Increasing Healthcare Options for Veterans

2017 Annual Report

INCREASING HEALTH CARE OPTIONS FOR VETERANS

VA
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Veterans Health Administration
Wilkes-Barre VA Medical Center

2017 ANNUAL REPORT WILKES-BARRE.VA.GOV
FACILITY OVERVIEW AND STATUS

The Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, is a complexity level 2 teaching hospital that provides a full range of patient care services. The medical center operates 58 hospital beds, 10 domiciliary beds, and 105 Community Living Center (CLC) beds.

Comprehensive healthcare is provided through Primary Care, Medical and Surgical Specialty Care, and Mental Health Programming. Geriatrics and Extended Care services are also offered, including long term care; respite, rehabilitation, and dementia care; hospice and palliative care; transitional care; and a variety of home care services.

The Wilkes-Barre VA Medical Center is part of the VA Healthcare - VISN 4 Network along with eight other medical centers in Altoona, Butler, Coatesville, Erie, Lebanon, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Wilmington.

SERVICE AREA

**TOTAL EMPLOYEES:**

- **1,384**

**EMPLOYEES BY THE NUMBERS:**

- **Veterans:** 328
- **Nurses:** 234
- **Physicians:** 97

### Breakdown by Location

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Operating Budget</th>
<th>Unique Veterans Visits</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Wilkes-Barre</strong></td>
<td>$272,001,347</td>
<td>35,047 / 293,334</td>
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<td><strong>Allentown</strong></td>
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<td>10,025 / 67,655</td>
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<td>1,619 / 4,009</td>
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<td><strong>Tobyhanna</strong></td>
<td>$16,388,493</td>
<td>2,681 / 17,988</td>
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<td><strong>Sayre</strong></td>
<td>$15,906</td>
<td>2,681 / 17,988</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Northampton</strong></td>
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<td>1,559 / 4,829</td>
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<td><strong>Wayne</strong></td>
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<td>576 / 4,829</td>
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<td><strong>Williamsport</strong></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**UNIQUE PATIENT TOTAL**

- **38,527**

**OPERATING BEDS**

- **166**

**TOTAL OUTPATIENT VISITS**

- **407,073**

**TOTAL OPERATING BUDGET**

- **$272,001,347**

**Medical Service**

- **$220,867,348**

**Facilities**

- **$17,297,976**

**Administrative**

- **$17,447,530**

**NRM (Non-Recurring Maintenance)**

- **$16,388,493**
A MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR...

For the past 28 years, I’ve had the good fortune of serving our nation’s Veterans through my employment with the Department of Veterans Affairs. Although I’ve held several positions across the organization, the mission to provide the Veterans we serve with safe, reliable, high quality healthcare has always been a constant.

After my first year in Pennsylvania, I can tell you that it’s not quite as hot in Wilkes-Barre as it is in Central Texas, but the Veterans are just as deserving and the staff are just as dedicated. I’ve been impressed by the staff at Wilkes-Barre, and it’s great to hear the Veterans compliment their care.

Over the last year, Wilkes-Barre and its Community Based Outpatient Clinics participated in more than 24 internal/external inspections, including significant hospital level program reviews by the Joint Commission, Office of the Inspector General, and Long Term Care Institute. Of all the reviews, surveys, and inspections, I’m pleased to announce that there were no significant findings at Wilkes-Barre or any of our Community Based Outpatient Clinics.

As Director, I raise these successes not to boast, but to acknowledge the daily dedication and hard work of the staff across the Medical Center and Community Based Outpatient Clinics. We’re not celebrating survey successes; we’re celebrating the delivery of safe, reliable high quality healthcare to our Veterans!

I hope you enjoy reading this year’s Annual Report, which documents some of our many accomplishments this past year. I look forward to many more successes in the future, and I thank you for your continued support of our Medical Center.

Russell E. Lloyd
TELEHEALTH GOES MAINSTREAM

Wilkes-Barre hires full-time telehealth provider for primary care

Telehealth is the use of telecommunications technology and electronic information systems to provide healthcare and clinical education remotely. Although some technologies to conduct telehealth have been available for a number of years, the increased availability of broadband networks; better and more powerful laptops and smartphone applications; and the widespread use of social media have increased the availability of telehealth services for most Veterans.

Wilkes-Barre recognizes that telehealth provides a significant convenience to the Veterans we serve. By continuing to expand our telehealth services, we’re increasing their access to healthcare, resulting in improved clinical outcomes and increased satisfaction with our services.

In 2017, Wilkes-Barre recruited a full-time Telehealth Primary Care provider, Dr. Burhanuddin Farooqi. Dr. Farooqi is physically located at Wilkes-Barre’s Allentown Clinic, but will support Veterans’ primary care needs at all of our healthcare facilities. If a primary care provider is absent or otherwise unavailable at any of our locations, Dr. Farooqi can see the patient remotely. This will reduce the number of appointments our facility needs to cancel because a provider is unable to see his or her patients.

“I’m pleased to be working with our nation’s Veterans. Through the use of telehealth technologies, I hope to make receiving VA care more convenient for Wilkes-Barre Veterans.”

Wilkes-Barre’s Veterans are increasingly taking advantage of the convenience of Telehealth. This graph demonstrates the increasing number of our patients’ Telehealth encounters, thanks to increased availability and an increased comfort level with the technology being used.
CENTER FOR LEARNING AND SIMULATION AWARDED CERTIFICATION

Facility demonstrates excellence in simulation-based quality

Wilkes-Barre’s Center for Learning and Simulation has been awarded the Intermediate Level of Facility Simulation Certification from the Veterans Health Administration (VHA)’s SimLEARN National Simulation Center. This certification demonstrates excellence in simulation-based quality standards and distinguishes Wilkes-Barre as a leader in simulation-based training within our VISN, VHA, and the healthcare community.

Facility certification is an accomplishment that signifies increased clinical work force skills, improved patient outcomes, and support for the ten strategies of VHA’s Blueprint for Excellence, a set of strategies VA uses nationwide to provide more patient-centered care. This designation confirms Wilkes-Barre’s commitment to quality improvement, patient safety, and accountability for improving Veteran patient outcomes. It also adds value to the training and healthcare we deliver at our medical center.

Our facility’s Center provides innovative, simulation-based exercises and performance assessments, which have been shown to be a powerful training tool. It also promotes patient safety and performance improvement. At the Center, staff is able to practice for events that do not occur frequently in hospitals and clinics, but put our patients at significant risk—without using actual patients. Our staff become more proficient and confident when they have the opportunity to practice skills they are unfamiliar with or use infrequently through simulation. This increased proficiency and confidence translates into improved patient safety and satisfaction.

This will reduce the number of appointments our facility needs to cancel because a provider is unable to see his or her patients.

Wilkes-Barre’s Center for Learning and Simulation uses computer controlled lifelike mannequins, with fluctuating vital signs, symptoms, and even moans of discomfort, to create a realistic and interactive training scenario for our providers.
ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR OF PATIENT CARE SERVICES RECOGNIZED

Boytin VA Nurse Executive of the Year for 2017

Congratulations to Valerie Boytin, RN, MSN, Wilkes-Barre’s Associate Director, Patient Care Services, on receiving the Secretary of Veterans Affairs Award for the Advancement of Nursing Programs for 2017 in the Nurse Executive category.

Advancement of Nursing Programs Awards are given annually. The Nurse Executive category recognizes one VA Medical Center Nurse Executive who has achieved distinction in promoting VA nursing programs, thereby enhancing VA’s quality patient care. Those who receive this award demonstrate skills, values, and attitudes that significantly influence the environment and relationships among healthcare professionals involved in ensuring quality patient care.

Among her many recent accomplishments, Ms. Boytin was instrumental in driving the reorganization of nursing services, using the LEAN model of system redesign as a guide. She led significant improvements to patient satisfaction on the medical-surgical unit; helped expand telehealth and home-based primary care; oversaw significant improvements to the safe-patient handling program and the sterile processing service; increased nurse recruiting by creating a Nurse Recruiter position; and took action to reduce nursing turnover.

In addition to her 40 years of service with VA, Ms. Boytin is a retired Lieutenant Colonel in the Army Reserve Nurse Corps. She deployed to Saudi Arabia during the Persian Gulf War. Valerie has held several Nursing Leadership Positions during her military career, and mentored many new officers.
TREATING VETERANS AND THE ENVIRONMENT WITH CARE

Wilkes-Barre receives EPA, Practice Greenhealth Awards for environmental stewardship

For Wilkes-Barre to remain a viable VA Medical Center, healthcare must be delivered in a manner that’s not only safe for our patients, staff, and visitors—but also for the environment.

In 2017, Wilkes-Barre was recognized by Practice Greenhealth, an organization that supports environmental stewardship and best practices in the healthcare community, with an Emerald Award for our work in eliminating mercury, reducing and recycling waste, and implementing sustainable sourcing practices. We also received Practice Greenhealth’s 2017 Systems for Change award.

Wilkes-Barre was also recognized by the Federal Green Challenge, receiving the U.S. Environmental Protection Administration (EPA)’s Mid-Atlantic 2017 Waste Award for increasing the amount of waste diverted from landfills by more than 500 percent in 2016 through our recycling efforts. By recycling demolished construction materials, we were able to demonstrate a 762-ton increase in recycling over the previous year. As part of the Challenge, we also received EPA’s Mid-Atlantic 2017 Outreach and Education Award.
ADDING SERVICES AND LOSING WEIGHT

New bariatric services program offers latest weight reduction procedures

In 2017, Wilkes-Barre VAMC announced the establishment of a Bariatric Surgery Program. The program, an expansion of Wilkes-Barre’s existing weight management services, is the first of its kind to be established at a VA Complexity Level 2 Medical Center. (VA complexity levels are determined on the basis of the characteristics of a facility’s patient population, the clinical services it offers, its education and research missions, and its administrative complexity. Level 2 facilities are considered “moderately complex.”)

The multidisciplinary team is led by Dr. Ghazali Chaudry, Chief, Surgical Service. The team uses well-studied, minimally invasive techniques to perform weight reduction procedures, including gastric bypass and sleeve gastrectomy.

Before being accepted for surgery, candidates are required to understand and commit to the life-long behavioral changes required for safe and successful outcomes. Among the most important of these changes is a commitment to sound nutritional choices, both before and after surgery. During the screening process, each candidate attends an “Introduction to Bariatric Surgery” class to gain an understanding of the lifestyle changes required by the program.

In addition to medical and nutritional staff involvement, Behavioral Health Service also plays a key role in the program, addressing emotional eating and teaching strategies to manage diet restrictions and lifestyle changes on a long-term basis.

Once appropriate candidates complete the pre-operative screening process, our Registered Dietitian issues a prescribed, medically-monitored meal-replacement regimen to elicit weight reduction and improve comorbidities (other chronic diseases patients may have) prior to surgery. Following the surgery, the team develops an individualized plan for each patient to improve their health through dramatic and long-term weight loss.

Evidence-based weight loss benefits are well documented. They include long-term remission of Type 2 diabetes, improved cardiovascular health, relief of depression, elimination of obstructive sleep apnea, joint pain relief, improved fertility, and the alleviation of other medical conditions.

Front (L-R) Mandy Hora, ST; Ellen McCabe, R.N., B.SN.; Middle (L-R) Kelly Yale-Suda, R.N, B.S.N., CNOR; Michele Reap, OR Program Clerk; Kim Jobst, R.N., B.S.N., MHCA
Back (L-R) Sharon Duddy, R.N, B.S.N.; Edith Kanaske, R.N, B.S.N.; Veronica Pauska, R.N.; Kelly Korea, R.N.

Front (L-R) Kelly DeLeo, PSA; Christy Rothermel, Ph.D., Chief of Psychology; Paola Montross, MS, RD, LDN, MOVE! Weight Management Program Coordinator; Afzana Sharmin, PA-C

Back (L-R) Ghazali Chaudry, M.D., F.A.C.S, Chief of Surgery; Gina Foltz, MS, RD, LDN, Chief of Nutrition and Food Services; John Treven, D.O.; Dane Doornbos, PA-C; Mary Kaye Gattuso, PHRN, BSN, CDE
SLEEPING SOUNDLY—AT HOME!

Sleep lab testing now available in Veterans’ residences

Mature adults understand the importance of a good night’s sleep. Being well rested not only protects physical and mental health, but has an overall impact on quality of life.

In 2014, Wilkes-Barre renovated and upgraded its Sleep Lab to ensure that Veterans were receiving the latest in diagnostic sleep studies in a modern clinical environment.

In 2017, we expanded our offerings in this area by introducing in-home sleep studies. Veterans are now able to receive the clinical benefits of a sleep study in the comfort of their own home. Wait times for the completion of studies have decreased as a direct result of this in-home testing, and Veteran feedback has been positive.

In support of the sleep program, Wilkes-Barre’s Prosthetics Department has begun to maintain a stock of Continuous Positive Airway Pressure (CPAP) machines, which can be provided to

Veterans immediately after completing their sleep study if the test indicates such machines would be beneficial. Prosthetics can issue the device, train the Veteran on its use and benefits, and answer any questions the Veteran or his or her caregiver may have. Many Veterans are using the machine and experiencing a more restful night’s sleep within a few nights of completing the study.

The CPAP machines contain a built-in modem, which automatically transmits sleep pattern data to the provider to assure continued clinical success.

Wilkes-Barre’s expansion of the diagnosis capabilities our Sleep Lab offers is one example of how we are employing modern technologies to assure that our Veterans are receiving safe, reliable, high-quality care in a convenient manner.
CLEAN AS A WHISTLE
HUBSCRUB system cleans, disinfects better than ever

At the Wilkes-Barre VAMC, we’re committed to providing the Veterans we serve with safe, reliable, high-quality healthcare. An important aspect of this care is the cleanliness of the equipment we use and the environment in which care is provided.

Over the years, the methods of cleaning the medical center have progressed from brooms to high-efficiency particulate arresting (HEPA) floor scrubbers/vacuums, and from mops to microfiber cleaning heads. Ultra-violet room sterilization devices now reinforce the manual cleaning of room surfaces and equipment. Just as standards for clinical care delivery have evolved over time, so have our methods of assuring that the environment meets higher levels of cleanliness.

In 2017, Wilkes-Barre became one of the first medical centers to acquire and use the HUBSCRUB System, an automated cleaning system. The system, which resembles a small car wash, is an equipment cleaning solution that uses both chemical and ultra-violet cleaning processes to clean, rinse, and disinfect equipment. It also eliminates troublesome pathogens like Methicillin Resistant Staphylococcus Aureus (MRSA) and Vancomycin Resistant Enterococcus (VRE).

Before the implementation of the HUBSCRUB system, equipment such as wheelchairs, tray tables, walkers, and linen carts were manually cleaned. Testing the manually cleaned equipment after cleaning often detected residual bacteria, which meant the equipment had to be recleaned and retested before it could be safely returned to service.

The automated cleaning system has improved both the efficiency and effectiveness of equipment cleaning. The automated system, which can clean multiple items at a time, has a 7-minute cycle time, half the time needed to manually clean a single item. The post cleaning testing results continually demonstrates a 100 percent success rate for removal of bacteria.

Wilkes-Barre is proud to use this new technology to assure our Veterans and their families that they are receiving the safest and most reliable care possible.

The success rate of post-cleaning testing has significantly increased through the use of automated cleaning units, which has increased patient safety and improved staff efficiency while reducing turnover time for rooms and equipment across the facility.
DIGITAL DENTAL CROWNS: TAKING THE BITE OUT OF WAITING

Time for procedure reduced from weeks to hours

Wilkes-Barre’s Dental Clinic has recently incorporated the Planmeca FIT System into the services it offers eligible Veterans. The system uses the latest three-dimensional modeling developments in digital dental technologies. It scans, designs, and mills custom-fit permanent dental crowns. The new equipment is increasing patient satisfaction and access to care, while improving the overall Veteran experience.

The conventional crown fabrication process typically involves multiple dental visits over a 6-8 week time frame. The FIT System significantly reduces the time it takes to complete installation of the prosthesis. Many Veterans now receive their prosthesis during their initial visit.

Once a hand-held intraoral scanner has captured a picture of the prepared tooth, the equipment digitizes the image and designs a crown using computer aided design (CAD) software. After the crown has been designed virtually, it is checked for form and functional accuracy before being sent to an on-site milling machine.

The miller fabricates the permanent crown from a block of fibered ceramic, chosen by the treating dentist based on the color and strength requirements of the crown being fabricated. The crown, milled in approximately 10 minutes, rivals the quality and fit of those received from the finest dental labs. Since the crown is designed and fabricated on-site, the treating dentist and on-site laboratory technician have total control of the finished product, allowing for a more customized and form-fitted restoration.

Our Dental Clinic continuously strives to provide the highest quality and state-of-the-art dental care. Veterans served at the clinic are now able to receive a permanent crown, fully fitted and operational in one 90-minute appointment. Acquiring and using high-tech equipment is just one way Wilkes-Barre provides Veterans with safe and reliable, healthcare.

Dr. Jeffrey Manzo with Veteran Mark Miller following Mr. Miller’s receipt of a same day crown from Wilkes-Barre’s Dental Clinic.
DIGITAL DENTURES:  
THE SECOND BITE  

Better fitting prosthetics—in one-third the time!

Working with VA’s Office of Dentistry Task Force, the Wilkes-Barre VA Dental Clinic has implemented the practice of digital denture fabrication.

Conventional denture fabrication features include portions of manual fabrication, which can lead to deviations from the original impressions and produce a low quality of form fitting dentures. This lengthy and traditional process also inconveniences Veterans through multiple clinic appointments and delays in denture delivery. It may also impact the Veteran’s overall health and well-being.

Conventional dentures take approximately 90 days to complete, and require a minimum of five clinical appointments from initial consult to delivery.

Our new digital denture fabrication process uses scanning technology to digitally record impressions on-site for superior form fitting dentures. The process reduces the number of required clinical appointments from five visits to three, and also reduces the overall time it takes to fabricate dentures to approximately 30 days. The digital technology also allows individual information to be stored in a centralized depository, so that Veterans can order a replacement set of dentures at any time, without a clinical appointment.

From March 2016 through October 2017, the new process opened up 238 additional appointments within the dental clinic, providing Veterans with greater access to dental care. Veteran satisfaction has also increased, thanks to the improved quality digital dentures offer. The digitally recorded impressions allow for a better and more comfortable fit, and Veterans now receive their dentures 60 days earlier, on average, than they did using the conventional process.

These digital denture fabrication techniques improve access to care, quality, and Veteran satisfaction. The clinic’s efforts demonstrate the service’s commitment to continuous improvement to better serve Wilkes-Barre Veterans.
HENRY FORD WOULD BE PROUD

Lab automation system offers Veterans newest and best technology

The Wilkes-Barre VAMC is committed to continually improving the services we offer Veterans. By focusing on Lean Management System principles, we’re constantly working to improve the safety, reliability and efficiency of our processes to improve clinical outcomes and increase Veterans’ satisfaction with their healthcare experience.

In 2017, Wilkes-Barre installed a Beckman Coulter Power Express laboratory automation system. The system, which interfaces with our Laboratory Information Systems (LIS), automates the pre-analytical, analytical, and post-analytical processes taking place in our clinical laboratory.

The system is capable of processing up to 1400 blood samples an hour. It uses a barcode tracking system to monitor, sort, and route those samples to the appropriate test stations for analysis. The system prioritizes sample testing by rack type and instrument availability, while automatically identifying and segregating unreadable samples into an error lane. On completion of the testing sequence, the tubes are routed to an outlet rack for sample preservation at ambient or refrigerated temperatures.

In today’s medical world, a significant portion of clinical decisions are based on laboratory testing. With the installation of the laboratory automation system, Wilkes-Barre is using the newest and best laboratory technology to provide Veterans with the most reliable care. The improved specimen management processes afforded by the system have increased the overall efficiency, accuracy and reliability of laboratory testing, enabling more rapid diagnosis for improved clinical outcomes.

If everyone is moving forward together, success takes care of itself. ~Henry Ford

(L-R) Dr. Mirza Ali (Chief of Staff), Dr. Hanna Kaspar (Chief Pathology), and Mr. Russell E. Lloyd (Director) observe the Power Express System in operation.

Wilkes-Barre’s Power Express Laboratory Automation System is enhancing productivity, efficiency, and reliability of laboratory testing.
SERIOUS MEDICINE
Wilkes-Barre works to reduce Veterans’ dependence on opioids

More than six of ten drug overdose deaths involve the use of an opioid, a drug that acts on the nervous system to relieve pain. Since 1999, the number of overdose deaths involving opioids, including prescription opioids and heroin, has quadrupled. Between 2000 and 2015 more than half a million people died from drug overdoses, and 91 Americans die from an opioid overdose every day. According to a 2011 VA study, Veterans are twice as likely to die from accidental opioid overdose as non-Veterans.

This is because the Veteran population has a high incidence of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), major depressive disorder (MDD), alcohol use, and suicide attempts. All these disorders are associated with high dose opioid use and an increased risk of overdose.

Healthcare providers play a key role in educating patients on the potential risks of opioids. VA recognizes the clinical challenges to both successfully manage pain and prescribe safely for Veterans.

At the Wilkes-Barre VAMC we use a number of strategies to assure our Veterans’ use of opioids is both safe and effective.

Opioid reduction strategies include:

- Educating patients on the correct use of opioids and other methods of managing pain.
- Offering Veterans the opportunity to attend a weekly walk-in multi-disciplinary pain school.
- Ensuring our providers use the Prescription Drug Monitoring Program, which collects designated data on prescriptions within Pennsylvania to avoid concurrent prescribing of opioids.
- Monitoring patients closely who use opioids, to include routine urine drug screens and pain assessment.
- Making Take Back envelopes and Med Safe receptacles available at our facilities to enable Veterans to dispose of any unused medications.

Here are some ways Veterans can help prevent opioid abuse:

- Ask your physician about ways to manage your pain that do not involve prescription opioids.
- Understand the risks and side effects of taking prescription opioids.
- Ask your physician to prescribe naloxone (a synthetic drug that blocks opioid receptors in the nervous system) if you will be taking opioids at home, in order to prevent overdose.
- Tell your physician about any mental health, addiction, or dependency issues you may have or have had in the past.
- Help prevent misuse and abuse by keeping medications securely stored;
- Never share or sell prescription opioids.
- Make sure medications are used in the manner in which they are prescribed.

If you are having difficulty managing your medications, speak to your VA provider. WE CAN HELP!
COMMUNITY LIVING CENTER PROVIDING MORE THAN JUST HEALTHCARE

Residents kept physically, mentally, and spiritually active

For most people, healthcare conjures up images of doctors and nurses, pills, needles, and drafty gowns. For residents of Wilkes-Barre’s Community Living Center (CLC), however, hospital stays are much more than clinical: for these men and women, the CLC is their home. The center is where they interact with family and friends, experience Veteran camaraderie, and take part in the daily activities that keep them active.

As we age, we lose friends and family members. We may also lose our ability to do things, and to pursue activities and the independence we once enjoyed. A lack of social interaction, activities, and personal engagement may result in feelings of isolation and a lack of personal purpose. Because of this, in addition to providing safe and reliable care, the staff of the CLC goes to great lengths to keep residents active and socially engaged during their stay.

By providing activities that encourage residents to remain physically, mentally, and spiritually active, we foster a sense of purpose, self-esteem, and confidence, which has been shown to help sustain physical and emotional well-being.

A recent Harvard School of Public Health study published in The American Journal of Public Health, suggests that “strong social ties, through friends, family and community groups, can preserve brain health as we age and that social isolation may be an important risk factor for cognitive decline in the elderly.”

Recreation Therapy, along with the CLC Spirit Committee, may appear to be all fun and games, but the committee provides enriching physical and social activities that improve the clinical outcomes of all our residents.
Quick response by Wilkes-Barre employee saves a fellow officer’s life

Dane Sorensen demonstrates selfless dedication and an impeccable level of commitment every day as a full-time VA Police Officer and a part-time Municipal Police Officer.

Officer Sorensen was born and raised in Phoenix, Arizona. He served with honor in the United States Army in Afghanistan, and continues his service in uniform as a team leader with the Pennsylvania National Guard.

In July of 2017, while attending the VA Police Academy at the department’s North Little Rock, Arkansas, Law Enforcement Training Center, a fellow officer, trainee and Veteran experienced a cardiac event during a physical fitness drill. Officer Sorensen, along with his fellow classmates and instructors, immediately began emergency treatment and established contact with emergency responders. Medical professionals involved in the incident credit the officers’ quick response and actions of the officers with saving the individual’s life.

Officer Sorensen deserves recognition for his actions in this case, and for the commitment, character, and professionalism he displays daily as an officer. His work brings credit to the VA Police Service and to all Veterans who proudly serve other Veterans at VA.
In 2017, Wilkes-Barre welcomed Nicole Garza, MSW, LCSW, as our new Chief, Social Work Services. Mrs. Garza is an Army Veteran who continues to serve with the Army National Guard as a Behavioral Health Officer. Before joining our team in Wilkes-Barre, she worked at VA Medical Centers in Colorado, Wyoming and North Carolina.

I’m excited to join the team of dedicated professionals that comprise Wilkes-Barre’s Social Work Service. As a service, we will continue to work to the best of our ability to advance and expand all our programs to ensure we are providing Northeastern Pennsylvania’s Veterans with the best possible services.

During the past year, our facility continued to support the expansion of the Veteran’s Justice Outreach (VJO) Program to help avoid the unnecessary criminalization of mental illness among Veterans.

Our Suicide Prevention Coordinators were available at all times to assist Veterans in crisis, and maintained an active calendar of outreach and community engagement events.

We incorporated Military Sexual Trauma (MST) services and treatments directly into the Mental Hygiene Clinic to facilitate the availability of therapeutic and recovery services.

The Mental Health Intensive Case Management (MHICM) Program focused on working with individuals requiring a higher level of support and case management, to provide these individuals with the increased peer support they need to build, strengthen and reinforce their socialization skills.

Our Transition and Care Management (TCM) Team worked to help Post 9/11 Veterans not only with managing their healthcare needs, but also with navigating VA and community based resources.

We continued to expand our Homeless Programs in our continued effort to end Veterans homelessness.

We expanded our Substance Treatment and Recovery (STAR) Program to include supportive services including case management, medication management support, and individual psychotherapy by specialized professionals and various groups.
Congratulations to Catherine Ball, Registered Dietitian (RD) on becoming credentialed as a Certified Lactation Counselor (CLC) in 2017. As a RD and a CLC, Mrs. Ball works closely with Wilkes-Barre’s Maternity Care Coordinator to provide counseling, education and support to pregnant and nursing Women Veterans throughout VISN 4.

Mrs. Ball provides services on a daily basis from Wilkes-Barre’s Community Based Outpatient Clinic in Sayre, Pennsylvania. However, she is available to Veterans throughout VISN 4 via Clinical Video Telehealth (CVT) visits.

The availability of this telehealth service allows new mothers to connect with the lactation counselor from the comfort of their own home, using their smart phone, computer, tablet or even telephone. The flexibility telehealth visits also provide women Veterans with prompt assessment and care, an essential aspect of lactation support.

Through modern technologies, Wilkes-Barre is increasing the services available to our women Veterans, assuring they receive the right care, at the right time, in the most convenient manner possible. Lactation services are now available to any lactating or pregnant woman enrolled at any VISN 4 Facility, and Wilkes-Barre is working to expand its offerings to other VISNs in the near future.