

I am honored to be your representative from the Department of North Dakota on the Veterans Affairs Voluntary Service (VAVS) Committee of the Veterans Affairs Medical Center (VAMC) in Fargo. Recently, I attended our quarterly meeting and will highlight some of the programs and developments that are being planned and/or considered for roll out in the near future.

- **Veteran Transportation Service** or the VTS program has begun its soft opening in Fargo and is providing transportation for veterans. At this time, the vehicle on loan from the DAV (Disabled American Veterans) is not equipped for special mode transportation, but the Fargo VA has secured two vehicles from Texas that are properly equipped for wheelchair-bound patients. Once confirmation comes that the vehicles are en route, the VA will begin hiring additional drivers. More vehicles and drivers will be added over time as the program continues to grow.
- **Beneficiary Travel** update reported that the goal for beneficiary travel is to process all travel claims within ten days. Currently, staffing is down 70% which has significantly impacted the speed in which claims are processed. To combat this, the Fargo VA has partnered with the Veteran Travel Program Office nationally for assistance.
- **Parking Ramp Update:** The parking ramp proposed for the VAMC campus is still in the design phase with intent to award the construction contract in the future. The ramp will add an additional (net) one hundred parking spaces and allow for further infrastructure improvements in the future.
- **Mental Health Outpatient Clinic:** The new building, slated for construction in Fiscal Year 2024 will offer easily accessible mental health care for outpatient veterans as well as add approximately 17,000 square feet of space at the facility. Initial bids exceeded the estimated costs. Additional efforts are needed to bring bids down to an acceptable level before the project can move forward.
- **Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOC):** The Fargo VAMC is in the process of building new facilities in Fergus Falls, MN, and Grand Forks, ND. Both facilities are in the design process; the Fergus Falls facility will be three times larger than the current facility, and the Grand Forks clinic will be double the size of the original. Currently, efforts are underway to identify and acquire all medical equipment needs for these two sites and to assure everything needed is in place before these two sites 'go live' in early calendar year 2025.
- **Fisher House Updates:** The construction of a Fisher House will provide veterans' family members who must travel long distances a place to stay while their veteran undergoes medical procedures at the VAMC Fargo. The Fisher House project is still currently in the land acquisition phase. After discussion with local homeowners and community

members, it has been decided that our initial proposed site will not be pursued further. Other well-suited sites are being explored at this time.

- **Guest Speaker:** Katie Hanson, Clinical Pharmacist, presented information on the VA's new pharmacogenomics program. Pharmacogenomics is the study of how genes affect a person's response to medications. Working in conjunction with Sanford Health, the VA is offering free pharmacogenomic testing for veterans.
- **The Veterans Creative Arts Competition** is returning this year. The Veterans Creative Arts Festival is a national program that aims to recognize veterans and their creative accomplishments as well as educate and demonstrate to the community the therapeutic benefits of art therapy. The program, co-sponsored by the American Legion Auxiliary, will be held on Tuesday, September 10th, 2024, in the VA's 3rd floor auditorium. A flyer containing links, due dates, and additional information is available on the Auxiliary Department website ([www.ndala.org/var/](http://www.ndala.org/var/)). Eligible veterans must be enrolled in care with the Fargo VA Health Care System and may compete in any of fifty categories including painting, metal work, poetry, woodworking, and music. More information will be available in March.
- **VAVS Patient Casino Night:** The VAVS Committee will be hosting a patient casino night on March 18, 2024, at 6:30 pm in the VA's CLC recreation room. There are still slots remaining for service organizations and their members to participate and bring extra joy to our hospitalized veterans.

Carol Wolf

Department VAVS Committee Representative