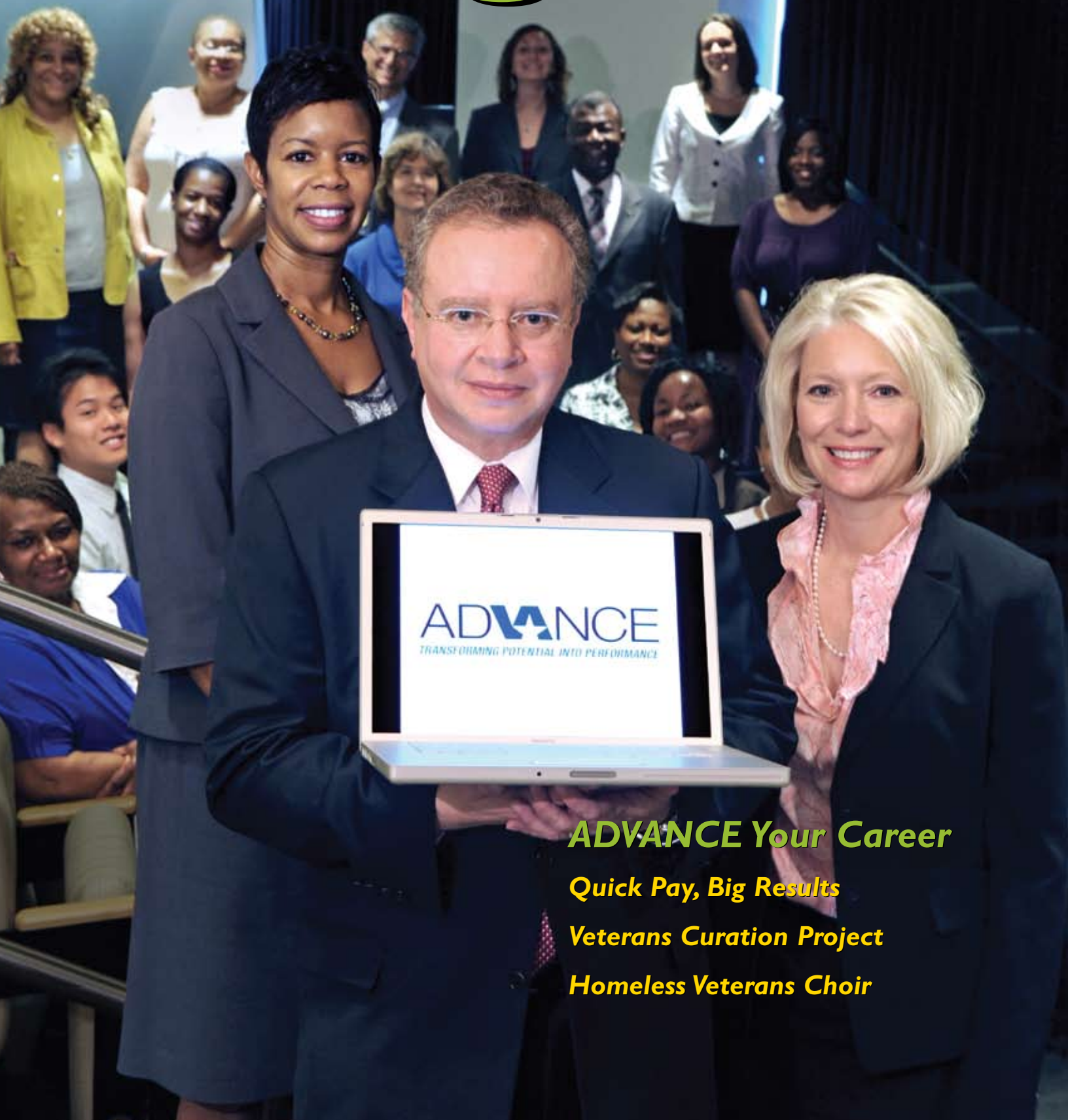


VAanguard

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

September/October 2010



ADVANCE Your Career

Quick Pay, Big Results

Veterans Curation Project

Homeless Veterans Choir



Vanguard

VA's Employee Magazine
September/October 2010
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On the cover

The new HR initiative ADVANCE, launched in July, is aimed at helping employees get the tools, training and support they need to advance their careers and improve services to veterans. Leading the initiative is Assistant Secretary for Human Resources and Administration John U. Sepúlveda, foreground, along with Deputy Assistant Secretary for Human Resources Management Tonya M. Deanes, left, and Dean of the VA Learning University Alice Muellerweiss, right. *photo by Robert Turtill*

U.S. Colored Troops

It is a shameful day when the African American Cultural Alliance allows the *Vanguard*, VA's employee magazine, to print the degrading word "Colored" when referring to African American people. In this case, the word was used to describe African American soldiers ("U.S. Colored Troops Honored at Nashville National Cemetery," May/June issue).

The word Colored hasn't been used for years. Please, for future reference, don't use distasteful words. The past is behind us—let's try and keep it there.

*Esther A. Sparks
Nursing Assistant
Seattle VAMC*

Editor's note: We asked VA historian Darlene Richardson about the use of the term "U.S. Colored Troops." Here's what she had to say: "The

term 'U.S. Colored Troops' is the factual and historically accurate name for segregated regiments of African American soldiers who fought in the Civil War.

When you hear about the U.S. Colored Troops—abbreviated as USCT—it is always in a discussion about the history of our country or the Civil War. The term is always used with the utmost respect. To discuss the USCT acknowledges their important role in American history and honors the sacrifices those individuals made to preserve our nation.

"President Lincoln authorized the first-ever African American units for the Union Army on July 17, 1862, and nearly 200,000—178,975 soldiers and 18,000 sailors—served during the war. The USCT story was absent from most secondary school Civil

War history lessons until the 1970s, but children going to school today learn about the USCT at an early age.

"The term 'U.S. Colored Troops,' or USCT, refers only to African Americans who served in military service during the Civil War. In July 1866, the Army was reorganized for peacetime: two cavalry and four infantry African American regiments were created, and those soldiers came to be known as 'Buffalo Soldiers.'

"Ignoring the past dooms us to repeat many 'forgotten' lessons."

VA Provider Saved My Life

I had a routine appointment at the Cedar Park (Texas) VA Outpatient Clinic on June 14 to have my knee looked at. After the provider examined my knee, she asked if there was anything else. I mentioned having "burning" in my chest and that I had to stop and rest earlier that day.

She did an EKG, which was abnormal; she compared it

to an EKG I had when I was initially seen at the VA clinic in 1997, and immediately determined that something was wrong. She gave me an aspirin and immediately called an ambulance to transport me to the nearest hospital.

I was admitted to the hospital with emergent cardiac concerns. Cardiologists at the hospital determined that four of five coronary artery bypass grafts done in 1992 had completely deteriorated, and the remaining vessel had 90 percent blockage. A stent was put in that vessel.

I was the last patient of the day, and I was scheduled to see another provider at the VA clinic that day. I was seen by Dr. Sabiha A. Mondal, who took the time to take care of me as a patient. Words cannot adequately express my gratitude to Dr. Mondal for what she did for me. She saved my life! VA providers do make a difference in taking care of veterans.

*Phillip T. Leddy
Patient
Leander, Texas*

Tribute

Harvey Pekar, a retired VA file clerk who became famous for his autobiographical underground comic book "American Splendor," died at his home in Cleveland Heights, Ohio, on July 12 at age 70.

Pekar worked at the Louis Stokes Cleveland VA Medical Center from 1965 until his retirement in 2001. The comic book series, introduced in 1976, chronicled his experiences navigating everyday life, what he called "the 99 percent of life that nobody ever writes about." Pekar collaborated with a number of top comic book artists, including Robert Crumb, to illustrate the issues, which came out once a year.

"American Splendor" was a departure from the superhero-focused comics that dominated the industry at the time, and attracted a devoted

following that led to fame for Pekar. In the late 1980s, he was a frequent guest on "Late Night With David Letterman," and in 2003, actor Paul Giamatti played Pekar in an Oscar-nominated film.



Harvey Pekar

We Want to Hear from You

Have a comment on something you've seen in *Vanguard*? We invite reader feedback. Send your comments to vanguard@va.gov. You can also write to us at: *Vanguard*, Office of Public Affairs (80D), Department of Veterans Affairs, 810 Vermont Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C., 20420. Include your name, title and VA facility. We may need to edit your letter for length or clarity.

What Can ADVANCE Mean for You?

On July 15, VA leadership announced the launch of **ADVANCE**, the largest investment in VA employees in the history of the department. Learn about **ADVANCE**, learn how to further develop your skills and understand how you will transform VA into a 21st-century organization. Visit the **ADVANCE** Web site at vawww.va.gov/ADVANCE. If you have further questions, contact the **ADVANCE** call center at 1-888-566-3982 or e-mail advance@va.gov.



Improving Our Service to the Nation's Veterans

John U. Sepúlveda
Assistant Secretary for Human Resources and Administration

The world is changing, and so are the needs of our veterans.

Today, our soldiers are more than twice as likely to suffer multiple wounds, and require multiple VA services, than they were in World War II. The number of patients in VA hospitals has increased from 3.8 million in 2000 to 5.5 million in 2009. Within the next 10 years, 16 percent of veterans are expected to be female—double the current figure.

The veteran population is changing, and we at VA must adapt with them.

That is why, on July 15, we launched ADVANCE. ADVANCE is a VA-wide initiative to improve the skills of the VA workforce, to improve VA's work environment, and to recruit and retain the best talent available so that we can deliver the best health care, benefits and services to veterans and their families.

The thinking behind ADVANCE is simple: investment in our employees means better service to veterans.

ADVANCE is currently composed of 15 individual programs and initiatives. Some of these are in the form of training courses, such as program/project management training, leadership training, EEO/conflict management training, and the HR Academy. Another ADVANCE initiative, Wellness Is Now (WIN), focuses on promoting good health habits among VA employees.

Alice Muellerweiss, dean of the VA Learning University, has overseen the rapid growth in ADVANCE's train-

ing course offerings. To date, VALU has delivered 414 classroom-training sessions in 46 cities this summer, in addition to 103 webinars. By the end of this fiscal year, many more training courses will be offered in nearly 50 locations around the country. In fiscal year 2011, VALU will roll out a new leadership competency model and will increase the number of training courses available.

ADVANCE courses, which are an initiative of the Office of Human Resources and Administration, cover not only the topics mentioned above, but also subjects such

to veterans and their families. The HR Academy is also supporting hiring reform: its two-hour hiring reform webinar has, to date, been attended by 1,300 HR managers and professionals.

WIN is ADVANCE's health and wellness program. WIN will feature a customized and confidential Web tool with health and wellness assessments and health education, as well as VA-wide awareness campaigns and opportunities for office and group exercises. WIN will assist VA employees in adapting to new, healthy behaviors by providing online and in-person

ADVANCE represents a new level of commitment to employee development. Taking full advantage of this investment will depend on you signing up for the appropriate course.

In the box below, you'll find a link to the ADVANCE Web site, which has more information about the training courses and programs we're offering. We encourage you to read the information carefully and pursue your own course of action so we can transform VA into a 21st-century organization capable of providing world-class service to our veterans.

As Secretary Eric K. Shinseki has said, we owe every man and woman who has worn our nation's military uniforms a level of courage and determination that matches their own.

as transformational leadership, diversity, and effective workplace practices. Professional development courses, such as time and stress management, business writing, and the 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, are being offered as well.

Tonya Deanes, deputy assistant secretary for human resources management, has presided over the launch of ADVANCE's HR Academy and will unveil WIN this fall.

The HR Academy supports the career development of more than 3,800 HR professionals across the department. Its programs will help HR professionals attract, develop and retain employees who provide quality services

coaching (depending on your location) to fit your individual needs.

These programs are here for you because we know that higher job satisfaction in VA leads directly to better service outcomes for veterans. The programs that WIN will implement have already been shown to reduce absenteeism and health insurance costs, reduce recovery time for injuries, and increase worker productivity.

ADVANCE has programs for everyone within VA, across all offices, career levels, backgrounds, administrations and locations. Take note: the kind of long-term investment in professional and personal growth we have made with

As VA Secretary Eric K. Shinseki has said, we owe every man and woman who has worn our nation's military uniforms a level of courage and determination that matches their own.

ADVANCE yourselves. ADVANCE our veterans. ADVANCE VA.

Learn More About ADVANCE

- Visit the ADVANCE Web site at: vawww.va.gov/ADVANCE
- Visit the VALU Web site at: vawww.va.gov/valu
- Visit the HR Academy Web site at: www.vahracademy.com

Expanded Employee Wellness Program Set to Launch Nationwide

Diane Verkamp, a materials management specialist at the Omaha (Neb.) VA Medical Center, had planned to join a weight-loss program, but kept putting it off. When a program for employees became available at her facility, she seized the opportunity. She's lost 30 pounds so far.

Sandy Harm, who works in the outpatient clinics at the Omaha facility, joined the same "at work" program and has shed 26 pounds. Meanwhile, at the neighboring Lincoln facility, Janice Anderson, a Nursing Service employee, lost more than 14 percent of her body weight, winning a weight-loss challenge sponsored by the same program.

Verkamp, Harm and Anderson are taking advantage of the Veterans Health Administration's employee wellness program, conveniently located at the medical facilities where they work. They enjoy not only convenience, but also the support and camaraderie of their fellow employees.

Because she knows there is a weigh-in every Thursday with friends and co-workers, Harm says she is more accountable, and therefore more successful. "We are all friends and have become each other's cheerleaders," she says.

Participants attend classes on-site, during lunch or after work, to learn about such things as portion control and smart food choices. A farmer's market organized on-site offers easy access to fresh fruit and vegetables to help with healthy food choices.

There are also opportunities to add physical activity to their day. New fitness centers with state-of-the-art equipment and certified instructors are located at both the Lincoln

and Omaha VAMCs. Yoga and tai chi classes are also offered to reduce stress and add more opportunities to work out in a fun, supportive environment.

There is one more advantage these employees have, and that is the knowledgeable support and guidance of an on-site personal wellness coach-coordinator. Quin Kelly, R.N., divides her time between Lincoln and Omaha, where she not only organizes weight-loss programs, but also provides opportunities for increased physical activity, support for tobacco use cessation,

of which makes them happier and healthier employees.

Harm says the WIN program lets participants go as far as they want with a healthier lifestyle. "The tools are there, you just need to implement them."

The WIN program began in VHA in 2008 as a pilot project in the VA Midwest Health Care Network (VISN 23), building on the experiences of corporate wellness programs in the private sector, which have been active for more than 10 years. These programs provide their employees an array of services

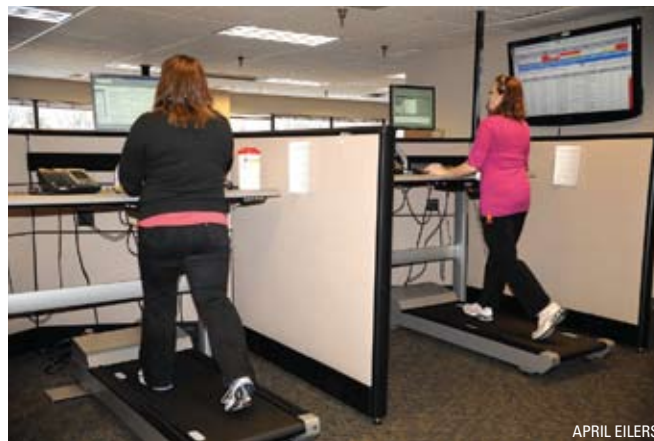
of Personnel Management, and supported by the White House and VA/VHA leadership.

And earlier this year, the VA Office of Human Resources and Administration defined employee wellness as one of the major Human Capital Investment Plan elements under the T16 initiatives. This program, also called WIN, will be offered to all VA employees and will provide wellness services including personal coaching. A formal kick-off of the expanded WIN program will be held at VA Central Office in September.

Plans for this expanded program were discussed in April at an Employee Health Promotion conference held in Minneapolis, where attendees from across the country shared their experiences with developing, maintaining and expanding programs to advance employee wellness.

VA Assistant Secretary for Human Resources and Administration John Sepúlveda gave the keynote address. He noted that employees are the most vital resource the department has and pledged his support for the WIN VA program.

Sepúlveda also toured the employee fitness center in Minneapolis, as well as the Minneapolis call center, where "walking workstations" provide employees who are ordinarily confined to their desks the opportunity to add physical activity to their day. These walking workstations are slow speed (no more than 1-2 miles per hour) treadmills with adjustable computer desks attached. Both the new fitness center and the walking workstations were funded by the WIN program.



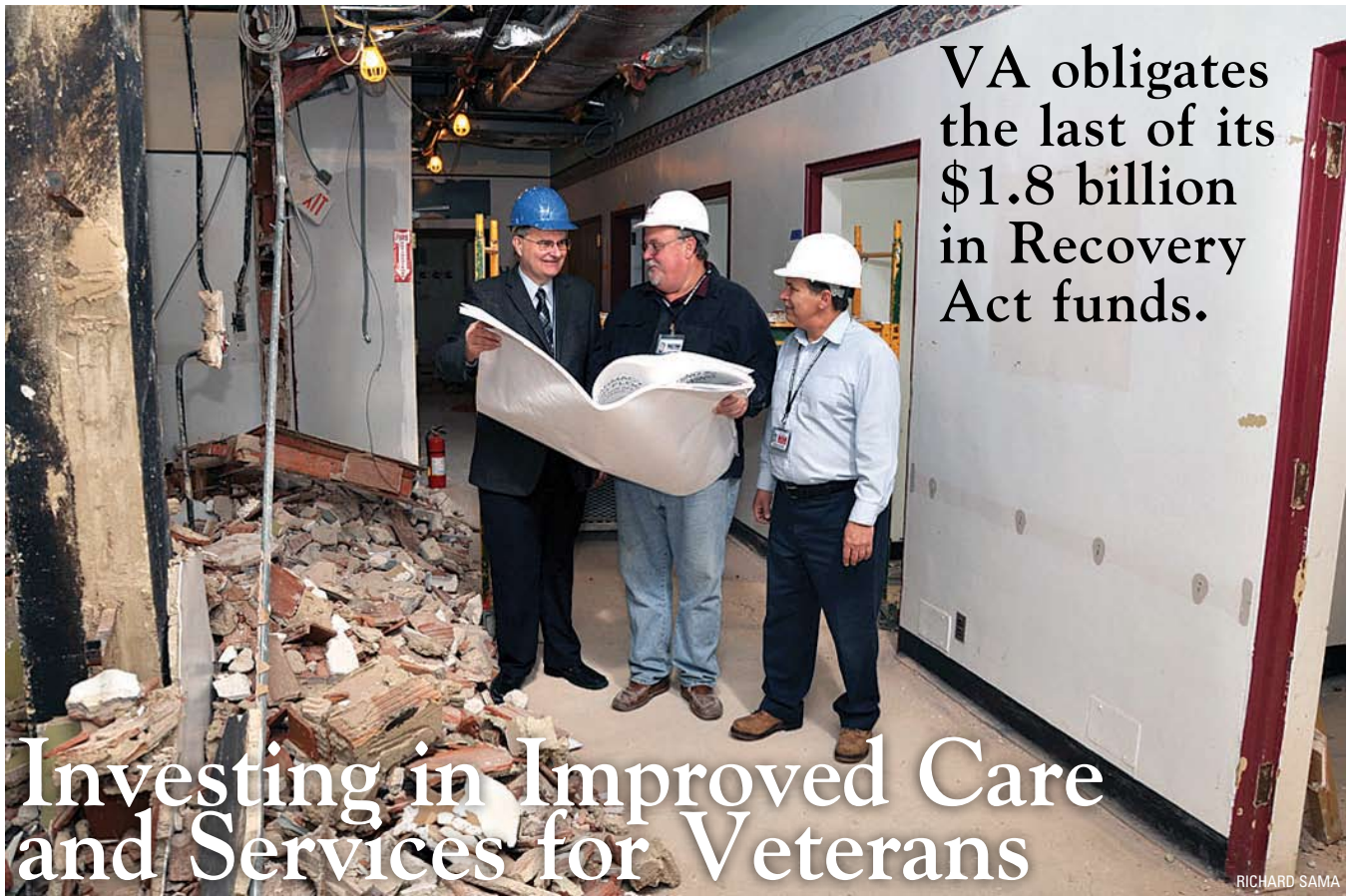
The "walking workstations" at the Minneapolis VA Medical Center.

and stress management classes. These core components are delivered both face-to-face and through a secure Web site.

Kelly is part of an innovative program called Wellness Is Now ... at the VA (WIN), a health promotion/disease prevention program focused on improving the health and well-being of VA employees. For Verkamp, Harm and Anderson, this experience has made their work site more enjoyable. They get to meet people outside of their workgroup, and are able to add fun, exercise and relaxation conveniently and at no or reduced cost, all

to help them develop and maintain healthy lifestyles. On average, these programs have resulted in a 4:1 return on investment from health promotion funding, with benefits accruing from decreased sick leave, decreased employee turnover, and increased productivity. Employees appreciate the convenience, cost savings, and improvements in their health and well-being.

The VISN 23 Employee Wellness pilot, which includes a rigorous evaluation component, was recently accepted as one of three federal pilot projects sanctioned by the Of-



VA obligates the last of its \$1.8 billion in Recovery Act funds.

Investing in Improved Care and Services for Veterans

RICHARD SAMA

The department committed the last of its \$1.8 billion in American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds July 31, one of the first federal agencies to achieve that milestone. Projects at more than 1,200 sites in all 50 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico will increase access to health care and services for veterans, while creating jobs and stimulating the economy.

“Veterans across the nation are benefiting from these Recovery Act funds,” said VA Secretary Eric K. Shinseki. “Recovery Act projects are improving medical care, speeding claims processing, enhancing our national cemeteries, advancing our energy efficiency, and generating jobs for Americans.”

VA rapidly put Recovery Act funding to work to improve its medical facilities, revitalize its national cemeteries, hire claims processors, upgrade technology systems, and as-

sist states in acquiring, building or remodeling state nursing homes and domiciliary facilities for veterans.

“If you would have asked us before we started, we would have said it couldn’t be done—we would have been wrong,” said VA’s Deputy Assistant Secretary for Finance Ed Murray. “These projects are an example of how we can pull together to meet goals with the resources we have to get the job done.”

The funding received by VA is part of President Obama’s economic recovery plan to improve services to America’s veterans. By obligating these funds quickly, VA is revitalizing its infrastructure and moving needed money into the economy.

“We had about a month to identify projects and develop a plan,” said Murray. “We were looking for projects that fell into one of three categories: patient safety, patient security, and energy.”

Using Recovery Act funds, VA entered into 1,521 contracts with 696 contractors. Three-quarters of the contractors are veteran-owned businesses, either service-disabled veteran-owned businesses or veteran-owned small businesses.

“The majority of the veteran business owners are craftsmen,” said Fred Downs, chief procurement and logistics officer for the Veterans Health Administration. “They do quality work and receive good feedback. The ARRA funding is affording them work they might not otherwise have in the current economy. Plus it’s an opportunity to build a reputation and earn more work in the future.”

VA obligated \$1 billion to improve medical care facilities across the country through building renovations, roadway and walkway repairs, high-cost equipment replacement, security improvements, new construction, replacement of steam lines and boiler

plants, upgrades in emergency power distribution, and purchases of additional emergency generators, among others.

To help veterans access care, Recovery Act projects at VA medical facilities will add or improve more than 26,000 parking spaces, and 39 elevator banks are being built or upgraded. VA will upgrade nearly 14,000 inpatient bed spaces, while 16 pharmacy renovation projects will help veterans get medicines quicker and more efficiently. More than 14,400 clinical improvement projects, some with multiple exam rooms, will be undertaken.

Funds are also helping ensure VA health care facilities function more efficiently (by reducing annual recurring maintenance and upkeep costs) and are equipped to provide world-class care to veterans.

“We’ve been working very closely with OMB (Office of Management and Budget) on reporting the financial status of what has been obligated and disbursed,” said Murray. “We highlighted these in a report each week and talked with OMB about twice a day.”

VA is also promoting energy conservation and reducing its environmental footprint by investing \$200 million in Recovery Act funds for renewable energy generation technologies, metering systems, and energy conservation and water-saving measures. In total, the renewable energy systems awarded represent more than 9 megawatts of planned power-generating capacity from solar, wind

and cogeneration technologies.

The department is also investing \$197 million in energy and water infrastructure improvements. VA facilities across the country are upgrading their facilities to reduce energy consumption and water usage and better manage related costs.

VA is working to improve the systems for processing claims to deliver benefits to veterans faster and more efficiently. The department has obligated \$150 million to hire, train and equip new employees to improve claims processing and speed the delivery of benefits to veterans. VA has hired approximately 2,700 temporary and permanent employees to assist with processing veterans’ claims for benefits.

“In this economy, just having a job is extremely positive,” said Veterans Employment Coordination Service Director Dennis May. “These jobs will not only provide them with a paycheck and training, but also an opportunity to gain experience and prove themselves.”

If a position becomes permanent, and a veteran has proven themselves and becomes a known quantity, there are special recruiting authorities VECS can use to bring them on board

with little or no competition, May explained.

Throughout VA’s system of 131 national cemeteries, 391 improvement projects are underway using \$50 million in Recovery Act funding. The department is restoring and preserving 49 historic monuments and memorials, becoming more energy-efficient by investing in renewable energy sources (solar and wind), moving forward on nine energy conservation projects, and improving access and visitor safety with 49 road, paving and grounds improvement projects.

Recovery Act funds are also being used to raise, realign and clean approximately 200,000 headstones and markers, repair sunken graves, and renovate turf at 22 VA national cemeteries.

The Recovery Act provided one-time \$250 economic recovery payments to eligible veterans, their survivors and dependents to help mitigate the effects of the current economy. Some \$7.1 million was intended for administrative support of the one-time benefit payments. VA was able to successfully administer the program with a savings of approximately \$6.1 million, and may return the remaining funds to the U.S. Treasury. **VA**

Opposite: Homer May (center), of Fidelis Design & Construction, reviews plans for a pharmacy renovation project at the Coatesville (Pa.) VA Medical Center with Stephen Blanchard (left), the facility’s director of Facilities Engineering Service, and Tom Stepsis, project manager; right: Forty-nine historic monuments and memorials at VA’s national cemeteries are being restored and preserved with Recovery Act funds, including the National Soldiers Monument at Dayton National Cemetery in Ohio.



Suzanne Nunziata, center, assistant director of the St. Petersburg VA Regional Office, and staff celebrate hitting the \$1 million mark in payouts under the Quick Pay Disability initiative.



Quick Pay, Big Results

St. Petersburg's pilot claims program pays \$1 million in veterans benefits to date.

When Suzanne Nunziata, then acting director of the St. Petersburg (Fla.) VA Regional Office, heard VA Chief of Staff John Gingrich's challenge to "achieve remarkable change" in the field within 60 days, she took the message to heart.

"The mandate could not have been clearer," said Nunziata. "Go home to your offices, examine your processes, and determine the best way to improve the services you provide. And do it quickly."

Armed with the chief of staff's call to action, Nunziata returned to her regional office in St. Petersburg

with a mission: Assemble a team of experts, outline a program, and secure the buy-in of stakeholders ranging from employees to veterans service organizations. Timelines were tight. Expectations were high. But Nunziata knew her team was equal to the task.

Rallying the Troops

From the beginning, Nunziata was determined to gain feedback from all quarters.

"We knew that securing input from all team members—especially from VA employees who would be responsible for making the initiative a reality—was absolutely critical to

building a successful program. From day one, we made sure that everyone involved in the initiative had a voice in the process."

After bringing a variety of players to the table—including technicians, data specialists, public affairs, and directors from other regional offices—Nunziata and her team asked themselves if some processes were creating unnecessary barriers to quick decisions on claims. After careful analysis, they realized many claims could be rated and paid with the limited evidence on hand.

The outcome of the team's effort to expedite the disability claim pay-

ment process, the Quick Pay Disability initiative, enables veterans service representatives to fast-track payments to veterans who have submitted sufficient evidence to decide all or part of a claim. The program covers a wide range of medical conditions, including diabetes mellitus and prostate cancer for Vietnam-era veterans, as well as surgery or joint replacement for a previously service-connected condition. These claims require minimal supporting evidence, allowing VA to process veterans' claims and submit payment about three months faster than the targeted 125-day cycle period.

QPD is one of more than three dozen initiatives developed as part of the VA Claims Transformation Plan, designed to "break the back of the backlog." The plan is aimed at meeting VA Secretary Eric K. Shinseki's call to eliminate the disability claims backlog by 2015, processing disability claims so no veteran has to wait more than 125 days, and ensuring a 98 percent accuracy rate in claims decisions.

Initiatives range from business process reengineering like the QPD program to empowering employees with a paperless, IT-driven system now in development. More information is available at www.vba.va.gov/transformation.

Under the initial strategy, the St. Petersburg VA Regional Office developed tailored processes and procedures to identify and pay disability claims within 30 days of receipt for veterans meeting Quick Pay criteria. That meant that the St. Petersburg office had to readjust their daily operations, educate the workforce, and put the QPD program into practice—fast.

Within four days, the regional office completed employee training, designed an evaluation strategy to

capture metrics, and paid \$6,000 to four veterans.

Broadcasting the Message

Recognizing that maintaining open lines of communication with employees was paramount, Nunziata quickly initiated an internal communications strategy. Employees remain up-to-date on program success via digital pop-up messages that provide information on the number of veterans paid, the total value of disability benefits paid through the QPD, and the average monthly increases in claims. These daily updates are supported through an electronic marquis that displays program metrics in the



Employees had input into building the Quick Pay program, and are kept up-to-date on its success.

regional office's public spaces.

To educate stakeholders on the program's growing success, Nunziata worked with the regional office staff to produce a flyer that promotes QPD. Targeted at three key groups—veterans, veterans service organizations and employees—the flyer provides a brief overview of QPD as well as a demonstration of its impact on veterans' payments and timeliness. Additionally, the St. Petersburg VARO staff provides regular updates to six local VSOs, staying in close touch with each organization's leadership.

Throughout the initial phases of the pilot, the St. Petersburg staff members have remained in constant

contact with veterans who have participated in the program. Initial feedback has been overwhelmingly positive—to date, 100 percent of veterans describe QPD as helpful to resolving their outstanding claims.

The Road Ahead

The program is already posting impressive returns. Ninety days after launch, QPD paid more than \$1 million in claims to 810 Florida veterans—417 of whom received their benefits within 30 days—resulting in an average monthly benefits increase of \$1,257. Additionally, 403 veterans received their first disability benefit payments through the program, which

also provided them with faster, easier access to the VA health care system.

But as impressive as they are, the numbers alone don't tell the entire story. Operating on the front lines of a new pilot initiative, the St. Petersburg staff has witnessed firsthand the difference the QPD program is making in the lives of the veterans they serve. From faster payments to fewer complications in the benefits review process, the QPD

is having a real and significant impact on the lives of Florida's veterans.

Looking ahead, Nunziata is optimistic about the program's potential to improve the disability claims process in other regional offices.

"The QPD program proves that we can, with the right resources and smart planning, rapidly launch an initiative that makes a measurable impact on veterans' quality of life," she said. VBA leadership is assessing the potential for replicating this program in other regional offices—allowing VA to pay benefits faster and more easily from coast to coast. **VA**

By Terry Jemison

10,000 Rescues and Counting

VA's suicide hotline is a lifeline for veterans in crisis.

The department's National Suicide Prevention Lifeline recorded its 10,000th rescue on the Fourth of July. That's 10,000 veterans who would not be here today if they hadn't called the VA Lifeline and talked to a trained responder—a responder who deemed it necessary to take immediate action to save the caller's life.

"These are people who call us, but they've already taken pills, or they have a gun in their hands, or they're standing on a bridge," explained Jan Kemp, VA's national suicide prevention coordinator. "These are the calls where we can't wait. We call emergency services right away."

VA's Lifeline crisis center, which opened in July 2007, is staffed 24/7 by 20 responders, social workers, health technician assistants and counselors who handle 15 phone lines and three chat lines. The center, located in Canandaigua, N.Y., has received about 260,000 calls during its three years of existence.

"A lot of our callers just want information regarding mental health and other services available to them at their local VA hospital," Kemp explained. "But some of the calls are more urgent. The person is clearly distressed. We try to provide them with immediate assistance ... we'll send someone out to their house to do a wellness check-up."

In some instances, however, it becomes clear that the caller needs more

than a sympathetic ear, more than an appointment with a VA counselor or psychologist, more than a wellness check-up at their home. "For some of them, this one call is their last resort," Kemp said.

That "last resort" moment arrived recently for a young veteran in the Oakland, Calif., area.

"One evening, a 26-year-old Iraq veteran called our hotline from the Oakland train station," said Melissa Rath, a Lifeline responder. "He was distraught; our hotline staff worked with him but we weren't able to decrease his panic. He told us he wanted to jump in front of a train. We could hear the trains over the phone. The veteran hung up on us, stating he had no option but to die. We called the Oakland police, who in turn stopped the trains until they found him and took him to the local hospital."

In another instance, a Lifeline responder found herself talking to a distraught veteran who was behind the wheel of a truck, barreling down an interstate highway. He was on his way to deliver a load of cable from St. Louis to De Coyne, Ill.

"He told me he was a truck driver who was on the road all the time, with no real address," explained Lifeline responder Julianne Mullane. "He said he was going to kill himself with a 20-gauge shotgun when he got back to his home base. I asked him why he wanted to die and he said his father had died and he wanted to be with

him. Leslie Brew, my partner, called the state police and they agreed to intercept him. I let him know that the state police were going to pull him over for his own safety ... I didn't want that to be a surprise."


The veteran was safely pulled over by police and taken to a nearby hospital.

Lifeline responder Terry Rose remembers an active duty sailor who called the crisis center one evening from his base in Virginia.

"He was standing on the roof of a building preparing to jump," Rose said. "I was able to convince him to go back inside. I stayed on the phone with him while my partner, Roger Cheney, called the local police, who took the sailor to a local hospital for treatment."

But Lifeline rescues don't end when a distraught caller is taken to the hospital.

"We always follow up with the veteran the next day," said Christopher Maginn, a Lifeline responder and Army reservist who recently returned from Afghanistan. "Just because they're rescued doesn't mean they won't need our help again. So follow-through is important. We don't want anybody falling through the cracks."

The phone number for VA's Suicide Prevention Lifeline is 800-273-TALK (8255). The chat line address is www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org. 

By Tom Cramer

"These are people who call us, but they've already taken pills, or they have a gun in their hands, or they're standing on a bridge. For some of them, this one call is their last resort."



The Lifeline crisis center is staffed 24/7 by responders, social workers, health technician assistants and counselors who handle 15 phone lines and three chat lines.

Uncovering a New Life Back Home

Forensic work in Iraq leads to job skills for veterans in the States.

Imagine sifting through the rubble of mass graves, enduring dizzying temperatures topping out at 130 degrees, all the while knowing you could be shot by the enemy at any time. That was life for Dr. Michael A. Trimble for six deployments over three years in Iraq. Trimble is an archaeologist and chief of the Archives and Analysis Branch of the Army Corps of Engineers.

National Security Presidential Directive 37 (NSPD-37), issued under the Bush Administration in 2004, sent Trimble and his fellow archaeologists to Iraq to excavate nine mass graves, and “put all the evidence together to show the systematic killing of the Kurds in the mid-’80s,” he said.

“Mass grave work is usually done when wars are over,” Trimble noted. “There is not another instance in modern times where, while the war was on, people decided, ‘We’re going to hop around, try to do the work between the pauses in the war.’ If I had to do it again, I’d certainly think twice about it. It was very dangerous.”

Trimble’s guardian angels during this time were the Army and Marine Corps personnel who were responsible for the shelter, feeding and daily existence of his crew. “When you are out in a combat environment and people are trying to kill you, and you’re not allowed to have weapons, you never forget the people who keep you alive,” he said.

The matter-of-fact way in which he says this is an indication that he’s said it before, perhaps to friends in trying to find a way to repay these individuals for their service.

One of those friends

found a solution: a way of paying returning disabled service members while they learn new job skills, and at the same time solving a problem that the Corps of Engineers has had since the 1930s. That problem was a backlog in the curation—proper labeling, photographing and cataloguing—of 80 years of ceramics, glass and other items found at digs in the U.S.

The backlog had left about a

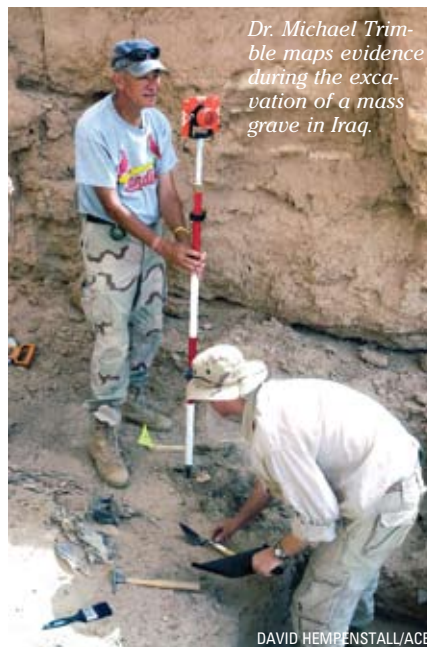
football field’s worth of objects and records to be curated. The solution for both dilemmas was the Veterans Curation Project, through which disabled veterans get paid to learn new job skills while helping preserve the sizable collection of historic artifacts held by the Corps of Engineers.

Timing is everything. Around the same time that Trimble formulated the concept of the Veterans Curation Project, the Obama administration was looking for worthy projects to receive stimulus money distributed as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. The project was awarded \$3.5 million in funding, allowing the Corps to open three labs, in Augusta, Ga., St. Louis, and Washington, D.C., within a few months of each other.

In attendance at the openings was Jo-Ellen Darcy, assistant secretary of the Army for civil works, who described the labs as “an innovative approach to supporting returning veterans of all services with jobs and training in a variety of technical skills. At the same time, the labs will advance the curation of archaeological and historic properties that have come

into the Corps’ possession over the years as a result of construction at its water project sites around the country.”

The premier site was Augusta, which opened on Oct. 20, 2009. Veterans entering the lab found high-tech camera equipment, computers filled with programs they would learn to use, like Microsoft



Dr. Michael Trimble maps evidence during the excavation of a mass grave in Iraq.

DAVID HEMPENSTALL/ACE



DAVID KNOERLEIN/ACE

Left: Reginold Fryson positions an artifact under a digital copy camera as Christopher Bowman steadies the platform at the curation lab in Augusta, Ga.

Word, PowerPoint, Excel spreadsheets and Access databases, plus boxes and boxes of uncatalogued property: man-made axes; 50-year-old ceramics; glass shards which, when pieced together, tell their own story; and even human teeth.

They also found curators, instructors and staff who were passionate about helping veterans. That's what many veterans hoped for when they came into the project. What most didn't think about was finding others like themselves, who weren't quite the same as when they left for war; others who are finding it hard to get a job, either because they don't have the needed high-tech skills, or because their disabilities are causing them to reevaluate their career paths.

Navy veteran Reginold Fryson was one of the first 12 students in the project. At age 26, he was injured just after returning from Iraq, when the brakes failed on the firetruck he was driving. Fryson doesn't know exactly what happened after that, but the truck landed in two pieces on either side of the road; he landed on his back in the middle.

After six months of recuperation, Fryson tried to return to work as a firefighter. But left-side weakness and memory loss made that impossible. During this time, Fryson also lost the family member he was closest to, his grandmother.

Lonely and depressed, "My confidence was almost gone," Fryson said of the time in his life just before coming to the Curation Project. For Fryson, the Curation Project is more than just a place that gave him job skills; it's where he "found a new family," he said. "We kind of instantly bonded with each other. We instantly had each other's back."

Lack of confidence is surprisingly common among these veterans. For Trimble, the idea that the brave service members who watched over his crew would return without confidence was a shock. "I think the most rewarding part of the project is seeing these

individuals not only gain the skills, but—something I never thought too much about—they believing that they have worth to society and they have a job they can do that makes them proud of themselves is a very big deal."

A classmate of Fryson's, Ben Berkman, was a Purple Heart recipient who did two tours in Iraq as a scout sniper. He and his company endured 20 improvised explosive device attacks and came home with traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress disorder so severe that when Berkman first came to the unit, he was monosyllabic. "He was only giving one- or two-word answers," Trimble recalled, "and I thought, 'This is not going to work for this guy.'" But with patience, it did work.

Eventually, Berkman became a leader in his group, and only six months after he started the program, he spoke at the opening of the Veterans Curation Project lab in Washington, D.C. He walked to the podium with confidence and told the 50-plus people in attendance how the program helped him gain job skills and more. "It's helped me adjust back into society," he said. "I don't have to see a psychiatrist as much."

Adjusting back into society is an issue for the veterans at all three Curation Project centers, where medical problems range from significant physical injuries to severe PTSD and TBI. "The TBI is very traumatic," said Trimble. "People learn at a slower pace. You have to be very patient with them. This is very tedious work. But I see that as a good thing because they're going to get frustrated at a real job out on the street. So they need to control it."

Cody Gregory, a senior airman who was deployed to Afghanistan from 2006 to 2007, agreed that the chance to readjust to a real work environment in the safety of the Curation Project lab is invaluable. "It's been really nice to go to an office setting every day," he said. "I'm back in a

federal building, learning to commute, little things that people forget about, especially us guys that have been to war and then come back; things like traffic. Those are the things that are huge obstacles that I'm learning to overcome slowly.

"The people in this program know where I'm coming from," he added. "It's really great to know that they're working with me on this."

Every veteran's unique story helps program organizers determine how to shape the future of the Curation Project, just as small shards of pottery, when pieced together, help archaeologists discover an older way of life. The Augusta, St. Louis and Washington, D.C., Veterans Curation Project labs have as many different archaeological finds as they do veterans' stories.

But Trimble summed up the project's common thread: "I think there are only two components at this moment—doing the curation and gaining the skills that come with it, and making them believe in themselves again."

It's clear that amid the 80 years of finds that they sort and photograph, what these veterans really have discovered is the opportunity for a new life. **VA**

By Melodee Mercer

When the Money is Gone

What happens when the stimulus money is gone, but the need continues? There is a bill in the House (H.R. 5282), "To provide funds to the Army Corps of Engineers to hire veterans and members of the Armed Forces to assist the Corps with curation and historic preservation activities, and for other purposes." The bill was sponsored by Rep. John Barrow (D-Ga.), who attended the second graduation at the Augusta site. At the time of this printing, the bill had 45 co-sponsors. Of the 12 who graduated with the first class in April, four now have full-time jobs.

George Hill (back row, second from left) and the New Directions Choir performed on NBC's "America's Got Talent" this summer.



GEORGE GRAY

Raising Their Voices for Hope and Redemption

Homeless veterans choir spreads
their message to millions.

MacArthur Park and Skid Row would hardly make the list of most popular tourist attractions in Los Angeles. In fact, many locals would advise newcomers not to visit these places alone.

George Hill is no newcomer. For 12 years, the Marine Corps veteran called these places home. He ate there, slept there, and survived there.

“You learn to survive there,” said Hill, in describing his experience living homeless. Eventually, he decided to seek help, and turned to VA. “I made up my mind that I was tired of being homeless,” he recalled.

It was at VA that Hill was introduced to New Directions Inc., a non-profit agency located on the grounds of the West Los Angeles VA Medical Center. New Directions helps hundreds like Hill each year by providing temporary housing, drug and alcohol detoxification, intensive substance abuse treatment and job training for displaced veterans in the Los Angeles area.

During Hill’s tenure at New Directions, a movement was born. It all began when he first arrived at the building. He recalled how shiny the floors were and how everything seemed to be in order, just like it had been when he was in the Marine Corps. And also like when he was in the Marines, there was an unmistakable sense of camaraderie and compassion that ultimately drew him in and kept him off the streets.

“I felt like people cared,” he said. “When you feel like someone cares, you feel like going on.”

After a dozen years of being on the streets, Hill was finally starting to get his life back together. All the while, he never forgot where he came

from. In its likeness to his Marine Corps experiences, Hill also found similarities to his homelessness experience in the New Directions building. The hallways reminded him of the times he would sing in the tunnels of MacArthur Park. For that reason, it was common for Hill and others to be heard singing in the hallways.

New Directions founder John Keaveney requested that Hill and the others sing during an event at the facility to show that residents who receive help have fun at the same time.

From this request came many other invitations to sing at events, and the New Directions Choir was formed. Composed of all previously homeless veterans, the New Directions Choir, under the direction of Hill, sings a cappella renditions of popular songs and traditional gospel music to send a message to other homeless veterans that there is hope.

“We want to make sure that other people know that there is a way,” said Hill.

Since its founding, the New Directions Choir has been able to spread its message to millions. The choir recently performed on NBC’s “America’s Got Talent,” and has been featured on NBC “Nightly News” and E! Entertainment Television. They have performed at more than 100 venues and events, including the “Donny & Marie” show and the Democratic National Convention, and for members of Congress. Despite their show business forays, the New Directions Choir

has never forgotten their humble roots or their message of hope and redemption.


“The choir led by George Hill has helped bring joy and inspiration to thousands with a message of hope for a better tomorrow to all,” said Pete Dougherty, national director of VA’s Homeless Veterans Programs.

The choir plans to be featured on more national television programs and is currently developing a CD. While members of the choir change as veterans move in and out of treatment, their collective voice is a constant sound of hope and faith.

As for Hill, in addition to serving as the New Directions Choir director, he has been a VA employee for 10 years, working as a computer assistant. He is also a student at California State University, Los Angeles, where he’s majoring in computer information systems.

Hill credits the genuine compassion of the VA staff he encountered as a homeless veteran with helping him turn his life around and stay off the streets.

“They have no idea what their kindness means to homeless veterans seeking help,” he said.

An estimated 15,000 homeless veterans reside in Los Angeles, comprising nearly a third of the area’s homeless population. For more information about New Directions, go to www.ndvets.org. 

By Tiffani Long

Connecting With Today's Veterans

Soldier turned filmmaker lends his talents to promoting programs and services for veterans.

Outreach is nothing new to VA, but reaching out to the newest generation of veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan is a bit different from years past. Today's veterans are turning to social media outlets like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to receive information about VA health care and other benefits.

Kyle Hausmann-Stokes' passion for filmmaking grew while he was serving in the Army, where he created videos that his fellow soldiers could send home to their loved ones.



ROBERT TURTEL

Army veteran Kyle Hausmann-Stokes realized early on that telling the story of today's military is best done through social media techniques. While in film school at the University of Southern California, he created the film "Now, After" to portray the struggle of veterans returning from active duty with post-traumatic stress disorder.

The emotional film caught the eye of VA leaders and encouraged a new approach to public outreach through a social media campaign to connect with the nation's newest veterans. VA commissioned Hausmann-Stokes to produce a public service announcement for nationwide distribution. "Confessions" was created to show veterans who struggle with re-adjusting to civilian life that they are not alone and that the 300 vet centers across the country are there to help. The veterans featured in the video are combat veterans employed in vet centers.

Hausmann-Stokes is now a director, writer and producer, but his passion for film grew while he was serving in the Army. To cope with the sometimes-overwhelming feelings of homesickness and fear that he experienced in the months prior to his deployment, he began creating music videos with footage of daily activities. His films were well-received, and his popularity spread quickly, first among his peers and finally the entire post.

Known as "Battalion Film Guy," Hausmann-Stokes created videos that soldiers could send home to their loved ones. "It's so complicated," he said, "so hard to explain to someone else what it means to be a soldier. What we do. How we feel. When you have a film, you can just pop it in and watch. You don't have to say anything."

August 2004 marked the completion of his three-year assignment with the 509th Airborne Infantry at Fort Polk, La. His emotions ran high as

the final days of his military service approached. Soon enough, the last week arrived, and Hausmann-Stokes began packing his personal belongings in eager anticipation of returning to civilian life as a student veteran. But shocking news began to spread: the 509th Airborne had been ordered to deploy to Iraq. In an instant, his spirits plummeted.

Just days before deployment, he was faced with yet another life-altering event when he was instructed to report to his battalion commander to discuss the films he had been making. As he waited to see his commanding officer, the young soldier paced nervously, wondering why he'd been summoned.

Hausmann-Stokes' love of filmmaking, initially just an artistic and emotional outlet, was about to change the course of his deployment in a

"It's so hard to explain to someone else what it means to be a soldier. When you have a film, you can just pop it in and watch. You don't have to say anything."

significant way. He was about to learn that he would be assigned a much different mission from the rest of his unit.

As he was ushered into the battalion commander's office, their eyes locked, and his commanding officer spoke words that would become permanently inscribed in Hausmann-Stokes' memory: "I've seen your videos and I've seen what you have been doing," the commander said. "I have seen the impact it has had on our troops and their families.

"Your mission is to seek out the best film school in the world. I don't know where it is, but you better find it. You better get the best education. I want you to graduate at the top of your class because you are an infantryman and paratrooper and we just don't do anything second-rate. When you graduate and polish your skills as a filmmaker, you come back and tell the

soldier's story."

With a smart salute and an emphatic "Yes, sir!" Hausmann-Stokes' journey into the world of academic film began. Soon after, the young soldier packed his bags and headed west to the competitive School of Cinematic Arts at the University of Southern California. In preparation, Hausmann-Stokes studied media arts, television and film at Universidad de Madrid in Spain and Arizona State University.

In 2007, he was accepted to USC's prestigious film school. The same week he was celebrating his admission, he was recalled to active duty—receiving orders for a year-long deployment to Iraq. The USC Admissions Office allowed an academic leave of absence, but he made the decision to put schooling on hold and fulfill his obligation to his country and fellow soldiers.

From May 2007 to May 2008, Hausmann-Stokes served in Iraq as a convoy commander and squad leader and was awarded two Army Achievement Medals and the Bronze Star for his service. While in Iraq, he used his spare time to further refine his filmmaking skills. He filmed footage ranging from combat to life on post to interviews with soldiers and Iraqi civilians.

When he returned to USC, Hausmann-Stokes was determined to fulfill his promise and tell the soldiers' stories. After graduating from USC, Hausmann-Stokes visited VA Central Office in July to discuss social media techniques that can be used to reach today's younger veterans.

Currently, he is filming another PSA for VA's peer-to-peer counseling center in Denver (1-877-WAR VETS). The ad is set to air online in September. To watch his earlier PSA on vet centers, go to www.vetcenter.va.gov.

By Katie O'Hara

'Forgotten' Veterans Find Their Way Home

Group works with VA to rescue unclaimed remains and arrange for a final resting place.

A few dozen people gathered in a committal shelter to attend a funeral service for a group of veterans whose unclaimed cremated remains had been discovered in local funeral homes. Not one person present knew any of the deceased, yet they all participated in a dignified funeral service complete with rifle volleys, flag folding and a rendering of taps. The cemetery director accepted the flag from the military chaplain on behalf of all veterans and said it would be flown on special occasions in the cemetery's Avenue of Flags.

Three such services took place earlier this year over three consecutive days at VA national cemeteries around the country; these services are becoming increasingly more common.

Eight unclaimed cremains were interred at Georgia National Cemetery on April 20, six were interred at Fort Richardson National Cemetery in Alaska April 21, and five more were interred at Tahoma National Cemetery in Washington on April 22.

The Missing in America Project, an organization that facilitates the rescue of unclaimed cremated remains of veterans from the shelves of funeral homes, hospitals and coroners' offices so they can receive proper interments in

national shrines, was instrumental in all three services. Other groups and individuals have taken up the cause as well. The National Cemetery Administration frequently works with these entities to determine eligibility and to provide a final resting place for these forgotten heroes.

According to MIAP National Executive Director Fred Salanti, 649 veterans have been laid to rest as a direct result of their efforts.

"Our goal is to act as the middle men," Salanti said. "We help the funeral home get the information to the VA so that these veterans will be interred with the dignity and honor they deserve."

According to Jim Trimbo, director of Tahoma National Cemetery, MIAP representatives do the legwork by contacting funeral homes and coroners' offices in search of veterans'

remains. "They help us get these forgotten veterans off the shelves and into the cemeteries," said Trimbo. "We recently interred a vet who had earned every medal but the Medal of Honor whose remains had been sitting in storage for 15 years. No veteran deserves that."

The reasons cremated remains go unclaimed are many and it is not always because the deceased was indigent. Sometimes no one in the family wants to take responsibility for a distant relative who lived in a far-off state. Some families simply walk away from the cost of burial after having their relative cremated. Others assume the cremation process is an end unto itself or that other family members will take care of the interment. Still others don't know what to do, so they choose not to deal with the situation.

Whatever the reason, the problem of unclaimed cremains accumulating in the nation's funeral homes is a growing one. The Cremation Association of America estimates that 5 percent of cremated remains, 35,000 per year, go unclaimed. The lower cost of cremation compared to casketed interment has led to cremations becoming more popular in the United States. And consequently, the number of unclaimed cremated



LAURI SHAW-WOOD

Veterans service organization members line the committal shelter walkway at Georgia National Cemetery.



Honor Guard members process with unclaimed cremains at Tahoma National Cemetery.

JOE LA VOIE II

remains is also on the rise.

In December 2008, representatives from Tahoma National Cemetery signed a memorandum of understanding with the state of Washington, several state funeral directors associations, the Washington State Department of Veterans Affairs, the Washington Military Department and the MIAP. The agreement gives funeral homes the power to release qualified veterans' remains to Tahoma National Cemetery or to the new Washington State Cemetery in Spokane. Since signing the agreement, Tahoma National Cemetery has received the remains of 59 veterans that were stored in funeral homes and coroners' offices throughout the state. Congress has also introduced a bill dealing with the issue. The Veterans Missing in America Act of 2009 (HR 2642), sponsored by Rep. Patrick Tiberi (R-Ohio), recognizes the work of the MIAP. If signed into law, the



Cemetery Director Virginia Walker accepts the folded flag for all veterans at a Missing in America Project ceremony at Fort Richardson National Cemetery in Alaska.

WILLIAM POTTINGER

bill would, among other things, direct VA to cooperate with the MIAP and similar organizations to assist in determining if unclaimed remains are those of veterans or family members eligible for burial in a national cemetery.

With the crack of rifle fire, followed by the bugler's mournful call, several more forgotten veterans are laid to rest in a place of honor. The

grassroots efforts by groups like the MIAP have produced encouraging results so far, but have also uncovered a problem much bigger than first thought. NCA, for its part, will always help veterans find their way to dignified and honorable final resting places. For what they gave for their country, they deserve nothing less. **VA**

By Chris Erbe

Veterans TEE Off for Victory

What started as a local golf tournament for blind veterans has grown into so much more.

Marvin Heminger, a Marine Corps veteran of the Korean War from Holland, Ohio, has attended the National Veterans TEE Tournament for 13 of the event's 17 years. Blind since 1979, Heminger, like many other regular participants, believes the annual golf event continues the therapy he received through VA's blind rehabilitation program when he first lost his vision.

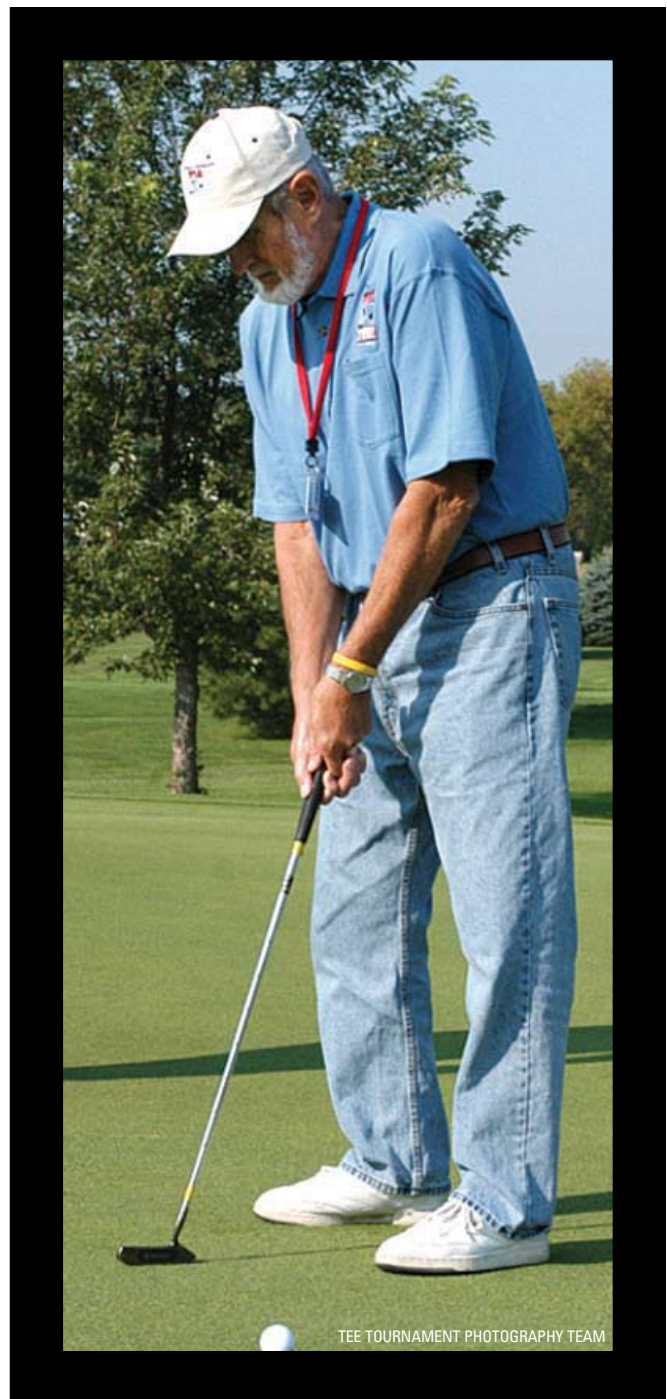
"We still don't know what caused [my blindness]," Heminger said. "One minute I was working and had perfect vision, and 53 hours later I was totally blind." Suspected to have stemmed from either a virus attacking the optic nerve or an injury on the battlefield many years earlier, the exact cause of Heminger's blindness was never pinpointed.

Undeterred, Heminger decided to live his life as independently as possible; he first signed up for the event in 1997. "I rode motorcycles, snowmobiles, and went hunting and fishing, but I had never golfed a day in my life before this happened," he said. "Now, my golf game has improved and I got a new set of clubs last year, thanks to the Tournament. My son takes me out to the driving range before we go, and I also practice swinging my clubs at home."

Like many who attend, Heminger, 79, says the annual journey to Iowa "provides lots of fellowship, increases self-confidence, and is a great program for anyone with visual problems or other disabilities also."

The event was the brainchild of several veterans with visual disabilities, along with a few employees from the VA medical center in Iowa City. These visionaries got together, and the new event was later named the "TEE Tournament," an acronym for Training, Exposure and Experience. The event has given legally blind veterans an opportunity to develop new skills and strengthen their self-esteem through adaptive golf and bowling. Starting in 2009, veterans with other disabilities were also accepted into the program.

One of those founders is Eldon Miller, 58, an Army veteran from nearby Colona, Iowa. He has attended ev-



Marine Corps veteran Marvin Heminger has been blind since 1979. Every year since the Tournament started. Like Heminger, Miller never considered himself a golfer before, but now he practices throughout the year to maintain his skills and improve his game. He enjoys everything about the TEE Tournament, and believes that the more people who attend, the better it will become. "Don't ever say you can't do something unless you try first," he said.

The first Tournament was held in 1994 in Nauvoo, Ill. At this inaugural event, there were 36 legally blind veter-

ans from six Midwestern states. The event was moved to the Iowa City area in 1995 and has been held there ever since, with increasing numbers attending each year. Nearly 200 veterans from across the United States signed up for the 2010 event, taking place Sept. 6-9 at the Riverside Casino and Golf Resort. Golfing takes place at five area courses.

“The event has evolved and grown every year since its first swing,” according to Kirt Sickels, director of the Tournament. “We listened to what our veterans wanted and made every effort to meet those expectations and then exceed them.”

As evidence, Sickels and his team developed unique and tailored instructional and training sessions, as well as a golf buddy program, a golf coach program and a community-supported volunteer base of more than 250 people. “We have added additional programs and activities to explore and expand new skills to improve our veterans’ self-esteem and celebrate their accomplishments,” Sickels added.

Unique to the Tournament is a special companion program for the veterans’ spouses, giving them some needed R&R while at the event. “In short, it is our duty to constantly reevaluate the event and listen to what our veterans have to say to move forward and make the necessary improvements.”

Each year, the Tournament uses a therapeutic format to continue rehabilitation and also promote camaraderie among the participants. According to Sickels, “We have broadened the scope of our event to include participants with visual impairments, amputations, traumatic brain injuries, psychological trauma, certain neurological conditions, spinal cord injuries and other disabilities. This was a great opportunity to reach out to and include more veterans, and give them an opportunity to participate, set new goals and celebrate accomplishments.”

New specially adapted golf carts and other equipment were added to accommodate some of those disabilities. In addition to golf, bowling and horseshoes are part of the program, and last year the veterans started kayaking, which proved popular.

In 2008, the National Veterans TEE Tournament and Summer Sports Clinic became VA’s fifth and sixth national rehabilitation programs, respectively, joining the Wheelchair Games, Creative Arts Festival, Winter Sports Clinic and Golden Age Games.

According to Barry Sharp, director of the Iowa City VA Medical Center, all of the national programs are able to share their successes and implement best practices learned over many years of experience. “Because of the success of the TEE Tournament on a local level, it was elevated to a national event. Increased media coverage and awareness about the event has spawned additional support from the local community in the way of both volunteers and sponsors.”

Sharp added, “Ultimately, the greatest benefit of being a national event is our ability to involve more veterans from anywhere in the country. The TEE Tournament, like all the national events, changes veterans’ lives, enabling them to return to their local communities and go on with their lives with the knowledge and confidence that they can accomplish many things they previously thought they were unable to achieve. Seeing a first-time participant evolve over the week of the event is always my biggest thrill.”

Air Force veteran Jeanne Goldy-Sanitate, 54, of Medford, N.J., was among the first wheelchair users to tee off last year. She came with a desire and a determination to learn the sport that she had until then only been able to watch her husband play from a distance.


“Living with multiple sclerosis, I never thought I would be able to get out on a golf course and swing a club,” she said. “Learning how to golf using adaptive equipment allows me to share something that means so much to my husband.”

Goldy-Sanitate uses a motorized scooter to get around. It is similar to the motorized adaptive cart she was provided at the Tournament to use on the golf course, using a special swing chair that simulates a natural swing. Half the size of a normal cart, it maneuvers easily on the greens and permits wheelchair users to golf alongside their able-bodied friends and partners.

At VA’s national rehabilitation programs, the changes made in veterans’ lives are not short-term, according to Sharp. “I have personally seen and heard testimonials from veterans and their families on how the event has brought families together by giving them a venue to look forward to each year,” he said. “It also enables the veterans to go back to their communities and accomplish many daily living activities that they previously felt they couldn’t or wouldn’t do, providing an improved lifestyle—not only for the veterans but their families as well.

“One of the best examples is a veteran who recently lost his sight and became legally blind,” Sharp continued. “He felt his life was over and had given up on himself and withdrawn from his family and friends. After participating in the event, he went back to his own community and held a golf event for the local veterans there.

“Every year, I hear stories like this. These veterans inspire all of us who support VA’s national events. I strongly encourage any VA employees who have never participated in any of these programs to seek out the opportunity—it will change their lives and inspire them to do even more for our veterans on a daily basis.”

To learn more about the National Veterans TEE Tournament, contact Sickels at 319-339-7104, or by e-mail at Kirt.Sickels@va.gov. 

By Kim Byers

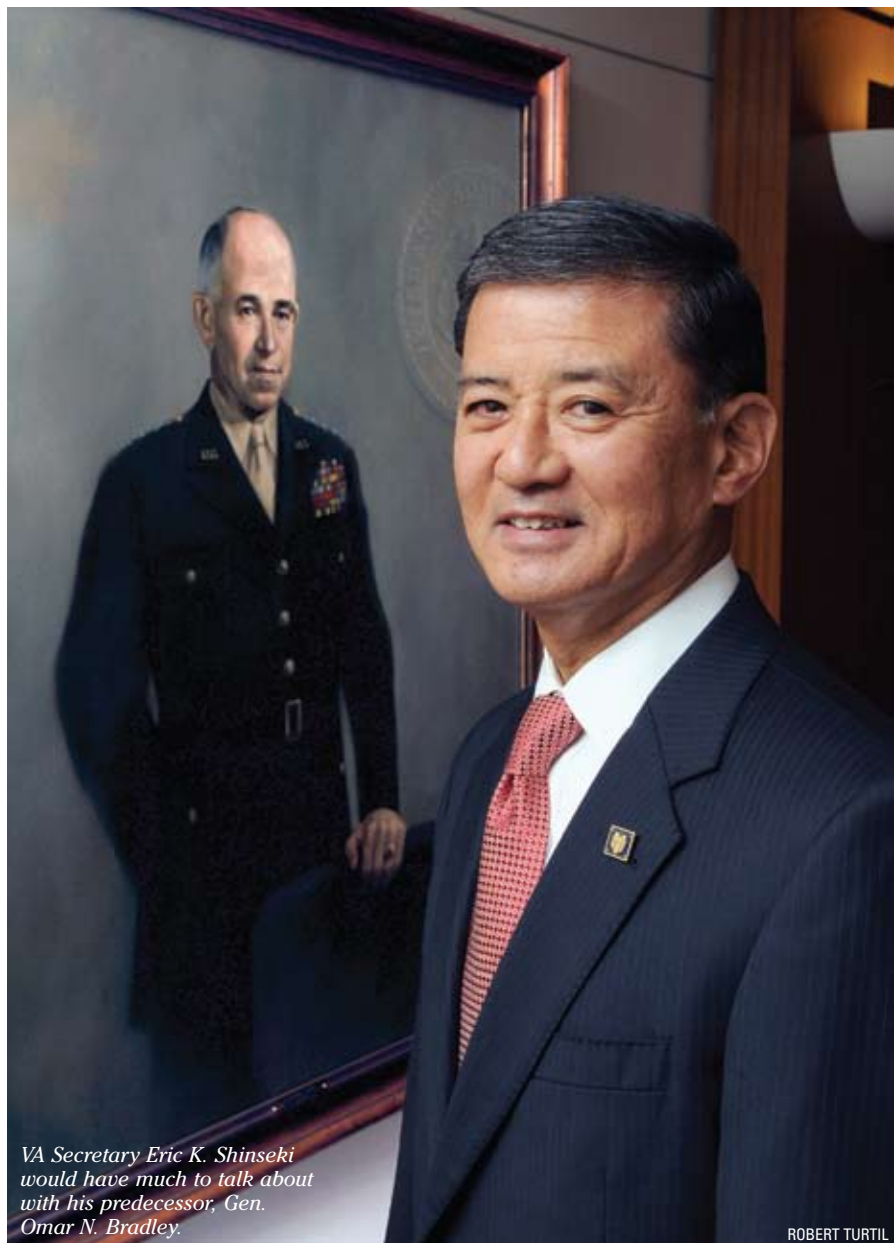
When Gen. Omar N. Bradley accepted the President's request to lead VA through the post-World War II years, the challenges were surprisingly similar to today's.

A troubled economy. High unemployment. Veterans returning from war looking for health care and jobs. Democrats controlling both houses of Congress, but voter dissatisfaction running high enough to threaten their hold in the off-year elections. News reports of the "backlog" of claims at VA and its lack of preparedness for the rush of new veterans.

Today's headlines? Yes. And no.

These were the stories and the conditions on Aug. 15, 1945. That was the day Gen. Omar N. Bradley walked into the Veterans Administration headquarters, across from Lafayette Square and the White House, and took the oath as the agency's newest administrator.

At the press conference following his swearing-in, Bradley stated simply,



VA Secretary Eric K. Shinseki would have much to talk about with his predecessor, Gen. Omar N. Bradley.

ROBERT TURTILL

Transforming VA: Looking Back at the 'Veterans' General'

"I don't think there's any job in the country I'd sooner not have nor any job in the world I'd like to do better." Fully aware of the challenges, he added, "For even though it is burdened with problems, it gives me the chance to do something for the men who did so much for us."

The challenges were not only

obvious, they were immediate. Recalling those first few months in his autobiography, *A General's Life*, Bradley explained the Pentagon's plan for a phased demobilization over the next three years was almost immediately "scrapped" in favor of what we might call today a "discharge express lane." The result? Nearly 12.8 million men

and women left military service in just eight months, swelling the veteran population from nearly 5 million to more than 17 million.

Previous management actions had centralized administrative functions in the Washington office. While Bradley was appreciative of the 75,000 pieces of mail processed each day, he

was more concerned with the overwhelming volume coming in—"on some days at four times that rate," he explained. "My most vivid memory of my first days in office is the sight of unopened canvas mail bags stacked to the ceiling in the hallway: hundreds of thousands of letters from veterans or dependents unanswered," wrote Bradley.

With a commitment to make decisions "in the best interest of the veterans," and support for the same from then-President Truman, Bradley set about "transforming" VA to meet the needs of veterans. Following a plan of decentralization and increasing staff, Bradley took aim at each of the major benefit pillars designed to support veterans through their transition to civilian life.

Then, as now, the link between education and enhanced employability was unquestioned. The GI Bill passed by Congress offered money for college tuition and subsistence. However, the original legislation had placed an age "ceiling" of 25 years on the benefit, based on a misconception that "older" veterans already had sufficient education or skills before entering military service. In fact, the older veterans were just as aware of the value of higher education and eager to pursue college degrees to further their careers.

Arguing against what he called the "discriminatory" nature of the age limit, Bradley persuaded Congress to remove it, opening the new benefit to all 16 million World War II veterans. In addition, he campaigned successfully to have Congress increase the subsistence allowance and remove a provision that would deny any subsistence benefit if a veteran took an outside job.

The response was overwhelming, both for VA and for colleges and universities across the country. Bradley, while admitting VA was "inexcusably behind" in making payments to institutions and individual veterans alike in the early going, was pleased to note

the program, later to be considered one of the greatest pieces of social legislation ever passed, was, after two years, on solid ground.

VA officials, basing their estimates on past experience, expected applications for disability "pensions" to come in from about 10 percent of the returning veterans. Due in part to the average length of service of the World War II veteran, the higher casualty rate and a misunderstanding of their own eligibility by the veterans, the projected 60,000 applications per month became nearly 400,000 per month, equaling a rate of 25 percent of the returning veteran population. By Feb. 1, 1946, VA had received more than 2 million claims from World War II veterans.

Bradley responded by creating 500 "rating boards" to review and adjudicate claims, later doubling that to 1,000 boards and hiring 7,000 new people to move claims through the process. In spite of clearing 1.5 million claims, VA still faced a backlog of half a million. In the end, nearly 4 million World War II veterans would file pension claims.

The GI Bill also included provisions to support veterans who were interested in purchasing a home. Initially, the benefit provided a \$2,000 guaranty to the lender in case of a default. VA does not actually lend veterans the money, a point of confusion that has required regular clarification from that day to this. Bradley convinced Congress to raise the guaranty amount to \$4,000.

The loan guaranty benefit not only protected the lender, it also allowed the builder to offer a veteran a house for "nothing down." This, as Bradley pointed out, "gave the housing industry a powerful shot in the arm." Within the first year, VA guaranteed some 200,000 home loans, which not only provided housing for veterans, but jobs as well.

Almost 95 percent of military members during World War II took advantage of the inexpensive life

insurance offered to them. Congress passed legislation to allow World War II veterans to continue the policies after they returned to civilian life.

VA's insurance operation was headquartered in New York back then and was a paper-driven process done entirely by hand. While a member of the military was on active duty, premium payments were automatically deducted from the paycheck, so the insurance staff was able to handle the workload. But once a service member became a civilian, the requirement to send out premium notices, receive and post payments and make payments to beneficiaries, all done by hand, became overwhelming—even for the 8,000 personnel assigned to process the actions.

During the first six months of Bradley's tour at VA, they received 1.5 million letters from veterans about their insurance and sent out some 5 million premium notices. All this communication created what Bradley called "the most mind-boggling mail logjam" he had ever seen.

Despite the logistical challenges of mail handling, Bradley was more concerned with the 10 million veterans who had allowed their insurance to lapse prior to converting to civilian policies. Despite his personal appeals to veterans via radio and support from Congress, in the form of liberalized regulations regarding reinstatement, the response was lukewarm at best.

As Bradley explained, "It is difficult to convince a 20- or 22-year-old single man that life insurance is important." However, as these veterans grew older, married and had families, the value of their GI insurance became more apparent, with millions reinstating their policies and keeping them in force.

The "most urgent challenge," according to Bradley, was the need to improve the quality of VA medical care. It was, according to Albert Deutsch, a respected journalist who crusaded for better mental health treatment and similar social issues,

“medieval.” By Bradley’s own account, it was, and always had been, “mediocre.”

The most immediate concern was the lack of doctors. Although the rolls showed some 2,300 full-time physicians, about 1,700 were “on loan” from the Army and Navy, fulfilling two-year service commitments that would soon expire, leaving roughly 600 career staff on board. Struggling to provide adequate care to the current population of veteran patients, Bradley was acutely aware the returning combat vets needing care would overwhelm the system.

It didn’t take Bradley long to discover the sticking point in VA’s ability to hire enough qualified doctors—they had to come through the U.S. Civil Service. When a list of available physicians was sent over from Civil Service, there were but 80 names. A careful review showed more than 60 percent were over 60 years old and some had already been committed to institutions for alcoholism or insanity. For doctors, working for the Civil Service carried the connotation of “state” or “socialized” medicine and was not an attractive option for bright new M.D.s.

Bradley, with the help of Dr. Paul R. Hawley, Eisenhower’s chief surgeon in Europe, set about an ambitious plan to establish an “elite” VA medical corps separate from the Civil Service with appropriate pay and benefits. This step was so important to Bradley that when faced with what appeared to be defeat in his bureaucratic dogfight with the Civil Service, he threatened to resign. The measure passed.

The plan also recommended current and future VA hospitals be affiliated with class “A” medical teaching institutions. The benefits of these symbiotic relationships continue to accrue, both in improved care for veterans and in the research and development of new techniques, procedures and equipment.

These changes, along with the addition of prestige advisory boards,

which drew experts—like Dr. Charles W. Mayo, of the Mayo Clinic—from across the medical profession, and a change in focus to rehabilitate instead of warehouse disabled veterans, remain significant components of today’s VA.

While admitting he was unable to “magically upgrade VA medicine overnight,” Bradley took well-deserved satisfaction in the fact that within two years, he and his team “had launched it on the right track.”

Beyond his own assessment, Bradley was able to point to outside critics for validation. Again, he cited Deutsch, who reported that VA had undergone a “revolution” and that Hawley had “infused the whole hospital program with a spirit of modern scientific medicine.”

Likewise, medical journalists Lois Mattox Miller and James Monohan wrote in a *Reader’s Digest* article, “Veterans Medicine: Second to None,” that “... General Omar N. Bradley has transformed the medical service of the Veterans Administration from a national scandal to a model establishment.”

Fast forward to January 2009. Retired four-star general and former Army Chief of Staff Eric K. Shinseki is sworn in as the seventh Secretary of what is now a full-fledged Cabinet-level Department of Veterans Affairs.

“The overriding challenge I am addressing from my first day in office is to make the Department of Veterans Affairs a 21st-century organization focused on the nation’s veterans as its clients,” Shinseki said.

Like Bradley, Shinseki began immediately to transform VA into an organization that is “people-centric, results-driven and forward-looking.”

Like Bradley, he was faced with executing plans to implement a brand new GI Bill education benefit that eligible veterans could begin using in the fall, reducing the “backlog” of disability claims, and opening VA’s health care system to veterans previously unable to enroll, while facilitating access

for returning Iraq and Afghanistan veterans.

The Post-9/11 GI Bill authorized the most extensive educational assistance opportunity since the passage of the original GI Bill in 1944. The maximum benefit allows every eligible veteran, service member, reservist and National Guard member an opportunity to receive an in-state, undergraduate education at a public institution at no cost.

Since VA began accepting veterans’ applications on May 1, 2009, and school enrollment certifications on July 6, 2009, approximately 277,000 applications for eligibility determinations or school enrollment certifications have been received for the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

During this same period, VA received more than 603,000 applications for other education benefit programs, such as the Montgomery GI Bill; processed more than 503,000 of those applications; and authorized payments to students totaling more than \$1 billion.

Secretary Shinseki seized the moment presented by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act to spend \$150 million to hire some 2,300 new employees to help reduce the growing backlog of disability claims from veterans for service-related injuries as well as the current combat troops returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

But his plans to “break the back of the backlog” will require a long-term commitment, and Secretary Shinseki, with the support of President Obama, has proposed a budget increase of \$460 million, along with plans to hire more than 4,000 additional claims processors for veterans benefits. This is a 27 percent funding increase over the 2010 level.

Shinseki and Bradley could share more than a knowing expression of concern and resolve when comparing the number of claims and their apparent ability to grow exponentially. The 1,014,000 claims received in 2009

were a 75 percent increase over the 579,000 received in 2000. Shinseki said the department expects another 30 percent increase in claims—to 1,319,000—in 2011.

The growth is a product of several factors in addition to the current crop of returning combat veterans. There are the additional diseases added to the list of presumptive conditions related to exposure to Agent Orange by veterans of Vietnam, and the success of medical science, which has been able to connect a variety of service-related experiences to the onset of negative health effects years later.

For long-term reduction of the inventory, Secretary Shinseki is looking to additional manpower, improved business practices, plus an infusion of \$145 million in the proposed budget to develop a paperless claims processing system, which plays a significant role in his plans to transform VA.

The dream of home ownership is just as strong for today's service members and veterans as it was for those returning from service at the end of World War II. While the dollar amount guaranteed by VA for home loans has climbed steadily over the years, the basic tenets of the program remain constant. The program makes home ownership more affordable for veterans, active-duty members and some surviving spouses by protecting lenders from loss if the borrower fails to repay the loan. Currently, about 1.3 million active home loans were obtained using VA's Home Loan Guaranty Program.

More than 90 percent of VA-guaranteed loans are made without a down payment. Despite problems in the nation's housing market, VA has the lowest serious delinquency rate in the industry, according to the Mortgage Bankers Association. Furthermore, VA's percentage of loans in foreclosure is the lowest of all measured loan types—lower even than prime loans, which require high credit scores and a 20 percent down payment by the borrower.

Since 1944, when home-loan guarantees were offered under the original GI Bill, through the fiscal year that ends Sept. 30, VA has guaranteed more than 18.7 million home loans worth \$1.04 trillion.

But helping veterans obtain homes is a battle with two fronts. The second is providing housing for those who are homeless. Secretary Shinseki has set an ambitious goal for VA and its federal, faith-based and community partners, vowing to eliminate veteran homelessness in five years.

"Our plan enlarges the scope of VA's efforts to combat homelessness," said Shinseki. "In the past, VA focused largely on getting homeless veterans off the streets. Our five-year plan aims also at preventing them from ever ending up homeless."

To that end, VA will spend \$3.2 billion this year to prevent and reduce homelessness among veterans. That includes \$2.7 billion on medical services and more than \$500 million on specific homeless programs.

Omar Bradley would be pleased to know that his efforts to encourage veterans to convert their military life insurance policies to civilian versions after their service still resonate with today's veterans. In fact, VA operates one of the nation's largest life insurance programs, providing more than \$1 trillion in coverage to 7 million service members, veterans and family members.

And it is still providing benefits to some 1 million veterans who served between 1917 and 1956 and who hold certain government life insurance policies. These veterans shared \$319.8 million in annual insurance dividends during 2009.

The dividends come from the earnings of trust funds into which veterans have paid insurance premiums over the years, and are linked to returns on investments in U.S. government securities.

Although Secretary Shinseki inherited a VA with a much-improved reputation for delivering quality medi-

cal care to veterans, health care challenges continue to be a primary focus of his transformational plans. Owing to the lingering questions about negative health effects from the Gulf War, a quick, decisive victory fought in a toxic environment; the devastating injuries sustained by veterans of the longest-running combat operations in the nation's history in Iraq and Afghanistan; and the ongoing research into the latent effects of exposures during previous conflicts, the need for a continued infusion of money and people is obvious.

Again, following in the Bradley tradition of making bold decisions and taking aggressive action on behalf of veterans, Secretary Shinseki has attacked on multiple fronts:

- adding three diseases to the list of Agent Orange presumptive illnesses, a move that will help 200,000 Vietnam veterans who may have been exposed to the defoliant receive the health care and benefits they need;
- eliminating co-pays for the catastrophically disabled;
- restoring enrollment eligibility for 500,000 Priority 8 veterans;
- directing unprecedented resources to treat the wounds of today's wars—traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress disorder;
- reducing the burden of proof for veterans claiming PTSD from their military experiences;
- taking measures to support the caregivers who take care of injured veterans; and
- providing clinics, staff and programs focused specifically on the health of women veterans.

So while the headlines may sound familiar, the devil, as they say, is in the details. And getting the details right, whether directing troops in combat or the large organization designed to care for them afterward, takes a strong executive committed to serving the veteran, "generally" speaking. **VA**

By Jim Benson

Three Honored for Leadership in Health Care Communications

For all the talking, writing, e-mailing, texting, faxing and tweeting that goes on all around us these days, it's amazing how often "a failure to communicate" is cited as the reason something was not done correctly.

Perhaps it's because all these technological devices help only with how fast and how far we can send a message. Deciding what to say and how to say it—the content—still requires deliberate thought, and that takes time and effort.

Enter the Veterans Health Administration's army of public affairs officers, who battle daily against obfuscation, omission, misuse and a host of other barriers to effective communication.

Often the unsung heroes of successful events, insightful interviews, inspirational stories and the like, these "word warriors" had the spotlight shone on their efforts when VHA held its annual Communications Awards ceremony Aug. 9 at the VA Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs annual training conference in Atlanta.

After reviewing a litany of both routine and emergency tasks facing PAOs each day, event emcee Susan Poff, VHA Office of Communications Management, cited their collective creativity, skill, leadership and warmth in reaching out on behalf of their facilities "to the most deserving of our nation's citizens, those who served us first, the United States veteran."

Poff paid tribute to all the entrants who "made it so hard on our judges to pick winners" in the 13 available categories. For all but three categories, awards were given at three lev-



Jonathan Friedman took on the unique challenge of communicating the opening of the first fully integrated VA/DoD health care facility.

els: Pinnacle, Ace Achievement and Honor, in descending order.

The three separate awards come under the heading of "Leadership" awards. They are the VHA New Communicator of the Year; VHA Communications Visionary (Director in Support of Communications), critical to creating an environment that empowers all to do their best; and the Jeannie Riffe VHA Communicator of

ever James A. Lovell Federal Health Care Center, where the Navy and VA have integrated medical care for active-duty sailors and veterans together. Presented with a significant communications challenge for which there was no blueprint, Friedman met with senior leaders from the Navy and VA and laid out a robust plan to keep all constituents informed of progress and changes as they occurred.

active military and veterans to the new facility. For his efforts, Friedman was named the VHA New Communicator of the Year.

"To say that I was humbled by this award is a bit of an understatement, as this has certainly been a team effort for our entire communications department," Friedman reflected. "We've had the fantastic fortune of working together as an integrated communications

"Communicating the historic integration has been both challenging and rewarding. As a first-of-its-kind venture, there were no rule books, but this allowed us the flexibility to create communication tools to best reach stakeholders."

the Year, named for a valued public affairs colleague killed in a tragic auto accident.

Following the Biblical reference "the last shall be first," Jonathan Friedman, the "last" PAO at the North Chicago VA Medical Center, is also the "first" PAO at the new, first-

For his "Promises Kept" campaign, Friedman used traditional methods, Web 2.0 and creative 60-second videos to target select elements of his diverse audience. He even navigated the bureaucratic jungles to have tollway signs added or changed to direct

team, which I really feel made all the difference."

When asked about the uniqueness of the joint venture, Friedman explained, "Communicating the historic integration has been both challenging and tremendously rewarding. As a first-of-its-kind

venture, there were no rule books, but this allowed us the flexibility to create communication tools to best reach our stakeholders.”

It's easy to underestimate the power or influence one individual can have until you see the impact of a leader committed to the mission and empowering the staff. Inheriting a non-existent public affairs program when he took the reins at the Oklahoma City VA Medical Center, David Wood quickly made communications a top priority. He made his part-time PAO a full-time position, hired two additional staff, placed medical media under the wing of public affairs, and provided a budget.

Wood's "visionary" approach was actually based on his ability to look back at his previous leadership roles at the VA medical centers in Butler, Pa., and Bath, N.Y., where he experienced the benefits of a properly supported full-time PAO. More important, he stayed engaged in the process, developing an award-winning director's blog, embracing social media, using electronic messaging and designing an Internet café for patients. For his ongoing support of communications, Wood earned the VHA Communications Visionary award.

"It was a complete surprise and I was very flattered," Wood said. "A lot of the credit goes to Stacy Rine and Travis Villani, who worked hard to integrate the internal and external communications efforts and initiated the use of Facebook and other social media tools."

If there's one skill a good communicator must develop to be effective, it's the ability to persuade. Given his track record thus far, it is clear Todd Sledge is skilled at persuasion. Working as a part-time PAO



STACY RINE

Above: David Wood won praise for making communications a top priority when he took over as director of the Oklahoma City VA Medical Center; right: Todd Sledge convinced his boss to dedicate him to communications full-time.

at the Cincinnati VA Medical Center, Sledge first persuaded his boss to dedicate him to public affairs full-time. Then to provide a budget. And staff. Since then he has been persuading his fellow citizens to get behind the mission to care for their veterans.

Now, thanks to his powers of persuasion and outreach efforts, Sledge has signed up the Cincinnati Bengals to provide on-field VIP packages for returning veterans; convinced the city of Cincinnati to host the "Welcome Home" event each year (with a growing list of corporate sponsors); and motivated a local foundation to donate a custom-built mobile clinic to help enroll veterans at outreach events.

And he is willing to share his success with others. Taking

on the added responsibilities of the VISN 10 PAO, he ripped a page from the "best practices" playbook and created standardized outreach handbooks to extend his successes throughout Ohio.

Finally, as a volunteer on the Communications Advisory Board, he was voted by his peers to be a co-chair in his first term.

Persuasive communication is more than just words. It's actions and results. Thanks to his ongoing actions and impressive results, Sledge is the 2010 Jeannie Riffe VHA Communicator of the Year.

Sledge first learned of his selection while surrounded by fellow PAOs at the National Veterans Wheelchair Games in Denver.

"I knew Jeannie and



LYDIA VALDEZ

immediately thought of her smiling face the last time I saw her," Sledge recalled. "She was a valued friend and colleague and winning the award named for her means a lot. I just questioned whether I was worthy."

And the winners are ... veterans who are persuaded to come to VA for the care they need, deserve and have earned through their service.

Veterans Benefits Administration Honors Outstanding Employees

Veterans advocacy begins with good customer service, and that was underscored by national awards presented during the Veterans Benefits Administration employee recognition ceremony held in Cleveland in early August. VA Deputy Secretary W. Scott Gould joined VBA top leaders in honoring winners in three award categories as outstanding advocates for veterans who are making a real difference in the lives of veterans and their families every day.

The Leo C. Wurschmidt Jr. Customer Service Team Award was presented to the Nashville VA Regional Office Month of Death Team, represented by Jan Dew, Courtney Washington and Melissa Watson. The award is named in honor of the late VBA area and regional office director who devoted his career to improving customer service.

During fiscal year 2009, VA identified surviving spouses who were entitled to retroactive month of death (MOD) payments for veterans who died between Jan. 1, 1997 and March 2, 2009. The Nashville Month of Death Team was selected to process requests for those payments. As the only regional office in VBA assigned to process MOD payments, the team had to identify and resolve many issues before payments could be made.

During the course of their work, they processed more than 5,000 pieces of return mail, answered more than 8,000 electronic inquiries, and dealt with thousands more inquiries from customers ranging from veterans' spouses to the White House. After clearing those hurdles, the MOD team processed more than 10,800



Acting Under Secretary for Benefits Michael Walcoff, left, and Deputy Secretary W. Scott Gould, right, flank award recipients (left to right) Laura Jones, Candice Lopez, Jan Dew, Melissa Watson and Courtney Washington.

outstanding payments—all in less than three months.

Candice Lopez, a vocational rehabilitation counselor at the Waco (Texas) VA Regional Office, was honored with the Outstanding Customer Service Individual Award. This award is given to a non-supervisory employee assigned to a regional office or center for “making a difference in VBA” through commitment to the highest level of customer service to veterans.

Lopez maintains a heavy training schedule but still manages to be a leader nationally in the number of completed rehabilitation cases. She was cited for her compassion in working with disabled veterans and for her innovative approaches to encouraging and supporting their vocational goals.

“My mission has always

been to ensure that veterans leave my office feeling as though VA is really an advocate for them,” Lopez said. “I try to attend all of their college graduation ceremonies, and I find myself clapping and shouting just as loudly as their family members, because I’m so proud of their accomplishments. And it is on those graduation days that I’m most proud to work for VA.”

Laura Jones, a coach, mentor and change agent at the VA regional office in Little Rock, Ark., received the Juel Award.

The Juel Award was established in memory of the late Juel E. Marifjeren, a supervisory veterans claims examiner who was killed in 1998. Marifjeren spent his entire VA career at the Chicago VA Regional Office and was noted for his exemplary leadership

style and for treating employees with fairness and respect.

Jones received the Juel Award for her efforts toward leading change and instilling a vibrant and productive work environment as VBA embarked on a multi-year transformation of veterans’ claims processing and benefits delivery. In June 2009, Jones was the first coach to successfully lead a team to test and refine a compensation claims pilot project using a sophisticated data-driven, decision-making methodology.

Jones proved that the business methodology could work to improve VBA performance, and she attributed that success to the team she led. At the awards ceremony, she was described as “an agent of change” who “fosters continuous improvement within her team.”

It's September—Are You Ready?

“Ready for what?” you might ask. Are you ready for the second half of the 2010 hurricane season? A sudden severe storm that knocks out power to your home for the next three or four days? A flash flood in your community? A fallen tree in your living room? An earthquake? Wildfire? How about a sudden evacuation from your workplace or a shelter-in-place event? And there's still the potential for a real or threatened terrorist attack or some lone wolf who decides today he will vent his anger at “the system.” Are you ready for that?

These events are real. Some may occur routinely, seasonally, annually or seldom, depending on where you live and work. And there isn't much you can do to prevent them. But you can anticipate their arrival, make plans and be ready to respond.

To help you do just that, September has been designated as National Preparedness Month. National Preparedness Month is sponsored by the Ready Campaign, in partnership with Citizen Corps and the Advertising Council. NPM is held each September to encourage Americans to take simple steps to prepare for emergencies in their homes, businesses and communities. September is the seventh annual NPM. The focus of this year's campaign is to encourage Americans to work together to take concrete actions toward emergency preparedness. All Americans are encouraged to join the readiness team and truly help themselves, their neighbors and their communities be Ready.

Throughout the year, the Ready Campaign promotes individual emergency preparedness. Ready is a national public

service advertising campaign, produced in partnership with the Advertising Council, to educate and empower Americans to prepare for and respond to emergencies, including natural disasters and potential terrorist attacks.

While individual preparedness is important, working together with others provides the added layer of preparedness needed when disaster strikes. Most hazards don't happen to just one person. They affect entire communities. And a community that prepares together will survive together.

There are a number of ways to get involved, including participation as a group.

NPM Coalition membership is open to all public and private sector organizations. Groups can register to become an NPM Coalition member by visiting ready.gov and clicking on the NPM banner.

In 2009, nearly 2,700 organizations joined the Ready Campaign in promoting the readiness message across the country in homes, schools, businesses and communities to highlight the importance of individual and community public emergency preparedness throughout September.

During NPM, Coalition members share preparedness information with their members, customers, employees and communities. Members spearhead activities that encourage specific steps for individual, neighborhood and community preparedness.

VA Central Office, under the direction of the Office of Operations, Security and Preparedness, will host its own daylong NPM event on Sept. 24, sharing preparedness information with employees,



Ready.gov offers free emergency preparedness information.

contractors and visitors.

The campaign's Web sites (ready.gov and listo.gov) and toll-free numbers (1-800-BE-READY, TTY 1-800-462-7585, and 1-888-SE-LISTO) provide free emergency preparedness information.

Citizen Corps is the Federal Emergency Management Agency's grassroots strategy to bring together government and community leaders to involve citizens in all-hazards emergency preparedness and resilience. Local Citizen Corps councils enable collaborative

planning between government and civic leaders and provide localized support for: outreach and educational efforts to the public; training and exercises that effectively integrate all sectors of the community; and volunteer programs that augment the full range of emergency response services.

For more information about Citizen Corps, visit www.citizencorps.gov. Help ensure your preparedness and that of your community: *Get a Kit – Make a Plan – Stay Informed – Get Involved.*

PMF Program: Answering the Call to Leadership

This past spring, some of the brightest graduate and law students from universities across the country attended an event at the Washington, D.C., Convention Center. The Office of Personnel Management sponsored the event, kicking off the hiring season for the Presidential Management Fellows Class of 2010.

The PMF program is highly selective, with only one in 10 applicants chosen for a two-year fellowship. Each year, OPM recruits recent graduates from top master's and doctoral programs from accredited colleges and universities worldwide. Fellows can be hired at the GS-9, GS-11 or GS-12 level (or equivalent).

Presidential Management Fellows are available for hire year-round, providing a constant stream of top talent to hiring managers. Each year, the PMF program recruits thousands of applicants and puts them through a rigorous screening process to select finalists.

Hiring managers search an online resume bank of PMF finalists, conduct interviews, and can make offers in a matter of days rather than weeks or months, saving considerable time and expense. There is no hiring flexibility that can match the quality, speed and cost-effectiveness of the PMF program.

Inquiries about the PMF program can be sent to the VACO Internships mailbox, or visit the OPM/PMF Web site at www.pmf.opm.gov.

Gwendalyn Minton

Gwendalyn Minton, of the Syracuse (N.Y.) VA Medical Center, was recognized for her creative thinking, work ethic, people skills, leadership qualities and—perhaps most important of all—her compassion, when she was presented the Under Secretary for Health’s Award for Excellence in Social Work Practice on July 20.

“She always takes time for those in need,” said Principal Deputy Under Secretary for Health Robert Jesse, M.D., Ph.D., who presented the award during a Veterans Health Administration National Leadership Board meeting in Arlington, Va. “If you’re ever at the Syracuse VA Medical Center, there’s a good chance you’ll find her stopped in the hallway, chatting with a veteran patient, a family member, or a staff member about how she can help them.”

Tammy Paquin, a registered nurse who works with Minton at the Syracuse VAMC, said Minton continually exceeds expectations despite her numerous and emotionally demanding responsibilities. “Gwen is the social worker for our outpatient geriatric clinics,” Paquin explained.

“She also works our hospice unit, providing much-needed emotional support to veterans and their families. She’s one of only two social workers at our 48-bed community living center. She coordinates our respite program, an invaluable service that enables caregivers to get a break so they can rest, rejuvenate, and keep caring for their loved one at home, for as long as possible.

“In each of these areas, Gwen’s loving spirit shines

through,” Paquin said. “It was an honor to nominate her for this award. It’s an even greater honor to work beside her every day.”

“From the time I was young, I have always felt a sense of fulfillment from being able to help others,” Minton said, “whether it was just being helpful around the house with chores, or offering a friend a shoulder to cry on. I feel like that’s how I was wired—to be a helper.”

While attending Syracuse University, Minton began to ponder her social work “niche.” Did she want to work with young children? Teenagers? Older adults?

“Around this time I took a more active role in the care of my grandmother,” she explained. “She had dementia and was living in a nursing home. I supported my mother’s efforts to give her care, and made visits to the nursing home to feed her meals, read to her, and advocate for her needs.”

The Syracuse native said it was this experience that prompted her to choose the Alzheimer’s Association, Central New York Chapter, as her first clinical placement as an undergraduate at Syracuse University’s School of Social Work. It was her experience there, she said, that made it clear to her that working with the elderly was her passion.

Later, as a graduate student at Syracuse, she was selected for an internship at VA in geriatric social work.

“I found the Syracuse VA Medical Center to be a bustling place with positive energy,” she said. “I loved working with the veterans and their families. My grandmother and grandfather served in the



Gwendalyn Minton is a social worker at the Syracuse VA Medical Center.

EMERSON SANDERS

Army during World War II as a nurse and physician, respectively, and it was a privilege to be able to give back to the veterans who so selflessly served our country.”

After graduating, Minton went to work as a helpline and education coordinator for the Alzheimer’s Association. Eighteen months later, VA called, offering her a job, and the rest is history.

“The best part of my job is developing relationships with veterans and their families,” Minton observed. “I treasure the privilege of being allowed to tread gently into the intimate spaces of their lives, and to walk with them and guide them. You can’t work in this field without being shaped and changed—for the better—by what you do.

“My colleagues here at

VA are some of the most genuine, hard-working people I know,” she added.

Does Minton ever have bad days? Is there anything about her job she finds occasionally frustrating?

Apparently, yes. It’s the feeling of powerlessness she gets when she’s unable to provide a veteran and his or her family the help they need due to financial, human, or other limitations beyond her control.

“It can be very frustrating to work in a system that is challenged by the volume of need that exists,” she admitted. “Financial limitations are the most difficult. I have to remind myself that sometimes the best I can do is just be with a person in their struggle, and reassure them they’re not alone.”

By Tom Cramer

VA Research Finds Possible Link Between Head Trauma and Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy

Researchers with VA and the Center for the Study of Traumatic Encephalopathy at Boston University School of Medicine have provided the first pathological evidence of a link between repeated head injuries—such as those experienced by athletes in contact sports like boxing, football and hockey—and a disease (chronic traumatic encephalopathy) that resembles amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or ALS, also known as Lou Gehrig’s disease. The results appeared in the September issue of the *Journal of Neuropathology and Experimental Neurology*.

The brain has long baffled scientists; its elaborate structure makes it uniquely difficult to study. Brain biopsies are too risky as general practice, and diagnostic images often fall short of providing the desired details for full understanding of brain function. So neurology researchers rely heavily on brain banks, including some housed at the Bedford (Mass.) VA Medical Center, for collecting clues about the biological nature of brain-related medical conditions.

For the new study, Bedford VA’s Dr. Ann McKee and colleagues at the CSTE examined the brains and spinal cords of 12 athletes donated by family members to the CSTE Brain Bank at the Bedford VA Medical Center.

The researchers found that all 12 athletes showed evidence of chronic traumatic encephalopathy, a progressive neurodegenerative disease caused by repetitive trauma to the brain. The condition can result in large accumulations of tau proteins, killing cells in regions of the brain responsible for mood and emotions.

In addition to CTE, three of the athletes had been afflicted with motor neuron disease, with severe and progressive muscle weakness and deterioration for several years before their deaths. The brains from patients with CTE and motor neuron disease showed a unique pattern of tau and deposits of another protein, TDP-43, in the spinal cord and brain. The pattern was different from that found in the most common form of ALS. Previous epidemiological studies have suggested a possible link between repetitive head trauma experienced by athletes and combat veterans and the development of motor neuron diseases like ALS.

“This is the first pathological evidence that repetitive head trauma might be associated with the development of an ALS-like disease,” said McKee. “Although much more work is necessary to completely understand this association, if repetitive head trauma can trigger this kind of neurodegeneration, then by studying the effects of repetitive mild brain trauma, we can learn about the early triggers of ALS and how to slow, reduce and reverse them.

“Future work based on these observations offers a significant opportunity to develop treatments to benefit veterans and all Americans well into the future,” she added.

The research of Dr. Ann McKee and colleagues may lead to better treatment for an ALS-like disease.



FRANK CURRAN

McKee and her colleagues are also studying whether military troops with traumatic brain injury from blasts or other exposures on the battlefield experience the same types of effects.

“We can’t treat what we don’t understand,” said McKee. “The idea with these brain banks is to learn as much as possible about brain diseases, including their origins and any environmental or genetic triggers.”

McKee is director of neuropathology at the Bedford VA Medical Center, where this research was conducted. She is also director of the Bedford-based VA brain banks, and CSTE co-director, as well as an associate professor of neuropathology and neurology at Boston University School of Medicine.

ALS affects about 30,000 people in the United States. It is relentlessly progressive and nearly always fatal. The disease causes degeneration of nerve cells in the brain and spinal cord that leads to muscle weakness, muscle atrophy, and spontaneous muscle activity. The cause of ALS is unknown and there is no effective treatment.

In 2008, VA established ALS as a presumptive compensable illness for all veterans with 90 days or more of continuously active service in the military.

Diagnosing Heart Attacks May Be Just a Lick Away

A diagnostic tool to detect heart attacks using a person's saliva is now being tested at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center in Houston through a collaboration with Baylor College of Medicine and researchers at Rice University's BioScience Research Collaborative.

John T. McDevitt, professor of chemistry and bioengineering at Rice University, and his team of researchers have developed a microchip sensor called the Nano-Bio-Chip that processes saliva and yields on-the-spot results. McDevitt says he intends to establish Houston as the hub of a biomarker highway, where Nano-Bio-Chips will be configured to diagnose a variety of diseases.

"The device works by analyzing saliva, looking for cardiac biomarkers of injury implicated in the heart attack," said Biykem Bozkurt, M.D., professor of medicine at Baylor College of Medicine.

Typically, when a heart attack occurs, hospital staff or emergency medical technicians use an electrocardiogram machine to review heart activity. If the electrocardiogram is abnormal, the patient is immediately moved to an area to be treated. Unfortunately, electrocardiograms fail to correctly diagnose about a third of patients having a heart attack. These patients are monitored carefully in the emergency room, where further blood tests are used to look for certain biomarkers to verify whether a heart attack occurred.

"At the DeBakey VA, we follow this same procedure but also include the saliva test to determine whether salivary biomarkers will perform similar to blood markers in diagnosing a heart attack," said Bozkurt, who is also chief of cardiology at the DeBakey VA. "The patients presenting with chest pain are enrolled from the VA emergency room after informed consent, and provide a saliva swab as well as blood samples. It is anticipated that saliva will be an alternative or complementary technique to blood drawing for early diagnosis of heart attacks, ultimately for testing in the ambulance before arrival in the emergency room."

Over the next two years, samples from approximately 500 patients who come to the DeBakey VA emergency room with chest pain or heart attack-related symptoms will be collected.

To obtain a saliva sample for the Nano-Bio-Chip, health care providers swab a patient's gums with a cotton-tipped stick. The saliva is transferred to the disposable diagnostic microchip. The microchip is then inserted into an analyzer and within a few minutes, the saliva sample is checked and results delivered.

"We find the electrocardiograms provide more accurate information when combined with the saliva test," McDevitt said.

Dr. Biykem Bozkurt is leading a clinical trial at the Houston VA Medical Center to test a biochip that rapidly detects biomarkers in saliva that have been linked to heart attack.



AGAPITO SANCHEZ/BCM

"Saliva-based tests have the potential to quickly diagnose heart attack victims as well as to find false alarms."

Nano-Bio-Chips deliver all the capabilities of a traditional laboratory but do not require expensive instrumentation to get results. Manufactured with techniques pioneered by the microelectronics industry, they have the potential to analyze large amounts of biomarker data at significantly lower cost than traditional tests, said McDevitt.

Chest pain brings about 5 million patients to U.S. emergency rooms each year, but 80 percent of those patients are not suffering heart attacks. Blood test results can take anywhere from 90 minutes to three hours, and in many cases, it may be 12 to 24 hours before patients know if they had a heart attack. McDevitt said the new test could save lives, time and money by allowing doctors to identify those suffering from a heart attack before administering a battery of costly tests.

"We are very excited about this study and believe that in the future, we may be able to apply the same technology to improve screening for cardiovascular disease and diabetes to identify problems before a heart attack occurs," said Christie Ballantyne, M.D., chief of atherosclerosis and vascular medicine and professor of medicine at Baylor College of Medicine and director of the Center for Cardiovascular Disease Prevention at the Methodist DeBakey Heart and Vascular Center.

Funding for this study is provided by the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research Division of the National Institutes of Health.

VA Research Featured at International Alzheimer's Meeting

VA research was featured in a July 14 news briefing at the International Conference on Alzheimer's Disease, held in Hawaii. Two studies by a team with the University of Wisconsin and the Geriatric Research, Education and Clinical Center at the Madison VA Medical Center yielded key insights on a recently identified Alzheimer's risk gene called TOMM40. One study, which included 726 healthy middle-aged men and women with a family history of the disease, found that those with a high-risk version of the gene did worse on memory tests. A related study found that healthy adults with the high-risk version of TOMM40—along with a certain variant of another gene—had reduced volume in two brain regions affected early in Alzheimer's. In a separate study at the VA Puget Sound Health Care System, GRECC researchers treated 109 adults affected by Alzheimer's or mild cognitive impairment with either placebo or intranasal insulin. Those who got insulin performed better on some mental tests but not others. In those who showed benefits, there were also positive changes in Alzheimer's biomarkers in spinal fluid.

VA Researchers Show Off New Prosthetics Technology on Capitol Hill

Bioengineers with the Cleveland Functional Electrical Stimulation Center, a VA research center of excellence, demonstrated new prosthetics technology at the 5th Annual Capitol Hill Modeling and Simulation Expo this summer. Attendees of the event wore 3D glasses and used a “space mouse” to check out a virtual environment being developed to teach patients with limb loss how to operate a multi-joint prosthetic arm. The system also helps train people with paralysis to control their disabled arm when it is activated through electrical stimulation.

Displaying a related project, FES bioengineer Joris Lambrecht, his upper arm taped with electrodes and a special motion sensor, showed how electrical signals from residual shoulder muscles could be used to maneuver a virtual prosthetic arm in a video game environment. One of the eventual goals of FES technology is to allow patients to use their brain signals to control a robotic prosthetic limb or their own paralyzed limb.



Joris Lambrecht, of the Cleveland FES Center, controls a virtual prosthetic arm on the screen through electrical signals from his shoulder muscles. The virtual system, based partly on video game technology, helps amputees learn to control a multi-joint prosthetic arm through impulses from their residual arm muscles.

Minneapolis VAMC ‘Paint-a-Thon’ Helps Vietnam Veteran

The annual Minneapolis VA Medical Center Paint-a-Thon was held on an overcast Saturday in early June, but the weather didn’t affect the spirits of the 40-plus staff and family members. “Maybe the threat of rain made us work a little faster,” said Donna Paal, event organizer. Beginning at 8 a.m., the crew was done by 11:30—just minutes before a downpour.



Employees of the Minneapolis VA Medical Center helped refurbish the home of a local Vietnam veteran.

This was the 21st year of the VAMC’s participation in the Twin Cities Paint-a-Thon. Typically held in early August, the VA event was moved up to accommodate the needs of the homeowner, a Vietnam veteran who will soon be returning to a renovated and repainted home in north Minneapolis. The VAMC teamed with Rebuild Together and the Paint-a-Thon organization to refurbish the two-story stucco home. The Rebuild Together organization is undertaking a major redo inside the home that includes wider hallways to accommodate a wheelchair. Several local groups are working to help with the interior renovation.

Oregon Veterans Make 2.5 Million Poppies a Year

Each year, the Southern Oregon Rehabilitation Center and Clinics in White City produces about 2.5 million artificial poppies with their telltale red blossoms and green stems, making it the largest producer nationwide.

“These poppies go all over the United States—we’ve got orders now for Connecticut, New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio,” said Don German, the volunteer supervisor at the center. “Ours is the biggest poppy center the VFW has across the nation.”

Since March, German, 76, a Navy veteran who served in the Korean War, has shipped out more than 1 million Buddy Poppies to VFW posts around the nation. “Buddy Poppy—Wear it proudly,” reads one side of the label on each poppy; “Proceeds to the Veterans of Foreign Wars for veterans assistance programs,” is on the other.

Nationally, the VFW raises more than \$15 million each year through donations for its Buddy Poppies. German has 27 veterans at the SORCC working on the Buddy Poppy project.

HAVE YOU HEARD

Lost Heroes Art Quilt Tour Stops at Riverside National Cemetery

Riverside (Calif.) National Cemetery recently hosted a handmade quilt honoring men and women who have died in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Lost Heroes Art Quilt stitches together childhood photos and the stories of 82 American service members as told by their mothers.

On hand to tell the story of the quilt were Gold Star Mothers Laura Stephens of Big Bear, Calif., and Ann Yoakum, of Twentynine Palms, Calif., who each have a son depicted on the quilt, created by Florida artist Julie Feingold. Inspired by the loss of several close friends and a chance viewing of the Iraq and Afghanistan casualty list, Feingold collaborated with Gold Star Mothers to render the stories of their children into 82 individual vignettes. Each of the 50 squares is dedicated to a hero from one of the 50 states of the union. The quilt's border contains representations of 32 more. It measures 17 feet wide by 8 feet tall.



A visitor views the Lost Heroes Art Quilt at Riverside National Cemetery in July.



The leadership team at the Salt Lake City VA Medical Center poses with the life-sized photos of them with "blue hands" that were posted around the medical center.

Salt Lake City 'Blue Hand Group' Says Scrub Up!

Clean hands save lives! Infection control convinced the VA Salt Lake City Health Care System leadership team to strike a pose for safety's sake. The catchy campaign not only encourages good hand hygiene, it's a real hoot seeing life-sized pentad members perched around the medical center with blue hands.

For more than a century, clinicians have known that correct hand hygiene prevents infections and saves lives. Salt Lake City's infection control team met with the patient safety crew, created the concept and pumped up the program (literally), starting with hand hygiene. Life-sized photos of the leadership sit in conspicuous places around the medical center for both staff and patients to see. Posters are in every hallway, bathroom stall and stairwell. "Blue hand" stickers are on all soap and alcohol dispensers, with the number to housekeeping for quick refills.

OEF/OIF Women Veterans Gather at the VA Maryland Health Care System for a Meet and Greet

Decorated in black and gold, the 3rd floor atrium at the Baltimore VA Medical Center took on a decidedly feminine look when the Office of Returning Veterans hosted an OEF/OIF Women Veterans Meet and Greet in July. Organized by June Penn, nurse case manager for the OEF/OIF office, the evening soiree, which included women veterans and VA Maryland Health Care System employees who treat or support the women veterans health initiatives, was intended to remind women veterans that "they are not forgotten."

The event, which included a buffet dinner and music, offered the women veterans an opportunity to relax, enjoy each other's company, and discuss with VA Maryland staff everything from the rigors of transitioning back to civilian life to juggling families to women's health concerns to how they perceive VA. The OEF/OIF program staff plan to hold quarterly Meet and Greets for returning OEF/OIF women veterans to help increase the number of women veterans seeking health care.

'Don't Be a No Show' Awareness Campaign

"No Shows"—patients who don't show up for scheduled appointments—are a problem for any VA medical center. Whatever the reasons, they slow clinic operations, delay patient care and reduce productivity. Dr. Daniel MacDonald, of Dental/Research Service at the James J. Peters VA Medical Center in the Bronx, sympathized with both staff members and patients affected by no-show delays and decided to do something about it. If veterans knew they were keeping their fellow veterans from getting necessary care, they'd make every effort to keep their appointments, he reasoned. So he came up with an awareness campaign centered on a poster he designed with Yang Zhao, chief of medical media.

The "No Show" poster is now displayed in all waiting areas. The poster's text points out the negative consequences of being a "No Show" and provides instructions on how to properly cancel an appointment. The overall message is that if handled responsibly, the patient's inability to keep an appointment will become an "opportunity" for patients waiting to be seen. Early indications are that the poster is working. Clinics have reported fewer missed appointments and more calls from patients to cancel appointments.



Dr. Daniel MacDonald, left, teamed up with Yang Zhao, chief of medical media at the Bronx VA Medical Center, to create the "No Show" poster.



The U.S. Honor Flag is unveiled during the ceremony.

Dallas VA Medical Center Hosts Honor Flag

The VA North Texas Health Care System holds the distinction of being the first VA facility to host a visit by the highly respected and revered U.S. Honor Flag. The Dallas VA Medical Center used the opportunity to recognize its Iraq and Afghanistan veteran employees and patients during a special flag ceremony complete with honor guard, singing of "The Star-Spangled Banner" and playing of taps.

Since 2001, when it was flown in New York City at Ground Zero after 9/11, the U.S. Honor Flag has served as a special symbol of service and sacrifice for the nation's military, fire and rescue, and law enforcement officers. The U.S. Honor Flag has since flown over the battlefields in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Pentagon, the U.S. Capitol, and now the Dallas VA Medical Center.

Fargo VAMC Sponsors Clothesline Project

The Fargo VA Medical Center, together with the North Dakota National Guard, sponsored a "Clothesline Project" awareness event to "Break the Silence" on military sexual trauma on July 27 at the Fargo VAMC.

Following the kickoff event, two educational sessions were held in the 3rd floor auditorium. Guest speakers were Angela Rose, executive director of PAVE (Promoting Awareness, Victim Empowerment), and Susan Thompson, Fargo VAMC military sexual trauma coordinator. T-shirts decorated by victims of military sexual trauma as part of their therapy were displayed outdoors in a National Guard tent on the Fargo VAMC grounds. After the event, Fargo VAMC Mental Health Service Line clinical staff and the National Guard sexual assault response coordinator were available for any veteran needing assistance or questions about military sexual trauma answered.



Heather Prigge, right, Mental Health Service Line intern, looks at the T-shirt display with Lt. Rachael Walters, of the North Dakota National Guard.

Secretary Honors VA's Top Nurses

On the last Wednesday in June, VA Secretary Eric K. Shinseki honored six VA employees who exemplify the comprehensive, complex and compassionate care provided to the nation's veterans by VA's nursing staff, made up of more than 77,000 registered nurses, licensed practical/vocational nurses, health care technicians and nursing assistants across the country.

Shinseki presented the awards to Sofia Puerto, Ph.D., of California's Loma Linda VA Healthcare System, in the registered nurse expanded role category; Lisa Alexander, of San Antonio's South Texas VA Healthcare System, in the registered nurse staff role category; Josephine Vranick, of New York's Northport VA Medical Center, in the licensed practical nurse role category; Rebecca Knutson, of Wisconsin's Tomah VA Medical Center, in the nursing assistant role category; Terry Gerigk Wolf, director of the VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System, in the medical center director category; and Julie Brandt, associate director of Patient Care Services at the Central Arkansas Veterans Healthcare System, in the nurse executive category.



VA Secretary Eric K. Shinseki talks to award recipients in his office prior to the award ceremony. Left to right: Lisa Alexander, VA Chief Nursing Officer Cathy Rick, Terry Gerigk Wolf, Josephine Vranick, Rebecca Knutson, Sofia Puerto and Julie Brandt.

EMERSON SANDERS



THOMAS R. KOSTEN, M.D.
BAYLOR COLLEGE OF MEDICINE

VA Psychiatrist Named One of America's Top Doctors for Fifth Time

Thomas R. Kosten, M.D., senior advisor on substance abuse based in the Mental Health Care Line at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical

Center in Houston, was recently named one of America's Top Doctors for the fifth time by Castle Connolly Medical Ltd.

"I am very pleased with this recognition of one of our physicians," said J. Kalavar, M.D., DeBakey chief of staff. "Only a small percentage of physicians have earned the prestigious recognition of America's Top Doctor at all. Many, many fewer have earned it five years in a row."

Kosten is also the Jay H. Waggoner professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences in the Menninger Department of Psychiatry at Baylor College of Medicine and research director of the VA National Substance Use Disorders Quality Enhancement Research Initiative. He has several major awards for clinical research, is editor of two major journals on substance abuse, and has been on the *American Journal of Psychiatry* editorial board.

Providence VA Medical Center Housekeepers Receive Bunker Hill Awards

Ten Providence (R.I.) VA Medical Center housekeepers—Wayne Johnson, Robert Fitzpatrick, Karl Mann, Robert Dunston, Vester Gross, John (Joe) Balko, Adonnis Brown, Mark Tortolani, Ron Parrady and Tom Finnegan—each received the Bunker Hill Award in recognition of their stellar efforts in support of Army Corps of Engineers-administered construction projects at the medical center. Col. Tom Feir, commander of the New England District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, presented the awards.

On Sept. 26, 2007, VA and the Army entered into a nationwide agreement for Corps of Engineers support to VA in the areas of project management, design, construction, environmental and contracting services. "There is an unsung bunch at the Providence VA who make our lives easier every day, but get very little recognition," says Corps Site Supervisor James Morocco. "It's the housekeeping staff. They are responsible for cleaning and moving, but do so much more. For every construction contract, the contractor is responsible for getting the room 'construction' clean. The housekeeping crew then makes the space 'hospital' clean. They never fail to deliver."

Volunteer Honored With Presidential Citizens Medal

George Weiss, a volunteer at Fort Snelling National Cemetery in Minneapolis, received the 2010 Presidential Citizens Medal from President Obama in a White House ceremony Aug. 4. Weiss and 12 other people were selected to receive the medal from more than 6,000 applicants.

Weiss is a founding member of the Fort Snelling National Cemetery Memorial Rifle Squad. Since the rifle squad's founding in 1979, Weiss and the other members have performed military honors every day that burials have taken place at the cemetery. For 30-plus years, the rifle squad has performed this duty regardless of the sometimes-extreme weather conditions in Minneapolis. So far, they have performed military honors for more than 56,400 veterans.

Weiss, one of six founding members of the rifle squad, began as the youngest member and is now the last survivor of the original six. The average age of the volunteers is 71.6. The Presidential Citizens Medal is the second-highest civilian honor the President can award.



President Obama presented George Weiss his medal at the White House on Aug. 4.

Iron Mountain VAMC Chief Appointed to Prestigious Position

On May 6, Dr. Dinesh Ranjan was installed as the 2011 president of the United States Section of the International College of Surgeons during its annual meeting in Denver. Ranjan is currently the chief of Surgical Service at the Oscar G. Johnson VA Medical Center in Iron Mountain, Mich., and will assume the office of president on Jan. 1, 2011.

“As I prepare to take office as president, I feel humbled by the legacy, history and global presence of the college,” noted Ranjan. “As a surgeon practicing in the VA system, I feel committed to quality and monitoring standards that I have experienced firsthand; these can be applied and implemented in hospitals anywhere.”

The International College of Surgeons is a world federation of general surgeons and surgical specialists founded in Geneva, Switzerland, in 1935 by Dr. Max Thorek. Headquartered in Chicago, ICS has more than 60 organized national sections around the world, with approximately 7,000 members that speak more than 40 languages and represent more than 100 countries.



JAMIE ROSS

VA Student Volunteers Receive Jesse Brown Scholarships

Two G.V. (Sonny) Montgomery VA Medical Center student volunteers, Errol Jimerson Jr., and Janez M. Young, are recipients of this year's national Jesse Brown scholarship. The Disabled American Veterans' Jesse Brown Memorial Youth Scholarship Program is named in honor of the former VA Secretary. “These are truly outstanding students and volunteers,” said Linda Watson, director of the Jackson, Miss., facility. “They are shining examples of a great program for our youth.”

Jimerson has volunteered at the VA medical center for the last four years, contributing 524 hours to the facility. He plans to attend Hinds Community College and study nursing. In addition to the Jesse Brown scholarship, Jimerson was awarded an ACT scholarship and a Hinds Development Foundation scholarship.

Young was valedictorian of this year's graduating class at Bailey Magnet High School. She's been volunteering at the VA medical center since 2006, and has dedicated more than 600 hours. She will attend Jackson State University.



C. YOUNG

Errol Jimerson Jr., top, and Janez Young are volunteers at the G.V. (Sonny) Montgomery VA Medical Center in Jackson, Miss.

HONORS

Atlanta VA Regional Office Receives Patriot Award

The Atlanta VA Regional Office was recently presented a Patriot Award by the National Committee for Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve. The awards program recognizes employers who support a strong National Guard and Reserve force. Employers qualify for recognition when they practice leadership and personnel policies that support employee participation in the Guard and Reserve.

The nomination was submitted by Korrise D. Alston, currently serving in Afghanistan. Alston is a veterans claims examiner in the Education Division at the Atlanta VA Regional Office. Al Bocchicchio, Atlanta VA Regional Office director; Brian Ward, assistant director; Angela Seelhammer, Education Division chief; and Jeannie Daniels, assistant education officer, accepted the award. The award was presented by Tom McCollough of the National Committee for Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve.



Tom McCollough, center, of the National Committee for Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve, presents the award to Angela Seelhammer and Al Bocchicchio.

Dayton VAMC Program Wins Federal Employee Team Excellence Award

The Dayton (Ohio) VA Medical Center's Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom Post-Deployment Clinic competed with 15 other federal teams to win the International Public Management Association for Human Resources "Team Excellence" Award at the 48th Federal Employee of the Year Awards Ceremony.

The Freedom Center is comprised of a group of professionals who are recognized by staff, leadership, active duty members and veterans alike for their expertise in the care management of OEF/OIF veterans and their families. The Freedom Center team goes "above and beyond" in their unique focus on the interrelationships among the five most frequently presenting and overlapping conditions of post-deployment: pain; post-blast injuries; post-traumatic stress; polysubstance abuse; and partner relationship and family problems, known as the "P-5" Model. The Freedom Center's vision is "Taking Care of Those Who Took Care of the Mission."

Minneapolis VA Medical Center Recognized by Quality Council

The Minneapolis VA Medical Center has been recognized by the Minnesota Council for Quality for its commitment to continuous improvement. The facility is one of only four organizations to receive the council's "Achievement" award for 2009.

Established in 1991, the Minnesota Quality Award is given to organizations that successfully complete a full assessment using either a narrative-based or survey-based approach. In accepting the award on behalf of staff and volunteers, VAMC Director Steven Kleinglass said, "The recognition symbolizes our ongoing commitment to provide the highest quality care to our patients. These brave men and women are America's heroes, who have served their country and enabled us to have our freedom. They have the absolute right to expect nothing less than our very best."



The award honored the medical center's commitment to continuous improvement.

Five Honored With Financial Management Awards

Winners of the 2009 VA Chief Financial Officer Financial Management Awards were recognized in the G.V. (Sonny) Montgomery Veterans Conference Center at VA Central Office earlier this year. Five employees received awards recognizing exceptional accomplishments that contributed to the department's success in financial performance and management.

Winners of the VA CFO Award for Financial Management Innovation were Christine Bensedira, operations manager, VBA Administrative and Loan Accounting Center in Austin, Texas; and Paul F. Hopkins, CFO, Harry S. Truman Memorial Veterans Hospital in Columbia, Mo. Winners of the VA CFO Award for Financial Management Program Improvements were Roy W. Coles Jr., director, Payroll/Human Resources Support Service, Office of Finance at VACO; Victor Cruz Jr., chief fiscal officer, Orlando (Fla.) VA Medical Center; and Donna P. Smith, financial analyst and network payroll/travel manager, VA South Central Health Care Network (VISN 16) in Jackson, Miss.

Four Off-Duty VA Employees Attempt to Save a Life

Dawn Martz-Porter, a staff assistant at the Coatesville (Pa.) VA Medical Center, was driving to work when a car drifted into her lane and plummeted over an embankment. She immediately stopped her car and ran to check on the driver.

Having left her cell phone at home, she ran back to the side of the road to flag down passing motorists for help. Two drivers

sped right past her. Someone finally stopped. It was Angie Laurento, a registered nurse at the Coatesville VAMC. Another car approached the scene, pulled over and stopped. That driver was Carolyn Riddle, a physician assistant at the medical center. Two more drivers stopped to lend assistance. One was Martz-Porter's neighbor, who also happens to be a nurse at a nearby hospital. The other was Bob Dyer, a firefighter and trained medic with the Coatesville VAMC.

"Carolyn and Angie were assessing the young man's condition," Martz-Porter said. "The situation was dangerous—the vehicle was teetering on the edge of the embankment and could have slid down the steep slope at any moment." Laurento, Riddle and Dyer disregarded their own safety in an attempt to stabilize the young man until medics arrived on scene. Unfortunately, despite their efforts, the 19-year-old man died at the scene.



Coatesville VAMC employees (left to right) Carolyn Riddle, Bob Dyer and Dawn Martz-Porter were among the Good Samaritans who stopped to help a 19-year-old accident victim.

VA Employee Thwarts Domestic Violence

It was an ordinary Tuesday for office manager James B. Meeks III, of the Mesquite Vet Center in Texas—until he was on his way home from work and saw a man choking a woman who was holding a baby. Meeks and another passerby attempted to intervene diplomatically, asking the man to release the woman and child, but the man refused to release his grip on the woman's throat.

Meeks then took matters into his own hands, and was able to wrest the two away from their attacker, who turned out to be the woman's husband and the baby's father. Officers of the Mansfield Police Department were called and arrested the man. Meeks later learned that the assailant was a resident physician at a university medical center who was on a leave of absence to receive treatment for depression.

Officers Prevent Man From Drowning

Two police officers with the Clement J. Zablocki VA Medical Center in Milwaukee jumped into a lake on the campus June 22 to save the life of a distraught veteran. Lt. Detective Mark Zamborini and Officer Nathan Johnson were lauded by Chief Tim Jantz for disregarding their own safety by pulling the man out of the water after he made it to the middle of the lake and went underwater.

"They performed their job wonderfully, in a situation that doesn't typically come up," Jantz said. "They were swift, controlled the situation and absolutely saved that person's life." Jantz submitted the two for a local award as well as national recognition, but to the cops involved, it was all in a day's work.

Both officers are veterans. Zamborini spent 10 years in the Air Force. Johnson spent 10 years in the Marines and saw combat in Iraq. He also did a stint in the Air National Guard, and is now a lieutenant in the Army Reserve.



STEVE JUDISH

David Riedy helped choking co-worker Elizabeth Colville.

Payroll Clerk Saves Co-Worker's Life

David Riedy, a payroll clerk at the Denver VA Regional Office, was sitting at his desk when he heard co-worker Elizabeth Colville choking. Riedy immediately ran to her workstation and quickly administered the Heimlich Maneuver, clearing the blockage before any serious complications occurred. Riedy's timely action possibly saved the life of his co-worker.

Camaraderie and Competition

Jim Martinson, 63, a combat-wounded Army veteran of Vietnam, was one of more than 500 athletes who competed in the 30th National Veterans Wheelchair Games in Denver July 4-9. Martinson is from Puyallup, Wash., and receives care through the VA Puget Sound Health Care System. The Games, presented each year by VA and Paralyzed Veterans of America, are the largest annual wheelchair sports event in the world.

