The last three weeks are historical for the world, the U.S., and the Carl Vinson VA Medical Center. Never have we dealt with a worldwide pandemic in our lifetimes. The Carl Vinson VA Medical Center is taking many precautions in the wake of COVID-19 to ensure our Veterans and employees remain safe.

Our leadership team is a part of the emergency planning team that meets daily to implement decisions quickly. The team also meets with our Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) leadership daily to confirm our operations are in-line with national expectations. We are strictly adhering to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) guidelines.

On March 12th, we implemented screening for COVID-19 for our Veterans. Entry points for the public now are limited to the main entrance at Building 5, next to Urgent Care, and Building 87, our new Mental Health building. I encourage patients to arrive early to allow time for screening. Currently, only Veterans with scheduled appointments, urgent care walk-ins, and prescription pick-ups are allowed in the facility. We implemented the COVID-19 telephone support line for Veterans enrolled in our medical center at 800-595-5229, which is available 24/7 for evaluation by clinical staff.

On March 23rd, we implemented mandatory screening for all staff at Building 5 and Building 1. Once screened for the day, employees enter or re-enter the medical center without additional screening.

Staff at each screening station ask three questions:

1. Do you have a fever?
2. Do you have a cough or a sudden respiratory illness?
3. Have you been in close contact with someone, including health care workers, confirmed to have the coronavirus disease?

Veterans and staff with a negative screen may proceed into the medical center based on the above criteria.

Veterans or staff with a positive screen will be directed to a doctor for additional evaluation before entering the medical center. Based on the symptoms and history, the doctor will determine the next steps in the Veteran’s treatment, if additional testing or isolation are needed or if the Veteran should isolate at home.

Our community clinics in Brunswick, Macon, Milledgeville, Perry, and Tifton also are screening Veterans upon check-in and again when they see their clinician. Our Albany Clinic is closed for 14 days and tentatively scheduled to re-open on April 6. Veterans with a positive screen at the community clinics will be directed to a provider for further evaluation.
On March 16th, we suspended all elective procedures, many specialty care appointments, and in-patient visitation, with exceptions for end-of-life and complex decision-making. Our Community Living Center, which houses our assisted living Veterans—our most vulnerable population—also suspended visitations. The Mental Health leadership team is contacting Veterans to offer visits by telephone and video. If Veterans prefer to present in person, we follow appropriate screening precautions to ensure the safety of our Veterans and staff for face-to-face visits. Additionally, group therapies now are offered by telephone and VA Video Connect in order to minimize viral exposure, and at the same time, continue to provide therapeutic interventions that our Veterans need and deserve. Our community-based clinics are offering the same treatment options as those provided at the main facility in Dublin. No one under the age of 18 is allowed in any of our facilities.

The care and safety of our Veterans, their loved ones, and our staff remain our utmost priority. During these challenging and unprecedented times, remember the Veteran Crisis Line, 1-800-273-8255, press 1 for Veterans.

As this crisis unfolds, our routines must be ever-changing and we must be adaptable. It is imperative that we stay focused and resilient as a team and protect each other. Our Veterans put their trust in us to provide the best healthcare they earned through their service to our nation -- in even the toughest of times. We stand ready to deliver the care they deserve.

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