

Brecksville Veterans Administration campus ends 50 years of care

Published: Sunday, May 15, 2011, 9:00 PM Updated: Monday, May 16, 2011, 7:22 AM

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Enlarge Scott Shaw, The Plain Dealer A patient uses one of the long hallways that connect buildings at the Brecksville campus of the Louis Stokes Cleveland Veterans Affairs Medical Center. **Brecksville VA closes gallery** (4 photos)

BRECKSVILLE, Ohio -- For 50 years a complex of 16 orange-brick buildings sprawling across a scenic 102-acre site has been the place where Northeast Ohio veterans have gone to be treated, healed and sometimes die.

Now, time has come for the Brecksville campus of the Louis Stokes Cleveland Veterans Affairs Medical Center to "just fade away," as per Gen. Douglas MacArthur's observation regarding all old soldiers.

In recent months, fewer and fewer electric carts have hummed down hospital corridors lined with framed jigsaw-puzzle artwork assembled in patient therapy sessions; passing offices and treatment rooms stacked with moving boxes, a darkened chapel and theater, a six-lane bowling alley crashing with silence, and waiting rooms with furniture reminiscent of your dad's basement rec room.

Shadows and memories lurk in a green-tiled hall where a sign reads: "Change is coming! Residents and staff, are you ready?"

That change is transfer of most of the services and 1,350 workers, plus more than 200 residents to **new quarters at the Wade Park campus in Cleveland**, where the results of a \$526 million renovation and new construction project will be officially dedicated Monday.

Old plant, new view of care

According to the VA, the move was needed to upgrade medical treatment in terms of facilities and programs, handle a regional patient load that has more than doubled in the past decade (from 39,000 to 100,000 annually), and eliminate duplication of services. The consolidation is expected to save the VA about \$23 million per year.

More about Veterans Affairs

"Brecksville has been a wonderful institution that has provided terrific care to thousands of veterans, but the physical plant is old and doesn't allow us to provide state-of-the-art care to our veteran population," said Susan Fuehrer, director of the medical center, who started as a management intern at Brecksville 26 years ago.

She said one of the many changes for Brecksville hospital residents will be a switch from four-bed rooms with one or two bathrooms for an entire ward, to private and semi-private rooms, each with its own bathroom.

Fuehrer also noted that the tone of patient care has changed since Brecksville opened as a 999-bed hospital for psychiatric patients in 1961.

Nowadays, she said, the emphasis is on treating and keeping vets in "healthy and productive" community settings.

Brecksville VA timeline

The evolution of Veterans Affairs hospitals in Northeast Ohio involves four facilities in a process of construction and consolidation that continues today.

1940: First patient admitted to the Veteran Administration's (as it was known then) Broadview Heights Hospital, which is later converted from a general medical and surgical facility to tuberculosis treatment. The unit closes in 1965.

1946: The VA takes over Crile Hospital in Parma Heights, which had been created in 1943 to treat Army wounded of World War II. Crile General Hospital becomes a 1,000-bed general medical and surgical facility.

1956: Construction starts on a 999-bed, \$23 million hospital in Brecksville for treatment of psychiatric patients. It opens in 1961.

1964: The VA's Wade Park Hospital, a 786-bed facility on a 20-acre site in the University Circle area, opens, prompting closing of the Crile VA Hospital, which is now the Western Campus of Cuyahoga Community College.

1971: After operating as separate facilities, each with its own budget and director, the Brecksville and Wade Park hospitals merge.

1980: The first of the Cleveland VA's 12 Community-based Outpatient Clinics opens in Canton.

1999: The Cleveland VA Medical Center is named in honor of former Congressman Louis Stokes.

2004: The decision is made to consolidate all patient care at the Wade Park campus.

The process involves extensive renovation of existing Wade Park facilities, plus construction of a \$102 million, 222-bed tower, a seven-story office building to house administrative services formerly at Brecksville, a 122-bed homeless domicile and an additional parking garage.

A new outpatient clinic to replace the one at Brecksville will be built in Parma, due to open in January 2012.

May 16, 2011: Formal dedication of the new facilities at Wade Park.

Sept. 5, 2011: A decommissioning ceremony is planned for the Brecksville complex on the 50th anniversary of its opening day. The site has been leased to a private firm for redevelopment.

"We really don't want them to come here and stay here for the rest of their lives," she added.

So a few Brecksville amenities that *won't* be moving to Wade Park include the bowling alley, baseball field, full-size gym and theater.

The Brecksville complex also once included a fishing pond. The feature was considered a therapeutic and recreation project until it was discovered that someone forgot to stock the waters with fish -- prompting one VA official to note that patients were probably discouraged enough without having them angle for nonexistent fish.

The pond eventually got fish, but the incident became part of the hospital's history of occasional stumbles and some outright tragedy.

Black smoke pouring from the coal-burning power plant initially drew the ire of surrounding soot-sifted residents. A lack of central air conditioning turned parts of the hospital into a furnace in summer, when steam heat wasn't cooking the complex in winter.

A 1981 investigation led to the arrest of employees for stealing drugs from the hospital for resale on the street. Given the population of patients with psychiatric problems, suicides were not uncommon, sometimes off-site as vets stepped in front of vehicles on nearby streets and highways.

In 1986 a former patient returned to the hospital and fatally shot two unarmed federal police officers. A glass case in the front lobby of the administration building still displays their badges, photos, handcuffs and Mace holsters. Hospital guards are now armed.

A 1988 congressional report said the facility had to shut down more than a third of its beds due to shortages of doctors, nurses and operating funds.

"Growing pains," is how Kenneth B. Smith, an inventory management specialist, described some of the hospital's past woes.

"Just like a child, then an adolescent and now it's still growing, still getting better," said Smith, 57, who has worked at Brecksville for more than 20 years.

The Army veteran also was a patient, who credits the VA with saving his eyesight with surgery in 1979, a time when fellow vets advised against going to the VA for treatment.

'Major blow' to the city

The Brecksville hospital had its shortcomings and disappointments, but it also had resounding successes.

Fuehrer noted that it was nationally recognized for its pioneering role in the treatment of gambling addiction, substance abuse and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The facility was the first in the VA system to establish a domicile for homeless veterans, she added.

The announcement in 2004 that the VA would be moving services from the Brecksville hospital to Wade Park was greeted with cries of dismay from some veterans and local residents.

The move will be a "major blow" to the city of Brecksville, which will lose \$2 million annually in income tax collections from employees at the hospital, according to Mayor Jerry Hruby.

However, Hruby said the city has been able to prepare for the hospital's departure by cutting expenditures, and will not have to lay off workers or increase taxes to compensate for the loss of tax revenue. "We knew this was coming and have been preparing for the past three years," he added.

The city has had a strong relationship with the hospital and Hruby said he understands the VA's reasoning in the move. "We knew this facility was antiquated, we knew they wanted to save money by consolidating and bringing veterans a higher level of medical care," he said.

The VA has leased the site to a private firm, Veterans Development LLC, which built the office building, parking garage and homeless domiciliary at Wade Park and will guide redevelopment of the Brecksville site in conjunction with the city of Brecksville.

"We're looking for institutions -- office, medical, light manufacturing, whatever fits in that zoning criteria [office/laboratory]," Hruby said. "This [move] could be a good opportunity for the city. We're taking it and making it a positive.

"And if you know anybody who's looking for about 900 room air conditioners, I'll give them a really good deal," he quipped.

Reaction to the move among Brecksville hospital staffers has varied from sentimental reflection to anticipation.

Lisa Herman, a nurse manager and retired Army Reserve colonel who has worked 32 years for the VA, said Brecksville has been "a great place to work. The setting is so beautiful with all the trees and grass. When patients are having problems with pain and other issues, it feels better when you're not in such an institutional environment.

"It's a good respite for patients, some who come here to die," she added. "For some patients it's perhaps the best part of the last part of their lives."

But Herman also said she's looking forward to Wade Park, where "as far as increasing my knowledge base and skills, there is a lot of opportunity to learn new things, and that part is very, very interesting and exciting to me."

The move came up during a recent discussion between Elizabeth Noelker, associate chief nurse of long-term care, and one of her patients, Jacob Rudd, 25, a Marine who was deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, got shot in the neck and is now quadriplegic.

Rudd wasn't sold on the move. "I think it's a mistake," he said. "Here, you can go outside, they've got trees, it's quiet and relatively calm, which is good for the [Iraq and Afghanistan] vets with PTSD."

Plus, there are about a half-dozen local pizza delivery guys he's come to appreciate.

Noelker responded by praising Wade Park. "It's not Brecksville, but it's very green," she said. "They're all private rooms with their own bath and shower, and you're going to love the privacy, the space, the views.

"And I'm sure the pizza guys will find us," she added.

Later, Noelker said she had no problem with leaving the hospital where she has worked for the past 10 years.

"No, it's time to close this tired old building down," she said. "I'll miss it for sentimental reasons, but as far as what you need to do to provide care, let's bury it and move on."

And another old soldier just fades away.