

The Union Democrat

VA Clinic, Memorial, Honors Veterans

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The new VA clinic in East Sonora is scheduled to open Sept. 29, right on time. For this, both the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and builders Scot and Mark Patterson should be commended.

Robert Geldman, a Livermore-based VA administrator, said the project will take only 18 months from decision to build through next month's opening day. "Considering all the requirements we have to meet, that's fast," he said.

The actual building, said Scot Patterson, was finished late last month. Since then, the VA has been outfitting the 8,000-square-foot clinic.

The Pattersons got the \$2.5 million job done in nine months, relying almost exclusively on local subcontractors and hiring a Sonora-area workforce.

The VA will hold a 10-year lease on the building and lot, which includes more than 50 parking spaces below and behind. The quarters are more than twice the size of its present 3,500-square foot clinic on Greenley Road. With more space will come additional services, more staff members and a greater patient capacity.

The clinic's entrance will eventually be marked by a memorial to veterans of all service branches in all wars, with funds being raised by Tuolumne County's chapter of the Vietnam Veterans of America through sales of bricks and pavers honoring local vets.

The new clinic and its grounds, thus, will pay tribute to those who have served and, more importantly, provide them with a level of medical care they richly deserve.

More than 8,000 veterans live in Tuolumne County, about 19 percent of its adult population (as contrasted with a 13 percent vet average nationwide). Most were soldiers, sailors and Marines who put their lives on the line in World War II, Korea, Vietnam, Iraq or Afghanistan.

According to Geldman, the Sonora clinic now has a growing annual caseload of about 3,000 patients. That this small army of vets has for years depended on the small Greenley Road clinic for medical care seems disproportionate to the need, especially considering that the clinic also serves vets from Calaveras County (7,000) and beyond.

But help is on the way.

The present clinic is now staffed by two full-time and one part-time doctor, as well as by two

social workers. The new building, at 3663 Mono Way near The Junction shopping center, will provide room for one more physician, a case manager for Iraq veterans, homeless outreach, family counseling and enhanced mental health services.

“And the building is specifically designed for these purposes,” said Geldman. “The staff is really looking forward to the move.”

The Sonora clinic is part of the Palo Alto branch of the VA health care system, which includes clinics and offices in Stockton, Modesto, Livermore, Menlo Park, San Jose, Capitola and Monterey. Vets in need of care by a specialist, said Geldman, will typically be referred to Livermore. The nearest VA hospitals are in Sacramento and Palo Alto.

Under the present schedule, the move to the new clinic will begin on Sept. 25 and, on Tuesday, Sept. 29, it will be open for business.

A grand opening ceremony, with refreshments and tours of the new building, is scheduled for 11 a.m. Tuesday, Oct. 6.

That ceremony, at least for the veterans to be served, will be more than a mere formality. It will truly be something to celebrate.

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