

## Serving Those Who Served



Photos by PATRICK C. LEONARD / Palatka Daily News

U.S. Navy veteran Frank Brigante listens to U.S. Rep. John Mica's remarks during the dedication ceremony of the new Veterans Affairs Community Based Outpatient Clinic in Palatka.

### Palatka's new VA facility dedicated with military music, ceremonies, speeches

By CHRIS DEVITTO  
*Palatka Daily News*

**W**orld War II veteran Nelson Cooper was smiling Thursday as he sat in the new Veterans Affairs Outpatient Clinic at the Palatka Mall.

The 91-year-old U.S. Army veteran of the North African campaign attended the dedication ceremony of the new medical services clinic that will cut his travel time, normally nearly an hour to Gainesville, to just minutes, he said.

"This will be a lot better now. I only have about 18 miles to come here from Interlachen," he said.

"We had been going to Gainesville and that is a little over 40 miles."



Mica



People attending the dedication ceremony for the new Veterans Affairs Community Based Outpatient Clinic at the Palatka Mall tour the facility on Thursday.

Cooper said he injured his head while running to his guns during an air raid.

"That injury still bothers me and I have not asked for any help with it," he said. "I'm just starting to ask for it now."

About 100 dignitaries and veterans attended the ceremony that included a

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## Clinic

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Navy honor guard and band from the Jacksonville Naval Air Station.

Palatka Mayor Karl Flagg said Thursday represents more to the city than just its place on the calendar.

"This is the first day of countless days to come that will positively reflect the new era of health care provided to our local and regional veterans," he said. "As your mayor I am grateful for those who have endured all of the processes, procedures, protocols and necessary policies to get us to this pristine, proud and most phenomenal moment in history."

Flagg said the clinic is very significant for Palatka and Putnam County.

"This is one of the most dynamic developments in recent times for us and we are

very ecstatic to say the least," he said. "May all of our area veterans, military retirees along with their families and their caregivers fully utilize the benefit of the access to quality health care."

Flagg praised the efforts of U.S. Rep. John Mica, R-Winter Park, for helping locate the clinic in Putnam County.

"I'm so sure that those who have participated in the congressional overview processes are appreciative today of this becoming a reality," he said. "But I must salute and commend our local champion, Congressman John Mica."

Mica told the crowd that without the cooperation of local officials, the clinic might not have been a reality.

"We are here today because we have a great community that rose to the occasion," he said.

"I came here to thank you that this is possible because of a combined effort."

In 2008, VA officials began

searching the county for a site to house a clinic that would offer an opportunity for local residents to receive basic treatment without driving 30-40 miles to an existing facility.

"They had agreed to look for a site in Putnam County and they finished their search and said they couldn't find any," Mica said. "We convened a meeting at the Putnam County Chamber of Commerce and said let's see if we can't find a suitable location. The VA was gracious enough to reopen the search and the efforts of that are what you see today."

Not only will the clinic benefit veterans, but it will also benefit the community economically, he said.

"We make a commitment, the federal government, to help veterans with their medical needs and this helps meet that," he said. "This will also be an economic generator for Palatka Mall and this area of the community."

The 10,000-square-foot clinic has the capability to treat more than 4,000 veterans and will provide primary care, similar to what would be offered at a large doctor's office.

The clinic began seeing patients Oct. 12. It provides veterans with examinations, basic diagnostic work-up and ongoing management of their diseases, illnesses and medical conditions.

Its staff will consist of four doctors, a nurse practitioner, a psychiatrist, a social worker, a psychologist, seven nurses and three health technicians.

Patients who need specialized care will be referred to Jacksonville or Gainesville.

Many of the county's 10,000 veterans recently had the opportunity to sign up for services during an enrollment fair at the mall.

cddevitto@palatkadailynews.com