



DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
Syracuse VA Medical Center
800 Irving Avenue, Syracuse, NY 13210

**Syracuse VA's Television PHON-A-THON:
a New Approach in Reaching Eligible Veterans**

The Three 12-hour Phono-A-Thons
telecast on March 13th (Syracuse), July 20th (Rochester) and July 22nd
(Utica/Rome/Herkimer), Brought Nearly 2500 Veterans to VA Phones

(Syracuse, New York)

Expanding the Patient Base is a Top VA Priority!

One day last December, Syracuse VA Public Affairs Officer Gordon Sclar was reviewing his Outlook messages, where one particular item grabbed his attention. Jill Atwood, Public Affairs Officer of the Salt Lake City Healthcare System shared information about a special event she coordinated on Veterans Day.

Ms. Atwood, a former broadcaster arranged a telethon-type event on the local CBS affiliate where she had previously worked as a newscaster. What a success! The initiative drew more than 400 calls. Sclar phoned Ms. Atwood to learn more. She explained that VA received the airtime at no charge. Working with the station's news department made it possible.

Immediately, Sclar saw the possibilities in the Syracuse market. He reasoned that Syracuse VA might be given free airtime from a local television station by allowing the TV outlet to sell the airtime to a private company and the turning this paid time to VA. It indeed happened!

Sclar brought this idea to Syracuse VA Outreach Coordinator Bill Hoffman.

They "brainstormed" ideas to develop a new and effective way to enroll large numbers of eligible Veterans who have yet to enrolled in VA.

Their discussions paid off!

Sclar suggested a unique commercial television campaign—a Phon-A-Thon. VA informational segments (60-90 seconds) would be scheduled throughout the day; one each half hour. (e.g. OEF/OIF, quality of care, Behavioral Health, Adult Day care;, G.I. Bill, Women's health, etc.) Area Veterans and their family members would respond by calling a special VA phone number to request an application. VA staff would man the phones for one 12-hour day on one specific television station. Hoffman arranged the business side of the event, scheduling staff to man the phones, mailing the applications, and the challenging task of follow-up phone calls to Veterans who responded.

Both Sclar & Hoffman thought that this idea might work. The 'who', 'where', 'how' and 'when' were still

questions to be answered. Assistant Business Office Manager Michael Van Zummeren (now Business Office Manager) and the Associate Director Michael Swartz recognized the challenges, but authorized them to move forward. Sclar brought in a former broadcaster and owner of Media One Communications, Michael Otis. Otis is a former broadcaster, and is a Veteran who is an enrolled patient at Syracuse VA.

Weeks with several area broadcasters took place. WSTM (NBC) affiliate provided the best arrangement.

The station would provide a 60-90 second segment each half-hour from 6:00am to 6:30pm. The station would sell the airtime to a commercial sponsor; Syracuse VA receives the airtime at no charge. Every one wins; the station sells the commercial time; the sponsor positions itself as an entity that cares about our Veterans and Syracuse VA reaches out to Veterans/their family members who might not otherwise be aware of the VA healthcare message.

In addition, to airtime provided for the one-day Phono A Thon event, WSTM provided a total of 250 30-second promotional announcements on 3 local TV stations (WSTM (NBC), WTVH Channel 5 (CBS), WSTQ (Cable 6)(WB), 2 weeks before the event.

Pre-taped segments were produced which included Syracuse VA Medical Center Director, U.S. Congressman Dan Maffei, (NY-25), the Onondaga County Executive, State & County Veteran Service Officers, area Veteran Men & Women and VA staff.

On Saturday, March 13, 2010, Syracuse VA's first Phono A Thon took place beginning at 6:00am; from that moment, the phones rang and continued to ring until its conclusion at 6:30pm. The Veteran Service Center of the Syracuse VA was a large part of the event's success, since it was VSC staff who were assigned to answer the phones.

By 7:30pm over 700 calls were received and more than 465 applications were sent to the Veterans who called that day! A Tremendous success!

On the heels of this success, a second Phono A Thon was telecast on July 22, 2010 covering the east side of Syracuse VA's coverage area, focusing on the cities of Utica/Rome/Herkimer. This time the station was WKTU Channel 2 (NBC) which services the surrounding five counties. From 6:00am to 8:00pm VA segments were once again aired each half-hour throughout the station's broadcast schedule. This event brought U.S. Congressman Michael Arcuri (NY-24) who joined the Veterans, VSOs and VA staff to urge Veterans to enroll. The results—another outstanding success--Over 800 calls received with 650 applications sent out to Veterans that night!

Canandaigua VA Public Affairs Officer Dan Ryan took the Syracuse VA lead and produced a third Phono A Thon, televised on July 20, 2010 for the Canandaigua/Rochester market via WHAM Channel 13 (ABC). From 6:00am to 6:30 pm, they drew an astounding 1000 calls and sent out over 800 applications.

Lessons learned!!

- The Value of Sharing Your Ideas (Thanks to PAO Jill Atwood)
- Traditional media is alive and well to carry our VA messages.
- An effective relationship with local media (Both in News and Business is absolutely essential)
- The Team work among Public Affairs, Outreach Coordinators, and the VA Center's Veteran Service Center is essential for success.
- Including your local Congressman, other government officials and VSOs is also a must.

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