

# CARES Commission Site Visit Report

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## VISN 18: VA Southwest Health Care Network *VAMC Albuquerque, NM*

**Dates of Visit:** July 22, 2003

**Sites Visited:** VAMC Albuquerque, New Mexico

**CARES Commissioners/Staff:**

Commissioner Chad Colley  
Commissioner John Kendall  
Johnetta McKinley, Commission Staff

**Overview of Site Visit:**

*VAMC Albuquerque* is the cornerstone of the New Mexico VA Health Care System (NMVAHCS). It is a Level 1 tertiary care facility with an authorized bed level of 246 but operates only 217, which includes a 26-bed spinal cord injury center (SCI), and a 36-bed geriatrics and extended care unit. The Albuquerque VAMC is the referral center for the New Mexico-West Texas market area, which includes 2 other VA hospitals (Amarillo and Big Springs) in West Texas. The NMVAHCS is a leader in providing rural health care services and opened its first VA-staffed community based outpatient clinic (CBOC) in Farmington, NM in 1987 and its most recent CBOC was opened in the Santa Fe area in January 2002. Its extensive CBOC system, which allows for services to a large square mile area, includes 6 VA-staffed clinics in New Mexico and 5 contract clinics, which includes one in the Durango, Colorado area.

Its major affiliation is with the University of New Mexico School of Medicine with 114.64 resident FTEE currently rotating through 35 clinical residency-training programs. The school has received national recognition for both its rural medicine program and primary care curriculum. NMVAHCS has a multidisciplinary research program with 70 principal investigators, 200 research projects and a total budget in excess of \$5.5 million, which accounts for about two thirds of VISN 18's research funding.

Active issues for NMVAHCS include the reactivation of its neurosurgery program following the departure of the organizations two neurosurgeons and difficulties in recruitment/retention of registered nurses, licensed practical nurses, physical therapists, pharmacists, nurse anesthetists, diagnostic radiology technicians and occupational therapists among others.

**VA Representatives in Attendance/Name & Title:**

**VISN 18: NMVAHCS**

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|--------------------------|---|
| ➤ Patricia McKlem        | VISN Director                                       |
| ➤ Jamie Robbins, MD      | Chief Medical Officer                               |
| ➤ John Fears             | Director, Carl Hayden VAMC/CARES<br>Committee Chair |
| ➤ Jim Moule              | VISN CARES Manager                                  |
| ➤ Kurt Schlegelmilch, MD | Acting Director, VA Albuquerque                     |
| ➤ Dave Graeber, MD       | Chief of Staff                                      |
| ➤ Mike McNeil            | Acting Associate Director                           |
| ➤ Sonja Brown            | Chief, Voluntary Service                            |
| ➤ Joe Dean               | Planner   |

- Ron Richter Chief, Engineer
- Michael Kleiman Public Affairs Officer

### **Tour of Facility:**

**NMVAHCS:** Mr. Richter, Chief Engineer led a walking tour of the VA Albuquerque facility that included visiting the Acute Psychiatric locked unit (28 bed unit with 22 beds operational/ECT referral center for network/plan to put mental health services in all CBOC's), Specialty Outpatient areas on 6<sup>th</sup> floor (medical subspecialty clinics/medical telecare program), Inpatient medical ward (40 beds/28 operational), Primary Care areas.

### **What did we learn?**

**NMVAHCS:** The network/facility presentation and focus was on:

- Network has chosen a careful and reasonable approach to address the challenges to health care through 2022
- Need to address growing demand for treatment at Phoenix VAMC by improving specialty care and adding primary care in Prescott VAMC
- Need to decentralize primary care in Albuquerque by increasing number of VA-staffed CBOC's around the area and backfilling that primary care space at the facility with expanded specialty care in those areas
- Significant challenge to provide adequate staffing of medical faculty/nursing
- Need to improve access for inpatient hospital and tertiary care by partnering with Beaumont Army Medical Center in El Paso
- Looking at building less expensive administrative space and then back-fill vacated areas with specialty expansion (there are 11 acres of vacant land on campus where building could be located)
- Proposed co-location project of VBA office on vacant land has been stalled for 3 years (somewhere in Washington, DC) and timeline for advancement is being questioned
- Condition of/need for improved research space was discussed as a real need throughout the network
  - Poor research space has had negative impact on ability to recruit top clinicians/researchers to the facilities

### **Summary of Stakeholder Meetings/Topics of Discussion:**

The level of stakeholder understanding about the CARES process was generally good during the site visit. All groups were interested in hearing about the next phase of the process and focused on specific initiatives for their facility.

Commissioner Colley gave opening remarks, introduced Commissioner/staff and gave a brief overview of where the CARES process was at this point.

**NMVAHCS:** Stakeholders in attendance included representatives of veterans service organizations, Navajo veterans affairs representative, DoD representatives, Atomic War Veterans, and staffers from local Congressional offices. Comments were in the areas of:

- Request for a brief overview of planning initiatives that the network submitted through CARES process (McKlem/Fears responded with an overview for audience)
- Will Commission include information from the earlier Presidential Task Force Report in its final recommendations

- Need for more VA/DoD sharing in the future to meet the needs of the growing veteran population  
Comment from Beaumont Chief of Staff that they are very supportive of VA efforts to increase sharing opportunities between the entities
- Concern about the proposed 'one stop shopping' project with VBA that has been stalled for 3 years and needs to be moved forward for the good of the veterans in this area
- Question about what is it that stakeholders should/could do at this time
  - Voice their concerns about any planning initiatives to the Commissioners
  - Submit their written testimony/comments for the hearings in September
  - Support the efforts of the network to improve healthcare for the area veterans
  - Explanation of how the hearings will be conducted and who will represent national service organizations at those hearings

**Exit Briefing with VISN/Facility Leadership:**

Commissioners expressed their appreciation to the network and local VA staff at the end of the site visit. The hospitality, coordination and assistance provided by the facility was acknowledged as well as the efforts of other staff members in the network all working together to make for a smooth experience.

**Prepared by:** Johnetta McKinley, CARES Commission Staff  
July 25, 2003

**Approved by:** Chad Colley, CARES Commissioner  
John Kendall, MD, CARES Commissioner