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Togus 150-year history started with action by President Lincoln

Property was once a hotel resort developed by a granite merchant

BY WARREN WATSON
CORRESPONDENT

President Abraham Lincoln designated Togus as the site for the nation’s first veterans home as the bloody Civil War neared a disastrous end in 1865. Thousands were dead or injured.

The 500 acres of woods and wetlands had been part of Togus Springs, a hotel resort developed by Rockland granite merchant Horace Beals just east of Augusta. It had stables, a pool, a race track, even a bowling alley.

As the war began in 1861, the resort failed. The government purchased the property for $50,000 as part of Lincoln’s plan to build the first National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers. Togus, in the wake of Lincoln’s 1865 death and the war’s end, admitted its first veteran on Nov. 10, 1866.

Dozens of other presidents have come and gone since and the VA at Togus eventually exploded into a full-fledged hospital and health center that has served a constant stream of veterans with onsite, online and satellite services that touch the entire state.

Togus turns 150 years old this November amid celebrations and respectful fanfare. It is one of the oldest institutions in one of our oldest states. About 1,600 people are employed there, making Togus one of Maine’s largest employers. Hundreds of volunteers pass through its doors weekly.

“Togus has proudly carried the mantle of providing excellent care to our state’s veterans for 150 years,” said U.S. Sen. Susan Collins, (R-Maine). “Our debt to those who have served our country can never be fully repaid, but this historic mile-

stone is a powerful reminder of our ongoing dedication to do all that we can.”

U.S. Sen. Angus King agreed.

“This remarkable milestone is not only an opportunity to celebrate and reflect on the important work that’s been done there, but also to recommit ourselves to ensuring that every man and woman who wears the uniform is supported and taken care of,” King said.

According to VA history compiled by Donald Beattie and others, the original Togus housed around 400 veterans. In 1868, however, a new building program allowed accommodations for 3,000 veterans. In 1870, a 100-bed hospital portion was built.

In its early years, Togus was a destination place for the entire region, complete with picnics, a zoo, golf, Broadway shows, concerts and more. Trolleys ran back and forth to Augusta and Gardiner. The campus grew to become a full-service medical center, matching the needs of generations of veterans in long-term and short-term care.

The campus was self-sustaining with a shoe factory and a farm, complete with Maine’s first Holsteins.

Life for veterans was organized along military lines until 1939. Veterans wore uniforms and were organized into 150-man companies. Diversions were many, with band concerts, Broadway and vaudeville shows, golf, a beer hall and a deer park.

Togus still is home to Maine’s only National Cemetery, which is now closed but accommodates 5,373 deceased veterans.

In 1989, Veteran Administration was redesignated as the Veteran Affairs. In 2002, the campus was renamed the Veteran Health Administration, which strives to serve veterans in all needs. According to Maine’s VA history, approximately 60 percent of medical residents receive some of their training from serving at VA hospitals around the nation.

Today, these hospitals work to improve quality of life, treat post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), brain injuries, prevent suicide, and much more. Alongside regular patient care, the VA has opened outpatient clinics and contributes toward medical research.

Currently there are eight full-time community-based outpatient clinics (CBOC) located throughout Maine, according to the Togus website. Locations include Bangor, Calais, Caribou, Lewiston, Lincoln, Portland, Rumford, and Saco, and three part-time clinics Bingham, Port Kent, and Houlton.

That kind of change is a constant at Togus. In-hospital clinics are busier and more sophisticated than ever. Doctors and counselors work in a 12-bed hospice. Telehealth services allow for more contact with veterans in their own homes. New counseling centers statewide expedite contact with former soldiers.

In the works is the so-called Fisher House, a domicile where families can reside on campus to be near patients. The VA also is about to build “Cabins in the Woods,” so some vets can live on the Togus campus.

This live-in, family approach will be part of its attraction, according to Richard Grant, a veteran, who wrote “The Surprise of Togus” for a May 2009 Downeast magazine article about the facility.

“Togus was meant from the start to be a tranquil, secluded place, a world into itself,” Grant wrote.
Though the actual “birthday” will be publicly observed indoors at Togus on Nov. 10, coming right up will be a daylong outdoor celebration of the 150th anniversary on Saturday, Sept. 17, rain or shine. The entire community — veterans and their families as well as the general public — are encouraged to attend and take part in these events planned for all ages, and all free of charge.

Beginning at 9 a.m., visitors can stop by the exhibits and a historic encampment, and enjoy children’s activities. Guided trolley tours will be offered before the parade, speeches and ceremonies get under way. Events will include face painting, balloon animals and clowns; kids of all ages can try their hand at hula hooping, bean bag toss and other old-fashioned games. The old-fashioned trolley car tour of the expansive Togus grounds starts and ends at Quarters 1, which was originally named the Governor’s House. The name was a reference to the one-time residence of the Togus director. The building, located near the Veteran Tree and used today as administrative space, was officially designated a national historic landmark in 1975.

Stops on the tour will include the Administration Building, Beals House, the Community Living Center, the Hospice Memorial Garden and a loop through West Cemetery, where some historically significant veterans have been laid to rest. Tour participants also will visit the sites of forthcoming initiatives, such as the Cabins in the Woods project and the Fisher House site. Opportunities to disembark and explore on foot will be made available. Meanwhile, everyone will have the chance to see some of the dozens of buildings that have been built and re-purposed over the years, ranging from old barns and dormitories to the Togus Fire Department.

For the big anniversary parade, which kicks off at 10 a.m., the trolleys will be pressed into service to transport WWII, Korean and Vietnam veterans wishing to take part in the celebration. Parade units will include marching bands, vintage automobiles and historic re-enactors, along with motorcycle groups and public safety vehicles.

The parade wraps up at Building 209, where Gary Crocker will preside as master of ceremonies and introduce the featured speakers. These will include Togus Center Director Ryan Lilly, keynote speaker, Secretary of the Veterans Administration Robert MacDonald and Veterans Integrated Service Network 1 Director Michael Mayo-Smith, who leads the Northeast region of the Veterans Administration. “Maine Representatives Bruce Poliquin and Chellie Pingree, and our Senators (Angus) King and (Susan) Collins have all indicated they will be attending,” said Lorna Hatch, chief of Volunteer Services at Togus, who has been serving with many of her colleagues on the anniversary celebration planning committee.

After the speeches, follow the aroma of grilled chicken, hot dogs and burgers served up at the community barbecue, compliments of the Maine State Elks Association. Several bands will be providing live entertainment at the gazebo. Organizers will dedicate the Veteran Tree and the Hospice Memorial Garden. The towering red oak, visible in several vintage photographs from the Togus archives, was certified earlier this year by representatives of the Maine Forestry Service as being over 198 years old.

The Veteran Tree, towering above many of the buildings and plantings on the Togus VA campus, “has, like our country’s veterans, survived various rigors of life,” said Rev. Kenneth Hellmer, Iraq War combat veteran who now serves as one of the Togus chaplains after a 22 year career in the U.S. Air Force.

As for the recognition of the Veteran Tree, this personal passion has become a project of his extended military family members across several generations. His wife, Rev. Kim Hellmer, has created a poem for the Veteran Tree dedication. Other family members have donated the two granite benches to be placed under the tree for rest and contemplation.

Rev. Kenneth Hellmer said that, as visitors look up and marvel at this Veteran Tree, he hopes they will “take note of (their) feelings of wonder, awe, beauty, reverence and appreciation. Yes, this veteran has weathered the storms of life, exhibiting the scars of battle inside and out, but yet this veteran stands...”

More CELEBRATION, PAGE 5
strong providing protection for those who take refuge under its resilient canopy.”

The Hospice Memory Garden also represents a labor of love, the culmination of a dedicated volunteer effort underwritten by individual and corporate generosity.

The project evolved from the kind, spontaneous act of family members of veterans receiving care at the hospice, according to Lisa Munzing, Togus VA Hospice palliative care social worker. They chose to roll up their sleeves and reclaim old perennial beds that long predated the 5-year-old hospice building. “Then some members of the Kennebec Valley Garden Club got involved, as well as other family members and friends, members of the Boothbay American Legion Post 36 — even a local Eagle Scout — and the transformative project has taken on a life of its own,” she said.

Munzing, coordinating the project together with Courtney Oliver, a Togus VA Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialist, said they were thrilled when Lowes’ Augusta and Brunswick employees chose to adopt the garden as a Heroes Project, donating labor, know-how and materials for the refurbished gazebo, the pergola, the surrounding plantings and landscaping and some 1,800 paving bricks that can be engraved for the Memory Garden.

The dedication will be a fitting opportunity to recognize the donors of over $11,000 in-kind funding, as well as the families, gardeners, Legion members, scouts, students, Lowes employees and clinical staff who have collectively put in more than 400 volunteer hours.

The memorable 150th anniversary celebration day will wrap up with history brought dramatically to life, complete with cannon fire. Some 200 re-enactors, portraying cavalry and infantry, will authentically recreate the Battle of Fredericksburg — chosen because it was a battle in which many members of the 20th Maine Regiment valorously took part.

The Veteran Tree recognition, part of Saturday’s events, is a red oak that towers above many of the buildings and plantings on the Togus VA campus. “It has, like our country’s veterans, survived various rigors of life,” said Rev. Kenneth Hellmer, Iraq War combat veteran, who now serves as one of the Togus chaplains after a 22-year career in the U.S. Air Force.

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VA Togus leadership assesses the agency in Maine

“We work in partnership with other caregivers and schools. We have better relationships in our communities than ever.”

RAY LASH, COORDINATOR FOR RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT FOR VA TOGUS

As VA Togus marks its 150th year, we sat down with the three-person leadership team to assess the state of the Veterans Administration in Maine. In a matter of a few short years, the VA staff has grown about 50 percent, to 1,460 people, as the institution has added remote/Internet and satellite services and clinics for veterans. Ryan Lilly, left, has been center director since 2012. He is a native Mainer with years of VA experience. He is the 24th VA leader in the state since the institution was created in 1866. Stephen Sears, right, is the chief of staff at VA Maine Healthcare System, whose focus is to improve the access and quality of primary and specialty medical care services for veterans in Maine. Amy Gartley, center, was appointed nurse executive in Aug. 2010. She has oversight of nursing and patient care services for thousands of Togus veterans across Maine.

ABOUT THE CENTER DIRECTOR

Ryan Lilly, 36, returned to his native Maine when he was appointed center director at Maine VA Healthcare System in 2012.

Lilly began his VA career in 1999 at the VA Health Administration Center (HAC) in Denver as a presidential management intern.

After one year as a budget analyst, he became chief fiscal officer of the HAC, a position he held until relocating to White River Junction VAMC as chief fiscal officer in 2002. He also served as business office manager, overseeing all operations of the business office (Finance, Acquisitions, Contracting, Medical Records, Patient Accounts and Patient Services). Lilly held the position of acting associate director at White River Junction VAMC from Feb. 2006 until he reported to VA Maine Healthcare System as associate director on June 11, 2006. Lilly received a master’s degree in Public Administration (MPA) and a Healthcare Administration certificate from West Virginia University.

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Several major construction projects planned on VA campus

BY WARREN WATSON
Correspondent

The Togus VA will undergo another facelift in the coming months.
That’s not surprising, given the fact that the institution turns 150 years old later this year. Facelifts here are commonplace.

In November 1866, shortly after opening to its first veteran, plans were already underway for expansion renovations and the addition of a 100-bed hospital. Every few years, a building or two is modernized or added.

Today, Edwin Lee, chief of facilities management services, is looking ahead to at least four major construction projects on the 500-acre campus of the VA in Chelsea, just east of Augusta.

- Cabins in the Woods: With the design virtually complete, construction will begin in October on 21 residential cabins on 11 acres of the Togus grounds. “We’ve never had such a development like this here,” said Lee.
- Fisher House: Early stages of planning and design are also underway on a Fisher House dom-icile on the campus. The residence is planned to support access to critical medical care for veterans traveling from long distances. It has been described as a “Ronald McDonald house for veterans.”
- Nursing home / specialty additions: Also planned are a nursing home addition and 16,000 square feet of clinical and hospital space.

CABINS

The $4.2 million cabin project will evoke Togus’s past, circa 1865. In its early years, some veterans built camp-like housing for their stay at the VA. They were called just that – cabins in the woods. Togus subsidized the small houses.

This time, they will be funded and built by VA Togus. Working with Volunteers of America, the Togus grounds. “We’ve never had such a development like this here,” said Lee.

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FISHER

In 1991, Zachary and Elizabeth Fisher House opened, serving 277,000 family members, with 46 new ones in the works. “Ours will be first rate,” said Togus Center Director Ryan Lilly. “It will be comfortable, probably the nicest place these families will ever experience.”

Since 1990, the Fisher House Foundation has hosted 277,000 families and provided more than 6 million days of lodging, saving them more than $200 million in lodging and transportation. In 15 years, a total of 7,000 students have shared $10 million scholarship grants through the Scholarships for Military Children program. Since 2005, the Operation Hero Miles program has provided more than 58,000 airline tickets to Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom wounded military and their families.

Fisher Houses are typically 7,800 to 16,000 square feet with eight to 20 bedrooms, featuring private suites with private baths and common areas, including laundry facilities, dining rooms, private baths, living room and libraries. A 16-suite facility is planned at Togus.

Togus.

It is anticipated that the local Fisher House will accommodate more than 500 families per year.

OTHER WORK

Early planning is also underway to improve the physical plant of the main hospital, Lee said.

This will include a new nursing home of single-floor design (2017) and other work in 2018 and 2019, Lee said. About 16,000 in other expansion is planned.

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Hospice care at Togus is praised for its excellence

“You are amazed at what a wonderful facility it is.”

COLUMNIST GEORGE SMITH WROTE ABOUT THE HOSPICE CARE UNIT AT TOGUS

Nurses, aides and other caregivers tend to patients in a demonstrable way.

“It’s a challenge,” said McFawn, a floor nurse at Togus before and during the early days of the hospice. “It’s about teamwork. We get people in emotional crisis. Everyone is different.”

Richardson, who has practiced medicine at VA Togus for 30 years, has watched the area of geriatrics explode in the medical complex just east of Augusta.

He has been chief of geriatric medicine since 1991.

The area is one of the busiest at VA Togus and one impacted by new forms of outreach from the medical center, including home services. It also will expand in the next year with a new 48-bed nursing home, to open fully by 2020.

Geriatrics includes the following areas: hospice and palliative care, in-hospital clinics, outpatient care, caregiver support teams and skilled care.

Richardson’s office also over-

More HOSPICE, PAGE 9

“Hospice care at Togus is praised for its excellence”

BY WARREN WATSON
Correspondent

You can wrap the activities of the 5-year-old Hospice and Palliative Care unit at VA Togus neatly around the five core principles of the veterans hospital that has been part of central Maine life for 150 years:

• Integrity
• Commitment
• Advocacy
• Respect
• Excellence

As the project serves more and more veterans and their families, it receives constant praise from inside officials and outsiders. Executive Director Ryan Lilly of Togus calls the hospice a “showcase program.”

Throughout the decade of the 2000s, Togus caregivers envisioned a hospice as part of the medical center’s campus, according to Dr. James Schneid, the center director. But it didn’t come overnight.

It took six years — from 2003 to 2009 — to secure $3.1 million in federal dollars to build the unit as part of the geriatric care complex at Togus.

Reviews of the hospice have been positive. Kennebec Journal columnist George Smith raved about the quality of the experience last year in a piece for the newspaper. “We are amazed at what a wonderful facility it is,” he wrote.

Smith added in his column, “The attention of the nursing staff to each and every patient is impressive. If Dad made even a slight noise, a nurse rushed to the room to make sure he was OK. They administered his medicine, delivered his meals, visited with him and bathed him and comforted him and hugged him and loved him.”

In letters about Smith’s column, writers lauded the services of the hospice, even the volunteers — “readers, musicians, crafters, pets, companions.”

Central to the program are its leaders, Dr. Schneid and Kate McFawn, R.N., the nurse manager. “We’ve expanded our service presence,” said Schneid, who previously worked at Maine General Hospital. “We provide comprehensive services.”

Almost overnight, after the facility opened in June 2011, Kandyce Powell of the Maine Hospice Council said the VA was already emerging as a leader in end-of-life care.

It’s about the details involved in hospice work.

At Togus, the clinic itself has a different feel. The rooms are painted in softer, muted colors. A gas fireplace warms the space and the heart in the main area.

A gas fireplace warms the space and the heart in the main area. The rooms are single rooms. A kitchen is available for families to cook for their loved one. A flower garden donated by Lowe’s department store sits right outside the back door.

The stained glass in the chapel at the hospice unit.
Central to the Hospice program are its leaders, Dr. Schneid and Kate McFawn, R.N., the nurse manager.

Hospice
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8

sees Maine’s veterans homes. “We’re responsible for a significant number of veterans with service connections,” Richardson said.

Specific projects in geriatrics:
• Skilled home health nursing care
• Homemaker home health aid
• Home-based primary care
• Community adult day care
• Geriatric outpatient clinic
• Community residential care
• Medical foster home
• Community living center
• Contract nursing home

After the passing of a patient, their bed is dressed out with the flag and flowers in respect.

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TOGUS VA MAINE TIMELINE

1859 – Horace Beals, a wealthy granite merchant from Rockland, purchases 1100 acres of land that was known as Togus. Mr. Beals constructed an elegant health spa and resort known as Togus Spring.

1863 – Mr. Beals passes away and the hotel is shut down.

1865 – March 4, President Abraham Lincoln second inaugural address promises “To care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan” by serving and honoring the men and women who are America’s veterans.

1866 – March 21, Congress approves the Federal Government to purchase the 134-room resort from the Beals estate and converts it to a hospital for wounded soldiers.

1866 – October 5, LT. Col. Edward W. Hincks is appointed the first “Governor” of Togus, which was known in those days as The National Asylum for Disabled Veterans. The Governor was the Director of the Facility.

1866 – November 6, The National Asylum for Disabled Veterans opens its doors to wounded Veterans. At least one veteran, Leonard Messer, fought in the War of 1812 and not the Civil War.

1867 - January 5, fire destroys Beal’s resort building, which was turned into the hospital. During the summer of 1867, a new hospital was built along with four main barracks.

1867 - February 16, James (Mclaughlin) West, is the first Veteran to pass away at the hospital. West is the Fourth Veteran to be buried in the West Cemetery.

1873 - The National Asylum for Disabled Veterans changes its name to The National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers.

1873 – August 13, President Grant visits Togus and eats lunch with Togus Governor Tilton in Quarters 1.

1883 - June 1, “Professor” Berthold Thieme is hired as the new Togus Band leader. Under Thieme’s direction the band goes from being an “amateur-volunteer” group to one of the best in all of New England. Thieme served in the U.S. Navy as a musician on board the USS Plymouth.

1890 - March 8, Wilhelm Redlin is the first and only non-veteran to be buried in the Togus National Cemetery. Redlin was a musician under the tutelage of Professor Berthold Thieme.

1890 - A narrow gauge railroad from the Kennebec River in Randolph and an electric trolley line from Augusta are completed. The relative isolation of Togus ended and it became a popular excursion spot for Sunday picnics. There were frequent band concerts, a zoo, a hotel and a theater, which brought shows directly from Broadway.
TOGUS VA MAINE TIMELINE

1916 - “Board of Managers” decides to cut back on cost for the Togus Band and only has them play at Togus. Professor Thieme retires in early 1928 and dies on May 31, 1928. He is buried in the East Cemetery.

1930 - July 3, President Herbert Hoover creates the Veterans Administration (VA) with the Consolidation Act to consolidate all veteran services. Construction of a new hospital with 275 beds began in 1932 at a cost of $750,000. That building is now known as Building 200 and includes modern types of X-ray machines and sound proof areas for psychiatric patients. In 1933, the staff includes seven doctors, 12 nurses and a number of ward attendants.

1934 - February 15, Col. Malcolm L. Stoddard becomes the “First Manager of the Veterans Administration Facility” at Togus.

1941 - Togus celebrates its 75th anniversary with a program held in the Theater. By 1966, Togus had grown to comprise 50 buildings, 929 beds and approximately 900 employees.

1984 - Building 248 is opened and now houses The Veterans Benefits Administration. As one of seven combined medical and regional office centers throughout the country, Togus can now house the six divisions, which provide veterans benefits information to all Maine veterans in one spacious and central location. As this building was being dedicated, plans were being drawn for the new clinical addition to provide better access to outpatient services for Maine’s veterans.

1989 - VA is designated a cabinet-level agency and becomes the Department of Veterans Affairs. Today, onboard Togus VA campus is a Medical Center, a Regional Office and a National Cemetery. The Medical Center, with a staff of approximately 1,150 personnel representing various disciplines, consists of 67 in-patient beds and 75 beds in the Nursing Home Care Units, which provide for long-term care as well as Alzheimer’s/dementia, and community based outpatient clinics.

1991 - During our 125th Anniversary, the New Hospital addition in front of building 200 was opened to the public.

2000 - The Beals House opened to provide temporary, no-cost accommodations for families of in-patient Togus Veterans. A former on-campus home for senior VA staff, it was donated to the nonprofit agency that now operates it. VA Maine HCS is scheduled to receive a Fisher House in the future, which will significantly increase the services and support for Veterans and their families.

2012 - Eight full-time community based outpatient clinics (CBOC) located throughout the state of Maine provide needed services to Veterans in their communities. These CBOCs include Bangor, Calais, Caribou, Lewiston, Lincoln, Portland, Rumford and Saco. There are also three part-time clinics located in Bingham, Fort Kent and Houlton. VA Maine Healthcare System's (VA Maine HCS) current structure is indicative of VA’s focus on increased out-patient healthcare while simultaneously raising overall quality indicators.

2013 - A new Women’s Primary Care Clinic opens to accommodate the growing women veteran population. This clinic now has a full time primary care providers, two part-time primary care providers, 1 full time registered nurse, 2 full time licensed practical nurses, a part-time gynecological surgeon (who does surgical procedures at Togus), a full time Military Sexual Trauma Program Manager and a full-time Women Veterans Program manager. The clinic was designed to allow two providers to see patients in a more efficient manner. There are two exam rooms per provider and all rooms have a bathroom attached for privacy.

As of 2015, the Togus campus cares for about 1,250 women veterans for their primary care needs, and about 1,200 women get their gender specific care at their Community Based Outpatient Clinic, with most being seen by a designated Women’s Health Provider. VA Maine Healthcare System cares for approximately 2,495 female veterans and anticipates continued growth as the Department of Defense opens more and more roles/career opportunities for women. Fourteen percent of active duty and 18 percent of our National Guard/Reserves are now comprised of Women, and the VA has and will continue to expand services to meet the needs of the fastest growing population in the VA.

Left, Beals House provides temporary no-cost housing for families of veterans being cared for at Togus.

Breaking ground 1932.

Behind the church.

Above and right, the Governor’s Mansion, where President Grant visited and eats lunch with Togus Governor Tilton in 1873.

Old postcards and photos courtesy of Togus VA.

Beals and Governors house photos by Nancy P. McGinnis.
Women now feel more welcome at the VA Togus. Much of that is due to the tireless efforts of LaRhonda Harris, women veterans program manager.

She believes 100 percent in the ongoing effort to create a new welcoming culture and look for the nearly 3,000 women who are now served at the veterans center just east of Augusta.

“Prior to 1980, women veterans were not even given veteran status,” Harris said of the social and cultural changes driven by the enhanced role of women in the military. “It’s not easy for women to feel comfortable in this environment. But we’re now dealing with different veterans with different needs.”

It all started with the changing nature of the military. Women are now the fastest growing subgroup of U.S. veterans. And the number of women veterans is expected to increase dramatically in the next 10 years. This will result in increased demand for VA health care.

“Prior to 1980, women veterans were not even given veteran status. It’s not easy for women to feel comfortable in this environment. But we’re now dealing with different veterans with different needs.”

As of 2007, 14.3 percent of active duty military (all branches) were women. Only in the last decade have women been allowed into more dangerous combat roles. That, or course, further changed the nature of women veterans at Togus.

As far back as the Civil War, women actually fought alongside men in the Union Army but they did so in disguise, as cross dressers, according to the National Archives. Most other women in the military were nurses, cooks or did domestic tasks.

In 2013, women were approved for combat roles under Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta after a relaxation of Pentagon rules. All told, about 15.6 percent of women in the military today are women. Similarly, 16 percent of West Point grads are women. The ratios are similar for the other branches of the armed services.

Harris, the program manager, said that these changes nationally translate into new needs at VA hospitals.

“Women vets are younger. Many are younger veterans. They also have extra parts,” Harris quipped. Some of the changes involve optics and cosmetics.

VA units at Togus now feature more drapes and curtains with the goal of giving patients more privacy.

“Women were second tier until these changes led to more females at our hospitals,” she said. “They’re more complicated for women.”

“Older rooms might have four men per unit. It’s hard for women to be comfortable in that kind of setup,” Harris said.

Harris, a veteran herself who has been at Togus since 1994, said that changes began 10-15 years ago in the women’s clinic.

“A woman might need a little more time in receiving medical care,” she said of all the changes, which included a different paint job, everything, she said, “that makes the clinic environment more inviting.”

She emphasized “women now feel more comfortable in our rooms.”

According to VA demographic data, the number of women using VA health care has more than doubled, from nearly 160,000 in 2000 to more than 390,000 in 2013. Women vets returning from current actions in Iraq and Afghanistan show that 81 percent were born after 1970 (aged 43 or younger) and 55 percent were born after 1980 (aged 33 or younger).

In all, there are 127,694 vets in Maine; women total 10,711, or about 8.5 percent.

Delivering services can be tricky in such a large and rural environment as men.
In addition to Togus, community-based outpatient clinics (CBOC) and outreach clinics have been set up to deliver care. The network provides services in the following ways — inpatient care, outpatient care, long-term care, telehealth, geriatric programs, home-based primary care, medical foster homes, mental health and women's clinic.

Harris said that the Department of Veterans Affairs is committed to reaching out to the 1.8 million women veterans alive today.

"Women are a different audience for us to reach today," Harris said. "By nature they are caregivers themselves. So standards are different."
Volunteer service complements Togus staff

BY WARREN WATSON
Correspondent

While everyone working at Togus marks the 150th anniversary of the veterans hospital east of Augusta, Lorna Hatch is celebrating a second anniversary.

“Our volunteer services are 70 years old,” she said. Meaningful because Hatch is chief of volunteer services and in her 39th year at Togus. She has headed the volunteer program for the last 22 years.

Togus has 426 volunteers in all, Hatch said. “That’s up some year over year.”

Her network of volunteers work varied hours and in varied situations. Some work one or two times a month; other regulars might do three days a week.

Her longevity is typical of many long-time staffers at Togus. Hatch began as a medical transcriptionist, and later worked in other areas. Along the way, she took night courses at the University of Southern Maine to earn a bachelor’s degree in communication.

“Volunteers complement our staff,” Hatch said. “They don’t replace them, nor do they fill in for them.”

Volunteers complement our staff. They don’t replace them, nor do they fill in for them.

LORNA HATCH, CHIEF OF VOLUNTEER SERVICES

The numbers are impressive, she said, noting that the volunteer force logged 40,013 in fiscal year 2015. Hatch was asked to name the most popular volunteer program of the year.

“That would have to be our ‘Homeless Stand-down,’” she said.

Hatch said the project — modeled after the term used for safe havens during the military’s Vietnam War — brings together veterans from all over Maine for a day at Togus. This year’s date is Oct. 22, with more than 200 volunteers taking part. Seventy-two vets participated in 2015.

“More than 20 services are offered to those coming — medical screenings, tax advice, Social Security, housing, food stamps,” said Hatch. “We give out clothes, boots, coats.

“We don’t consider it giving handouts, but giving them a ‘hand-up — something that will give them a better start.”

Prospective volunteers who express interest just need to fill out an application, and allow a background check, she said. Contact Hatch at 1-207-446-6832 for more information.

Lorna Hatch, chief of Volunteer Services, standing in front of a donated handmade crocheted flag, said volunteers who express interest just need to fill out an application, and allow a background check. If you are interested in volunteering contact Hatch at 446-6832 for more information.

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52-year volunteer honored

Chief of Volunteer Services, Lorna Hatch’s all-star volunteer is 89-year-old Jeannette Chapman of Cushing. Chapman has volunteered at Togus since 1964. She is pictured at right receiving an award for volunteerism from VA Maine director Ryan Lilly.

“Chapman is impressed by the growth in services at Togus,” she said.

the mother of two, Chapman has four grandchildren and four great grandchildren.

Today Chapman works in the long-term care area and enjoys spending time and getting to know the veterans. Her favorite assignment was a year ago working in the area of occupational therapy.

“She is so reliable,” said Hatch. “She wants to make a difference for the vets. If we can find a way to get her, she’ll be here.”
Outreach program employs an unconventional approach

Team leader seeks to provide service to all veterans

“It’s all about veterans taking care of themselves. Our goal is to make it easy for the veterans. In a rural state like Maine, this is all part of getting veterans connected.”

BY WARREN WATSON
Correspondent

Team leader Amy Marcotte will go to unusual lengths to coax military veterans to take advantage of the services offered by her Sanford Vet Center in southern Maine.

Her team will go to gun shows, even conventions frequented by tattoo artists. She’ll offer guitar lessons as part of her outreach.

Her unconventional means are emblematic of today’s Veterans Administration in its efforts to counsel and serve the thousands of veterans who call Maine home. Togus at 150 years old finds new ways of connecting with its veterans.

The VA here in Maine uses other non-conventional approaches to serve vets, including computers and tele-medicine to get the word out and serve patients online.

Maine today has five vet centers scattered statewide in its outreach. Centers in Caribou, Bangor, Lewiston, Portland and Sanford are “critical places for gathering,” according to U.S. Sen. Angus King, I-Me. King is an advocate of the vet center efforts.

Marcotte pointed out that the veteran center concept was born toward the end of the Vietnam era for veterans, around 1979, approximately five years after the end of the conflict in Southeast Asia.

“Veterans from that period did not get a warm welcome back to the U.S.,” she said of the controversial war. “They were disrespected. Even some people in the VA from the World II and Korean era were discriminatory.”

So, veterans “had to advocate for themselves,” she said. With many vets experiencing what she called “readjustment issues,” the concept of reaching out to those veterans was born.

U.S. Sen. Max Cleland led a movement in Congress to create programs in the VA designed to help those new veterans.

Unlike veteran’s programs centered around medicine and medication, veteran centers deal with counseling only.

“It’s just talk,” said Marcotte, herself a veteran of U.S. Army campaigns in Somalia and Haiti, respectively, from 1992 to 1996.

A main focus of a veteran center is to help men and women adjust to the nuances of civilian life. “That can be a head-spinning process,” she said a few years ago on an “Inside Maine” radio program. That’s because, in part, the VA has a complicated array of projects that sometimes involve entire families.

The first step, said Marcotte, is to find veterans, who rarely just stumble into its 10-person centers. She said the office’s outreach may involve “finding vets where they are in the community,” and that could be at gun shows, even tattoo conventions.

But the services are worth it. They’re all free and highly confidential. And more and more they are tailored to the individual. In fact, the Sanford office even offers guitar lessons, by popular demand.

Telemedicine advances
The Togus-based Maine VA uses a similar approach to

TIFFANY ROONEY, EDUCATION CHIEF
More OUTREACH, PAGE 17
Outreach

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 16

health care delivery. While veterans are given options in interfacing with the broader organization through veteran centers, patients are dealing with the hospital itself through telemedicine.

Small groups and individuals now have the option of receiving certain services through an ever-expanding network of telemedicine.

Real-time videos now are used to connect and inform patients in specialty areas, including eye-care and dermatology.

Behind this is 12-year Togus veteran Tiffany Rooney, who recently added Telemedicine to her overall duties as education chief.

“It’s all about veterans taking care of themselves,” said Rooney. She added that website and distance services are part of all this.

“Our goal is to make it easy for the veterans,” she said. “In a rural state like Maine, this is all part of getting veterans connected.”
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Delays in benefits processing reduced

BY WARREN WATSON  
Correspondent

Phil Black is in the reduction business, and he’s always working against the clock. Black heads the Togus Regional Benefits Office and processes claims for military veterans benefits nationwide. He reports that his staff has reduced a claims backlog from 611,000 to 75,000. That has led to his office receiving a “station of excellence” designation.

A former U.S. Air Force veteran himself, Black attributes it to technology and a can-do spirit. Today, a claim takes about 125 days to resolve, a significant reduction. He said the national VA is on a “mission” to reduce delays.

Part of this, he said, is attributable to improvements in electronic record-keeping, which is centralized at VA Togus. Black said his benefits department has processed 1.7 million claims this year.

The VA operates the nation’s largest integrated health care system with more than 1,500 sites of care, including hospitals, community clinics, community living centers, domiciliaries, readjustment counseling centers and other facilities.
You’re Invited to our 150th Celebration at Togus VA Campus
(Off Eastern Avenue/Thomaston Rd., Chelsea)
Saturday, September 17th • 9 a.m. - 4 p.m.

DAY’S ACTIVITIES
7 a.m. Registration/Assignment of Volunteers (B205-front entrance)
9 a.m. Trolley Tours (pick-up/drop-off Quarters 1)
Kid’s Activities (behind the tennis court)
Parade Participants muster in parking lot #5
Exhibits & Encampment
10 a.m. Parade from B207 to B209
Guest Speakers (B209 parking lot #2)
12 noon BBQ (Parking Lot 17 - Across from Hospice’s East entrance)
Bands in the Gazebo
1:30 p.m. Dedication of the Veterans Tree (Quarters 1)
2 p.m. Dedication of Hospice Memory Garden (B207-South Entrance)
3 p.m. Re-enactment (Old Hallowell Rd - towards Route 226)

Overflow parking available at Chelsea School with shuttle bus to/from Togus.

Don’t miss our November 10th celebration!
9 a.m. - 3 p.m.
Stay tuned for details.