

WELLNESS
Gardening safety

SUPPORT
New Portland CBOC

OUTREACH
Helping the homeless

INNOVATION
Guitar therapy

New England **Veteran**

GRAND OPENINGS

New clinic and a new research center

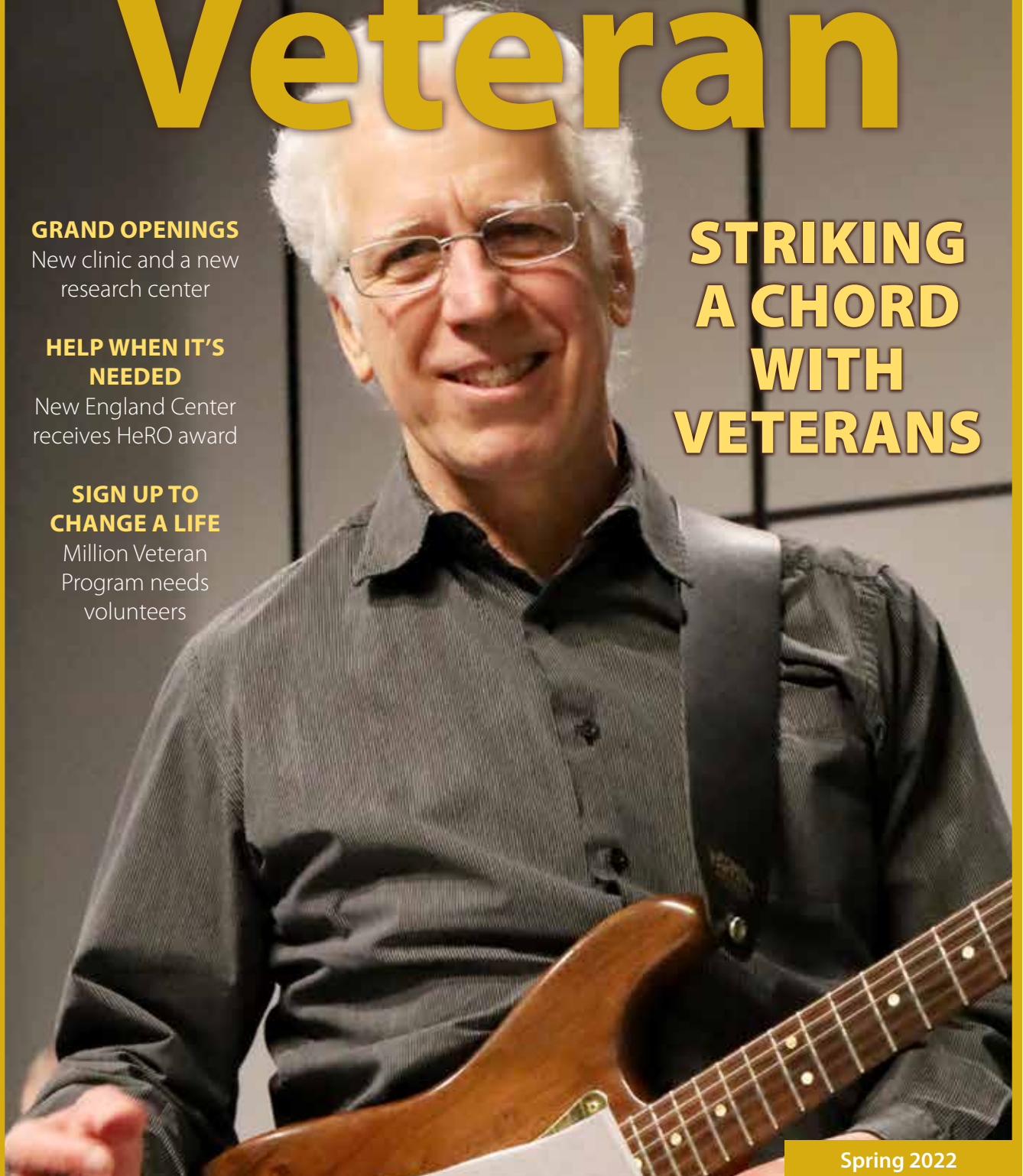
HELP WHEN IT'S NEEDED

New England Center receives HeRO award

SIGN UP TO CHANGE A LIFE

Million Veteran Program needs volunteers

**STRIKING
A CHORD
WITH
VETERANS**



Spring 2022

New England Veteran

VA New England Network Director
Ryan Lilly

Contributors in this issue

Dina Galvin, Orthopedic Hand Surgeon,
VA Boston Healthcare System

Jonathan Barczyk, Public Affairs
Specialist, VA Maine Healthcare System

John Loughlin, Public Affairs Officer, VA
Providence Healthcare System

VISN 1 Communications Department

Gerald Culliton, Director,
Communications, Veteran Outreach
and Marketing

Maureen Heard, Chief,
Communications & Public Affairs, Coast
Guard and Air Force Veteran

Michael McNamara, Chief, Outreach,
Community Education & Advertising,
Army Veteran

Paul Corbett, Brand & Content
Manager, Marine Corps Veteran

Russ Tippetts, Senior Editor & Writer,
Coast Guard Veteran

On the Cover: Vietnam Veteran Steve
Young, guitar-therapy instructor at
Providence VA Healthcare System

Website

www.newengland.va.gov/news

New England Veteran is published by the VA New England Healthcare System as an educational service. The publication is intended to provide information about Veteran benefits from a military-culture perspective and offer stories of interest to our Veteran community. All articles may be reproduced for educational purposes. The publication is not intended to be a substitute for medical advice, which should be obtained from your VA health care provider.



Message from the Network Director

A lot is happening throughout the Department of Veterans Affairs, most notably the Asset and Infrastructure Review (AIR) report, released March 14, 2022. It includes recommendations by the VA Secretary to cement the department as the primary, world-class provider and coordinator of Veterans health care for years to come.

The AIR report's release marks the beginning of an in-depth deliberative process. It is the result of years of research and analysis intended to help VA build a healthcare network with the right facilities, in the right places, to provide the right care for all Veterans, including underserved and at-risk Veteran populations in every part of the country—making sure our facilities and services are accessible to Veterans in their communities.

The recommendations center on improving access to and quality of care for Veterans by ensuring the department's infrastructure reflects Veterans' needs and 21st century design standards for many decades. VA is investing heavily in its number one asset—its employees, strengthening its public/private strategic partnerships and elevating its role as the leading healthcare research entity and the leading healthcare workforce training institution in the country.

I, personally, am very excited about this process and what it represents. In VISN 1, we are particularly challenged by the age of our infrastructure at nearly all of our VA-owned sites of care. This process represents a unique opportunity for us to fundamentally transform our infrastructure to deliver world-class health care in world-class buildings.

For the full report, and to see all the proposed changes for the VA New England Healthcare System, see the **AIR Commission report**.

With thanks for your service,

Ryan Lilly, MPA
Network Director

New Portland Community Based Outpatient Clinic



Officials cut the ribbon during a celebration ceremony for the new Portland, Maine VA CBOC on February 11, 2022. Pictured from left to right: John D. Thomas, Associate Executive Director, Office of Real Property, Congresswoman Chellie Pingree, Maine's 1st Congressional District, VA Deputy Secretary Donald M. Remy, VA Maine Healthcare Director Tracye B. Davis, and VISN 1 Network Director Ryan Lilly.

**By Jonathan Barczyk,
Public Affairs Specialist, VA
Maine Healthcare System**

In February, VISN 1 welcomed the newest VA New England Healthcare Network Community Based Outpatient Clinic in Portland, Maine.

This state-of-the-art facility will be a game-changer for our Veterans in Maine. The 62,000-square-foot clinic can serve as many as 400 Veterans a day. It will consolidate services now offered to Veterans at clinics in Saco and on Fore Street in Portland.

The New England Healthcare System strives to give Veterans the best care possible; the care they deserve. These clinics, now 51 strong across the New England Network, provide comprehensive outpatient services, including health and wellness visits, mental health care and other services for Veterans.

The number of Veterans eligible for services now and in the coming years will likely tick steadily upward, reaching more than 104,000 in 2024. This clinic is designed to meet the needs of Veterans today, and those in the years to come.

Through VA Healthcare Connect, new telemedicine technologies throughout the facility will further improve service to Veterans in rural locations throughout Maine.

The clinic also will serve as a teaching site with space dedicated to enhancing affiliate relationships with the Tufts Medical School and Maine Medical Center. The academic partnership between the VA and Tufts Medical School is outstanding and just one of the many extraordinary academic partnerships in New England, along with Yale, Brown, Boston University and others.

The Healing Power of Music

Music therapy provides creative outlet



Guitar therapy instructor and Vietnam Veteran Steve Young poses with his guitar at VA Providence.



**By Russ Tippets,
Senior Editor & Writer**

For Vietnam Veteran Steve Young, teaching a guitar therapy and songwriting class to Veterans isn't just simply a gig, it's his life's calling. "It is truly a privilege to be included in their lives, to share in their dignity, self-respect and courage," said Steve Young.

Young first enrolled in VA health care in 1999, and that's when he also started volunteering at the VA as well. Seeing the need for music therapy programs, Young, a professional music teacher, started offering Veterans free guitar lessons.

If the Veteran didn't have a guitar, Young would get them one for free. He first offered free guitars and lessons in 2010, but after working with the Veterans and their case workers, he realized he could do more.

"It is truly a privilege to be included in their lives, to share in their dignity, self-respect and courage."

- Steve Young

"I found out that as a part of rehabilitation for Veterans suffering from PTSD, in their group therapy programs, they would write down their thoughts and read them to the class," said Young. "I thought, 'These are amazing stories that people should hear about,' and I thought it would be a good idea to do something creative as opposed to just writing down these words, saying them to the class and then putting them away. That's when I started the songwriting class."

Young developed a nine-month guitar therapy and song-writing program at the Providence VA Healthcare System to help Veterans suffering with anger management issues and PTSD.

"The program started in 2018 and it has been great for the Veterans," said Donna Russillo, Providence VA Chief of Community Development and Civic Engagement. "If a Veteran is having a particularly bad day, the whole class will stop to help that Veteran. They have become a family."

In addition to providing a creative outlet for Veterans, Young wanted the public to hear the Veterans' stories. That's when he approached Russillo with the idea of professionally recording his students' songs and helping them produce an album.



Album cover of "Veterans Opus," featuring a collection of original songs by Veterans from Steve Young's guitar therapy class at VA Providence Healthcare System.

The album, titled Veterans Opus, consists entirely of Veterans' songs written and performed by them, except for one that a Veteran didn't feel comfortable performing, so someone else performed it for her.

"I've seen amazing changes in the students in my class. I've had a number of them tell me they don't like being around other people and they don't like going out in public, but they never miss my class," said Young. "I've even had students who started bringing in family members for comfort. Those family members have told me how much of a difference this program has made for their Veteran."

Young's end goal is to get all VA Medical Centers to adopt this program. "There are other programs out there that say we give free guitars for Veterans for therapy. I believe it's not therapy if it's not addressing the Veteran's personal situation. That's what's different about this program. VA clinicians and case workers are involved to ensure the students referred to this program will actually benefit from it."

To learn more about the album produced by the Veterans, visit [Facebook.com](https://www.facebook.com).

The Greatest Mission

Caring for those at risk of homelessness

By Russ Tippets,
Senior Editor & Writer

At first glance, the Errera Community Care Center (ECCC) in West Haven, Connecticut, looks like any other VA building. People come and go and shuttles drop off and pick up people at regular intervals. But inside, VA staff carry out a vital mission; perhaps the most important mission of all. They work to give struggling Veterans hope.

The mission of the ECCC is to enable individuals struggling with mental illness, substance abuse, and/or homelessness to live successfully within their communities. The goal is to maximize independence through recovery and rehabilitation plans designed to meet individual Veteran needs.

Leading this charge in the fight against Veteran homelessness is the ECCC Director Debbie Deegan. "We believe we were the first state in the country to end Veteran homelessness," said Deegan. "Our homeless services are vast and cover the entire state of Connecticut."



The Tree of Inspiration, where Veterans at the ECCC are invited to join the community by adding a leaf, contains something that motivates them or something they are grateful for.

For U.S. Navy Veteran Erla Lanier, the ECCC has been a lifesaver. "This program has changed my life entirely," said Lanier. "I went from being homeless to being able to get my own apartment. The programs here helped me not only get housing, but also access to group therapy and disability benefits."

Lanier, who has been getting service from the ECCC since 2008, now does what she can to help other struggling Veterans. "They've helped me so much that I try to give back where I can. I like working in the kitchen serving lunch," said Lanier.

VA Recognized for Patient Safety

Thanks to the New England Center for Innovation Excellence (NECIE), a Veteran got the help he needed right when he desperately needed it. On March 18, 2022, NECIE was awarded the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) National HeRO Award for their contributions to VHA's Journey to High Reliability.

VHA's enterprise-wide Journey to High Reliability aims to continuously improve its processes by maximizing patient safety and reducing harm to restore trust and ensure every Veteran receives the high-quality care they deserve.

The NECIE received the honor for the Non-Clinical Team from a VISN or Facility category. On a Friday afternoon last year, staff in Connecticut opened an email from a Veteran in Austin, Texas, with the subject line: "Help me."

This Veteran was homeless and missed his community methadone appointments and was detoxing on his own with no clinical care. The Veteran was searching for help and saw a blog post about VA Rideshare, a project based out of the NECIE.

Learn more about VA's Journey to High Reliability at [**VA National Center for Patient Safety**](https://www.newengland.va.gov).



The Healthcare for Homeless Veterans (HCHV) at the ECCC offers housing services to Veterans who are homeless, at risk of homelessness, or economically challenged. These services include emergency housing, traditional housing, and permanent supportive housing.

"I don't understand why a homeless Vet would stand out on the street with a sign that reads 'homeless Vet' when you have all the resources you need right here," said Lanier.

The ECCC takes a whole-health approach to treating its Veterans, focusing on conventional and complementary approaches in addition to prevention and treatment programs that revolve around nutrition, exercise, and body and mind.

"Many hospitals do have these types of programs but having them coordinated under one roof makes a huge difference. It makes communications clearer and we're not repeating service in two different places, being under one umbrella so to speak. This also allows our staff to really communicate and focus on the Veteran's needs," said Deegan.

Those eligible for HCHV include Veterans who are homeless or at risk of homelessness with at least one day of active duty in the military. They must have a discharge status of: Honorable, General Under Honorable, Other than Honorable or Bad Conduct via Special Court Martial.

Any VA provider can refer a Veteran by placing a homeless consult or the Veteran can drop in during the clinic hours.

Capt. John H. Harwood Research Center Opened in Providence

By John Loughlin, Public Affairs Officer, VA Providence Healthcare System

With a cheer and a cut of the ribbon, the VA Providence Healthcare System marked the opening of the Capt. John H. Harwood Research Center. Research conducted at the new facility aims to improve care for Veterans challenged by aging, disease or disability.

The VA renovated the former Harwood U.S. Army Reserve Center to create a state-of-the-art facility for ground-breaking research. The Army Reserve center was built in 1950, closed in 2006 during the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) process, and was transferred to the VA in 2012. The VA renovated approximately 22,640 square feet and added more than 7,200 square feet at a cost of about \$12.8 million.

Researchers in Providence are working on new interventions to reduce Veteran suicide and substance abuse after hospitalization, and ways to reduce depression among elderly Veterans living in community living centers. They're also identifying risk factors for food insecurity among Veterans, assessing for Alzheimer's disease and dementia among homeless Veterans, and looking at how Veterans respond to COVID-19 vaccines and booster doses.



Pictured left to right: Kasim J. Yarn, Rhode Island Director of Veterans Affairs; Hon. Jorge Elorza, Providence Mayor; Hon. David N. Cicilline, Congressman, Rhode Island 1; Lawrence B. Connell, Director VA Providence Healthcare System; Hon. Jack Reed US Senator, Dr. James Rudolph, Director, Long Term Services and Support (LTSS) Center for Innovation (COIN), VA Providence Research Service; Hon. Seth Magaziner, Rhode Island General Treasurer; Dr. Gaurav Choudhary, Associate Chief of Staff, Research and Staff and Cardiologist, VA Providence Healthcare, Matthew Goulet, Associate Director for Patient Care/Nurse Executive VA Providence healthcare System; Dr. Annmarie Dunican, Chief of Staff, VA Providence Healthcare System. Photo by VA Providence Public Affairs.

Joining VA Providence Healthcare System officials were U.S. Senator Jack Reed, Congressman David Cicilline, Rhode Island General Treasurer Seth Magaziner, Providence Mayor Jorge Elorza and Rhode Island Director of Veterans Affairs Kasim Yarn.

"The VA Providence Healthcare System punches well above its weight in terms of groundbreaking medical research for our Veterans, due in large part to our partnership with Brown University," said Director Lawrence B. Connell of VA Providence Healthcare System.

The center is named after a Rhode Island resident who was killed in action on June 7, 1944, on Omaha Beach in Normandy, France. Harwood was 25 years old.

Million Veteran Program Needs You

The Million Veteran Program is a national research program designed to learn how genes, lifestyle, and military exposures affect health and illness.

Since launching in 2011, over 850,000 Veterans have joined MVP, making it one of the world's largest programs on genetics and health. The MVP's goal for 2022 is to have one million Veterans join by Veteran's Day.

Understanding differences in our genes can help explain why some people get diseases and respond to certain treatments while others don't. This can also help healthcare providers offer better preventive care and treatments.

Individual genetic information is not currently returned to our MVP partners. However, Veterans, families, and their providers can use findings from MVP to make important healthcare decisions.

Historically, women have been underrepresented in biological and medical research. This makes it difficult to ensure new treatments, screenings and other medical breakthroughs work just as well for women as men.



The future of health care is in your genes

VA's MVP is working to change that. Women make up about nine percent of MVP enrollees. By enrolling in MVP, you help ensure women aren't left out of medical research that could potentially improve or save the lives of fellow female Veterans.

Our current research includes cancer, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, gene variation, Gulf War Illness, informatics, kidney disease, macular degeneration, mental health, osteoarthritis, Parkinson's disease, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance use disorders, suicide prevention, traumatic brain injury, tinnitus, and COVID-19.

Join MVP today by visiting mvp.va.gov.

Veterans who prefer to join in-person can schedule an MVP visit online or call the MVP Info Center toll-free at 866-441-6075, Monday – Friday; 8:00 a.m. – 6:00 p.m. ET.

The Upper Hand

Beware of gardening health risks

By Dina Galvin, MD

Since 2020 and the onset of the pandemic, many Americans have found new hobbies to relieve stress and improve their homes. One way is through being outdoors and in a garden! There are numerous benefits to gardening including reducing stress, boosting your mood, increasing your sun exposure and obtaining vitamin D. The best part is that you also produce beautiful flowers and tasty vegetables.

However, there are three common hand injuries that can occur from gardening. Before you dig out that spade and shovel, be aware of these risks and take precautions to avoid them.



Trigger fingers

A trigger finger causes pain and locking in any finger or your thumb. It does not just occur in your index finger (also called the trigger finger). The name comes from the act of your finger clicking or “triggering” when it bends. This occurs when the tendons that flex your finger become inflamed. This can limit the movement in your finger, making it difficult to either bend or straighten your finger. This is common after using tools or any repetitive flexion activities.



It is common for symptoms to be worse in the morning upon awakening. Risk factors for this condition include diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis, and hypothyroidism. Treatment for trigger finger include rest, wearing a splint, using a topical gel or taking an anti-inflammatory medication. In the clinic, we can inject corticosteroid for relief. If the condition continues or if previous treatments do not work, surgery will be recommended.

Tendinitis

Tendinitis involves inflammation of the tendons in the wrist. These tendons allow the wrist to bend and extend. Inflammation usually occurs from overuse of the wrist, causing inflammation and limits the ability for the tendon to glide within its sheath and move normally. Symptoms of wrist tendinitis include stiffness, swelling, and pain in the wrist. This may also be worse in the morning. De Quervain's tenosynovitis is a specific type of wrist tendinitis that affects the thumb. This is from overuse of the thumb when you use it to pinch and grip. Treatment for all tendinitis is to rest the tendons. The best way to do this is to stop the overuse activity. Wearing a wrist splint also allows the tendons to rest. Tendinitis is different than "carpal tunnel syndrome" as it affects tendons and not nerves. So, there should not be numbness or tingling.

Hand Infections

Gardeners can injure themselves when sharp objects penetrate the skin, leading to infection. Be careful when using gardening tools with sharp ends, like shears or pruners. Shovels with wooden handles can cause splinters if you don't protect your skin. Infections can also come from pathogens in the environment. Historically, tetanus was a big concern before vaccination was available. It is important to remain up to date with your tetanus shot (boosters should be given every 10 years to prevent disease).

Rose Gardener's disease, also called sporotrichosis, is caused by a fungus. It is found on certain plant matter and in soil. A skin infection can occur when the fungus enters through a small scrape or cut. Frequently, this happens after touching the thorn on a contaminated rose bush. Symptoms are usually a small painless bump that can occur 1-12 weeks after exposure. They can be pink, red or purple. They can grow slowly over time and look like an ulcer or a sore that is not healing.

The best precautions while gardening this spring:

- Wear protective clothing, including gloves and long sleeves, to prevent touching plant matter, especially if working with roses.
- Vary activities so you do not perform the same repetitive activity
- Take breaks
- Use tools so you are not using your hands to do a job that a tool could do faster

For more information, or to make an appointment, reach out to your Patient Aligned Care Team or call the Boston VA Orthopedic Hand Clinic at 857-364-4270.



New England **Veteran**

VISN 1 Communications
Department of Veterans Affairs
200 Springs Road
Bedford, MA 01730

New England **VETERAN**

The Right Care, Right Now.

Introducing our new 24/7
virtual care service.



The Right Care, Right Now
1-877-741-3400



VA Health Connect allows you to see a provider wherever you have internet access using your smartphone, tablet, or computer. A nurse will listen to your concerns, review your health records, and recommend what to do next.

With VA Health Connect, you can:

- Ask questions about medications and get refills
- Get connected to the mental health care team
- Triage with a nursing health advisor
- Schedule, verify, or reschedule primary care appointments
- Receive patient education

For more information on VA Health Connect, visit newengland.va.gov.