



Federal Health Matters

USNS Mercy on Humanitarian Mission in Southeast Asia

As part of the U.S. Navy's Pacific Partnership 2010—the fifth in an annual series of U.S. Pacific Fleet humanitarian and civic assistance endeavors—the hospital ship USNS Mercy is traveling to Vietnam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Timor-Leste, Palau, and Papua New Guinea this year.

Mercy's mission (which officially kicked off on May 1) is to provide a range of onshore assistance, including medical and dental care, engineering projects, and exchanges of expertise. To achieve her mission, Mercy has on board a multispecialized team of medical and dental professionals, veterinarians, and engineering experts, and the ship has been outfitted with humanitarian and civic assistance equipment and supplies.

The total number of personnel on board will range from approximately 900 to 1,100. This year's crew comprises personnel from the navy, air force, and army. Navy Capt. Lisa M. Franchetti, Mercy's commodore and commander, said that personnel from 130 partner nations also will join the crew, along with 580 volunteers from 17 nongovernmental organizations.

"In addition to [performing] surgeries aboard the Mercy, [during] every one of the visits we will provide primary health and dental clinics, biomedical repair opportunities, preventive medicine and veterinarian care, which is a new thing this year for most of our countries," said Franchetti.

According to its official web site, the concept of Pacific Partnership evolved from Operation Unified Endeavor, the U.S. Government's humanitarian

response to the devastation caused by the 2004 Asian tsunami. Missions such as Pacific Partnership recognize the benefits of cooperation among national governments, militaries, international organizations, and nongovernmental organizations during disaster relief operations and civic assistance projects.

"I can't emphasize enough what a partnership it is," Franchetti said. "That's why they call it Pacific Partnership. [It] really is not purely a military mission in any sense of the word, and we really couldn't do the mission without the support of all our partners."

President Signs Health Services Bill

On May 5, President Obama signed the Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act, significantly expanding health care for veterans and recognizing the key role that families and caregivers play during the recovery of wounded military personnel.

The new law expands mental health services for veterans of Operations Iraqi and Enduring Freedom, including national guardsmen and reservists. It allows the VA to use hospitals outside of its network when treating returning soldiers with brain injuries, improves support for veterans living in rural areas by increasing housing and transportation assistance, aids veterans who are homeless, and removes copayments for veterans who are "catastrophically disabled."

The law also expands health care services for female veterans in order to meet their unique needs, such as offering maternity and newborn care. It also enables the VA to launch a pilot

program that provides child care for veterans who are receiving intensive medical care.

In addition, Obama said that the legislation marks a major step forward in America's commitment to the families and caregivers who tend wounded warriors every day. Prior to signing the bill, the president specifically recognized retired Army Sgt. Ted Wade and his wife, Sarah. In 2004, Wade was severely injured by an improvised explosive device while serving in Iraq. Obama said that the support of the sergeant's wife was an important factor in his recovery.

The new legislation provides caregivers with stipends and lodging allowances for medical visits to assist them in caring for severely injured veterans who served in Afghanistan or Iraq. Caregivers also can receive training in providing care for their loved ones.

"These caregivers put their own lives on hold, their own careers and dreams aside, to care for a loved one...it's hard physically and it's hard emotionally. It's certainly hard financially. And these tireless caregivers shouldn't have to do it alone," the president said. "If you need counseling, you'll receive it. If you don't have health insurance, it will be provided. And if you need a break, it will be arranged—up to 30 days of respite care each year."

The president said his administration has "dramatically increased funding for veterans' health care, including our wounded warriors, especially those with the signature wounds of today's wars—posttraumatic stress and traumatic brain injury." Obama also noted that in 2009, the VA received the largest budget increase in its history. ●