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# New England Veteran



**OPEN & READY**  
Rumford CBOC  
welcomes Veterans

**REMEMBERING  
THE FALLEN**  
VA Manchester  
expresses thanks

**BACK IN ACTION**  
Innovative technology  
reopens possibilities

**TAKE  
THE  
NEXT  
STEP**

Summer 2023



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
Veterans Health Administration  
VA New England Healthcare System

# New England Veteran

**VA New England Network Director**  
Ryan Lilly

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**On the Cover:** Astrid Perez, Director,  
Hartford Regional Office, is ready to help  
you navigate the PACT Act Claims process.

## Website

[www.newengland.va.gov/news](http://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

Dear Veterans,

It's hard to believe it's already summer in New England. With all of the activity across the VA New England Healthcare Network, it feels like the year is flying by. I have a lot of great news and stories to share with you in our summer edition of *New England Veteran*.

This past May, VA relaxed mandatory masking requirements at medical facilities across the country, dropping one of the final vestiges of the coronavirus pandemic of the last three years. This means during daily visits to our medical centers and outpatient clinics, you will no longer be required to wear a mask for entry, except in limited circumstances. Masks will continue to be required for staff, Veterans, and visitors in "high-risk" areas, such as transplant units, emergency and urgent care, chemotherapy units and certain Community Living Centers.

Also, this past May, we opened a new Community-Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) in Rumford, Maine. This new 7,200-square-foot, single-level facility replaced the former outpatient clinic located on Franklin Street in Rumford. The new Rumford CBOC is expected to serve at least 1,400 Veterans in the region, providing primary care, blood draw and mental health services.

Also, in this issue we have a great story about the research being conducted at the VA Boston Brain Bank, and great Veteran profile stories. I hope you enjoy every last bit of summer with family and friends, and I look forward to connecting with you in the months to come.

With thanks for your service,

Ryan Lilly, MPA  
Network Director



*New England Network Director Ryan Lilly and Acting VA CT Medical Center Director Brett Rusch participate in a Memorial Day ceremony at the Newington VA clinic on May 26, 2023.*



# New Rumford CBOC now open for business

Story and photo by Jonathan Barczyk, Public Affairs Specialist, VA Maine Healthcare System

The VA Maine Healthcare System held a ribbon-cutting ceremony on May 26 for the new Community-Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) in Rumford.

The new 7,200-square-foot, single-level facility, located at 10 Railroad Street on the Business Island, replaced the former outpatient clinic located on Franklin Street in Rumford.

Tracye Davis, VA Maine's Medical Center Director, said, "This clinic will connect our Veterans to the resources and state-of-the-art technology that we have throughout VA Maine, throughout VA New England and beyond."



VA Maine Medical Center Director Tracye Davis (far left) and VISN 1 Deputy Network Director Barrett Franklin (far right) look on as Senator Angus King and Sharon Steele, VA Maine's Space Planner, cut the ribbon for the new Rumford CBOC on May 26, 2023.

In the new clinic, lab services and conference rooms are accessible from lobby areas. Additional exam rooms included in the new building will facilitate a better experience for Veterans and improve the efficiency of staff.

The new clinic allows staff on the Veteran's care team to work together in a shared space, strengthening communication regarding coordination of Veteran care.

The new Rumford CBOC is expected to serve at least 1,400 Veterans, providing primary care, blood draw and mental health services.

To find out more information about the Rumford CBOC, including contact information and hours, please visit [www.va.gov/maine-health-care/locations/rumford-va-clinic](http://www.va.gov/maine-health-care/locations/rumford-va-clinic).

# Navigating the PACT Act claims process

Story and photo by Russ Tippetts,  
Senior Editor & Writer, Coast  
Guard Veteran

Let's face it, the VA claims process can, at times, be overwhelming. As a Veteran, who works for VHA, I get overwhelmed too sometimes. Luckily for us, VA has experts here to help.

Let's get started with the basics about the PACT Act.

## What is the PACT Act?

The PACT Act is the law officially known as the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring Our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act of 2022. It fulfills President Biden's top priority of addressing Military Environmental Exposures, as well as keeping our nation's promise to care for those Veterans, who suffer from related conditions, and their survivors.



*Astrid Perez, Director, Hartford Regional Office, U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs.*

The PACT Act is one of the largest health and benefit expansions in American history. It recognizes toxic exposure as a “cost of war” by addressing the full range of issues impacting toxic-exposed Veterans, ensuring generations of Veterans who suffer from toxic exposure-related conditions get the benefits and care they’ve earned. This new law also expands and extends eligibility for VA health care for Veterans with toxic exposures and Veterans of the Vietnam era, Gulf War era, and Post-9/11 era.

I recently sat down with Astrid Perez, Director, Hartford Regional Office, U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, to find out everything you need to know about navigating the PACT Act claims process.

**The first thing I learned is that you do not need a toxic exposure screening before you submit a PACT Act claim.** That’s because VA considers all conditions established by the PACT Act presumptive on the date the bill became law.



“A Veteran does not need to do a screening for toxic exposure to submit their claims for a service connection to any PACT Act-related claim. They can do those things simultaneously,” said Perez. “The screening for toxic exposure is done at a VA hospital, where they are provided with a questionnaire and, depending on the outcome, referred to a primary care physician.”

**If a Veteran submits a claim for a condition related to PACT Act and is found eligible, depending on the evaluation for the condition or multiple conditions, a Veteran can be entitled to numerous benefits, such as:**

- Veteran Readiness and Employment benefits to help with job training education, employment accommodations, resume development, and job-seeking skills.
- Assistance in starting a personally owned business.
- Independent living services for those who are severely disabled and unable to work in traditional employment.
- VA Health care

Perez encourages everyone to submit a claim, even if they have not had any symptoms from toxic exposure. “Even if you are a younger Veteran who has not had any symptoms from toxic exposure, get a screening and get added to the registry. Then you will have that on record and if something happens in the future, your information is already on file and documented.”



**So now that you know what PACT Act is and are ready to file your claim, let's talk about some important upcoming PACT Act deadlines.**

To mark the first anniversary of the signing of the PACT Act on Aug. 10, VA is hosting Summer VetFest awareness events across the country, emphasizing making Veterans aware of the two upcoming PACT Act deadlines.

Aug. 9, 2023. VA encourages all eligible Veterans and survivors to file a claim—or submit their intent to file a claim—for PACT Act-related benefits now. Veterans who do so on or before Aug. 9 may have their benefits (if granted) backdated to Aug. 10, 2022, the day that President Biden signed the bill into law.

Sept. 30, 2023. Are you a Veteran who deployed to a combat zone and never enrolled in VA health care? If you were discharged or released between Sept. 11, 2001, and Oct. 1, 2013, you may be eligible to enroll now during a special enrollment period. But act fast—the deadline to apply is Sept. 30, 2023.

At the events, VA staff will be ready to help Veterans apply for PACT Act-related benefits, enroll in VA health care, get screened for toxic exposures and more. Find a Summer VetFest event near you by visiting: <https://news.va.gov/121480/pact-act-events-summer-vetfest/>. If you can't make it to a Summer VetFest event in your area, learn more by visiting [VA.gov/PACT](https://va.gov/PACT) or calling 1-800-MYVA411.



## Patient parking garage coming to West Haven

VA Connecticut Healthcare System is excited to announce that construction will begin soon on a 300-plus space, four-story patient parking garage at the West Haven campus.

The garage will be in front of Building 2 in Parking Lot 4. This is the lot by the flagpole (formerly the valet parking lot) near the main entrance.

During the various construction phases, we will temporarily relocate the handicap and spinal cord injury parking spaces currently in parking lots 4 and 5.

Safe pedestrian pathways and appropriate signage will be maintained throughout the project with the Building 2 main entrance remaining open for the duration. We appreciate and thank you for your patience and flexibility during construction as it will impact parking and traffic flow.



# Manchester VA Memorial Day celebration honors fallen heroes



*Gold Star Mother Helen Boudreau is escorted by Manchester VA Medical Center Director Kevin Forrest for a wreath presentation tribute during a Memorial Day Ceremony on May 29 in Manchester, New Hampshire.*

Sen. Maggie Hassan, Rep. Christopher Pappas, Manchester City Mayor Joyce Craig, and New Hampshire congressional delegation representatives spoke alongside Forrest with one voice, recognizing the legacy of our fallen heroes and the continued support for Veterans.

A wreath presentation led by Gold Star Mother Helen Boudreau, accompanied by Forrest, served as a reminder of the ultimate sacrifice of service members and families. The Hillsborough County Sheriff's Honor Guard framed the wreath laying. The event concluded with the Manchester Central High School Band playing Taps.

The heartfelt event is a labor of love for VA employees, spearheaded by Stella Lareau, Chief of Civic Engagement and Community Development, and the team of dedicated medical center staff.

"Our Memorial Day Ceremony honors those who lost their lives defending our freedoms," said Lareau. "We also pay tribute to those Granite State Veterans who lost their lives over the past year, to not only remember their legacy, but to support family members with a remembrance rose. The survivors are woven throughout our communities; they are a part of our VA family."

**Story and photo by Lori Flynn, VA Manchester, Public Affairs Officer, U.S. Army Veteran**

Hundreds of Veterans, family members, caregivers, and survivors from across the Granite State traveled to attend the Manchester VA Medical Center's Memorial Day Ceremony on May 29 to honor and remember America's fallen heroes.

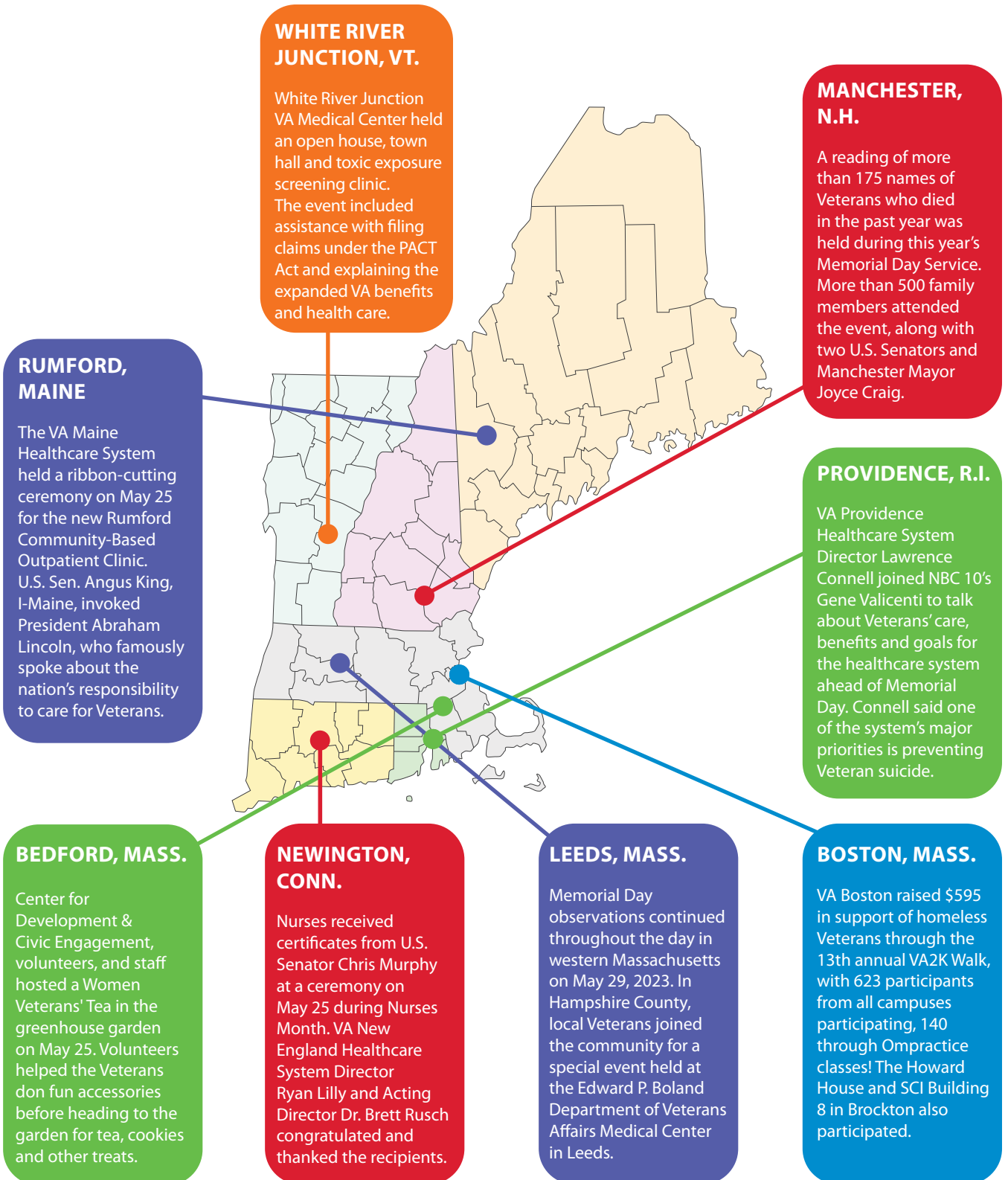
"Memorial Day is a sacred day for America," said Manchester VA Medical Center Director Kevin Forrest. "And it's dedicated to all those who gave their lives securing our freedoms, not only through words taken by oath to defend our country, but through their actions, by putting their lives at risk."

The steps into the medical center served as the stage, where many of America's Veterans who are 'borne the battle' return home for care. On this special day, they honor those who did not make it home—who died in service for our nation.

"This responsibility and duty of the living occurs every day at the VA, and Memorial Day is a time to solemnly remember—to ensure none of us ever forget—our fallen, who, for nearly 250 years, have devoted themselves to the cause of liberty," said Forrest. "We also honor those who went missing in action and remain unaccounted for."



To read about each of these headline stories, visit the VA New England “News” page at [www.newengland.va.gov/news](http://www.newengland.va.gov/news)



# Physical therapy helps Veteran get active again

Story by Russ Tippetts, Senior Editor & Writer, Coast Guard Veteran

Retired Army Colonel Jim Bedingfield is back in action—sports action, that is—thanks to VA health care. Bedingfield, a Reading, Massachusetts native, suffered a spinal cord injury in the line of duty in 1994, which left him paralyzed.

Now 61, Bedingfield can take on a wide range of adaptive sports thanks to VA physical therapy and new functional electrical stimulation leg device technology from a company called Bioness, being utilized by the VA.

The technology stimulates nerves to help get muscles working. The results are usually immediate. “For the first time in 30 years since pre-injury, I skied. For the first time in 40 years since pre-injury, I golfed. And those are things I just never thought I could do again,” said Bedingfield.

After 24 years of Army service, Bedingfield retired and made a second career at Raytheon working in space and missile defense. Now retired from Raytheon, Bedingfield has made it his new mission to spread the word that VA is here to help.



Retired Army Colonel Jim Bedingfield (front-left) skies with a fellow Veteran at the 2023 Winter Adaptive Sports clinic at Snowmass in Colorado. Photo courtesy of Jim Bedingfield.

“I like the holistic sense in which VA health care deals with you. They take care of not just the physical elements but also the mental and emotional health aspects. I like to think that help from the neck up is just as important as from the neck down,” said Bedingfield.

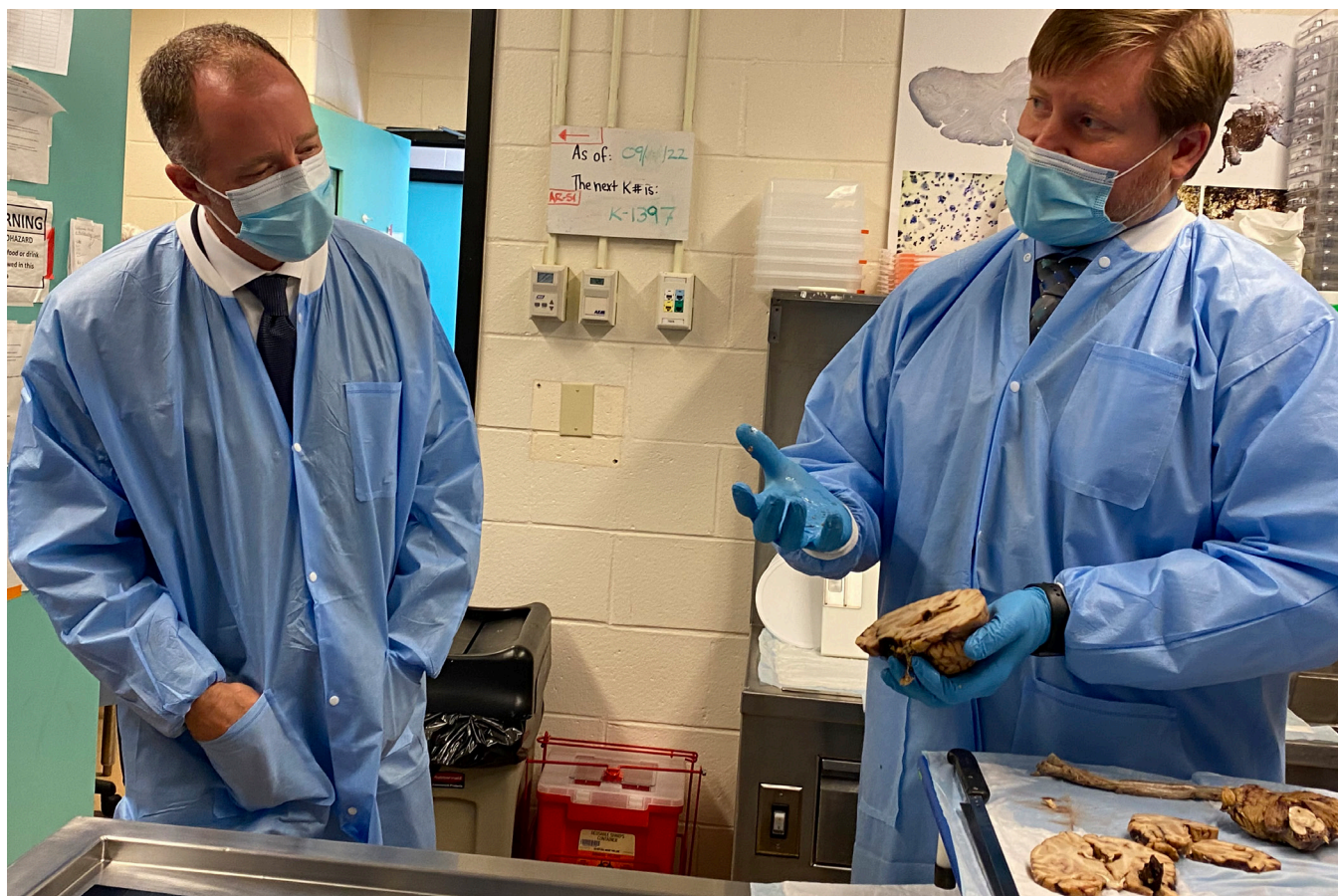
Bedingfield most recently participated in the Snowmass Winter Adaptive Sports Clinic in Colorado, which showcases the health and rehabilitative benefits adaptive sports provide for Veterans with profound injuries and medical concerns.

After using VA health care for a little over two years, Bedingfield wishes he had started using it earlier. “If I had any idea the amount of help and support I could get and the progress I could make, I would have done this years ago,” said Bedingfield.

To learn more about VHA physical therapy programs, please visit [www.rehab.va.gov/PT](http://www.rehab.va.gov/PT).



# VA Boston Brain Bank helps future generations of Veterans with brain disease



*VISN 1 Network Director, Ryan Lilly (left), gets a briefing from Dr. Russ Huber about the study of PTSD and how it affects the brain during a tour at the VA Boston brain bank last September. Photo courtesy of Latha Sivaprasad, VISN 1 Chief Medical Officer*

**Story by Russ Tippets, Senior Editor & Writer,  
Coast Guard Veteran**

The VA Biorepository Brain Bank (VABBB) in Boston is a human tissue bank that collects, processes, stores, and gives out research specimens for future scientific studies.

The VABBB provides central nervous system tissue and health information to scientists studying disorders, such as amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease), disorders of Veterans of the 1990-91 Gulf War, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

"ALS is four times more frequent in the military population, and VA has really made a big push to facilitate research to understand this disease," said Dr. Thor Stein, a Neuropathologist at the Boston VABBB, which has long studied ALS.



According to Dr. Stein, any Veteran around the country diagnosed with ALS is eligible to enroll in this study. The VABBB enrolls the Veteran for life and has a number of clinical questionnaires and other items they perform with the Veteran. When the Veteran passes, they donate their brain and spinal cord, which comes to the VABBB.

“When we receive the donation, our charge is twofold,” said Stein. “We bank the tissue to be used for research and we do a very comprehensive neurodiagnosis to understand what was going on with the brain and then we share those results with the Veteran’s family, if they desire.”

Other brain bank studies at Boston VABBB include a study to understand PTSD in the Veteran population and in civilians. There is also a Gulf War brain bank study. Through a partnership with Boston University, there is an Alzheimer’s disease brain bank as well as an athlete’s brain bank study, which focuses on athletes and Veterans who played contact sports and have a history of repetitive head impacts.



*Dr. Thor Stein, a Neuropathologist at the Boston VABBB, at work in his laboratory. Photo by Winfield Danielson, Public Affairs Officer, VA Boston Healthcare System*

“The PTSD brain bank has a significant challenge in identifying the underlying pathology in traumatic stress because of the lack of a specific marker for PTSD. In essence, the brain of someone with PTSD looks the same as someone without the condition,” said Dr. Russ Huber, Staff Neurologist at the VA Boston Brain Bank. “Our research has focused on two main areas: one, the transcriptional signature of PTSD, and two, the microstructural changes in PTSD.”

Dr. Huber further explained, “Work within VISN 1 and with other VA brain bank partners has provided details about the transcriptional changes in brain regions involved in PTSD.” The work of the PTSD brain bank will provide targets for future therapies and biomarkers that will allow physicians to follow the progression of PTSD and have an objective way of monitoring the efficacy of treatments.

“I am extremely proud of our team at the VA Boston Brain Bank,” said VISN 1 Network Director Ryan Lilly. “They are at the forefront of cutting-edge research and academics. I believe the work they’re doing will advance the field of brain disease study and it will greatly help our Veterans for generations to come.”

Scientists studying neurological disorders must compare brain tissue donated by people affected by these diseases with tissue from people who are not affected by them to understand the causes of these conditions. Yet most brain banks, including the VABBB, have critical shortages of tissue from those without these brain disorders (otherwise known as “control tissue”). Therefore, obtaining brain tissue from those without brain disorders is also critical to research.

## New England VETERAN

# The VABBB needs your help

Any Veteran in the United States may enroll in the VA Biorepository Brain Bank (VABBB). Some non-Veterans may also be eligible. Please see below on how to enroll in our study.

**ALS:** Veterans diagnosed with ALS, suspected ALS, or its related forms, can find information about the ALS brain bank study, or call to speak with a researcher at (866) 460-1158.

**GULF WAR ILLNESSES (1990-91 Gulf War):** Veterans who served during the 1990-91 Gulf War (deployed or non-deployed) can find information about the Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses Biorepository (GWVIB) brain bank by speaking with a researcher at (855) 561-7827.

**PTSD:** Veterans and non-Veterans diagnosed with PTSD can find information about the National PTSD Brain Bank by speaking with a researcher at (800) 762-6609.

**THOSE WITHOUT BRAIN DISORDERS:** We hope that those without brain disorders consider enrolling in the VABBB to support research on neurologic conditions affecting Veterans. Find information about why those without brain disorders should consider brain donation by speaking with a researcher at (866) 460-1158.

**OTHER CONDITIONS:** Veterans and non-Veterans diagnosed with other disorders, such as major depression, may also be eligible to enroll in the VABBB. Call (800) 762-6609 to speak with a researcher to learn more.

Learn more by visiting:  
[www.research.va.gov/programs/  
specimen\\_biobanking.cfm](http://www.research.va.gov/programs/specimen_biobanking.cfm)

