

**VA**



**U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs**

Veterans Health Administration  
VA Healthcare—VISN 4

# VISION

*for Excellence*

*Newsletter for Veterans and Stakeholders in VISN 4*

Issue 32



## **Surgical Services in VISN 4**

*VISN 4 facilities provide a wide array of inpatient and ambulatory surgical procedures*

# Dear Veterans, fellow employees, volunteers and friends of VISN 4:

I hope you had a great summer! I am pleased to present the latest issue of Vision for Excellence, which highlights:

- Our VISN 4 Surgery Program, which offers a wide variety of surgical services from minor same-day surgery procedures to the most complex procedures such as organ transplants and those using specialized high-tech equipment.
- Wilkes-Barre VA Medical Center's stellar Bariatric Surgery Program, which recently became the first federal facility in VHA and the Department of Defense to earn the national recognition of accreditation by the Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery Accreditation and Quality Improvement Program.
- An update on construction of our new multispecialty Community Based Outpatient Clinic in Monroeville, Pennsylvania.
- VA Secretary Denis McDonough's visit to the Coatesville VA Medical Center.
- Recent implementation of the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act and what it means for Veterans.

Also featured is the story behind how our most recent VISN 4 I CARE award winner did everything in her power to help a Veteran who was in crisis. In this situation, the Veteran told the employee she saved his life. Read all about the employee's lifesaving actions and how you can be prepared to do the same for a Veteran you care about.

On behalf of all VISN 4 employees, I thank all Veterans and their families for entrusting us to provide your health care.

Please stay safe and make sure you get your annual flu shot and COVID booster shots when recommended.

Sincerely,

Timothy W. Liezert  
Network Director



## VA Healthcare-VISN 4 Leadership Team

**Timothy W. Liezert**  
Network Director

**Charles R. Thilges**  
Deputy Network Director

**Timothy Burke, M.D.**  
Chief Medical Officer

**Denise Boehm, MSN, RN, NEA-BC**  
Chief Nursing Officer

**Maira M. Hughes, FACHE**  
Quality Management Officer

**Joseph Haverstick**  
Chief Financial Officer

**Amber Mesoras**  
Chief Human Resources Officer

**David E. Cowgill**  
Communications Manager

**Kristy Kralik**  
Executive Assistant



## Did you know?

Getting a flu shot protects you, your family and your community. And if needed, you can safely get vaccinated for COVID at the same time you get a flu shot – one visit, two vaccines.

Eligible Veterans can get a no-cost flu shot from a nearby VA or at one of 70,000 community locations nationwide. To learn more, visit <https://www.prevention.va.gov/flu/>.



*I CARE represents the core values that define the basic elements of how we go about our work—“who we are”—and form the underlying principles we use every day in our service to Veterans.*

*VISN 4 established a new, quarterly I CARE award to recognize employees who not only demonstrate our I CARE values, but who go the extra mile to live by our I CARE ideals. There are many wonderful examples of employees demonstrating these values in their day-to-day work.*

**Integrity • Commitment • Advocacy • Respect • Excellence**

**FY21 3rd Quarter Awardee**

***Marisa Downs, Executive Assistant***

*VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System*



Earlier this year, Marisa received an email through social media from a Veteran advising that he would like to check himself into the inpatient behavioral health unit at the Pittsburgh VA. He is an acquaintance of her and he knew she worked at VA. He proceeded to write a message detailing a very specific plan of how he planned to commit suicide. Marisa kept communicating with him, providing the information for the Veterans Crisis Line, and advising him to go to the emergency department at the University Drive campus that night rather than waiting until the next day.

Having no other contact info than the social media account, Marisa attempted to reach him several times the next day with no response. She then contacted a VAPHS suicide prevention social worker and the Veterans Crisis Line. The VCL operator reached out to the Veteran and was unsuccessful. Later that morning the Veteran contacted Marisa and she convinced him to go to the University Drive emergency department for help, and she stayed in constant communication with him until his arrival.



If it weren't for Marisa's actions, this event may have had a terrible outcome. She did everything within her power to keep communicating with this Veteran and got him to a safe place. Since his discharge from VA, the Veteran has thanked Marisa for her persistence and credits her and VA for saving his life.

# AROUND the NETWORK



## Construction continues on new outpatient clinic in Monroeville, Pa.

VA Pittsburgh's new state-of-the-art outpatient clinic near the Macy's in Monroeville Mall will improve Veterans' access to primary and specialty outpatient services and reduce drive times for many Pittsburgh-area Veterans enrolled in VA care. Services offered at the new clinic will include integrated primary and mental health care, physical therapy, laboratory, podiatry, optometry, and more. It will be staffed by VA Pittsburgh employees.

The building is approximately 64,000 square feet, 500 parking spaces will be available, and it will cost \$92 million to build and lease for 20 years.

The construction of this building continues to progress on schedule. We have not experienced any material or weather delays to date.

We anticipate construction will be completed this winter, and then we will need some time to move in furniture and equipment and prepare it to open for patient care. We are still on schedule to open next year (2023).

*The new outpatient clinic will make it easier for many Veterans in southwestern Pennsylvania to access VA health care.*



# VA Secretary visits Coatesville VA Medical Center

Secretary of Veterans Affairs Denis McDonough visited the Coatesville VA Medical Center campus this past spring. During the visit he discussed several topics important to area Veterans including homelessness, mental health, suicide prevention, and an infrastructure update.

The secretary's visit also included a tour of the campus where he met several Veterans and staff along the way.

Congresswoman Chrissy Houlahan, who represents Pennsylvania's 6th District, co-hosted the event. She was among the stakeholders who gathered during small roundtable discussions with other health care executives that focused on health care needs in southeastern Pennsylvania.



- 1) Upon arrival, VA Secretary Denis McDonough shakes hands with Chuck Thilges, VISN 4 Deputy Network Director, as Mr. Jeff Beiler, Coatesville's Medical Center Director looks on.
- 2) Jim Paradis, President of Paoli Hospital; Barbara Wadsworth, EVP/COO MainLine Health; U.S. Representative Dwight Evans (PA-3); U.S. Representative Chrissy Houlahan (PA-6); Michael Duncan, president and CEO, Chester County Hospital; VA Secretary Denis McDonough; Kevin Mahoney, President, University of Pennsylvania Healthcare System; Jeff Beiler, Coatesville MCD; and Chuck Thilges, VISN 4 Deputy Network Director.
- 3) VA Secretary Denis McDonough and U.S. Representative Chrissy Houlahan (PA-6) toured the Coatesville VA campus followed by Joseph Galazin, Staff Assistant to the Director, Jeff Beiler, the Director of the Coatesville VAMC and other event participants.
- 4) VA Secretary Denis McDonough meets with local political representatives and health care executives from Southeastern Pennsylvania gathered for a Community Health Partner RoundTable to discuss the health care needs in the region.



*The Bariatric Surgery Program at VA Wilkes-Barre has recently become the first federal facility to earn the national recognition of accreditation by the Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery Accreditation and Quality Improvement Program.*

## Bariatric surgery can help you lose weight and improve your health

***People living with obesity are at higher risk of developing a range of serious medical conditions. If you are a Veteran and excess weight is affecting your life and health, VISN 4 has several options for treatment including bariatric surgery.***

Bariatric surgery involves making changes to your digestive system to help you lose weight. This treatment was first offered in VISN 4 at VA Pittsburgh in 2003. Since then, more than 1,000 procedures have been completed in Pittsburgh and Wilkes-Barre. To increase access, we'll be expanding bariatric surgery services to Philadelphia as well in the near future.

Not all bariatric procedures are performed at VA, and it is important to discuss with your surgeon the types of surgical procedures available to you. There are two types of bariatric surgery offered in VISN 4: gastric bypass and sleeve gastrectomy.

### More info...

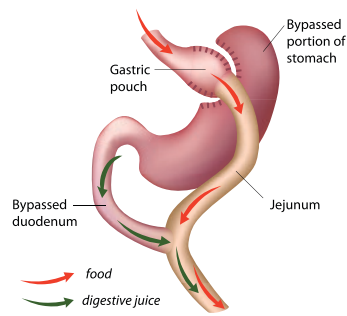


Learn more about bariatric surgery in the Veterans Health Library.

- **Making Bariatric Surgery Work for You**  
<https://www.veteranshealthlibrary.va.gov/Search/3,87019>
- **Deciding on Bariatric Surgery**  
<https://www.veteranshealthlibrary.va.gov/Search/3,87005>

## Gastric bypass

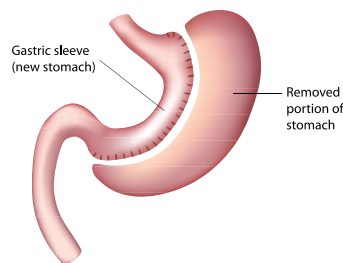
This is also called a Roux-en-Y gastric bypass. During this surgery, your surgeon separates part of the stomach to create a small pouch. The pouch is then attached to a part of your small intestine.



The gastric bypass reduces the amount of food you can eat at one time as well as decreases your hunger and makes you feel full faster. It also reduces the number of calories and nutrients you can absorb from the foods you eat. The gastric bypass also works by gut hormones, that results in less hunger, faster fullness, and improved diabetes resolution.

## Sleeve gastrectomy

This is also called the gastric sleeve. This surgical procedure removes up to 80% of the stomach and reshapes the stomach into a narrow tube that looks like a banana. The sleeve holds much less food, and you feel full faster. The sleeve also works by gut hormones that change how full or hungry you feel.



## Benefits of bariatric surgery

The benefits of bariatric surgery may include far more than just weight loss:

-  Long-term remission of type 2 diabetes
-  Improved cardiovascular health
-  Resolution of obstructive sleep apnea
-  Decreased or elimination of joint pain
-  Relief of depression
-  Improved fertility
-  Improvement of other medical conditions

## Talk with your VA provider

Bariatric surgery isn't for everyone. To qualify, you must have a body mass index (BMI) of 40 or higher, or a BMI of 35 or higher plus a serious obesity-related health problem such as type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, or sleep apnea. You must be healthy enough to have surgery, and you also must have tried to lose weight by other means such as diet and exercise.

VISN 4 currently offers bariatric and robotic surgery at our Pittsburgh and Wilkes-Barre medical centers, and soon we'll be starting a bariatric program in Philadelphia as well. The benefits of robotic surgery include faster recovery time, less post-operative discomfort, minimal scarring, and fewer risks and complications.

Talk with your health care provider to see which surgery may work for you. Together you can decide the right treatment for your needs.

## Diane's Story



**"The decision to have gastric sleeve surgery was one of the greatest decisions of my life. Before the surgery I was trapped, oppressed and ashamed of myself."**

**"The love and compassion given to me by Dr. Chaudry, Afsana and their team made the surgery much easier for me. They are wonderfully supportive people."**

**"Every day I feel closer to my goal. I would never have had this opportunity without the surgery. Absolutely life changing!"**

**– Diane Veit, U.S. Army Veteran**

*Note: Weight loss results can vary depending on the individual. There is no guarantee of specific results.*



## VISN 4 facilities provide a wide array of inpatient and ambulatory surgical procedures

***VA Healthcare-VISN 4 offers several surgical procedures that improve the quality of life of our Veterans.***

We offer routine same day procedures, urgent life-saving surgeries, procedures to remove cancerous tumors, knee and hip replacements, cataract surgeries, and many more.

In addition to bariatric surgery, several other procedures in general surgery, gynecology, urology, ENT and cardiothoracic are completed using the da Vinci robotic system.

### ***da Vinci surgical system***

The da Vinci surgical system is a three- or four-armed robot operated by surgeons with hand controls at a computer located several feet away from the patient. Surgeons see inside the patient's body through a tiny 3D video camera attached to one of the long robot arms. The other arms are fitted with tiny surgical instruments.

The system allows surgeons to perform a wide range of minimally invasive surgeries that result in potentially shorter recovery times, fewer complications, reduced hospitalization costs, and decreased trauma for patients.

VA Pittsburgh has been performing a variety of surgeries using the da Vinci robot since 2004. At other facilities in VISN 4, surgeons in Philadelphia began using the robot in 2020, followed by Lebanon in 2021, and Wilkes-Barre in 2022. Wilmington is expected to begin using the da Vinci robot in 2023.

### ***Academic partnerships***

Each of our medical center surgical programs have academic partnerships to provide teaching and learning experiences for a variety of surgical





areas, including medical students, surgical residencies, and fellowships, as well as associated health training in nursing, dentistry, and more.

In fact, many of our surgical programs have world class surgeons who spend part of their time in large academic affiliates such as the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center (UPMC), the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania (Penn Medicine), and many others.

### ***Surgical outcomes***

The quality of our surgical teams is on par with that of our community partners and often exceeds them. One such example is the VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System Transplant Program which provides liver and kidney transplants. Recently the VA Pittsburgh transplant program had some of the best outcomes and one year survival rates in the nation as reported from the Scientific Registry for Transplant Recipients (SRTR). Learn more at <https://www.visn4.va.gov/VISN4/services/transplant.asp>.

### ***Continuous improvements***

Our surgical programs are continuously improving and expanding to ensure we are providing our Veterans with the most up to date and highest quality surgical care.

Over the next year, we will be starting an Intracranial Neurosurgery program in Philadelphia to offer Deep Brain Stimulation (DBS). DBS is a treatment for movement disorders associated with Parkinson's disease and other neurological conditions in which neurosurgeons implant electrodes into a specific part of the brain which receives mild electrical stimulation. This can be a powerful treatment for those who do not respond to medications.

Additionally, the Lebanon VA Medical Center is planning to begin a breast surgery program.

Over the next year our IMPACT (Interdisciplinary Medical Preoperative Assessment Consultation and Treatment Clinic) program will be implemented in all nine VISN 4 facilities. This program ensures that all patients who will undergo surgery in VISN 4 will have the highest quality preoperative care and education. To provide you with easy access, most of this care is also completed via video or telephone without the need for travel.

In fact, many of our surgical specialties including bariatric and transplant surgery conduct a large majority of appointments using VA Video Connect. Our TeleRetinal and TeleEye Care programs also allow you to have images of your eyes examined by specialized optometrists and ophthalmologists without traveling to the eye clinic.

# Surgical Treatment Options

## **Bariatrics**

Sleeve gastrectomy, Roux-en-Y gastric bypass

## **Cardiac Surgery**

Heart and valve surgery

## **Dental**

Extractions, dental implants, root canals, reconstructive surgery

## **General Surgery**

Hernia repair, removal of gallbladder or appendix, placement of ostomies and feeding tubes, colorectal, endocrine and oncologic surgeries

## **Gynecology**

Fibroid and ovarian cyst removal, hysteroscopy

## **Ophthalmology**

Glaucoma, cataracts, retinal

## **Orthopedics**

Joint (ex: knee, hip, shoulder) replacement, ligament repair, amputations

## **Ear, Nose and Throat**

Eardrum repair, removal of tonsils and adenoids, nasal septum repair, cochlear implants

## **Neurosurgery**

Removal of herniated discs, craniotomy, lumbar puncture, spinal fusion, laminectomy, DBS

## **Plastic Surgery**

Hand surgery, repairs after trauma or injury such as burns, correction of congenital defects

## **Podiatry**

Foot and ankle fracture care, joint replacement, repair of cartilage, tendons, ligaments

## **Thoracic Surgery**

Esophagectomy, hiatal hernia repair, removal of part or all of the lung

## **Transplant**

Liver and Kidney transplants, referrals to other transplant centers

## **Urology**

Cystoscopy, prostate procedures, treatment of kidney stones

## **Vascular**

Aneurysm repair, procedures to repair or replace blood vessels, treatments to prevent damage from clots

\*\*\*Not all procedures are available at all VISN 4 locations.  
Speak with your VA provider about your particular situation.

# The new PACT Act



» Expands toxic-exposed Veterans access to VA care

» Extends health care eligibility for Vietnam, Gulf War, and Post-9/11 era combat Veterans

» Adds new presumptive conditions for radiation, Agent Orange, Gulf War toxins, and burn pit exposures



## EXPANDED VA CARE & BENEFITS

Learn more at [VA.gov](http://VA.gov)  
1-800-MyVA411 (800-698-2411)



# VA

U.S. Department  
of Veterans Affairs

Veterans Health  
Administration  
VA Healthcare-  
VISN 4

**VA Healthcare-VISN 4**  
1010 Delafield Road  
Pittsburgh, PA 15215  
412-822-3316  
[www.visn4.va.gov](http://www.visn4.va.gov)

### Vision for Excellence - Issue 32

Executive Editor ..... *David E. Cowgill*  
Layout & Design ..... *Louis Scavnicky*

### We'd Like to Hear from You

Vision for Excellence is published for the employees, volunteers, patients and friends of VA Healthcare-VISN 4. For more information about this publication, contact David Cowgill at 412-822-3318 or [david.cowgill@va.gov](mailto:david.cowgill@va.gov).