The Tomah VA Medical Center (VAMC) continues exploring ways to connect and care with our Veterans. Recreation and Creative Arts Therapy, Facilities, Infection Control and Patient Safety Departments worked to develop Patriot’s Porch, which was opened in December 2020. Patriot’s Porch is designed for Veterans who reside on any of the Community Living Centers (CLC) at the Tomah VAMC to see and visit with their family members safely during the COVID pandemic.

A previous shelter space was cleaned and remodeled into Patriot’s Porch. The space includes a plexiglass window and an intercom communication system. The Tomah VAMC has a dedicated group of staff and volunteers that assist with escorting the Veterans to ensure their safety. Patriot’s Porch is cleaned between each visit to ensure the safety of our Veterans and their family.

While pandemic restrictions have caused limitations to on campus visits in order to maintain the highest level of safety for our Veterans and staff, Patriot’s Porch is a great opportunity for them to stay connected with one another. The Unit Coordinator on each CLC can schedule visits.

Here is what our Veterans and families had to say about Patriot’s Porch:

“This is the best Christmas present!”

“This is amazing, thank you to all the staff that help with this, it means so much to us.”

“I haven’t seen my brother for almost a year, this was just wonderful! Thank you!”

For more information or to schedule a visit, please contact vhatomvoiceofvet@va.gov.
It’s been a long strange trip and quite a journey. I was born in 1981 and lived in a small-town in Illinois with my parents, two older brothers and a younger sister. I grew up playing all kinds of sports, but really got into playing the guitar. I graduated high school and had no interest in going to college. I continued playing in a band and I worked at an autobody shop. I was listening to the radio on my way to work on September 11th. At first, I thought it was a joke, but it became apparent what was going on. I just remember feeling helpless and an intense anger. Military service had been the farthest thing from my mind, but I remember thinking that I should join. I enlisted on Valentine’s Day in 2002 and I was in the delayed entry program because so many people were joining. It was a difficult decision and my parents were initially upset. Everyone saw the writing on the wall, but I still wanted to go. This was the only time that I ever saw my dad breakdown. That was tough and it set in what I was about to do.

I absolutely loved boot camp and I received a meritorious promotion while I was there. Coming out of there, I thought I was going to be in the Marine Corps forever. After boot leave, I went to Camp Pendleton and started School of Infantry training. I ended up with the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, in Charlie Company. During peacetime, you’re on the MEU where you get on a battle carrier group and sail around, but I never got to do any of that. The orders came around the fall of 2002 when I got to the Fleet Marine Force. We didn’t know exactly where we were going, but knew it was somewhere in the Middle East. We started doing all these different exercises, including live fire. You could very much tell it was geared towards combat operations.

I was deployed to Kuwait in 2003. They parked us in the middle of the desert in a tent city. We were conducting training exercises. We would pack all our gear and our trucks and head out to cross the border. The first couple of times were a rehearsal, but on the third time we were given extra ammo and we knew it was the real deal. We spent a couple of days training and on March 19th we crossed the border. I had only been in for 10-months and I was already taking rounds, putting rounds on targets and taking in artillery fire; it was intense. We ended up in Saddam City in Baghdad and we were able to take the eastern end. On April 10th, we assaulted Baghdad. It was a large assault with a lot of incoming and outgoing fire. They were using everything they had to keep us out, but we kept going. We were in the city, secured a palace and dug in there for a while. My first deployment was five months long.

We came back to the states to resupply, do some quick training and then deploy to relieve the 2/4 in Okinawa. We trained for several months, got new guys and got up to speed. The insurgency started to kick off in 2004 and the battlefield was starting to change really fast. We still thought we were going on the MEU and we continued to train for that. We were ready, went on pre-deployment leave and when we came back we learned the MEU had been cancelled. We flew into Kuwait and did some training with the British Royal Marines. We ended up driving in seven-ton trucks from Kuwait to Camp Mercury, which was right by Abu Grey Prison. The mission of Charlie Company was to stay at the prison; with one platoon training local Iraqis and the other three platoons conducted patrols in the area.

I wasn’t there for very long when there was an incident in April 2004 where four military contractors were killed in Fallujah. Their bodies were dragged through the streets, lit on fire and hung from a bridge; the area had gotten out of control. Insurgencies were thick and there were a lot of IED attacks. Word came down that we were going to assault Fallujah, which was the first assault. We took half the city relatively quickly, then everything was put on pause. It was upsetting because we were given the order to cease fire, but there was no cease fire on the other end. The 2/5 relieved us. After we pulled out of Fallujah, we were doing patrols in our AO. There were a lot of IED and rocket attacks, along with small arms fire. My second deployment was seven months long.

When we got back to the states there was a change in command. The Captain told us that we had done a great job over there, everyone had heard what we had done, and he told us that we needed to do it one more time. Right away he told us that we
needed to take leave and go home. When we came back, we found out we were going to Ramadi, which is in the Sunni Triangle. That deployment was extremely tough, we took a lot of casualties and a lot of KIA’s. That was how that deployment went, it was intense with a lot of combat, small arms fire and a lot of room clearing. Then they started to use car bombs. They used anything they could to try and inflict damage and they inflicted a lot of damage. There was a bridge that we ended up guarding and we started using the bat system. Essentially, we were building a public record of who was coming in and out. I feel that we did a good job and it got safer by the time we left. That deployment was tough, but I ultimately got through it and came home. My third deployment was seven months long.

In my last 3-4 months, I was no longer deployable because my enlistment was ending. I had ended up getting another meritorious promotion in the fleet and I was a sergeant in my third year, which is difficult to do. I had a good reputation and had gotten a job in the Single Marine Program as a Platoon Sergeant. It was a great time after the tough 3 ½ years I had prior. The last few months were incredible, and I can’t believe I scored that duty.

Then it came time to start thinking about what I was going to do when I got out. College is all I really wanted to do, and I knew I had to do something important with the GI Bill. I started paramedic school and excelled at it. I got my license and started practicing in 2009. I love being a paramedic. There is just something about helping other people, it’s a great outlet for me. A couple of years ago I started down the path of critical care nursing and I’ve been going to school for a couple of years now. I never thought I would be passionate about healthcare.

I discovered this area on accident about 10 years ago and I kept coming up more and more. In the last year or so I got the idea in my head that I wanted to move up here for good. I had to become a nationally registered paramedic because my license didn’t transfer to WI. Everything else fell in line and I moved here in December 2018. I just really love this area, there’s nothing like it. Leaving that hustle from Chicago to come here to just take a deep breath is what I’ve been needing for a long time.

I’ve always been good at helping other people, but not so good at taking care of myself. I do great physically, and I eat right, but I suppose when it comes to some of the mental health issues, I’ve ignored that for a long time. I’ve come to realize I need to do something about it. It’s been affecting other portions of my life and has destroyed relationships. It’s a big reason why I’m coming to the VA.

The military was a stabilizing force for me. When things get difficult, I revert to what I learned when I was in. There is always a little bit more to give if you step back and assess the situation. It’s gotten me through some very difficult times. It was a difficult decision to join, but I’m glad I did it. It has brought me to a place I never thought I’d be. I must thank the Marine Corps for that and it changed my perspective on life in a very positive way.

It doesn’t seem that I did enough while I was in service though. Sometimes I’ll sit back and think how did I do all that? Then I think I didn’t do enough. I’m not sure if it’s a guilt feeling or not? I feel like I could have done more or that I skipped out too early, but I knew it was the right time for me to get out because my heart wasn’t in it anymore. The worst part is when you’re in the barracks you had each other, but when you get out and come home, it’s all gone, and no one really gets it. I don’t have any friends that are Vets, besides the guys I served with. There are a lot of Veterans in this area and it’s comforting to be surrounded by people who get it.

My time in the Marine Corps was incredible. It was the best and worst decision I have ever made in my life and I would do it all over again. The deployments were tough, but the brotherhood, camaraderie and the fun we had together was just so great. Now when I meet Veterans, I thank them for their service because very few people do it and it’s such an honorable thing to do. Even though our experiences are different, there is still that esprit de corps that we did something special that was beyond ourselves and we gave up a significant portion of our life. There is something to be said about that no matter what branch of service you were in.
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CHECK OUT OUR LIVE VIRTUAL CLASSES

You have served your country proudly, and we are offering the opportunity for you to serve your health through live virtual group exercise classes and access to on demand classes.

How it works

Step 1: Create an account

- Create an account by clicking HERE and entering the password: USAVAMC
- Click on the blue “Get Started Today” icon and then select the correct registration (Veteran or VAMC employee).
- After registering, login to your email to activate your account (check your spam folder if you do not see an email in your inbox), select “activate your account” in the email, then access the available classes.

*Click here for Veterans
*Click here for VAMC Employees

Step 2: Register for classes

- After creating an account, view the available live classes and simply click the class you wish to attend.
- Select “register” and complete the zoom registration information (name, email, etc.).
- You will receive a registration confirmation email that will provide you with the detailed information about the class you registered for: class description, dates, times, the link to join the class as well as a link to add the class to your calendar and establish calendar reminders. Note: you will be registered for ONLY the dates and times listed in the registration email. You must register for any additional classes you wish to attend.

Step 3: Set up your space and begin your wellness journey

- On the day and time of your class- select “Click Here to Join” hyperlink in your confirmation email or in the calendar invite you established.
- Roll out your mat, position your laptop or phone 7-8ft away from you, make sure your webcam is turned on and enjoy!

See all class descriptions by clicking here.

DISCLAIMER: YOU SHOULD CONSULT YOUR PHYSICIAN OR OTHER HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONAL BEFORE STARTING THIS OR ANY OTHER FITNESS PROGRAM TO DETERMINE IF IT IS RIGHT FOR YOUR NEEDS. DO NOT START THIS FITNESS PROGRAM IF YOUR PHYSICIAN OR HEALTH CARE PROVIDER ADVISES AGAINST IT. IF YOU EXPERIENCE FAINTNESS, DIZZINESS, PAIN OR SHORTNESS OF BREATH AT ANY TIME WHILE EXERCISING YOU SHOULD STOP IMMEDIATELY.
My military journey did not start like most people. A lot of people grow up hearing stories from past family members about wars of the past. The knowledge gained from cherished family members engrains a certain nostalgia that lights a fire to follow in family footsteps becoming a Soldier.

There was no such history in my family as my father was the only member of my family that served in the Air Force, and the story he spoke of was one of joining the Air Force to see the world only to be stationed less than an hour from his hometown in Macon, GA at Robins Air Force Base. My dad would never see the world but instead would serve two years obtaining a compassionate honorable discharge due to his father becoming ill with lung cancer and going home to help his mom with his younger siblings.

Although I did not have the strong family history, I did grow up revering Soldiers that served our country. When I was 23 years old working in an ICU in Kissimmee, FL one of my peers, who was also in the Army Reserves, began to recruit me after she heard me complaining about having to pay back my student loans. The picture she painted was one of intrigue and adventure that also came with the promise of a $10,000 bonus and $50,000 to pay off my student loan debt. It did not take long, and I was hooked. So, in November of 1997 I was sworn into the United States Army Reserves as a Critical Care Nurse.

24 years later, one deployment to Afghanistan, and many mobilizations across the United States I am now a Lieutenant Colonel. I can honestly say that although I joined initially for financial reasons, that joining the military was the best decision I ever made, and it is something that I am honored and privileged to do every day. Ever since high school I have wanted to help other people that is why I became a nurse. The military was just another way I could give of myself and help preserve the freedoms of this country.

I am honored to continue my military career and to also serve at the Tomah VA. Working at the VA is my way of giving back to the Veterans that paved the way for me to continue to serve and protect this great nation.

Marcie Fulford, RN
Non-Institutional Care Nurse Manager
Preventing Suicide by Helping Veterans Stay Connected

The loss of any individual to suicide cannot be explained simply. It’s the result of a complex set of factors that affect every person uniquely. We do know, however, that loneliness and social isolation are significant risk factors. This is especially true for Veterans living in rural areas. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it has been even harder for Veterans to connect to their loved ones and community. So, as part of the VA’s on-going suicide prevention efforts, we are highlighting tools that Veterans and families can use to help them keep in touch.

For example, a serious illness or health crisis is when you need support the most. Getting that support, and giving updates to friends and loved ones, can be difficult or overwhelming. Making phone calls, answering questions, asking for help and other tasks all take time and energy. One tool that Veterans find helpful is CaringBridge (www.caringbridge.com). This free service helps you stay connected to friends and loved ones during a health journey using your own personalized website. The website is a private place where you can share updates, ask for help and get support from your loved ones. It simplifies communication, and gives you a place to feel hope, love and encouragement.

Sometimes, a crisis can occur if a Veteran is going through a tough spell – and he/she is feeling alone, and does not have friends, loved ones or professional supports. This is when it’s important to have tools close by to use right then and there. One of these tools is the Virtual Hope Box.

The Virtual Hope Box is a free smart phone app for both Apple and Android devices. You can personalize this app with resources you need to help you through a tough time. You can upload pictures of your family and friends. You can load sound bites/videos of special moments or loved ones. You can add calming or inspirational music, quotes, readings, relaxation exercises, games - anything that will help get you through. You can also add help line phone numbers and safety plans. This app not only helps as a distraction during difficult moments – it can also remind you of what’s important in your life to keep you inspired and hopeful.

Virtual Hope Box was developed as a partnership between the VA and the Department of Defense. It is one of only a few smart phone tools that has been researched and proven to support Veterans at risk for suicide. You can load it onto your smart phone through the app store for your device (Google Play or Apple App Store).

Remember, feeling lonely and being isolated are bad for your health. Staying in touch with family, friends, neighbors and providers is important. You can do this by phone, online or in person (when safe). There are many online tools to help, and these are just a few.

If you would like help accessing these tools, please reach out to your VA provider.
Dr. Robert Gosnell joins the VA, as an Optometrist, after 30+ years of clinical practice. His specialties include: Low Vision/Retina, Corneal Irregularities and Binocular Disorders. He has a passion for his profession and respects all aspects of the complex visual system.

Dr. Gosnell is eager to serve the great Veterans of Wisconsin!

He and his wife are settling in, with their new move to Wisconsin Rapids, and look forward to enjoying the outdoor activities, which are unique to this climate.

Dr. Gosnell is an avid outdoorsman, and enjoys all watersports, golfing, hunting and fishing.

"Let's All Work to Keep Your Eyes Healthy and Beautiful!"

Dr. Judy Rausch, APNP is board certified in Family Medicine and comes to this new position at the VA with 20+ years of experience in Emergency Medicine as a trauma nurse. Her doctorate in Family Nurse Practitioner is from Viterbo University and her clinical education was performed at Gundersen Clinics and the VA.

Her husband’s active-duty service provided the opportunity to work in hospitals from coast-to-coast and at military hospitals overseas. She is excited to work with her primary care PACT team at the Tomah Clinic serving the Veteran population.

Judy, the daughter and granddaughter of Veterans, is the wife of an Air Force Veteran and the mother of three boys, one in the Army, one in the Army National Guard, and one newly graduated from high school.

Her interests outside of work include jogging, sewing, knitting and reading. She, her husband, and third son reside in La Crosse, Wisconsin with three kittens and a golden retriever puppy.

Angela “Angie” Fuller is a board-certified Nurse Practitioner in Hospice and Palliative Care and Women’s Health Care. She comes to us with over 28 years’ experience in nursing, the past 13 as an advanced practice provider in hospice and palliative care.

She is very excited to have been given this opportunity to provide exceptional care to our Veterans for their inpatient hospice care needs.

Dr. Adekunle Kuku is ACGME trained in Internal Medicine and Geriatric Medicine. He joins the medicine service at Tomah VA with about 14 years of experience. He completed his residency training at the Brooklyn Hospital in New York and fellowship training at the Emory University in Atlanta.

He has cared for Veterans in the past as a contractor in the area of research, residency/fellowship and internal/emergency medicine practice.

Dr Kuku is excited to return to the VAMC and work with the medical service team at Tomah lead by Dr Lehner. He is looking forward to providing high-quality care to the Veterans of Tomah area and possibly beyond. Dr Kuku's interest outside of medicine include activities such as traveling, soccer and music. He comes from the Chicago area where he currently resides with his family.
TELL US ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCE!

Your feedback is essential in making your VA serve you better. Veteran Signals, or V-Signals, is a short customer experience survey that measures the most impactful moments in a specific service experience. The survey is sent shortly after an interaction with a VA service. If you have provided your email address to the Tomah VA, you may receive a short email survey from us asking about your experience.

BENEFITS OF SURVEYS:

- Submissions are “real-time” allowing us to see your feedback quickly.
- We can make things right if we did not meet your expectations.
- Patient feedback on employees improves morale and recognition opportunities.
- We can improve patient-healthcare team communication.

You may receive surveys for your experience in the following areas:

- Outpatient Primary Care
- Outpatient Specialty Care
- Telehealth Care
- Community Care
- Outpatient Pharmacy Services
- COVID-19

Tomah VAMC Scores
October 1, 2020 to April 30, 2021

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<tr>
<td><strong>Confidence/Trust</strong></td>
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Track Your Medications

- Certain maintenance medication refills will only be sent through mail.
- Request refills at least 14 days before running out of medication to avoid delays. Medication refills are NOT sent automatically.
- All Schedule II medications such as oxycodone, hydrocodone, Adderall, must be renewed each month by your primary care provider. Notify them 14 days in advance.
- Please call us with any questions, concerns or to update your mailing information.

Request refills online at: http://www.myhealth.va.gov

Call to request refills at: 1-800-252-1788 (Press #2 right away). Will need full social security number and Rx #
- Follow the prompts to speak to a pharmacy employee

Detach and send your refill slips to the return address on your prescription label

Learn more at: https://mobile.va.gov/app/rx-refill
- mobile.va.gov/Appstore Download from the App Store or Google Play

Easy Medication Refills

Track your delivery of VA meds mailed in the last 30 days.

Get email notifications when your medications have been shipped.

Secure Message your team to request a renewal if you are out of refills.

Visit www.myhealth.va.gov to learn more!

Using My Health Vet Premium

Not signed up for Premium?

After creating your account stop by any VA clinic to Identity Proof. Show your VA ID or Driver’s license to VA staff. Your account will be upgraded to Premium.
Tobacco Cessation

Tobacco use is the leading cause of death, disease and disability in the United States. The statistics around smoking are grim. Cigarette smoking results in more than 480,000 deaths each year due to smoking-related illness. These smoking related illnesses account for about one in five deaths nationally. Smoking is linked to diagnoses such as cancer, heart disease, stroke, lung diseases and diabetes. Smokeless tobacco is also linked with many health problems, including cancer, diseases of the mouth, heart disease and stroke. In the United States, tobacco use costs more than $300 billion a year due to direct medical care and lost productivity due to death and disability.

The good news is that many tobacco users want to quit. Tobacco users who use counseling and medications in combination are more likely to quit and quit for good. It is never too late to quit!

There are many options available through the Tomah VA Medical Center. The Nicotine Dependence clinic offers individual assessment of your tobacco use and helps you find the strategies that will work best for you. Strategies may include any of the following: individual counseling through telephone or VA Video Connect, group counseling on VA Video Connect, medication management with your primary care provider or a clinical pharmacy specialist, referral to the Veterans Quitline, SmokeFree Vet Text program, home telehealth and recommendations for mobile applications that bring skills and tools to your fingertips.

For more information,
Call your Patient Aligned Care Team (PACT)
OR
The Tobacco Cessation Lead Clinician at 1-800-872-8662, Ext. 61498
The Tomah VA welcomes your feedback. If you have suggestions for future newsletter articles, please email, call or text the Patient Centered Care Coordinator at Vhatomvoiceofvet@va.gov.

608-399-8829

Tomah VA Medical Center Vision:
Tomah VAMC will excel in patient-centered Primary, Whole Health, Mental Health, Rehabilitative and Long-term healthcare, partnering with other VHA and community organizations providing a fully integrated continuum of care. As a servant led institution, we will develop a culture of excellence as a High Reliability Organization responsive to the changing needs of Veterans. Initiatives will be shaped by technology, research and evidenced based practices. Care will be delivered by engaged collaborative teams in an integrated environment that supports learning, continuous and sustained improvement. We will embrace change and constantly reinvent our organization to meet the changing needs of the Veteran, healthcare, and national direction.