

ALL STAR NEWS

Spring 2011



April's Fury
Tuscaloosa VA Responds to
Assist Veterans, Employees and the
Community in Need

VA ALL STAR NEWS

Quarterly Newsletter
Spring 2011 Edition

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"All Star News" is a publication produced by the Public Affairs Office for the employees of the Tuscaloosa VA Medical Center. We thank the medical center staff for their never-ending commitment to the care of our Nation's Heroes."

April's Fury

On April 27, a tornado ravaged through three states moving across 219 miles leaving a path of death and destruction in its wake. The Tuscaloosa VA Medical Center is located less than 2 miles from one of the areas hardest hit by the tornado, now being referred to as April's Fury. Employees at the VA quickly sprang into action as the local EMA activated them as the primary morgue for Tuscaloosa County. A state forensics team was sent in to help with tagging and identification of the storm victims while a team of VA employees set up a center to help families of victims with identification of their loved ones and bereavement counseling. Employees performed duties that they had never encountered before such as helping with carrying and photographing bodies to counseling with families who identified their family members as victims. Each employee stepped up and performed with such resolve under intense circumstances.

"When we became the primary morgue for the crisis, our staff took up the challenge at once," said Alan Tyler, the medical center's director.

"To be honest, some of our people were not prepared, psychologically, to deal with the number and appearance of the bodies – especially the children. But our staff did their jobs and handled themselves like professionals. We functioned as a hospital, a morgue, and a shelter.

We fed people and clothed them, gave them a place to sleep. We tried to comfort them. We did bereavement counseling with all the families who came in to identify their loved ones."

Damon Stevenson, Tuscaloosa VA's public affairs officer, said one bereavement effort was particularly heart wrenching.

"On April 28 we had two families here at the Tuscaloosa VAMC who were meeting each other for



Rochelle Walker spends time with a child staying at the Red Cross shelter in Bldg. 137 Sports Atrium

the first time, but under very tragic circumstances," he reported. "Each family had a daughter attending the University of Alabama. They were roommates. Both died in the storm. The two families came together here, at the Tuscaloosa VA, to comfort one another."

"It was one of the most emotional events I've ever witnessed," said Daniel Pettey, a patient advocate at the medical center. "The two mothers immediately embraced. They shared an instant, tragic bond. It was witnessing moments like this that that made me realize the reality of the situation we were facing."

Stevenson said that in addition to displaced families, many local Veterans were brought to the medical center for shelter and care.

“The professionalism I have witnessed from the medical center staff through this horrific event is truly amazing,” he said. “We have employees performing duties that many of them have never been asked to perform. They’ve done so with a sense of duty I can only compare to a battle-tested military unit. One day before the disaster I saw an employee from Human Resources processing paperwork. Today I saw that same employee carrying a body bag.

Laura Balun, director of Voluntary Services at VA, said local volunteers began showing up at the Tuscaloosa VA Medical Center within hours after the tornado struck.

“I’m told that members of Veteran Service Organizations, who volunteer at the medical center, began collecting and delivering donations of clothing, personal care items, and other things needed for citizens who were seeking shelter at the VA,” she explained. “Apparently, baby diapers turned out to be a hot item.”

“At the VA we’ve never needed baby diapers before,” Stevenson said. “But our volunteers stepped up to the plate, as they always do, and had these items to the medical center in record time.

“We are a community,” he added. “We’re just doing our part to assist our community in any way we can.”

Connie Booth, a management analyst at the Tuscaloosa VAMC, said she’s seen ‘some beautiful stories emerge’ in the midst of the carnage, loss, and heartbreak.

“On Thursday morning (April 28) a family arrived at the morgue viewing area to identify their beautiful young 21-year-old daughter,” she explained. “Afterwards, our staffers hugged them, sat with them, held their hands.

“On Friday an elderly gentleman came in to identify his deceased wife,” she continued. “They had been married 50 years. The staff determined that his wife had sustained major trauma to her face. In an effort to lessen this painful process for the

husband, our VA photographer took the time to go into the morgue and take very detailed photos of the lady from the neck down. Immediately when the man saw the photos of his wife’s shirt, her ring, a small scar, he was easily able to identify her. Thanks to the extra efforts of our staff, an already traumatized individual did not have to suffer through another shock when making a positive identification of his wife’s body.”

“Over and over,” Booth said, “VA staffers who had never worked in a morgue took the time to prepare bodies for viewing by families. They wiped and cleaned and covered bodies to make them more presentable.”

“How do you comfort a mother who comes in to positively ID her one-year-old child?” she asked.

“Well, you don’t. You cry with her. But you tell her, ‘I hope it brings you some peace to know that your beautiful little girl has been handled with great care and love while being here with us, and we all truly are grieving with you.’”



Personal care items donated by Veteran Service Organizations are sorted for distribution.

Disaster Relief Efforts to Help Employees

Many employees at the Tuscaloosa VA have been affected by the April 27 tornado, and the medical center wants to assist these employees in numerous ways.

Employees like Jeff and Casandra Munford, are very thankful to the Tuscaloosa VA staff and others for support they have received. Casandra explained that in approximately 2 minutes on April 27 around 5 p.m., the Munford's life as they once knew it was changed forever.

"Our life was turned upside down instantly, but we are so grateful and appreciative how quickly our church family, community and the TVAMC responded to meet our needs after the April 27 tornado," Cassandra said. "We are personally grateful to Dr. Nathan Whitaker who calmed me down only minutes after the storm and assured me that everything would be alright. Also, Dr. Thompson, who was at the corner waiting to pick us up as we walked 4-5 miles out of our destroyed community. Special thanks go to the staff of the Optometry and Audiology Clinics and The Research and Development Department. They are continuously assisting us. We know that God truly had his hand on us. Throughout all of the devastation around us, God chose to spare our family. Romans 8:28 tells us 'And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.' When God allows it, there's purpose in it. We take this opportunity as a new beginning."



The Munfords sit in what once was the living room in their home destroyed April 27.

Tuscaloosa VA Medical Center has established a Donation Center whereby employees may donate items (e.g. clothing, personal hygiene items, etc.) for employees who experienced significant losses of homes/ personal property as a result the recent tornado disaster. The Donation Center is located in Building 137, 1st Floor, Room C1-106 (former seamstress room). If you wish to make donations, please first contact Kristy Bridges at Ext. 2896, or Christie Mills at Ext. 4117.

In addition, the Employee Association has established an account whereby anyone can make monetary donations to support employees who have suffered loss and need assistance.

Tuscaloosa VA Medical Center
Attn: Credit Union/ (Tuscaloosa VA) EA Tornado Fund
3701 Loop Road East
Tuscaloosa, Alabama 35404

Individuals interested in giving monetary donations to TVAMC veterans who have suffered a loss due to tornados, may take or mail contributions to the Tuscaloosa VA Voluntary Service made payable to the Tuscaloosa VA Medical Center General Post Fund. The mailing address is below.

Tuscaloosa VA Medical Center
Attn: Voluntary Service
3701 Loop Road East
Tuscaloosa, Alabama 35404

Tuscaloosa VA Earns Praise for Helping Storm Victims

Courtesy of the Tuscaloosa News

Veteran Alan Sanders lost his home and two cars in a Birmingham tornado in 1998. He never thought he would be struck twice.

Sanders, who works at the Tuscaloosa VA Medical Center, lost his Alberta apartment to the tornado that ravaged Tuscaloosa. If it weren't for the Tuscaloosa VA, he would have nowhere else to go, Sanders said.

"This place has made a world of difference," Sanders said. "They have really stepped up and cared about our welfare, and have gone above and beyond."

On May 4, officials from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs in Washington, D.C., visited the Tuscaloosa VA to observe how the center was assisting veterans and the community after the tornado.

Visiting officials included Dr. Robert Petzel, Veterans Health Administration undersecretary for health, and William Schoenhard, Veterans Health Administration deputy undersecretary for health for operations and management. Petzel and Schoenhard toured the facility and met with veterans. They said they were impressed with the VA's efforts and that the Tuscaloosa VA will serve as a model for other VA medical centers on how to assist veterans after a crisis and more importantly, how to help the community.

After the tornado, the VA served

as a Red Cross shelter site and also served as the primary morgue for storm-related deaths.

"We want to stress how incredibly impressed we are with the way the Tuscaloosa VA has supported the community after such a terrible tragedy," Petzel said.

Serving in a time of crisis is a mission of the Veterans Administration, but the Tuscaloosa VA has gone beyond that at a time when many of its employees and staff were affected by the storm themselves, Petzel said.

Navy veteran Willie Gardner Jr. agreed. During the storm, Gardner was one of 18 veterans living in the Salvation Army shelter on Greensboro Avenue, which was destroyed by the April 27 tornado. During the storm, about 35 people sought refuge in the Salvation Army's dining hall. As the storm passed overhead, the building's doors were flung open, windows were smashed and the roof started to peel away from the building.

"It hit so fast that we didn't have time to think about anything, just to react," Gardner said.



David Gay stands with Dr. Petzel and Mr. Schoenhard as they talk with Veterans affected by the tornado.

After the tornado passed, there was nothing but silence and the screams coming from people trapped in their homes in nearby Rosedale Court, Gardner said. Gardner's basic military training took over and he ran to Rosedale to help pull people from the rubble, including a woman who was trapped under a wall of her home.

Gardner said he is still recovering from the experience, something that the VA is helping him through.

"It all got so overwhelming," Gardner said. "That's one reason I'm so thankful for the VA."

On With the Show!

In the past, the Director of the Tuscaloosa VA Medical Center, Mr. Alan J. Tyler, has gone to service areas to meet with staff to give them an overview of current and future plans for the medical center.

Mr. Tyler feels it important that all staff are aware of the plans for the medical center, and what role they play in those plans.



On With the Show casts include: (left to right) April Jones, Jeanell Foree, Alan Tyler, Debra Leonard, Daniel Pettey, Connie Booth

This year, Mr. Tyler decided to enlist the support of the Customer Service Improvement (CSI) team, led by Connie Booth, to create an innovative, entertaining and fun way to present this information to all staff, as well as other stakeholders.

This is where the "On With the Show" concept was born.

"We felt it was time to give everyone more than expected, no usual 'dog and pony show,'" said Connie Booth, the show coordinator. "We like for our Veteran's to feel they get more than they were expecting when

they visit TVAMC, so we wanted the staff to experience that feeling first hand."

The "On with the Show" presentation was entertaining, informative and funny. There were parts that made you laugh, and parts that made you cry, but they all made you think.

This was a unique way of getting the message to everyone. The CSI team performed colorful skits that demonstrated Mr. Tyler's vision for the facility. They entertained the staff of the medical center in 10 separate

shows. The setting was perfect as the auditorium was decorated like a Broadway Show, right down to bouncers at the door and ladies in evening gowns distributing playbills.

"The 'show' was given rave reviews," Booth said "We had a great time doing this, the only problem is, how do we top it next year?"

If any employee was not able to attend a live show, it was videotaped and the education department has the discs available for viewing.

National Salute to Veterans!

As part of National Salute to Veterans, Tuscaloosa VAMC hosted several celebrities/athletes the week of February 13-19, including Mal Moore, Athletics Director, and Head Football Coach Nick Saban, both from the University of Alabama, as well as high school and college cheerleaders, beauty pageant winners, an Olympic bronze medalist boxer and other local members of Veterans Service Organizations and school groups. The visitors toured the facility and met with Veterans throughout the medical center.





Diversity Advisory Committee holds celebrations honoring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Black History Month

Tuscaloosa VAMC's Diversity Advisory Committee and Chaplain Service held a program in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., on January 20. The guest speaker for this event was the Rev. E.J. James, Pastor of New Zion Baptist Church, Northport, Alabama. The Diversity Advisory Committee also held a Black History Month program on February 17. Keynote speaker for the program was Michael L. McCoy, Sr., Associate Director, National Chaplain Center, Department of Veterans Affairs. Both events were well attended by Veterans, staff and others from the community.



Chaplain Michael L. McCoy, Sr., gives his keynote address during the Black History Month program



Singers perform during the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., program



Westlawn Middle School choir performs during the Black History Month program



Employees and Veterans enjoy the Black History Month program

News Nuggets

Tuscaloosa VAMC, in partnership with the Birmingham Vet Center and Alabama Career Center, conducted **outreach events for veterans** in the Alabama cities of Fayette, Winfield, Vernon, Aliceville, Eutaw and Livingston from March 1 - 3. The purpose of the events was to provide information to veterans about services available to them from the Tuscaloosa VA and the other agencies. The public affairs officer worked with the local papers in each city to publicize each event, and they were well attended by veterans and their families.

Tuscaloosa VAMC staff and volunteers participated in the **“Read Across America” day at Arcadia Elementary** as part of the Adopt-A-School program on March 1. Tuscaloosa VAMC and Arcadia Elementary have been Adopt-A-School partners for more than 20 years. Staff and volunteers read Dr. Seuss books to the students, which was well received.

Transition Center staff at the Tuscaloosa VAMC hosted a **Veterans Job Fair** on March 31. Approximately 23 potential employers participated in the fair and provided information to veterans concerning employment. Vocational Rehabilitation staff from Tuscaloosa VAMC also participated.

From the VA Mailbag

Ms. Nelson,

I can't believe I mailed my broken glasses on 01-27-11 and I have them on my head on 01-31-11. There was two days in that time (Saturday & Sunday). You all must work day and night.

I appreciate your good work. May all the gifts and benefits from our God, our Father and our Master Jesus Christ be yours.

Sincerely,

T. S.

P.S. I have heard of service with a smile. You had to be smiling to fix my glasses so quick.

Mr. Alan J Tyler,

I came to the VA today after being turned away by private home owners insurance company on May 3, 2011, for continued housing and meals after being directed to go to their mobile sight. I was very distraught, as I am a disabled veteran who sought assistance from the VA. I was greeted at the front desk by Ms. Carol Greene, who recognized my distress and asked how she could help me. I explained that I was in my home on April 27, 2011, when the tornado devastated Tuscaloosa and had been denied needed assistance from my insurance company as they assign a new adjuster. I have not been seen by an adjuster from my insurance company. My son and I are presently living in a hotel here until I get assistance. She assisted me in writing a letter to my insurance company, referred me to other sources in the community and also sent me to speak with Gina Nix, Tele Health Mental Coordinator for further assistance. If there were more people with Ms. Green's care and concern, this would truly be a better world. It makes me proud to choose the TVAMC for my primary care and mental health needs.

S.R.

IN MEMORIAM

APRIL 27, 2011

SWEET SOUL, DO WITH ME AS THOU WILT;
I LULL A FANCY TROUBLE-TOST
WITH ` LOVE'S TOO PRECIOUS TO BE LOST,
A LITTLE GRAIN SHALL NOT BE SPILT!

AND IN THAT SOLACE CAN I SING,
TILL OUT OF PAINFUL PHASES WROUGHT
THERE FLUTTERS UP A HAPPY THOUGHT,
SELF-BALANCED ON A LIGHTSOME WING:

SINCE WE DESERVED THE NAME OF FRIENDS,
AND THINE EFFECT SO LIVES IN ME,
A PART OF MINE MAY LIVE IN THEE
AND MOVE THEE ON TO NOBLE ENDS.