2018 Annual Report
St. Cloud VA Health Care System
About Us

The St. Cloud VA Health Care System began serving Veterans in 1924 and now delivers care to more than 39,000 Veterans per year. The Health Care System provides primary and subspecialty medical, urgent, specialty and mental health care; acute psychiatry services; and extended care and rehabilitation services. Specialty outpatient services offered include audiology, dental, endoscopy, ambulatory surgery, laboratory, orthopedics, optometry, podiatry, pulmonology, radiology, urology, otolaryngology, respiratory therapy, rheumatology, hematology/oncology, cardiology, neurology, nephrology, and women Veterans health care.

The Health Care System also provides a number of special emphasis services including residential and outpatient mental health and substance abuse programs, a mental health residential rehabilitation treatment program, outpatient programming for serious mental illness, homeless Veterans programs, a suicide prevention program, a transition and assistance program for returning Veterans, a women Veterans program, an incarcerated Veteran program, a Veterans justice outreach program, Native American sweat lodge ceremonies to meet diverse spiritual needs, vocational rehabilitation, and supported employment programs. Extended care and rehabilitation services include skilled nursing care, home-based primary care, adult day health care, memory care, hospice and palliative care, ventilator care, and a variety of rehabilitation services including physical therapy, speech pathology and occupational therapy.

The Health Care System does not maintain an inpatient medical unit. Those needs are met by authorizing care at local community hospitals and transfers to the Minneapolis VA Health Care System 80 miles to the south. Veterans can access care and services at the St. Cloud VA Medical Center and three community clinics in Alexandria, Brainerd and Montevideo.

Our History

In March 1919, the largest federal hospital construction program in history (to date) was authorized by Congress to provide medical facilities for World War I Veterans. Public Act 194 of the 67th Congress, also referred to as the second Langley Bill, was approved by Congress on April 20, 1922 and called for an appropriation of $17 million for the construction of twelve Veterans hospitals. A 500-bed neuropsychiatric hospital for Veterans Bureau District No. 10, which included the states of Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Montana, was authorized as part of that law. In support of locating the hospital in St. Cloud, the St. Cloud Commercial Club staged a pledge drive and raised upwards of $60,000 for the acquisition of 310 acres of farmland on the Sauk River. The property deeds were donated to the U.S. Veterans Bureau, and construction of the hospital began on July 17, 1923.

U.S. Veterans Bureau Hospital No. 101 at St. Cloud was officially dedicated on September 17, 1924. The St. Cloud facility was the first federal hospital for disabled Veterans to be constructed in the Veterans Bureau's tenth district. On September 24, 1924, the first patient was admitted. Thousands of Veterans from Minnesota received neuropsychiatric care at St. Cloud from 1924 to 1950. Since 1950 it has served thousands of American Veterans from modern-era wars.

The St. Cloud VA Hospital Historic District was placed on the National Register of Historic Places on August 21, 2012, because of its significance to the history and evolution of American medicine and Veterans care, its representation of World War I-era federal architecture, and its role in providing quality health care to World War I Veterans after the war. The St. Cloud VA Hospital Historic District continues to serve as a physical reminder of medical care provided by the federal government through the Veterans Bureau and the VA to Veterans.
We are grateful for the continued trust that is placed in this organization by Veterans, employees, Veterans service organizations, volunteers and members of our communities. Respect for the obligations that comes with this trust drives our every action and fuels our thirst to continuously improve this organization. In 2018, we made considerable progress in our ongoing journey to become a high reliability organization:

- Our team has adapted the organization to implement the MISSION Act in 2019, and are ready to co-manage expanded private-sector health care options for Veterans. In support of this expansion, we have focused on strengthening relationships with community providers to ensure Veterans get the care they need, when they need it.

- We have made progress in implementing a whole health system of health care, which seeks to treat the Veteran as a whole person rather than just treating a disease or condition, and in connecting Veterans to their care virtually as a means of increasing access and convenience.

- We have overhauled the way we approach our daily work, empowering our great teammates at all levels to be innovators and change agents.

- We have implemented a culture of respect for people and continuous improvement that will provide the springboard to enable the St. Cloud VA to become a high-reliability organization, postured to pursue our true north goals of leading with safety, ensuring world class care, acting responsibly and for our employees to be engaged in caring for our Veterans and each other.

On behalf of the entire team, thank you for your service and for allowing us the honor of serving you.
At a Glance

**FY 2018 Outpatient Visits**
- 375,801 St. Cloud Medical Center
- 33,908 Brainerd VA Clinic
- 16,048 Max J. Beilke VA Clinic
- 12,148 Montevideo VA Clinic
- 1,968 Mobile Clinics

- 39,143 Unique Veterans Treated
- 437,877 Outpatient Visits

**Total Operating Beds - 388**
- 15 Acute Psychiatry
- 148 MHRRTP*
- 225 Community Living Center

- 50 Veteran Service Organizations
- 597 Volunteers

*Mental Health Residential Rehabilitation and Treatment Program

- Average Daily Census = 361
- 131,766 Bed Days of Care
- 1,897 Employees*

*Comprised of 1,697 full-time and 200 part-time employees
Operating Statistics, FY 2018

Bed Occupancy Rates

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community Living Center</td>
<td>91.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MHRRTP</td>
<td>96.1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acute Psychiatry</td>
<td>74.5%</td>
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Overall Bed Occupancy Rate: 93%

*Mental Health Residential Rehabilitation and Treatment Program

Budget Totals

- $340,592,753 Total Operating Funds
- $3,774,937 Equipment Funds
- $8,661,168 Non-Recurring Maintenance & Repair Funds
- $2,227,694 Construction Funds
- $355,256,552 Grand Total All VA Funds
- $19,829,397 External Revenue+

+Funds collected from other health insurance, also included in Total Operating Funds

2,769 Inpatient & Resident Unique Patients

- 21% Community Living Center
- 25% MHRRTP*
- 54% Acute Psychiatry

*Mental Health Residential Rehabilitation and Treatment Program

Total Value of Volunteer Resources = $2,464,810**

- $151,901 Cash Donations
- $511,100 Material Donations
- 75,454 Volunteer Hours (Equivalent to 36 Full-Time Employees)

**Includes value of cash, material donations, and dollar value of payroll equivalent provided by volunteers.
The St. Cloud VAHCS is assigned a primary service area of 27 Central Minnesota counties. In 2018, over 34,000 veterans from these counties received care through the St. Cloud VA Health Care System. Nearly 5,000 veterans from across the rest of Minnesota and the Upper Midwest traveled to us to receive specialized care and services.
Distinguished Civil Servants

**Physician’s Award for Clinical Excellence**
Christopher Churchill, D.O.
Extended Care and Rehabilitation

**Clinical Employee of the Year**
Crystal DeMoss, RN
Primary & Specialty Medicine

**Outstanding Registered Nurse**
Kori Happke, RN
Surgical & Specialty Care

**Outstanding Registered Nurse: Expanded Role**
Alice DeLane, RN
Surgical, Specialty Care Coordinator

**Nonclinical Employee of the Year**
Ian Behnen, Tractor Operator
Facilities Management

**Outstanding Nursing Assistant**
Nichole Bialke, CNA
Extended Care and Rehabilitation

**Outstanding Licensed Practical Nurse**
Melissa Schlangen, LPN
Surgical & Specialty Care
### Clinical

**Nicole Mares**  
Nurse Manager, Extended Care and Rehabilitation

**Denis McGuinness**  
Social Worker, Mental Health

**Trisha Fonda**  
Staff Nurse, Extended Care and Rehabilitation

**Dr. Julie Happe**  
Orthopedic Surgeon, Surgical & Specialty Care

**Rebecca Herman**  
Staff Nurse, Extended Care and Rehabilitation

**Kay Iken**  
Nurse Practitioner, Extended Care and Rehabilitation

**Scott Frank**  
LPN, Extended Care and Rehabilitation

**Stephanie Okland**  
Nursing Assistant, Extended Care and Rehabilitation

**Dr. Zurya Anjum**  
Physician, Mental Health

**Kristine Masberg**  
RN, Extended Care and Rehabilitation

**Katherine Hissam**  
Social Worker, Mental Health

**Kimberly Hartung**  
Staff Nurse, Imaging

### Administrative

**Susan Molitor**  
Housekeeping Aide Leader, Facilities Management

**Amy Wipper**  
Program Support Assistant, Health Administration Services

**Brenda Wesenberg**  
Medical Support Assistant, Extended Care and Rehabilitation

**Cathy Talberg**  
Payroll Supervisor, Fiscal Department

**Lisa Schultz**  
Health Technician, Surgical Specialty Care

**Amber VanDrehle**  
Human Resources Information Specialist, Human Resources

**Dustin Miller**  
Medical Administrative Assistant, Health Administration Services

**Stephanie Herold**  
Medical Support Assistant, Surgical and Specialty Care

**Nicholas Busch**  
Police Officer, Office of the Director

**Joshua John**  
Food Service Worker, Nutrition and Food Service

**Holly Zabinski**  
Lead MRT Coder, Health Administration Services

**Joann Houge**  
Program Specialist, Office of the Director
Clinical Organization & Service Offerings

Primary & Specialty Medicine
Richard Linares, M.D.
Acting Medical Director

- Preventative Health & Chronic Disease Management
- Telephone Care
- Clinical Pharmacy
- Rheumatology Clinic
- Neurology
- Pulmonology
- Retinal Scanning
- Nephrology
- Compensation & Pension Exams
- Cardiology-Environmental Exams

Surgical & Specialty Care
Jay Collins, M.D.
Director

- Outpatient Surgery
- Optometry
- Dental
- Otolaryngology
- Oral Surgery
- GI/Endoscopy
- Plastic Surgery (limited)
- Orthopedics
- Audiology
- Ophthalmology
- Urology

Mental Health
Jeremy Maurstad, MSSA, LICSW, FACHE
Director

- Outpatient Mental Health Treatment
- Residential Rehabilitation and Treatment Program
- Substance Use Treatment
- Acute Psychiatric Inpatient Treatment
- Mental Health Intensive Case Management
- Psychosocial Rehabilitation & Recovery Program
- Primary Care Mental Health Integration Program
- Veterans Justice Program
- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder Track
- Vocational Rehabilitation
- Psychological Testing & Assessment
- Suicide Prevention Program
- Healthcare for Homeless Veterans Program

Extended Care & Rehabilitation
Christopher Churchill, D.O.
Director

- Home Care Telehealth
- Dementia Care
- Hospice Care
- Nursing Home Care
- Respite Care
- Pastoral Care/Counseling
- Rehabilitation Therapies
- Home Improvement Structural Alteration
- Secondary Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) Evaluation
Special Programs for Veterans

Post 911 Transition and Care Management Program
Mike Mynczywor, Program Manager, 320-252-1670, ext. 6546
Website: http://www.stcloud.va.gov/freedom.asp

Suicide Prevention Coordinator
Mary Jo Pine, 320-252-1670, ext. 6719

Patient Advocates
Brenda Smude, Karen Harrison & Anthony Meemken, 320-252-1670, ext. 6353

Homeless Program Manager
Ellen Dinsmore, 320-252-1670, ext. 6973

Veterans Justice Programs
Tanya Greene, 320-252-1670, ext. 6169

Military Sexual Trauma/Intimate Partner Violence Program Manager
Joy Finkelson, 320-252-1670, ext. 6398

Caregiver Support Coordinator
Jessica Behrends, 320-252-1670, ext. 7283

Women Veterans Program Manager
Amber Willert, 320-252-1670, ext. 6655

Polytrauma Support Clinic Manager
Lindsey Monroe, 320-252-1670, ext. 7798

Vision Impairment Services Team Manager
Lois Thesing, 320-252-1670, ext. 7235

Spinal Cord Injury & Disorders Program Manager
Heidi Ampe, 320-252-1670, ext. 7235

Former Prisoners of War Advocate
Christine Dawson, 320-252-1670, ext. 6379

LGBTQ Veterans Care Coordinator
Annette Mason, 320-252-1670, ext. 6875
2018 Highlights

Dr. Christopher Churchill Named Physician of the Year

Dr. Christopher Churchill, Service Line and Medical Director for the St. Cloud VA Health Care System’s Extended Care and Rehabilitation Service, accepts the American Legion, Department of Minnesota Physician of the Year award from Wilson Spence of the American Legion, Department of Minnesota’s Rehabilitation Committee.

In recognition of “outstanding performance, encouraging attitude and superior dedication to ensuring Veterans receive the highest quality of health care,” Dr. Christopher Churchill was named Physician of the Year by the American Legion, Department of Minnesota.

Dr. Churchill serves as the Service Line and Medical Director for Extended Care and Rehabilitation Service. In recognizing him as Physician of the Year, the American Legion cited several numerous continuous improvement initiatives, including:

- Implementation and development of comprehensive reviews for psychotropic medication use and management of residents with disruptive behaviors.

- Adopting the Behavioral Recovery Team model within the St. Cloud VA.

- Continued development of the Hospice and Palliative Care Program.

St. Cloud VA HCS Awarded Top Honor

In recognition for continuing achievement and innovation in health care sustainability, the St. Cloud VA Health Care System received the Top 25 Environmental Excellence Award from Practice Greenhealth, the nation’s leading organization dedicated to environmental sustainability in health care. The award is one of the Environmental Excellence Awards given each year to honor environmental achievements in the health care sector.

This is the third straight year that the St. Cloud VA has earned the Top 25 distinction.

The 25 hospitals presented with Practice Greenhealth’s highest honors exemplify environmental excellence and are setting the highest standards for environmental practices in health care. Award winners are leading the industry with innovation in sustainability and have the data and documentation to prove their success.

This recognition demonstrates the St. Cloud VA’s commitment to environmental excellence, and its dedication to continuous improvement, systematically achieving incremental changes in processes to improve efficiency and quality.
St. Cloud VA Becomes Beyond the Yellow Ribbon Employer

Major General Neal Loidolt, Deputy Adjutant General, Joint Force Headquarters MN Army National Guard; Steve Simon, MN Secretary of State; Stephen D. Black, FACHE, Director, St. Cloud VA Health Care System; and Annette Brechon Kuyper, Director of Military Outreach, State of MN, display a banner in a proclamation ceremony at the St. Cloud VA on Sept. 17, 2018, welcoming the St. Cloud VA Health Care System as a new Yellow Ribbon Company, which are organizations that connect and coordinate resources, education, outreach and support to meet the needs of Servicemembers, Veterans, and military families.

The St. Cloud VA Health Care System was proclaimed a Yellow Ribbon Company by the State of Minnesota at a ceremony conducted in September. A formal proclamation signed by Governor Mark Dayton was presented to the St. Cloud VA by Minnesota Secretary of State Steve Simon and Major General Neal Loidolt, Deputy Adjutant General, Joint Force Headquarters, Minnesota Army National Guard.

The St. Cloud VA is the first federal entity in Minnesota to receive this designation and is the 63rd organization across the state to achieve Yellow Ribbon Company designation. In the greater St. Cloud area, other Yellow Ribbon Companies include Rasmussen College and St. Cloud State University.

Sponsored by the State of Minnesota, the Yellow Ribbon Company network is comprised of broad, organizationally structured companies with national, regional or statewide influence that unite all areas of the company in connecting and coordinating resources, education, outreach and support to meet the needs of Servicemembers, Veterans, and military families.

Services Expanded at the Brainerd VA Clinic

The VA Clinic in Brainerd added new services as the result of a physical expansion completed in 2018. The expansion added 3,900 square feet to the clinic, increasing gross square footage to just over 20,000 square feet. Included in the expansion are:

- **An audiology booth with an exam suite.** The expansion provides 40-50 audiology exams per week instead of the 40-50 exams per month using the mobile van.

- **Two fully equipped Optometry exam rooms** designated for auxiliary optometry testing including a visual field, optical coherence tomographer and retinal camera. Staff can conduct 70 optometry appointments per week, and Veterans can now get their eyeglasses at the clinic.

- **15 new exam rooms** to support additional or expanded services, including: additional physical therapy, podiatry, primary care space and a dedicated women’s health room.

Nicole Finnegan, St. Cloud VA Health Care System Brainerd VA Clinic Coordinator; Cheryl Thieschafer, Associate Director; Mark Aberle, Nurse Executive; Stephen D. Black, FACHE, Director; and Veterans in attendance celebrate a ribbon cutting ceremony on May 1, 2018 at the Brainerd VA Clinic.
Patriot Store and Café Remodeled

The remodeling of the Veterans Canteen Service facilities at the St. Cloud VA celebrated another milestone in April with the opening of the new Patriot Retail Store.

The new store features an updated look and a modern atmosphere, and is a full-service retail store with products such as electronics, cosmetics, toiletries, and clothing. Items may be purchased tax-free. The store hours are Monday - Friday, 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. and Saturdays from 8 a.m. to Noon. The store is closed on Sundays and holidays.

Whole Health System is the New Approach to Health Care

The St. Cloud VA has taken a new approach to improving health and treating chronic pain by offering alternative and complementary therapies as part of the new Whole Health System.

The concept of Whole Health teaches Veterans that they have the power to take charge of their life and health. This involves the teaching and learning of different ways of dealing with pain, stress management, health, and wellness that ultimately improves Veteran’s lives.

Whole Health goes beyond illnesses, injuries, or disabilities and instead focuses on an individual’s values, goals, health and well-being. Whole Health provides alternative tools and therapies to complement conventional medical care. This type of approach is especially beneficial to Veterans with chronic pain.

The use of complementary and alternative therapies is a part of Whole Health that is quickly gaining popularity among Veterans. These complementary therapies help manage pain naturally with limited reliance on medications.

In 2018, St. Cloud VA expanded its Whole health offerings, and currently offers treatments including manual treatments, mindfulness, and Tai-Chi classes, in addition to Whole Health coaching and battlefield acupuncture.

Building 28 Renovation

In August, Veteran residents of the Mental Health Residential Rehabilitation Treatment Program (RRTP) moved into the totally renovated and expanded east wing of Building 28, 2d Floor. Residents are housed in two-person rooms, and the home-like atmosphere includes a juice bar, refrigerator, recliners, and dayroom activities. The RRTP offers treatment to Veterans for a variety of mental health issues, substance abuse and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or a combination of these conditions.
### Keeping Veterans Safe

The focus of VA’s top clinical priority is simple—saving lives.

In January, an executive order allows newly minted Veterans transitioning from active duty to contact the nearest VA medical center or Vet Center today, ask for mental health services, and start receiving care. To receive care, these new Veterans must (1) have served in the active military, naval, or air service, and (2) have been discharged or released under conditions other than dishonorable.

Additionally, since 2017, any former service member with an Other-than-Honorable (OTH) administrative discharge may qualify for a 90-day episode of care which can include inpatient, residential or outpatient care.

These individuals and other Veterans can seek care at any VA medical center or Vet Center. VA will assess each individual for an emergent health care need and provide appropriate care and resources.

In support of keeping Veterans safe, the St. Cloud VA Health Care System distributed 12,000 free gun locks in 2018 to Veterans and their family members, and invited area businesses, organizations and individuals to help distribute the gun locks. Additionally, the St. Cloud VA doubled its suicide prevention team and expanded community education efforts, offering suicide prevention training and outreach to community groups concerned about Veterans.

The Veterans Crisis Line connects Veterans in crisis and their families and friends with qualified, caring Department of Veterans Affairs responders through a confidential toll-free hotline, online chat, or text. Veterans and their loved ones can call 1-800-273-8255 and Press 1, chat online, or send a text message to 838255 to receive confidential support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.

We seek everyone’s help in eliminating suicide among Veterans—a necessary first step is getting them the care they need, when it is needed.

Help us #BeThere for Veterans. Community hospitals and providers, civic groups, and individuals who seek to help Veterans by raising awareness about mental health wellness and suicide prevention programs should visit: https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/BeThere.aspx, or contact Mary Jo Pine, Suicide Prevention Coordinator, at 320-255-6480, ext. 6719.
Providing one example of the many continuous improvement efforts occurring in 2018, several St. Cloud VA employees were recognized for the eyeglass systems redesign project. Shown in the top photo is St. Cloud VA Chief of Staff Scott Bartley with Connie Powell, Deb Doeden, Michelle George, and Dr. Amber Scharnweber. Team member Luke Steinbach is pictured in the bottom photo with Associate Director Cheryl Thieschafer. Not pictured is Chad Hirsch.

Prior to the redesign project, eyeglasses consults were taking an average of 7.8 days to complete, and only 9.6% were completed within 3 days. In a full workweek, an average of 4.36 lab errors were reported to the Optometry clinic, requiring additional time to correct.

Through the systems redesign project, vendor errors were reduced by 15%, the amount of paper used to process consults decreased by 15,000 pages annually, one hour of Optician time was saved daily, and consult completion decreased to an average of 1.2 days from 7.8 days.

St. Cloud VA Nurse Executive Mark Aberle and Chief of Staff Dr. Scott Bartley joined Vietnam Veterans of America Region 6 National Director Robert Grabinski, Bob Behrens, President of Vietnam Veterans of America Central Minnesota Chapter 290, and Chapter 290-member Clyde Lewandowski to add the first Vietnam Veteran photo collage to the Vietnam War Commemoration exhibit at the St. Cloud VA Medical Center, on National Vietnam War Veterans Day, Thursday, March 29, 2018.

The exhibit in the medical center recognizes, honors and thanks Vietnam Veterans for their service and was established as part of the 50th Anniversary of the Vietnam War Commemoration.

The photo collages of individual Veterans on our Vietnam War Commemoration exhibit help us identify with our Veterans by seeing them as they served, and to remind us of the reason why VA serves them today.
Increased Tele-Audiology Services at Max J. Beilke VA Clinic

The Max J. Beilke VA Clinic in Alexandria increased the use of tele-audiology services in 2018.

Tele-audiology is available in Alexandria every week on Tuesdays from 2-4 p.m., Thursdays 2-4 p.m. and Fridays 8 a.m. to Noon.

This transition to tele-audiology from mobile van service increased the number of appointments available to Veterans while providing them with greater scheduling flexibility, enabling Veterans to continue to get the high-quality audiology care and services they need close to home.

St. Cloud Veterans Day Parade moves downtown

Sponsored by the St. Cloud MetroVets, the City of St. Cloud, St. Cloud State University and the St. Cloud VA HCS, the annual parade is now in its TWELVTH year! In 2018, the free parade, social, and concert featured hundreds of participants and observers in its new downtown venue.

Annie Here: How Are You?

It’s lunchtime in St. Cloud, and U.S. Marine Corps Veteran Bill Ranczka is sitting in his car in the parking lot at work. He’s had a rough morning, so he’s focusing on breathing deeply and listening to his favorite music. Annie suggested it.

Across town, later that evening, U.S. Army Veteran Juli Joseph is looking in her closet. She’s selecting outfits for the next three days and enjoying quiet time after an intense day at her job as a sexual assault victims advocate. Annie suggested this, too.

It’s not a coincidence that both Ranczka and Joseph heard from Annie. It’s part of the VA care they receive at the St. Cloud VA Health Care System.

Meet Annie

Annie is VA’s automated texting system that reminds Veterans to do self-care activities between appointments. VA released Annie nationally last fall. St. Cloud is one of 17 VA locations where the system was first tested, and has been released nationally.

VA care teams can use Annie to text Veterans many types of reminders to manage conditions. For example, a Veteran might get the message “Hi, it’s Annie with a helpful reminder. Did you remember to take your blood pressure medication? Please reply ‘MED yes’ or ‘MED no.’”

Ranczka and Joseph both receive Annie messages that help them manage anxiety. Their St. Cloud VA
psychologist, Dr. Jennifer Roth, Psy.D., LP, signed them up for the program in January – and technically, she did a lot more than that. Dr. Roth is the VA clinician who helped to design Annie’s mental health self-care messages.

First, Veterans pick the days and times they want Annie to check on them. The initial message always asks, “Are you feeling anxious? Text Y or N.” If the answer is no, Annie will text back with a message to keep having a great day. If the answer is yes, Annie asks them to choose whether they want to do a breathing, mindfulness or other activity.

“Annie gives them an active coping skill in that moment to decrease their anxiety,” Dr. Roth explains.

**The connection matters most**

Ranczka says Annie offers an at-home connection to his VA care that he didn’t have before. “I get the text, and it’s like Annie is asking me if I’m okay. I know it’s not an actual person, but it feels like there’s somebody checking on me. I know it leads back to someone, somewhere. No matter how bad I’m doing, at least this program is thinking about me.”

Joseph’s experience is similar.

“I don’t have a lot of people who message me, so when the text comes in, it makes me feel like someone’s there to care for me. Annie came into my life when I really needed it. She kind of feels like a sister. I can count on her to be there every day.”

Joseph adds that the activities Annie suggests have made a big difference in how she manages anxiety. “Instead of going home and watching TV, I look forward to doing what Annie suggests. It helps me because I’m not sitting there on the couch stewing in negative emotions. I’m engaged in a positive activity.”

**Annie’s other messages**

In addition to anxiety, Dr. Roth has helped to design three other mental health “protocols” for Annie: anger management, grief and activity engagement for elevating mood. Each protocol helps Veterans engage in self-care between appointments with their VA care team.

To date, Dr. Roth has helped to train 35 mental health staff members throughout the St. Cloud health system, and more than 100 Veterans are now enrolled in one or more of Annie’s mental health protocols. Another 100 St. Cloud patients are also enrolled in primary and specialty care Annie protocols, like weight management, hypertension, medication reminders, surgical care and many others.

**Everyone’s abuzz about Annie**

Dr. Roth says word about Annie has spread fast. “I’ve had Veterans approach me and ask, ‘What do you know about Annie?’ And I’ll respond, ‘Well, actually ...’

“It’s been a great experience to be a part of this opportunity to help our Veteran population. Annie is very versatile. It’s been rewarding to see the many ways it has encouraged Veterans to become more active participants in their own self-care.”

Learn More

Veterans can talk to their care teams if they are interested in enrolling for Annie. You can learn more about the [Annie App for Veterans](#) and [Annie App for Clinicians](#) on the [VA App Store](#). Even though Annie is available as an app, Veterans don’t need a smartphone to use it. The system works on any basic cell phone with text messaging capability, which will make it more widely available to Veterans everywhere.
Low MSA Vacancy Rate at St. Cloud VA

Medical Support Assistants (MSA), also referred to as clerks, are an indispensable part of the health care team. They are the glue that binds our care teams together, and are the first voice or face patients encounter when seeking care throughout the health care system.

A steady and reliable customer experience depends on an efficient scheduling process, prompt, easy check-in, and having someone answer patient phone calls, and the MSA community handles these tasks several thousand times per day.

To improve our service to Veterans, recruiting and hiring MSAs has been a focal point for the health care system for the past couple of years, and these efforts paid off in 2018 in terms of prompt and efficient service to Veterans.

In July, there were over 3,000 MSA vacancies across VHA. At the same point in time, St. Cloud VA had just 5 vacancies out of a total of 176 full-time employee equivalent positions. That’s a vacancy rate of under 3%, and at the time was the lowest in the VA Midwest Health Care Network and 5th lowest across VHA.

Women Veterans Program Expands Enrollment and Activities

The Women Veterans Program at the St. Cloud VA HCS provided care to 2,373 unique women Veterans in 2018, an increase by 173 from previous years.

Numerous events and activities were conducted in celebration of the unique needs of Women Veterans.

On May 9, the St. Cloud VA was one of 60 VA medical centers across the country to host baby showers.

The goal of the baby shower was to celebrate Veteran parents — especially moms — while also increasing awareness of VA’s comprehensive maternity care services and to encourage women Veterans to choose VA to support their health and wellness goals.

Women make up approximately 10 percent of the Veteran population in the United States, and nearly half of the nation’s 2 million women Veterans are of reproductive age. VA offers comprehensive primary care, prenatal and preconception (pre-pregnancy) care, infertility services, maternity care services and the first seven days of newborn care.

The St. Cloud VA Women Veterans Program also hosted a memorial walk for Veterans and their families who have experienced pregnancy or infant loss.

The walk, on Oct. 15, was held on the campus walking path, near Bldg. 92 on the south side of campus.

Oct. 15 is National Pregnancy and Infant Loss Awareness Day, and in coordinating maternity care for Veterans we often encounter those who have experienced a pregnancy loss,” said Amber Willert, Women Veteran Program Manager at the St. Cloud VA.

“The walk was a way to show them to know they are not alone, and to provide a way for others in the community to do the same,” Willert added.
Recognizing Vietnam Veterans

The St. Cloud VA is a commemorative partner in the national Vietnam War Commemoration, and is committed to publicly thanking and honoring Vietnam Veterans and their families. According to Stephen Black, Director for the St. Cloud VA Health Care System, many Vietnam Veterans have never been told “thank-you.” In 2018, “we wanted to change that,” he said.

Numerous ceremonies were conducted across our service area, individually recognizing 791 Vietnam Veterans. Ceremony sites included:

- Douglas County, Feb. 20, at Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 936, in Alexandria.
- Brainerd Lakes area, May 1, at the Brainerd VA Clinic, in Brainerd.
- Wright County, June 18, at the Monticello Community Center, in Monticello.
- Mille Lacs County, July 4, at Mille Lacs County Fairgrounds, in Princeton.
- Crow Wing county, July 31, at the Crow Wing County Fairgrounds, in Brainerd.
- Kanabec County, Aug. 4, at the Mora Civic Center, in Mora.
- Chippewa County, Aug 21, at the Montevideo VA Clinic, in Montevideo.
- McLeod County, Oct. 21, at the Hutchinson national guard Armory, in Hutchinson.
- Stearns County, Nov. 12, at ROCORI High School, in Cold Spring.
New Methods of Keeping Up with Your Appointments

In 2018 we introduced new methods to assist Veterans in managing their care. These included:

**MyHealtheVet (MHV) and Online Scheduling**

Veterans can now use Online Scheduling to:

- Self-schedule primary care appointments for your assigned primary care provider
- View or cancel existing primary care and mental health clinic appointments
- Make requests for help scheduling primary care and mental health appointments

To use Online Scheduling, you will need a premium My HealtheVet account. For personal assistance establishing an account, stop by the St. Cloud VA Health Hub in Bldg. 29, Room 20, during your next visit.

**Text Message Reminders**

Our convenient text message system sends VA appointment reminders via a text message.

- You can confirm or cancel out of an appointment with an easy text message reply.
- Reminder messages go out seven days and two days before the appointment.
- Veterans with multiple appointments on the same day will receive multiple reminders.
- All appointment reminder messages contain instructions on how to end messages.

**Bringing Care Closer to You via VA Video Connect**

“Beam me up, Scotty!” was a catchphrase popularized on the Star Trek television show anytime Captain Kirk needed to be teleported back to the Starship Enterprise.

VA hasn’t yet developed a teleportation machine, but we can now allow you and your provider to “beam in” to a virtual medical room using everyday technology, via a computer application, or app, called VA Video Connect.

In the virtual medical room, you participate in video health care visits where a hands-on physical examination is not required. You access your provider on a scheduled date and time – just like a face-to-face appointment in an exam room. In the virtual medical room, you communicate with your provider over the Internet using a microphone and web camera. Text messaging is also included in a virtual medical room visit.

To use VA Video Connect, you need an electronic device, such as a personal computer or laptop equipped with microphone and web camera, a smart
phone or a tablet computer. A personal email account is also required.

Once a virtual medical room session is scheduled, you will receive an email with a link to join the virtual medical room. At the time of your appointment, you simply click on the link, enter your name, and launch the session.

Virtual medical rooms provide you with access and convenience when:

• You live far away from your VA facility.
• You’re dealing with health conditions that make it difficult to travel to the specialist you need.
• You have a few minor questions for your doctor that can be answered over live video.
• You lack time to attend an in-person appointment.
• A hands-on physical examination is not required.

Video appointments are secure and respect your privacy. Only invited participants can join a virtual medical room for a visit. Participants can always see who has joined. And further, the VA provider can lock the room once all invited participants have arrived. There are no co-pays associated with these appointments.

That’s it! If interested in using this service, tell a member of your care team!

2018 St. Cloud VA Summer Games

The 4th Annual St. Cloud VA Summer Games were held Saturday, August 4 at the St. Cloud VA Medical Center. The games were open to all Veterans enrolled at the St. Cloud VA. This year’s events included: 1-mile walk/run/cycle, pool/billiards, badminton, rowing, weightlifting, table tennis, and horseshoes. Ski erg and pickleball were both introduced as new events this year.
An important sign of quality in health care is being approved by respected agencies. Accreditation is a process where standards are set, and health care providers are reviewed to make sure they are meeting those standards. Accrediting agencies review medical centers by interviewing patients and staff and observing the environment. There are many accrediting agencies that review VA medical centers. St. Cloud VA HCS is accredited in the following areas from the following agencies:

**Agency:** The Joint Commission  
**Services Surveyed:** Hospital, Behavior Health, Home Care  
**Survey Outcome:** Three-Year Accreditation, expires October 2019

*Joint Commission accreditation is recognized nationwide as a symbol of quality and signals an organization’s commitment to improving safety and quality of care. A culture of continuous improvement is fostered through ongoing monitoring and measuring.*

**Agency:** Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF)  
**Services Surveyed:** Mental Health Rehabilitation and Recovery Services  
**Survey Outcome:** Three-Year Accreditation, expires April 2021

**Agency:** Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF)  
**Services Surveyed:** Healthcare for Homeless Veterans Program  
**Survey Outcome:** Three-Year Accreditation, expires April 2021

**Agency:** Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF)  
**Services Surveyed:** Mental Health Residential Rehabilitation Treatment Programs which includes Behavioral Health and Residential Treatment  
**Survey Outcome:** Three-Year Accreditation, expires January 2022

**Agency:** Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF)  
**Services Surveyed:** Mental Health Psychosocial Rehabilitation and Recovery Center  
**Survey Outcome:** Three-Year Accreditation, expires January 2022

*CARF is a nonprofit organization that accredits human service providers, and CARF-accredited organizations demonstrate compliance with internationally recognized standards and a focus on consumer satisfaction.*

**Agency:** College of American Pathologists (CAP)  
**Services Surveyed:** Laboratory Services  
**Survey Outcome:** Two-Year Accreditation, expires January 2020

*The College of American Pathologists (CAP’s) Laboratory Accreditation Program accredits laboratory test disciplines to ensure compliance with comprehensive scientifically endorsed laboratory standards in order to maintain accuracy of test results, ensure accurate patient diagnosis and increase the value they bring to organizations, customers, and patients.*
Thank You for Your Service,

Now Let Us Serve You!

All Veterans are encouraged to enroll in the VA Health Care System. If not currently enrolled, Veterans can complete the *Application for Health Care Benefits* (Form 1010EZ) online at:

https://www.va.gov/health-care/apply/

Once the application is completed, you can submit the form online or you may print the form and mail it to us at:

St. Cloud VA Health Care System
Attn: Health Administration Service - Eligibility (Veteran Services) HAS136A
4801 Veterans Drive
St. Cloud, MN 56303

You can also hand-carry the form to the Eligibility (Veteran Services) Office, which is located on the ground floor of Building 1 (Main Entrance).

For more information or to enroll via phone please call the Eligibility (Veteran Services) Office at (320) 255-6340.