



QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER
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VHA's Office of Community Engagement and
Center for Compassionate Care Innovation

VHA and its Partners Spread Positivity in Difficult Times

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VA



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Veterans Health Administration





A Note From the Nurse Executive:

Happy summer! The Veterans Health Administration (VHA)'s Office of Community Engagement and Center for Compassionate Care Innovation (CCI) team hope you are continuing to stay healthy during the coronavirus pandemic. In challenging times, it is especially important for us all to stay positive. This includes not only the Veterans and their loved ones that we serve and support, but also the people at VHA and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) who provide care and resources to those Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors.

To that end, we bring you a story about a conference call where VA and VHA employees shared good news about events happening in their facilities and in their own lives. Veterans at a Texas VA Community Living Center recently found out how much they are loved and appreciated when a drive-by parade designed to raise their spirits attracted more than triple the number of participants that were expected. This story can be found on **pages 3-4**.

Thanks to our partners at the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), a number of Veterans are experiencing love of the unconditional variety through their pets, which were adopted through support provided by the HSUS partnership, called Operation Hero-Animal Bond, and a VA research physiologist. Learn more about how these former service members are finding comfort in caring for their furry friends on **pages 5-9**. We are proud to share success stories about how partnerships can help Veterans lead healthier, happier lives.

The ongoing modernization within VHA has resulted in OCE and CCI being realigned under the VHA Office of Discovery, Education and Affiliate Networks (DEAN). OCE's mission will not be changing. In fact, we are hoping for more frequent interactions and new collaborations with our sister program offices within DEAN that, like us, are focused on promoting partnerships at the local, state, and national level, and on innovations that improve Veteran care. Please see **page 12** for more on these collaborative efforts.

Finally, we are continuing our series of profiles on OCE team members and what motivates us to do the work that we are so honored to do on behalf of Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors. Please see **pages 10-11**.

In good health,
Dr. Tracy L. Weistreich

*Nurse Executive, Office of Community Engagement
and Center for Compassionate Care Innovation*

In case you missed it: OCE and CCI have a SharePoint site!

Be sure to check it out: OCE and CCI have a SharePoint website that is accessible to VA employees. This is where the team posts blogs, good news stories, and other updates about partnerships and innovations. We encourage our fellow VA colleagues to give us a call and learn more about our partnerships and initiatives to help Veterans lead healthier, happier lives. Perhaps we can collaborate on a project together?

VA and VHA employees can learn more about us at <https://dvagov.sharepoint.com/sites/VHAvha-office-of-community-engagement>.

'Silver Lining Stories': VA staff call promotes good news stories about both Veterans and employees

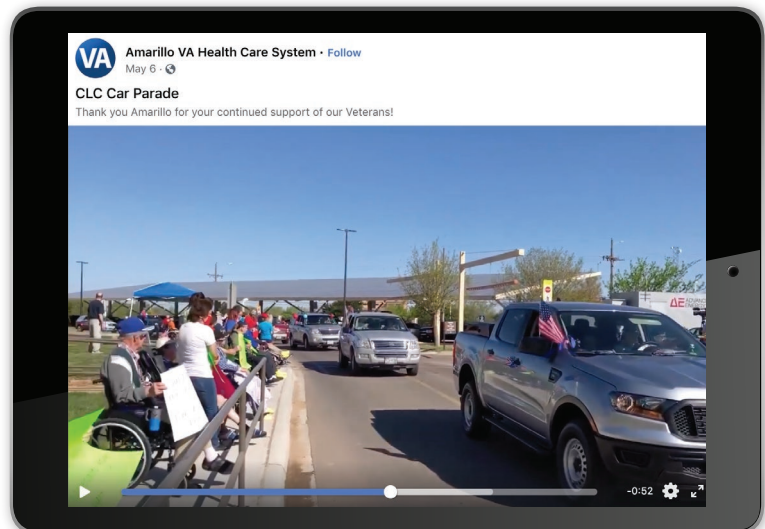
During these difficult times, everyone can use a little good news. VA and VHA employees are no exception. One program office within VHA recently created an opportunity for employees and staff members to share uplifting stories with one another: Employees within Palliative and Hospice Care at VHA hosted a "Silver Lining Stories" discussion during their national call on Tuesday, May 12. Staff members from VA medical centers and facilities across the country lifted each other's spirits with stories about all the good that is happening for Veterans at their facilities as well as in their own lives.

"If our palliative care teams are going to deliver quality care in these challenging times, they need to take care of themselves first. I keep thinking of the instructions when flying: 'Put the oxygen mask on yourself first and then help others,'" said Dr. Scott Shreve, national director for Palliative and Hospice Care. "My sense is these Silver Lining Stories will provide some 'oxygen' for our teams."

These stories focus on people's sense of social connectedness, an important social determinant of health (SDOH). SDOH are conditions in the environment in which Veterans live, learn, work, play, worship, and age. SDOH are the theme of the VHA Office of Community Engagement (OCE) **2020 Community Partnership Challenge**. OCE supports many partnerships throughout VHA and VA that bring Veterans greater access to SDOH.

"Is it such a pleasure to see how VHA and VA colleagues are coming together to not only help Veterans in new ways right now, but also to help each other by sharing good news," said Dr. Tracy L. Weistreich, Nurse Executive of OCE. "A sense of social connection is critical, especially right now, for Veterans and staff members alike."

For more information on OCE and its partnership work, please visit va.gov/healthpartnerships.



Here are some of the uplifting stories that were shared that day:

Hospice and Palliative Care Program Manager Mary Jo Hughes at the Grand Junction, Colorado VAMC said she and her team have been using the VA Video Connect (VVC) program to help patients stay in touch with their loved ones. One patient undergoing treatment for cancer was able to speak with their spouse and children by way of VVC. **“It was the most moving experience. As a nurse of 38 years I think myself, and our chaplain, were both in tears.”** She said that the family sang “You Are My Sunshine” to the patient. “There is nothing like the power of seeing your family members and feeling nurtured and cared for by them,” Ms. Hughes said.

Melissa Cyrus from the Lebanon VA Medical Center in Pennsylvania shared that on Mother’s Day, her doorbell rang. She found a bouquet of flowers and a box filled with treats—a local funeral home randomly gifted 100 mothers, and Dr. Cyrus’ husband put her name on a list to win.

Given some of the “heavier things that we deal with,” Dr. Cyrus said, referring to working in hospice and palliative care, it was a “real treat.”



Carisa Sullivan, a hospice nurse practitioner within the Amarillo VA Health Care System Community Living Center (CLC) in Texas, shared that she recently was “part of one of the most memorable things I’ve ever experienced as a hospice nurse practitioner.” Her colleagues organized a drive-by parade for Veterans at that facility. **“There were supposed to be 55 cars, but somehow it got out into the community, and we had 180 vehicles come by. It was just a phenomenal experience for these Veterans to enjoy safely,”**

Ms. Sullivan said.

Staff members at the Amarillo VA facility also organized a B-1 bomber plane flyover with the Cannon Air Force Base which was also exciting for the Veterans. She encouraged other CLCs to explore if something similar could be arranged at other facilities.



Ryan Weller, national program manager of Palliative and Hospice Care at VA, shared that his family recently celebrated his daughter’s 10th birthday on Zoom. Some family friends, he said, “took it a step further” and organized a car parade in front of his house. “There were signs wishing my daughter a happy birthday, kids were shooting silly string out of the car windows, chucking birthday presents into our front yard, and waving and cheering,” Mr. Weller said. **“She later said that it was the best birthday party she ever had.”**

Veterans adopt pets through Operation Hero-Animal Bond

Veterans across the country have benefited from the services of a VHA partnership called Operation Hero-Animal Bond, which can help match Veterans with animals to adopt.

Navy Veteran Jessica Beck said her cat, Kaya, has been a welcome source of joy—and a little distraction—as Ms. Beck has stayed at home during the coronavirus pandemic.

Growing up, Ms. Beck always loved animals and felt connected to them, including to her family's dog. She always thought cats were funny, too, and found comfort in the sense of connection she had with cats. Since the pandemic-related lockdown was looming a few months ago, Ms. Beck said she knew that a companion animal could lend that sense of comfort to her life in uncertain times.

"She reminds me of the wonderful memories I had as a kid," Ms. Beck said of her 7-year-old cat. "She keeps me present."

Ms. Beck, who lives in Oregon, adopted Kaya through **Operation Hero-Animal Bond**, a partnership between VHA and the Humane Society of the United States.

The partnership is managed by VHA's Office of Community Engagement (OCE) and helps pair Veterans with companion animals. It also encourages Veterans to consider participating in volunteer opportunities with local community animal shelters and rescues, which can reduce the social isolation some Veterans experience.

Ms. Beck reached out to a representative from Operation Hero-Animal Bond for assistance with adopting Kaya. Ms. Beck and her husband went to a local PetSmart store where she first met, and then decided to adopt, Kaya.

"I knew I needed a companion animal, but I needed a push," she explained. "It's not an

extremely easy thing to do [to have and take care of an animal], but Operation Hero-Animal Bond helped me get [Kaya], which is the first step."

Kaya also gave Ms. Beck a project to do at home: She built Kaya an outdoor "patio" to keep the cat from running away while affording Kaya outdoor time. Watching Kaya behave as a typical cat has brought Ms. Beck a sense of delight, too, she says—like any feline is apt to do, Kaya managed to catch a few mice that made their way onto her cat patio.

Now, Ms. Beck says Kaya will follow her throughout the house and meow at her for attention. She calls Kaya her "fluffy, strange, unique cat."

One of the main goals of Operation Hero-Animal Bond is to provide Veterans with the benefits of the human-animal bond, which is the mutually beneficial relationship between people and animals—Veterans can experience the human-animal bond when they adopt or spend time with animals. Research shows that spending time with animals can reduce blood pressure, heart rate, stress hormones, and feelings of isolation.

That sense of connectedness and comfort, the feelings of joy instead of stress, is what Kaya has offered to Ms. Beck: "It's been a blast," Ms. Beck said with a laugh.

For more information on Operation Hero-Animal Bond and OCE, please visit va.gov/healthpartnerships.



Operation Hero-Animal Bond provides Veterans with companionship during physical distancing

A few minutes on the Clackamas River in 2013 were all it took to wash away a lifetime of being comfortable on the water for Mr. Lonnie Hamon. The Navy Veteran (1988-92) was on a float trip with friends and family when two members became tied up on a log.

The Navy-trained rescue swimmer jumped into action but quickly found himself submerged with a rope caught around his neck.

"I began practicing what I learned in the military," said Mr. Hamon. "Drownproofing," which is a method for surviving in water disaster scenarios.

"I was trying to remain close to the surface in hopes that someone would see me," explained Mr. Hamon.

The survival method worked—two nearby teens noticed Mr. Hamon, pulled him from the water and began CPR.

Mr. Hamon survived, but his concerns about the ebbs and flows of life quickly took over.

"After that incident, I began having issues controlling my anxiety," explained Mr. Hamon. "I also went through very heavy alcohol use and started to feel lonely."

"Recently, I started looking for a companion cat," he continued. "I always really wanted a kitten."

He eventually discovered **Operation Hero-Animal Bond**, a partnership created in 2017 between VHA and the Humane Society of the United States.

The partnership is managed by VHA's Office of Community Engagement (OCE) and helps pair Veterans with animals to foster or adopt. It also encourages Veterans to consider participating in volunteer opportunities with local community animal shelters and rescues, which can reduce the social isolation some Veterans experience.

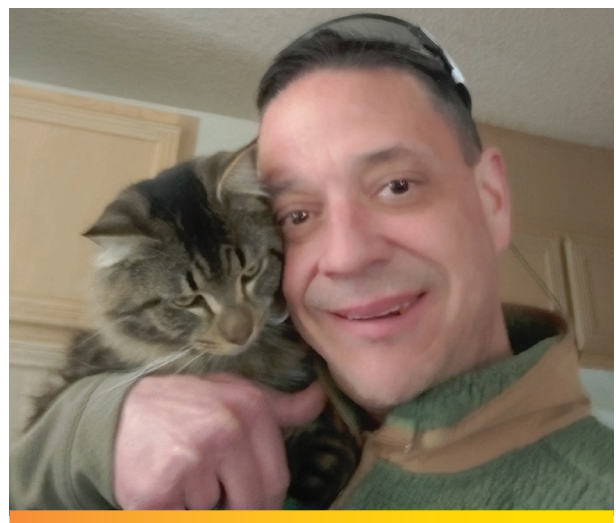
Sammie, a one-year-old kitten, came home with Mr. Hamon this spring. Operation Hero-Animal Bond helped unite Sammie with Mr. Hamon.

"Sammie is a hero at home," Mr. Hamon said. "It sounds strange, but I no longer have to talk to myself. Sammie has been such a blessing during these times of stay-at-home orders and social distancing guidelines."

Sammie has also helped Mr. Hamon with his anxiety in addition to being his constant ally.

"When my heart begins racing, Sammie knows. And he's there to calm me down," said Mr. Hamon. "Sammie is the comfort and confidence I need to overcome any challenge that comes my way."

To learn more about how OCE builds effective partnerships across VHA to support Veterans, visit: va.gov/healthpartnerships.



Sammie and Veteran Lonnie Hamon.

Veteran finds a kindred spirit in her rescue dog, Simone

Dorothea Hooper found a kindred spirit in her dog, Simone. Ms. Hooper, who spent 32 years in the Army and Army Reserves, is diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). She suspects Simone, who was abandoned and found on the side of a road, has also experienced trauma.

When Ms. Hooper feels anxious or sad, she said Simone notices and tries to get her owner to pet her or pick her up. Likewise, when Ms. Hooper thinks Simone is not her usual self, “I can sense it. It’s the connection we have.”

That’s not to say that the relationship between human and Yorkie was smooth from the start.

“It was a long process to get Simone used to me, and I started feeling like we weren’t a match at first,” she said.

Ms. Hooper, of Baltimore, Maryland, explored fostering through a Department of Veterans Affairs-approved research study entitled “Veterans as Foster Ambassadors,” which was sponsored by **Maddie’s Fund**. She decided to foster Simone first to see if they were compatible before becoming her forever home.

Fostering, she said, is “an opportunity to see if that dog is a fit for you, and if not, then you can try a different dog and keep looking until you find one that fits you—one that’s compatible with you, and you with them.”

It seemed to Ms. Hooper, during this trial period, that Simone was more attached to the person who was responsible for matching them up—Dr. Heidi Ortmeier, a VA Maryland Health Care System research physiologist and investigator with the Geriatric Research and Education Clinical Center, who was the principal investigator for the study.

But Ms. Hooper didn’t give up on the Yorkie. The relationship took a turn for the better when Simone started migrating from her dog bed to sleeping at the foot of Ms. Hooper’s bed and then jumping on the bed.

“She was scared at first, I think,” said Ms. Hooper. “Now she follows me everywhere.”



Veteran Dorothea Hooper and Simone.

Ms. Hooper adopted Simone through **Operation Hero-Animal Bond**, a partnership between VHA and the Humane Society of the United States that is designed to match animals in need of a home with Veterans in need of companionship.

She and Simone, who have been together about a year, enjoy taking walks together, helping Ms. Hooper to get out and about more. She would like to take Simone out for rides in the car, but Simone has motion sickness.

As Simone, who’s about 9 years old, ages and becomes less active, Ms. Hooper said she would consider adopting a second dog.

VHA’s Office of Community Engagement (OCE) supports partnerships like Operation Hero-Animal Bond that are designed to benefit Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors. Visit [va.gov/healthpartnerships](https://www.va.gov/healthpartnerships) for more information.

Veteran finds a wrestling buddy and instant stress relief in his rescue dog, Murphy

Andrew Findlay was immediately attracted to the rescue dog he came to meet, but what really sold him on this particular pup was the instant stress relief he felt when the dog leaned up against him.

Mr. Findlay, an Army Veteran who completed nearly eight years of service, had been thinking about getting a dog to help him deal with his posttraumatic stress disorder and major depressive disorder symptoms, so he adopted one with help from **Operation Hero-Animal Bond**. The program, a partnership between VHA and the Humane Society of the United States, connects Veterans with pets through pet fostering, pet adoption, and volunteerism at an animal shelter.

Mr. Findlay's girlfriend, Lexi, discovered Murphy, believed to be a purebred Labrador Retriever, at a shelter. The couple, who lives in Castle Rock,



Veteran Andrew Findlay with his girlfriend, Lexi, and their dog, Murphy.

Colorado, put a 24-hour hold on Murphy while they reached out to Operation Hero-Animal Bond for help. They also wanted to introduce their dog, Kiera, to Murphy to make sure the two dogs would get along. The dogs, Mr. Findlay said, have settled into a "grumpy old men-type relationship," where they nap together, but if Murphy gets too rambunctious, Kiera "has something to say about it."

Mr. Findlay said Murphy, who's just over a year old, "is one of the smartest dogs I've ever seen in my life. We teach him tricks in the matter of an hour. He still has the behavioral quirks of a puppy, but he is such a good dog. We're just really happy to have him."

One of his favorite things to do with Murphy is wrestle, but the pair enjoys quiet times, too. Murphy is also known to flop down on his owner's lap similar to "a rag doll," said Mr. Findlay. "When I'm hanging out with Murphy, I don't feel anxious. There is definitely therapeutic value in that."

Mr. Findlay was going through a divorce at the time of the adoption, which made his house feel a little empty. Murphy is not a substitute for his children, but Mr. Findlay said, "He gives me a little bit more of a sense of purpose, he kicks in my paternal instincts because I'm taking care of him."

Mr. Findlay noted his appreciation for Operation Hero-Animal Bond, not only for the speed with which staff responded to his request for assistance with the adoption, but also for following up with him several times to make sure he and Murphy were doing OK.

Operation Hero-Animal Bond is supported by VHA's Office of Community Engagement (OCE). Learn more about OCE's work at va.gov/healthpartnerships.

Army Veteran finds his ‘right-hand man’ in his rescue dog

If there is anybody Oscar Moreno had to be stuck in quarantine with this past spring during the coronavirus pandemic, he is glad it was his rescue dog, Sophie, whom he calls his “right-hand man.”

Mr. Moreno, an Army Veteran, was paired with Sophie after an initial assessment with Dr. Heidi Ortmeyer, a research physiologist with VA Maryland Health Care System. She brought Sophie to Mr. Moreno’s home in Maryland to see how the pair interacted.

“It kind of just seemed right,” Mr. Moreno said about how he and Sophie got along.

Sophie seems to sense her owner’s mood and counterbalances it as either an energizing force or a calming influence depending on the situation, according to Mr. Moreno, who is diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

“My anxiety gets really bad. I consider the anxiety the highs and the depression the lows. Sophie’s like my opposite, almost. When I have my low days, she’s high energy. She jumps on the bed and wants me to get up—I can’t sleep in past 8 a.m.,” said Mr. Moreno, who now lives in Fife, Washington. “If I’m really, really anxious, she is a really calm dog. She’ll come and lay next to me. We’re leveled out.”

Sophie, who is about to turn 4 years old, made it easier for Mr. Moreno to get out and talk with people before COVID-19. “It was nice because she would help me socialize,” said Mr. Moreno, about the times when the pair went to dog parks and someone would approach him to talk or pet Sophie. “Going out in public was always one of the things that scared me.”

Mr. Moreno adopted Sophie through a **Maddie’s Fund** Innovation Grant awarded to Eskie

Rescuers United, an American Eskimo dog rescue organization based in Maryland. The grant was awarded to encourage adoptions of rescue dogs by Veterans.

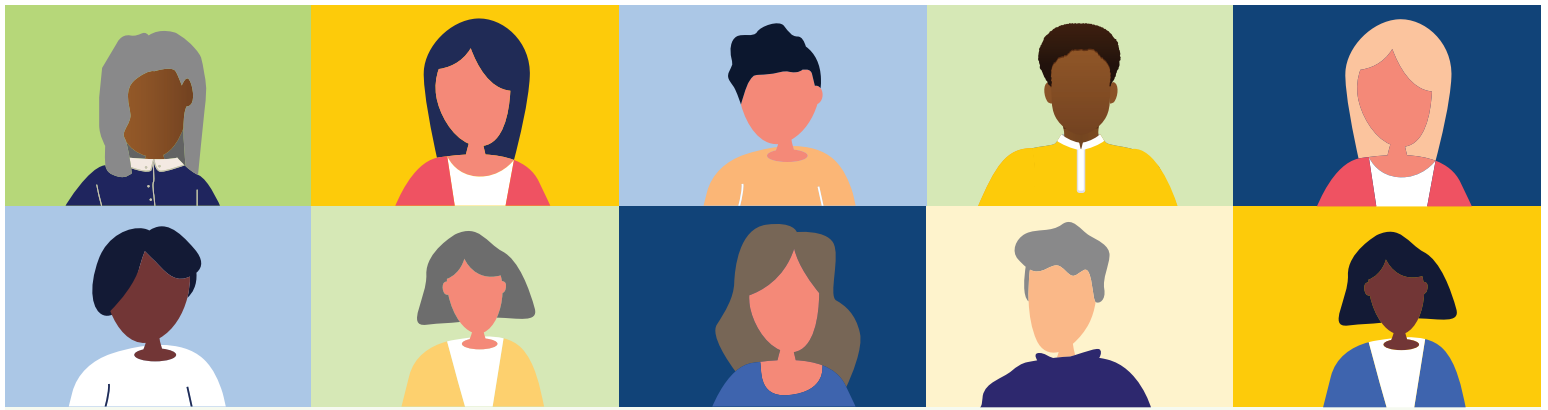
Mr. Moreno comes from a family that owned dogs, but he never had one of his own. He is hoping to adopt at least one other dog because Sophie loves playing with other dogs. “I’m just happy when Sophie’s happy,” he said.

VHA’s Office of Community Engagement (OCE) supports partnerships with organizations that improve the health and quality of life for Veterans, including partnerships that promote the human-animal bond. Research shows that spending time with animals can reduce blood pressure, heart rate, stress hormones, and feelings of isolation.

For more information about OCE’s work, please visit va.gov/healthpartnerships.



Sophie and her owner, Veteran Oscar Moreno.



Meet two of OCE/CCI's staff members

In each of the next few editions of our quarterly newsletter, we are introducing you to the people behind OCE/CCI's work. Read on for more about our team members.

» Dr. Tracy L. Weistreich

*Nurse Executive,
VHA Office of Community Engagement*

Dr. Tracy Weistreich oversees and leads the implementation of OCE's strategic public-private partnerships and CCI's small-scale clinical demonstration projects. Dr. Weistreich has extensive nursing and executive leadership experience, as well as comprehensive knowledge of clinical nursing practice, health care administration, and regulatory requirements. An Army Nurse Corps Veteran, Dr. Weistreich completed her Ph.D. in health care administration from Touro University International and holds several additional degrees and certifications in nursing.

What is the most rewarding thing about the work you do, and why?

My work affords me an opportunity to serve Veterans, improve the quality of their experiences, and expand the array of services available to them through development of national and local strategic partnerships and clinical innovations. As a Veteran, I understand the important role VA plays in the lives of our nation's heroes. Having the

privilege to expand services through nonmonetary partnerships with other government agencies and nongovernmental organizations is the reason I awaken with a smile each day and am energized about going to work.

What motivates you during challenges in the course of your work?

The work we do has a positive and lasting impact on Veterans' health and well-being. We have the capability to expand services and opportunities at a national level, meeting Veterans where they are, and improving the quality and quantity of programs available.

What are some of the most important issues facing Veterans today, and how does your work address those issues?

Due to revolutionary improvements in body armor, surveillance, and technology, Veterans are surviving traumatic injuries, but we are seeing traumatic brain injury, posttraumatic stress disorder, suicide, and pain management issues in great number and to greater severity than ever before. Suicide remains a significant risk for Veterans. Chronic pain and subsequent opioid addiction and social isolation are other persistent concerns.

Our office actively pursues partnerships that address positive social determinants of health, such as food security, spirituality, employment, housing, and mental health. All of our partnerships include education about VA-specific conditions.

Encouraging social integration is the basis of several partnerships, recognizing the importance of having a sense of meaning and purpose.

What about the work you do are you most grateful for?

First, I am grateful for the Veterans who have entrusted their care to us. As a country, we have found a good balance of support for and understanding of the Veteran's experience. This was not always the case, particularly with earlier eras.

I am grateful for the amazing leadership within VA. They ensure we have the tools we need to provide the best care anywhere to Veterans.

I am grateful to the team I am blessed to work with every day. As a small group, we accomplish big things because the sum is greater than the individual efforts.

I am grateful to the public we serve, including caregivers, family members, survivors, and Veterans who have and have not enrolled in our care.

I am grateful for the opportunity to have served Veterans for the past 20 years and plan to for many more.

» Randolph ("Randy") C. Moler

*Licensed Clinical Social Worker,
VHA Office of Community Engagement*

Mr. Moler assists in the development of national partnerships that provide help to Veterans. He coordinates meetings between VHA subject matter experts and representatives from non-governmental organizations to determine if a proposed partnership will directly benefit Veterans. Mr. Moler also works to determine if a proposed partnership will establish measurable goals and outcomes to aid in ongoing monitoring of the partnership.

What motivates you during challenges in the course of your work?

The primary reason I wanted to work at VA was to repay a debt. My father retired from the U.S. Army after serving 30 years. Early in his military career he was deployed to Vietnam. Eight months into his tour, his tank company was called in to support infantry during a firefight. He was injured—shot in the neck. That required an immediate medevac to save his life. I often think about the unknown soldier who pulled him off that tank to get him the medical care he needed and the field hospital staff that stabilized him before he could be transferred for additional care.

Why is the work you do so important for Veterans and their families, caregivers, and survivors?

Developing partnerships with community organizations allows VA to fill gaps in what VA is able to provide. Examples of this could be partnerships with food pantries, transportation services, and organizations that provide housing assistance (such as furnishings and household supplies).

What partnership within OCE holds special meaning for you, and why?

Assisting with the development of the memorandum of agreement (MOA) between VHA and the Parkinson's Foundation (PF) holds a special meaning to me because it will be the first MOA that I have advised on and shepherded through the concurrence process from start to finish. VHA and PF have a shared goal to improve the care and quality of life for Veterans living with Parkinson's through collaborative education, research, and services.

A note from Nurse Executive Dr. Tracy L. Weistreich on OCE and CCI's move to DEAN

As part of a modernization of VHA, OCE and CCI are now aligned under the VHA Office of Discovery, Education and Affiliate Networks (DEAN).

DEAN's focus is to enhance quality care for Veterans by advancing education and training of health care professionals through academic affiliations; clinical research; and an innovation ecosystem that includes simulated learning.

OCE is a natural fit for DEAN because its mission dovetails with DEAN's objective to promote organizational partnerships at the local, state, and national level. OCE will continue its mission to serve as a trusted resource and a catalyst for the growth of effective partnerships and as a facilitator and access point for public and private entities interested in partnering with VHA to benefit Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors.

Likewise, CCI, an OCE program that explores emerging safe and ethical therapies to enhance Veterans' physical and mental well-being, fits in with DEAN's objectives to improve Veteran care, amplify VHA's vital research mission, and drive advancement in scientific knowledge through small-scale clinical demonstration projects. In fact, additional opportunities for CCI projects will result because three offices that focus strongly on innovation are also part of DEAN: VHA's Office of Academic Affiliations, VHA's Office of Research and Development, and VHA's Innovation Ecosystem Office.

OCE and CCI will continue our efforts to help Veterans lead healthier, happier lives. For more information about our work, please visit va.gov/healthpartnerships.

In good health,

Dr. Tracy L. Weistreich,
*Nurse Executive, Office of Community
Engagement and Center for
Compassionate Care Innovation*



In case you missed it: OCE partners step up during COVID-19

OCE's website has a new, special tab called "**OCE Partnerships and COVID-19**." It is a repository for all the stories that showcase our partners' ingenuity and commitment to helping Veterans during these challenging times that make in-person activities nearly or completely impossible.

One recent example comes from Pet Partners. Under pre-COVID circumstances, volunteer handlers bring their animals to VA facilities to visit Veterans or to participate in clinical interventions. Pet Partners volunteers have turned to virtual means to lift patients' spirits by sending photos of the animals to Veterans and by hosting Facebook Live events.

Pet Partners is also encouraging families to read to their pets, especially when school is out of session, so children can maintain and improve their reading skills. The project, called "**We Are All Ears**," encourages reading to pets based on research that shows children are more at ease reading to animals.

Stay tuned to this space to read more about how OCE and CCI team members are directly helping using their expertise and skills during COVID-19!

Read more about how OCE partners are meeting challenges associated with the pandemic on our website: va.gov/healthpartnerships.