as well as opportunities for improvement in the patient centered care cultural transformation.

"Many of the things we've done to improve patient centered care here come directly from the themes identified from the focus groups," explains Keri Frank,

Wilkes-Barre's Patient Centered Care coordinator.

Design charrettes for the new community living center and women's clinic enabled the facility to include the "voice of the Veteran" in the design of these two important facilities. In both cases, Veterans were invited to discuss what they wanted to see in the facilities, and to learn about the current status of the planning process.

Finally, Frank mentions the facility's use of Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) techniques, such as acupuncture; yoga; t'ai chi; and qigong, a Chinese practice of aligning breath, movement, and awareness for exercise, healing, and meditation. "Our use of CAM makes us stand out from other facilities," she explains.

In 2014, the facility will work to develop a long-term relationship with Planetree to secure their assistance as the facility progresses through the organization's "tiered recognition" process. Tiered recognition documents the level of patient centered care Wilkes-Barre provides using criteria developed by Planetree.

And next September, the facility's FIT partners will provide an independent review, including additional focus groups, of the progress the facility has made towards providing patient-centered care.



*I'm passionate about this process.*

**Keri Frank**

Patient Centered Care Coordinator





## A WRITER TO HER TOES

Veteran Kim Heartsong wins gold medal at 2013 VA Creative Arts Festival

The National Veterans Creative Arts Festival is the culmination of talent competitions at VA facilities throughout the nation in art, creative writing, dance, drama, and music for Veterans treated in VA's health care system. In the 2013 competition, Kimberly (Kim) L. Heartsong of Breinigsville, Pa. was awarded a gold medal for her humorous short story, "Red Toenail Polish."

The story highlights the difficulties of retaining a woman's femininity in the midst of combat while still being able to command male troops—a dilemma many female officers face.

"When I was a little kid, I wanted to be a writer," Kim, the fourth of five siblings, said. "I had my first story published in Highlights for Children in 1977. I also was a technical writer for the Air Force." Kim's only brother is a Navy Vietnam Veteran; her late father, a World War II Army Veteran, was a Purple Heart recipient and self-taught artist.

Kim's Air Force career also included work in the Air Force's meteorological section, helping NASA with space shuttle launches, and maintaining and refueling C-130s and helicopters. She took part in Operation Desert Storm and received the

Kuwait Liberation Medal. Kim retired in 2007 with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, and is now using her GI bill benefits to take writing and art classes at Moravian College in Bethlehem.

"A woman working with 500 men for twenty years has a lot of stories to tell," she explains. "My nieces would make me tell my war stories over, and over, and over again, so I kept them fresh in my memory."

Wilkes-Barre's 2014 competition begins in January and runs through March. It is run by the Recreation Therapy Department.

Kim is an accomplished artist as well as a writer, and hopes to make art her new career. "This is my next evolution," she explains. "I was showing pottery in North Carolina before I moved up here. I've knocked out some walls in my house to make an art studio. I hope to produce an art collection to sell by next Mother's Day."



*As someone once told me, the earth without art is just eh!*



**Kimberly Heartsong**

Creative Arts Festival Gold Medalist



*Besides her award-winning essay, Kim submitted two poems to the 2013 contest, which won the local Wilkes-Barre competition.*

