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## **A healing home for nation's heroes**

South Hall VA clinic will expand services, capacity for veterans



**A rendering of the new Veterans Administration clinic to be built in Oakwood.**



**Dr. Michael Streleckis talks with patient Joe Colon at the Veterans Administration Oakwood Community Based Outpatient Clinic. Construction is supposed to start early this year on the new VA clinic in Oakwood.**

OAKWOOD — The number of area veterans needing medical care is rising, putting further strain on the tiny U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs clinic off Mundy Mill Road.

"We're all now carrying more patients per provider than we used to, to try to increase our capacity," said Dr. Michael Streleckis, team lead physician at the VA's Oakwood Community Based Outpatient Clinic. "The downside to that is, obviously, we can see people less often."

Help is on the way, however, with plans under development for a 16,000-square-foot clinic on Tanners Creek Drive, off Thurmon Tanner Parkway and just north of H.F. Reed Industrial Parkway, in Oakwood.

The estimated completion of the \$774,000 building is April 2013, said Gregory Kendall, spokesman for the VA in Atlanta.

The current 4,500-square-foot clinic, which opened in 1999 to relieve overcrowded operations in Decatur, sits across from Gainesville State College and at the entrance to Walmart Supercenter.

The Hall County area has grown considerably over the years, plus the number of aging veterans who need care throughout the region has grown. Also, newly returning veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan have pressing health care needs.

The clinic had 20,365 visits in federal fiscal 2010, which ran from Oct. 1, 2009 to Sept. 30, 2010, and saw 4,065 patients during that time. In fiscal 2011, which ended Sept. 30, the clinic had 20,751 visits and 4,492 patients.

"Presently, there are about 4,900 patients assigned (to the clinic)," Kendall said.

Streleckis said even though a doctor has been added in the past couple of years and patient loads have been increased, "we still can't fit everybody in who wants (medical attention) ... from the internal medicine/primary care perspective."

The clinic also has just one psychiatrist.

That person "is no longer seeing a lot of our newer patients because she is completely (booked)," Streleckis said. "... They have to go to contracted local facilities or down to Atlanta."

At the new clinic, "we're going to be getting more primary care capacity and more psychiatry capacity, and there also will be rooms set aside for specialists," the doctor said.

"The thought is we'll have different rotating subspecialists through (such fields as) cardiology, endocrinology and rheumatology, so for our patients who have to see (those doctors), instead of taking the 45-mile drive to Atlanta and back, they can do it here," Streleckis said.

New services also will include radiology, eye and dental care, women's health and nutrition.

The clinic "is going to be nice for the patients already here, but also for the patients who can't get in here," Streleckis said. "It'll open up more spots for people driving to Atlanta now or choosing not to use the VA because of the distance."

Kendall said the VA expects "to add another 1,200 patients over time, pending available staffing."

Oakwood officials announced the new clinic in October, saying it will be located in the Tanners Creek Business Park.

"Along with providing better service for our military veterans, we also expect to see more jobs with the expanded VA office," City Manager Stan Brown said at the time.

He added: "We think it is indicative of what we're going to see on Thurmon Tanner Parkway ... and this is recognition that (road) is going to be a major roadway, where we will see development occur."

Veterans, such as Jim McNutt, also say they are eager to see the new clinic.

"It's about time," he said. "The drive to Atlanta ... I mean, I'm from Dawsonville, but there are folks who come from farther north. And if you don't get (to the Atlanta VA) early to the valet parking, you're not going to get a parking spot.

"You'll be driving in circles trying to find a place to park. If I have a 9 a.m. appointment, I'll leave my house at 5, 5:30 in the morning."

Joe Colon of Toccoa said the new clinic "is going to be awesome."

"The only thing that I'll have to travel to Atlanta for that I wouldn't want to change would be my post-traumatic stress (disorder) treatment," said Colon, who suffers from Gulf War syndrome, a

chronic disorder with numerous physical and psychological symptoms affecting veterans of the Gulf War in 1991.

"Once you're locked into a group, you feel safe and secure. And you're in the midst of fellow soldiers who have experienced what you have experienced."