A ribbon cutting is held for the new Community Based Outpatient Clinic in Littleton, N.H., on Friday. Taking part are, from left, N.H. Army National Guard Brigadier Gen. Peter Corey, Congresswoman Anne Kuster, U.S. Sen. Kelly Ayotte, U.S. Sen. Jeanne Shaheen, and Deborah Amdur, Medical Center Director for the White River Junction, Vt., VA.

COMMUNITY-BASED VETERANS CLINIC OPENS

Outpatient Clinic To Be Run By Veterans Administration

BY ROBERT BLECHL
Staff Writer

LITTLETON, N.H. — Area veterans and state and federal officials are celebrating a first for the region - a community-based outpatient clinic for veterans, to be run by the Veterans Administration, that will offer a full VA model aimed at keeping care closer to home.

“As we have so many veterans coming home, it is important they have access to care in their communities,” U.S. Sen. Kelly Ayotte, R-NH, said Friday to a crowd of about 100 attending the grand opening of the clinic along Cottage Street.

The new 10,000-square-foot clinic replaces the former veterans clinic along Meadow Street, which was half the size and not directly run by the VA.

“When I found out this is a VA facility and not a contract facility, I said, ‘My God, maybe we’ll have some continuity,’” Bethlehem resident and Vietnam veteran Bill Brown said during a tour of the clinic.

Work on the community-based outpatient clinic (CBOC), which is in the former Littleton Regional Hospital building now owned by Affordable Housing, Education and Development (AHEAD), began last autumn.

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The aim is to improve health care access for area veterans, said Deborah Amdur, director of the White River Junction VA Medical Center, which includes seven outpatient clinics in New Hampshire and Vermont and serves a total of 6,500 veterans in the North Country and Northeast Kingdom.

The Littleton clinic, to be the second largest of the seven clinics, just behind Burlington, will now enable North Country veterans to receive more health care services right in their community instead of having to drive 80 or so miles to White River Junction for audiology and other services.

Amdur thanked the partners that include AHEAD, the developer, and H.P. Cummings, of Woodsville, which was the construction manager.

"What a wonderful place they have created in partnership for the veterans of Grafton County and beyond," she said.

For the site, the VA entered into a 10-year lease with AHEAD, for five years firm and an option to renew for another five years.

A full clinical and support staff will be maintained in Littleton to accommodate expanded mental health services - to include a full-time mental health coordinator and expanded primary care offerings and new offerings that include audiology, physical therapy, tele-health services, and a team of home-based primary care practitioners for those veterans unable to leave their homes because of age or health.

About 2,400 veterans received their primary care at the Meadow Street clinic, and the goal of the new clinic is to expand those numbers through the larger space.

For those needing hearing-related services, the audiology booths will allow them to undergo hearing tests and possibly get fitted for hearing aids.

U.S. Sen. Jeanne Shaheen, D-NH, who attended Friday's dedication and ribbon-cutting with Ayotte and U.S. Rep. Ann Kuster, D-NH, said one of the biggest needs for veterans is audiology services.

The new clinic, too, will now be able to address the needs of women veterans, said Shaheen.

Kuster called the Littleton CBOC a bipartisan effort.

"Excellence, compassion, respect - those are our guiding principles," said Kuster.

Long distances and weather had previously made it difficult for veterans seeking care outside the region, she said.

Kuster said she and her fellow delegates also look forward to returning to the North Country for the official openings of veterans clinics in Colebrook and Berlin.

Among those attending Friday's grand opening in Littleton, which also included the N.H. Color Guard presenting the colors, were Grafton County commissioners Linda Lauer and Michael Cryans, and state Reps. Erin Hennessey, R-Littleton, and Linda Massimilla, R-Littleton.

Also present were N.H. Adjutant General William Reddel, who oversees the N.H. Army and Air National Guard and the N.H. Veteran's Cemetery, and N.H. National Guard Brigadier General and Littleton native Peter Corey, director of the N.H. Joint Force Headquarters. He's responsible for the joint staff and overseeing issues that impact the NHNG with an emphasis on Homeland Security.

"The North Country has not always been as well served as it could be," said Reddel. "This is a great opening."

Karen Fesler, of Bath, who served in the Navy for seven years, agrees.

During a tour of the clinic, Fesler, who currently goes to White River Junction for services, was inquiring about audiology services.

"This is going to be a wonderful addition to the care available for veterans," she said.

Littleton resident Jere Eames, who served in the Army for two years, said he doesn't need any services now, but he'll be signing up for when he might need care at
Korean War veteran Robert Drummond bows his head during a dedication ceremony for the new Veterans Administration Clinic in Littleton, N.H., on Friday. Drummond, who was raised in St. Johnsbury, Vt., and lived two decades in Twin Mountain, served three years in the U.S. Marine Corps.

the Littleton clinic.

Of the new facility, close to Main Street and downtown, Eames said, "This will be a great draw for Littleton."

Littleton resident Bob Drummond, who lives in the adjacent Beattie House and who served in the both the Army and Marines from 1951 to 1953, said he will now be able to get regular blood tests in Littleton whereas previously he had gone to White River Junction.

The former Littleton VA clinic beside Tractor Supply along Meadow Street opened in late 2009, replacing the outpatient veterans clinic at Littleton Regional Hospital that closed in June of that year.

Brown, who served in Vietnam in 1969 and later enlisted in the N.H. National Guard, going full-time in 1986 and retiring in 2000, had gone to both clinics.

Veterans need consistent care as provided through the VA, and now more of that care is in Littleton, said Brown, who receives all of his medical care through the VA.

"It's a good thing to have in the local community," he said.