

Veterans Affairs to open health care clinic in county

By ERIC AVEDESIAN
Cape May Star and Wave

NORTHFIELD — A U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) clinic will be created in Cape May County, U.S. Rep. Frank LoBiondo announced Oct. 6.

LoBiondo spoke during a suicide-prevention signing ceremony at the Veterans Affairs Atlantic County Community based Outpatient Clinic in Northfield.

"We have a commitment from the VA. The money is in place that Cape May County is going to have a new clinic. The VA is going through the traps and the hurdles to be able to do that," LoBiondo said. "It's not a matter of if; it's a matter of when."

LoBiondo said detailed announcements concerning the new Cape May County VA clinic should be made in the future.

The VA has not kept past promises to the veteran community, who grow frustrated with these clinics, according to LoBiondo.

"It's something that hurts deeply because saying thank you is something we all should be doing, but demonstrating that thanks by keeping a promise is what really should matter," LoBiondo said.

On Oct. 4, the VA and AtlantiCare entered into an agreement to allow veterans who are members of the VA's Choice Program to receive care at AtlantiCare facilities with approval from the VA.

Under the provider agreement, veterans still must clear nonemergency treatment through the VA before receiving it, and notify the VA after getting emergency care.

VA leaders will meet with AtlantiCare representatives in the coming weeks to further discuss how the two organizations will evolve their coordinated care of veterans.

Earlier this year, LoBiondo introduced legislation creating a pilot program for eligible veterans to receive medical services at non-VA facilities in Atlantic, Cape May and Cumberland counties.

"This is a mission that will never end. The commitment to our veterans, to keep reaching to a higher level for better care and more care closer to home is something that we're all committed to," LoBiondo said.

He said veterans now have a choice to seek treatment at the VA facility in Wilmington, Del., or closer to home through local health care providers.

Besides the proposed Cape May County VA clinic, LoBiondo said the VA opened a clinic in Vineland in Cumberland County.

He credited the partnership among private sectors, the VA and the public sectors, veterans and health care providers with expanding health care options for veterans.

LoBiondo joined with officials from the VA and regional medical centers in signing a declaration committing to ensure veterans receive timely access to health care and mental health care and work with Community Veteran Engagement Boards and other community groups in suicide prevention efforts.



Kristen Kelleher/CAPE MAY STAR AND WAVE

U.S. Rep. Frank LoBiondo announces Oct. 6 during a suicide prevention signing ceremony that the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs has agreed to open a health clinic in the county.

Preventing suicide

Cynthia Murray, nurse manager of Clinical Operations at the Atlantic County Community Based Outpatient Clinic, said the VA alone is unable to fight the battle against the national pandemic of suicide.

"It will take all members of our society to stop the stigma attached to this condition of human suffering and provide a no-wrong-door response to the early symptoms and acute crisis presentations wherever the veteran presents," Murray said.

In March 2016, Charles Richard Ingram III, 51, doused himself with gasoline and set himself on fire outside the Department of Veterans Affairs clinic in Northfield. The Egg Harbor Township man, who served in the U.S. Navy from 1985 to 1992, died later that day from his injuries. He was a frequent visitor to the VA clinic, where he was frustrated by waiting for hours and told to reschedule appointments.

A bench was dedicated in Ingram's memory behind the clinic where he took his life. It was at that spot where Ingram's widow, Billie, said her husband's actions "spoke louder than words."

"Since that day, changes have occurred and the VA is beginning to take steps in the right direction," Billie Ingram said. "I still feel that harsh words and blaming will never make things better. They cannot undo the past. They cannot bring Rich back. We need to learn from the past. Only then can we move forward."

Ingram said there have been improvements made for helping veterans, both from the VA and the community.

"I pray that no one else will go through the tragedy my family has suffered. The commitment you make today will help someone in need. Saving the life of even one person is all worth it," she said.

Veterans commit suicide at a rate of 20 per day, with 14 of those suicide victims not under the care of the VA.

According to a September report on veteran suicide, in 2014, about 65 percent of all veterans who died by suicide were 50 or older.

Northfield VA clinic include same-day treatment service and supplemented care from partnering health care providers.

"We've added staff here both from a mental health perspective as well as from a primary care and specialty health perspective, because we know that suicide just doesn't present in a mental health clinic. It presents everywhere. We need to be robust in everything that we do," Kane said.

Dr. Anthony Macchiavelli, medical director of AtlantiCare Regional Medical Center, called the VA's alignment with health care providers a "perfect marriage."

"We're a nation that's been at war since the 1700s, and for the past 16 years, we've been at continuous war. Very often we see people coming back from those conflicts with physical injuries, but it's the less visible injuries which we're here to talk about," Macchiavelli said. "We need to embrace our veterans in times of crisis. We need to ensure that our doors are open. We need to ensure that they have access and timely treatment."

Dr. Alka Kohli, executive vice president and chief population health and clinical officer of Inspira Health Network, said addressing behavioral health care needs of veterans is "urgent."

"Across this nation, the number of suicides every year is numbing, and according to the latest data, suicide among our vets is 22 percent higher than that for

civilians of the same age," Kohli said. "Compounding this sad statistic are the countless family members and friends who must navigate the loss."

Kohli called suicide prevention "everyone's responsibility."

David Hughes, chief financial and development officer of Shore Medical Center, read a letter from Fred Banner, Shore Medical Center's vice president and chief information officer.

"Shore Medical Center holds our veterans in the highest regard and has great reverence for their sacrifices," Hughes read. "It is with this acknowledgement and admiration that we proudly join with the VA and other community health care leaders to memorialize our steadfast commitment to proudly serve and deliver health care for our warriors close to home and the communities in which they live."

Thomas Piratzky, vice president of Cape Regional Foundation, said Cape Regional Medical Center is committed to provide quality care for veterans.

Piratzky said Cape Regional Medical Center was part of forming the Citizens/Veterans Advisory Committee, a group comprised of veteran and citizen volunteers working together to serve veterans in Cape May County.

"They have a mission to go out and help our veterans. Many times these veterans were denied services," Piratzky said. "Their main goal is to provide housing, transportation and veteran benefits. I'm proud to say since July 2013 we have served over 100 veterans."

Veterans and service members in crisis can call a toll-free suicide prevention hotline at (800) 273-8255 or get more information at veteranscrisisline.net.

The risk for suicide was 22 percent higher among veterans when compared to nonveterans.

Vince Kane, director of the Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Wilmington, said the VA set a "brave and noble goal" to end veteran suicide.

"Suicide among veterans is higher than it is among other populations and that shouldn't be," Kane said. "I am so humbled and grateful to have all of our major medical centers here in south Jersey standing with us today to say, 'No more, that we will have no wrong door for our veterans in crisis, that we will make sure that we engage them and give them the care they need.'"

Kane said changes at the



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