

HORIZONS

SOUTH CAROLINA VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION DEPARTMENT

Dr. H. Lucius "Luke" Laffitte

People with disabilities lose a friend and advocate

The S.C. Vocational Rehabilitation Department's longest-serving board member passed away Sept. 23.

Dr. H. Lucius "Luke" Laffitte, 87, died in his beloved Allendale



Dr. Laffitte

County Hospital after a brief illness. A memorial service celebrating his life was held Sunday, Sept. 26.

When the General Assembly created SCVRD as a state agency in 1957, Dr. Laffitte was appointed as a charter member of the agency

board, the S.C. State Agency for Vocational Rehabilitation. He was named vice chairman in 1968 and served in that capacity until his death.

Five SCVRD commissioners and an untold number of people with disabilities benefited from his wisdom, guidance, caring and compassion. He said in a 2003 interview that his reward was being able to help people with disabilities achieve or return to gainful employment.

"He served his fellow man for over half a century as a medical doctor and board member," said Derle A. Lowder Sr., chairman of the agency board. "He served people with disabilities well and he'll be sorely missed.

"He was a perfect Southern gentleman and highly respected by everyone," Lowder said.

"His respect and compassion for people with disabilities were instrumental in guiding the agency," said SCVRD Commissioner Barbara Hollis. "He was an integral part of the VR family and his legacy will continue to be an inspiration to all of us."

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SERID honors Spartanburg client, staffer

A Spartanburg client and his employment coach received regional recognition as winners of the William E. Woodrick Case of the Year award from the Southeast Regional Institute on Deafness.



Blanton

The award was presented at the SERID conference October 19 in Louisville, KY. It recognizes unique and/or outstanding efforts in the rehabilitation and employment of an individual who is deaf or hard of hearing.



Osburn

Nathan Blanton, who has severe hearing loss, came to SCVRD employment coach MeLinda Osburn in January to

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VR counselors get advice on helping returning veterans

Reintegrating into society after serving months or years in combat situations is often a difficult task for returning veterans.

They've watched their buddies die; they've killed the enemy; they've been wounded themselves. The physical and emotional toll is enormous.

SCVRD is working to help veterans adjust to being home and assist them in finding jobs so they can take care of their families.

A two-day Veterans Institute in September brought together VR counselors, combat veterans and representatives from the Department of Veterans Affairs, the VA Hospital, the Lieutenant Governor's Office on Aging, and the National Guard Yellow Ribbon Campaign, among others, to explore the issues facing returning veterans and discuss how to better serve them.

"I just want to go back to work and feel like I'm contributing to my family," said Raymond Keller, who has a wife and four children.

An Army veteran who served in Iraq, Keller was a member of the panel of former soldiers who talked about issues at the Institute.

Returning soldiers may be referred to the Warrior Transition Unit. The Army Wounded Warrior (AW2) program is also available to

assist wounded soldiers and their families from the time they're injured throughout recovery for as long as they need help.

"We take a more holistic approach to the soldier," said Dr. Debra Hauck, information referral and follow-up coordinator for the Warrior Transition Unit. "We try to get soldiers at the beginning and be proactive."

The Soldier Family Assistance Center at Fort Jackson provides a one-stop center for medical, administrative and psychosocial services available to Warriors in Transition and their families. Military and civilian personnel staff the center.

Returning soldiers often don't feel like they "fit" any more. It's difficult to let go of the psychological coping mechanisms combat requires and readjust to the life they left behind. Just being around the general public can be distressing.

Terry O'Connor and SSG Deana Bizette of the National Guard spoke about military culture and the mind-set of returning soldiers. SSG Bizette, who served several tours and commanded an all male unit, described how she was in a state of combat awareness and vigilance after returning home. Because soldiers are

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Veterans Institute panel members listen as Gracie Anthony makes a point. From left are Elton Jewell, Raymond Keller, Anthony, and Allan Raynor.

DDS sees big increase in claims while economy puts pinch on VR general program

DDS claims jump 30 percent

The federal fiscal year, which ended September 24, 2010, was a very successful year for Disability Determination Services (DDS).

The year began with unprecedented increases in receipt of claims—as high as 30 percent over last fiscal year. Fortunately, this did level off somewhat during the year but the DDS continued to receive unprecedented levels of incoming claims.

As expected, the staff of the DDS met the challenge and adjudicated 85,819 claims, which exceeded the budgeted workload of 79,332! This was an overall increase of production over last fiscal year by 20.8 percent. As more claims were adjudicated, the backlog queues were also reduced by 36 percent. In addition to exceeding the production goals set by the Social Security Administration, the DDS maintained stellar quality throughout the year!

The Lexington State Claims Office also had an excellent year. They adjudicated 11,510 Medicaid claims while maintaining an accuracy rate of 99.1 percent. Despite an increase in receipts, the State Claims Office increased production and eliminated their backlogged cases.

This year's customer satisfaction surveys included numerous compliments of the DDS staff, citing particular examples of exceptional service for our claimants. In the spring of this year, the assistant director of the DDS attended a meeting of attorney representatives who raved about the call centers in the DDS and the prompt attention they gave every question. What impressed this group of attorneys the most was the fact that the DDS staff would take the time to research issues that were outside the scope of the DDS responsibilities.

In addition to demonstrating quality performance, the DDS participated with the Cooperative Disability Investigation (CDI) Team to ensure good stewardship of SSA and non-SSA funds through referrals of suspected fraud cases. As a result, the CDI team saved \$6,665,198 in SSA savings and \$3,690,860 in non-SSA savings.

—Shirley Jarrett
DDS assistant director

High unemployment a challenge

The poor state economic climate and accompanying high unemployment rates posed major challenges for the Vocational Rehabilitation Department's basic service program during fiscal year 2009-2010, but the department's staff met those challenges with a determination to keep client services and successful outcomes at a high level. More than 7,600 people with disabilities went to work after receiving SCVRD services, doing their part to bolster their personal and financial success and the state's economy.

There were many highlights during this year. Upstate clients with significant disabilities benefited from the opening of the Bryant Center in Lyman, where specialized services are offered in addition to those available at an area office. Staff at this facility provide comprehensive services such as physical and occupational therapy, a brain injury program, a pain management program, rehabilitation engineering, and information technology training, previously available only by traveling to the Columbia area. Client participation at the Bryant Center has been excellent.

Transition services remain a key area of focus and the department continued to expand and refine its services to high school students with disabilities, better equipping staff through training in evidence-based practices for serving this population in preparation for careers. Early intervention is vital in avoiding a cycle of poverty and reliance on government benefits. VR counselors at each school, cooperative agreements, service provision through federal grants and the High School/High Tech program all contributed to these efforts.

Improving the level of career opportunities for clients has been the focus of the Skilled Workforce Apprenticeship Training program and at the end of FY2010, more than 60 clients had been hired by participating employers into solid career positions with benefits.

Conversion to the South Carolina Enterprise and Information System (SCEIS), as mandated by the state,

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October area activities include open houses, Disability Mentoring Day events

October is National Disability Employment Awareness Month and SCVRD offices celebrated with open houses, drop-ins and tours in a continuing effort to remind their communities of the importance and benefits of employing people with disabilities.

This year, many offices included Disability Mentoring Day activities. The event matches students with workplace mentors according to their career interests. The students experience a typical day on the job and learn valuable workplace skills. Employers gain an increased awareness that people with disabilities represent an overlooked talent pool.

The **Florence** area office was pleased to have state Sen. Hugh Leatherman, Senate Finance Committee chairman, as guest speaker for its open house.

"We're in tough economic times," he told the audience. "The only way we're going to get out of it is by creating jobs for our people and you are doing that."



Students learn to operate a cash register in the Customer Service Department of the Beaufort Walmart during Disability Mentoring Day.



State Sen. Hugh Leatherman, third from right, was among the honorees at the Florence area open house. From left are, Gary James, owner of the Creek Ratz restaurant; area supervisor Carol Anderson; center manager Susan Urquhart; Leatherman; SCVRD Commissioner Barbara Hollis; and Leo Brockington, a client who has been working at Creek Ratz.

"All of the people who train here are dedicated and they want to work. The program is very cost-effective and I will always be a great supporter of it," Leatherman said.

To the clients, he said, "You have so much to offer. When I see what you're doing here, I'm so proud of you."

Seventeen students participated in Disability Mentoring Day activities in **Lancaster**.

They visited a day care, a print shop, an eye-care facility, a computer store, a sandwich shop, Walmart, a nursing home and an auto repair shop.

Lancaster Mayor Joe Shaw provided a proclamation declaring October as National Disability Employment Awareness Month in the city.

Mickey Hinson, manager of the local Food Lion, spoke about the value of work and the steps necessary to be successful in finding a job; April Faulkenberry, acting director of the Lancaster County Adult Education office, emphasized the value of education; and Allen Price of McBride's Building Supplies talked about how to be successful at a job interview.

In **Beaufort**, eight students visited the animal shelter, a pre-school, a physical therapist, Walmart and a radiologist.

U.S. Rep. John Spratt and state Rep. Herb Kirsh joined other guests at the **Rock Hill** open house.

Nineteen students participated in job-shadowing experiences for Disability Mentoring Day and three businesses—Celgard, Composite Resources and 3D Systems—were recognized for their support for employment of people with disabilities.

A former client spoke about his positive VR experience.

In **Greenville**, 22 students participated in Disability Mentoring Day. Mentors included 16 employers from various career fields.

Five job seekers and 24 students participated in Disability Mentoring Day activities in **Charleston**.

Mentors included Evergreen Boarding Home, Kevin's Transmission, Full Code Recording Studio, Pinckney & Sons Welding, East Bay Deli and the S.C. Department of Mental Health.

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Events

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Janice McKinney from AmeriCorps was the speaker. AmeriCorps offers adults volunteer opportunities with local and national nonprofit groups.

Students in **Berkeley-Dorchester** toured the Piggly Wiggly distribution center and Walmart.

At Piggly Wiggly, they learned about plant procedures and job duties as well as use of facility space, safety and recycling.

Walmart provided a behind-the-scenes look at various departments and job duties, including produce, stockers, mechanics, cashiers, bakers and loading dock operations.

Olive Garden, one of the national Disability Mentoring Day sponsors, provided a complementary lunch for students.

In **Richland**, 95 students participated in mentorships at an attorney's office; a construction site; the Humane Society; a day care; Providence Hospital; a car dealership; a cosmetology school; Sam's Club; an educational supplies store; the First Baptist Church kitchen; and a computer training school.

Special guests included state Rep. Joe McEachern and Richland County Councilman Norman Jackson. Other guests included representatives from Diamond Transport, Pontiac Foods and Pure Power.

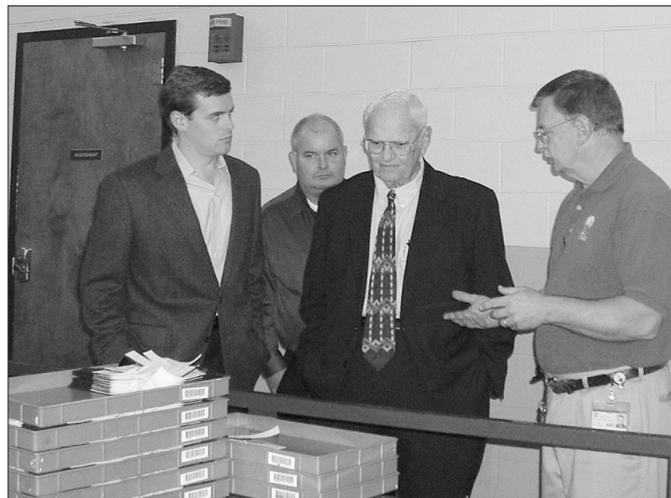
The chef at First Baptist provided lunch. Food items for the open house were donated by Krispy Kreme doughnuts, Starbucks coffee, Moe's and Walmart. Chick-Fil-A and McDonalds donated food coupons for the students.

Eleven students participated in Disability Mentoring Day activities in **Sumter**.

They visited a child care center; a welding shop; an audio production studio; a health-care facility; a diner; and the sheriff's department.



A student learns about changing oil during a visit to an auto repair shop in Lancaster.



Phil Hall, right, SCVRD job readiness training coordinator in Rock Hill, explains training center operations to Rep. Herb Kirsh while Kirsh's staff members Devon Brown and Skip Miller listen.



A cosmetologist at Virginia College uses a practice manikin to explain to a Richland student how she cut and styled the hair.

Veterans

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so focused on following command and having direction, they “get lost” when that structure is no longer there.

As more and more soldiers return from Iraq and Afghanistan, the number of veterans seeking assistance from VR has almost doubled.

Traumatic brain injury (TBI) has been called the “signature wound” of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and combat stress injuries come in second. Co-occurring illnesses, in addition to substance abuse and depression, also are factors.

Keller said when he left the Army two years ago, returning soldiers didn’t get a lot of time to prepare for the transition. Programs for veterans were not readily accessible, which made it more difficult.

And, sometimes it’s hard to apply military skills to civilian jobs, he said.

Gracie Anthony, another panel member, was an Army staff sergeant and LPN who retired in 2000. She served in Desert Shield and Desert Storm, working in a “MASH” setting.

“One military [member] understands another better than someone from the outside,” she said, “because they’ve been through it.”

In many ways VR is returning to its roots. World War I created thousands of veterans with disabilities, so in 1918, Congress passed the Soldier’s Rehabilitation Act, a vocational rehabilitation program providing disabled veterans with job training. Two years later, the Smith-Fess Act established the civilian vocational rehabilitation program, administered by the Federal Board for Vocational Education. This provided funding for vocational guidance, training, occupational adjustment services, and job placement.

Almost 90 years later, SCVRD

RSA commissioner visits SCVRD



SCVRD Commissioner Barbara Hollis, right, listens as Lynnae Ruttledge, commissioner of the Rehabilitation Services Administration, makes a point during the Region IV meeting.

State Vocational Rehabilitation directors from throughout the Southeast attended a Region IV meeting in September, hosted on the SCVRD campus.

SCVRD Commissioner Barbara Hollis, selected by her regional colleagues as the Region IV representative, coordinated the meeting and invited Lynnae Ruttledge, commissioner of the Rehabilitation Services Administration in Washington, D.C., who discussed several key issues with the directors.

Among the items on the agenda were state funding shortfalls, best practices in transition services, services to prepare people with the most significant disabilities, training needs, cost management and other common issues.

Commissioner Ruttledge and the directors also toured the SCVRD campus.

Region IV includes Kentucky, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, North Carolina, South Carolina, Mississippi and Tennessee.

was invited to participate in a national conference convened by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Federal, State and local partners came together to address and improve services for returning veterans. Among their goals were reducing barriers to information, providing outreach and public awareness of veteran’s issues, and sharing knowledge among partners and field staff.

SCVRD developed the Veteran’s Institute to bring health care and other providers in South Carolina together to address the needs of returning veterans in South Carolina.

“I was [stunned] by the number of veterans with [such a] variety of disabilities who are not receiving services,” said Institute attendee Donna Turner, area client services manager

from Conway. Attendees learned about the broad variety of services available to veterans and their families.

“We’re working hard to get [veterans] connected with the resources we learned about,” said Turner.

Asked how VR counselors could be of more assistance to returning veterans, Raymond Keller pointed to trust and isolation issues. It is important to find out how many tours a veteran served. Veterans who served multiple tours have different issues than those who served one tour.

“Don’t push, but don’t get too far away,” Keller said. “Enforce that you’re there to help.”

“First impression means a lot,” Anthony said. “Be truthful and honest. Be on the same level with them and establish a rapport.”

Laffitte

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Dr. Laffitte was born July 9, 1923, in Estill, one of eight children born to the late M. Tucker and Elizabeth Lucius Laffitte.

After attending Estill public schools, he spent three years at The Citadel but had to finish his pre-medical studies at the University of South Carolina because the military college didn't have a senior year in 1944. The entire class was called for active duty during World War II. Damage to his leg from osteomyelitis, a bone infection, in childhood kept Laffitte out of the service and he graduated from USC in 1944 and the Medical University of South Carolina in 1947.

He practiced medicine in Allendale County from 1948 until he retired from "office hours" in 2001. He then spent 10 days in Honduras, helping out a doctor friend at two clinics supported by Barnwell United Methodist Church. He continued to see patients at the Allendale County Nursing Home and work with the Allendale County Rescue Squad until he completely retired at the age of 80.

Dr. Laffitte and his wife Ann Cassels were married for 61 years. Their eldest child, Elizabeth, has cerebral palsy. She finished college, was a VR client and went on to

become a certified adjustment specialist for the agency before retiring.

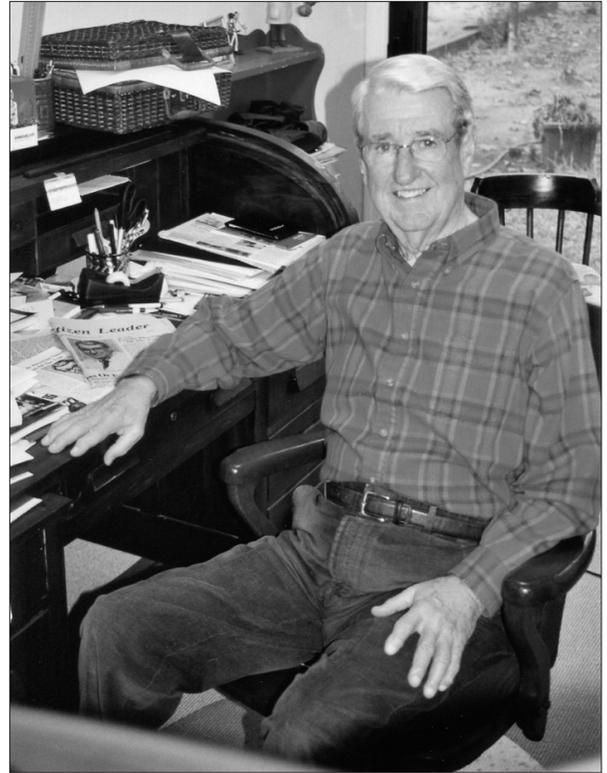
The Laffittes had three other children. Rosalie is married and lives in Allendale; Becky is a lawyer in Columbia; and Lucius, a doctor like his father, lives in Beaufort with his wife and two children.

Dr. Laffitte said he was often asked why he didn't move to a larger city where he could make more money. He wasn't interested.

"My wealth is friends," he said.

Over the years, Dr. Laffitte served as chief of staff of Allendale County Hospital, medical director of the Allendale County Rescue Squad and was active in the Lions Club and the Allendale Historical Society. An avid supporter of USC-Salkehatchie, his family endowed a scholarship there in his name.

His service to his patients and his community earned him numerous awards, including an honorary doctor of Humanities from the Baptist College of Charleston, the Order of the Palmetto, S.C. Physician of the Year and the Algernon Sydney Sullivan Award from the University



Dr. Laffitte in his home office in 2003.

of South Carolina. The award seeks to perpetuate the excellence of character and humanitarian service of Algernon Sydney Sullivan by recognizing and honoring such qualities in others.

SCVRD named its Beaufort office after him in 1989, recognized him with the Commissioner's Medal of Excellence in 2003 and in 2007 honored his 50 years of service to the agency board and people with disabilities.

VR general program

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also presented a huge challenge due to the nature of SCVRD's client service provision and local operations. A large number of staff members worked long hours for extended periods of time to prepare for and carry out the conversion.

The department also made many technological improvements on its own, all designed to improve the

quality and timeliness of services to clients. The electronic Case Management System progressed to new levels, and the department launched its web-based staff development and training site which features online training modules. Many of these modules offer disability-specific instruction, enabling counselors and other staff to understand clients' issues more completely and learn effective service approaches.

These are just a few of the areas of success during this very busy year. The department faces continued severe budget challenges in the years ahead but through innovative yet cost-effective practices, SCVRD's dedicated team will strive to provide quality, life-changing services to people with disabilities in our state.

—Mark Wade
SCVRD assistant commissioner

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SERID

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discuss job options. He had been helping his wife with her cleaning business, but when the economy slowed, her business did too.

Blanton wanted to go back to school to become a truck driver. He'd already done some research and found a school in Charlotte.

Getting into the school was the first hurdle, but Blanton, equipped with new hearing aids and funds to cover tuition, finally was accepted.

An interpreter assisted him in the classroom and after five weeks of training, he graduated near the top of his class.

Getting a commercial driver's

license was the second hurdle. He was initially refused because of his hearing loss, but after much advocacy from VR and the truck driving school, the North Carolina Department of Motor Vehicles allowed him to take the test.

The third hurdle was getting the hazardous materials, tanker and double trailer endorsements added to his CDL without specific restrictions.

The last hurdle was finding a company to hire him.

"We applied to over 30 companies and it felt like 1,000 after we were finished," Osburn said. "Several were interested until they found out he was hard of hearing and had to use

relay services for complete understanding during phone conversations."

Finally, a recruiter for Schneider National trucking company called and Blanton was invited to participate in a weeklong training class. Osburn spent the week with him to support his training and interpret when necessary. He was one of four hired out of a class of eight.

Blanton is completing his training with Schneider and his next step will be a truck of his own.

"Please know that I really appreciate all of the VR staff's help," Blanton said. "MeLinda is truly my backbone. She was and will continue to be an awesome lady!"