Ms. Pittman’s experience shows that while the VA Community Care program does work in providing excellent CI services to those who cannot receive them from their local VA, there are still issues that need to be addressed such ensuring the timely acceptance of providers into the program.

Margaret Pittman served in the US Army from February 1990-November 1991 as a radio and satellite operator.

Q&A with Margaret Pittman, US Army Veteran

April 2020

How long have you worn hearing aids? Where did you obtain them? Privately or via the VA?
How did that work for you?
I first was given a hearing aid at West Palm Beach VA Medical Center in 2016. My left ear was worse than my right, which had hardly had any word recognition even when the volume was turned up. The audiologist did not suggest (or provide) a hearing aid for my left side. I went back about six months later and was referred to the Miami VA. The audiologist there said the left ear gives the right ear a boost when working together and had custom molds made for both ears, which helped my hearing even more.

How did your CI journey begin? Did anyone from the VA suggest you might benefit from cochlear implants? Who told you that you might be a candidate for a cochlear implant?
An otolaryngologist I was referred to at the Miami VA suggested a CI in 2017. I was hopeful that additional medications would help restore my hearing but they did not. I moved forward with plan for a CI in 2018. It took until March of 2019 before I qualified for the surgery.

How did you learn about the services at the VA?
By asking the right questions and having a good doctor.

What was the hardest part about the process of getting a cochlear implant?
I was referred out of my VA for the surgery once I qualified. My CI surgeon is now located at the University of Miami and previously provided services at the Miami VA once a week. By the time I was referred to the Miami VA for a CI, the surgeon was no longer there. It took months for my doctor to be accepted by the Triwest Community Care Program. Triwest is one of the regional partnerships tasked with administering the Department of Veterans Affairs Community Care
programs to provide improved access to health care to veterans. All medical providers must be accepted into the Community Care Program to provide VA care and be reimbursed via the VA.

**What could be done to improve the process for veterans (of getting a cochlear implant)?**
As the West Palm VA does not have a cochlear department, I really don’t know if I would have a CI right now if I had not been referred to the Miami VA. If a veteran is receiving services at a VA that does not provide cochlear implant services, it can be hard to get information or a referral. An improved referral system is where help is needed.

**What worked well for you? What compliment(s) can you make of the VA process?**
I can say if I had been seen initially at the Miami VA, it would have been a much quicker and easier process. The audiologists and ENT team at Miami VA are great and once the surgeon was accepted into the community care program with Triwest, all systems were go!

**Who performed your surgery and where was it done? What about the follow-up services?**
Dr. Christine Dinh at University of Miami did my surgery. My referrals for all follow-up appointments were through the Triwest Community Care Program and have been scheduled easily.

**Where there any mishaps and approximately how long did it take to get resolved?**
No mishaps once I was able to get a referral and into the CI program in Miami.

**Can you provide some suggestions on what would have made the process of dealing with the VA better?**
The process of a doctor getting into Triwest Community Care system needs to be improved. It seemed to me to take way too long and delayed my surgery.

**Tell us about the care after your surgery.**
My activation of the cochlear implant by an audiologist was on February 24, 2020. So far, things are amazing.

**Do you have any tips for those veterans who may be candidates for a CI?**
Don’t give up, keep pushing. Ask questions and don’t worry about whether or not it’s important. Every question you have is important! Ask to speak to a patient or veteran who has received care from the surgeon that have been referred to. Conduct additional research. The more I knew about my surgeon and the other clinicians providing care, the more comfortable I felt. Join a hearing loss support group; there are many with local chapters. Making friends with others with hearing loss gives you a lot of support. You will learn a lot and maybe become a mentor yourself.