

FALL/WINTER 2009

VISION

FOR EXCELLENCE

A Rural Revolution

VISN 4 is quietly transforming the way that rural Veterans receive health care—and setting a new industry standard in the process.



LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR



Director Michael Moreland VISN 4's "Heroes at Heinz Field" event in September.

Dear Veterans, fellow employees, volunteers and friends of VISN 4:

In the past year, VISN 4 has been working hard to connect more Veterans than ever before with the VA health benefits that they have earned and deserve.

I am proud to say that this issue is bursting with examples of our recent successes. This September, we had VISN 4 teams stationed at Fort Dix Army Base in New Jersey, ready to catch members of the 56th Stryker Brigade hours after they returned from Iraq. Our staff made sure the soldiers had everything they needed to get off to a great start

with their VA health care (for more, turn to page 11).

Our cover piece, which starts on page 6, is another huge success story. The Louis A. Johnson Medical Center in Clarksburg, W.V. has spent the last year pioneering a comprehensive rural health program that brings health care into Veterans' homes and communities like never before. This program is an excellent example of how one VISN 4 facility is going above and beyond to get Veterans—even our most isolated Veterans—exceptional, convenient care. Considering that all 10 medical centers in our network treat rural Veterans, this story is a must-read.

In addition, this newsletter touches upon several special VISN 4 events that bring together Veterans and the VA in unique ways. On page 14, we spotlight our Heroes at Heinz Field event with the Steelers football franchise, and on this issue's back cover, we highlight our recurring First Swing Amputee Golf Clinic. These events not only offer Veterans moments of fun and fellowship—they also underscore VISN 4's unyielding support for our heroes' health and happiness.

Finally, the Vision for Excellence newsletter—if you haven't noticed already!—has undergone a massive visual and editorial redesign. We are striving to cram more information and more Veterans' stories into each issue.

I hope you notice a difference and enjoy the issue!

Sincerely,

MICHAEL E. MORELAND, FACHE
NETWORK DIRECTOR, VISN 4

WHAT'S INSIDE

- It Takes a Village..... 4
- COVER: Rural Health 6
- 56th Stryker Brigade Return..... 11
- Heroes at Heinz Field 14
- First Swing Golf Clinic 16

DID YOU KNOW?!



This summer, members from the **IRON HORSE HELPERS**— a local, community-driven volunteer organization—gave the **Lebanon VA a check for more than \$13,000**. To present the donation, the 13-person group organized a cavalcade of some 2,000 motorcycles and classic automobiles. “One of our favorite parts of the event was seeing the look in Veterans’ eyes when we personally handed them gift bags, giving them our thanks for our freedom,” said Michelle Becker, the Iron Horse Helpers’ secretary.

The **Philadelphia VA’s Sleep Center** has received its second consecutive 5-year accreditation from the American Academy of Sleep Medicine. Way to go, Philly!



Combat-injured Iraqi war Veteran **Doug Mignot** recently won the **national powerlifting championship** after squatting, benching and dead-lifting a total of 1,600 pounds. The Clearfield, Pa. native heads to the World Powerlifting Championship in November. Congrats, Doug!



10%

IN 2010, SOME 10 PERCENT OF ALL VETERANS WILL BE WOMEN. VISN 4 IS COMMITTED TO MEETING THE UNIQUE NEEDS OF WOMEN VETERANS. VISIT OUR WEB SITE (WWW.VISN4.VA.GOV) TO FIND OUT HOW.

James Brown of the Wilkes-Barre VA clogged and jitterbugged his way to first place at the **National Veterans Creative Arts Festival in San Antonio** this October. The Veteran, 72, says he’s already planning his encore performance for 2010, but with new moves: “I’m going to waltz.”



IT TAKES A VILLAGE

HOW VA HEALTHCARE – VISN 4 IS MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN THE LIVES OF VETERANS



Jennings, second from left, enjoys her new apartment—and furniture!—with some members of her VA support team.

Veteran Kim Jennings’ world took a sudden turn for the worst when she lost her job and home more than a year ago. In this new, seemingly empty life, she felt terribly alone.

She was wrong. “I met people who were there all along who went out of their way to make me feel like I was worth something again,” says Jennings, 46. Today, with the help of the Erie VA, Jennings and her 20-year-old son are surrounded by daily reminders of how far they’ve come. There’s her couch. The lamp. Their beds. Even the cereal bowls assure the Gulf War Era Veteran that she is no longer alone. One VA employee—medical records tech Michelle Ohmer—and her family donated nearly every item in Jen-

nings’s new apartment, which she moved into thanks to a program co-sponsored by the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Housing and Urban Development. This program—called the HUD-VASH program—aims to pair homeless Veterans with affordable housing as well as a therapeutic alliance that offers targeted career and medical support. Jennings first learned of HUD-VASH while visiting the Erie VA. “From the moment I walked into Erie VA, everyone was bending over back-



wards to help me,” recalls the Veteran. Today, she is busy working full time in her “dream job” at the local YMCA—and her future looks bright. “It is good to smile again and joke again. Every morn-

ing, I wake up hoping that this wasn’t just a dream. I can’t ever express how thankful I am for everything Erie VA has done.” Read on to hear more from some of the key players in Jennings’ journey home.



VETERAN KIM JENNINGS “Never in my wildest dreams did I expect that going to the VA could change my life. I just expected a doctor’s appointment, but I was blessed with so much more: a job, a home and, most importantly, a support group.”

KIM'S KEY PLAYERS



Erie VA HUD-VASH Coordinator Mike Wehrer
 “I was able to build on Kim’s strengths to link her with services including a Section 8 “Housing Choice” Voucher. Through coordination of community and VA resources, we were all able to develop similar goals with Kim in the lead. Kim did the hard work and deserves all the credit.”



Carol Ohmer, mother of Erie VA employee Michelle Ohmer “I wasn’t expecting to donate a mattress or cooking supplies, but when I found out Kim and her son were sleeping on the floor, I knew they needed this stuff more than I did. She dedicated her life to our Nation, so the least we could do is to help her get back on her feet.”



Steve Blackman, uncle of Erie VA employee Michelle Ohmer
 “We started asking around to see if anyone could use a living room set. One thing led to another, and before I knew it, I was sitting in the dark because we had given all our lamps away. To us it is just stuff, but to Kim and her son, it is everything. Kim once asked us ‘How can I ever thank you?’ I told her she didn’t need to thank us. This is our way of thanking her for her service to our country.”

Erie VA Women Veterans Program Manager Nadean Sitter “My role with Kim was one of advisor, advocate and emotional support person. I was her cheering section, fan club and sounding board. I provided guidance regarding her health care, listened when she needed to talk about problems and rejoiced with her as she became self-sufficient.”



Healing Small Town





BY BETHANY MIGA

Heroes

**WEST VIRGINIA'S
RURAL VETERANS TELL
HOW THE LOUIS A.
JOHNSON VA MEDICAL
CENTER IS GIVING THEM
UNPRECEDENTED
ACCESS TO MEDICAL
CARE.**

On most days, Army Veteran John Hennessy talks to more animals than people. Today is no exception. He's already bade hello to his four angus cattle, whispered words of encouragement to a nameless farm cat and soothed his clucking hens before kindly robbing their nests of a half dozen eggs. • "I guess I'm like a hermit in a way. I don't like to be around a lot of people all the time. It's just my nature," says »

The Veteran at home on his 88-acre farm.

“I’m glad they are doing something like this for Veterans—and in West Virginia of all places,” says Hennessy of the clinic.



Hennessy, a Vietnam Veteran with a slim frame, fading red hair and a warm spray of freckles across his face.

The 67-year-old retired physician’s assistant lives with his wife in Middlebourne, W.V., a shrinking town of about 800 residents. Their 88-acre farm sits at the end of a long dirt road lined with honeysuckle bushes, pawpaw trees and bright yellow “private property” signs nailed to thick trunks. “It’s just quiet and nice,” says Hennessy of his land. It’s also so remote that—until recently—any major medical issue would require the Veteran to make a nearly three-hour roundtrip trek to Clarksburg, navigating mostly winding country roads.

In his remoteness from Wal-Marts and Starbucks and major city centers, the farmer is not alone. Though defining “rural” can be somewhat tricky, experts often call West Virginia the second most rural state in the country, and recent statistics suggest that Veterans make up more than 14 percent of the state’s population. (In neighboring Pennsylvania, another VISN 4 state, one



“It’s nice. There’s no traffic. It’s not stressful at all.”

third of the population lives in rural areas, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services).

Meeting the medical needs of the John Hennessys of VISN 4 can be a challenge. People in rural areas often live hours from a full-service hospital and lack options when it comes to specialty treatments. They also tend to face more hardships than their urban counterparts when seeking even basic care.

In response to these challenges, the Louis A. Johnson VA Medical Center in Clarksburg, W.V. recently launched a new program intended to address the specific needs of rural Veterans in the northern heart of the state. The program, which is funded through a \$1.3 million federal award, is one of only four nationwide.

“Our focus is simple. We want to bring

health care to Veterans,” says the VA medical center’s director, William E. Cox.

Since the program hit full swing earlier this year, the Clarksburg VA has been hard at work maintaining this focus. In July, the facility rolled out a 40-foot mobile clinic that boasts exam rooms, a reception area and basic lab capabilities.

The clinic’s traveling team includes a physician, three nurses, one social worker and one enrollment specialist. Three days a week, the crew visits the hospital system’s most rural areas and offers an array of medical services—blood work, physicals, flu shots and more—to Veterans who live off the beaten path.

Hennessy, for one, is thankful for the VA’s extended reach. This morning, he’s put on his nice jeans, hopped into his trusty red pickup and travelled a familiar,

13-mile drive to the clinic, which is parked in the nearby town of Sistersville. "It's nice. There's no traffic. It's not stressful at all," he says of the trip.

The soft-spoken farmer arrives first in line, 20 minutes early, and stands outside the VA van's steps, eager to ask a few coverage questions. He will be one of 26 Veterans to visit the clinic today.

The process is so convenient, says Hennessy, it has helped him be more proactive with his health. "I probably still wouldn't have gone to the VA if I had to go to Clarksburg," he says. "But if it's close like this, you can just zip in and check in, and the staff is very nice, informative and professional. It's just a lot easier for everybody. It's a really good thing."

After making a return appointment for December, the Veteran leaves the clinic. "I have to get back and tend to things on the farm," he says before sliding into his truck and firing up the engine. Soon enough, he's home. "It isn't anything special," he says. But it is home. Nearby, there's a mockingbird chirping a stolen song, his tractor is ready for action and his animals are waiting for their next meal.



"I talk to my animals. I talk to God," says Hennessy of his typical day.

“As a physician this is very gratifying. You make a difference. There is a saying... people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. This clinic, as the VA, says that we care.”

—SIDNEY JACKSON, RURAL MOBILE HEALTH CARE PROGRAM PHYSICIAN

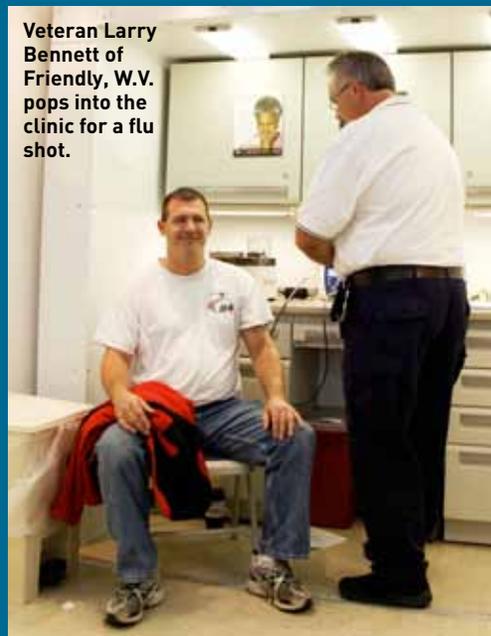
THE MOBILE CLINIC BY THE NUMBERS

- 6 staff members
- 3 rooms
- 1 handicap accessible ramp
- \$350,000 price tag
- 40 feet long
- 19 counties served



The Clarksburg VA's Mobile Clinic

Veteran Larry Bennett of Friendly, W.V. pops into the clinic for a flu shot.



Veterans Love the VA Mobile Clinic



"It's good that the VA is paying attention to little towns like Sistersville with 800 people in it. There are a lot of Veterans and elderly people here. It's a great thing."

—RONALD HOWELL, ARMY VETERAN, SISTERSVILLE, W.V.



"This is a tremendous convenience for the Veterans. Especially us older folks. It's often difficult for us to drive and get around."

—CLARENCE DELANCEY, NAVY VETERAN, SISTERSVILLE, W.V.



RURAL HEALTH GOES HI-TECH

THE LOUIS A. JOHNSON VA relies on an array of tools to help deliver quality health care to its rural Veterans. In addition to its mobile clinic, the facility supports four community-based outpatient clinics, which offer permanent, primary care services in select communities. Veterans can also utilize the innovative programs below:



Clarksburg dermatologist Armistead consults with Altoona-based patient Gary Dick.

TELEDERMATOLOGY

Thanks to technology, the Clarksburg VA shares one of its hottest commodities—dermatologist Drury Armistead—with Pennsylvania’s Erie VA Medical Center and James E. Van Zandt Medical Center in Altoona. Both VISN 4 facilities serve rural patients and do not have a dermatologist on staff.

The Clarksburg VA’s teledermatology program—which utilizes a network of computer monitors outfitted with high definition cameras—enables Armistead to forgo meeting patients face to face and instead diagnose them virtually. The program, which is still in its infancy, is the first of its kind at the VA and can enable Armistead to “see” up to 20 to 30 patients in one day—without the Veterans ever leaving their hometown facility.

Gary Dick, a Veteran from Hollidaysburg, Pa. near Altoona, recently tried the program instead of taking a stressful, daylong trip into Pittsburgh to see a dermatologist. “I think it’s a wonderful idea,” said the Vietnam Veteran after his first teledermatology consult. “I came in here today and got a quick result. I think Veterans will like to know that they don’t have to schedule a trip at a far away facility.”

Adds Armistead, who coordinates care with a physician’s assistant at the outlying medical centers: “Dermatologists are in very short supply in this country. This enables me to access a lot more patients in a very convenient manner. We’re going to see more of this in the future.”

TELEHEALTH

Roy Barnette has been admitted to the Clarksburg VA—80 miles from home—seven times in the last year. Today, the 85-year-old World War II Veteran lives alone in his mobile home under the watchful eyes of his younger brother, Pirl Barnette, who has temporarily moved into a nearby mobile camper until the Veteran’s health returns.

But Roy’s brother isn’t the only person checking in on him on a daily basis. The Birch River, W.V. resident is one of 145 Veterans currently using the Clarksburg VA’s telehealth program. This program

connects the former Navy supply clerk with the VA via a small electronic device that taps into his telephone landline. Every day the machine relays Roy’s vital statistics—such as his blood pressure and blood sugar—to a pair of dedicated nurses at the Louis A. Johnson facility.

“I tell you—they don’t miss a trick,” says Roy of the VA’s telehealth team. “If my numbers are off, I don’t even leave the room. I just sit down, because I know they’ll be calling.”

This one-on-one attention helps put Pirl at ease.

“It’s reassuring to know that the VA is in contact with him almost every day,” says Pirl.

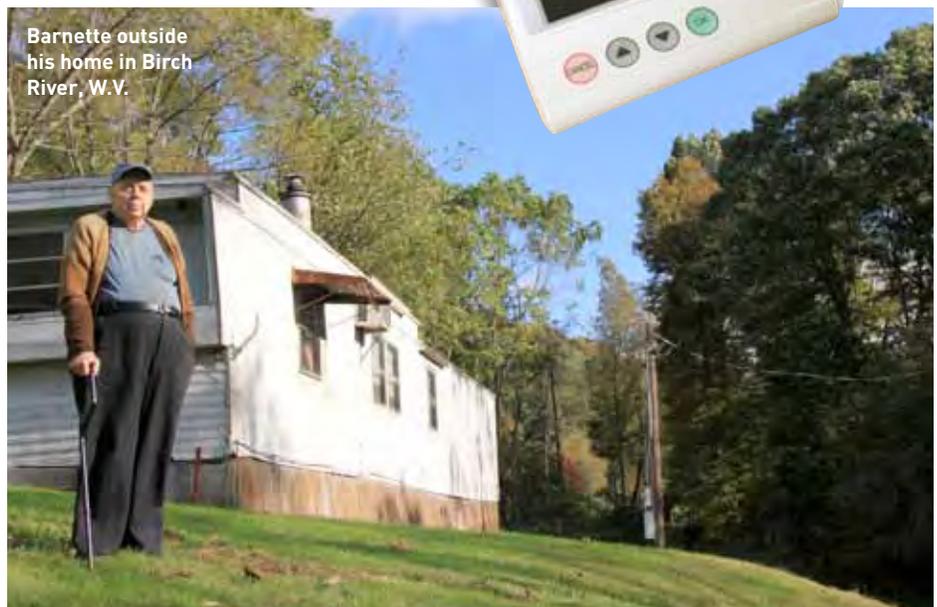
“And if something goes wrong, they tell him to come to the emergency room right away—and they are there waiting for him when we get there. It’s a wonderful system.”

Equally important, the telehealth machine eliminates routine but often stressful trips to the doctor’s office.

“The VA brought me back from death twice,” says Roy, nodding soberly to his telehealth device on a nearby bedside stand. “I value it...a fellow should.”



A telehealth machine.



Barnette outside his home in Birch River, W.V.



Omni Air Int

A Journey's End

SNAPSHOTS FROM THE
56TH STRYKER BRIGADE'S RETURN
TO AMERICAN SOIL

A Journey's End

During the month of September, some 4,100 soldiers from the 56th Stryker Brigade returned from Iraq. These soldiers were part of the largest deployment of the Pennsylvania National Guard in the last 50 years. VISN 4 was a part of this historic homecoming—and captured a few special moments on film.



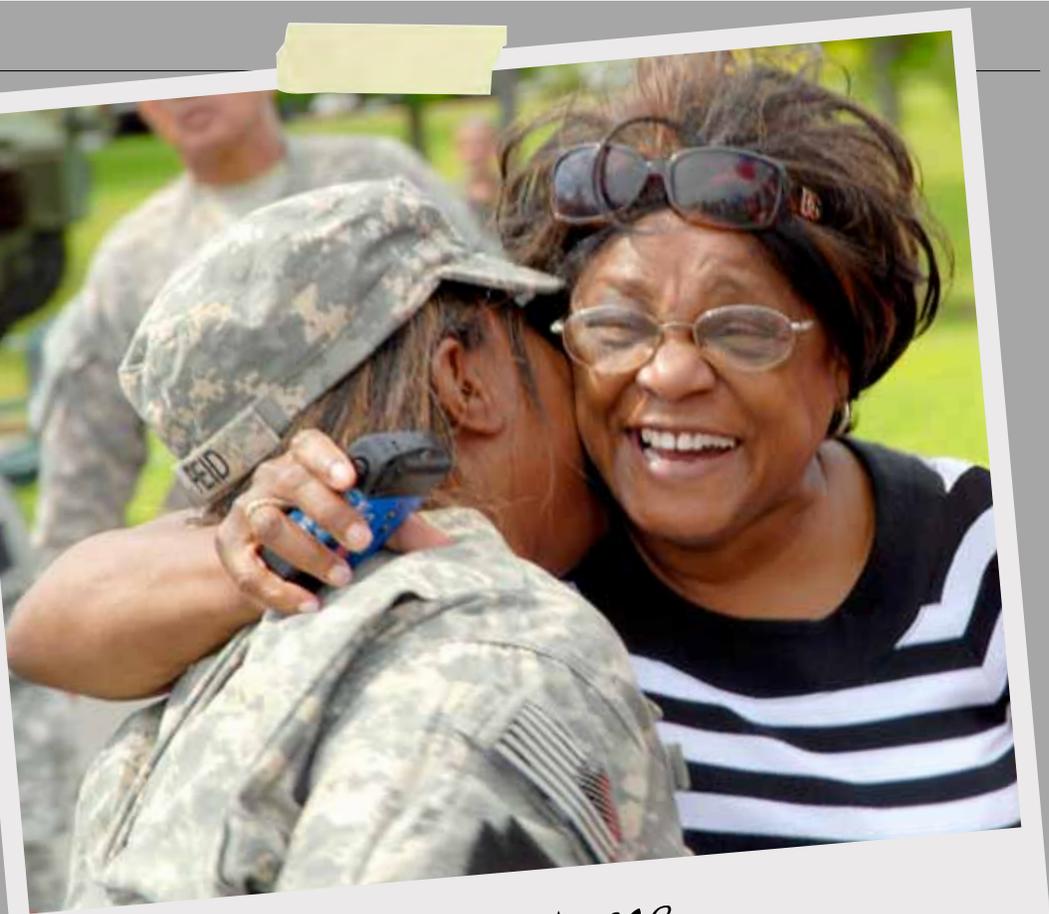
Soldiers become Veterans.



A hero's welcome.



A family reunites.



A long embrace.

ASK THE STAFF

What advice do you have for Veterans new to the VA?

“Be patient, be on time and don’t be afraid to ask questions.”

—JAMES WHITBY, HOUSEKEEPING AIDE, LEBANON



“If you have any injuries from being on active duty, even if it’s not from combat duty, you should file a claim. You could have a service connected disability that you can be compensated for.”

—JOE MARTIN, SUPPLY, PROCESSING AND DISTRIBUTION CHIEF, COATESVILLE

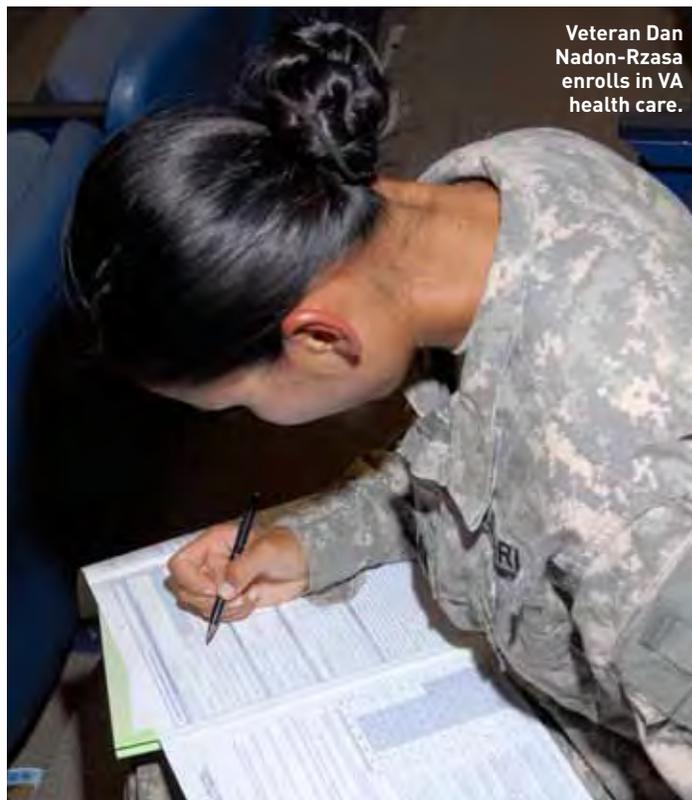
A VISN 4 WELCOME

IN SEPTEMBER, Lebanon VA spearheaded an unprecedented effort to connect with incoming soldiers. A team of VISN 4 employees lived out of suitcases for weeks so that they would be ready and waiting when troops from the 56th Stryker Brigade landed. As a supplement to the soldiers’ official demobilization process, the VISN 4 crew gave briefings about VA health care and introduced the soldiers to their specific Operation Enduring Freedom /Operation Iraqi Freedom program managers.

These briefings accomplished two major goals. One: the soldiers left the base knowing who to contact at their hometown VA with health questions. Two: every VISN 4-designated soldier enrolled in their guaranteed five free years of VA health care before heading home. This feat is particularly impressive given that less than half of the returning troops typically take advantage of their guaranteed VA benefits.

“I was really excited to get off the plane, but I’m glad we had these briefings... Having the VA here helps out a lot.”

—SERGEANT MARC ROBLES FROM LEOLA, PA.



Veteran Dan Nadon-Rzasa enrolls in VA health care.

A Day for Cha

On a cool day in late September, 76 Veterans put on their game face and headed down to Heinz Field for an unforgettable evening with the Pittsburgh Steelers. The crew spent an hour catching, kicking and tossing footballs alongside the reigning Super Bowl Champions before stopping to nab autographs and enjoy a free, catered dinner inside the stadium.

For many Veterans and their guests, the night had a hint of magic to it.

"I think we're still in shock that we're standing here on Heinz Field!" laughed Amy Patterson, a former Marine from Clarksburg, W.Va. who attended the event with her husband—also a Veteran—and their two young boys. "We're a huge football family, huge Steelers fans, so it's a dream come true."

Jeremiah Workman felt the same way. After sliding into the Steelers' end zone to nab a pass, the Veteran ended up with a bright red burn on his arm. The Richwood, Ohio native showed off the wound with a big smile. "I'm a diehard fan," he said. "When they invited me, I started going through the closet, trying to figure out if I wanted to wear a jersey or maybe should I wear my cleats?...So, I'm pretty excited. It's been amazing to be here."

Another attendee, Veteran Nick O'Brien of Washington, Pa., had returned from Iraq only two weeks before. The challenge of combat seemed to fade in comparison to meeting his sports heroes. "I put extra deodorant on because I was really nervous!" O'Brien laughed. "I didn't know what Steelers we were going to meet...it could have been anybody!"

The excitement was mutual, said Steelers offensive lineman Doug Legursky. "It's great for us; it makes us feel so good and it's awesome that they have a good time while they're out here too."

Added punter Daniel Sepulveda: "This isn't work for us, this is a piece of cake... to come out here and put smiles on people's faces. It's nothing compared to what they've done for us."



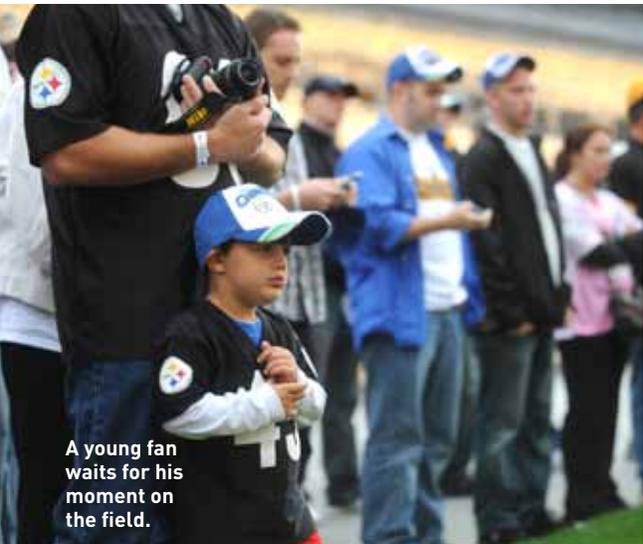
mpions

VETERANS CONNECT WITH THE PROS—
AND SHOW OFF THEIR SKILLS!—AT
VISN 4'S SECOND-ANNUAL "HEROES AT
HEINZ FIELD" EVENT IN PITTSBURGH

Veteran Daniel Maguire looks on as his son, Lucas, gets a kiss from mom Krystal Grimes and an autograph from Steelers linebacker Lawrence Timmons.



Players (from left) Patrick Bailey, Doug Legursky and Keyaron Fox took time out from their season to give back to Veterans.



A young fan waits for his moment on the field.



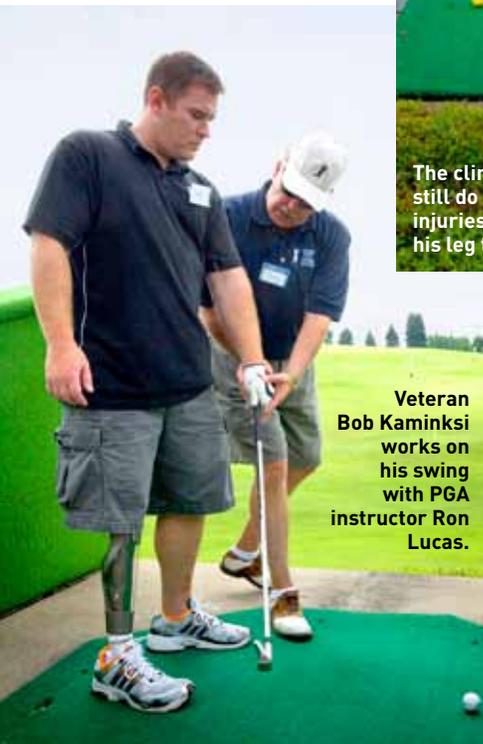
"It's neat being on the field instead of watching it on TV," said Veteran (and novice field goal kicker) Keith Wolverton of Buchanan, W.Va.

Swing School

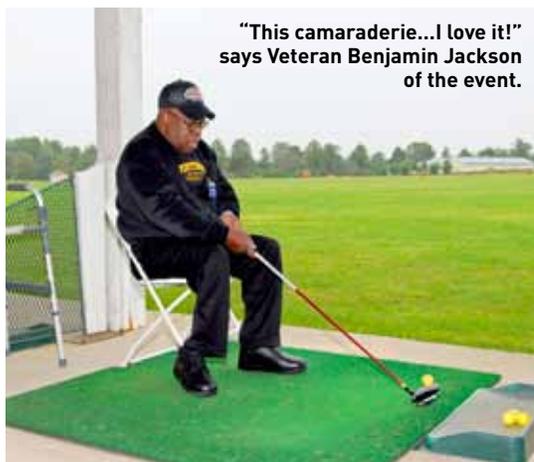
Both Philadelphia and Pittsburgh's VA medical centers hosted **First Swing Amputee Golf Clinics** this summer. This annual, therapeutic event pairs Veterans of all ages and skill levels with trained golf professionals and "it gives Veterans a chance to socialize while encouraging them to be more active," says Christopher Nowak, VISN 4 prosthetics chief.



The clinic "helps show us that we can still do everything that we did before our injuries," says David Bronson, who lost his leg to a roadside bomb in Iraq.



Veteran Bob Kaminksi works on his swing with PGA instructor Ron Lucas.



"This camaraderie...I love it!" says Veteran Benjamin Jackson of the event.

VISION

FOR EXCELLENCE

ISSUE 7 | FALL/WINTER 2009

VISN 4

MICHAEL MORELAND, FACHE
NETWORK DIRECTOR

CARLA SIVEK
DEPUTY NETWORK DIRECTOR

DAVID S. MACPHERSON, MD, MPH
CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER

WILLIAM E. BOYLE
CHIEF FINANCIAL OFFICER

DOROTHY STEELE
EXECUTIVE ASSISTANT

DAVID E. COWGILL
PUBLIC AND COMMUNITY
RELATIONS MANAGER

BARB L. FORSHA, RN, MSN, ET
QUALITY MANAGEMENT OFFICER

VISION FOR EXCELLENCE

MANAGING EDITOR
DAVID E. COWGILL

EDITOR
BETHANY MIGA

CONTRIBUTORS
SARAH GUDGEON
SHELLEY NULPH

PHOTOGRAPHERS
GLENN HANGARD
WARREN PARK
JACK WIDMAIER



VA Healthcare-VISN 4

323 North Shore Drive
Suite 400
Pittsburgh, PA 15212

PHONE: 412-822-3316
FAX: 412-822-3275
www.visn4.va.gov

WE'D LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU

VISN 4's Vision for Excellence is published for the employees, volunteers, patients and friends of VA Healthcare—VISN 4. To submit story ideas for possible inclusion, contact Bethany Miga at 412-822-3533 or bethany.miga@dva.gov