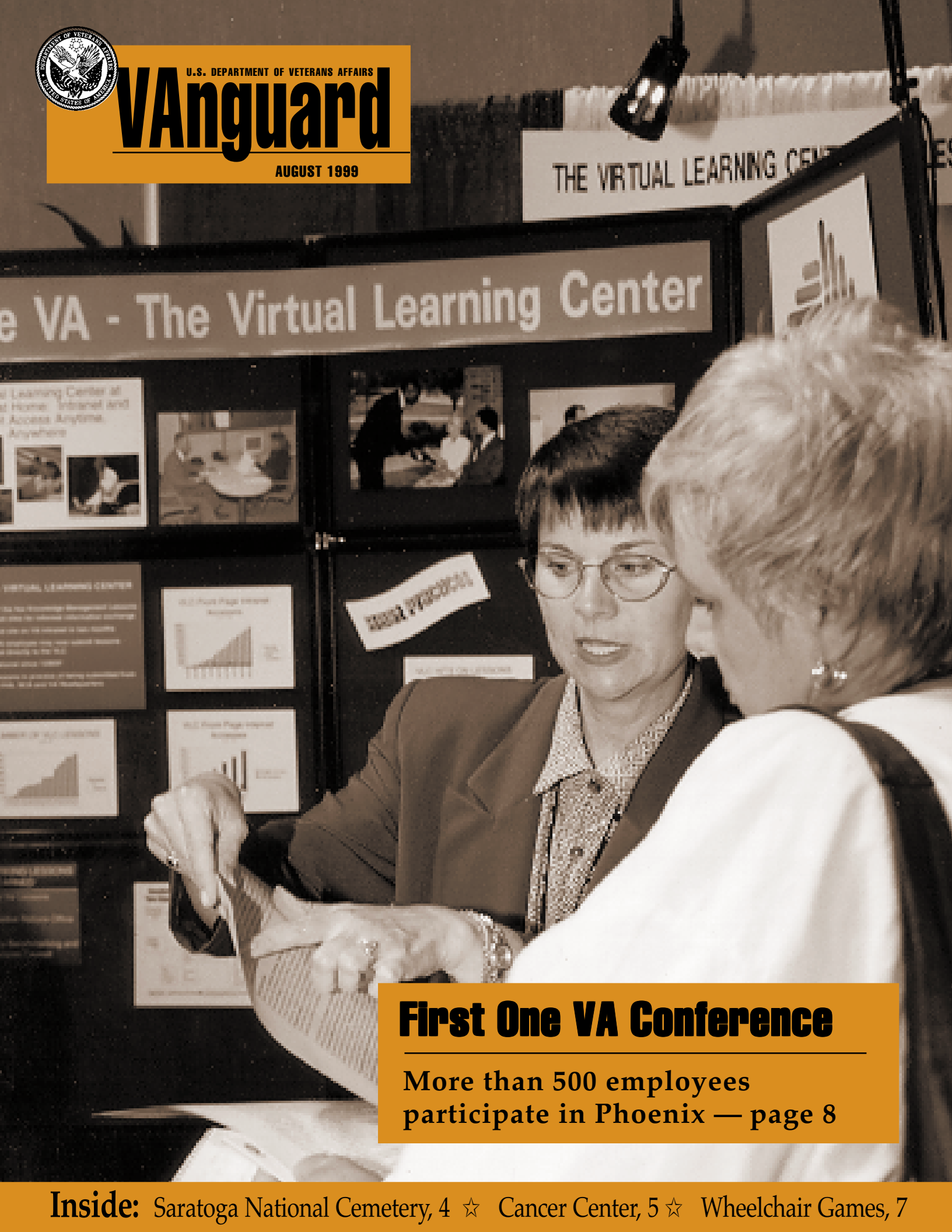




Vanguard

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

AUGUST 1999



The VA - The Virtual Learning Center

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DATA PROVISION

DATA PROVISION



First One VA Conference

More than 500 employees participate in Phoenix — page 8

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On The Cover:

Laura Warfield, program manager, VHA Office of Special Projects (left), explains to Penny Jones, chief of rating activity at the Reno, Nev., Veterans Service Center, how to use programs of the Virtual Learning Center. The Center allows computer users to receive information on topics of interest from others who have shared their practices.

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INTRODUCING

James Magiera

Although James Magiera never quite thought of himself as a hero, that is exactly what he is to veterans at the VA medical center in Bedford, Mass.

On Memorial Day weekend, while most Americans were heading off to the beach or busy with backyard barbecues, Magiera ran 200 miles to highlight the need for volunteers at VA medical centers. "I wanted to give some recognition to the VA hospitals and our veterans," he explained.

A Vietnam veteran and avid runner, Magiera has been working as a horticulturist at the Bedford VA Medical Center for the past 30 years. Recently, Magiera became concerned about the lack of youth volunteers at his medical center. "Veterans, some of whom have no family, really value a visit from younger generations," he said.

Many of the visitors to the VA medical center are members of veterans groups, which are typically made up of older people. As the veterans groups get smaller and smaller, Magiera wonders, "who will take their place?" To raise awareness about the lack of younger volunteers, Magiera decided that if he ran 200 miles, then maybe he could motivate the younger generations to volunteer 200 hours.

Averaging 50 miles a day, Magiera ran through Lexington, Boston, Pembroke, and finally reached his summer home in Brewster, Mass., after four grueling days. Although his feet were swollen

with blisters and covered in blood, the first thing Magiera wanted to do after completing his run was to call the medical center in Bedford to let everyone know he had made it. "They were all thrilled," he said. "I could hear them yelling in the background. They knew I wouldn't let them down."

With the temperature reaching well over 90 degrees during the Memorial Day weekend, Magiera said the heat was the most challenging aspect of his run.

To keep his energy level up during the run, he munched on trail mix and drank water from a five-pound pack. His wife, Susan, met him each afternoon along the route and took him to a hotel to eat and rest. And although he had managed to resist junk food for more than a year before the run, he celebrated the end of his

long, hot journey with a cool treat — ice cream.

When asked whether or not he would do it all over again, Magiera proudly said he would push his body to the limit again if people would be willing to give up a little of their time for volunteering. Whether playing cards, reading a book, or simply sharing a conversation, he said, volunteers at VA medical centers let veterans know that someone truly cares.

James Magiera truly cares, and to the veterans at the Bedford VA Medical Center and to VA employees across the country, he truly is a hero. ❑

By Matt Bristol



Hershel W. Gober
Deputy Secretary
of Veterans Affairs

First Conference Sets Stage for Making One VA a Reality



As we approach our second One VA conference in Atlanta, I want to thank all who participated in July's Phoenix conference. Their enthusiasm and hard work boosted

the One VA process with a momentum that will carry through the remaining three conferences and on to success in transforming VA into a seamless veteran-focused organization.

In Phoenix, I sat at several tables of employees from all VA services and heard serious and thoughtful concerns. I heard front-line people telling it as it is. Then it was management's turn — the moment of commitment.

At the end of the conference, the leadership of each of VA's administrations faced VA employees and voiced their commitment to One VA. I joined those leaders in discussing the conference recommendations for moving One VA forward. And then I made some commitments based upon those recommendations —

commitments backed by VA's top leadership.

I've charged the VA Learning University (VALU) to develop and distribute by January 1 a One VA employee orientation program for use at all our facilities. It will provide our employees with a better understanding of all elements of VA with strong focus on serving veterans.

I have directed that the One VA learning maps used by conference participants be made available to all facilities. I want conference participants to make them part of a total employee learning experience at their facilities.

I also committed VALU to development of a learning map targeted toward veterans to enhance their awareness of their own potential entitlement to benefits and services VA provides.

I have directed that an information guide be prepared that will aid VA employees in helping veterans and their families reach the right source for information they are seeking. The guide will be available on the VA Intranet and will have the capability of directing the veteran to the nearest VA facility that provides the service required.

These are specific commitments

to implement ideas generated by rank-and-file VA employees who believe we can become One VA.

The last night in Phoenix, we spent time looking at a list of One VA issues the conferees believed had to be addressed at the national level. Foremost among them was the issue of information technology and the need for access to the kinds of information those in the front lines need to get the job done.

I have directed the Acting Assistant Secretary for Information and Technology to work with other members of the Department's Chief Information Officers Council to determine what it will take to make this kind of integrated information system a reality. I am asking that they get back to me in November with a report that includes milestones and estimated costs to achieve this One VA goal.

Phoenix turned the concept of One VA into a process, and that process will grow into reality with each succeeding conference. We are laying the foundation — a One VA foundation that will support an organization of dedicated VA employees empowered to provide the best service possible to veterans well into the 21st century. □



Balloon sales were among the fund-raising efforts launched by employees of the Oklahoma City VAMC to help co-workers who were victims of the most intense tornado in U.S. history as it swept through parts of central Oklahoma in May. Through the generosity of Oklahoma City VAMC employees and many others, the VAMC collected \$15,000 for tornado victims. Of the 52 employees who sustained damage to their homes, cars or personal belongings, 24 applied for and received financial assistance. Oklahoma City VAMC employees extend thanks to their colleagues at VAMCs nationwide who contributed money, as well as food, clothing and supplies, to this worthy cause.

New National Cemetery Dedicated in New York

As F-16 fighter jets flew overhead and bagpipes and drums played on the ground below, Saratoga National Cemetery, VA's 116th national cemetery and the sixth in New York, was dedicated July 9 before a crowd of about 2,000 people who braved a steady early-morning drizzle to attend the ceremony.

Secretary of Veterans Affairs Togo D. West, Jr., presided over the ceremony, which was also attended by numerous national, state and local dignitaries, including New York Governor George Pataki and former Congressman Gerald Solomon, who was instrumental in securing funding for the \$11 million cemetery.

"Great nations care about those who defend them," Secretary West said in his keynote address. "It is the mighty heart of America's veterans that brings us here today...and gives us hope.

"Veterans in this area can be confident that this cemetery will



Secretary of Veterans Affairs Togo D. West, Jr. shakes hands with Acting Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs Roger Rapp as (from left) New York Governor George Pataki, Saratoga National Cemetery Director Mary Ann Fisher, and Jim Wilson, chairman of the Saratoga National Cemetery Veterans Support Committee, look on.

meet their needs for the next 100 years," he added.

Located approximately 30 miles north of Albany, the 373-acre cemetery will serve the more than 225,000 veterans living in the Saratoga area. The cemetery lies along the Champlain Canal Trail, famous as a significant military route of Native Americans during pre-colonial times and the colonists

during the French and Indian War and the American Revolution.

The 60-acre first phase of the cemetery is now open for burials, and has space for 5,000 grave sites, 2,000 lawn crypts, 1,500 vaults for cremated remains and 700 garden niches for cremated remains. Eventually, the cemetery will include 175,000 burial sites. A computerized grave locator will be open 24 hours a day in the cemetery's information center to help visitors locate the grave sites of their loved ones.

Cemetery Director Mary Ann Fisher and her staff expect to handle an average of eight to 15 burials each day, and about 40,000 visitors are expected during the first year of operations.

Saratoga National Cemetery is the first of four new national cemeteries VA will open this year. The others are Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery near Chicago; Dallas-Fort Worth National Cemetery; and the Ohio Western Reserve National Cemetery near Cleveland. □

Fourth of July Y2K Compliance Test a Success

There were no sub-freezing temperatures, no teeth-chattering blustery winds, no snow drifts, and certainly no holiday decorations adorning the shop windows or streets of Chicago.

Yet for a three-day period over the Independence Day holiday, it was "December in July" when VA moved the computer clocks forward to January 2000 to test the Y2K compliance of the veterans benefits delivery system.

The Benefits Delivery System at the VA Data Automation Center in Hines, Ill., west of downtown Chicago, served as "command central" as a total of 127 employees from VA facilities around the country went to work inputting data, accessing veterans' files, and updating records.

Sally Wallace, the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA)'s Y2K coordinator at VA Central Office,

said that the test, officially called a Business Process Simulation (BPS), included VBA adjudicators and finance personnel from Chicago, St. Louis, St. Paul, Philadelphia and Bay Pines, Fla. They entered routine transactions that tested the critical systems for VBA's business lines and links between those systems in a Y2K-compliant environment.

This final Y2K test covered all VA business functions: compensation and pension (C&P), education, vocational rehabilitation and counseling (VR&C), insurance payments and the VA hospital veterans inquiry system (HINQ) which links VA medical centers to VBA databases. Computer dates were rolled ahead to the year 2000 at the Hines and Philadelphia Benefits Delivery Centers, Austin Systems Development Center and St. Paul Debt Management Center, and the com-

puters were put to work processing benefits.

"We were going to 'pretend' that it was January 2000. However, you can't use your current data because it is not retrievable if it is January 2000," Wallace explained. "You have to age your data and prepare the files for access." In many cases, Wallace said, dedicated communications lines had to be established specifically for the test.

She said planning for such a simulation is just as important — and intense — as the test itself. "It took us over a year of planning to orchestrate the project," she said. Initial planning began back in 1998, when the 1999 Independence Day holiday weekend was agreed upon as the best date. All of the needed resources during the three-day holiday were available, without

(continued on page 12)

Portland VAMC Dedicates Cancer Research Center

Event Was One of Kizer's Last as VA Under Secretary for Health



Kenneth W. Kizer, M.D., M.P.H., speaks at the June dedication of the Northwest Veterans Affairs Cancer Research Center.

Portland, Ore., VA Medical Center dedicated its Northwest Veterans Affairs Cancer Research Center on June 24, signifying both an important beginning and an historic end. VA established itself even further as a major cancer research contributor in the Pacific Northwest, and Under Secretary for Health Dr. Kenneth W. Kizer gave what turned out to be one of his last public addresses as head of VA's health care system.

The new research center, built by VA at a cost of nearly \$30 million, now resides, only two years after groundbreaking, in two futuristic buildings, housing 66 labs and 150 research staff. VA researchers, in partnership with Oregon Health Sciences University (OHSU) colleagues, will begin scientific studies focused on understanding the genetic basis and biological pathways of cancer.

The outdoor dedication program, with standing-room-only attendance of more than 100, was held under a sprawling awning to protect the audience from the wet mist of "Portland sunshine." The agenda featured a broad roster of speakers, starting with master of ceremonies Grover Bagby, M.D., the new research center's director and the Portland VAMC's chief of hematology and oncology.

Bagby set a warm, personal tone of diverse people working together

for the same vital health cause. He, in turn, introduced a formidable array of speakers, including VISN 20 (Portland) Director Ted Galey, M.D.; Portland VAMC Director James Tuchschildt, M.D.; and OHSU President Peter Kohler, M.D. Veteran Richard Yoshikawa, a long-time Bagby patient, spoke eloquently of how Portland VAMC provided outstanding care when he was diagnosed with leukemia.

As Bagby introduced Under Secretary for Health Kizer, he paused after noting Kizer's board certification in five medical specialties, turned to a seated Under Secretary, smiled, and said, "Five specialties? I've never heard of such a thing!"

Kizer then gave one of his final public addresses as VA under secretary for health. He has since chosen not to serve a second term, after having established the foundation for VA health care in the 21st century.

He began by acknowledging the structure in front of him (the medical center) and the new one just over his shoulder (the cancer research center), saying that, ultimately, both are only buildings — beautiful, impressive, but inanimate. "I expect a lot of good to come from inside this [research center] building, but let us remember that it will come from the work of the *people* inside of the building," he said.

He emphasized that it will be the people

that count, that "there are more important things [we can do] than giving a pill or an injection, because...health care is more than medical care. It includes working together with mutual respect, and caring about one another."

As the ceremony neared its conclusion, Bagby introduced the man many considered the perfect person to bring the day's various themes together — former U.S. Senator Mark Hatfield. Hatfield, who has achieved almost legendary status in Oregon as a champion of veterans and as a dynamic supporter of cancer research, spoke movingly of his personal experience with VA's good work, in partnership with the university, and of the importance of continuing cancer research. □

By Joe Barison
Los Angeles OPA Regional Office



BOB ELLIS/THE OREGONIAN-REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION OF THE OREGONIAN

Portland VAMC Cancer Researcher Dr. Michael Heinrich and Research Assistant Diana Griffith pull frozen cells from liquid nitrogen in one of the 66 laboratories in the new Northwest Veterans Affairs Cancer Research Center.

National Partnership Council Sets Tone of Cooperation

Five years ago, VA entered into an historic labor-management partnership agreement with employee unions at the national level. Never before had the leadership of VA's three administrations and five major employee unions sat down together at the same table to discuss the biggest challenges affecting the Department's employees.

As the VA National Partnership Council (VANPC) — the group established to carry out the goals of that agreement — celebrates its fifth anniversary this year, members are reflecting on its accomplishments and looking ahead to where the organization will go from here.

"The fact that the VANPC has been in existence for five years means that it's not just a flash in the pan," said VHA Chief Network Officer and VANPC member Ken Clark. "There was some skepticism in the beginning about whether it would work and whether it would last, and the fact that it has says a lot about its role and its need."

Originally, the national partnership agreement was an outgrowth of President Clinton's direction to agencies to overcome past adversarial relationships and mobilize the creative energies of federal employees to achieve the objectives of the National Performance Review. Members drawn from the employee unions and VA management were charged with designing, implementing and maintaining a cooperative, constructive working relationship between labor and management.

Specific objectives included: ensuring implementation of labor-management partnership concepts in VA; developing methods of voluntary resolution of disputes; identifying training needed to accomplish partnership objectives; and addressing VA policies and procedures affecting employees and customer services. By the end of the VANPC's first year of existence, more than half of all VA facilities had formed local partnership councils, 36 percent had partnership agreements and 63 percent had received the necessary training. Since then, the Council has continued to promote the benefits of partnership in helping field facilities

overcome the conflict that has traditionally existed between unions and management over how the mission can best be accomplished.

"The Council believes that strong local partnerships are the best way to achieve improvements in services to veterans and their families and to improve working conditions for all employees," said Ronald Cowles, VA Deputy Assistant Secretary for Human Resources Management and VANPC member. "Since our union partners represent the employees who are directly providing services and benefits to veterans and their families, they have a unique and vitally important perspective on how and where we can achieve better outcomes and higher satisfaction."

The VANPC meets quarterly to discuss major Department issues and provide a forum to address concerns about program or policy changes before decisions are made. This approach reduces the need for national-level labor-management negotiations on changes that are likely to affect the working conditions of VA employees. National policies and issues addressed by the Council using this method have included the pilot program to arm VA police, buyouts, and performance management and incentive awards.

"VA has gone through a lot of changes in recent years," said Clark, "and in times of great challenge and stress, there needs to be common

agreement between labor and management on what the goals and priorities are. The VANPC brings the rank and file employee together with management and makes sure that everyone is aware of and involved in decisions that will affect all aspects of the organization."

As the VANPC moves forward from the five-year milestone, members say they hope to renew the Council's efforts to promote and recognize successful partnerships throughout the Department, as well as offer advice and direct support to local partnerships that are not working. They are looking at ways to use the VA home page to provide links to a partnership Web site where VA's best practices and information on partnership can easily be shared with anyone who is interested in developing and maintaining a cooperative labor-management relationship.

"We are all working toward a common goal of improving the quality of care given to our veterans, but VA should also be concerned with doing the best for its most valuable resource — the employees," said Lorraine Payton, President of the National Federation of Federal Employees (NFFE) VA Council and VANPC member. "We must continue to work hard to strengthen the relationship between management and labor. Our survival depends on a cooperative relationship." □

VANPC Logo Contest

The VANPC is sponsoring a contest for the design of a logo that will become the Council's symbol. The contest winner will be rewarded with a monetary prize of \$500 from the VANPC and will be invited to attend a meeting of the Council. Contest entries will be accepted until **October 15, 1999** and should be sent to one of the following:

Department of Veterans Affairs
Office of Human Resources Management (051B2)
810 Vermont Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20420
Attention: Jeneen Mingo
Or by e-mail to npc.logo.contest@mail.va.gov.

The logo should be no larger than 3" x 4" and no more than three colors. The contest winner will be notified by mail not later than **December 10, 1999**. All VA employees and their family members are encouraged to enter. Questions can be directed to Jeneen Mingo at (202) 273-9873. The symbol should reflect the VANPC's diversity, creativity and commitment to positive change. The contest is the first of numerous activities the Council is planning to reward successful and creative labor-management partnership initiatives.

San Juan VAMC Hosts 19th Wheelchair Games



Two track competitors race across the finish line in a blur of flying wheels.

For the first time in its 19-year history, the annual National Veterans Wheelchair Games were held outside the continental United States, on the island of Puerto Rico in June.

More than 600 athletes from 45 states, Puerto Rico and Great Britain competed in events such as track and field, weightlifting, slalom, swimming and basketball at 11 venues in and around San Juan. First-time exhibition events included scuba diving and a billfishing tournament.

Jointly sponsored by VA and the Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA), the Games are the largest annual wheelchair sports event in the country and are open to all U.S. military veterans who use wheelchairs due to spinal cord injury, certain neurological conditions, amputations or other mobility impairments.

For employees of the host facility, the San Juan VA Medical Center, along with members of the Puerto Rican team and local volunteers, this year's event was an opportunity to showcase the history and hospitality of the island.

From the commonly heard phrase "*Bienvenidos a Puerto Rico* (Welcome to Puerto Rico)," to the local police escorts for the athletes' buses as they traveled between venues, participants found local hospitality in abundance. They also were introduced to local history during the colorful opening ceremonies, held at the historic Cuartel Ballajá, the largest military installation of the

New World, built by the Spaniards during the 19th century.

But as always, it was the opportunity to challenge themselves through athletic competition with their fellow disabled veterans that drew the

participants to these Games.

Two facts about participant Guido Padula, a Navy veteran from Fairview, N.J., made him unique among the athletes — at age 74, he was competing in the Games for the first time, and he also was one of only 16 World War II combat veterans participating in this year's Games.

After returning home from that war, where he served in the Pacific as a master sea diver, Padula began attending college and working in construction. But within a few months, his life took a dramatic and unexpected turn — while working on a construction site one day, he suddenly fell eight stories.

His injuries left him in a wheelchair, but he wasn't willing to give up. "I just kept going," he said. "Life continued, thanks to my family's support and unconditional love."

With his daughter, Kim, cheering him on from the sidelines, Padula conquered the grueling slalom competition, his first event of the week. "I wasn't sure he could do it," Kim said after her father crossed the finish line. "I held my breath with each turn he made and when he finally crossed the finish line, I pretty much exploded with euphoria. I am so proud of him."

The fast-paced week closed with a ceremony at Minillas Plaza featuring the passing of the torch to next year's host and the announcement of the winner of the highly coveted Spirit of the Games award.

As his fellow athletes erupted in

cheers around him, an emotional Kenneth Huber, a Navy veteran from Milan, Mich., rolled onto the stage to accept this year's Spirit of the Games award.

Throughout the week, Huber was quick to credit his wife, Mary, and other caregivers for the support that allows him to compete in the Games each year. "The doctors, the nurses and therapists, the caregivers and spouses — these are the ones who assist us every day, and take care of our needs all year long," he said. "They're there by our side when we need them, and without them, a lot of us couldn't be here to compete."

And Huber also had a special message for potential future Games competitors. "To those who haven't made it here yet — make a special effort to attend," he said. "Your life will be enriched by the experience."

Next year's Games will be held in San Antonio, Texas, July 4-9. The Heart of Texas Health Care Network will be the first Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) to host the Games, and organizers say they are planning a variety of special activities marking both the 20th anniversary and first Games of the 21st century. For more information on next year's Games, contact Tom Brown, National Veterans Wheelchair Games VA Director, at (210) 617-5125. □



Jack Franklin, an Army veteran from Vina, Ala., competes in javelin.

On the Way to One VA

First Regional Conference Held in Phoenix



Fortunata Kennedy, program chief, Associated Health Professions, VHA Education Office, points to information on the VA Learning Map, an exercise to help employees see the "big picture" shaping the way they work. Looking on are (from left): group facilitator Jackie Zepp, personnel specialist, Phoenix VARO; Vincent Barile, Director of Operations Support, NCA; and Bob Bubniak, Associate Deputy Assistant Secretary, Office of Telecommunications, VACO.

More than 500 VA employees and veterans' advocates met in Phoenix last month to devise ways to help the Department operate as One VA. Heading the list of ideas for national implementation was creation of an integrated computer information system accessible to all employees across organizations so they can improve service to veterans. At the local level, participants advocated co-location of medical and benefits services — one-stop shopping.

Encouraged by Deputy Secretary Hershel Gober and VA under secretaries to "just do it," participants also found activities to pursue by themselves or with local VA partners.

In Hawaii, for example, VA facilities pledged to work together to develop a resource card that will help all employees assist veterans with questions involving any VA program. A group of Arizona participants suggested creation of local inter-agency steering teams. They thought a "director's coffee" would be one way for employees from several agencies to meet

regularly. They also suggested local Web sites to help employees as well as veterans.

Through a series of fact-finding exercises and discussions, employees in mixed teams of VA organizations reached consensus on systems needing change — those they can change locally, those requiring headquarters support within VA administrations, and others needing VA top management consideration. The conference culminated with inter-administration teams developing and sharing action plans they will implement locally.

Deputy Secretary Gober, the driving force behind the One VA conferences, announced several national initiatives that an executive leadership team

adopted at the end of the conference. In the last-day wrap-up, Gober committed headquarters offices to the following actions:

- The VA Learning University (VALU) will develop by Jan. 1 a One VA employee orientation program for use at all facilities and, by Jan. 31, a One VA Learning Map for veterans to help them understand VA services.

- VALU will make the employee Learning Map available to facilities participating in the One VA conferences within a month after each conference.

- VALU will also develop by Jan. 1 an information guide (available on VA's intranet) to help employees direct veterans to sources of information they seek. Employees will have the ability to provide veterans with printed directions to the nearest VA facility offering needed services.

- By Nov. 5, VA's Office of Information and Technology will assess the cost and time needed to create an integrated information system that will support a reliable database and give front-line employees access to information across the Department.

Dennis Duffy, Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, whose office coordinated planning and implementation of the conference, identified a requirement of those who attended — participants will send his office quarterly reports on



Keith Pratt, associate chief of staff/ambulatory care (left), and John Fears, director, Phoenix VAMC, try out the Board of Veterans' Appeals CD-ROM explaining videoconferencing of veterans' hearings on appeal.

their efforts to implement local One VA plans beginning Oct. 15. That information will be placed on the VA home page as One VA best practices.

According to Under Secretary for Benefits Joe Thompson, legislation that developed discrete veterans' programs ever since World War II created VA organizational "stovepipes." Arguing for a single, unified approach to service, he urged, "Now it's important that our veteran customers don't see our organizations. You have opportunities at the local level that we don't have at Central Office to make that happen."

Kenneth Clark, Chief Network Officer of the Veterans Health Administration, called for improving VA's image, a single point of contact for veterans and better new-employee orientation. Clark called on network directors to give facility managers time to collaborate. He urged everyone not to wait for "a

green light," but to move forward with One VA initiatives.

Roger Rapp, Acting Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs, reinforced Clark's call for employee orientation. "Thank God for our field employees," he added. "They are the heart and soul of One VA."

Team members gained some of their ideas from exhibits showcasing 20 locations and headquarters groups that improved their service, often in conjunction with other VA units. Other ideas came from videos and interviews they conducted with veterans and employees before the conference.

Ideas from the Phoenix conferees will be shared with employees, state and local veterans officials and union representatives who will participate in the Southern conference in Atlanta Sept. 8-10. Other One VA regional conferences will be held for the Northeast in Pittsburgh Nov. 3-5, and for the Central region in St.

Louis Dec. 7-9.

Walt Ozawa, director of the Hawaii Office of Veterans Services, said in his conference evaluation, "Four state directors attended. We are already beginning to collaborate on a One VA process. Thank you to our regional VA directors who invited us. We are excited about this major change in approach. VA's commitment to stay the course on this will be key."

Eileen Powell, Associate Deputy Assistant Secretary for Financial Management, listed some of the things she liked about the conference, including "the common message and stated commitment from VA executive leadership." For future consideration she suggested, "Somehow we must have sessions for all rank and file employees on One VA," and added, "VA has no choice; we must become One VA." □

By Jo Schuda

Waco VARO Disconnects Last Wang Computer

An era in computing ended for the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) in June when the Waco, Tex., VA Regional Office (VARO) became the last VARO to disconnect its Wang computer system.

VBA had been moving applications from the Wang system to newer computer systems for several years, but that process was accelerated over the past year when the Wang system's lack of Year 2000 compliance became an issue. Most VAROs disconnected the Wang systems last spring, but the Waco VARO's IRM staff needed to keep their system running while they converted some locally developed programs to run on the Microsoft Windows-based Local Area Network (LAN) now used throughout VBA.

Once that conversion was complete, with no users on the system and no applications running, the IRM staff "pulled the plug" on the Wang system. As the cables were disconnected, Waco VARO IRM staffers who had spent many long hours keeping the system running were more than a little nostalgic. "It

was a very reliable system in its day," said Sector Service Center Manager Ron Conaway, who helped install the first Wang minicomputer.

Wang computers were first introduced into VAROs in 1983, when each received a minicomputer and 10-30 terminals. Although the

office electronic communications system.

Upgrades to the Wang system eventually provided many VBA employees their own terminal, and a variety of automated solutions were developed using Wang, including the Veterans Assistance Inquiry

(VAI), Automated Vouchers (AVAPS) and numerous loan guaranty applications. VA regional offices also used the Wang system to improve local processes, and some of those locally-developed solutions were adapted for nationwide use.

By the early 1990s, Wang terminals gave way to personal computers that were able to access the Wang systems. The middle of the decade found VBA employees using Microsoft Windows applications such as Word and Excel, and former mainstays like Wang

WP and 20/20 were abandoned. In the past year, VBA made a major effort to migrate the remaining Wang-based applications to the LAN. □

By David Wild
Waco, Tex., VA Regional Office



Waco VARO IRM employees (left to right) James Flippin, Debra Winchester, Carol Webb, David Wild, Betty Strahl, Ron Conaway and Jon Welk prepare to disconnect their Wang minicomputer.

systems were purchased to give VAROs office automation support (especially word processing tools), they were soon adapted for use in production applications. Wang's electronic mail system, Wang Office, was fully implemented in 1985, providing VAROs their first interof-

Deputy Secretary's One VA Mentoring Program

Getting a Closer Look at a Top Job



Deputy Secretary Hershel Gober talks with One VA Mentoring Program participants (left to right) Wayne Wrighting, Angela Prudhomme and Isabel Soto in his office.

Careerists intent on broadening their perspectives and their prospects as future VA leaders are doing just that thanks to Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs Hershel Gober.

Deputy Secretary Gober's new One VA Mentoring Program offers VA Central Office employees in grades GS 9-15 the opportunity to work with the Deputy Secretary at the highest levels of VA management. The competitively selected participants work two-month tours as a special assistant to the Deputy Secretary. They perform assignments designed to develop managerial and leadership skills and are encouraged to ask questions and provide feedback as they follow Deputy Secretary Gober through his workday. That day can take them to top-level meetings and conferences in Washington or to town hall meetings with veterans half a continent away.

The mentoring program's initial phase began in March and will end February 28, 2000 when the last of the first group of six program participants completes the mentoring cycle. Plans are underway to recruit a second group this fall. Deputy Secretary Gober said he is anxious to continue the program next year and wants as many employees as possible to apply this fall when the second phase is announced.

"For me and VA this is a win-win

and I plan to continue it."

Those who have completed the One VA Mentoring program share Deputy Secretary Gober's enthusiasm. Wayne Wrighting, a program specialist in the Office of Administration, said that seeing the Deputy Secretary interact with veterans firsthand was most memorable.

"The opportunity to travel with Mr. Gober and watch him listen to veterans' concerns and respond positively to them in various situations had the greatest impact on me," he recalled. "I definitely learned much about 'Putting Veterans First.'"

Another protégé, VA General Counsel attorney Angela Prudhomme, said her mentoring experience included traveling with the Deputy Secretary and attending top-level meetings where she observed key decisions being made.

"My most enlightening experience was a veterans' town hall meeting where veterans asked Mr. Gober about changes in the veterans health care system, benefits claims processing and the need for more national cemeteries," Prudhomme said. "As a VA attorney, I'm aware of how law, politics and bureaucracy influence benefits and services, but now I have a better understanding of how these factors impact veterans."

Isabel Soto, director of the Veterans Benefits Administration Business and Technology Integration staff, has just finished the program.

program," he said. "My office benefits from the expertise and energy of employees from other divisions, and the protégés have an opportunity to broaden their knowledge of VA at a higher level. The program has been extremely successful

"Two aspects of my experience stand out," she noted. "The 2001 internal budget meetings helped me clearly understand how critical and important that process is. It truly enables us in VA to serve our nation's veterans. And the success of the One VA conference in Phoenix, Ariz., was gratifying. It shows that we as a Department are truly moving toward working together as One VA for veterans."

Deputy Secretary Gober sees mentoring programs like his as an essential ingredient in moving toward One VA. "I encourage other VA managers to get involved in mentoring programs of their own," he said. "As we strive to become One VA, these programs help employees become aware of broader aspects of the agency and how we work together. By understanding VA as a whole, we can move towards providing seamless service to our nation's veterans." □

By Chris Scheer

More on Mentoring

In 1997 the VA Central Office Federal Women's Program (FWP) teamed with the Department to sponsor a structured mentor program. The "Mentoring Program for Career Development" is designed to provide participants with the benefit of a one-on-one mentoring experience.

Some of the most experienced and respected VA officials volunteer to serve as mentors. Mentors draw on their experience to help counsel and guide employees. The mentors agree to help the employee assess her skills, set goals and develop and implement an individual career plan. Since its inception, 128 employees have participated in the program. For more information, contact Angela M. Prudhomme, FWP Vice-Manager and Mentoring Program Coordinator, via e-mail or call (202) 273-6345.

More VA Teams Collect Hammer Awards

Teams of VA employees are continuing to achieve new standards of excellence in their efforts to help build a better government, and are being recognized with Vice President Gore's Hammer Awards.

The **Cleveland VA Regional Office** recently received its fifth Hammer Award, this one for its innovative approach to job placement services for disabled veterans. The VARO's Veterans First Team, which combines the services of Cleveland's Vocational Rehabilitation and Counseling division, the Ohio Bureau of Employment Services and the U.S. Department of Labor, streamlines the process of finding jobs for veterans. Cleveland is one of only a few VA regional offices to receive five Hammer Awards.

For many years, VA administered 22 small golf courses used for patient therapy, rehabilitation and recreation. But the annual cost of operating and maintaining these courses was nearly \$1 million — funds that could be reallocated to more critical, direct patient care.

A team from the **Asset and Enterprise Development Service in VA's Office of Facilities Management** set up a variety of enhanced-use leasing agreements that have allowed VA patients to continue to have access to most of the golf courses, but VA no longer pays to operate and maintain them.

An innovative example was the **St. Cloud, Minn., VAMC Enhanced-Use Contract Team's** project turning the operation of the facility's nine-hole golf course over to the city of St. Cloud. The city pays all of the operating costs, allows VA patients to play for free and credits the VAMC for a portion of the medical center's utility costs.

These two teams received Hammer Awards for their efforts to eliminate the use of appropriated funds to operate and maintain VA golf courses.

The **VA/Bureau of Prisons Incarcerated Veterans Matching Project Team in VA Central Office** won a Hammer Award for developing an electronic means to identify veterans incarcerated in the Federal

Prison System. VA is responsible for reducing or suspending benefits payments to veterans who are incarcerated after being convicted of a felony or misdemeanor. Through the new method developed by this team, the Bureau of Prisons provides VA an electronic tape each month that allows the two agencies to compare records and identify inmates who are receiving VA benefits. VA regional offices are then notified of incarcerated veterans in their jurisdiction and can begin taking the appropriate actions to reduce or suspend the inmates' veterans benefits.

In a related effort, a team from the **Huntington, W.Va., VA Regional Office** received a Hammer Award presented by West Virginia Governor Cecil Underwood for an initiative to identify and adjust the compensation and pension awards of veterans incarcerated in state facilities. They partnered with the West Virginia Division of Corrections, which also received a Hammer Award for the effort.

The **Urology Clinic Team at the Washington, D.C., VA Medical Center** received a Hammer Award for their efforts to improve service for patients who need to be screened for prostate cancer. Using existing resources, this team made changes that significantly reduced waiting times for patients.

The **Long-Term Care Laundry Process Improvement Team at the Leavenworth, Kan., VA Medical Center** won both Hammer and Scissors Awards for their efforts to improve the laundry process and eliminate redundant steps after a satisfaction survey of nursing home residents identified concerns with the timeliness and quality of laundry services. A subsequent survey conducted after the team made improvements indicated that laundry issues were no longer a main area of concern.

A team of 51 employees at the **Philadelphia VA Regional Office & Insurance Center** recently collected the facility's third Hammer Award in less than two years. The award recognized the team's telephone interview initiative that reduced a "blocked call" (busy signal) rate of 52

percent to nearly nothing, resulting in better service to veterans and their families who call for assistance.

The **Pharmacy Benefits Management Strategic Healthcare Group in VA's Office of Patient Care Services** received a Hammer Award recognizing the achievements of VA's consolidated mail-out pharmacies in transforming an outdated, hospital-based process to a state-of-the-art system that serves veterans with greater accuracy, convenience and improved timeliness.

Before the seven centralized mail-out pharmacies were established, veterans had to wait up to 20 days for their new or refilled prescriptions to reach their homes. Today, 80 percent of all prescriptions are received in four days, and nearly all are received within five days.

Veterans not only receive their medications quickly, but with less error due to the use of computer bar coding and visual inspection by a licensed pharmacist. And the average cost of filling each prescription has decreased from \$2 to 80 cents. VA's consolidated mail-out pharmacies are located in Bedford, Mass.; Charleston, S.C.; Dallas; Hines, Ill.; Leavenworth, Kan.; Murfreesboro, Tenn.; and West Los Angeles.

The Government on Display event held at the Mall of America in Minneapolis on a weekend earlier this year was a massive project for the Federal Executive Board (FEB) of Minnesota and the more than 50 participating federal and state agencies, including VA. The goal of this event was to put federal and state government programs before the public in a hassle-free environment. On an average weekend, 200,000-300,000 people visit the Mall of America.

The **Minneapolis VAMC** provided free blood pressure screenings and offered eligibility/enrollment assistance to veterans, and the **St. Paul VARO & Insurance Center, Fort Snelling National Cemetery** and the **St. Paul Vet Center** offered benefits information.

For their combined efforts, the Minnesota FEB, the participating federal and state agencies and the Mall of America received the Hammer Award. □

Y2K Test (cont.)

interfering with regular work week data processing and benefits payments production.

Diane Jelonek, Y2K test coordinator for the Hines System Development Center, the launch site and focal point for the three-day test, had to make sure all the computer programs were modified and all the linkages between the benefits operational. "There were program analysts, systems analysts, adjudicators, finance specialists, and supervisors participating in the test," she noted. "In other words, we used the whole gamut of staff it takes to process a normal day's work."

To prepare for the BPS test, a dry run was conducted several months earlier with the Department of Treasury, which actually produces and distributes VA payments to veterans.

Testing was conducted along two tracks. Track I focused on payments. VBA generated computerized

payment files for compensation and pension, education, spina bifida, survivors entitlements, and insurance, and sent them to Treasury for processing and payment. Track II



Bernadette Pessagno, BPS coordinator in the VBA Y2K Project Office in VACO, looks on as Sheila Henderson, a veterans claims examiner in the Chicago VA Regional Office, participates in the Fourth of July Y2K compliance test.

tested non-receipt and cancellation of payments. VBA sent four files to Treasury for processing later this year.

In the first track, 36 payment files were sent to Treasury, which reported it could read all the upgraded Y2K-compatible code and that all payments were processed correctly.

By the end of the three-day Y2K simulation, hundreds of computer scripts had been successfully tested, thousands of transactions executed among all of the test sites, and payment data for all VBA benefits programs, worth a combined value of \$3.5 billion, had been sent to Treasury. The Business Process Simulation was an overwhelming success.

"We tested all the benefits that we are going to pay our customers," Wallace said, summing up the effort. "Our customers are very special people — our nation's veterans and their beneficiaries," she added. "For the Year 2000, we can now

truly say 'we are ready.'"

By Carl Henderson
Chicago OPA Regional Office

Y2K Readiness Update: What's Left to Do?

VA has passed its final exam and the grade is A. The Department of Veterans Affairs is Y2K ready. Bring on the 21st century!

A final July 4th national test of the VA benefits system involving VA data automation centers, regional offices and medical centers, and the Department of Treasury showed that years of planning and hard work have brought the VA computer programs and processes that generate benefits payments to veterans into compliance with the "00" environment that begins January 1, 2000.

"We've accomplished our goal," Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Information and Technology Harold Gracey told VBA Y2K conferees in Pittsburgh. "The first stages of our effort were the realm of information technologists. Next came extensive testing to make sure the new software worked as intended.

"The final task— contingency planning — belongs to all of us," he

said. "This is the bailiwick of VA people — claims examiners, veterans' service representatives, facility directors and the like. Each of us must now tailor contingency plans for each aspect of our operation, address every possible point of failure, and exercise the plans repeatedly to be sure that no matter what the circumstances might be on January 1, 2000, we are ready and able to serve veterans and their families."

He noted how dependent all organizations are on information technology — telephones, refrigerators, and even cars are filled with computer components. He said VA had made much progress preparing to work around possible Y2K interruptions beyond its control.

"Contingency plan templates have been adapted to the unique circumstances of every medical center," he reported. "Imagine the complexity — every elevator, every heating and air conditioning control, power supplies, generators, tele-

phone and paging systems — examined and fixed, or plans in place to work around them."

Gracey also noted what may be the greatest Y2K problem of all — public confusion and hysteria.

"Our biggest probable source of trouble in the U.S.," he said, "is panic or hoarding behavior stimulated by lack of information or the spread of misinformation. In addition to our contingency planning, it is important that each of us in VA help educate the public about our high level of confidence. I encourage VA managers and leaders to engage in Y2K conversations in their communities and invite veterans service organizations and other groups to their facilities to discuss VA readiness."

Finally, Gracey advised: "Be ready for a surge of phone calls and inquiries; be ready to communicate the status of VA operations both to VA Central Office and to the public; and be ready to face the unexpected." □



VA Study Finds Rise in 'Good' Cholesterol Cuts Risk for Heart Disease

In a recent issue of the *New England Journal of Medicine*, VA researchers reported findings from the first large-scale, long-term clinical trial to prove that raising "good" high density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol prevents heart disease and stroke.

The researchers found that the drug gemfibrozil caused a six percent increase in HDL-cholesterol (relative to placebo). They also found that gemfibrozil reduced coronary heart disease death by 22 percent, non-fatal heart attack by 23 percent and stroke by 29 percent, in a study of 2,531 men with coronary heart disease and low levels of both HDL and LDL cholesterol.

Beginning in September 1991, researchers at 20 VA medical centers recruited and randomly selected 1,264 patients to take gemfibrozil and 1,267 to take placebo until July 1998. Men in both groups of the study were characterized by low levels of HDL, low LDL ("bad" cholesterol), moderate levels of triglycerides (another dangerous blood fat), advanced age (average 64 years), a high prevalence of diabetes, high blood pressure and abdominal obesity.

Hanna Bloomfield Rubins, M.D., M.P.H., chief of general internal medicine at the Minneapolis VA Medical Center, co-chaired the VA HDL Intervention Trial with Sander Robins, M.D., of the Boston University School of Medicine.

They and their colleagues chose gemfibrozil for the study because they considered it the agent most likely to sharply improve HDL-cholesterol and triglyceride values while having the least effect on LDL-cholesterol level.

Rubins said the drug is a safe and cheap therapy option for the 20 to 30 percent of coronary heart disease patients — several million in the United States — who don't have high LDL-cholesterol but do have low levels of the beneficial HDL-cholesterol.

The VA HDL Intervention Trial was supported by the Cooperative Studies Program of VA's Office of Research and Development and by a supplemental grant from Parke Davis, a division of Warner Lambert.

VA Researchers Find Nasal Flu Vaccine Reduces Employee Absenteeism and Health Care Visits

VA researchers and colleagues have found that a new investigational flu vaccine, delivered via nasal mist, significantly reduced employee absenteeism, doctor's office visits and medication use in healthy, working adults. Results of their study appeared in a recent issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*.

More than 4,500 healthy, working adults aged 18 to 64 participated in the study at 13 medical centers. Two-thirds of them received one dose of the intranasal influenza vaccine, while the remaining third received a placebo. From November 1997 through March 1999, study participants self-reported illness events and illness-associated absenteeism, health care visits and the use of prescription antibiotics and over-the-counter medications.

Participants who received the actual vaccine experienced 18.8 percent fewer severe febrile (feverish) illnesses and a 23.6 percent reduction in upper respiratory tract illnesses associated with fever. The duration of severe febrile illnesses was reduced 27.3 percent.

Although the economic effects have yet to be analyzed, influenza accounts for millions of workdays lost and physician office visits each year. In this study, the VA researchers and colleagues found that illness-related absenteeism and health care visits were significantly lower among those who received the flu vaccine.

Participants missed 17.9 percent fewer workdays due to severe febrile illnesses and 28.4 percent fewer days for febrile upper respiratory tract illnesses. Health care provider visits were as much as 40.9 percent lower for febrile upper respiratory tract illnesses. Vaccinated subjects also experienced a 47 percent reduction in days of prescription antibiotic use and 28 percent fewer days use of over-the-counter medications due to severe febrile illnesses.

"These findings show substantial benefits in a population not usually targeted for flu vaccine," said study leader Kristin L. Nichol, M.D., M.P.H., chief of medicine at the Minneapolis VA Medical Center and professor of medicine at the University of Minnesota. "We found that when you vaccinate healthy, working adults, good things happen."

The researchers' work was supported by Aviron, manufacturer of the intranasal vaccine (FluMist™). The vaccine is being developed as part of a Collaborative Research and Development Agreement between Aviron and the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, a unit of the National Institutes for Health.

Memphis VA Medical Center Researcher Helps Develop Strep Vaccine

James B. Dale, M.D., infectious disease researcher at the Memphis, Tenn., VA Medical Center and the University of Tennessee, Memphis, helped develop a vaccine to prevent diseases from streptococci bacteria that will soon be tested for the first time in humans.

The vaccine could help prevent the 25 million cases of strep throat, rheumatic fever and strep-related illnesses that occur each year.

Development and testing of the new vaccine has been conducted in collaboration with scientists at the National Institutes of Health and at ID Biomedical Corp. of Seattle. The first phase of human clinical trials is scheduled to begin this summer at the University of Maryland Center for Vaccine Development. □

HAVE you heard

The **VA Web site** is being redesigned in an effort to provide a single point of access to VA information for veterans, their families and the general public. The new framework design will provide a model for all VA elements to place information on the Web. Representatives from VHA, VBA, NCA and veterans service organizations are serving on a committee to help develop this new VA-wide Internet site that can be a viable tool for veterans and others who need VA information. All VA employees are invited to respond to the VA Homepage Redesign Survey at <http://vawww.va.gov>.

Maria Z. Hamilton, program assistant in the Equal Employment Opportunity office at the Fayetteville, N.C., VA Medical Center, recently had one of her poems, entitled "Renewal," selected for inclusion in the book *Homecoming*, an anthology of prose and poetry

of the Writer's Ink Guild. Another of Hamilton's poems was previously published in a nationwide collection entitled *Poetic Voices of America*.

Despite coming to Texas with years of experience as professional nurses, language barriers and a challenging state licensing process cause many Hispanic nurses to resign themselves to taking jobs outside of their training. But thanks to an initiative led by the Dallas chapter of the National Association of Hispanic Nurses, these nurses are getting the help they need to practice their profession in Texas. Two nurses from the VA North Texas Health Care System (VANTHCS), **Graciela Arredondo** and **Christina Frias**, help spearhead the initiative, through which Hispanic nurses who are reasonably proficient in English are eligible to receive 120 hours of education and training to help them become

In Memoriam

The veterans of America and their families lost a devoted and life-long friend with the death of **Zachary Fisher** in June. His lasting tributes to the men and women who served the nation in uniform and their families include the Intrepid Museum, the Zachary and Elizabeth M. Fisher Armed Services Foundation and the Fisher Award for Excellence in Military Medicine.

His 25 Fisher Houses provide a place for families of service members and veterans to stay while their loved ones are undergoing medical treatment. A bronze plaque at the entrance of each Fisher House states that the house is "dedicated to our greatest national treasure...our military service men and women and their loved ones."

"If anyone merited the title of national treasure, it was Zach Fisher," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Togo D. West, Jr. "He will be greatly missed."



Golfer **Tiger Woods** accepts two awards presented to his father, Earl, by Dr. Dennis Wyant, director of the Indianapolis VA Regional Office. Earl Woods, who served as a lieutenant colonel in the Army (including two tours of duty in Vietnam), and was trained as a Green Beret, was honored with a certificate of appreciation for his military service and a flag flown over the U.S. Capitol. Wyant presented the awards to Tiger Woods at the Douglass Golf Course in Indianapolis, the first public golf course in the nation opened to African Americans. Woods was in Indianapolis for a golf clinic sponsored by the Tiger Woods Foundation.

fully licensed in Texas. Another 25 non-Hispanic VANTHCS nurses are serving as volunteer instructors in the program.

The **Bay Pines, Fla., VA Medical Center** recently hosted a standdown for homeless veterans of the Central Florida West Coast that brought together resources from VA, the military and veterans groups. As part of their summer training, Army reservists from the 73rd Field Hospital pitched their tents and trained on the grounds of the Bay Pines VAMC. They joined with the VAMC, the St. Petersburg VARO and several local veterans service organizations (VSOs) to help more than 175 area homeless veterans. With transportation provided by the VSOs, the veterans were brought to the encampment to receive medical screenings, benefits

reviews and a hot meal. Those with urgent medical needs were cared for at the VAMC.

The **VA Optometry Service Web Page** was recently selected as a Links2Go "Key Resource" for Optometry. The Web page was ranked tenth in a list of the top 19 "Key Resources" on the Internet. The Links2Go Key Resource Award is based on an analysis of millions of Web pages using an objective statistical measure applied to an extremely large database. The only way for a Web page to be listed as a "Key Resource" is to achieve enough popularity for the Links2Go analysis to select the page. The success of the Web page, located at <http://www.va.gov/optsvc>, is largely due to the efforts of Dr. Philip Gross, an optometrist at the Philadelphia VAMC. □

HONORS

and awards



VA Chief Patient Care Services Officer **Dr. Thomas V. Holohan** has been appointed to chair the Drugs, Biologics, and Therapeutics Panel of the Medicare Coverage Advisory Committee (MCAC). The panel will advise the Health Care Financing Administration (HCFA) on the drugs, biologics and therapeutics that are reasonable and necessary for Medicare beneficiaries. He will also serve as a member of the MCAC Executive Committee.

Maynard Henning, health technician in the Minneapolis VA Medical Center's Adult Day Health Care (ADHC) program, received the Excellence in Caregiving Award from the Minnesota Alzheimer's Association in recognition of his outstanding work with complex-care veterans in ADHC.

Dr. Linda Rabeneck, a physician-health services researcher at the Houston VA Center for Quality of Care and Utilization Studies at the Houston VA Medical Center, has been appointed to serve a five-year term on the editorial board of the monthly scientific journal *Gastroenterology*. The journal is published by the American Gastroenterological Association and is the leading publication in gastroenterology research.

Dr. Nick Kanas, associate chief of Mental Health Service at the San Francisco VA Medical Center, received the Raymond F. Longacre Award from the Aerospace

Medical Association. The award is given annually to recognize outstanding accomplishment in the psychological and psychiatric aspects of aerospace medicine. Kanas has been conducting NASA-funded research on crew member and crew-grounded interactions during NASA/Mir, and has published numerous literature reviews and conceptual pieces on the psychological, psychiatric and interpersonal issues associated with long-term space flight and the U.S. and Russian psychological support systems for space crews.

Joseph Ouslander, M.D., director of the Rehabilitation Research and Development Center of the Atlanta VA Medical Center, has been elected president of the American Geriatric Society for a one-year term, to be followed by a one-year term as chairman of the board. Ouslander also was appointed board member of the new Foundation for Health in Aging Committee.

Susan G. Osguthorpe, associate director of the Medical and Surgery Care Centers at the Salt Lake City, Utah, VA Medical Center, was installed as the new president of the Salt Lake County Division of the American Heart Association during its recent state-wide annual meeting.

Carol L. Ceresa, chief of the Clinical Nutrition Section at the San Francisco VA Medical Center, was recently

elected president of the California Dietetic Association (CDA) for a one-year term. The CDA is a professional organization with nearly 7,000 members — the largest state dietetic association in the nation.

Thomas Weaver, director of the Bay Pines, Fla., VA Medical Center, and **Sandra Overstake**, education specialist with the VA Learning University, jointly received one of six National Outstanding Business and Industry Contribution and Innovation Awards presented by the National Association of State Directors of Vocational Education recently on Capitol Hill. A long-standing teaching relationship between the Bay Pines VAMC and the Pinellas Technical Education Center (PTEC) led to the development of an innovative minority outreach community-based clinic on the PTEC campus. Weaver and Overstake were instrumental in developing and implementing the unique clinic.

Arnon Krongrad, M.D., chief of Urology at the Miami VA Medical Center, received the Physicians Award from the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce at its recent 1999 Health Care Heroes Award Luncheon. Dr. Krongrad is an expert on prostate cancer and men's health.

Teresa Harris, histotechnologist at the Marion, Ill., VA Medical Center, received the Histotechnologist of the Year Award from the Southern Illinois University College of Education.

VA's **Veterans Canteen Service (VCS)** recently presented its annual Outstanding Canteen awards for 1998. The awards are

presented to the top five percent of canteens and recognize those that provide the highest quality customer service and have the most success in achieving overall program goals. Selections are made on a regional level and are based on personal visits by regional office and headquarters staff, feedback from the VA medical centers and technical reports on compliance with VCS customer service programs. The 1998 Outstanding VAMC Canteens were: Jackson, Miss.; Martinsburg, W.Va.; Minneapolis; San Diego; San Juan, Puerto Rico; Shreveport, La.; Richmond, Va.; and Tampa/Orlando, Fla.

Ron Currier, team leader of Prosthetic and Sensory Aids Service at the Manchester, N.H., VA Medical Center, received the 1999 National Outstanding Veteran-Patient Award from the Daughters of the American Revolution. Currier, himself a double amputee, was recognized for facilitating the rehabilitation process. He serves the community as an instructor for occupational therapy students at Tufts University, and he teaches area elementary school students about amputees and prosthetic devices. He also regularly serves as a ski instructor at the annual National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic.

David Cathcart, a readjustment counseling specialist at the Newark, N.J., Vet Center, recently received the Four Chaplains Legion of Honor Award. The award is presented to individuals in recognition of service to community, nation or humanity without regard to race, religion or creed. It was created in memory of four Army chaplains who went down with the troop ship *Dorchester* during WW II. □

HEROES



When a helicopter crashed in Poplar Bluff, Mo., narrowly missing an office building and a residential area, three members of the VA Medical Center's nursing staff were the first to arrive at the crash site after seeing the helicopter go down while they were driving through the area. Registered nurses **Kim Gum** and **Vince Maurer** helped emergency personnel with the victims, while Registered Nurse **Christy Maurer** assisted with crowd control.



It was a very busy night in the emergency room at the Des Moines Division of the VA Central Iowa Health Care System when a young mother appeared at the door with her three-year-old daughter, who was choking on a piece of candy. Registered Nurse **Pamela Varner** put the girl over her arm and used her other hand to give two quick thrusts to the middle of the choking child's shoulder blades. The piece of candy popped out, and the child was fine.



For **Richard Jacobsohn**, a registered nurse at the Nashville VAMC, a quiet walk on the beach at sunset during a Florida vacation suddenly took an ominous turn. He noticed four young girls struggling in the water, unable to fight the strong undertow. Jacobsohn quickly swam out to rescue the girls, who ranged in age from five to ten years old. He had rescued two of the girls and was in the

process of rescuing a third when he became caught in the undertow. He was able to get the child into the arms of another rescuer before he too was pulled underwater, and the fourth child was saved by other rescuers. Jacobsohn's own rescue came from a surfer who used his board to transport him to shore, where he was admitted to the hospital and treated for aspiration pneumonia. The girls visited their rescuer while he was in the hospital.



Two Leavenworth, Kan., VA Medical Center employees came upon an auto accident while traveling together to the VAMC. **Dr. Craig Scott**, from Dental Service, and **Dr. Paul Reicherter**, from Medical Service, provided first aid to the three seriously injured accident victims and monitored their vital signs until emergency medical technicians arrived on the scene.



A truck driver delivering storm sewer drains to the Knoxville Division of the VA Central Iowa Health Care System got his feet caught while removing tie-downs from the delivery truck and fell five to six feet from the flatbed trailer onto his left side. The fall left him immobilized. Utility Systems Operator **Randy Langebartels** saw the driver fall and rushed to his aid. After assessing the situation, Langebartels called for an ambulance and more help. General Equipment Mechanic **Rand Mechan**, who

also is a first responder with the Knoxville Rescue Team, arrived at the scene moments later and began providing medical care to the injured truck driver. When the ambulance arrived, Langebartels and Mechan helped load the driver into the ambulance to be transported to the emergency room.



Three Tuscaloosa, Ala., VA Medical Center employees transporting patients to clinic appointments at the Birmingham VA Medical Center assisted victims of an accident on a local interstate. Nursing Assistants **Mary Booth** and **William Glenn**, and Motor Vehicle Operator **Clarence Thorpe** were the first to arrive at the scene of a collision between a woman's car and a tractor trailer. Thorpe stayed with the veterans while Booth and Glenn checked the conditions of the two drivers. The truck driver was uninjured, but the woman in the car was badly shaken and had suffered cuts from flying glass. Booth and Glenn administered first aid and tried to keep the woman calm until rescue and law enforcement personnel arrived.



When **Glenda Webb**, appraiser at the Nashville VA Regional Office, ran into obstacles while trying to get help for a sick co-worker, she took matters into her own hands. The co-worker, who had been complaining of chest pains, had just returned from a visit to the nurse's station, where he had been told to go immediately to the nearest hospital emergency room. He asked Webb to call his wife to take him to the emergency room. After trying unsuccessfully for several

minutes to reach the co-worker's wife, Webb called 911, only to get a busy signal. Meanwhile, her co-worker had slumped over. She quickly made the decision to transport her co-worker to the hospital in her own vehicle. She asked another co-worker, **Greg Portwood**, to help her get the sick co-worker to her car. The co-worker later underwent quadruple heart bypass surgery and is now recuperating at home.



The rapid response and extraordinary emergency care provided by a group of VA Central Office employees saved the life of Pat Smith, a human resources specialist in the Career Transition Center. Smith suffered a life-threatening medical emergency near her office on the second floor. But thanks to the swift actions of her co-workers **Mary Alan Beckley**, **David Tracy** and **Mari Horak**, she is alive and well today. Beckley comforted Smith while Horak called 911 and Tracy raced to the health unit for assistance. **Dr. Andrea Fore** and Registered Nurse **Carol Lambiase** rushed to the scene, where they administered CPR and assisted emergency medical technicians until Smith was transported to a local hospital.



As **Stanley Jenkins**, a social worker at the Boston VA Outpatient Clinic, stood in line at a local restaurant to pick up a sandwich for lunch, a patron tapped him on the shoulder. It took a few seconds for Jenkins to realize that the man was choking and was signaling for help. After several attempts, Jenkins was able to successfully use the Heimlich maneuver to dislodge the food particle blocking the man's airway. □