



LETTER FROM THE CHIEF

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Acting Associate Deputy Under Secretary for Health

Dear Colleagues,

When I last wrote the introduction to *CONNECTION*, most of us who serve on Team ORE were deep in the doldrums of winter. Where I live in Massachusetts, ice and snow start in the late autumn months and can last for almost a half a year. But today, it's definitely looking and feeling like spring.

I really enjoy the sense of renewal this season brings—the flowers and plants are growing; the birds are nesting. Over the past two years, we've all adapted to life during the COVID-19 pandemic—and VHA also adapted and continued to deliver excellent care to Veterans during a time of national hardship. Many of you likely faced some personal hardship over the past two years—and you've demonstrated both your resilience and your deep commitment to the work we do.

May is National Military Appreciation Month, a time set aside to "ensure the nation was given the chance to publicly show their appreciation for troops past and present." The month begins with Loyalty Day, when we are challenged to celebrate and live up to the principles set out in our Constitution. And it ends with Memorial Day—a solemn time to remember the men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice in giving their lives in service to our country.

Since each of us on Team ORE spends our work lives serving Veterans, "military appreciation" is not as abstract to us as it may seem to some Americans. We don't have to pause and think about appreciating our military on just a few holidays each year. We know active-duty service members, and we work alongside their spouses or parents, their family and friends. When we honor military spouses on May 6, we do

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Story ideas can be submitted to: oreteamdis@disconsulting.com.

so knowing the sacrifices they are called to make when a partner or co-parent is deployed; and we demonstrate our appreciation for the nation's military with our work each day to ensure that Veterans receive the very best health care.

As a physician, I always believed that when you keep the patient as your focus, other issues will be clarified and will be easier to resolve or may resolve themselves. I feel the same about our shared work as part of Team ORE. While the work we do under the ORE umbrella is broad and far-reaching, we are connected by our shared mission to promote ethics and accountability in VA healthcare with the Veteran as the focus. When we keep this mission as our focus, we honor Veterans—and demonstrate our appreciation for America's military—every day.

I hope you enjoy this issue of *CONNECTION*.

NEW LEADER PROFILE: DR. FREDERICK KOTLER, VHA MEDICAL INSPECTOR

TELL ME ABOUT YOUR ROLE WITHIN TEAM ORE

I currently serve as the VHA Medical Inspector, leading a team of three physicians, seven nurses and five administrative professionals at VHA's Office of Medical Inspector (OMI). I've been part of OMI for four years and became the Acting Medical Inspector in October of 2021. Officially, I became the Medical Inspector on March 13, 2022.



OMI is charged with investigating allegations related to quality of care and patient safety at VA medical facilities. OMI functions as an independent investigative office that reports to the Under Secretary for Health (USH). Most of our investigations stem from allegations made by whistleblowers who identify and report a problem related to health care at a VA facility. We receive case referrals from several sources, including the Office of Special Counsel, the VA Office of Accountability and Whistleblower Protection (OAWP), the VA Office of the Inspector General or directly from the USH.

The issues OMI investigates include things like failure to follow guidelines for sterile processing, failure to adequately staff a particular unit, or to otherwise meet standards for quality of care. Recently, during the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen an increase in allegations concerning staff safety at VA facilities. When we conclude an investigation, we produce a report that includes our findings, conclusions and recommendations. The facility will develop a plan to address our concerns and we will work in step with that facility until the plan is complete.

WHAT'S YOUR FAVORITE PART OF YOUR WORK AT VHA?

I've been at VA for almost 24 years, so clearly, I enjoy my work! Throughout my career at VA—especially at OMI—I've had the good fortune to work with great colleagues who are passionate about caring for Veterans.

I take so much joy and pride in the fact that we make a real difference in improving overall patient care and safety—and I find it very satisfying to be able to positively affect the quality of treatment patients receive across the system. While our investigations often make recommendations

to fix problems that are specific to one facility, sometimes those recommendations can have a nationwide impact. It's great when we can recommend ways facilities can head off problems before they occur.

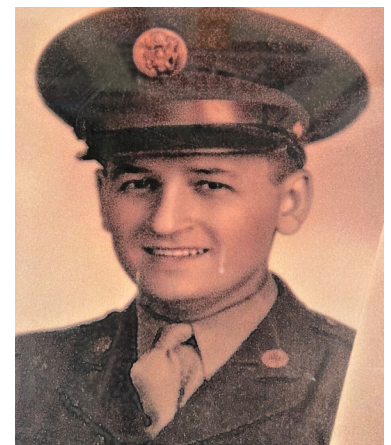
MAY IS MILITARY APPRECIATION MONTH. WHAT DOES THIS MONTH MEAN TO YOU?

I first worked with Veterans when I was a medical student at the University of Maryland, and from the beginning, I loved treating these men and women and getting to know them. It's amazing to me what people do and the enormous sacrifices they make in the name of service to our country. So, during military appreciation month—and all year round—I think of the hundreds of men and women I've gotten to know during my 24 years of service to VA. Each of us owes a debt of gratitude to the men, women and families who are making sacrifices each day for our country.

On Memorial Day, we honor and recognize those who made the ultimate sacrifice for our country, and in doing so allowed the rest of us to maintain our freedom and way of life. When you work with service members and Veterans, the weight of that sacrifice—and the impact it has—is very real.

WHY HAVE YOU CHOSEN TO SPEND YOUR CAREER SERVING VETERANS? IN OTHER WORDS, "WHAT'S YOUR WHY?"

I was very close with my grandfather, who was a World War II Army Veteran. He passed in 2006 at the age of 91, and I have a photo of him in his Army uniform in my family room. It means so much to me to take care of those who served as my grandfather did. During medical school and residency, I spent many months working at the VA in both Baltimore and Pittsburgh, and I loved it. I met so many interesting people and found it so rewarding to care for the Veteran population. The Veterans were so appreciative of what we were able to do for them. When, after two years in private practice, I saw a job listing back at the Baltimore VA, I jumped at the chance to serve Veterans again. And the rest is history! I have thoroughly enjoyed my time at VA and I would do it all over again.



OIC RISK MANAGEMENT PROFESSIONALS PRESENT AT HEALTH CARE COMPLIANCE ASSOCIATION

On March 28, Natalie Bulger, Nick Boyd and Andria Nichols from the Office of Integrity and Compliance (OIC) presented at the national [Health Care Compliance Association \(HCCA\) Annual Compliance Institute](#) in person in Phoenix, Arizona.

Their presentation, “Seeing Risk in a Different Light,” told the story of OIC’s recent effort to transform VHA’s risk management. When the team started this effort in 2017, VHA was managing risk through spreadsheets in Microsoft Excel. Last year, OIC Risk Management launched a new, user-friendly online portal that captures risk data and trends in real time with the ability to view data at the local, regional and national level.

The team shared lessons learned and key details of how large and small health care systems can model VHA’s approach in transforming risk management and capturing data, modeled on the success here at the nation’s largest health care system. By improving the way VHA manages risk, it can improve health outcomes and health care for individual Veterans.



OIC RISK MANAGEMENT PORTAL SOLUTION

Using Microsoft PowerApps, an off-the-shelf software, VHA OIC created a “one-stop shop” platform for collaboration between leaders, Integrity and Compliance Officers (ICOs), risk owners and business process owners. The resulting system better positions VHA to collect and report emerging risks, facilitating long-term, cross-functional solutions.

NEW VIDEO

This [new video](#) was presented at the conference: “VHA: Seeing Risk in a Different Light.”

VISN INTEGRITY AND COMPLIANCE OFFICER IDENTIFIES AND CORRECTS SYSTEM-WIDE POTENTIAL FRAUD ISSUE: PURCHASE CARD HOLDERS ACCEPTING FREE OFFERS

WHAT HAPPENED?

Some purchase card holders at a VHA Medical Center were accepting “free offers” from vendors based on the total spending. These items were not gifts. They were government property because they were acquired with government funds. This was fraudulent action by the employees.

The VISN Integrity and Compliance Officer (ICO) researched the situation and found that there was already a VHA policy in place, but it was not included in standard training for purchase card holders.

Her review and coordination with VHA compliance professionals at every level led to a training update across the VHA system, one example of how VHA’s compliance program can address the root cause of a problem.

VETERANS HEALTH ADMINISTRATION (VHA) CODE OF INTEGRITY

All VHA employees abide by the VHA Code of Integrity, which ensures employees follow both the letter and the spirit of applicable laws, regulations and policies. The VHA Code of Integrity underscores an employee’s Duty to Report fraud, waste and abuse, as well as to act with integrity—doing what is right, even when no one is looking.

VHA’s Integrity and Compliance Program assists VHA program offices, Veteran Integrated Service Networks (VISNs) and facilities with managing and mitigating legal and regulatory risks. The program also addresses enterprise-wide oversight and accountability concerns. Integrity and Compliance Officers (ICOs) at VA Medical Centers and VISN offices help leaders across operational areas develop and implement long-range solutions to big-picture problems. This case study illustrates how one ICO can make a difference in solving an enterprise-wide problem.

VISN INTEGRITY AND COMPLIANCE OFFICER IDENTIFIES AND CORRECTS SYSTEM-WIDE POTENTIAL FRAUD ISSUE: PURCHASE CARD HOLDERS ACCEPTING FREE OFFERS

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CHALLENGE: EMPLOYEES SELECTING AND ACCEPTING FREE OFFERS FROM VENDORS

An employee at a VA Medical Center reported a concern to the facility Chief Logistics Officer after noticing an invoice included an item with no associated charge. After reviewing additional invoices with similar extra items, the Associate Medical Center Director asked the facility ICO to conduct a fact-finding to explore allegations of misconduct at the facility. The facility ICO reached out to the VISN ICO for awareness.

An invoice review identified several purchase card holders were selecting and receiving items identified as free offers when making official purchases on behalf of VA and keeping these “free” items for personal use. Based on the total dollar amount of the purchase, employees were allowed to select a free item from the vendor’s free offer catalogue as a thank you for spending a certain amount to money.

After the initial finding at the original facility, the VISN ICO conducted a systematic assessment at facilities across the VISN. This level of review can often identify whether further incidents are occurring and initiate appropriate steps to address wide-spread problems.

The facility and VISN ICO identified one vendor commonly giving “free offers” to VHA purchase card holders. The facility ICO and VISN Compliance team examined invoices by individual purchase card holders. Upon identifying the free offers selected and received by the purchase card holders, the market value was researched through the vendor’s website and national retailer websites to determine the overall value of accepted items. The employees may not have known, but by taking the “free” item they were stealing government property, since it was government money used to make the official purchases.

SOLUTION: COLLABORATION ACROSS AREAS OF OPERATIONS AND LEVELS OF LEADERSHIP

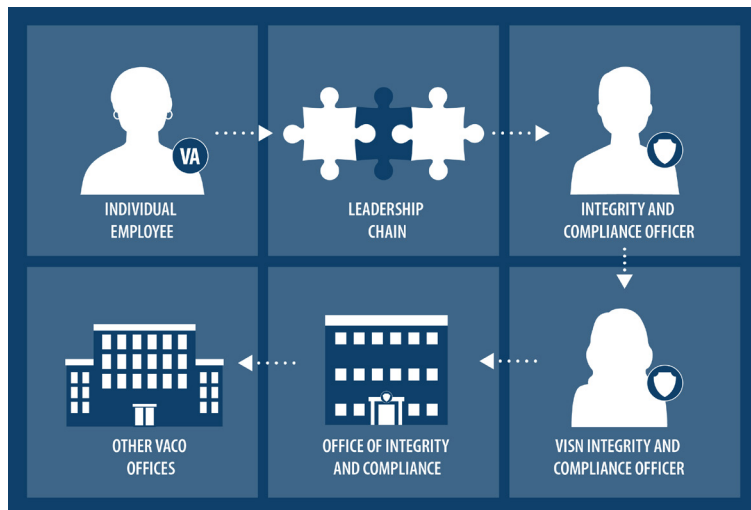
“This is a case of the process working the way it’s supposed to,” said Tracy Davis Bradley, Ph.D., Executive Director of the Office of Integrity and Compliance (OIC) and VHA’s Chief Compliance Officer.

An individual employee suspected wrongdoing and took it up the chain of command. The service chief brought the reported concern to the attention of the Compliance Officer, who brought it to the attention of the Facility Director and

“My colleagues throughout the facility and the VISN were open and collaborative throughout the review. Everyone recognized that this was a problem with wide-reaching impact, and people were willing to work across silos to get to the bottom of it.”

- Kelly Stevenson, VISN 10 Chief Compliance Officer

the VISN Compliance team. VISN Compliance reviewed the concern across areas of operations. Throughout the review, VISN Compliance worked with Procurement and Supply Chain Management professionals at both the facility and VISN, and with VHA and VA program offices (including the Office of General Counsel [OGC] and Officer of Inspector General [OIG]) and the General Services Administration (GSA), which oversees purchasing across the federal government.



The VISN Compliance Officer kept VHA Central Office (VHACO) OIC informed throughout the review process and collaborated with other VHACO program offices to explore whether this was a systemic issue across the enterprise. A Compliance Alert was created and sent to all staff within the VISN that discovered it and facility employees, as well as other VISN ICOs across VHA for wide dissemination. The VHA Chief of Procurement and Logistics disseminated the alert created by the VISN ICO in

VISN INTEGRITY AND COMPLIANCE OFFICER IDENTIFIES AND CORRECTS SYSTEM-WIDE POTENTIAL FRAUD ISSUE: PURCHASE CARD HOLDERS ACCEPTING FREE OFFERS

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email correspondence sent to all VHA Acquisition employees, along with a 2016 Memorandum from the VHA National Purchase Card Manager that addressed this same topic.

BENEFIT: IDENTIFICATION OF ENTERPRISE-WIDE GAP IN TRAINING

Although this issue was previously identified and addressed in 2016, the memorandum had not been included in standard purchase card or ethics training leading to a gap in understanding.

Many purchase card holders who selected and received free offers did not realize they had done anything wrong as they believed the offers fell under the \$20/\$50 gifts rule for government employees—employees may accept gifts with a value under \$20 per occurrence and \$50 total per year.

Several individuals had accepted small items with low market value, such as a desktop calendar. However, there were multiple egregious offenders who accepted up to 80 items, such as expensive grills and coolers, sports merchandise and camping equipment. Both the VISN and facility ICO believe these individuals knew they were stealing.

Because the free offers were given as a condition of the purchase, the items were actually considered government property and did not fall under the \$20/\$50 gifts rule.

The review revealed a gap in the understanding of standard ethics training for purchase card holders, which needed to clarify rules around free offers from vendors for official government purchases.

“The system worked—an individual employee spoke up, and leaders took the accusations seriously. Our Compliance Program mobilized leaders at the local, regional and national level to understand the problem and how we can improve this gap in our training going forward.”

- Tracy Davis Bradley, Ph.D. VHA's Chief Compliance Officer and Executive Director, Office of Integrity and Compliance

RESULT: EDUCATING STAFF AND IMPROVING TRAINING

The individual facility, where the original case was identified, added the 2016 Memorandum as a supplementary attestation to the mandatory training for purchase card holders. The training assignment requires purchase card holders attest they have reviewed and agree to comply with the memorandum requirements.

This attestation process was also incorporated for purchase card holders across VISN 10, to include a series of questions requiring purchase card holder acknowledgement and acceptance. Nationally, relevant VHACO leaders are exploring adding the Memorandum attestation for all purchase card holders across the enterprise.

Want to learn more about working with your facility or VISN Integrity and Compliance Officer or how the Office of Integrity and Compliance can help you address complex risks that cross multiple areas of operation? Email us at vhacooic@va.gov.

REMEMBERING OUR NATION'S HEROES

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow
Loved, and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

- World War I Colonel John McCrae

REMEMBERING OUR NATION'S HEROES

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Memorial Day, recognized annually on the last Monday of May, is a time to honor those who died while in military service. The above World War I poem by Colonel John McCrae serves as a tribute to the brave soldiers who sacrificed their lives protecting their fellow Americans. Poems and stories like this allow us to capture and preserve the remarkable stories of our nation's heroes.

CAPTURING VETERAN STORIES AT VA

Every Veteran has a story, and the mission of one program here at VA is to help tell those stories. Through the My Life, My Story program, writers have interviewed thousands of Veterans since 2013 to preserve and share their stories. The goal of the program is to foster a closer connection between Veterans and their VA providers while also honoring Veteran voices and lived experiences.

Sponsored and supported by [VA Whole Health](#), the program is active in nearly 60 VA medical facilities across the country.

[VAntage Point](#) is another great source for Veteran stories. From the #VeteranOfTheDay series to Program Office feature stories, there's an abundance of diverse, meaningful Veteran accounts to digest.

//The 30th day of May, 1868 is designated for the purpose of strewing with flowers or otherwise decorating the graves of comrades who died in defense of their country during the late rebellion, and whose bodies now lie in almost every city, village, and hamlet churchyard in the land. In this observance no form or ceremony is prescribed, but posts and comrades will in their own way arrange such fitting services and testimonials of respect as circumstances may permit."

- Memorial Day Order, 1868



Team ORE proudly counts many Veterans among our ranks. If you haven't seen the 2021 [Our Veterans Among Us](#) video, featuring some of our employees and their service details, I encourage you to check it out.

THE HISTORY OF MEMORIAL DAY

The tradition of decorating fallen soldiers' graves began in the late 1860s, after the Civil War claimed more lives than any conflict in U.S. history. The tragic number of deaths resulted in the establishment of the country's first national cemeteries.

In 1966 the federal government declared Waterloo, New York, the official birthplace of Memorial Day. The day was later officially recognized as a national holiday in 1971.

Today the holiday is often associated with a surge of poppy flowers, spread as a token to remember the fallen. You can read more about the red poppy and distribution efforts in [this VAntage Point article](#) from last year.

OBSERVING MEMORIAL DAY

Many Americans choose to honor Memorial Day by visiting cemeteries or memorials, holding family BBQs, or attending local parades. Others may volunteer with the American Legion Auxiliary, passing out poppy flowers and raising funds to assist Veterans, servicemembers, and their families.

VA employees can learn more about Memorial Day volunteer opportunities and observances through the [VA Center for Development and Civic Engagement](#) and through local announcements in your community.

IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENTS: ORE UPDATES AND EVENTS

ORE TOWN HALL

The second ORE Town Hall of the year was held in April 2022. Dr. Hirshberg, Acting VHA Associate Deputy Undersecretary for Health, Oversight, Risk and Ethics shared updates on the permanent ADUSH position, we celebrated new and outgoing colleagues and service milestones, and heard project updates from the national program offices. You can access the recording of this town hall in the [ORE SharePoint Site, Town Hall Folder](#).

Be on the lookout for the calendar invitation for the next Town Hall from [Alfreda Holmes](#).

BETTER TOGETHER CONVERSATIONS

Better Together Conversations continue in 2022! Thank you to everyone who has attended our 2022 sessions thus far. We've covered self-care and growth, recognizing your peers for a job well done, and how to achieve continued success while working from home. Our April session featured a guest speaker from the VA History Office who shared stories and resources celebrating VHA History, and our May session featured the OMI nursing team in recognition of National Nurses Month and Military Appreciation Month. You can view the recordings from these sessions in the [ORE SharePoint site, Better Together Conversation folder](#).

If you haven't attended a session yet or are new to ORE, Better Together Conversations or BTC are informal themed conversations for ORE staff to learn new skills, share stories, tips and tricks, and get to know each other better. Our next session will take place on Wednesday, June 8. Watch your inbox for a calendar invitation from [Alfreda Holmes](#).

VA REBOOT TASK FORCE

The Veteran's Health Administration (VHA) knows that burnout is an urgent organizational issue and is committed to implementing actions that address stressors that contribute to burnout, as well as promoting initiatives that foster joy and wellbeing in the workplace. The task force is proposing recommendations to refine organizational systems and processes, enhance recruitment and retention at VHA, and promote mental health and well-being, as well as a set of recommendations for supervisors and managers. If you have questions about REBOOT or want to learn more about the task force and other initiatives supporting employee well-being at

VHA, visit the following resources:

- VA Insider REBOOT webpage: [Reducing Employee Burnout - REBOOT - VA INSIDER](#)
- [Fact Sheet](#)
- Employee Whole Health Hub: [Employee Whole Health Home \(sharepoint.com\)](#)
- NCOD Leadership Canvas: [The Leadership Canvas \(sharepoint.com\)](#)
- NCOD Rapid Response Tools: [Rapid Response Resources - Home \(sharepoint.com\)](#)

The objectives of the REBOOT Task Force are to:

1. **Serve as a hub** to further support ongoing work and provide coordination and integration of initiatives and strategies
2. Enlist field and program office representation to **champion workgroups and conduct an environmental scan of current work underway**
3. Determine **proven practices** to be implemented across the enterprise and **identify gaps where further examination and planning** are needed
4. Provide VHA Leadership, employees at all levels, and external stakeholders with the **proper level of detail they need to stay informed**
5. Develop a long-term roadmap to **sustain and institutionalize practices** that improve VHA culture, reduce burnout, and promote joy in the workplace

MAY 2022: MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS MONTH

May is Mental Health Month, and throughout the month we highlighted Veteran mental health resources VA offers to Veterans in need of support. One hub for Veteran mental health support is [Make the Connection](#), which provides resources for Veterans and encourages positive conversations about Veterans' mental health. By enabling contact with other Veterans who faced challenges and found paths to recovery, Make the Connection shows Veterans that they are not alone and that effective help is available. I encourage you to visit [MakeTheConnection.net](#) to learn more about Veteran mental health and healing.

ORE RESOURCES

Check out the variety of tools and resources below, which are designed to streamline information sharing and improve ORE processes. If you have a project or tool you'd like to share, please email [Kelly O'Donnell](mailto:kelly.o'donnell@va.gov).

- IA Resources
 - [Pain Management Case Study](#)
 - [IA FAQs](#)
 - White board video #1 - [VHA's Office of Internal Audit Helps Employees Address Those Monstrous Issues That Keep Them Up](#)
 - White board video #2 - [VHA's Office of Internal Audit Case Study of the Pain Management Team Audit](#)
- ORE leadership videos
 - [Office of Internal Audit](#)
 - [Office of Integrity and Compliance](#)
 - [National Center for Ethics in Health Care](#)
 - [Office of the Medical Inspector](#)
 - [Office of Research Oversight](#)
- [Enterprise Risk Management video](#)
- [Online Risk Appetite Quiz](#)
- [Choose Your Own Compliance Adventure tool](#)
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