

## TRANSFORMATIVE CARITAS LEADERSHIP IN ACTION AT A RURAL VETERANS' OUTPATIENT CLINIC

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**Introduction:** The Atlanta VA Medical Center is an affiliate of the Watson Caring Science Institute, and committed to integrating Caring Science into all nursing practice settings. Soon after the Newnan VA Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC,) an offshoot of the Atlanta VA, opened in September 2009, the nurses at the clinic began voicing the need to do more to further establish caring relationships and create a healing environment in the clinic. Nursing staff expressed the desire to give the veterans time to be heard which enabled the nursing staff to know them better and meet their needs more effectively. In addition, elderly veterans assigned to the clinic frequently voiced the desire to meet other veterans with similar military backgrounds, to forge new friendships and share war stories. It was evident that in order to accomplish the goal of providing this caring environment, leadership support was vital. The Nurse Manager has the privilege of securing resources, where there are none many times, to facilitate the provision of care in the clinic, and of supporting the direct care nurses in caring endeavors. In April, 2012 the Newnan CBOC began holding monthly, scheduled events with the sole purpose of allowing time for veterans to share their stories and enjoy a caring, healing environment without the time constraints of scheduled appointments.

**Significance:** Nurses who desire to provide an ideal caring, healing environment in their practice setting can do only so much without appropriate resources and organizational and leadership support. The transformative leader is aware of resource constraints and limitations, but exhibits the “ability to dwell in the grace and gratitude of the gifts of caring and healing...” and can “offer human contact, human-to-human connection, creating healing environments...creating spaces and a professional culture whereby caring-healing practices flourish” (Watson, 2005). The transformative leader is also “liberated into new horizons of fresh thinking” (Watson, 2005). No other VA clinic had ever provided this type of scheduled caring time for veterans, which was coordinated by the nursing staff. The nursing staff worked together to organize the events, invite veterans, and ensure those who needed transportation to the events were accommodated. As a result, the nursing staff further incorporated the Caritas Processes™ not only into their daily practice, but also into the culture and reputation of the clinic as a whole.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this project was to showcase how transformative caritas leadership could support a caring, healing environment in an outpatient clinic through scheduled events for veterans where they were viewed not only as patients, but also as humans in need of connection, caring, and healing.

**Setting and Participants:** The setting for this project was the Newnan Community Based Outpatient Clinic, an offshoot of the Atlanta VA Medical Center. It is located 50 miles southwest of the Atlanta VA Medical Center, in a rural community. The participants included one Licensed Practical Nurse who spearheaded the project and four additional Licensed Practical Nurses who provided additional support as needed monthly. Four Registered Nurses provided support as well, including assuring any sick patients coming into the clinic during the events were cared for expeditiously. In addition, one of the clerical staff and at the front desk and a health technician assisted with the event scheduling and set up when needed. The Nurse Manager provided funds for refreshments, assisted with set up, clean up, and patient care as necessary.

**Project Process:** The Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) spearheading the events met with the nurse manager about her ideas. They agreed on hosting the events on the first Friday of every month. The first event was held in April 2012, and featured a veteran who was in the Vietnam conflict and received a Purple Heart for his service. In order to ensure veterans were aware of the events, this LPN scoured the list of patients assigned to the clinic, and mailed them invitations in advance. She also requested photos of the veterans who would attend, in uniform and these were posted in the lobby during the weeks prior to each event. (Permission was obtained from the facility Privacy Officer to post the photos.) Subsequent monthly events included those to honor and hear from World War II, Korea Conflict, Women, and African American veterans. There was also an event in November 2012 to celebrate all veterans. At the December event, Pearl Harbor was remembered, and a local quartet group came to sing patriotic and holiday songs. Several of the events have also showcased veteran artwork, crafts, and hobbies.

**Project Outcome:** As a result of these events, the veterans have expressed appreciation for the nurses making the effort to prepare and assign special time to honor and pay attention to them as people. The clinic has a relaxed atmosphere, which welcomes the veteran at all times. The nurses continue to host these events, and the veterans who have visited other clinics or been assigned to other clinics comment frequently on how different and more welcoming the Newnan CBOC is. Veterans visiting from other states have commented that they had never been to a clinic like Newnan, where the wants and needs of the patient and their family seem to be so very important. 50-80 veterans monthly attend the events, and only good and positive feedback has been received.

**Project Evaluation:** We plan to begin collecting quotes from veterans who have attended by administering a simple, qualitative survey tool after the events. All of these events have been well received and attended, most times requiring staff to find additional space for those attending. Several of these events have also been featured in the local newspaper. Most of the clinic staff are now participating in these events as it gives them time to get to know and listen to their patients in a more relaxed, caring environment, and time for the veterans to tell their stories.

**Future Directions:** The Newnan nursing staff and Nurse Manager plan to continue hosting these events throughout 2013. They also plan to educate nursing leadership in Atlanta VA about it, so that others are aware of it, and perhaps can begin doing the same in their areas, especially in the Outpatient Clinics. The nursing staff plans to publish this work and present it at nursing conferences.

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**Reference:** Watson, J. (2005). *Caring Science as Sacred Science*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: F.A. Davis Company.