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

# Grateful for Veterans and our Partners

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VA



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
Veterans Health Administration



# A Note From the Nurse Executive



As we begin to close out what has been a challenging year, we at the Veterans Health Administration's (VHA)'s Office of Community Engagement (OCE) and Center for Compassionate Care Innovation (CCI) are focused on all the good that has happened—and is still happening—in 2020. VHA and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) have maintained continuity of service for, and our dedication to, Veterans, even with some of the difficulties of the coronavirus pandemic.

Since we published our [last newsletter](#), we have recognized Veterans Day (see VA Secretary Robert Wilkie's Veterans Day [message](#)), and offer in this newsletter the story of one VA medical center (VAMC) staff member who encouraged the community to honor Veterans by submitting fun and heartfelt videos for Veterans Day. Find that story on [page 7](#). That VAMC was one of the winners of the 2020 VHA Community Partnership Challenge—learn more about the 2021 Challenge on [page 6](#).

We also know we are in the middle of a major holiday season. On [page 5](#), you can learn about several other VAMCs that are hosting holiday season donations and charitable giving drives for Veterans, some by way of meaningful community partnerships—these medical centers held unique, COVID-safe events for Veterans Day, too. These events show how VHA and VA staff persevere on behalf of Veterans, no matter what the circumstances. The Cincinnati VAMC also will provide local Veterans meals throughout the holiday season (see story on [page 9](#)), thanks to its “Red, White, and Blue Mart” food pantry inside the center. Volunteers have been working hard to provide Thanksgiving baskets and holiday meals to Veterans and families in the area.

Holidays aside, OCE continues to pursue partnerships that will benefit Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors all year long. Recently, VHA partnered with Salesforce Military, a partnership that will help connect Veterans to employment opportunities and skills training in the tech industry. Learn more about that partnership on [page 3](#). Based on its work on hyperbaric oxygen therapy for Veterans who are diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder, CCI is a natural partner to work with VA on implementing a new law. See [page 8](#).

In case you missed it, you can also find stories we have published in recent months on: the VHA partner Pet Partners' annual “World's Largest Pet Walk,” ([page 11](#)) which was virtual this year but was no less meaningful; a story on OCE's role in the President's Roadmap to Empower Veterans and End a National Tragedy of Suicide ([page 4](#)); and the story of a Veterans Community Partnership that has hosted several Veteran-centered events this year with innovative adjustments in light of COVID-19 ([page 10](#)).

Be sure to read, too, about the stories of a few members of the OCE and CCI team, on [page 12](#). Behind all the work that OCE and CCI do for Veterans and their families are team members who are driven and dedicated each day to helping those who have sacrificed so much.

In good health,  
Dr. Tracy L. Weistreich

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

## Army Veteran, now tech company leader, says Salesforce partnership with VHA brings job opportunities to Veterans

Jared Crain, a U.S. Army Veteran and director of workforce development for [Salesforce Military](#), laughed when asked about his post-military employment experience.

“The last time I’d looked for a job I was a high school sophomore,” Crain explained. “For men and women finishing up their service or looking at transitioning, it’s a completely different world.”

“I questioned what I was going to do multiple times when I was getting out of the Army,” continued Crain. He wasn’t thinking, he said, of how to translate his skills into work in the civilian sector. Then, someone introduced him to the Salesforce Military program, of which he is a graduate.

“It’s like getting the blinders taken off, you realize, ‘I can go into this [tech] industry,’” he said.

[Salesforce, Inc., a customer relationship management platform](#), partnered with VHA in October 2020. Crain’s realization is what he said he hopes other Veterans and military spouses will gain from this partnership. Through the nonmonetary partnership, VHA and Salesforce will coordinate their efforts to help Veterans and military spouses access free training, education, and job opportunities.

[Research has found](#) that Salesforce and its partners will create 4.2 million jobs by 2024, and Crain said that Veterans and military spouses are ideal candidates because of the skills they cultivate during military service.

Military spouses, for example, might take responsibility for home repairs, child care, and family emergencies on their own. They are “masters at prioritizing and finding creative solutions to problems, at interpersonal interactions,” Crain said.

Veterans, similarly, have a keen understanding of logistics, detailed processes, working under stress, and having challenging conversations. Alumni of the Salesforce Military program have taken on positions within software companies as consultants, administrators or managers, or have started their own companies. Such employment changes lives for the better, Crain said.

“Having a meaningful, successful job, that’s a big part of who you are. The way VA has stepped in during this transition helps to alleviate some of the pressure.”

Part of VHA’s role in the partnership, managed by the [Office of Community Engagement \(OCE\)](#), is to expand access to information on suicide prevention. Not only will Salesforce Military help facilitate meaningful employment; a social determinant of health that can decrease suicide risk, its [Trailhead Military platform](#) will also include information about VHA benefits and suicide prevention resources such as the [Veterans Crisis Line](#).

The Salesforce Military program is open to all Veterans and military spouses, Crain said, no matter their age or experience.

Christine Eickhoff, health systems specialist for OCE who oversees this partnership, said: “VHA’s partnership with Salesforce will help Veterans and their spouses thrive across social determinants of health, which are important factors in VHA’s whole health approach. Connecting with Veterans and military spouses about suicide prevention, especially through a partnership that may reach those who do not regularly engage with VHA, has great potential to help reduce the risk of Veteran suicide.”

To learn more about Salesforce Military, visit [Salesforce.com/military](https://Salesforce.com/military).

To learn more about OCE’s partnership work, visit [VA.gov/healthpartnerships](https://VA.gov/healthpartnerships).

## OCE plays a critical role in Veteran suicide prevention

The Office of Community Engagement (OCE) is playing a key role in VA's and VHA's top clinical priority to prevent suicide by facilitating, coordinating, and maintaining nonmonetary partnerships that provide support for Veterans everywhere.

OCE has also been instrumental in the President's Roadmap to Empower Veterans and End a National Tragedy of Suicide (PREVENTS). On March 5, 2019, the president signed Executive Order 13861, establishing PREVENTS and creating an interagency task force to lead the development and implementation of a national, comprehensive roadmap to change how the nation treats mental health and understands suicide prevention.

Dr. Tracy L. Weistreich, nurse executive for OCE, served as a deputy lead for the Workforce and Professional Development line of effort within PREVENTS, under the leadership of Dr. Carolyn Clancy, assistant under secretary for health for Discovery, Education, and Affiliate Networks (DEAN). This team of contributors worked to identify challenges and establish best practices for suicide prevention efforts for employers and employees working across government agencies.

Dr. Weistreich continues to work on implementing best practices identified in the PREVENTS Roadmap and says that VA's public health approach will improve health outcomes for Veterans.

"Our belief is that everyone has a role to play in suicide prevention, and that our efforts need to focus on the community and on every individual," said Dr. Weistreich. "By educating everyone through a public health approach, we will increase awareness of the risk factors, signs, and ways to help so we can reduce the number of Veterans who die by suicide."

Some VHA partnerships coordinated by OCE have a clear connection to improving access to suicide prevention services—OnStar's emergency services will connect Veterans to VHA's Veterans Crisis Line around the clock. Many partnerships reduce the risk of death by suicide among Veterans by supporting the public health approach, offering small-scale clinical innovations, or by improving access to social determinants of health (SDOH). SDOH are conditions in the environments in which Veterans live, learn, work, play, worship, and age that affect a wide range of health, functioning, and quality-of-life outcomes and risks.

Examples of SDOH are access to transportation, food security, and employment. Some OCE-supported partnerships that support the SDOH and thereby decrease suicide risk are:

- MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger, which promotes food security for Veterans;
- Pet Partners, which enables therapy animal visits to decrease social isolation;
- Y-USA, which offers health services to better connect Veterans to their communities and provide a social environment for them to be active.

Dr. Weistreich also added that, "most of the partnerships are open to all Veterans, regardless of their VHA enrollment status or eligibility. This means that these partnerships increase the chance of reaching a Veteran who may not be receiving care from VHA. This makes the suicide prevention components of these partnerships even more important."

According to VA's 2019 Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report, there are many Veterans who do not use VHA services and the majority of Veteran suicides occur among Veterans who have not recently engaged in VHA services.

To learn more about how OCE builds partnerships across VHA to support Veterans, visit [VA.gov/healthpartnerships](https://www.va.gov/healthpartnerships).



## VA partners make season bright for Veterans

While COVID-19 has restricted the ability to host many events, Veterans served by the VA Central California Health System take comfort in seeing traditions continue even if they cannot attend in person, according to Voluntary Service Officer Mary Golden.

That's why a Veterans Day 2020 wreath-laying ceremony, much like one on Memorial Day, was broadcast on social media. Another VA Central California tradition will continue as planned with one adjustment. Organizers of VA Voluntary Service's annual Duffle Stuff Donation Drive requested that holiday season donations be made earlier than usual to allow time for items to be quarantined for three to five days before they are distributed. The project benefits 500 Veterans every year.

Other VA medical centers (VAMCs) across the country are also keeping up their holiday traditions with slight modifications. In New York, Canandaigua VAMC's Voluntary Service Office, for instance, requested donations of Walmart gift cards instead of holiday stockings. Operation Making Spirits Bright, for which volunteers purchase gifts for Veterans and their families, continued this year, as did the VAMC's year-round request for items such as gift cards, clothing, toiletries, bedding, baby items, and cleaning supplies. Deliveries of these gifts to the VAMC, however, had to be scheduled in advance, due to COVID-19.

The 2020 holiday season looks a little different this year at the Syracuse VAMC, also, because volunteers cannot distribute items to Veterans in-person. Those interactions will be left to the VAMC's recreation therapy staff who "dress up for these events and spread cheer, enthusiasm, fun, and friendly competition to create a lively environment," said Robert McLean, a public affairs officer and Marine Corps Veteran.

The inability of volunteers to visit VAMCs in person has not stopped partners and community groups from asking what they can do to support Veterans in other ways. For Veterans Day, Syracuse VAMC received cards and a banner thanking Veterans for their service, and several music groups live-streamed performances for Veterans.



Organizations are also digging deeper and creating new traditions to help those in need this year. A shopping spree that benefits children of Veterans in VA Central California's Homeless Program is in its second year. Last year the Kiwanis/Burlington Holiday Project provided 68 children with a pair of shoes, a coat and a sweater, or a sweatshirt. This year, the Fresno Kiwanis pledged to raise enough funds to provide an even larger budget for 100 children, which will allow them to purchase additional clothing, such as underwear, socks, and pants.

"Our community partners have always supported Veterans, their families, and caregivers. These examples are a few of the ways, during COVID-19, that VA facility staff and their community partners demonstrate how dedicated and creative they can be," said Dr. Tracy L. Weistreich, OCE nurse executive.

OCE hosts the annual National VHA Community Partnership Challenge, which has a fitting theme for 2021 given the difficulties presented by the pandemic: "Adaptability in a Changing World." For details on the contest, see **page 6**.

## Community Partnership Challenge focuses on diversity and adapting in a ‘changing world’

COVID-19 has brought about many restrictions to everyday life, but VA and VHA partners have risen to the occasion to keep helping Veterans, families, caregivers, and survivors by taking resources and programs online, or making other modifications to keep people safe.

The virus’ impact was one of the inspirations for the theme of the 2021 National VHA Community Partnership Challenge: “Adaptability in a Changing World.”

“The foundational thought was to bring the diversity and inclusion framework into the Challenge,” said Georgeanna Bady, health systems specialist in VHA’s Office of Community Engagement (OCE), which organizes the annual competition that recognizes outstanding partnerships between VHA and local organizations. “We also wanted to show how VA is agile and innovative—that we can change with what the needs of the Veterans and their families are.”

Entries must demonstrate how the partnership addresses one or more of the following categories:

- **Clinical and Self-Care:** Provides resources that directly support Veterans’ mental, emotional, and/or physical health and promote health and well-being.
- **Support of Social Determinants of Health:** Provides education, employment, food security, housing, transportation, and/or spiritual support opportunities.
- **Newly Transitioning Service Members:** Provides health services, employment, and/or benefits for newly transitioning Veterans (within 0-12 months of leaving active duty).

- **COVID-19 Pandemic/Flu:** Provides access to existing health care and/or the ability to provide new services or benefits that Veterans need due to COVID-19 or the flu.
- **Caregivers/Families:** Provides resources for Veteran caregivers and family members to support their ability to care for Veterans.

Entries also must describe how the partnership is built to serve Veterans of all races, ethnicities, sexual identities, languages, learning styles, and/or spiritual preferences in the context of one or more of the categories listed above. The newly transitioning service members category, for instance, was added as an example of age diversity.

“When we think of diversity, we always think ethnicity, but that’s not the only area of diversity. There’s gender diversity, lifestyle diversity,” said Ms. Bady.

In addition to a new theme, this year’s competition, which will kick off in January, has a different name—it’s now the **National** VHA Community Partnership Challenge. In reviewing records, Ms. Bady discovered that the first challenge, held in 2014, had the word “national” in it.

“The word ‘national’ includes ‘nation’ and ‘nation’ includes everybody,” said Ms. Bady. “We are reinstating that word because adaptability, diversity, and inclusion encompass the theme.” In addition, submissions come from all over the country, she explained. The contest is open to every VHA medical center, health care center, community-based outpatient center, clinic, and program office. The top three submissions are honored in a ceremony and with an award from the executive in charge and recognition from the VA secretary.

For more information on the Challenge and how to enter, be sure to bookmark [VA.gov/healthpartnerships](https://www.va.gov/healthpartnerships) for updates.

## Community and partners rally around Charleston-area Veterans for Veterans Day and beyond

When organizers at [Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center](#) (VAMC) in Charleston, South Carolina, realized the city's traditional Veterans Day parade wasn't feasible this year because of COVID-19, they decided cancellation wasn't an option.

"Instead of just saying 'No, we're not doing a parade,' we said, 'OK, how can we do it and make it special and inclusive?'" said Sue Kerver, [VA Voluntary Service](#) program manager and Coast Guard Veteran.

This year's [event](#), hosted on Facebook Live on Veterans Day, became a virtual parade of videos that paid tribute to the region's Veterans. Seventy groups had answered the call to record heartfelt messages and greetings that were compiled for the video. Ms. Kerver called the community's response "unbelievable" for two reasons. First, using technology can be a challenge for some people. Secondly, she received videos from the VAMC's entire service area, which ranges from Hinesville, Georgia, to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina—both cities more than a two-hour drive from Charleston.

Then again, the response might not have been so surprising after all. Ralph H. Johnson VAMC has been relying on the community and partnerships to augment its services and resources for the past 50 years.

"Folks are so dedicated to the health and welfare of our Veterans in the catchment area that when we bring new ideas, initiatives, or asks to them, quite often, we come to 'yes' pretty quickly," Ms. Kerver said.

Ralph H. Johnson VAMC was one of three [winners](#) in the 2020 Veterans Health Administration's Community Partnership Challenge, hosted by VHA's Office of Community Engagement (OCE).

The VAMC was recognized for its partnership with Lowcountry Hospitality Association, which has resulted in the placement of more than 97 Veterans in hospitality industry jobs since its inception in 2017.

"This area is very Veteran-centric. It's very supportive of Veterans," said Erin Curran, public affairs specialist at Ralph H. Johnson. "We have a lot of people in our community who want to help this population."

One of those helpers was a local television station, WCIV ABC News 4, which pitched in to spread the word about the Veterans Day event. The media partner fueled many of the submissions and drove traffic to the VAMC's Facebook page, Ms. Curran said.

"There are a lot of things we couldn't do without our community partners and we rely on them a lot," said Ms. Curran. "We know they've been important in the past and they will continue to be just as important, if not more important, as we go forward."

Partnerships allow VHA to address urgent and emerging Veteran needs, often by incorporating creative ideas from private-sector partners. OCE serves as the expert on partnerships within VHA. For more information, visit [VA.gov/healthpartnerships](https://www.va.gov/healthpartnerships).



*VFW Post 3137 marches down a beach to honor Veterans.*

## Law emphasizes importance of partnerships for Veterans' well-being

A recently passed bill aims to improve the quality of mental health care provided by VA, in part through nonmonetary community partnerships. The Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act of 2019 (Hannon Act) was signed into law in October 2020. The law includes a number of initiatives designed to support innovative mental health care services for Veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and traumatic brain injuries (TBI). One of these initiatives is to use community partnerships to facilitate research on the use of hyperbaric oxygen treatment (HBOT).

HBOT is a procedure that increases oxygen in the body to encourage healing. Currently, the procedure is commonly used to treat carbon monoxide poisoning, wounds that may not heal as a result of diabetes or radiation injury, and other health care issues by helping blood carry extra oxygen throughout the body. HBOT is not an evidence-based treatment for PTSD, any other mental health diagnosis, or TBI.

Section 702 of the Hannon Act allows VA to enter into nonmonetary partnerships with non-federal government entities to provide HBOT to Veterans for the purposes of research and to review the use of HBOT for treatment for PTSD and TBI symptoms.

VHA's Office of Community Engagement (OCE), VHA's partnerships resource, and its staff members are experts in partnership creation and support. OCE helps make possible partnerships that benefit the health and well-being of Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors.

The Center for Compassionate Care Innovation (CCI) is a program within OCE. The mission of CCI is to explore new, unique health care treatments that are safe for Veterans and that improve their physical and mental health.

Since 2017, [CCI has supported](#) a small-scale clinical (non-research) program evaluation referring Veterans diagnosed with PTSD, who have not responded optimally to at least two evidence-based therapies, for HBOT in Department of Defense and community clinics outside of VA. This treatment occurs under the close supervision of both physicians and mental health clinicians. The clinical program evaluation, designed to better understand the feasibility and resource requirements associated with HBOT treatment for Veterans diagnosed with PTSD, makes CCI a natural partner to work with VA's Office of Research and Development on implementing the Hannon Act and the new initiatives in it.



“OCE is committed to developing partnerships that improve the health and well-being of Veterans,” said Dr. Tracy L. Weistreich, nurse executive for OCE. “CCI has identified various mechanisms to enable the use of innovative treatments to help and offer hope to Veterans who do not respond optimally to treatment.”

CCI has supported many health care innovations in recent years focused on Veteran mental health. Over the past three years, CCI has worked with clinicians and researchers across the system to provide Veterans with new treatment options such as [stellate ganglion block for PTSD symptoms](#) and [light emitting diode therapy for Veterans diagnosed with TBI](#).

For more information on CCI's mission and research efforts, visit: [va.gov/HEALTHPARTNERSHIPS/CCIMission.asp](https://va.gov/HEALTHPARTNERSHIPS/CCIMission.asp)



## VAMC partnership provides meals for Veteran families throughout holiday season

The Red, White, and Blue Mart food pantry located at the Cincinnati VA Medical Center (CVAMC) and two of its community-based outpatient clinics distribute food to Veterans year-round, but meals this time of year often come with a little more cheer. Volunteers have been busy throughout November and December handing out holiday meals to local Veteran families in need.

The holiday spirit at these food pantries is the continuation of a service that has provided more than 14,000 meals to Veterans and their families since 2017. It's all made possible through a nonmonetary partnership between the CVAMC, Feeding America, and the Freestore Foodbank. The volunteers are coordinated through VA Voluntary Services.



“Our goal this holiday season and throughout the year is to care for local Veterans and their families,” said Sara Krzywkowski- Mohn EdD, MSHA, a health promotion and disease prevention program manager at CVAMC and a PACT Team Nurse Practitioner. Dr. Krzywkowski-Mohn is an Army Veteran herself, having served for three years in Frankfurt, Germany, and feels especially proud to help fellow Veterans. “Food is medicine, and I believe that meeting the basic needs for Veterans should come before we start caring for their medical issues.”

A potential grant with Feeding America may increase this partnership's reach even more by funding the creation of additional pantries and farmers markets at each of CVAMC's six community-based outpatient clinics. The grant also would provide funding for a women's social and educational program, as well as a picnic focusing on nutrition and healthy living that would be held after the COVID-19 pandemic.

By screening for food insecurity and factors that may increase food insecurity, such as number of dependents in the home, the Red, White, and Blue Mart is impacting positive social determinants of health (SDOH) for Veterans. SDOH are conditions in the environments in which people live, learn, work, play, worship, and age that affect a wide range of health, functioning, and quality-of-life outcomes and risks. Examples of SDOH are access to transportation, food security, and employment.

VHA's Office of Community Engagement (OCE) highlights outstanding work VHA employees do to create community-level partnerships and encourage others to create similar partnerships to benefit Veterans.

“Partnerships like the one between the CVAMC, Feeding America, and the Freestore Foodbank are great examples of how local organizations can collaborate with VA medical centers to care for Veterans,” said Tracy Weistreich, nurse executive for OCE. “Our hope is that similar partnerships can be created across the country to increase food security and improve a wide range of SDOH.”

For more information on OCE's work or to contact OCE for partnership opportunities, please visit: [VA.gov/healthpartnerships](https://www.va.gov/healthpartnerships).

To learn more about VA Voluntary Services, visit [Volunteer.VA.gov](https://www.volunteer.va.gov).

## Even during COVID-19, VCPs go above and beyond for Veterans

COVID-19 has not stopped the Hampton Roads Veteran Community Partnership (VCP) from safely honoring and supporting Veterans in creative, thoughtful ways.

The Hampton Roads VCP, which includes the Hampton VA Medical Center and local community partners, hosted pinning ceremonies honoring and recognizing Veterans for their service. They also held a birthday concert for a Veteran Navy SEAL and coordinated donations for Veterans experiencing homelessness in the area.

Recently, representatives from this Virginia VCP compiled and distributed an inspirational photo collage including images of the recent physically distanced and safe events they organized for Veterans.

“Since COVID-19 we’ve been having such a wonderful time serving the community, and our community partners have been doing a lot of things serving the community,” said Ms. Yvonne Bailey, a social worker at the Hampton VA Medical Center who works on the VCP. “I thought it would be helpful to put it in a collage so we could showcase what we’re doing, so other people could see it and get interested in [doing the same].” Members of the VCP distributed the collage to community partners in their area.

VCPs are coalitions that bring community entities together to foster Veterans’ access to care and supportive services in the community and at VA medical centers. Any one VCP in the United States—there are 41 as of December 2019—is part of the national VCP initiative, a joint project of VHA’s Offices of Community Engagement (OCE), Geriatrics and Extended Care, Rural Health, and Caregiver Support.

Sharing the good news about what the VCP is able to do during COVID-19 started as a way to share best practices, said Mary Dorss, community liaison

for Freda H. Gordon Hospice & Palliative Care, one of the health care agencies working as part of this VCP.

“We wanted to encourage each other and give each other ideas for things we could be doing during the pandemic when a lot of our traditional events were just not feasible,” Ms. Dorss explained.

These events are meaningful for Veterans during this challenging time. During the birthday party for the former Navy SEAL, Mrs. Dorss herself played patriotic songs on the violin. The Veteran was able to connect with other Veterans from a distance, fulfilling the need for social connectedness during a time of physical distancing.

“You could just see him light up from all we were able to do, even from a distance,” said Mrs. Dorss.

For pinning ceremonies, staff members present a red rose instead of a pin to eliminate the need for close face-to-face contact during the pinning. Another event included in the photo collage is the STOP Inc. (Supporting Transformational Opportunities for People) activity where “housewarming gift” donations were collected for Veterans living in transitional housing. Masks and “air hugs” helped keep participants safe.

Many of those served by the Hampton Roads VCP are Veterans in hospice or palliative care settings, explained Ms. Dorss. The need for social connection during COVID-19 is particularly great for this population.

“The population we serve are already so very prone to isolation, depression, not feeling like they’re a part of the community anymore,” Ms. Dorss said. “We felt it was particularly important to focus on our Veterans who are experiencing health issues or in care facilities to make sure that they know they’re not forgotten.”

For more information on VCPs and how OCE coordinates partnerships across VHA, please visit [VA.gov/healthpartnerships](https://www.va.gov/healthpartnerships).

## World's Largest Pet Walk encourages Veterans to get moving with furry friends

Air Force Veteran Sonya Heilmann said that her therapy dog, Jock, a 7-year-old Pembroke Welsh Corgi, seems sad since he cannot visit patients in medical centers due to COVID-19. The visits are his favorite activities.

"He really needed to go and do his job," Ms. Heilmann said. "Once we get to the hospital, and I put his little vest on, he gets a bounce in his walk. It looks like he's actually smiling."

Ms. Heilmann, who lives in Marion, Iowa, is a volunteer with Pet Partners, which promotes the health benefits of animal-assisted activities and therapies, which use specialized animals for patients' benefits. Ms. Heilmann and Jock have visited patients in their region several times per month since 2016.

Pet Partners partnered with VHA in 2019. The goal of the partnership is to bring the health benefits of the human-animal bond—which is the beneficial relationship between people and animals—to more Veterans. Research shows that this bond can lower blood pressure, lessen anxiety and pain, and decrease feelings of loneliness.

To uplift the importance of physical activity in addition to animal companionship, Pet Partners hosted its annual World's Largest Pet Walk 2020 event on Sept. 26. Anyone could participate from anywhere, and the event is Pet Partners' signature fundraiser. Ms. Heilmann and Jock participated to support her recovery from a knee injury and help raise awareness about Pet Partners.

"My plan was to go out and walk at least half an hour," she said. "Walking is very good for my knee therapy."

The walking is good for both her and Jock, she explained.

"Corgis are herding dogs, they need to get out and have exercise and some sort of enrichment every day. Once I see how much fun Jock is having, after I'm outside in the sunshine and fresh air, I'm feeling much better. My mood has improved," she said.

Funds raised for Pet Partners from the Pet Walk will help make therapy animal visits possible and help launch Pet Partners' Animal-Assisted Crisis Response Program.

The Pet Partners partnership, which is managed by VHA's Office of Community Engagement (OCE), has promoted other Pet Partners activities, such as encouraging families and children to read to their pets, virtual pet visitation, and plans to provide training webinars for volunteer animal handlers such as Ms. Heilmann.



*Jock*

One of the most meaningful visits was their first, Ms. Heilmann said. She and Jock went to see a young boy undergoing cancer treatments. As he visited and cuddled with Jock, the boy said, "Oh, I'm so happy, I love you, you're the best little dog, I wish I could keep you," Ms. Heilmann said.

"Here he is with tubes and wires on him, [but] for a few minutes his eyes were just glowing," she continued. "I thought, this is exactly what we're supposed to be doing with Jock."

For more on OCE's work, please visit: [VA.gov/healthpartnerships](https://www.va.gov/healthpartnerships).



## Meet two of OCE and CCI's staff members

*In this issue, we wrap up our series of profiles on our team members.*

### » Dr. Kimberly Pugh

*Health Systems Specialist*

Dr. Pugh has more than 20 years of federal experience. She has held various positions within VA, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and the U.S. Department of Defense. Dr. Pugh has degrees in nursing and education. She earned her doctoral degree from Morgan State University.

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

I am the daughter of a Veteran. Various health care professionals helped my dad when he was in need of VA services and care. I am rewarded knowing that I am helping someone's father, mother, or other family member acquire their health care needs.

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

The VHA/Y-USA partnership holds special meaning for me because this partnership works to promote and enhance the health and well-being of Veterans. It was so exciting to hear from a Veteran who shared how their PTSD improved by exercising and socializing at one of the YMCA locations. The Veteran said the VHA's partnership with the Y-USA is a "match made in heaven."

#### **What is the best part about working with your team?**

I enjoy our team collaboration. We have fruitful discussions that allow us to share ideas and

suggestions. Through collaboration, the team works together to complete tasks and accomplish the mission.

### » Latonya Agyekum

*Administrative Officer*

Ms. Agyekum serves as the administrative officer to the nurse executive of OCE. She is responsible for managing projects, assisting in coordinating daily office activities, and providing expert support to the nurse executive. Ms. Agyekum began her career as a legal assistant at the Board of Veterans Appeals and has worked as a program support assistant in VHA's Chief Business Office and as a staff assistant in VHA's Office of Primary Care. Latonya graduated from Prince George's Community College with a degree in business management.

#### **What is something about OCE and CCI that you think readers should know about?**

We ensure that partnerships address a need or gap that VA cannot address alone. We ensure that partnerships enhance programs and services that benefit Veterans and help support partnerships that leverage community support.

#### **What is the best part about working with your team?**

That we actually work as a team to achieve a common goal—to support the best partnership proposals and innovative treatments that will be a great benefit to our Veterans.

#### **Why is the work coming from OCE and CCI so important?**

It's important because we are helping to maximize available resources and services for Veterans. We work together to support those who have sacrificed so much and none of us could do it alone!