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Furniture delays new Veterans Affairs clinic opening

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs now expects to open its new Oakwood Community Based Outpatient Clinic on Aug. 19.

The clinic was set to open June 1, but a delay in ordering furniture for the 24,000-square-foot building off Thurmon Tanner Parkway forced the calendar change.

The VA went through a major reorganization in its contracting department last year, resulting in officials “re-educating (all) their contracting specialists on how they’re going to do their job, and that took specialists away from ordering,” VA project manager David Peters said Tuesday.

“There is one benefit to this delay: We’ve been able to find any problem with the structure,” Peters said. “We’ve been able to identify those issues and get them taken care of before anyone occupies the building.”

One example of that is some roofing work, which took place Tuesday.

Plans to move to the new clinic have been in the works for several years, as the current 4,500-square-foot clinic off Mundy Mill Road at Old Mundy Mill Road has become overcrowded.

The VA opened that clinic in 1999 to take some pressure off operations in Decatur.

Later, a clinic was opened in Blairsville to ease growing pains in Oakwood. In addition to a population surge over the years, the Hall County area has seen a spike in the number of aging veterans who need care.

Also, Iraq and Afghanistan veterans are returning home with pressing health care needs.

Officials recognized more space was needed.

Work has been mostly finished since March on the new clinic, which is on Tanners Creek Drive, just north of H.F. Reed Industrial Parkway.

“As soon as we open, it’s going to be busy,” Peters has said.

The new clinic will have 65 staff members, up from 19 in the current center, where “they are all crammed in,” Peters said.

Officials and veterans agree that one of the huge benefits of the new clinic is that it will save many veterans what can be an all-day trip to the VA Medical Center in Decatur.

The clinic will feature dental services for those who qualify and an optical shop, as well as an expanded focus on mental health.

“We are looking forward to the clinic opening because of the new clinics within the clinic that will be available to us,” said Samuel D. Smith, commander of the Disabled American Veterans’ Gainesville-Hall Chapter 17.

“And we won’t be required to go to Decatur, which has been an absolute nightmare in the past. Parking has been an issue ... they’re short-handed down there as well.”

He said his group is trying to work with the Oakwood clinic on providing space for a group of veterans’ wives who meet weekly to discuss their husbands’ battle with post-traumatic stress disorder.

“It’s still on the table,” Smith said of that arrangement. “A lot of the wives ... are suffering the same things, and a lot of them haven’t a clue about how to deal with it.”