



Bedside to Battlefield

Advocate Health's National Strategy
for Serving Country and Community

Foreword

My father served in the U.S. Navy for over 20 years as an aeronautics mechanic, with one of his earliest assignments aboard the USS Enterprise — the world's first nuclear-powered aircraft carrier. As a kid, I was captivated by his stories: fighter jets landing at 150 miles per hour on a deck barely longer than a city block and the extraordinary teamwork it took to make each landing possible — from the flight deck crew to the engineers below. Everyone had a role. Everyone was part of the mission.

And my grandfather, James Hobert Woods, served in World War II with Company E of the 392nd Engineers, a front-line unit that built the roads, bridges, and lifelines others depended on, often under fire. He was part of the Greatest Generation - brave soldiers who did dangerous, exhausting work without applause, shouldered the weight of war quietly, and returned home carrying more than they ever spoke about.

And from my experience of growing up on military bases, I witnessed firsthand the discipline, unity and shared purpose that define our armed forces. Those experiences shaped me deeply. They instilled a lifelong respect for the sacrifices our service members make — and have fueled my personal commitment to ensuring they receive the very best care, both in uniform and as veterans.

In fact, as CEO of Advocate Health, I've found a calling rooted in a similar ethos of service. Just as the military vows never to leave a soldier behind, we are committed to never abandoning those in need. That's why we consider it a sacred privilege to care for those who have dedicated their lives to serving our nation.

Advocate Health's leadership in civilian-military health partnerships is long-standing. For more than a decade, our hospitals have served as a training ground for the U.S. Special Operations Command. We pioneered a first-of-its-kind program that embeds active-duty trauma teams into high-volume civilian hospitals — allowing combat clinicians to sharpen their skills while serving communities at home. It's a model of mutual benefit and shared excellence.

We're proud that Advocate Health received the Department of Defense's Extraordinary Employer Support Award in 2021 — the highest honor for organizations supporting National Guard and Reserve teammates.

We employ more than 2,800 veterans across our 69-hospital system and were named a "Best Employer for Veterans" by Forbes, based on feedback from veterans.

On a personal level, one of the honors my father would be most proud of is the Patriot Award I received from the Office of the Secretary of Defense. Of all the recognition I've been privileged to receive, that one remains among the most meaningful.

That brings us to the reason for this report. It reflects our unwavering commitment by highlighting the depth of our partnerships, the progress we've made and the path forward.



Advocate Health CEO Eugene A. Woods, (center) is joined by military dignitaries, service members and Advocate Health leaders and teammates at the health system's 2025 Veteran's Day event with the theme "Service to Our Nation."

In these pages, you will see how we are redefining what care looks like — from pioneering robotic surgery and launching next-generation trauma interventions to leading clinical trials that bring cutting-edge therapies to the bedside — and how we're making sure military families are among the first to benefit.

We also maintain a strong collaboration with the Department of Veterans Affairs. Hundreds of our physician residents rotate through Veterans Affairs medical centers, helping staff these facilities with high-quality clinicians and build bridges between systems.

These partnerships aren't just the right thing to do — they make us a better health system.

That's why we're officially launching our new Office of Operational Medicine. This dedicated office will expand our programs for active-duty service members, strengthen our veteran hiring pipelines and advance research in trauma, resuscitation, prosthetics and pain management.

We aim to pursue our mission with the same dedication, excellence and tireless sense of purpose that our service members embody.

And this is just the beginning.

When I think about our commitment to service members and veterans, I think of my father and the crew of the USS Enterprise. Each person played an indispensable role in a mission that demanded their best. That memory reminds me daily: our patients, our teammates and the people in our communities who have worn the uniform deserve nothing less.

To the men and women of the U.S. armed forces — we salute you. Thank you for your service, your sacrifice and the ways you help us deliver the very best care. Advocate Health is honored to stand with you and proud to have your back — just as you've always had ours.

Sincerely,

EUGENE A. WOODS
Chief Executive Officer

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Joint Mission: Advocate Health's Operational Medicine Strengthens Care, Communities and Combat Readiness

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Advocate Health is a national leader in military-civilian partnerships, bringing together best-in-class clinicians, researchers, operators and public policy experts to drive solutions at the intersection of health and security. For decades, as the system has grown, it has continued to expand its commitment to educating professional military health providers, training elite combat medics, recruiting veterans and honoring the service of our country's men and women in uniform.

Advocate Health has built systems to capture wartime trauma care lessons and implement them to improve the care across its urban and rural footprint, from Charlotte and Winston-Salem in North Carolina to Chicago, Milwaukee and rural Georgia. It has partnered with active-duty units to expand access to care during pandemics and natural disasters. A long and reciprocal relationship with the Department of Veterans Affairs provides educational opportunities for nearly 400 trainees each year. Advocate Health also partners with federal defense sector agencies to explore health and medical research challenges.

The work reflects a belief in service, patriotism and exploration of complex challenges.

Patients benefit from the trauma skills and innovative medical techniques developed during wartime that may be applied in their care.

Communities benefit from a willingness to capture ideas from abroad and bring them home, such as remote patient monitoring advances and Advocate Health's nationally leading hospital at home program.

Clinical teams are strengthened, too. The integration of military and civilian providers improves knowledge exchange, strengthens staff resilience and creates novel solutions to advance the health system's commitment to a mission caring for all.

Careers in both the military and health care industry require a strong commitment to serving a greater purpose and putting others above self, as well as quick thinking, precision and teamwork. More than 2,800 veterans are employed by Advocate Health hospitals and clinics across its six-state footprint. They aren't just doctors and nurses; they're also paramedics and even construction experts behind a recent major project in Chicago.

Finally, combat fighters also benefit. Advocate Health's expansive scope, trusted relationships with the nation's most elite military units and focus on tactical execution allow the nation's third-largest nonprofit health system a unique role in ensuring our country's servicemen and women possess unparalleled medical readiness for combat.

The new Advocate Health Office of Operational Medicine, which opened in December 2025, will strengthen collaborations, facilitate new partnerships, drive new research funding and accelerate innovation for the benefit for Advocate Health's patients, the system, the military and the improvement of access and medical care everywhere.

A NATIONAL MODEL

It's no surprise when military members and veterans are drawn to careers in health care.

Both demand unwavering dedication, mission focus and a drive to serve something greater than oneself. Plus, lessons learned in military training and during active conflicts — quick thinking, precision and seamless teamwork — translate powerfully to the fast-paced world of hospitals and clinics.

This is especially true for medical specialists such as surgeons. Their skills get sharpened by the high-pressure needs of combat situations. During conflicts, they must treat life-threatening injuries with calm, speed and ingenuity.

In times of peace, though, those hard-won skills can dull. There's a name for the drop in readiness that can follow peacetime: "The Walker Dip."

"Military health care personnel often experience a harmful 'peacetime effect' and are unable to maintain their wartime medical skills when not deployed, resulting in an unready medical force at the onset of war," a 2025 U.S. Department of Inspector General report stated.¹

The Walker Dip is especially impactful for critical specialists, such as surgeons and emergency



Dr. David Callaway, left, and Army combat surgeon Dr. Michael Clemens help lead Advocate Health's military-civilian partnerships.

medicine physicians. In combat zones, they face unimaginable pressure, treating life-threatening injuries in a high-stakes, high-patient volume environment. These pressures breed innovation — frequently developing new procedures and technologies to save lives in the most extreme conditions. When conflicts end, these lessons too often are lost and never translated in ways that can benefit health care for all — a lose-lose scenario.

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These clinicians know how to deliver high-quality care in resource-limited environments.

— Dr. David Callaway
Global Health Security Officer,
Advocate Health

One solution: A bold military-civilian partnership designed to keep skills sharp and strengthen systems.

At Advocate Health, active-duty military clinicians work shoulder-to-shoulder with civilian teams in hospitals and clinics, gaining real-world experience while delivering exceptional care to local communities. Patients benefit from the expertise of highly trained military professionals who, as a result, stay mission-ready during times of peace. Hospital staffs learn new ideas and techniques from their military counterparts and experience some relief from heavy workloads.

"These clinicians know how to deliver high-quality care in resource-limited environments," said Dr. David Callaway, global health security officer at Advocate Health, professor of emergency medicine at Wake Forest University School of Medicine and a former U.S. Navy combat veteran. "That could be on a deployment overseas or in a rural community right here at home. When we bring these groups together, we solve problems faster and deliver better care."

Advocate Health — operating as Atrium Health in the Southeast U.S., Advocate Health Care in Illinois and Aurora Health Care in Wisconsin — is leading

the charge in preparing military clinicians to work in combat zones, disaster areas or back home upon retirement from active service and to start civilian careers, setting a standard for readiness-focused collaboration. The health system works with more embedded active-duty Army clinicians than any other health system in the country and maintains strong ties with the Department of Veterans Affairs. It also employs more than 2,800 veterans across its six-state footprint, offering meaningful careers as doctors and nurses, as well as researchers, recruiters and more.

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With continued support and thoughtful expansion, this partnership has the potential to serve as a national model for readiness-focused collaboration between military and civilian trauma systems.

– American College of Surgeons
Site Review Report, Fall 2024

Now, Advocate Health has opened a new office, the Advocate Health Office of Operational Medicine, to coordinate and expand military and veteran programs across the health system's six-state footprint.

In the fall of 2024, the American College of Surgeons visited Atrium Health in Charlotte, North Carolina, to review the Military Health System Strategic Partnership at work there. The partnership had received attention via a National Public Radio² feature that showcased the impact of the 2019 Mission Zero Act.

The report from a site visit called Atrium Health's program "a mature and mission-aligned military civilian partnership."³

"It supports national trauma preparedness, preserves combat surgical readiness and contributes to the evolution of a learning trauma system," the report stated. "With continued support and thoughtful expansion, this partnership has the potential to serve as a national model for readiness-focused collaboration between military and civilian trauma systems."



ENLISTING MILITARY PARTNERS

The Big Idea

What if the military and civilian health systems could strengthen each other — not just in times of crisis, but every day? That's the power that fuels military-civilian partnerships. These collaborations help combat clinicians stay sharp during peacetime, while providing hospitals with skilled reinforcements at a time when staffing shortages and burnout are straining systems nationwide.

The Advocate Way

Integrating active-duty military medical personnel into the Advocate Health academic engine and national clinical care delivery model achieves the dual goal of improving combat medical readiness and enhancing high-quality health care in the local communities served by the health system.

The ongoing partnership between Advocate Health and the military dates back to 2012. Atrium Health entered into a formal agreement with the U.S. Special Operations Command to serve as a medical proficiency training site for the command's most elite enlisted medics. The relationship has flourished from there.

In 2015, health system, military and government leaders teamed up to build a unique pilot program that integrates active-duty, mobile trauma teams into high-volume civilian trauma centers.

That pilot program was formalized in 2020, when a Medical Training Agreement with the U.S. Army



Special Operations Command provided active duty teams to work with the health system. This included surgeons, emergency medicine physicians, certified registered nurse anesthetists, nurses, medics and more. Since 2020, the health system has hosted the largest program of embedded active-duty U.S. Army medical personnel in the country and is one of the most comprehensive training partners for the Department of Defense nationwide.

Advocate Health maintains some of the busiest emergency departments in the country with Level I trauma centers, making it an ideal partner.

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The health system also exposes them to the full spectrum of care our patients receive, giving them experience they can carry back into active duty or into civilian careers after service.

— Chris Jackson
Business Operations Manager,
Atrium Health

“Our hospitals provide a complexity of cases that are great for military clinicians looking to keep up their skills,” said Chris Jackson, a former U.S. Navy officer who today serves as business operations manager at Atrium Health. “The health system also exposes them to the full spectrum of care our patients receive, giving them experience they can carry back into active duty or into civilian careers after service.”

That means military clinicians get more and more varied experience that they can take back with them to their active-duty work, while also providing valuable trauma center and hospital experiences that can open up additional opportunities for them when they leave the armed services.

The partnership is unique among similar programs across the country in that full military teams — surgeons, nurses and more — work at the hospital

together. Because they work together as one unit, clinicians in different roles and specialties all get the same readiness.

Advocate Health is actively preparing to launch a similar program with the military in one of its other markets. That program is expected to train a wide range of specialists.

Past success with these programs and planned expansion suggest Advocate Health could eventually support additional partnerships in more locations and with other branches of the military.

"I think our ability to make this work goes back to before we ever agreed to be a partner with the military," said Steven Haemmerle, Atrium Health associate vice president of clinical services. "It's how we set up our trauma program. We know there are just some inherent, upfront costs to run a really good trauma program, and we haven't ever steered away from that. We know, at the end of the day, we are doing the right thing for our patients."

The model in place at Advocate Health doesn't merely work: it leads. The system is proving that when military precision meets civilian compassion, the result is a stronger health system and military clinicians who are better-equipped to protect others in uniform during times of conflict and better-prepared for robust careers when they return to civilian life.



the best quality care possible without having to travel to a non-VA facility.

"The VA care gets ratcheted up a level," said Dr. James Hoekstra, president of Atrium Health Wake Forest Baptist High Point Medical Center in High Point, North Carolina, and a leader of Atrium Health's relationship with the VA. "It's great for our veterans."

Also, educating the next generation of health care providers has been a primary mission of the VA since its founding. In academic year 2023-2024, the Salisbury VA and its clinics in Charlotte and Kernersville, North Carolina, helped educate nearly 750 health care trainees. Of those, almost 400 were from Atrium Health Cabarrus, Atrium Health Carolinas Medical Center or Wake Forest University School of Medicine, the academic core of Advocate Health. Doing rotations at the VA medical center gives the next generation of physicians hands-on experience

Caring for Veterans; Training the Future

Beyond strengthening military medical readiness, Advocate Health has partnered with the Department Veterans Affairs (VA) to educate future clinicians. Just after World War II, the VA created partnerships with academic medical schools as part of a plan to care for the soldiers coming home after the war.⁴

As a result of those partnerships, the VA can tap into Atrium Health Wake Forest Baptist clinicians and faculty to work at the Salisbury, North Carolina, facility part-time and provide medical expertise that might not otherwise be available to its veteran patients. For example, an Atrium Health Wake Forest Baptist cardiologist might spend a few days per week working at the VA seeing heart patients he or she is uniquely suited to address. This helps ensure veterans receive



At the end of the day, our veterans have given us so much in so many ways. We appreciate what they've done, and if we can help them in any way medically, that's our duty. They deserve that.

— Dr. James Hoekstra
President, Atrium Health
Wake Forest Baptist High Point
Medical Center

with veteran patients and their often-unique needs, and it helps staff the VA in the process.

"You get your brightest and your best taking care of you when you're tied to medical schools," said Dr. Robin Hurley, associate chief of staff for research and academic affairs at the VA in Salisbury. "Faculty are teaching physician residents the freshest and latest information, so it's a win-win in that sense as well."

Another benefit is research coordination between the health system and the VA. For example, federal researchers can get experience using high-end equipment that Wake Forest University School of Medicine has access to,

and School of Medicine researchers can work with VA patients for their clinical studies.

The relationship between the VA and academic medical centers goes so deep that about 70% of all physicians practicing in the U.S. trained at a VA hospital or facility at some point in their careers.⁵

That includes Dr. Hoekstra.

"At the end of the day, our veterans have given us so much in so many ways," he said. "We appreciate what they've done, and if we can help them in any way medically, that's our duty. They deserve that."

More Opportunities to Learn

Chris Jackson is always looking at the numbers to try to decide what to do next.

For that reason, the former U.S. Navy officer and current business operations manager at Atrium Health and his team carefully track the kinds of cases taken and patients treated by military clinicians that partner with Atrium Health. It's the only way to know if they're getting the opportunity to keep the certain skills they need sharp.

The team sees a variety of cases, but there was a zero populating an important row on Jackson's spreadsheet — meaning the Army doctors and nurses hadn't seen any patients of this kind.

Zero burn cases.

"Based on the data that I was able to capture on the medics and their experience in the emergency

department, I identified where our training opportunities were," Jackson said.

There was a solution. As a large, integrated health system, Advocate Health has a myriad of clinics, hospitals and facilities where doctors, nurses and teammates can get training and experience.

In August 2025, Jackson began rotating military nurses to an Atrium Health burn center in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, ensuring they gain the experience they need to stay ready. A number of registered nurses and paramedics have gone through these rotations for the first time.

"I'm a strong believer in data-driven decisions," Jackson said. "What does the data tell us about where we need to go?"



Atrium Health Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center in Winston-Salem, North Carolina

The Future: Preparing New Providers

At Atrium Health Carolinas Medical Center, the graduate medical education programs in surgery and orthopedics provide comprehensive education to active-duty military resident physicians from Womack Hospital, at Fort Bragg in Fayetteville, North Carolina.



The Charlotte hospital also was one of just a handful nationwide that hosted West Point cadets for several weeks of rotations in summer 2025. Dr. Joseph Hsu, vice chair of quality for the Atrium Health Musculoskeletal Institute in Charlotte and a West Point graduate, said the partnership was good for the Army because it provides experience to upcoming military clinicians, who are in short supply.

“West Point is answering the bell, and we’re answering the bell,” Hsu said.

It’s good for the health system, too, because West Point cadets from across the country get introduced to the hospital and area, establishing a pipeline of highly qualified, high-grit future medical school students, fellows and, eventually, working clinicians.

Servant Leaders

Since he was a child, Dr. Joseph Hsu wanted to be in medicine and wanted to serve others.

When he was 17, he decided to attend the U.S. Military Academy at West Point as a pre-med and nuclear engineering double major.

His military service that followed included a deployment to Iraq in 2006, at a time of heavy violence that produced some of the war’s highest casualty rates.

“I was fully trained formally, but the learning and training was just about to begin,” he said. “No amount of training in the civilian sector gets you ready for what happens in war.

“Some of these things you carry with you forever,” Hsu added. “For me, they were transformative. They’re things that really push and challenge you to innovate, develop and get techniques going. The protocols, rehab and pathways that now are incorporated into the civilian world were born out of wounded warriors.”

Hsu is the vice chair of quality for the Atrium Health Musculoskeletal Institute, based in Charlotte, North Carolina, and involved in several initiatives to partner with the military and work with veterans across the health system.

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Military veterans are servant leaders. It’s a part of our culture. Leadership is not about privilege, it’s about service; making sure your team has what it needs to succeed.

— Dr. Joseph Hsu
Vice Chair of Quality, Atrium Health Musculoskeletal Institute

He said it’s clear why veterans succeed in health care careers, particularly as leaders.

“Military veterans are servant leaders. It’s a part of our culture,” Hsu said. “Leadership is not about privilege, it’s about service; making sure your team has what it needs to succeed.”

At a time when the health care field is changing rapidly, veterans and members of the military are able to succeed in complex systems where teamwork is critically important.

“Military veterans are comfortable with change, and that is why they do well in organizations that are growing and changing,” Hsu said.

BEDSIDE TO BATTLEFIELD INNOVATION

The Big Idea

Crisis can drive innovation, but structure and partnerships scale it for impact. Advocate Health facilitates this with the improvement of military-civilian partnerships and by aligning research, discovery and innovation to operational excellence in an increasingly complex health care environment. The goal is an ecosystem that capitalizes on every resource, opportunity and burning question to drive improved health for all, within its service territory and beyond.

The Advocate Way

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the health system learned that building teams of non-traditional partners was critical to successfully navigating a community threat.

As a leading academic health system, clinical research is fundamental within the organization's DNA. Advocate Health is heavily invested in bringing such research from the bench to the bedside more quickly.

Wake Forest University School of Medicine serves as the academic core of Advocate Health. Standing alongside each of the School of Medicine's two campuses are Advocate Health-driven innovation districts — the Innovation Quarter, in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and The Pearl, in Charlotte, North Carolina. These districts are key drivers in understanding how to bring frontline providers together with operators, researchers and industry.

History shows us that war drives some of the most pressing questions in health care. Since 2021, the

Department of Defense has awarded Advocate Health more than \$100 million in grants to fund diverse, cutting-edge research in areas such as regenerative medicine, concussions, reconstructive surgery, trauma resuscitation, diabetes and treatments for non-Hodgkin lymphoma, among others.

Besides manpower and clinical expertise, military clinicians also bring innovation to patient care in a variety of ways. From helicopter evacuations to vaccine development,⁶ the armed forces have long driven medical breakthroughs.

"We have to learn medicine at a faster pace because battlefield medicine is dirty, it's gritty and it's right in front of us," said Dr. Michael Clemens, an Army combat surgeon who works regularly at Advocate Health sites as part of the Medical Training Agreement. "We have to do that for our soldiers, and we've done a really good job over the last several wars of collecting data and learning at a very rapid pace. Then, those lessons have to come back into the domestic side, to help civilians and to ensure key lessons aren't forgotten during peacetime."

One technique refined in combat and saving lives at home is the use of a balloon to block the aorta during emergency surgery.

"That is something we use to decrease bleeding in traumas," Clemens told NPR.⁷ "That is a skill that has evolved and been used commonly on the battlefield, and so I get to have firsthand experience with that device before I go use it in a more austere environment."



Great Partnership in Innovation

When Drs. Lucas Neff and Tim Williams met as they deployed to Afghanistan in 2013, they never thought they'd be working together on a medical breakthrough a decade later.

Today, Neff is a pediatric surgeon at Atrium Health Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, where he and Williams, a vascular and endovascular surgeon at the same hospital, are working on developing a medical device that could save trauma patients' lives, if eventually approved by regulators.

"What started as two guys stuck on the other side of the world together, missing our families, turned into a great partnership for innovation," Neff said.

They're currently testing a device that uses smart technology to inflate a balloon in a patient's aorta to stop bleeding. The key advancement is the technology that regulates some amount of blood flow, based on the patient's needs.

It's the kind of device that could buy surgeons a few extra minutes with critically injured patients at a time when those minutes are the difference between life and death.

The two surgeons saw the need for such a device when deployed overseas and made a decision to



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— Dr. Lucas Neff
Pediatric Surgeon, Atrium Health
Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center

"keep the band together" when they returned home. Neff had trained at Wake Forest University School of Medicine early in his career and always wanted to go back. Today, both teach there.

The school provides needed research resources to test the new device, and Neff said that having teachers in medical school who are innovating helps inspire that mindset in the next generation.

"Having surgeons, professors, mentors who are thinking differently fundamentally sparks some interest in innovating," he said. "Now, even at an early age, students are thinking about their own unique solutions to the clinical problems they see."



Dr. Tim Williams, left, and Dr. Lucas Neff met in the military and are developing a device that could help surgeons in serious trauma cases.

Team of Teams



Advocate Health is proving that when military precision meets civilian compassion, the result is a stronger health system and better-equipped military clinicians, men and women who are ready to protect others in uniform in times of conflict and better-prepared for healthy, rewarding careers when they return to civilian life.

Advocate Health's "Team of Teams" model brings together experts from across disciplines to drive alignment and execution, because good ideas stay ideas without the right team.

For example, in 2017, the organization's government affairs team helped lead the integration of language into the John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act (2018) that created the legal architecture to support the Wake Forest University School of Medicine Special Operations Forces (SOF) Medic to Physician Assistant (PA) program.

This program allowed SOF medics to pursue a master's degree in PA studies, while remaining on active duty and at their operational unit. The work also led to the School of Medicine becoming a "Yellow Ribbon School," which provides funding to eligible veterans and their dependents to help pay for tuition and fees that exceed the maximum Post-9/11 GI Bill benefit.

In 2018, after years of advocacy, the health system team helped drive the creation of the 2019 Mission Zero Act (MZA) that provides critical funding to support military-civilian partnerships nationwide. Advocate Health has received nearly \$800,000 from the MZA since 2020, allowing it to scale its collaborations across North Carolina.

Regenerative Research for Wounded Warriors

Scientists at the Wake Forest Institute for Regenerative Medicine (WFIRM) in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, are known internationally as the first in the world to successfully implant laboratory-grown organs into humans, and they're working to apply that regenerative medicine expertise to help wounded warriors.

Since 2008, WFIRM has managed the Armed Forces Institute of Regenerative Medicine consortium, a nationwide effort funded with more than \$200 million from the federal government. AFIRM has brought forward new treatments for burns and limb, genitourinary, facial and skull injuries, resulting in more than 20 clinical studies.

WFIRM is leading AFIRM's latest initiative that began in 2023. The \$70 million grant is allowing teams of scientists to develop therapies in:

- Craniofacial regeneration
- Extremity regeneration
- Skin and wound healing
- On-demand blood
- Cellular therapies for trauma

"The work of the institute is so important for our wounded warriors, and we're dedicated to accelerating the transition of these regenerative medicine solutions into clinical use to improve the lives of wounded service members and veterans," said Dr. Anthony Atala, director of WFIRM.

WFIRM's work also includes research on the effects of chemical and biological weapons using a miniaturized system of human organs, better known as "bodies on a chip." Funded by \$40 million in grants from the Defense Threat Reduction Agency, the goal is to have the bodies-on-a-chip model the body's response to chemical and biological warfare for development of potential antidotes and treatments.

FROM SALUTES TO SCRUBS

The Big Idea

Nearly 2.8 million military veterans left active duty ready to enter the workforce between 2002 and 2021, according to U.S. Census Bureau data on the job market for veterans.⁸



"This initial transition to civilian employment marks a crucial step for veterans as they navigate the many challenges associated with leaving military service," the Census report noted. Too often, employers do not recognize the unique skills of veterans, resulting in lateral or downward career progression and lost opportunities for communities.

Advocate Health views this challenge as an opportunity. The health system believes the life experiences gained while serving in the armed forces can propel veterans into the civilian workspace. Hiring veterans provides a talent pool of individuals who innately understand leadership, the importance of teamwork and the value of working for a mission-driven organization.

The Advocate Way

Advocate Health employs more than 2,800 veterans across its six-state footprint, in all kinds of different roles from doctors and nurses to paramedics and more. It actively recruits veterans and creates opportunities for them to apply their unique, lived experience to work serving the health system's communities.

U.S. Army Reserve Maj. Gen. James J. Kokaska Jr. knows firsthand there can be clear overlap between military and health care careers.

Based in the Chicago area, Kokaska works for Advocate Health as vice president of planning, design and construction for its Illinois and Wisconsin operations. That means he oversees construction projects for the health system, including the recently opened nine-story care tower at Advocate Illinois Masonic Medical Center, in Chicago.⁹

It's a far different kind of project than the infrastructure construction he oversaw during deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan as part of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Through those experiences, Kokaska has learned a great deal about managing construction projects in resource constrained, difficult security environments.

"All large-scale construction projects have a critical pre-construction phase that requires innovation, vision, problem-solving and key decision-making, which set the conditions for a successful project," Kokaska said.

As part of the surge in Afghanistan between 2009 and 2010, his team was charged with the design and construction management of critical aviation facilities, new aircraft runways, basing expansions, medical facilities and supporting infrastructure.

"As you can imagine, the pre-construction challenges and time sensitivity of schedule delivery required us to create design standards and programs that would expedite the start of construction," Kokaska said. "I learned many tools from Advocate Health, managing large-scale complex projects that helped me navigate this difficult period and expedite projects."

The lessons go both ways, he notes, as he brings experiences from the military back to his work at Advocate Health. Plus, leadership lessons learned can apply anywhere.

"The military has blessed me with leadership assignments where I can improve my ability to lead people in difficult situations, collaborate and utilize my problem-solving skills," Kokaska said. "The people are the lifeblood of any organization, and when leading people, it is important we get it right."

Recruiting the best people into the organization is the first step.

In 2024, Atrium Health announced it would participate in the "Army Partnership for Your Success" program, which guarantees soldiers and ROTC cadets five



job interviews and possible employment after their service in the Army.¹⁰ Through the program, members of the armed forces can use their military occupational specialty codes on the health system's career site to identify civilian careers that may match their skill set.

"Through the program, we advertise our opportunities on their portal for Army soldiers who are transitioning out of the service to civilian jobs," said Shartia Huddleston, an Advocate Health talent acquisition program manager who helped set up the partnership. "We want them to know that we're here as a top employer, and that we welcome their application, along with providing support along their journey."

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The people are the lifeblood of any organization, and when leading people, it is important we get it right.

— James J. Kokaska Jr.
Vice President of Planning, Design and Construction, Advocate Health

Over the years, Atrium Health has earned recognition for engaging veterans once they work for the health system. Forbes has recognized Atrium Health as a

"Best Employer for Veterans" on multiple occasions.¹¹ The U.S. Department of Defense awarded the health system the Secretary of Defense Employer Support Freedom Award for support of employees who serve in the Guard and Reserve, as well as the Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve and Extraordinary Employer Support Award, which recognizes that support sustained over time.

Atrium Health also has received numerous Patriot Awards. This award recognizes individual supervisors and managers who support active-duty military through a wide range of measures, including flexible schedules, time off prior to and after deployment, caring for families and granting leaves of absence.¹²

Advocate Health Care received the Above and Beyond Award from the Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve State Committee. It recognizes employers who provide their Guard and Reserve employees additional, nonmandated benefits, such as differential or full pay to offset lost wages, extended health benefits and other similar benefits.

Behind those awards are resource groups throughout the enterprise that engage veterans who work for the system and plan activities and projects that bolster a sense of camaraderie. Sometimes, veterans will get together and write thousands of letters of support to their active-duty counterparts. They also volunteer with organizations to build homes or clean up local areas.

"It can be difficult, and even isolating, to start work in a new organization," said Peggy Harris, Advocate Health area vice president of access and opportunity.

"We want teammates to come in with ready-made communities, so the work we do with veterans includes creating community via our 'Veteran's Society: 1Team1Mission' (1T1M) system resource group (SRG) and veterans committee."

There are examples across the health system's footprint.

In 2025, Advocate Health hosted its annual Veterans Day celebration at The Pearl innovation district with nearly 200 in-person guests and many others who joined virtually from across the health system. Veteran teammates – doctors, nurses, researchers and more – were celebrated with the theme "Service to Our Nation," not just for their service in uniform but for the leadership and purpose they bring to Advocate Health's deeply rooted commitment to improve lives.

The One Team One Mission System Resource Group and the Veterans Committee were also recognized for their tireless work supporting and empowering military and veteran teammates, ensuring that the bonds of service remain strong. Retired Army General Stanley McChrystal provided the keynote via video.

"Veterans remind us that our work is about service – helping people live well and live longer," Advocate Health CEO Eugene A. Woods said. "At Advocate Health, they lead with courage and commitment every single day."

In North Carolina, the Veterans Society: 1T1M SRG held a Memorial Day remembrance service.

"I believe that honoring those who served is more than a tradition, it's a commitment to remembrance, connection and community," said Melissa Fennell, chair of the group and a Navy reservist. "Through 1Team1Mission's efforts, we create spaces where stories are shared, sacrifices are acknowledged and the legacy of service is carried forward with dignity and purpose."

In Georgia, the Atrium Health Floyd - Harbin Veterans Society 1T1M SRG participated in the Quilts of Valor program. Through this program, teammates who are veterans take part in ceremonies where quilts are presented to living veterans with a lapel pin and flag.

In Wisconsin, the health system participates in the Heroes for Healthcare program. The law, created by the state's governor in 2022, allows health systems to hire qualified veterans into medical assistant or LPN technician roles. The veterans that are a part of this program have attended an advanced 36-week medical training program. They have worked as military medical corpsmen, and they are now enrolled in an

educational program to obtain a degree and licensure. After being hired at Aurora Health Care, their leaders are committed to working with their schedules to assist in meeting their goals. Importantly, they can then advance in their health care careers.

"Advocate Health has implemented an ecosystem

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I believe that honoring those who served is more than a tradition, it's a commitment to remembrance, connection and community.

— Melissa Fennell
Chair of Veteran's Society:
1Team1Mission System
Resource Group

designed to create spaces where all teammates can belong and thrive, where teammates voluntarily join together based on shared characteristics or life experiences," Harris said. "Veteran teammates and 1T1M are an important part of the teammate engagement ecosystem."

Some of the veterans on their career journeys within Advocate Health work as paramedics, pilots and other jobs in mobile medicine, including staffing the system's patented MED-1 mobile hospital unit.¹³ MED-1 was instrumental in providing medical support to the Tryon, North Carolina, community in the aftermath of Hurricane Helene,¹⁴ as well as supporting regional hospitals during other natural disasters and in times of surge or construction.

"Most of the pilots, mechanics and clinicians that come through the military have built their education, experience and careers on being able to react to challenging situations," said Jonathan Collier, vice president of mobile medicine for Advocate Health. "They're able to think on their feet."

Once you hire veterans for these jobs, an informal pipeline to hire more develops to supplement direct recruiting. Veterans tell their friends and colleagues about a great place to work, and then the team grows over time.

"This is a great path for them to be able to continue their focus on why they may be in the military in the first place," Collier said. "If they're service-oriented, if they're people-oriented, trying to make a difference, saving lives, then it's a great fit for what we do in mobile medicine and EMS."

No matter what duties and skills a member of the military or veteran brings to their work, their experience with leadership and being part of a big, complex organization can be helpful in health care.

"I strongly believe serving in the military gives you an edge by challenging you to be an expert in your particular field and placing you in leadership positions to grow as a person," Kokaska said. "The opportunities are vast in the military, and the assignments can vary in leadership, difficulty and intensity. Finding a way to win is important on any project and I have had the great fortune of having learned from two great employers."

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Veteran teammates and (1Team1Mission) are an important part of the teammate engagement ecosystem.

– Peggy Harris

Area Vice President of Access and Opportunity, Advocate Health



Advocate Health's patented MED-1 mobile hospital unit. MED-1 was instrumental in providing medical support to the Tryon, North Carolina, community in the aftermath of Hurricane Helene.

The Meaning of Life

About a dozen years ago, Dr. Kevin Lobdell, system director of the Atrium Health Sanger Heart & Vascular Institute in Charlotte, North Carolina, received a call.

One of his patients went down on the golf course, suffering from a heart episode.

Following surgery, the patient was recovering well, until Lobdell fielded another call from the patient's wife. This time, the patient was having blood pressure issues and needed help.

Again, he got the help he needed, but this second episode is what drove Lobdell to start pushing for remote monitoring of patients. If only the patient had a blood pressure cuff and other tools to track his own health, some of these issues might be avoided.

In 2018, Lobdell was part of a team that secured a \$1.1 million grant from The Duke Endowment to improve patient access and education and to engage patients and their families through remote telemonitoring.¹⁵

As of fall 2025, they've enrolled more than 3,200 patients and counting.

It was with that background that Lobdell joined the Army Reserves in 2020, where his role has included working on remote monitoring technologies for the military. The uses are easy to understand: If soldiers in battle are wearing devices that monitor their health, medics and others can have a leg up on how to treat them if they're wounded.

Lobdell is a clear example of how the medical skills of a health system's experts can be useful to the military, and vice versa. In 2024, Lobdell was selected as the physician from Army Reserve Medical Command to augment the Office of the Command Surgeon during a Europe-wide simulated war exercise.

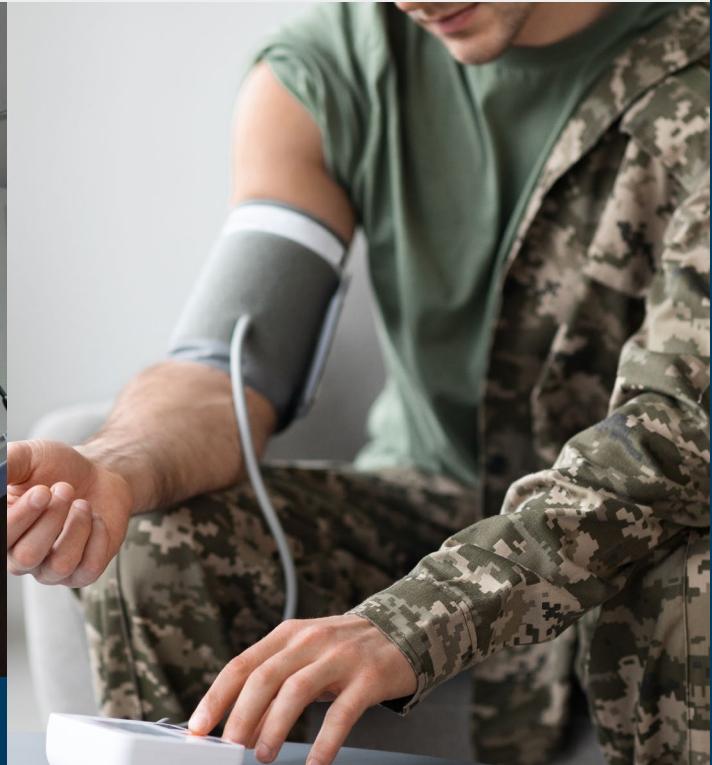
Among Lobdell's motivations for entering the Army Reserves was the service of his father. His dad was able to participate virtually as retired Gen. Stanley McChrystal commissioned Lobdell at Atrium Health Carolinas Medical Center in 2020.

To mark the occasion, Advocate Health CEO Eugene Woods commissioned a charcoal drawing of the two. The picture now hangs in Lobdell's office.

"Atrium Health and the Army both have given me many opportunities to serve others," Lobdell said. "It's the meaning of life."



Dr. Kevin Lobdell, system director of Atrium Health Sanger Heart & Vascular Institute in Charlotte, North Carolina, was commissioned at Carolinas Medical Center in 2020.



“I Wanted People There Who Are Important to Me.”

Misty Wheeler had already been a nurse for more than 20 years when she decided it was time to pursue a lifelong dream: She wanted to join the military.

Wheeler was working as a nursing leader in the surgical trauma division at Atrium Health Carolinas Medical Center in Charlotte, North Carolina, when it was time to receive her formal commission to join the U.S. Army Reserves as a captain.

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I really want to serve those that are around me, doing what I can for my unit and to help in any way I can.

— Misty Wheeler
Assistant Vice President, Patient Care Services, Atrium Health

First, though, she had one more decision to make. Where should she have her commissioning ceremony?

She could go down to a local office and quickly go through the process there.

Instead, Wheeler decided to have her ceremony at the hospital where she works.

“My family came and so did the team that I work with,” Wheeler said. “Not only was my boss present, but he supported me through this entire process. The whole team was right there with me when I was commissioned. This was a very personal and important decision, so I wanted people there who are important to me.”

Wheeler has been in the reserves since 2018 and continues to participate in regular training. She noted the skills she's learned and developed over years of nursing leadership are helpful in the reserves.

“I really want to serve those that are around me, doing what I can for my unit and to help in any way I can. I enjoy mentoring those around, whether that's fellow officers or enlisted soldiers,” she said. “Coming in a little more experienced in my career gave me the opportunity to immediately step into leadership roles within the unit, while still learning the basic soldiering skills.”

When a Patient Gives Back

When Isaac Drakin went to Atrium Health Levine Children's Hospital in Charlotte for his liver cancer treatments, he faced an incredibly tough road. Little did the young patient know he would form a bond with someone who would make all the difference in his life.

Joshua Sharer, a nurse on the hospital's 11th floor, noticed Isaac's love for Pokémon and immediately found common ground. Through simple conversations about their favorite characters, Sharer helped shift Drakin's focus from his treatments to something that brought him joy and helped him navigate some of the hardest days of his journey.

However, their connection didn't end there. Sharer is a U.S. Navy veteran, just like Drakin's grandfather. Due to his medical discharge, Sharer had to leave his career as a reactor operator aboard a submarine.

Deeply moved by Sharer's impact on his grandson, Drakin's grandfather felt compelled to honor Sharer in a meaningful way.

Together with help from fellow veterans, they surprised Sharer with the title of Honorary Submariner.

Through the Kap(ss) 4 Kid(ss) program,¹⁶ Sharer received an Honorary Submariner certificate, along with a teddy bear shipmate to accompany him on his own life journey — just as he does for the many patients he helps.



Joshua Sharer was named Honorary Submariner after working with patient Isaac Drakin.



“Tater’s Coming to Work for the Hospital”

When Mike Dunn joined the Army National Guard and later began flight school in Texas in 1985, one of his instructors called him “Spud.” He doesn’t know why, but they became friends and the nickname stuck.

That nickname then shifted to “Tater.”

Years later, Dunn — or Tater — was flying helicopters for a Charlotte television station after stints flying for oil companies in the Gulf of Mexico. Against all odds, he ran into that same flight instructor in a restaurant, who encouraged him to apply to fly helicopters for the local hospital.

Or as Dunn put it: “Tater’s coming to work for the hospital.”

Now, Dunn has been flying Atrium Health helicopters for 20 years, supervising the pilots who work for a health system contractor.

Dunn says the vast majority of pilots he works with are military veterans who can “wiggle sticks and make the helicopter do what they want it to.”

“When you get to the level of the hospital, these pilots aren’t fresh off the street,” he said.

Dunn prioritizes safety above all else, telling his fellow pilots they can’t get caught up in the care being provided in the back of the helicopter when they pick up a trauma patient. They have to remain completely focused on flying safely, landing safely and getting everyone delivered to where they need to be.

Still, he will occasionally talk to families — and especially veteran patients — he transports. The job means a lot to him “because you’re making an impact on somebody’s life at their lowest point. They’re having their worst days in the world.

“To meet these individuals later, it’s wonderful to be able to see them and their families and to think I’m part of that,” he said. “I’ve always wanted to serve. I served my country, and now I serve my community.”

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I’ve always wanted to serve. I served my country, and now I serve my community.

— Mike Dunn
Helicopter Pilot Supervisor

“I Knew This Was How I Wanted to Serve”

Meet Dr. Eric Verwiebe, an orthopedic surgeon at Aurora Medical Center – Summit, in Summit, Wisconsin, who enlisted as a combat medic in the Army in 1991, after his 17th birthday. Following his first active tour duty in 1994, Verwiebe joined the Wisconsin Army National Guard while earning his bachelor’s degree. He took an active-duty commission in 2001 and began medical school in Bethesda, Maryland.

Verwiebe began his clinical rotations in 2003 and cared for injured service members at Walter Reed Army Medical Center as part of the orthopedic surgery team. During his time at the medical center, he was amazed by the care they provided for injured service members.

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I knew that this was how I wanted to serve both our country and our injured service members, as an orthopedic surgeon.

— Dr. Eric Verwiebe
Orthopedic Surgeon, Aurora Medical Center - Summit

“I knew that this was how I wanted to serve both our country and our injured service members, as an orthopedic surgeon,” he said.

Verwiebe also worked in a San Antonio hospital that served the entire southwest region of Texas and regularly received evacuees from a wide range of trauma situations. The experience had a major effect on his professional development. The variety and complexity of cases allowed him to gain extensive experience managing complicated problems.

Now, at Aurora Medical Center – Summit, Verwiebe and the team are equipped to handle just about any type of orthopedic trauma.

Verwiebe says the most rewarding part of being an orthopedic surgeon is developing relationships with patients, seeing them progress through their injuries and regaining their function and independence.

“I relate to my patients,” he added. “I served on the enlisted side and did a lot of things that make me very relatable to my patients. They appreciate knowing that their doctor has some idea of what they do.

“I grew up in a small town. I spent a lot of time on a small farm. I have done all kinds of stereotypical jobs that a person coming from a small town in Wisconsin might have done.”

But among these jobs, for Verwiebe, none are greater than service to country and community.



BUILDING A COMMAND POST

The Big Idea

There are a lot of opportunities for health systems to partner with the military and give veterans a career path forward, but it can be tough to navigate the volume of programs and choose the best path forward.

Advocate Health will advance health care discovery and delivery by creating an aligned strategy for comprehensive military-civilian partnerships. The new Office of Operational Medicine will be a one-stop shop to bridge the civilian-military divide and advance care delivery.

The Advocate Way

Given the benefits of its ability to scale, Advocate Health is in a unique position to partner with the U.S. military to boost readiness, share its expertise with patients and advance military medicine research.

As it has done to improve overall care quality¹⁷ and its commitment to rural communities,¹⁸ the nonprofit health system can use its depth of expertise, diversity



of programs across the care continuum, wide geographic footprint and academic core to further its current, deep commitments to working with the military and veterans.

To best accomplish this, in December 2025, Advocate Health opened the Office of Operational Medicine. It created a centralized function to coordinate all of the enterprise's work with the Department of Defense and

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Just like how coordinating a patient's care across specialists leads to better outcomes, coordinating our work with the military will improve those partnerships.

— Dr. David Callaway
Global Health Security Officer,
Advocate Health

the federal interagency national security community, including identifying new, innovative opportunities and expanding regional programs to new areas.

“We already do a good job of this, but our goal is to be a one-stop shop for solving complex health security challenges,” said Dr. David Callaway, Advocate Health’s global security officer, who is spearheading the new effort and will be the operational leader of the new department. “Just like how coordinating a patient’s care across specialists leads to better outcomes, coordinating our work with the military will improve those partnerships.”

The scale of Advocate Health can be helpful to military partners because an enterprise that provides care across the continuum — from emergency care to hospital at home programs to expert specialty care and more — gives the armed forces an opportunity to increase readiness of clinicians, nurses and paramedics of all kinds.

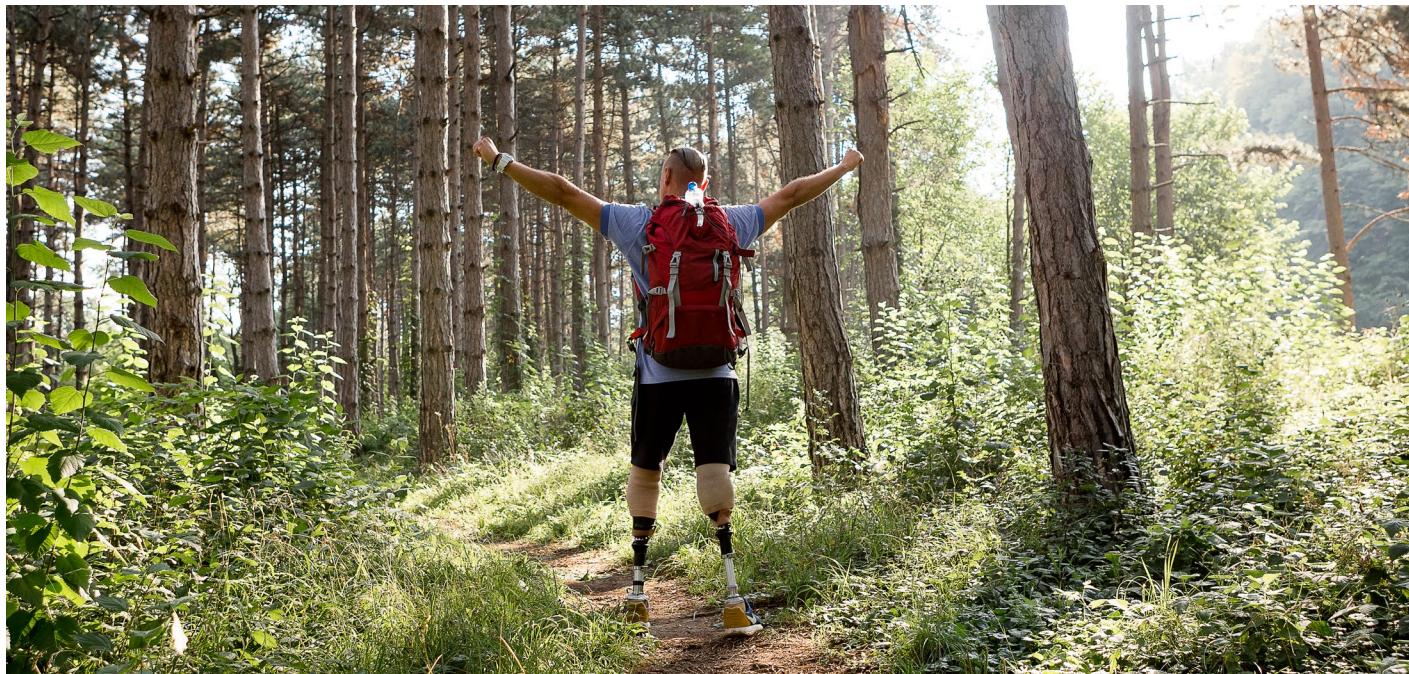
As part of this new effort, the health system also will open the Advocate Health Sustainment, Protection and Exposure Aligned Research (SPEAR) Lab, which will leverage clinical and translational research

expertise at Wake Forest University School of Medicine to catalyze innovative solutions for military-relevant health care challenges. The SPEAR Lab will foster civilian and military researcher collaboration by supporting and convening investigators across various disciplines, collaborating closely with federal intramural researchers.

While often associated primarily with combat causality care, operational medicine is a broad and comprehensive area of medical research and

clinical practice including basic science, device and biologics development, infectious diseases, emerging pathogens, trauma, resuscitation and prosthetics, as well as ergonomics, metabolic conditions, pain management, substance use disorders and rehabilitation.

In other words, supporting research that is helpful to the military means supporting research on topics that are also widely beneficial to Advocate Health's more than 6 million patients.



CONCLUSION

Formal partnerships between the military and Advocate Health have helped keep military surgeons, medics, nurses and more ready in times of peace so their skills will be sharp in times of war. A longtime collaboration with the Department of Veterans Affairs has provided education and research opportunities for Wake Forest University School of Medicine and benefitted from the medical expertise of the health system's clinicians who also do work at the VA. The list of partnerships is a long one, and the new Office of Operational Medicine will coordinate them all and expand to new opportunities.

"At the end of the day, our job at Advocate Health is to do the best job we can for our patients," said Dr. David Callaway, who, in addition to his roles with Advocate Health, serves as chief medical officer for Team Rubicon USA, a humanitarian group made up of veterans who provide disaster response and recovery assistance. "Partnering with the military helps us do a better job and helps our armed forces in the process."

Going forward, the health system will use its experience in this space to strengthen collaborations, facilitate new partnerships, drive new research funding and accelerate innovation for the benefit for Advocate Health's patients, the system, the military and the improvement of access and medical care everywhere.

"Military veterans are servant leaders. It's a part of our culture," said Dr. Joseph Hsu, vice chair of quality at Atrium Health Musculoskeletal Institute and a West Point alumnus. "Leadership is not about privilege, it's about service and making sure your team has what it needs to succeed."

Plus, at a time when the health care field is changing rapidly, veterans and members of the military are comfortable with change and able to succeed in complex systems where teamwork is critically important.

But it doesn't end there.

For many Americans, thoughts about veterans bring about reflections of loved ones who served or experiences lived personally as part of the U.S. armed forces. Those veterans also are changing

medicine: as members of the military share what they learn between the battlefields and stateside trauma centers through programs offered at places like Advocate Health; as they return from service to teach the next generation; and as they lead others in the workplace. Their service continues in multiple ways and with demonstrable impact.

Among family members of those who proudly wore a uniform, a feeling of inspiration is common. As Advocate Health CEO Gene Woods recalled in the foreword of this report, the stories his father — a Navy aeronautics mechanic — told were captivating, helping Woods grasp the concepts of teamwork, service and understanding what's possible.

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These partnerships aren't just the right thing to do — they make us a better health system.

— Eugene A. Woods
CEO of Advocate Health

Those possibilities today include building strong partnerships between the health system he leads and the military, as Advocate Health works to rewire health care in America.

For Woods and Advocate Health, it's about the mission and it's for all.

"These partnerships aren't just the right thing to do — they make us a better health system," said Woods. "We aim to pursue our mission with the same dedication, excellence and tireless sense of purpose that our service members embody."

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