



U.S. Department  
of Veterans Affairs

SOUTHERN NEVADA HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

# To The Point

## VASNHS Newsletter

Spring 2021

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## COVID-19 Vaccinations Update

VASNHS now offering vaccines for spouses, all Veterans under SAVE LIVES Act

VA Southern Nevada Healthcare System (VASNHS) is now providing COVID-19 vaccinations to anyone who served in the military, regardless of age, as well as spouses, caregivers and other beneficiaries under the authority granted by the SAVE LIVES Act, signed by President Joe Biden March 24, 2021.

“Since the start of the pandemic, VA Southern Nevada Healthcare System has been focused on vaccinating as many Veterans as possible, and we are excited to multiply our efforts to thanks to the SAVE LIVES Act,” said William Caron, VASNHS director/CEO.

Veterans, caregivers, spouses, and CHAMPVA beneficiaries newly eligible under the law can go to [www.va.gov/covid-19-vaccine](http://www.va.gov/covid-19-vaccine) to sign up to receive a vaccine from VA. Registering will also give users regular updates about VA’s vaccine rollout process. After registering through this site, users are also eligible for a walk-in vaccine at the North Las Vegas VA Medical Center.

Please note that VA care for non-enrolled Veterans, caregivers, spouses, and CHAMPVA beneficiaries newly eligible under the law is limited to only COVID-19 vaccinations.



**Scan the QR code**  
below with your  
smartphone or tablet to  
go to the VA COVID-19  
Vaccine "Sign up"  
website today!



Or go to the VA COVID-19 website:

<https://www.va.gov/health-care/covid-19-vaccine/stay-informed>

# Combating COVID -19 with available vaccines

## Q&A On vaccines provided by VASNHS

### Why do I need a COVID-19 vaccine?

The COVID-19 has caused severe illness and death around the world. This is, in part, because the virus that causes COVID-19 spreads easily from person to person.

We have some treatments to help reduce the effects of COVID-19 but a vaccine that helps prevent people from becoming infected is the best way to slow or stop the spread of the virus.

### How will getting a vaccine benefit my family and community?

Vaccines protect you and the people around you. Protecting whole communities from diseases like COVID-19 is an important reason for everyone to get vaccines. We call this “community immunity.” When enough people are vaccinated and develop immunity to a certain virus, that virus can’t spread as easily from person to person. This means that everyone in the community is less likely to get infected. Even if some people do still get infected, there’s less chance of an outbreak that causes many people in the community to get sick at the same time. This helps prevent issues like too many people needing care at once and not having enough hospital beds or health care providers. Data shows that some communities have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19. These include Black, Hispanic, Native American, Pacific Islander, and Asian communities. Members of these communities can help protect their families and friends by getting vaccinated.

### What if I have concerns about getting one of the vaccines?

You always have the right to ask questions about any vaccine or treatment. The best person to discuss your concerns with is your health care provider. Your provider can offer more information about each vaccine, and help you make choices that are right for you.

### Should I get a COVID-19 vaccine even if I’ve already had COVID-19?

Data from clinical trials show that the three authorized COVID-19 vaccines are safe in people who've been infected with the virus that causes COVID-19 in the past. If you're currently sick from COVID-19, you should wait until you've recovered, and you're finished with isolation to get a vaccine. If you've received passive antibody therapy to treat COVID-19, you should wait at least 90 days before getting a COVID-19 vaccine.

### Will I have side effects after I get a COVID-19 vaccine?

You may have some side effects after you get a COVID-19 vaccine. Side effects are normal signs that your body is building protection against COVID-19. These side effects may feel like the flu. They may even affect your ability to work or do other daily activities. But any side effects should go away in a few days. Some people have reported severe allergic reactions to a COVID-19 vaccine. When you get a COVID-19 vaccine at VA, we'll closely monitor your reaction for either 15 or 30 minutes after your vaccine. We'll also give you all the information you need about what to do if you experience any side effects.

### Can I choose which authorized COVID-19 vaccine I get?

For the next several months, we'll still have a limited amount of vaccines. It's always your choice if you want to get a vaccine or not. Your decision won't affect your VA health care or any of your VA benefits in any way. If you get a COVID-19 vaccine that requires two doses, you must get the same vaccine for both doses. You'll need to get both doses at the same facility.

### Can I still get COVID-19 after I get the vaccine?

An effective vaccine will lower your risk of getting infected with the virus that causes COVID-19. If you do get infected, the vaccine may also lower your risk of severe illness. But no vaccine can prevent all infections. That's why one goal of a COVID-19 vaccine is to make it harder for the virus to spread to others.

### If I get a COVID-19 vaccine, can I stop wearing a mask in VA facilities?

No. Even if you receive a COVID-19 vaccine, you'll still need to wear a mask that covers your mouth and nose when you're in a VA facility. You'll also need to follow other VA safety rules like practicing physical distancing. This helps protect you, other Veterans, and our staff.

Veterans can visit the VASNHS Medical Center's COVID-19 Vaccine website:

[www.lasvegas.va.gov/services/covid-19-vaccines](http://www.lasvegas.va.gov/services/covid-19-vaccines)

# VA Health and Nutrition Program

## Healthy Teaching Kitchen key source of nutrition for Veterans in a virtual world

### Would you eat a nourish bowl?

Many people may never have heard of one, but it would probably depend on what's actually in a nourish bowl for someone to develop a palate for it.

A nourish bowl is a good example of healthy eating. It can have nuts, whole grain, dried fruit, maybe even some cherry tomatoes, beans, broccoli and a bit of salad dressing on top. Substitute avocado for the salad dressing, if you like. Either way, it's good for you.

If such a concoction sounds interesting, Veterans should know that this and many other things are taught during a series of Healthy Teaching Kitchen classes at VA Southern Nevada Healthcare System. For each class, the on-site kitchen/classroom can hold approximately a dozen individuals in-person and about 20 people (including Veterans, spouses or caregivers) can be accommodated virtually.

"Nutrition plays such a big role in overall health," said Carolyn Pearce, a clinical dietitian at VASNHS.

While VASNHS has provided nutritional advice and resources, the coronavirus pandemic has relegated some of the class' cooking and dining activities to an online platform with Veterans creating many of their own delicacies at home. "Before COVID, we had Vets come in and learn some cooking skills," said Pearce, who has been a dietitian for 11 years. "We didn't think we'd see change [in] behavior in people, but we did."



Learning to prepare and cook healthy meals is the overarching goal of Healthy Teaching Kitchen, but the camaraderie of the program is another benefit of the instruction.

VASNHS' Healthy Teaching Kitchen went virtual in August and the program now includes specifically targeted courses about food safety, three meals a day, as well as classes for patients with diabetes and kidney issues.



The VASNHS new Healthy Teaching kitchen mobile unit

Soon, the Health Teaching Kitchen will also have classes for Veterans with cardiac and pain management issues. In January, VASNHS began a biannual program for Veteran cancer patients in remission.

To provide Veterans with hands on training, an actual Healthy Teaching Kitchen is located within the North Las Vegas VA Medical Center and the facility also owns a portable kitchen on wheels, complete with a small refrigerator, a small sink, a toaster oven, two burners and a receptacle for a blender. The portable model also has video capability for streaming classes online. "We try to do different things," said Pearce, "We encourage plant-based eating."

Pearce communicates with her student-patients via MyHealtheVet and throughout the six-week series of classes, she recommends they take pictures of what they make at home.

**Healthy Teaching Kitchen** classes are on **Thursdays at 10 a.m., 12:30 p.m. and at 2 p.m., and last one hour.**

**Veterans can self-enroll for the general class simply by calling (702) 791-9024. For other classes, you'll need a referral from a dietitian or a health care provider.**



# Recognizing 75 years of Volunteer's Service to VA

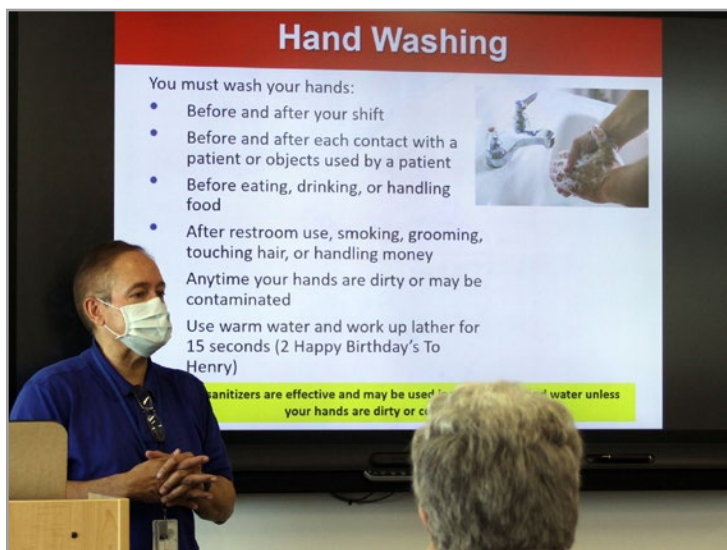
## Volunteers return to VASNHS, celebrate 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary

Volunteers are rare individuals. They work for no pay; give of their time freely and contribute immeasurably to the organizations they support.

For VA, their efforts equate to one billion volunteer hours of support since the end of the Civil War –the equivalent of approximately 3,080 people working a 40-hour work week at VA for 156 years.



"This year is the 75th anniversary of VA Voluntary Service," said Robert K. Johnson, who oversees volunteer operations at VA Southern Nevada Healthcare System as Chief of Volunteer Service.



Henry Marshall from Volunteer Service briefs volunteers returning to the VAMC

As with many other things, the coronavirus greatly affected volunteer services at VA. VASNHS felt the absence acutely as the facility lost the support of 586 volunteers for several months. In 2019, VASNHS volunteers accounted for 110,773 hours of service. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19, the number of VASNHS volunteers has dwindled to 244.

However, that is in the process of changing. Several volunteers recently completed in-person reorientation to resume work at various VA clinics in the Las Vegas valley and Pahrump. "We had to prioritize different groups of volunteers," Johnson said of the reimplementation process.

"The needs of the facility [are weighed] against the risk [to the volunteer]. We're bringing them back in phases over the next several months and the goal is to have everyone back by the end of this fiscal year."

While VA volunteers are unpaid, each gets a \$7.07 meal voucher, which is good at VA dining facilities if they provide a minimum of four hours of volunteer work on any given workday. This includes those who volunteer at VA's clinics and the voucher can be redeemed at VA Medical Center.

Hours are tracked by every VA facility and volunteers are recognized annually and awarded with pins, ranging from 100 to 50,000-hours for their total service. VASNHS also awards a 4,000-hour medal -- a special medallion suspended from a red, white and blue neck ribbon.

"[It was a] very good performance of presenters," said Gisela Thoma of the orientation. "The slide show was brilliant and made it fun for everyone!" Thoma, from Pahrump, is a 500-hour award recipient.

"[It was] very informative and a wealth of knowledge," said Richard Ladnier, who volunteers in Occupational Therapy and is a 2,500-hour award recipient.

"I feel truly humbled to work with these people who do this for nothing," said Johnson, who has worked for VA for 27 years, including three years managing the volunteer program. "It's the most rewarding job I've had in my life. We love our volunteers and look forward to having them all back by the end of the fiscal year."



Robert K. Johnson, Chief Volunteer Service

If you would like to know more about the VA Volunteer Services or even become a volunteer at the VASNHS, please go to our website:

<https://www.lasvegas.va.gov/giving/index.asp>

Or call VA Voluntary Service at: **702-791-9134**

# VA Doctors Improve Best Practices for Veterans

## VASNHS state-of-the-art collaborative comprehensive breast care program

Written by Dr. Cassandra Joffs, VASNHS Physician

The VA Southern Nevada Healthcare System's Breast Radiology and Breast Surgery team have been working to create a state-of-the-art collaborative comprehensive breast care program for our Veterans.

The breast radiology team, led by Kyle Robinson, Radiologist, has done amazing work to coordinate appropriate imaging, new technologies, follow up, and minimally invasive biopsy techniques. Dr. Kyle Robinson is now joined by Dr. Paul Robinson, Radiologist, to further expand the breast imaging service.



Breast surgery team made up of Radiology and OR surgery members

Breast surgery is led by Cassandra Joffs, Physician. Her recent oncoplastic training was fully supported by the VASNHS in a pursuit to offer cosmetically sensitive yet oncologically appropriate breast surgery. Dr. Joffs leads a dedicated team of highly skilled, compassionate OR nurses and surgical techs, all of whom volunteered to serve our breast patients.

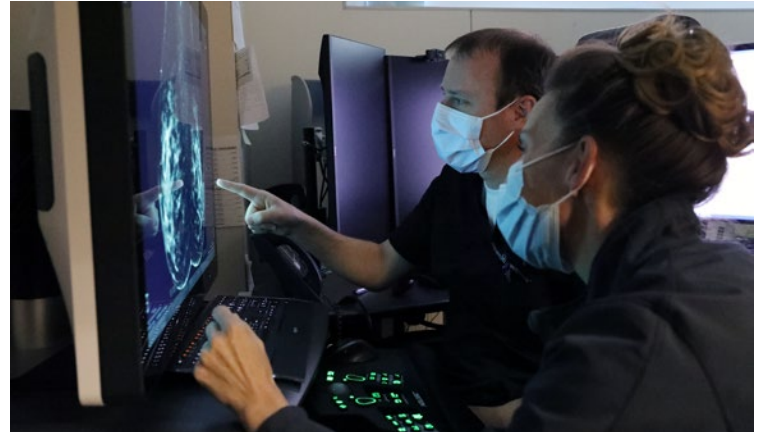
### Two recent examples highlight how our team approach has significantly benefited patient care:

A female Veteran felt a new lump in her breast. She contacted her primary provider, who immediately ordered imaging. Because of our high volume of breast imaging consults, her consult was automatically sent out to community care. Dr. Robinson saw that she had a new palpable mass and expedited her care--her lump was cancer.

Radiology alerted me and we got her into my clinic the next week. I was able to set aside OR time before even seeing her. We planned and performed her surgery within two weeks. At her follow up clinic visit, she told me that she had just been contacted by community care about scheduling the initial mammogram.

Another Veteran had newly established care with Joyce Coleman, Advanced Practice Registered Nurse, one of our providers in the Women's Health Clinic. Joyce went thoroughly through her records and found prior noncancerous breast biopsy results from a non-VA facility. Though not cancer, the results carried an elevated risk of a future breast cancer.

The patient underwent consultation and imaging with Dr. Robinson and then referred her to me. Her repeat imaging did not show a new suspicious lesion, but our concerns remained. As a multidisciplinary team, we worked with the patient to create a treatment plan which included radiologic targeting and surgical excisional biopsy. The surgical biopsy showed newly developed ductal carcinoma in situ – the earliest form of breast cancer.



Dr. Joffs and Dr. Robinson reviewing a female Veteran patient's mammography

This form is so early that we do not need to send the patient for chemotherapy evaluation. Truly an incredible save. Because of this great teamwork, we are one of few in VA that can provide this level of comprehensive care.

For more information go to:

<https://www.lasvegas.va.gov/services/women/index.asp>

## Save The Date: Womens Health Days 2021

When: **May 15, 2021**

Where: **VA Medical Center - Women's Health Clinic (3rd Floor)**

Time: **8 a.m. - 1 p.m.**

**\*\*\* Please call for an appointment as there are limited slots due to COVID-19 restrictions\*\*\***

**(702) 791- 9000 ext. 19176**

For More Information go to: [www.lasvegas.va.gov](http://www.lasvegas.va.gov)

### WOMEN'S HEALTH DAYS

May 15 • July 17 • Sept 18 • Nov 13

From: 8AM to 1PM

3RD FLOOR WOMEN'S HEALTH CLINIC

VA MEDICAL CENTER

6900 N. PECCOS RD

NORTH LAS VEGAS NEVADA 89086

(702) 791- 9000 ext. 19176

For More Information go to: [www.lasvegas.va.gov](http://www.lasvegas.va.gov)

Services available to Women Veterans during special Saturday Events include:

- SCHEDULING MAMMOGRAMS AND BONE DENSITY
- SCANS BREAST EXAMINATIONS
- PAP SMEARS TO DETECT CERVICAL CANCER
- STD SCREENING
- ROUTINE LAB DRAW
- MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES
- MYHEALTHVET SIGN UP AND ID VERIFICATION (TO EMAIL YOUR PROVIDERS)
- HEALTHY LIVING ASSESSMENT FIND OUT YOUR HEALTH AID
- LEARN ABOUT VA APFS
- LEARN ABOUT UPCOMING YOGA PROGRAM, YOGA KITS, ONLINE YOGA, ACCUPUNCTURE FOR PAIN, WHOLE HEALTH PROGRAM

\*\*\* Please call for an appointment as there are limited slots due to COVID-19 restrictions\*\*\*





# Year in review: Coming full circle combating COVID-19

## VASNHS marks anniversary of first Veteran patient COVID diagnosis and recovery

Written by John Archiquette, VASNHS Public Affairs specialist

When U.S. Marine Corps Veteran Ronald Pipkins walked into the Emergency Department of the North Las Vegas VA Medical Center (VAMC) on March 2, 2020, he had a mild fever and some trouble breathing. A little more than 48 hours later, the 55-year-old was diagnosed with COVID-19, becoming the first case at both the VAMC and the entire state of Nevada.

Following both a Southern Nevada Health District and Centers for Disease Control confirmation of COVID-19 on March 5, 2020, Pipkins spent six weeks at VAMC fighting for his life. One month of that time was spent on a ventilator in a medically induced coma. During that time, Pipkins remembers very little, and his dreams varied greatly from what was happening. "When I closed my eyes, I woke up back in what I thought was reality. I felt like I was living in Alaska, and there was a whole different life in my mind," Pipkins said. "But toward the end, it got very dark. I prayed to God, 'take me away. Take me away from this.' And then I woke up."

Pipkins remained in VA care for three weeks after awakening from his coma. During that time, he underwent intense rehabilitation with VASNHS physical and occupational therapists. Following his release from the VAMC on April 26, he spent a week in a rehabilitation facility before moving into an apartment; one that he now shares with his son, Ron Jr., a freshman at University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

Pipkins' road to recovery has been a difficult one, especially physically. "It's like, in my mind I'm stronger and healthier than I've ever been, but my body just can't run the race," said Pipkins. "It's muscles, joints, and endurance. I have arthritis in both of my hands. It took a while for my muscles to awaken."

Nearly one year after his emergency department visit, Pipkins returned to the VAMC Feb. 24 to receive his first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine. When he received the call about the getting the vaccine, Pipkins consulted with his two children, who were adamant that he gets his vaccination. "More than anything, I did it for them," he said. "After what they experienced, watching me lay in a coma for a month, I felt obligated. I didn't want to put them through that again."

Pipkins has been a strong advocate for masking following his release from the VAMC and is thankful to get vaccinated. "Half a million people have died without a vaccine. It makes me think about the AIDS epidemic. Will people still be dying five or ten years from now from COVID-19 because they didn't do anything? We all just need to get together and get vaccinated."

While he still finds it strange that he is famous for surviving, Pipkins hopes his journey will help others struggling with their recovery from COVID-19. "I'm that story," he said. "I'm getting better, but it's still an ongoing battle." He is currently working on a book detailing his year-long ordeal with the virus.

When asked if he was nervous about returning to the VAMC after spending a month in a coma in the same building, he shook his head. "I'm always excited to be here because this is where heroes work. The people who saved my life are here. I'm always happy to be in the presence of heroes."



Marine Veteran Ronald Pipkins gets his first COVID vaccine shot at the VASNHS VAMC

# June: National PTSD Awareness Month

## VASNHS offers programs for family of Veterans with PTSD

If a Veteran has been through a life-threatening event, such as combat or sexual assault, it can be difficult for loved ones to know how to support them. At the same time, it's important to remember that this type of event also affects family and friends — and it's normal for loved ones to struggle, too.

In addition to the many treatment options available at the VA to Veterans suffering through Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), VASNHS also offers a Couples Cognitive-Behavioral Conjoint Therapy (CBCT) for PTSD. This therapy helps a Veterans and their partner identify the thoughts and behaviors that affect the symptoms of PTSD, as well as other areas of their lives and relationship. The program consists of 15 75-minute sessions and can be conducted virtually or in-person.

"The goals of CBCT is to improve the understanding and communication between Veterans and their loved ones," said Dr. Benjamin Loew, Couples/Family PTSD coordinator. "Ultimately we aim to increase relationship satisfaction while decreasing PTSD symptoms."



In addition to helping couples, VASNHS is also starting a new program for friends and family of Veterans enrolled in VA care. The first session of PTSD 101 begins at the end of May. Programs such as CBCT and PTSD 101 help families recognize PTSD symptoms and learn what can help their Veteran feel better over time. VA is also offering a "PTSD Family Coach," a free, easy-to-use mobile application. The app can help partners and loved ones of people with PTSD, learn about how PTSD can affect families. It also has tools to help family members manage their well-being. PTSD Family Coach can also connect families with other caregivers and learn more about treatment options. Families can also use the app to create goals and help a Veteran and their family grow their own personal support system. If the Veteran is in crisis, the app also includes resources that families can use to connect with people who are ready to assist.

"It's normal to feel like you don't know how to support your loved one," said Loew. "You may feel helpless when they're upset or in crisis. But support from family and friends is important for people with PTSD — and there's a lot you can do to help." Referrals for CBCT for PTSD are made by referral from a Veteran's mental health provider. The PTSD 101 is not for Veterans themselves, but for friends, family, and partners. Veterans can request any of their providers contact Dr. Benjamin Loew to make a referral directly at (702)-754-4639. The Veteran will need to identify each participant and provide an e-mail address for each individual so they can receive a link to connect virtually.

Ask a provider or look for our brochure to navigate VASNHS PTSD programs in Behavioral Health Dept.

For more information on the VA PTSD programs go to:  
<https://www.ptsd.va.gov>



## Upcoming Events April - June 2021 (Go to [www.lasvegas.va.gov](http://www.lasvegas.va.gov) for current dates & times)

**April** - Sexual Assault Awareness Month

**April 18 - 24** - National Medical Laboratory Professionals Week

**May** - National Mental Health & Asian - Pacific American Month

**May 2-7** - Public Service Recognition Week

**May 6-12** - National Nurses Week

**May 17-21** - VA Research Week

**June** - National PTSD Awareness Month

**June** - VA "Be Safe. Prevent Falls" Month

**June** - LGBTQ Pride Month

**June 14** - U.S. Army 245<sup>th</sup> Birthday



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## Changing Behavior for Better Health

The VA Southern Nevada Healthcare System (VASNHS) **"To The Point Newsletter"** was designed to give Veterans, families, caregivers, and stakeholders information on the programs, services, and the knowledge to better educate them of whole-health approaches to wellness.

Together, with a Patient Aligned Care Team (PACT), each Veteran works together with health care professionals to plan for whole-person care and life-long health and wellness. The Veteran is the focal point at the center of the health team so he or she can make informed decisions about their health care plan with the provider, nursing, nutrition, mental health, and services in the VA and local community.



# LVR3 Incorporates Rec Therapy

## Equine therapy a boon for Veterans struggling with addictions

Written by Greg Frazho, VASNHS Public Affairs Specialist

Veterans have been using therapy animals for several years to provide companionship as they struggle with post-traumatic stress and other associated difficulties. Normally, therapy is done with dogs. This time, it was with different mammals.

Recently, several Veterans in VA Southern Nevada Healthcare System's Residential Recovery & Renewal Center (LVR3), found such an arrangement for peace and healing by participating in an equine therapy program with Spirit Therapies. "[We're] here for people who are in recovery," said Laurie Willmott, Spirit Therapies program director and certified equine specialist.



Christopher Hayes, VA Recreation Therapist

"We focus on physical trauma and the treatment of a wide range of mental health and basic human development issues." Willmott, the daughter and sister of Veterans, has worked extensively with recovery programs for the past 20 years, qualifying as a therapeutic riding instructor in the process. In addition to helping others deal with physical trauma, she has also worked with individuals struggling with attention deficit disorders, behavior disorders, and substance abuse.

The process is deliberate and incremental. Over the course of two hours, the Veterans were first introduced to the horses in the corral. They did this by gradually getting close to the animals in their environment. Then came petting and brushing as a way of making the contact more intimate; and a few Veterans even cleaned the hooves of the horses they were interacting with. "Equine therapy is great," said Galen, a patient at LVR3. "I had a fun time. It helps me to relax and get in touch with my feelings; when I'm there, I'm not thinking about anything but the relationship that I am building with the horse." "The horses were amazing and the owner, Laurie and [staff member] Joy were the best," said Sally, another patient at LVR3. "Everyone had their own experiences and the professionalism and care they gave I will remember for all of my days. I personally was able to bond with a horse named Lena and have her in my heart for life."

"Veterans learn a lot about themselves through the horses' actions," said Willmott. "Coming out to the ranch helps them look at themselves from the inside out. It's not about us, it's about the healing of our Veterans through the horses."

For the latest information in the VA Southern Nevada Healthcare System check out the following social media apps and WEB links:

VASNHS Website  
Free Email Alerts



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[www.myhealth.va.gov](http://www.myhealth.va.gov)



[www.instagram.com/VALasVegas](https://www.instagram.com/VALasVegas)



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The 9-Line Podcast

VASNHS YouTube



Scan Here for videos!