

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

# VANGUARD

November/December 2012



*Veterans Day 2012*

*Advocating for Women Veterans*

*America's Busiest National Cemetery*

*20 Millionth Home Loan Milestone*



6



9



22



## Vanguard

VA's Employee Magazine  
November/December 2012  
Vol. LVIII, No. 6

Editor: Lisa Gaegler  
Assistant Editor/Senior Writer: Gary Hicks  
Photo Editor: Robert Turtill  
Staff Writer: Jennifer Sardam

Published by the Office of Public Affairs (80D)

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Ave., N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20420  
(202) 461-7427  
E-mail: [vanguard@va.gov](mailto:vanguard@va.gov)  
[www.va.gov/opa/publications/vanguard.asp](http://www.va.gov/opa/publications/vanguard.asp)

## Features

<b>Advocating for Women Veterans</b>	<b>6</b>
Second in a three-part series celebrating women's health programs	
<b>America's Busiest National Cemetery</b>	<b>9</b>
Riverside National Cemetery handles an average of 35 burials a day	
<b>Easing the Transition to Civilian Life</b>	<b>12</b>
Houston VA Regional Office pilot-tests a reformed transition program	
<b>Reducing the Federal Footprint</b>	<b>14</b>
Upcoming office moves at VA headquarters will save millions over time	
<b>Fifty Years of Service to Veterans</b>	<b>16</b>
Nobel Prize-winning cancer researcher is honored in Miami	
<b>One Room at a Time, One Veteran at a Time</b>	<b>18</b>
A group of employees in Texas is brightening the lives of Veterans	
<b>... and for his widow and his orphan ...</b>	<b>20</b>
VA awards its 20 millionth home loan guarantee	
<b>Team Mercury Rising</b>	<b>22</b>
All-woman Veteran team makes history at Summer Sports Clinic	
<b>Finding Their Sea Legs</b>	<b>24</b>
Second annual Heroes on the Hudson gets disabled Veterans on the water	

## Departments

<b>3</b>	<b>News You Can Use</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>Have You Heard</b>
<b>26</b>	<b>Around Headquarters</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>Honors</b>
<b>30</b>	<b>Introducing</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>Heroes</b>
<b>31</b>	<b>Medical Advances</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>IT Awareness</b>



### On the cover

Members of the Veterans of Foreign Wars Honor Guard escort the procession of flags into Memorial Amphitheater to begin the national Veterans Day ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery. The parade of colors, highlighting the flags of the national Veterans service organizations that comprise the Veterans Day National Committee, has opened the national ceremony since Veterans Day was first established in 1954.  
*photo by Robert Turtill*



## 'Soldier Days' Event Helps Returning Troops Get Health Care

Many soldiers return home only to begin the new battle of putting their lives back together. The Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation New Dawn program staff with the VA Black Hills Health Care System in South Dakota is dedicated to helping these soldiers get the health care and assistance they've earned.

With the help of many VA Black Hills employees, Lori Vosika, OEF/OIF/OND program manager, orchestrated the "Soldier Days" event to help these returning soldiers get their VA health care started. The goal of this event was to provide soldiers with access and same-day service to minimize their absence from home, family, work and school.

Vosika noticed that a large portion of a returning Army National Guard unit, the 200th Engineering Unit headquartered in Pierre, S.D., included Veterans that would be eligible for care at VA Black Hills, but lived in central South Dakota. These returning soldiers would be living up to four hours away from the Fort Meade VA Medical Center. Vosika knew they would be busy integrating back into civilian life and might not have time to make several trips across the state for care.

"We identified geographically where our soldiers were coming from and we decided how best to get them here," Vosika said. "We ended up incorporating returning soldiers from the 200th, 139th and 189th South Dakota Army National Guard units."

Vosika and her team started months before by attending the Yellow Ribbon Reintegration events of these returning Guard units. There, the OEF/

OIF/OND team and the VA Black Hills Business Office helped finalize VA health care enrollment for soldiers. That way, when they arrived at the Soldier Days event, they would be able to go straight to their appointments, with the main business portion of the process complete.

"The idea was to get all the business stuff out of the way, except for ID cards, so that when the soldiers arrived, it could be a one-stop-shopping health care extravaganza,"



*Sgt. Mitch Demers of the 200th Engineer Unit gets an eye exam at the fourth Soldier Days event.*

Vosika said. After much planning and preparation, VA Black Hills hosted four Soldier Days events, in July and August. Immediately following the first Soldier Days event, they began hearing positive feedback.

"The soldiers that have

come through have been very impressed," Vosika said. "We had a soldier tell us, 'You guys rock!' She told her fellow soldiers, 'Oh my gosh, you guys have to go to VA.' The word of mouth has been great."

At each Soldier Days event, the soldiers arrived to a checklist of pre-scheduled appointments, some of which came by way of a health care screener at the Yellow Ribbon events. Each soldier was then assigned an ambassador to help them find their way

around the facility and to their appointments. The ambassadors were volunteers from local service organizations, including the Disabled American Veterans Auxiliary Chapter 3 from Rapid City and Auxiliary Chapter 11 from the Northern Black Hills, the American Le-

gion Riders, the Christian Motorcyclists Association and the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

"It's a group of soldiers talking to soldiers, and Veterans talking to Veterans," Vosika said. "If we show one or two the way and they have a good experience, they go out there and talk to each other."

At Soldier Days, returning soldiers were able to see health care professionals in primary care, women's health, dental and vision. Diagnostic teams from X-ray, lab and MRI, and specialists from orthopedics, physical and occupational therapy, audiology, behavioral/mental health and traumatic brain injury stood ready to provide same-day service. Each Soldier Days event also included breakfast, lunch and snacks provided by Veterans service organizations, the American Red Cross and VA Black Hills Nutrition and Food Service.

Sgt. Mitch Demers of the 200th Engineer Unit attended the fourth Soldier Days event and had nothing but good things to say about it.

"I appreciate it all very much," Demers said. "You feel honored to have people volunteer their time, their days, to help us out. I'm sure some of them never got this help. So for them to turn around and try to make it better for us is pretty humbling."

Throughout the four Soldier Days events, 62 soldiers attended and received same-day health care appointments across many specialty areas.

"I can't say thanks to everybody," Demers said. "But I really would if I could."

For more information about Soldier Days, contact Lori Vosika at 605-745-2000, ext. 92176.

***"You feel honored to have people volunteer their time to help us out. I'm sure some of them never got this help. So for them to turn around and try to make it better for us is pretty humbling."***

## Women Veterans Resource Fair Offers Benefits Information, Access

All too often, women Veterans say, “I served in the military, but I am not a Veteran.” That was the inspiration for a much-needed event: the second annual Colorado Women Veterans Resource Fair. The mission of the Fair was to provide information, education and access to benefits specifically for women who have served in the military.

Women Veterans—women who have worn the uniform and marched in the boots—are eligible for many benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs and many other organizations whose mission is to serve women and Veterans. The Fair emphasized that “it’s not your grandfather’s VA anymore;” that VA benefits and health care are not just for older, combat Veterans, but for all who served, including women of all eras. VA’s women’s program focuses on the specialized needs of women Veterans, with women Veteran coordinators at all medical facilities and benefits offices.

The Resource Fair was held on Aug. 24 and 25 in Greenwood Village, Colo. Co-hosting the event were Women

### “Who knew all this was available to female Vets?”

en Veterans of Colorado and VA. Kathryn Wirkus, president of Women Veterans of Colorado, and Rebecca Sawyer Smith, public affairs officer at the Denver VA Regional Office, served as co-chairs of the planning committee.

More than 178 women Veterans attended, along with many volunteers, speakers and exhibitors, including Colo-



*Under Secretary for Benefits Allison A. Hickey told the group that VA is working hard to decrease the backlog of claims and to reach out to women who served.*

rado Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve. “Transitioning” was the conference theme—not just transitioning from soldier to civilian, but transitioning throughout life.

Classes focused on career, including employment resources, resume review and interview practice from employment experts at Booz Allen Hamilton, a main sponsor of the conference. Other classes included women’s health and access to Veterans’ health care and benefits.

The Fair’s main luncheon speaker was VA Under Secretary for Benefits Allison A. Hickey, a retired Air Force brigadier general and a graduate of the Air Force Academy in the first class graduating women. Hickey spoke about the underutilization of Veterans benefits for women, but praised women’s usage of education benefits, which is higher

than that of male Veterans.

VA is working hard to decrease the backlog of claims and to reach out to women who served, said Hickey, to ensure they are getting the benefits they deserve. Participants remarked that Hickey was an inspiring speaker who connected well with her “Sisters in Service,” and that “she makes a difference.”

Other speakers included Dr. Patricia Hayes, chief consultant, Women’s Health Services, VA Office of Patient Care Services, who spoke about how VA is reaching out to women Veterans and providing specialized health benefits. Judi Guy, facility planning coordinator for the Denver VA Replacement Hospital, highlighted the women’s clinic slated to open in 2015. Women Veterans were pleased to hear the new medical center will have a “much-needed

private service and facility” for women Veterans.

More than 40 organizations shared information at resource tables, including government, nonprofit and educational institutions such as the Women’s College at the University of Denver. At the reception on Friday night, a 100-year-old Veteran of the Army Nurse Corps, Lile Magette, celebrated her birthday with attendees singing “Happy Birthday” and sharing cake. Magette said she was honored to have fellow women Veterans honoring her.

The Fair was a success, reaching many women who have served their country honorably, letting them know they are appreciated and that there are many benefits for which they may be eligible. As one woman Veteran put it, “Who knew all this was available to female Vets?”

## Health Coaching Improves Traditional ‘Find it, Fix it’ Practice

Veterans, health coaches and staff from the Fayetteville (N.C.) VA Medical Center recently filled the auditorium to hear about a new, innovative approach to health care presented by Dr. Tracy Gaudet, inaugural director of the Veterans Health Administration’s Office of Patient Centered Care and Cultural Transformation.

During her visit, Gaudet explained how this new approach can transform the VA health care system to improve a patient’s overall health.

“We have to look at the whole person and design a personalized, proactive and patient-driven approach to optimize our health care that expands the traditional ‘find it, fix it’ method of medical practice that we use today,” said Gaudet.

“The VA is innovating the way health care is delivered to our Veterans because chronic disease is so complex. By integrating health coach-

ing, we have the opportunity to make real changes to our health care system that truly benefit the Veteran.”

Following her formal presentation, Gaudet met with 38 integrative health coach graduates and medical center leadership for a discussion about the benefits of this new approach and to listen to their personal experiences.

“Health coaching helped our Veterans remove the layers of things they were buried in,” said Marsheta Boykin, Fayetteville VAMC Homeless Veterans Health Care program

health coach. “It helped them get back to who they really are and who they were destined to be, and they never lost sight of their spirituality.”

Carolyn Diaz, chief of social work and health coach

said, “Coaching taught us how to get the right information and gave us a place to start to help Veterans with their current and ongoing needs.”

According to Joan Budine, Housing and Urban Development-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) case manager and health coach, “Health coaching is a testimony to patient-centered care that is tempered with respect and empowerment for the Veteran. This integrative health coach model propels the VA into the future because it is built on a com-

prehensive vision of healthy and healing partnership. This moves the Veteran toward their optimal health vision.”

preensive vision of healthy and healing partnership. This moves the Veteran toward their optimal health vision.”

**“We have to look at the whole person and design a personalized, proactive and patient-driven approach to optimize our health care.”**

“Our next challenge is the hand-off to continue this energy and expand this knowledge to our next group of coaches so we maintain continuity of care, maintain the energy and spread this knowledge base. It is also an opportunity for the Department of Defense and VA to partner and take the philosophies of self-health learned on active duty as a continuum when they transition to the civilian sector.”

According to the VA health care system, using health coaching in conjunction with traditional medicine can optimize health and healing throughout a Veteran’s lifetime.

The VHA Office of Patient Centered Care and Cultural Transformation team returned to the medical center to provide the national perspective by hosting 25 class opportunities for staff during a two-day outreach starting on Nov. 2.

By Robin DeMark



Left to right: Dr. Tracy Gaudet and Fayetteville VAMC Clinical Health Systems Specialist Janet Vertrees meet with Veterans Annie Toney, Melissa Allen and Michael Perry at the Fayetteville VAMC’s Homeless Veterans Health Care Program.



Joan Furey served as an Army nurse with the 71st Evacuation Hospital in Pleiku, Vietnam.



# Advocating for Women Veterans

COURTESY OF JOAN FUREY

Second in a three-part series celebrating the history of VA women's health programs and recognizing the pioneers who developed health care services for women Veterans across the nation.

**J**oan Furey, Vietnam Veteran and first director of VA's Center for Women Veterans, recently spoke with a newly separated military nurse and was reminded of the things that *haven't* changed for women Veterans in the last 42 years. "I shared my experiences with post-traumatic stress disorder, and she looked at me like, 'How do you know that? That's exactly what I'm going through.'"

What *has* changed is the health

care VA provides to women Veterans. The Department now offers women Veterans primary and specialty care at all VA facilities, including mental health services. VA also has specialized inpatient and residential programs across the nation for women Veterans who have experienced PTSD or other psychological issues.

Many of these improvements in VA health care for women Veterans can be tied directly to the work Furey and other Vietnam Veterans did for

women Veterans in the decades following the war.

## Speaking Up

It wasn't until 10 years after Vietnam that Furey finally started talking about her depression, sleep disturbances and intrusive thoughts. In 1980, while working as a VA nurse, she got involved with the vet center in St. Petersburg, Fla., where she was able to open up about her experiences.

She went on to lead PTSD

sensitivity training courses for VA staff, and in 1982 attended the first national conference on PTSD, which was then known as Post Vietnam Syndrome. There, she reunited with “hoochmates” from the 71st Evacuation Hospital in Pleiku, Vietnam: Lynda Van Devanter and Sara McVicker, who were also advocates for women Veterans.

Like Furey, Van Devanter had experienced PTSD. She had recently published a memoir, *Home Before Morning*, which depicted her struggles to overcome hallucinations and a drinking problem after she came home from Vietnam. She also had helped launch the Vietnam Veterans of America Women’s Project in 1979, which later became the VVA Women Veterans’ Committee, and as head of the committee was leading VVA’s push for improvements in VA services for women.

“Lynda and VVA really kept the issues alive,” said Furey from her home in Sayville, N.Y., where she has lived since she retired from VA in 2004. “The VVA women’s committee started to put pressure to bear on VA, initially in relation to PTSD. Then, as more women tried to access health care and encountered obstacles, VVA broadened the scope of their interest.”

The VVA Women Veterans’ Committee pushed for the first report on Women Veterans—the Government Accountability Office’s “Actions Needed to Ensure That Female Veterans Have Equal Access to VA Benefits”—in 1982, and Public Law 98-160, which established the VA Advisory Committee on Women Veterans.

Then in 1984, Congress mandated VA to create a National Committee on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Furey was appointed to the committee, the lone woman among 11 men.

It turned out to be “one of the greatest experiences” of her professional career. Furey helped develop a PTSD national education program for VA staff and instituted PTSD

treatment teams in VA outpatient clinics. She later became director of education for VA’s National Center for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in Menlo Park, Calif., and helped establish the first inpatient PTSD treatment program for women Veterans there.

With the opening of that first inpatient PTSD program, women Veterans from as far back as Korea and World War II started seeking treatment for symptoms they had ignored or hidden for decades. And while they were talking, some of them shared stories of sexual trauma in the military.

“At first, I didn’t know how wide-

spread the problem was,” Furey said. “After hearing women from all different eras and different branches talk about their experiences, I realized it was big.”

Furey shared her concerns with other members of the National Committee on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The committee consulted with VA mental health staff; Susan Mather, who was then VA’s chief officer of Public Health and Environmental Hazards, under which the women’s health program was organized at the time; and staff from VA regional education centers to figure out what was needed to address what is now known



COURTESY OF JOAN FUREY



COURTESY OF JOAN FUREY

Above: (Left to right) Sara McVicker, Joan Furey, Jude Larkin and Lynda Van Devanter at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial on Memorial Day 1983. Larkin served with the women in Vietnam. He died three years later of a brain tumor; Van Devanter died in 2003 of an idiopathic respiratory illness.

Left: Then-VA Secretary Jesse Brown presents Joan Furey with her 20-year pin in 1996.

**“I was not the voice of the bureaucracy. There are enough people out there who speak from the organizational perspective but don’t understand what the woman Veteran in her little hometown is feeling.”**

as military sexual trauma.

Women Veterans Advisory Committee members such as Marsha Four (also an Army nurse who served in Vietnam) were instrumental in getting congressional legislation passed in 1992 that mandated VA to develop sexual trauma education programs. The PTSD committee took Furey’s map for PTSD education from 1984 and developed education and training for MST.

### **Becoming a Voice for Women**

By the early 1990s, there had been some progress in VA services for women Veterans. A 1992 GAO report on services for women Veterans was titled “VA Health Care for Women—Despite Progress, Improvement Needed.” VVA and other Veterans service organizations were pressuring Congress to elevate the national women’s program to a secretarial level. In 1994, Congress created the Center for Women Veterans, which would report directly to then-VA Secretary Jesse Brown. Furey was appointed the center’s first director.

Furey spent much of the next seven years on the road, visiting VA facilities and vet centers across the country. She would meet with facility directors and chiefs of staff and then hold a town hall meeting and listen to local women Veterans.

“I was such a proponent of the town hall meeting,” she said. “I felt it was important that these women had a voice.”

In fact, of all her accomplishments during her 30-year career with VA, being a voice for women Veterans is the one she’s most proud of.

“I was not the voice of the bureaucracy,” she said. “There are enough people out there who speak from the organizational perspective but don’t understand what the woman

Veteran in her little hometown is feeling.”

As director of the center, Furey made many other significant contributions. She coordinated the first National Summit on Women Veterans Issues. She worked closely with the Women Veterans Program Office and women Veterans coordinators in the field to expand mammography services, and she helped develop sensitivity training for Veterans Benefits Administration staff on women and their issues.

Also during her tenure, women’s comprehensive centers were opened at the Bay Pines, Fla., Boston and Palo Alto, Calif., facilities, and task forces were developed to study the need for inpatient psychiatric units for women in each Veterans Integrated Service Network, or VISN, and to extend sexual trauma counseling to female reservists and National Guard members.

“Joan was a visionary,” said Patty Hayes, chief consultant of Women’s Health Services at VA since 2008. “She was unafraid to push the agenda, to speak out. There wouldn’t have been anything in women’s health if she hadn’t been up there talking about women Veterans at the Secretary level.”

Furey acknowledged she was instrumental in getting women’s issues “a seat at the table: You know, the one where the important things are talked about by the people at the top.”

When the administration changed in 2001, Furey took a job as a program analyst in VA’s Office of Policy and Planning until her retirement.

Throughout her career, Furey worked closely with several of her Vietnam bunkmates on projects involving women Veterans. In 1991, she and Van Devanter co-edited *Visions of War: Dreams of Peace*, an anthology of

poetry by women who served in Vietnam. Furey and Van Devanter, along with McVicker, raised money and support for the Vietnam Women’s Memorial, which was spearheaded by another 71st Evac roommate, Diane Carlson Evans. Van Devanter advocated for women Veterans until her death in 2002.

“We’ve always found it interesting that we all became so involved with women Veterans’ issues over the years,” Furey said. “I guess Lynda inspired us all to be advocates.”

Today, Carlson Evans is president of the Vietnam Women’s Memorial. After retiring from a 27-year career with VA, McVicker serves on the Secretary’s Advisory Committee on Women Veterans, as Secretary for the Maryland State Council and on the national board of directors for VVA.

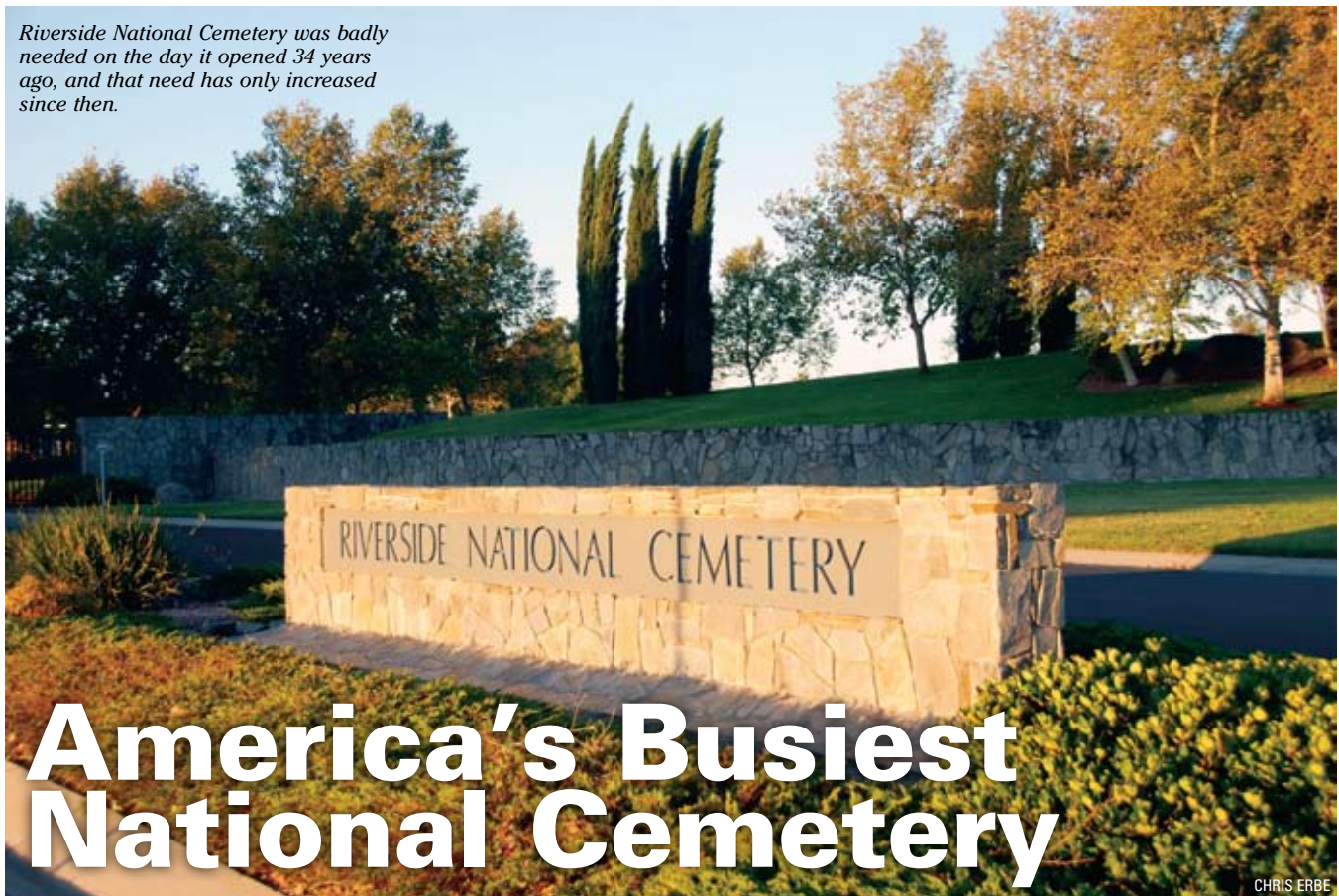
Furey is an ad hoc member of VVA’s Women Veterans’ Advisory Committee and is involved with the local VFW in Sayville. She has also served as the Veteran consultant on VA’s study of long-term health outcomes of women Veterans’ service during the Vietnam era. It is the first comprehensive study of the long-term physical and mental health consequences of women’s military service. The findings are expected to be available in 2013-2014.

From time to time, someone will ask Furey to speak with a woman Veteran who has recently left the military after serving in Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom or Operation New Dawn. She always agrees. **VA**

**Endnote:** There are many women and men who have contributed much to women’s health programs in VA. Visit [www.womenshealth.va.gov](http://www.womenshealth.va.gov) for more on these trailblazers or to tell us about a women’s health pioneer you know.



*Riverside National Cemetery was badly needed on the day it opened 34 years ago, and that need has only increased since then.*



# America's Busiest National Cemetery

CHRIS ERBE

**R**iverside National Cemetery opened on Veterans Day 1978, not a moment too soon for many in the enormous Southern California Veterans community. By then, Los Angeles National Cemetery, 40 miles west, had been closed to new burials for two years, and Ft. Rosecrans National Cemetery in San Diego had been closed to first interment casketed burials since 1966.

Because of its huge military presence, Southern California has always been home to one of the largest Veteran populations in the country. Despite the closure of several military

installations over the past 15 years, that population is still estimated to be around 1 million. So RNC was needed on the day it opened, and that need has only increased over the past 34 years.

Although RNC is relatively young compared to many national cemeteries, the land on which it sits has been part of the federal government since the early 20th century. It was originally part of March Air Field, but was taken over by the Army to become Camp Hahn during World War II. When the Army moved out after the war, the parcel reverted back to the Air Force and sat empty until it

was transferred to VA when the decision was made to build the cemetery in the mid-1970s.

At 921 acres, RNC is the third largest national cemetery, behind Calverton in New York and Abraham Lincoln in Illinois. Although it is a little over three decades old, the active portion of the cemetery has yet to reach 300 acres. That's due, in part, to the efficiencies brought about by the institution a decade ago of pre-set crypt installation. This enables RNC to use the land 65 percent more efficiently than traditional burial methods.

The crypts are manufactured lo-

Riverside National Cemetery handles an average of 35 burials a day at the 921-acre cemetery.





JIM RUESTER

*Above: Nearly 10,000 mourners, including thousands of law enforcement officers from across the country, attended the committal service for Riverside (Calif.) police officer Ryan Bonominio, who was killed in the line of duty in November 2010.*

*Below: Memorials like the National POW-MIA Memorial make Riverside National Cemetery a destination for thousands of visitors each year.*



CHRIS ERBE

cally, trucked to the site and installed by contract personnel into holes excavated by RNC personnel. This is currently taking place in two sections, simultaneously. As contractors are installing crypts in one section, cemetery workers across the street are excavating the next site.

A short distance away, contractors are putting the finishing touches on what will be RNC's fourth columbarium. When it opens around the first of the year, it will add 10,000 niches to RNC's burial options. All of this activity is taking place in phase four of a 10-phase development plan.

This work is an effort to keep up with demand.

The total number of burials last year was around 8,500. The daily average has been 35 for several years. Administrative officer (and 23-year RNC Veteran) Beverly Newsom manages the daily workload with a staff of 13 cemetery representatives working from seven committal shelters and nine staging areas.

The ninth staging area, located near the southeast corner of the cemetery, was added a few years ago

to accommodate the high number of mourners attending the services for Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom casualties. RNC is the final resting place for 87 casualties of the current conflicts—the highest number of any National Cemetery Administration cemetery. The total number of burials is approaching 215,000. Estimated capacity for the site is about 1.25 million.

The interment workload is only part of the challenge for the 60-member staff, lead by Director Dean Moline and Assistant Director Lynnette

Parker. The cemetery's location on the edge of the Mojave Desert, with its extremes of heat and cold, as well as the ravages of more than 30 years, make the job of keeping the place green and beautiful equal in importance to keeping up with the high number of interments.

For Moline, good customer service is equal parts family care before, during and after the committal service, and the presentation of the cemetery.

"You can't separate them," he said. "The family can have the best service possible, but if the cemetery doesn't look like a place they'd want



*The cemetery's location on the edge of the Mojave Desert, with its extremes of heat and cold, make the job of keeping the place green and beautiful a challenge for the staff.*

to leave their loved one, then their opinion of the cemetery is most likely going to be low. It all has to work together."

To ensure that opinions stay high, RNC undertook, nearly four years ago, a raise and realignment project that, when complete, will result in the renovation of most of the cemetery. Within the next few months, RNC will have four separate contractors performing raise and realignment projects, including the renovation and installation of artificial turf in two traffic circles along the cemetery's

main boulevard.

In addition to the hundreds of people who attend daily committal services, annual holiday events and several memorials, including the National Medal of Honor Memorial and National POW-MIA Memorial, make RNC a destination for thousands of visitors each year. The cemetery's Memorial Day and Veterans Day events attract 12,000 and 8,000 people, respectively. The annual Concert for Heroes is the only concert presented at any national cemetery and is attended by 10,000 people every Fourth of July weekend.

Besides the annual events, RNC

has hosted some unique committal services over the past few years, including separate services for two Southern California law enforcement officers, each of which drew nearly 10,000 mourners. More recently, more than 2,500 mourners attended a memorial service for local volunteer and Veteran activist Laura Froehlich.

In 2009, 10,000 mourners attended the committal service for Medal of Honor recipient Col. Lew Millett, which took place

on the plaza of the Medal of Honor Memorial. Millett joined three other Medal of Honor recipients interred at RNC, including John Henry Balch, Mitchell Paige and RNC's first burial, Riverside native Ysmael Villegas.

So what does the future hold for the nation's busiest national cemetery? Expansion and growth—RNC still has hundreds of available acres for development of new burial areas, ensuring service to Southern California Veterans for decades to come. **VA**

*By Jim Ruester*





STAFF SGT. MIKE PICKLO

*VOW/VEI is one of the largest transformation efforts in VA history. It affects 100 percent of transitioning service members, approximately 307,000 a year. The other pilot test sites are Fort Sill, Okla., Marine Corps Air Station Miramar, Calif., and Naval Air Station Jacksonville, Fla.*

## Easing the Transition to Civilian Life

The Houston VA Regional Office pilot-tests a reformed military-to-civilian transition program at Randolph Air Force Base.

**T**hree Houston VA Regional Office staff members recently led about 50 service members and some spouses through the VA portion of a weeklong military-to-civilian transition program, Veterans Opportunity to Work (VOW) to Hire

Heroes Act of 2011 and Veterans Employment Initiative.

The Houston VARO was selected as the first national pilot site to test VOW/VEI at Randolph Air Force Base, Texas. The other pilot test sites are Fort Sill, Okla., Marine Corps Air

Station Miramar, Calif., and Naval Air Station Jacksonville, Fla.

“All transitioning service members are required to participate in several activities during the week,” said Michael Walljasper, VOW/VEI project leader, “including a VA ben-

efits brief, pre-separation assessment and counseling, and a Department of Labor employment workshop.”

Expanding on the VOW Act, VEI focuses on Department of Defense, VA and DOL efforts to reform the current transition model by build-

## **“Our goal is to give service members awareness of VA benefits throughout their military career.”**

ing a curriculum of skill-building activities to ensure that service members meet career readiness standards. Using the Transition GPS (Goals, Plans, Success) approach, these activities will target risks that transitioning service members face.

“A major difference between VOW/VEI and the former Transition Assistance Program (TAP),” said Megan Knutson, military service coordinator, “is that VOW/VEI includes more interaction with service members.” Another difference is that the DOL portion of the weeklong program includes resources that crosswalk military occupations with civilian sector skills and market demands.

Both Houston VA military service coordinators and the project leader interacted with service members and spouses, informing them about VA benefits available and quizzing them about their plans after service and their goals, so they will be able to make informed decisions on benefits that best fit their lifestyles.

“Most of us entered this program without knowing any of this information,” said participant Jason Bennett, a technical sergeant, E-6, cyber systems operations specialist. “It’s great to be informed, and although some benefits will not benefit me now, they may benefit me in the future.”

One driving factor to promote VOW/VEI is the fact that Veterans 18-24 years old have an unemployment rate of 32.2 percent, much higher than the 15.8 percent for non-Veterans, and Veterans 25-34 years old have an unemployment rate of

11.1 percent, higher than the 9.2 percent for non-Veterans.

Nearly one in eight Veterans cannot find a job. Other factors include that one in 150 Veterans is homeless, and that more than 1 million service members are projected to leave the

military between 2011 and 2016.

The enhanced TAP portion of the program is four hours long, includes revamped briefing materials and is styled in adult learner mode. Part of the briefing breaks down VA benefits into work, home and life, and it challenges service members to use a multitude of available resources with a

members are invited to sign up with a VA benefits counselor. These sessions can occur weeks after the TAP presentation.”

Three tracks for one-on-one sessions are available to all service members, including the technical training track, with the Veterans Benefits Administration taking the lead; education track, with the Department of Education taking the lead; and the entrepreneurship track, with the Small Business Administration taking the lead. Service members can sign up for as many tracks as they’d like, and each track lasts between two and three days.

VOW/VEI is one of the largest transformation efforts in VA’s history. It affects 100 percent of transitioning service members—approximately



*Service members participating in the VOW/VEI program discuss work, home and life plans during an exercise at Randolph Air Force Base, Texas, in September.*

series of exercises to enhance learning, so they can take control of the VA benefits they pursue.

After the enhanced TAP portion of the program, all service members are invited to sign up for sessions that encourage them to apply for VA benefits (compensation, education, health care and more), and take a tour of eBenefits. One goal is to have service members apply online for all applicable benefits.

“One-on-one sessions are also encouraged,” said Walljasper. “Service

307,000 a year. VOW/VEI team members play a pivotal role to ensure service members receive quality training to efficiently access benefits earned.

“Our goal at VA,” said Walljasper, “is to give service members awareness of VA benefits throughout their military career—to institute VA benefits awareness into the military culture during basic training, brief at several milestones in a military career, and increase VA presence at all military installations.” **VA**

*The office moves scheduled to take place at VA headquarters over the next year will affect about 1,000 employees and result in a rent savings of \$60 million over 10 years.*



# Reducing the Federal Footprint

**O**ver the next year, about a thousand VA Central Office staff will be affected by a major initiative aimed at reducing the amount of money the Department spends to rent space in office buildings in downtown Washington, D.C. *Vanguard* sat down with Deputy Assistant Secretary for Administration Roy Hurndon to get answers to some key questions VACO employees are likely to have about the upcoming office moves.

**Q: Why do I have to move?**

**A:** VA is working to control the growth in administrative costs, which

have increased at a rate that is not sustainable. Rent costs increase every year. The amount of space occupied

by Staff Offices increased over the last several years, resulting in a shortfall in the General Administration activity



rent budget in FY 2013 and FY 2014. We are required to reduce the amount of rent needed, which will mean a reduction in the amount of Staff Office square footage and a dramatic increase in telework to offset the shortfall. Long term, we will also be looking at space savings at all our VACO buildings to further reduce cost and save taxpayer money.

**Q: Who is moving?**

A: Approximately 1,000 employees in the following organizations: Veterans Health Administration; Office of General Counsel; Office of Human Resources Management; Office of Employment Discrimination Complaint Adjudication; Office of Management; Board of Veterans' Appeals; Office of Small & Disadvantaged Business Utilization; Office of Public & Intergovernmental Affairs; and Office of Acquisition, Logistics & Construction.

**Q: When do I move?**

A: The current plan shows the following schedule:

- Nov. 30-Dec. 2, 2012 – Board of Veterans' Appeals (BVA) surrenders one-half of a floor at 425 I Street.
- January 2013 – Office of Acquisition, Logistics & Construction (OALC) relocates from hoteling space and collocates with BVA at 425 I Street.
- Dec. 7-9, 2012 – Office of Human Resources Management (OHRM), Office of Management (OM), and Office of Public & Intergovernmental Affairs (OPIA) relocate from 90 K Street to 810 Vermont Avenue.
- Dec. 10, 2012 – Office of General Counsel (OGC) condenses staff at 90 K Street to allow space for a paying tenant.
- January 2013 – Office of Small & Disadvantaged Business Utilization (OSDBU) relocates from 1722 I Street to 90 K Street.
- January-March 2013 – Office of Employment Discrimination Complaint Adjudication (OEDCA) moves from 1722 I Street to 1575 I Street.

■ January-November 2013 – Veterans Health Administration (VHA) backfills vacated space and relocates from 1722 I Street to 90 K Street.

**Q: How will these moves affect my organization?**

A: These moves will cause some disruption to the work of each organization. Plans will be developed with input from each organization to minimize this disruption. In addition, increased use of telework will be required to accommodate the same number of employees in less space. A contracted move company will handle the actual moves, which will primarily occur on weekends to minimize the disruption to employees and to the work of the organization.

**Q: How will telework be distributed?**

A: Telework will be distributed based on previously established goals set by the Department.

**Q: What resources/strategies will be available to assist us?**

A: The Rent Reduction Task Force was established and has been meeting since October 2012 to address the issue of eliminating future shortfalls. The Office of Human Resources and Administration will work closely with your organization to institute increased telework plans. A contracted space planner has been brought on to assist with the development of a comprehensive space plan with input from each affected organization. This plan will get into the details of how and where organizational space will be reconfigured.

Funds will be made available for storing or digitizing paper files, and for purchasing more efficient systems furniture, including touchdown stations to support telework. A contract will be awarded for furniture that needs to be reconfigured. The Office of Information and Technology is prepared to support the telework efforts. The move contractor and Office of Ad-

ministration's Property Management office will work with each organization to plan and organize all of the details of their moves to a new location. The move company will handle the actual moves. Limited minor construction work will be performed due to the tight time constraints.

**Q: How will the union be notified?**

A: OHRM has been working with organizations to notify the union and will help to ensure that all collective bargaining timelines are adhered to.

**Q: Are we the only group that is losing square footage?**

A: Many organizations will need to tighten up to help offset the rent shortfall. This is all part of treating space as a corporate asset. Funds will be available to purchase new furniture that will give your employees more efficiency in smaller spaces and to perform some minor construction work.

**Q: What benefits will VACO see by eliminating a lease in one year?**

A: Eliminating 1722 I Street helps the Department come into compliance with the Presidential initiative to reduce the Federal footprint. VACO will see a \$60 million rent savings over 10 years.

**Q: Why was the rent issue not raised earlier to avoid the need for quick turnaround action?**

A: Increases in Staff Office rent requirements were handled by reducing costs in other areas for the past two years and through negotiated rent rebates through GSA, which are now expiring. Funding to mitigate the higher costs was requested but not approved.

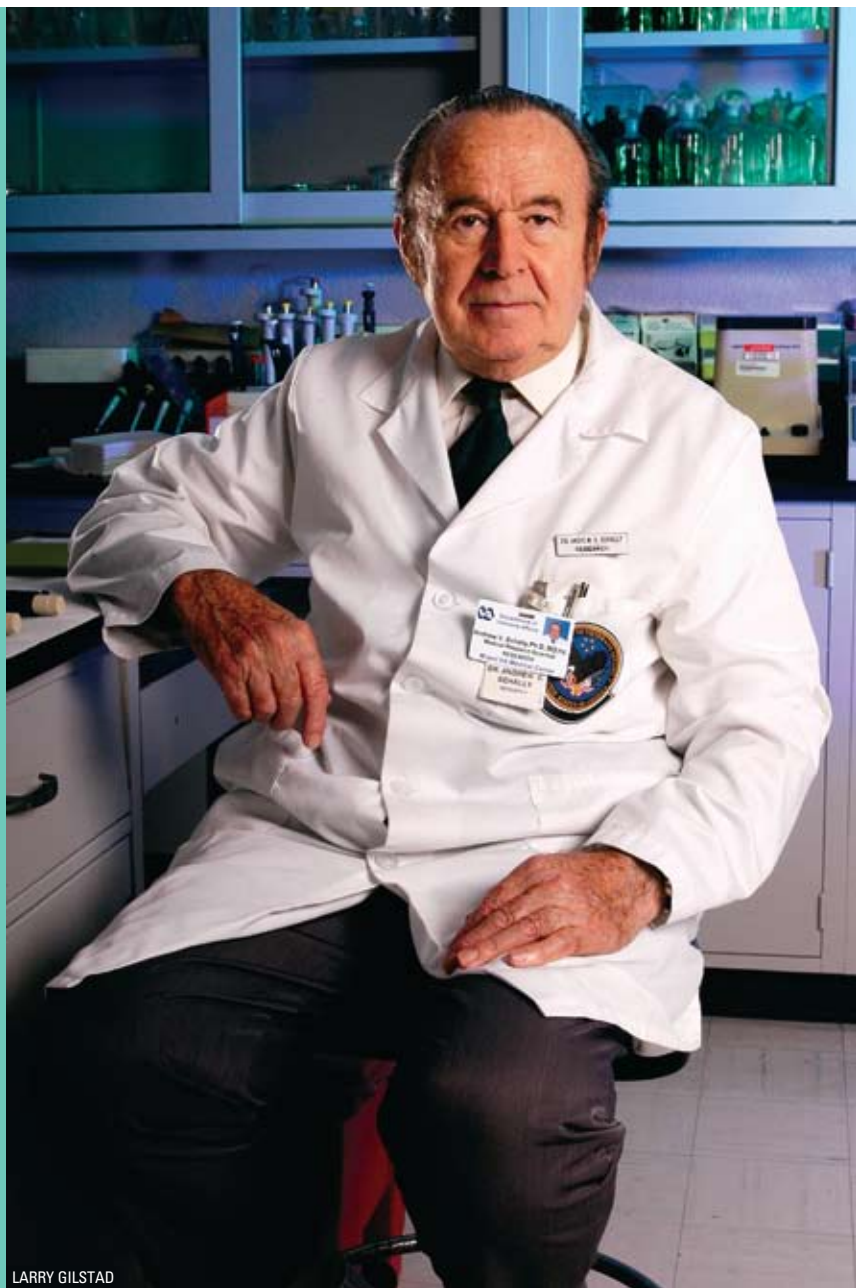
**Q: How will a delay in execution affect the projected shortfall?**

A: Delays in executing any portion of the option will have a negative effect on any projected savings since the driver behind the savings is moving to less expensive space. **VA**

# Fifty Years of Service to Veterans

Nobel Prize-winning cancer researcher Dr. Andrew Schally honored in Miami.

*Right: "I always seemed to be at the right place, at the right time," said Dr. Andrew Schally.*



**O**n Oct. 19, about 200 well-wishers, co-workers, admirers and friends gathered at the Miami VA Medical Center to honor Dr. Andrew Schally, the 85-year-old researcher and Nobel Prize winner whose lifetime of work has led the world's scientific community ever closer to a cure for cancer.

"Dr. Schally is a national asset," said Dr. Norman Block, a colleague of Schally's for 30 years. Block gave

up his surgical career in urology about seven years ago to support Schally's research full-time. "It was an easy choice," he said. "Doing surgery, I was helping one person a day to stay alive. Working with Dr. Schally, I may be helping a couple of hundred a day to stay alive."

Schally came to VA in 1962, and his list of achievements since then is formidable. Fairly early in his career, he established that the pituitary gland,

which controls certain other glands of the endocrine system, such as the thyroid and adrenal glands, is regulated by the region in the brain called the hypothalamus. This work laid the foundation of modern endocrinology and earned him the Nobel Prize in Medicine in 1977.

Schally is currently working on hormone-based treatments for breast, ovarian, pancreatic, lung and other cancers. And recently, he and his

team found a synthetic compound that works as an antagonist to a tumor-nourishing natural body chemical called growth hormone-releasing hormone. Simply stated: it stops the growth and spread of human prostate cancer cells. Studies are ongoing.

By a happy coincidence, Schally's decades of cancer research may also have produced a startling side benefit: the eventual conquest of heart disease. "We may have found a compound," he said, "that can induce the human heart to repair itself following a heart attack." Human testing has not yet begun, but the studies look promising.

Schally is also hot on the trail of developing "smart" chemotherapies that can destroy cancer cells without harming the surrounding, healthy tissue. "The beauty of these methods," he said, "is that the compound goes directly to the tumor and destroys malignant cells. You can perhaps totally destroy the tumor, while avoiding unpleasant side effects. In such a case, you have a treatment that comes very close to being a cure."

Schally is a busy guy with a lot on his mind, but he was more than happy

to answer a few "bigger picture" questions regarding his remarkable life.

First, the Big Question: Does he have any regrets?

"I always felt bad that I never served in the military," he said. "Back in 2004, on the 60th anniversary of the D-Day invasion, France awarded a lot of American Veterans the Légion d'Honneur. It's the highest honor the French people can bestow. They also gave me the Légion d'Honneur, for my cancer research work. It was an honor, but I always felt the Veterans were the real heroes, not me."

Next question: If he had it to do all over again, would he still choose the same career path he took more than half a century ago, back in 1952, when he began his research on the hypothalamus?

"I'm not a philosopher," he laughed. "All I can say is, fortune has smiled upon me. I've been very lucky. I always seemed to be at the right place, at the right time. For example, when I was a very young man living in England, I got to work with six Nobel Prize winners at the National Institute for Medical Research. They

taught me a lot. I was lucky ... right place, right time.


"Later," he said, "I came to work for VA, a good place to be, and at the right time. I appreciate the VA for what they did for me. From the very beginning, they understood what I was trying to do. They had confidence in my ideas. They gave me scientific freedom, and that's most important. During the 50 years I worked here, I was offered other positions paying a lot more money, but I stayed with VA because I was excited about the work I was doing.

"Plus, it gave me an opportunity to give back to the Veterans who fought for us and sacrificed so much," Schally continued. "I couldn't be there on D-Day with those brave men, or in Korea, or Vietnam, but hopefully the research work I've done has helped some of them, perhaps even saved their lives. You never know."

What does he regard as his best moment working for VA?

"I've been here awhile, so there's a million best moments," he said. "If I had to pick one, I'd say it was in June of 1971, at a meeting of the U.S. Endocrine Society in San Francisco. That's where I gave a presentation concerning the structure of LHRH. There was quite a reaction."

Schally is referring to a revolutionary discovery he made in the fight against cancer. It's derived from a brain chemical called luteinizing hormone-releasing hormone, or LHRH, and it's been used since the early 1980s to successfully treat millions of men with testosterone-dependent prostate cancer. It was nothing less than a revolution in endocrinology.

"After I told the audience what I had discovered, a room full of 2,000 people emptied in about two minutes," he said. "They were all running for the phones, to report what they'd just heard, in view of its medical importance. It was a pretty big deal. That's a moment you don't forget." 



*Dr. Andrew Schally came to VA in 1962; his early work laid the foundation of modern endocrinology and earned him the Nobel Prize in Medicine in 1977. He is currently working on hormone-based treatments for breast, ovarian, pancreatic, lung and other cancers.*

By Tom Cramer



# One Room at a Time, One Veteran at a Time

A group of employees in Texas has found a unique way to brighten the lives of some State Veterans Home residents.

People need their space, their room, their comfort zone. It's important to have a place to go to and unwind.

One quiet and reserved Vietnam-era Veteran who once worked for Ringling Brothers Circus as an animal trainer found a place of his very own at the William R. Courtney State Veterans Home in Temple, Texas.

Through the VA Heart of Texas Health Care Network (VISN 17)'s new "One room at a time, one Veteran at a time" initiative, re-decorating the Veteran's room was a treat for him and VISN 17 staff. Once the room was completed, he cried tears of joy and thanked the VA staff for decorating his room. He now waves and smiles whenever he sees them.

"At first, the Veteran's room, his personal space, just did not seem fitting and warm enough for someone who had given so much for his country," said staff at the state Veterans home in Temple. "We wanted to transform his bedroom to pay a more appropriate tribute to him for all he had sacrificed in service to our country."

In VA, patient-centered care is a vital component of the health care delivered. Methods of enhancing patient-centered care are constantly at

the forefront, with health care systems around the country demonstrating creative ideas and concepts on a daily basis.

One such idea in VISN 17, based in Arlington, Texas, focuses on re-decorating and transforming a Veteran's room at a state Veterans home, specifically Veterans who typically do not have many visitors or family nearby. Jacqueline Dixon, VISN 17 patient safety officer and state Veterans coordinator, took the lead in spearheading this initiative.

"I thought that together, with the help of VISN 17 volunteers, we could allow a Veteran to choose their own personalized theme for their bedroom, and have the volunteers donate items that would enhance the theme chosen," said Dixon.

Themes that have been chosen include fishing, hunting, automobiles, ships, cats and music. And some of the items that have been donated by volunteers to help re-decorate the rooms include pictures, clocks, bedspreads, wall hangings, pillows, blankets with designs or themes, homemade crafts, or any item that would assist in decorating a resident's room.

"Our goal is to help transform at least one Veteran's room every quarter at a Texas state Veterans home in

VISN 17," said Dixon. There are five homes in VISN 17, located in Bonham, Temple, Floresville, McAllen and Tyler.

Since the program's inception in October 2011, seven rooms have been transformed at the Temple home, four at the Bonham home, and four at the Floresville home.

"When Jackie came to me with the idea and the need for volunteers, I just beamed," said Veronica Elliott, executive assistant to the VISN 17 network director. "Decorating is something I enjoy, and of course being involved in a cause that helps Veterans live in a room that is more enticing and pleasant is extremely rewarding."

Elliott recently re-decorated a Veteran's room at the Frank M. Tejada State Veterans Home in Floresville in the theme of music and Frank Sinatra.

"That was a lot of fun, because I am a music lover myself and adore Sinatra tunes, so I probably went a little overboard, purchasing a full-size Frank Sinatra print for the wall, music note bedding, a Sinatra book, CD player and several music CDs," she said. "It is extremely rewarding for me to know that now, before this particular Veteran closes his eyes at night, he is surrounded by items that he cherishes

and has a personal connection with.”

Volunteers fund the rooms on their own and can get as elaborate and detailed as they would like. Some employees have decided to work together as a group to help re-decorate the room.

Feedback from staff at the Texas

to use this program as a way to thank the Veterans for their service.”

In VISN 17, innovative patient-centered care is at the forefront of what staff members do on a daily basis.

“The ‘One room at a time, one Veteran at a time’ campaign is special

because we are able to see the passion and commitment from employees on a personal level,” said Lawrence Biro, VISN 17 director. “Employees are giving their time and financial contributions, and do so with zest and excitement. The program is taking off and is one that as a network director brings me much pride and fulfillment in our core mission of serving our heroes.”

The program has met its goal to date of remodeling one Veteran’s room every quarter, and is growing.

“I have already received feedback from other VISNs wanting to implement the program, and I’m excited about the direction this is going,” said Dixon. “But what brings the most excitement is the feeling of knowing that we made a difference in the life of a Veteran on a very personal level. To think that a painting he looks at or the bedspread she covers up with at night was given with warmth from a VA employee—that is heartwarming and makes it all worth it!” **VA**

By Jessica Jacobsen



state Veterans homes has been positive. “When the box arrives with new décor for a Veteran’s room, it is a special time for the Veteran, and the staff as well, to see how the room brightens, while at the same time seeing the Veteran’s eyes brighten over the warmth of his or her new surroundings,” said Amanda Fanning Gilbreath, on-site representative for the Texas Veterans Land Board at the Clyde W. Coper Texas State Veterans Home in Bonham.

“Decorating the rooms for the Veterans has become such a treat that every time we go shopping for our own personal items, we tend to look for special themed decorations to be shared with the Veterans,” said Central Texas Veterans Health Care System employees Calandria Hypolite and Jane Avila. “It is truly an honor



Top and above: A Veteran’s room transformed by VISN 17 employees who volunteer to re-decorate residents’ rooms at the five state Veterans homes in the network.





*Three-year-old Joey Carpenter lives with his mom, Elizabeth, in a home in Woodbridge, Va., purchased using the VA Home Loan Guaranty Program.*

*...and for his widow  
and his orphan...*



# VA awards its 20 millionth home loan guarantee since the inception of the home loan program in 1944 under the original GI Bill.

**VA** commemorated a major milestone on Oct. 26: the guarantee of its 20 millionth home loan since the inception of the VA home loan program.

The loan went to Elizabeth Carpenter, the widow of an Iraq war Veteran who died of cancer in 2010. Carpenter used the loan guarantee program to purchase a home in Woodbridge, Va., that she shares with her 3-year-old son, Joey.

The initial intent of the program, first established in 1944 under the original GI Bill, was to assist returning World War II Veterans.

"I don't think most people know that the VA home loan program was inside [the GI Bill]," said Allison A. Hickey, VA's undersecretary for benefits.

"It wasn't just about 'how do we now help you find a job, how do we get you education or tradecraft skills since you've been fighting a war for the last four years.' It was also about 'how do we put you in a place where you move on with your life, you bring your family together, you start to create new memories for your family, [and] you start to live the American dream.'"

Sixty-eight years later, the program continues to empower Veterans, their families, and service members who are pursuing similar goals.

"This year alone has been one of our busiest years in VA—we've guaranteed over 2,400 loans every single day of this year," said Mike Frueh,

director of loan guarantee services in the Veterans Benefits Administration.

The program achieves its success in partnership with an extensive network of community stakeholders.

"Realtors and lenders are the frontline of our program by promoting our product and helping our Veterans, their families, and service members realize the dream of homeownership," said Brandon Scott, a management analyst with VBA.

While the home loan program affords Veterans greater access to homeownership and favorable loan terms, it also aids in sustaining the economy.

"Through proactive retention efforts, VA-guaranteed loans have a significantly lower default rate than other loan types in the market today," said Scott, "despite the fact that VA does not require a minimum credit score, down payment, or monthly mortgage insurance premiums."

According to Hickey, a central idea of the home loan guarantee program is that Veterans and their families offer a "safe bet" to lenders.

"As a result of their service and sacrifice as a group," said Hickey, "they prove to be disciplined, reliable and honorable—traits that are ideal for this kind of national investment."

Beyond its role in enabling homeownership, VA helps to ensure Veterans can keep their homes through providing foreclosure alternatives for those who experience difficulties making payments.

"Every year for the last three, we have kept 73,000 service members, Veterans and their family members

under roof when they've had hard times," said Hickey. "Our partners in the mortgage industry have worked with us to restructure those loans as necessary to ensure they stay under roof with their families."

Since fiscal year 2009, VA has helped more than 246,000 Veterans and their families avoid foreclosure. In fiscal year 2012, VA helped nearly 282,000 Veterans complete an interest rate reduction refinance of their home loan, which, on average, saved each Veteran \$202 per month and lowered their interest rate by 1.42 percent.

VA also improves the quality of life of seriously wounded warriors by helping them better adapt their living spaces.

"For eligible Veterans, we offer grants for the purpose of constructing an adapted home or modifying an existing home to meet their adaptive needs," said Scott.

Scott described VA's role in facilitating homeownership between lenders, realtors, Veterans, their families and service members as delivering "a loan product that's simple, expedient, and has a no down payment option."

"Our mission to help Veterans obtain, retain and adapt their home," he added, "is straightforward, and every loan closed is a success story."

Veterans can directly access their benefits online through the eBenefits Web portal, at [www.ebenefits.va.gov](http://www.ebenefits.va.gov), or the VA Home Loan Guaranty Program at [www.benefits.va.gov/homeloans](http://www.benefits.va.gov/homeloans). **VA**

---

By Jennifer Sardam





SUMMER SPORTS CLINIC PHOTO TEAM

# Team Mercury Rising

All-woman Veteran team makes history at this year's National Summer Sports Clinic.

**“W**e have arrived!” belts out Air Force Veteran Kim Specht, who proudly plants Mercury’s guidon in the ground near their first venue.

“I have waited 12 years for this, to feel this camaraderie again and to feel OK, like I belong again,” says Specht.

Amidst the cheers, laughter and obvious pride, there is a lot more go-

ing on here than just sailing; these women Veterans realize they are about to be a part of something very special.

“We are making history, and that feels great,” says Air Force Veteran Jazmin Coll-Serrano. “We complement each other as we learn to be women again.”

Nine women representing different branches, backgrounds and

personal battles make up the first-ever all-woman National Veterans Summer Sports Clinic team. Though scarred emotionally and physically from their service, they are eager to show what they’re made of.

“We are role models—I want my daughters to remember this,” says Army Veteran Shanda Taylor-Boyd. “I am so glad that I am here.”

Their disabilities range from trau-

**“We are constantly looking for ways to challenge Veterans during their rehabilitation, and sports are a great way to get them out of their shell and reengaged in their communities.”**

matic brain injury to military sexual trauma and spinal cord injury. There is a former Marine with flat feet, and a former Army non-commissioned officer who was a first responder on Sept. 11. They were warriors first and women second until San Diego, where they used their combined will to recapture something they had lost along the way.

“This is life-changing,” says Specht. “This support for us, especially having an all-women’s team, it’s a whole new dimension, being able to represent such an underrepresented segment of the military.”

“Who wants the full America’s Cup experience?” yells the captain aboard the famous racing yacht Stars and Stripes. Several of the women

giggle like teenagers before they jump to their feet and start barking out their own orders to each other. There is some tacking and jibing to be done. It’s only the first day, but the team already begins to gel.

Team captain Specht grabs the wheel. She tells how she first learned of the Clinic just nine months ago, and how she knew immediately she had to be a part of it. She found Acting Director Tristan Heaton’s phone number on the VA Adaptive Sports website and called him right away. “I said, ‘We have to have an all-women’s team’ and he was like, ‘go for it, Kim.’”

Army Veteran Catina Evans jumped into the Clinic at full speed. “I was nervous, at first. I’ve never surfed ... I don’t swim,” she says. “But it all just clicked. I’m going to learn to swim now. It was a lot of hard work, but, you know, I did it. I did it. I’m scared of heights, too, but I’m going to rock climb and conquer that.”

Evans went from “the girl that never smiles to the girl that always smiles,” jokes a Clinic photographer who watched the women evolve over a week’s time.

Evans is quite the athlete, despite her own absolute certainty that she is not. She scurried to the top of the rock wall in 23 seconds. She was a real surf diva on the shores of La Jolla (and has the T-shirt to prove it), and she held her own biking more than 15 miles across Coronado Island.

In the beginning, Evans rarely spoke and stood off to one side. Her coach feared she might never come around, but after a week of sea air,

sunshine and sandy beaches, the 38-year-old seemed reborn. The transformation from nobody to somebody—in her own mind—was nothing short of amazing.

Taylor-Boyd is here for the second year in a row, but this time it’s different. She is engaged and fiercely independent. “I was so afraid last year. But this time, what a difference a year makes. Thank you for believing in me. The difference is knowing VA has faith in you,” says Taylor-Boyd.

VA Director of National Veterans Sports Programs and Special Events Chris Nowak says this is exactly what the Summer Sports Clinic and other VA adaptive sports programs are supposed to do: inspire Veterans to want more, to believe in themselves.

“We are constantly looking for ways to challenge Veterans during their rehabilitation,” says Nowak, “and sports are a great way to get them out of their shell and reengaged in their communities.”

Those sentiments ring true for Coll-Serrano, who credits her involvement with VA’s adaptive sports programs with literally giving her a new life. After slowly losing her vision to a rare virus, she has found a renewed purpose. She says adaptive sports are her life now, and she hopes to someday work with other disabled Veterans.

She and eight others leave the Clinic empowered by an experience that will bond them forever. It is far more than just a physical accomplishment.

Team Mercury leaves thriving and strong because of each other. They leave with a new focus on what’s possible, not what’s in the past. **VA**



*Opposite: The women of Team Mercury aboard the famous racing yacht Stars and Stripes; left: Team captain Kim Specht, an Air Force Veteran.*

*By Jordan Schupbach*





JENNIFER SAMMARTINO

*Veteran Anthony Soto prepares for an afternoon in a kayak on the Hudson River.*

# Finding Their Sea Legs

Second annual Heroes on the Hudson event teaches disabled Veterans to kayak and sail.

**O**n the last Friday in August, clear skies and warm temperatures welcomed 50 Veterans to Pier 66 on the Hudson River in New York City for a day of kayaking, sailing and paddleboarding.

The event, Heroes on the Hudson, now in its second consecutive year, is an adaptive sports clinic for Veterans of varying abilities. It is made possible by VA NY/NJ Veterans Healthcare Network (VISN 3) Prosthetics and Sensory Aids, VA New York Harbor Healthcare System and

the Wounded Warrior Project.

Martina Parauda, director of VA New York Harbor, kicked off the day by thanking the prosthetics team for their efforts all year long and welcoming the Veterans.

The opening ceremony included color guard from Fort Totten, and the national anthem was sung by the American Bombshells.

After the formalities, Veterans—some with emotional scars and some with physical ones—headed to the boats for a day out on the water. With

the backdrop of the New York City skyline, an FDNY fireboat, an NYPD boat and the U.S. Coast Guard, the participants were flanked by friends on all sides.

Just off back surgery, Jerry Miserrandino, a Vietnam Veteran, came back for the second year, but not as a participant this time. The former Army Ranger, who served from 1966 to 1967, is an avid sportsman, with his own adaptive kayak from VA.

“I told them I couldn’t come this year because of my back,” he

**“We want to promote health and wellness for our Veterans, and we realize that sometimes the best location to promote physical and mental well-being is outside the hospital walls.”**

said, wearing an official Heroes on the Hudson T-shirt. “They said, ‘Oh, you’ll be there.’ So I’m here as a volunteer to help set the guys up.”

A double forearm amputee, Miserandino remembers what it was like to be timid about doing events like this. “Been there, done that,” he quipped. “I just love it,” he said of kayaking. “I miss being on the water today. But I’ll be back in next year, stronger than ever.”

Miserandino spent the day helping fellow Veterans get into kayaks and enjoy the Hudson River. “I’m here today for my fellow vets—anyone who is apprehensive—it’s just a matter of talking to them,” he said. “I can help make them feel more comfortable and before they know it, they’re in the boat.”

“We want to promote health and wellness for our Veterans, and we realize that sometimes the best location to promote physical and mental well-being is outside the hospital walls, where our Veterans are living their lives on a daily basis,” said Dr. Leif Nelson, clinical coordinator of prosthetics with VA New York Harbor.

“I’m so glad I came,” said Donna

Zephrine, an Army Veteran who came to the event for the first time. “The event was awesome. I met other Veterans and organizations. It was a beautiful day. I would recommend it to other Veterans.”

Under a cloudless sky, the event also offered chair massages, a caricaturist and musical entertainment all day long.

Vietnam-era Veteran Ray Castillo, who is legally blind, mounted a camera to his hat to document the picturesque day. Thanks to adaptive equipment, like his new laptop from VA, he can once again enjoy photography the way he did before his vision loss, which was the result of a car accident.

Castillo, 55, is a member of the Visual Impairment Services Team, or VIST, program at VA New York Harbor’s New York Campus, and knows a thing or two about adaptive sports. After an adaptive sports program at the Northport (N.Y.) VA Medical Center introduced him to tandem biking and kayaking, he stumbled upon Operation Mission Vision, an adaptive sports program under the United States Association of Blind Athletes

that was held in Colorado over the summer. There, he fell in love with archery.

“Before the accident, I was very active,” Castillo said. “Then I didn’t do anything for a year and a half. I couldn’t catch a ball. I was totally disabled. Now I am doing these things.” He credits the VIST program and events like Heroes on the Hudson with restoring his confidence.

Marine Corps Veteran Anthony Soto has had a similar experience. After exposure to Agent Orange left his vascular system compromised, he underwent a leg amputation. The Vietnam Veteran, who served from 1970 to 1974, became a resident of St. Albans Community Living Center for his rehabilitation—and he was depressed. “I was giving up on life,” recalled Soto, 62. But after meeting some inspirational Veterans and hearing their stories, he began to see there would be life after the amputation.

“This event is great,” he said, with his daughter by his side. “I’m adapting to doing things differently and I’m having a great time.” **VA**

*By Jennifer Sammartino*



*Left: Jerry Miserandino, left, counsels a Veteran about adaptive water sports; right: Blind Veteran Raymond Castillo, right, disembarks from a sailboat at the Heroes on the Hudson event. He wears a camera on his hat to snap photos throughout the day.*



## Nineteen VA Medical Facilities Named to Top Performers List

Nineteen VA medical facilities from across the nation were recently recognized by The Joint Commission as top performers on key health care quality measures for 2011-2012.

While all 152 VA medical facilities are accredited by The Joint Commission, the list recognizes facilities that are the top performers based on The Joint Commission's review of evidence-based care processes that are closely linked to positive patient outcomes. Three new accountability measure sets are included in the calculation for this year's Top Performers program: stroke; venous thromboembolism; and inpatient psychiatric services.

**“VA health care has been a leader in performance measurement, electronic health records, research and clinical quality for more than a decade.”**

This year's program recognizes Joint Commission-accredited hospitals for a significant achievement in accountability measure performance. Eight VA facilities have received the Top Performer status for two consecutive years—a noteworthy distinction.

“VA health care has been a leader in performance measurement, electronic health records, research and clinical quality for more than a decade,” said VA Under Secretary for Health Dr. Robert Petzel. “I am proud of the staff



PETER R. POTTER



BARBARA A. PETERSON

*The Samuel S. Stratton VA Medical Center in Albany, N.Y. (top) and the Boise (Idaho) VA Medical Center (above) are two of the 19 VA medical facilities cited for excellence by The Joint Commission. The Boise VA received the Top Performer rating for a second year.*

and I fully expect to see more VA medical facilities making this list next year.”

The Top Performers on The Joint Commission Quality Measures for 2012

announced its “Improving America’s Hospitals” annual report recognizing hospitals to national and trade media. Top Performers include the following 19 VA medical facilities:

- Tuscaloosa (Ala.) VA Medical Center;
- VA Long Beach (Calif.) Health Care System;
- Grand Junction (Colo.) VA Medical Center;

## VA Awards \$47 Million for State and Tribal Veterans Cemeteries

The National Cemetery Administration's Veterans Cemetery Grants Service awarded 18 grants totaling \$47,462,135 to 15 states and one tribal government to establish new Veterans cemeteries and to expand or improve others.

VA awarded two grants to establish new state and tribal Veterans cemeteries. The state of Louisiana received \$8,383,591 to build its third state cemetery—the Southeast Louisiana Veterans Cemetery in Slidell. VA awarded \$6,510,800 to establish the Oglala Sioux Tribe Veterans Cemetery in Pine Ridge, S.D. The Oglala Sioux tribal grant is the fourth award to a Native American tribe since 2011.

VA also provided 10 expansion grants to prolong the life of existing state cemeteries. The projects include development of new burial areas, new columbaria, in-ground crypts, landscaping and new supporting infrastructure.

Expansion grants, totaling more than \$28 million, were awarded to the following states: \$1,718,618 for the Southern Arizona Veterans Memorial Cemetery in Sierra Vista, Ariz.; \$410,394 to the Arkansas State Veterans Cemetery at North Little Rock;

\$1,293,286 for the Kauai Veterans Cemetery in Hawaii; \$2,441,500 for the Idaho Veterans Cemetery in Boise; \$5,036,089 for the Southern Nevada Veterans Memorial Cemetery in Boulder City; \$506,579 for the Western Montana State Veterans Cemetery in Missoula; \$1,448,091 for the Minnesota State Veterans Cemetery in Little Falls; \$10,796,649 for the Brigadier General William C. Doyle Veterans Cemetery in Wrightstown, N.J.; \$1,661,327 for the Virginia Veterans Cemetery at Amelia; and \$3,334,721 for the Albert G. Horton Jr. Memorial Veterans Cemetery in Suffolk, Va.

In addition, VA awarded operations and maintenance grants for more than \$3 million to six states. The money funds projects that help state cemeteries achieve shrine standards of appearance, such as headstone cleaning, raise and realignment projects and turf rehabilitation. Operations and maintenance grants were disbursed as follows: \$728,668 for the Arkansas State Veterans Cemetery in North Little Rock; \$679,018 for the Delaware Veterans Memorial Cemetery-New Castle County in Bear; \$121,860 for



BEATRICE RICHARDSON/SIERRA VISTA HERALD

*Veterans Cemetery Grants Service Director Josh de Leon (third from right) helps break ground for the Southern Arizona Veterans Memorial Cemetery in Sierra Vista, Ariz., on Sept. 17. With him are (from left): Rick Mueller, mayor of Sierra Vista; Britann O'Brien, Arizona Governor's Office; William F. Pakinkis, Marine Corps League; Maj. Gen. Gregg C. Potter, commanding general of Fort Huachuca; and Joey Strickland, Arizona Department of Veterans Affairs.*

the Georgia Veterans Memorial Cemetery in Milledgeville; \$798,987 for the Ohio Veterans Home Cemetery in Sandusky; \$1,185,607 for the Rhode Island Veterans Memorial Cemetery in Exeter; and \$406,350 for the Oregon Trail State Veterans Cemetery in Evansville, Wyo.

Since 1980, the Veterans

Cemetery Grants Program has awarded grants totaling more than \$483 million to establish, expand, improve, operate and maintain 88 Veterans cemeteries in 43 states and territories, including tribal trust lands, Guam and Saipan. These cemeteries provided more than 29,000 burials in 2011.

*By Richelle Taylor*

### Top Performers cont.

- Wilmington (Del.) VA Medical Center;\*
- Boise (Idaho) VA Medical Center;\*
- Jesse Brown VA Medical Center, Chicago;\*
- Robley Rex VA Medical Center, Louisville, Ky.;
- Oscar G. Johnson VA Medical Center, Iron Mountain, Mich.;\*
- Aleda E. Lutz VA Medical

- Center, Saginaw, Mich.;\*
- VA Gulf Coast Veterans Health Care System, Biloxi, Miss.;\*
- Samuel S. Stratton VA Medical Center, Albany, N.Y.;
- VA Hudson Valley Health Care System, Montrose, N.Y.;
- Portland (Ore.) VA Medical Center;
- Erie (Pa.) VA Medical Center;\*

- William Jennings Bryan Dorn VA Medical Center, Columbia, S.C.;\*
- Memphis (Tenn.) VA Medical Center;
- White River Junction (Vt.) VA Medical Center;
- Spokane (Wash.) VA Medical Center; and
- Huntington (W.Va.) VA Medical Center.

In addition to being

named in this report, Top Performers are highlighted at [www.jointcommission.org](http://www.jointcommission.org) and The Joint Commission's Quality Check website: [www.qualitycheck.org](http://www.qualitycheck.org).

**Editor's note:** An asterisk denotes a Top Performer rating for a second year.



## Women's Memorial Honors Service, Sacrifice Across the Years

When she first joined the military in the mid-1960s, Irene Trowell-Harris couldn't have imagined a national memorial would someday be created to honor the hard-won achievements of so many service-women like herself, pursuing careers in an arena considered unconventional for women.

The now-retired Air National Guard Maj. Gen. Trowell-Harris holds the distinction of being the first female African American promoted to general officer in the National Guard.

With 38 years of military service, Trowell-Harris is deeply humbled whenever she enters the Women In Military Service For America, or WIMSA, Memorial.

"For me, personally, words cannot adequately explain or describe what it feels like walking in this memorial," said Trowell-Harris, currently the director of the VA Center for Women Veterans. "This memorial recognizes and honors me for my service to this country and all the women Veterans out there—1.9 million. They put their lives on the line to serve their



Retired Air Force Brig. Gen. Wilma L. Vaught, left, with retired Air National Guard Maj. Gen. Irene Trowell-Harris, director of the VA Center for Women Veterans, at the Women In Military Service for America Memorial at Arlington National Cemetery.

Women's Memorial, marked its 15th anniversary Oct. 20.

But the journey to get there wasn't easy. Just as it took time for women to progress through the ranks, so did the efforts to establish the memorial and officially recognize

Wilma L. Vaught, one of the most decorated women in military history, who led the efforts to completion.

"It was so difficult," Vaught said, "and along the way I had those people who said, 'Let's just take what

Register, which houses approximately 250,000 women Veterans' stories and serves as a living, ever-changing monument to sacrifice.

"I am so touched as they tell some of the experiences that happened to them, and you see the kinds of barriers and obstacles they were confronted with and overcame," said Vaught, "or you see those moments that just challenged them so much, like the nurses close to combat. You read those stories, and it gives you strength to go on."

Vaught hopes that the memorial will continue to educate and inspire generations to come.

"I think it's one of the best things we've ever done for women, because it tells a total story," she said. "It tells the history. It speaks to the accomplishments. It speaks to

**"What is really unique about this memorial is that it is for all women, all services, and all eras."**

country—now they are getting just and fair recognition and honor for their service to this nation."

The memorial, situated at the ceremonial entrance to Arlington National Cemetery, is the only one of its kind.

"What is really unique about this memorial is that it is for all women, all services, and all eras," said Trowell-Harris.

WIMSA, often called the

women Veterans.

"It took about 15 years to really look at the planning process, the fundraising, and getting support from everybody," said Trowell-Harris. "The women Veterans, the professional members, the White House, the Veterans service organizations—everybody really worked together."

It took resolve on the part of a number of women, like retired Air Force Brig. Gen.

money we've got, and let's do something—a statue—so that we have something.' And I said, 'This is probably the only opportunity we'll ever have to do something like this. We've got to do it right.'"

The memorial now spans 4.2 acres, but the weight and depth of its stories cover so much more ground.

The heart of WIMSA is a computerized database of information known as the

## Veterans Provide Video Testimonials on Experiences With PTSD

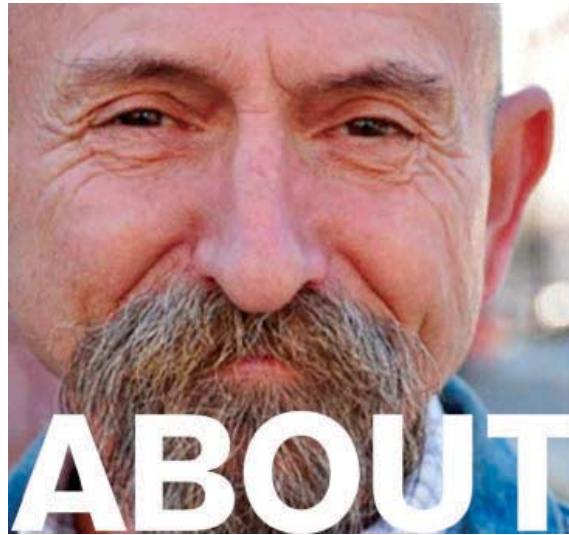
The VA National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder has begun a new online initiative, AboutFace ([www.ptsd.va.gov/AboutFace](http://www.ptsd.va.gov/AboutFace)), focused on helping Veterans recognize PTSD symptoms and motivating them to seek the effective PTSD treatment VA provides.

“The AboutFace campaign introduces viewers to Veterans from many different eras who have lived with PTSD and turned their lives around with treatment,” explained Vicky Bippart, a health science specialist with the VA medical center in White River Junction, Vt. “AboutFace gives you access to Veterans who offer intimate details of their own struggles to endorse a larger message, which is that taking that very difficult first step into treatment is worth it.

“In many ways,” she continued, “the most powerful aspect of this site is the courage of the men and women who truly want to help other Veterans get the help they deserve. It’s palpable. All we had to do is provide the conduit.”

AboutFace, launched in June, is located on the National Center for PTSD website, [www.ptsd.va.gov](http://www.ptsd.va.gov).

“There viewers can watch as Veterans candidly describe how they knew they had



LEARN FROM VETERANS  
HOW PTSD TREATMENT  
CAN TURN YOUR  
LIFE AROUND

*AboutFace is an online initiative of the VA National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.*

PTSD, its effect on the people they love, the stigma that surrounds it, and how ultimately treatment has helped them,” Bippart said. “Their straight talk is genuine. We hope it will convince others to get their lives back on track with treatment.”

Bippart said AboutFace is PTSD specific and was designed as a complement to VA’s current Make the Connection ([www.MakeTheConnection.net](http://www.MakeTheConnection.net)) campaign. Make the Connection also uses personal stories from Veterans who faced life events, experiences, physical ailments or psychological symptoms; reached out for support; and

found ways to overcome their challenges.

“VA is committed to ensuring the men and women who bravely served our nation can access the resources and services tailored for them that can lead to a more fulfilling life,” said Dr. Robert Petzel, VA’s under secretary for health. “We want Veterans to recognize themselves in these stories and to feel optimistic that they can overcome their challenges with proper treatment.”

VA provides effective PTSD treatment and conducts extensive research on PTSD, including prevention. For more information, go to [www.ptsd.va.gov](http://www.ptsd.va.gov),

where you’ll find educational materials including courses for providers on the best practices in PTSD treatment. You’ll also find the award-winning VA/DoD PTSD Coach Mobile App for electronic devices, which provides symptom management strategies.

These campaigns are part of VA’s overall mental health program. Last year, VA provided quality, specialty mental health services to 1.3 million Veterans.

For more information on AboutFace, visit [www.ptsd.va.gov/AboutFace](http://www.ptsd.va.gov/AboutFace) or contact the National Center for PTSD at 802-296-5132.

[www.ptsd.va.gov/AboutFace](http://www.ptsd.va.gov/AboutFace)

### Women’s Memorial cont.

the future. It speaks of what’s going on now. Those who come here leave with a sense of pride.”

The plaques and exhibits that line the walls of the memorial feature women Veterans, but Vaught points

out that the structure exists to unite and inform everyone.

“I think this memorial means a lot to women and even to men,” she said, “because sons, husbands, brothers all come and pay respects to that member of their family,

those that served.”

Vaught invites women Veterans not already registered with the Women’s Memorial to do their part to grow the memorial by adding their own personal stories to the archive.

“We achieved half of my

goal for dedication, which was to have 500,000 people registered,” she said. “We’re within about 200 of being at 250,000. So we have a great goal now, 250,000 more to hit that 500,000 mark.”

*By Jennifer Sardam*



## Dr. Mark Jensen

When you think of a working vacation, painting a few rooms in your home or completing fall yard work might come to mind. For the past nine years, Fargo (N.D.) VA Health Care System Chief of Surgery Dr. Mark Jensen has spent his working vacation in Pignon, Haiti, at the Hospital Bienfaisance (Charity Hospital).

Jensen was getting out of the military in 2003 when he was approached by Dr. Siri Fiebiger, a Fargo obstetrician/gynecologist. Fiebiger, who is now the president of “Promise for Haiti,” was hoping Jensen would join their mission team. The timing was perfect. Looking for his next adventure, Jensen said yes.

Mission work was not new to Jensen. He lived in the West African mission field in the late '70s. That experience made him an ideal addition to the surgical group volunteering in Haiti each year.

The team is made up of general surgeons, plastic surgeons, obstetrician/gynecologists, nurse anesthetists, nurses, supply technicians, medical students and administrative staff. They bring a large cache of medical supplies each year. A staff member from the Fargo-based Healthcare Equipment Recycling Organization is tasked with coordinating supplies. With all the talent and material they bring, they get a warm welcome from the people of Haiti.

Once the team is on the ground in central Haiti, they get down to work. The Hospital Bienfaisance is a 65-bed facility in Pignon, about 70 miles northeast of the capital, Port-au-Prince. It serves 145,000 people in the region.

The hospital boasts two well-equipped operating

rooms, quite rare in such an impoverished area. Lab, endoscopy, mammography, X-ray and pharmacy services are also offered by the hospital.

Since it is estimated that 75 percent of Haitians live below the poverty level set by the World Bank, the population served is largely poor and unable to pay for medical care. The modern facilities, however, do draw some privileged Haitians who access care from the hospital and are able to pay for services.

Clinics are held each evening in the courtyard. A wide variety of operations are performed during the day.

“If you can imagine it, we’ve seen it there,” says Jensen. Massive goiters, burns from the open fire cooking method used by Haitians, and tumors, including an abdominal mass that weighed 60 pounds.

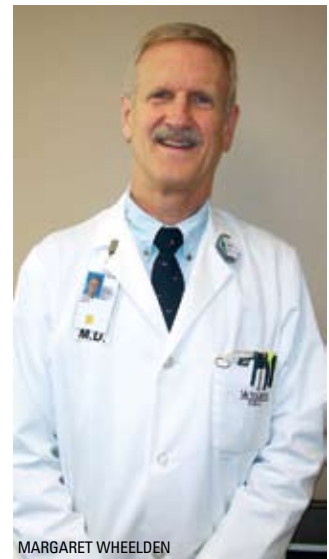
At the end of the long workdays, the team is housed in a dormitory nearby. Jensen notes that sometimes, on the way back to the dorm, an impromptu evening clinic occurs as well.

The team had the unfortunate experience of being in Haiti during the 2010 earthquake, which devastated the country and caused an estimated 300,000 deaths, according to the Haitian government. Jensen put his military training to use, and the surgical team immediately set up a mass casualty unit. It was a tense time, since security became an issue and communication was cut off.

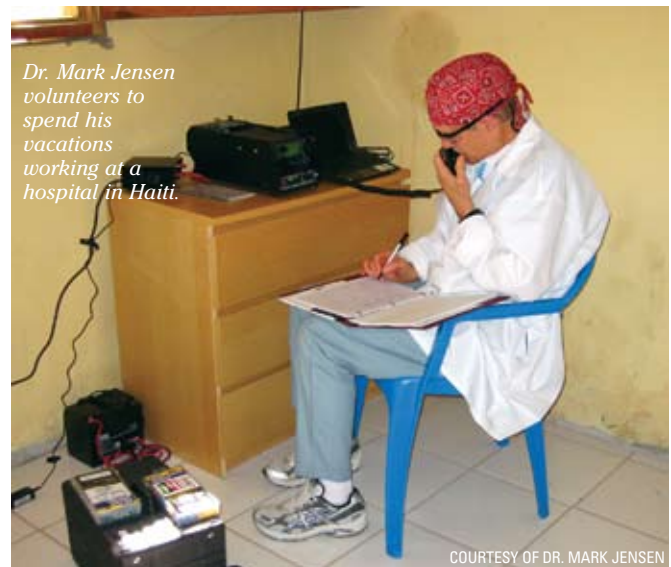
Even though Pignon had an antenna that would allow ham radio communication, no one could locate the radio. Anxious to avoid a similar situation, the next year Jensen

brought a system and left it for future use at the hospital.

With a life expectancy of 52 years and an average income of \$2 a day, Haitians have to beat the odds to make progress. Going to the same location each year has allowed Jensen to see gradual incremental improvements. Haiti is slowly recovering from the 2010 earthquake.



MARGARET WHEELDEN



*Dr. Mark Jensen volunteers to spend his vacations working at a hospital in Haiti.*

COURTESY OF DR. MARK JENSEN

“People were more hopeful than I’ve seen them in nine years,” notes Jensen about his last trip. There were infrastructure improvements, including new roads, dump trucks, sewer and waste disposal systems.

Moreover, Hospital Bienfaisance and Promise for Haiti had an exciting development in 2012. Since the hospital seeks to provide ongoing training for doctors, a residency elective involving the non-profit was developed. While volunteering with Promise for Haiti, surgical residents can earn credit toward completion of their residency. A University of North Dakota surgical resident was the first to take advantage of the opportunity.

“It was a fabulous experi-

ence,” says Jensen. “Residents are quite interested because it is such a unique experience.”

Volunteers from all over the United States are vital to the mission of Promise for Haiti. The work has expanded beyond health care to the provision of clean water, education, and programs for agricultural and economic development.

Even though he takes vacation days to go to work, Jensen describes the work as rewarding. “I come back totally beat,” he says. “My last day off is to simply sleep and recover. But seeing the individuals we help and the community we are helping makes it worthwhile.”

*By Sara Stetz*

## Study Looks at Link Between Substance Abuse, PTSD and Mortality

Veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder who are also battling drug or alcohol problems face a higher risk of death, according to new research from the VA Ann Arbor Healthcare System and the University of Michigan Health System.

The new study is the first to examine the association between drug or alcohol use disorders and death in Veterans with PTSD, and also includes data from the nation's youngest Veterans who have returned from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Dr. Kipling Bohnert, the study's lead author, said the research sheds new light on the importance of treating both substance use and post-traumatic stress disorders in Veterans.

"Attention needs to be paid to Veteran patients with PTSD, with an emphasis on identifying those who might also have a problem with drug or alcohol use," said Bohnert, who is a post-doctoral fellow at VA Ann Arbor and a research fellow at the University of Michigan. "This study highlights the potential importance of effective treatment for both conditions in helping Veterans after they've returned from conflict."

Previous research on Veterans has linked PTSD with higher risks of death, but the

Ann Arbor study is the first to highlight the association between substance use disorders, PTSD and mortality. The study was published online in the journal *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*.

While the researchers found a significant link between substance use disorders and death in Veterans with PTSD across all ages, they also found that the association was most pronounced for the youngest group of Veterans, including those from the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The youngest Veterans, those 45 and under, showed a particularly strong link between substance use disorders and both injury- and non injury-related death. Injury-related death included homicides, suicides and accidents, while non injury-related deaths included heart disease, cancer and other health problems.

Bohnert said more research is necessary to figure out why younger Veterans exhibit a stronger tie between substance use disorders and death.

Dr. Federic C. Blow, the paper's senior author and director of VA's National Serious Mental Illness Treatment Research & Evaluation Center, said the research might be helpful for physicians in deciding the best way to treat their patients.



ROBERT TURTIL

*Veterans suffering from PTSD who are also battling alcohol or drug problems face a higher risk of death, according to new research from the Ann Arbor VA and University of Michigan.*

"In theory," Blow said, "a treatment program that addresses both issues—substance use and PTSD—should re-

duce the risk of death from all causes, and this may be especially true for the nation's youngest Veterans."

## 'Keeping it Clean' Really Can Reduce Transmission of Infection

A recent VA study found that a daily cleaning of high-touch surfaces in isolation rooms of patients with *Clostridium difficile* (also known as *C. diff*) or methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (better known as

MRSA) significantly reduces the rate of pathogens on the hands of health care personnel.

"Our findings underscore the importance of environmental cleaning for reducing the spread of hard-to-treat

infections," said Dr. Sirisha Kundrapu, a researcher at the Louis Stokes Cleveland VA Medical Center and the study's lead author.

Kundrapu said she and her team conducted a prospec-

tive, randomized trial comparing regular cleaning protocols of housekeeping staff with daily disinfection of high-touch surfaces—including bed rails, bedside tables, call

**continued on page 32**



## Smartphone Virtual ‘Hope Box’ Could Reduce Suicidal Thoughts

The VA medical center in Portland, Ore., has become the test site for an interesting new approach to helping Veterans cope with thoughts of suicide: the “hope box.”

“One tool we use in distress tolerance here as part of our Dialectical Behavior Therapy treatment is for Veterans to develop what we call a ‘self-soothing box,’” explained Aysha Crain, a social worker and research coordinator at the Portland VA.

“This physical ‘hope box’ is a means for Veterans with suicidal thoughts to remember better times through favorite photos, gifts and notes, and by using distraction tools or games like Sudoku or crossword puzzles.

“We encourage our Veterans to try to keep their physical hope box with them,” she continued. “That way, they’ll have an option for managing distressing thoughts when they become overwhelming. The hope box can be any kind of container—a shoe box, envelope or plastic bag.”

Of course, it’s not necessarily private, convenient or easy to carry a shoebox around with you all the time. So technology has come to the rescue. A team led by Nigel Bush, a research psychologist at the Defense Department’s National Center for Telehealth and Technology, has come up with a potential solution.

“They developed a virtual hope box smartphone application that we hope can serve the same purpose as our physical hope box,” explained Dr. Steven Dobscha, chief of psychiatry at the Portland VA Medical Center. “It can be used conveniently and discreetly on a smartphone.”

When using the virtual hope box, the Veteran sets up the app with photos of friends and family, sound bites and videos of loved ones and special moments, music, relaxation exercises, games and helpline numbers.

Now that initial development of the app has been completed, psychologists and social workers at the Portland



DANIEL HERRIGSTAD

*Aysha Crain, a social worker and research coordinator at the Portland (Ore.) VA Medical Center, displays a smartphone app called the Virtual Hope Box.*

VA are busy evaluating it. How? They’re introducing the app to about 25 Veterans enrolled in a research project being conducted in collaboration with Portland’s Dialectical Behavior Therapy Program.

“We’re in the testing phase,” Dobscha said. “We’re hopeful this pilot study will

tell us if this is likely to be a tool that Veterans will use when they are struggling with suicidal thoughts.”

Development and testing of the app is being supported by a grant from the Department of Defense, through the Military Suicide Research Consortium.

### ‘Keeping it Clean’ cont.

buttons, phones, toilet seats and bathroom hand rails—performed by researchers in 34 C. diff and 36 MRSA isolation rooms.

“Our study assessed hand contamination of physicians, nurses and research staff six to eight hours after disinfection procedures,” Kundrapu explained. “In rooms where we disinfected daily, we found significant reductions in the amount and frequency of pathogens on the hands of investigators as well as health care personnel caring for the patients.

“The frequency of hand contamination was just 6.4 percent with daily disinfection of high-touch surfaces. That compares to a 30 percent frequency of hand contamination with standard cleaning.”

She continued: “These findings add to the growing body of evidence supporting environmental cleaning and disinfection as an important infection control strategy. This simple intervention was inexpensive and well accepted by patients and staff.

“Mom was right all along,” Kundrapu added.

“You just need to keep your room clean.”

Regular cleaning protocols of VA housekeeping staff during the study period included disinfection of patient rooms with sodium hypochlorite after discharge, daily cleaning of bathrooms and floors, and cleaning of high-touch surfaces only if visibly soiled. Now these protocols also include daily disinfection of high-touch surfaces in isolation rooms.

“During our study,” Kundrapu said, “rooms randomized to daily disinfection

were cleaned each morning for seven days, or until discharge. Our daily disinfection took about 20 minutes per room.

“This study is so interesting,” Kundrapu continued, “because it highlights the potential impact of small changes in environmental cleaning on preventing transmission and patient exposure to harmful pathogens.”

The study appeared in the October issue of *Infection Control and Hospital Epidemiology*, the journal of the Society for Healthcare Epidemiology of America.

### Orlando VAMC Team Offers Support, Hope, Success in Battling Suicide

Rain and clouds are common in an Orlando summer, but for some Veterans the metaphorical darkness of suicidal thoughts can hang on day after day. For that reason, the Orlando VA Medical Center's suicide prevention team actively seeks Veterans at risk to alleviate their suffering, and each September joins a national effort during Suicide Prevention Month.

Myra Brazell, Orlando VA's suicide prevention coordinator, and Cindy Hetue, suicide prevention case manager, are part of the top-notch Orlando team that has begun to make a significant difference in the fight to save and change lives. Brazell says hope is the first step in regaining a full and sustained life, and that hope should begin the moment patients reach one of the VA care facilities. "Our employees and their attitudes matter so much, and they're doing a great job here," she said.

The Orlando efforts include a fair amount of innovation, as recent studies identified lack of connectedness as a prime factor in suicidal tendencies. To combat it, the Orlando VAMC sends monthly cards to anyone who has ever been on its high-risk list and continues that practice for at least a year. The Veterans Crisis Line is available online at <http://veteranscrisisline.net>, by telephone at 1-800-273-8255, or via text message at 838255.



Myra Brazell (left), Orlando VA's suicide prevention coordinator, and Cindy Hetue, suicide prevention case manager.

### VA, DoD Join Forces for MRI Capability

For years, officials from the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center in Charleston, S.C., and Naval Hospital Beaufort lobbied for federal funding for a mobile MRI machine for their hospitals. They just couldn't get a green light. Those same officials gathered at the Naval Hospital in late September to unveil \$2.3 million in new medical imaging equipment they finally acquired by joining forces last year. Their team approach worked; the red light turned to green, and the money was awarded.

"In early 2011, leaders from both hospitals decided they'd have a better chance of getting the money for this equipment if they worked together," said Carolyn Adams, director of the Charleston VA Medical Center. "So that's what we did. We proposed paying for the equipment through the DoD-VA Joint Incentive Fund. And it worked."

The fund, which had about \$30 million this year, helps pay for projects that allow local, regional and national DoD and VA facilities to share resources. This recent collaboration between VA and DoD is the latest chapter in a partnership that formally began in 2001, when a VA community outreach clinic opened at the Naval Hospital in Beaufort, making it easier for area Veterans to seek basic care.



Staff Sgt. Erik Kunz, a Marine stationed at Marine Corps Air Station Beaufort, is readied for his MRI by Radiology Technician David Estep.

### DeBakey Hits Milestone in Research Enrollment

The Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center in Houston recently enrolled the 5,000th participant in the Million Veteran Program and is currently leading the nation in enrollment efforts. Air Force Veteran Robert Arrington became the 5,000th Veteran to enroll from the Houston area.

The facility is one of 40 VA medical centers serving as enrollment sites for this national, voluntary research program conducted by the VA Office of Research & Development. The knowledge gained will help increase understanding of how genes affect health and illness, with the ultimate goal of transforming health care.

Participants are asked to complete a one-time study visit and provide a blood sample for genetic analysis. Participation also includes filling out health surveys, allowing ongoing access to medical records, and agreeing to future contact.

This research program will establish one of the largest databases of genes and health history. MVP aims to enroll as many as 1 million Veterans over the next five to seven years. Results will help improve health care for not only Veterans, but all Americans.

MVP has extensive safeguards in place to keep Veterans' personal information secure and confidential. To learn more, visit [www.research.va.gov/MVP](http://www.research.va.gov/MVP).





### Cemetery Director Intern Class of 2012

The workers shown here certainly appear to be cemetery caretakers. After all, they are hard at work refurbishing turf in one of VA's national cemeteries. But looks can be deceiving. Introducing the National Cemetery Administration's Cemetery Director Intern Class of 2012 as they engage in hands-on training as part of their year-long preparation to become national cemetery directors.

The NCA National Training Center is located in St. Louis and provides the only training for cemetery operations in the federal government. During their course of study, the interns are exposed to every aspect of cemetery operations and frequently "get their hands dirty" at nearby Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery.

### Serving Women Veterans in Style at the West Palm Beach VAMC

Maureen "Molly" Boyle is exuberant about her wares. And she's even more passionate about the customers she serves. Boyle runs the West Palm Beach (Fla.) VA Medical Center's boutique-style women Veterans prosthetic and orthotic clinic. It offers all major brands of compression wear, as well as custom products designed for disabled women.

Boyle is much more than a shopkeeper. An orthotist at the West Palm Beach VAMC, she is one of only four VA employees nationwide certified as a mastectomy fitter. It was through her work with disabled women Veterans that she recognized their needs are much different from those of male Veterans. Helping women look and feel their best after trauma or a disease like cancer is important, she said, and she wanted to be able to offer them personalized, private fittings with products. Besides offering personalized fittings, Boyle issues limited maternity supplies to pregnant women Veterans. She works closely with all women patients to ensure they have the necessary items and the fit is just right.



VA orthotist Molly Boyle shows some of her wares to Veteran Patricia Cepeda-Russell at the West Palm Beach VA Medical Center.

### VA for Vets Call Centers Move to 24/7 Operations

On Oct. 1, the VA for Vets Coaching Call Centers and Technical Help Desk evolved into a 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week operation. As a result, Veterans can access VA for Vets program services anytime they are needed via phone, email or chat.

During weekday hours before 8 p.m. Eastern Standard Time, all coaching services are available to Veterans seeking career counseling and reintegration support. For those needing technical support, Tier I and Tier II Help Desk support is readily available.

In the evenings after 8 p.m. EST and on weekends (Saturdays and Sundays), Veteran representatives (Vet reps) are available for: general information; resource referrals; account creation; Career Center walk through; supporting skills assessments in the Career Center; initial upload of resume; and scheduling coaching appointments.

The Tier 1 Help Desk support staff is also available for password resets and difficulties using on-line Career Center tools. During the first 15 days of the 24/7 operation, 40 Veterans called the Coaching Call Centers to access these services during the expanded hours of operation.

### Home Depot Volunteers Crash Amarillo VAMC

More than 20 Home Depot employees volunteered their time to build an outdoor activity area for the Veterans of the Amarillo (Texas) VA Medical Center's Community Living Center in October. The job was done in one day, yard-crasher style. "That was a surprise," said Vietnam Veteran and Community Living Center resident Dalton Spell. "I think every one of them ought to have a pat on the back and a big hug."

The volunteers spent the day building a new, arbor-like shade structure, along with gardening boxes that are easily accessible, even for those in a wheelchair. Barbara Moore, chief of the Amarillo VA's Community and Patient Relations Service, said the shade structure "extends the areas where Veterans and their families can spend time outside without concerns related to sun exposure. And for those who like to garden, a state-of-the-art planter box will offer easy access to any vegetable or flower the Veteran decides to cultivate. As many as 120 Veterans make their home in our Community Living Center. The improvements outside complement the changes we've made inside, including pet therapy, room customization, Internet for residents and many other amenities." The garden project was made possible by a \$4,000 grant from Home Depot.



Community Living Center resident William Fulton accepts a special delivery from Home Depot volunteer Melanie Gaddy.

### GIS Technologies: Visualizing Choices to Better Serve Veterans

Located in Gainesville, Fla., the Planning Systems Support Group is a field unit of the Veterans Health Administration's Office of the Assistant Deputy Under Secretary for Health for Policy and Planning with a primary mission to assist planners in improving Veterans' access to health care through the application of advanced GIS tools to turn geographic information into the strategy needed to optimize resources and provide the right services to the greatest number of Veterans.

GIS is a software-based tool known as Geographic Information System. In its simplest form, GIS overlays data on a map to provide a visual representation of the data so it is easily understood. PSSG is the primary source for the geographic data and analysis needed to evaluate new sites of care.

Using data from the VA Site Tracking System and the enrollee travel time file, PSSG computes drive time to the nearest VA primary, secondary and tertiary site of care for more than 8 million enrollees. These data are the basis for many products and analyses, including the VA Enrollee Health Care Projection Model, market access performance statistics, the Geographic Access Report, the ADUSH GIS Planning Portal, custom site location analysis and address lists. For more information, visit [vawww.pssg.med.va.gov](http://vawww.pssg.med.va.gov).

### Valet Parking for Veterans

The Jack C. Montgomery VA Medical Center began a free valet parking service for Veterans in November at the Muskogee, Okla., hospital, which is available on a first come, first serve basis from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday, excluding federal holidays. Veterans who choose to use the service find it as easy as driving to the main entrance and handing their keys over to a valet attendant, who gives them a numbered ticket and parks their vehicle. When the Veteran is ready to leave the medical center, they return to the main entrance and show the ticket to the valet attendant, who then retrieves their vehicle.

"This will set the tone for their entire visit," said Bryan C. Matthews, associate medical center director. "Our motto is 'Excellence Starts Here' and we want every Veteran's experience at the medical center to be exactly that—excellent." Liberty Management Services LLC, based out of Ft. Smith, Ark., manages the service. The company is owned by Jamie Narramore, a service-disabled Veteran-owned small businessman. "As a Veteran myself, I realize the importance of this service to the VA and, more importantly, our Veterans," said Narramore. "Additionally, I have hired all Veteran valets to help provide the needed service to our heroes."



Valet Attendant Russell Patrick, an Army Veteran, gives Army Veteran Richard Swinney his keys at the Muskogee VA's main entrance.



**Veteran Organizes Ceremony to Recognize VA Greater Los Angeles Physician**

Veterans from the VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System recently recognized staff physician and MOVE program coordinator Dr. Zhaoping Li for her work helping Veterans live healthfully. “Dr. Li is genuinely interested in improving Veterans’ overall health,” said Veteran Gordon Bergelson. “She takes her time, listens, and builds on previous visits to advance the Veteran’s health.”

Bergelson, like so many Americans, struggled to lose weight. Over a period of five years, Li’s MOVE team worked closely with Bergelson to help him live a healthier, more active lifestyle. Grateful for the care he received from Li and her team of nutritionists and health care specialists, Bergelson reached out to the Los Angeles City Council to request a certificate of appreciation in her honor. Soon other government agencies, such as the California State Assembly and the California Department of Veterans Affairs, wanted to formally express their thanks as well. The certificates were presented in a ceremony on the West Los Angeles campus this summer, with Veterans and Greater Los Angeles VA leadership and staff in attendance. “Mr. Bergelson went above and beyond to illustrate his appreciation,” said Greater Los Angeles VA director Donna Beiter. “What a treat to witness such a meaningful gesture of thanks from a Veteran.”



*Left to right: Jim Horwitz, Los Angeles City Council representative; Dr. Dean Norman, chief of staff, VA Greater Los Angeles; Donna Beiter, director, VA Greater Los Angeles; Dr. Zhaoping Li, physician, MOVE program, VA Greater Los Angeles; Gordon Bergelson, MOVE program Veteran; Betsy Butler, California assemblymember; and Peter Gravett, secretary, California Department of Veterans Affairs.*

**Obama Appoints Palo Alto Neurosurgery Resident to Class of White House Fellows**

President Barack Obama recently appointed Dr. Anand Veeravagu, chief neurosurgery resident at California’s Palo Alto VA Medical Center, as one among 15 White House Fellows. Veeravagu, an Indian American, cares for troops returning from Afghanistan with traumatic brain and spinal cord injuries. Veeravagu focuses on advancing minimally invasive diagnostic and surgical techniques for central nervous system diseases. In 2006, he developed a novel radiotherapeutic medication to treat Glioblastoma Multiforme, a malignant brain tumor.

The White House Fellows Program, created in 1964 by President Lyndon Johnson, gives promising American leaders “firsthand, high-level experience with the workings of the federal government, and increases their sense of participation in national affairs.” Selection as a Fellow is highly competitive and based on a record of professional achievement, evidence of leadership potential, and a proven commitment to public service.

Veeravagu’s other accomplishments include: receiving the Gold Foundation’s Humanism and Excellence in Teaching Award for his commitment to mentorship in 2012; staffing the CURE Neurosurgical Hospital in Uganda in 2011; and organizing medical relief missions following the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004. Additionally, he has received more than 30 awards for his leadership, research and promotion of health care access to underserved populations and been published in more than 50 peer-reviewed scientific manuscripts.



*Dr. Anand Veeravagu*

**Houston VA Nurses Recognized for Excellence**

On Sept. 6, the Good Samaritan Foundation hosted its annual Excellence in Nursing Awards Luncheon. The event honors nurses who demonstrate a passion for the nursing profession and the desire to excel beyond expectations. Winners included seven nurses from the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center in Houston.

The Gold Award winner in the Clinical Practice in a Large Hospital category was Omana Simon. The Bronze Award winners in the Clinical Practice in a Large Hospital category were: Arceli Katigbak; Sybill Kyle; Beth Reimschissel; and Laterrica Stringfellow. The Bronze Award winner in the Clinical Practice in Hospice/Home Health Care/Clinic/Other Setting category was Eron Wahid. The Bronze Award winner in the Nursing Education Clinician category was Charlotte Joubert.

Founded in 1951, the Good Samaritan Foundation encourages nursing excellence through a variety of supported programs and created the Excellence in Nursing Awards to recognize nursing’s “best and brightest.” Nurses are nominated by their peers, selected by a committee of nursing leaders, and must exemplify excellence in teaching, mentoring, leadership and service to be selected.

**Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs Honors Chicago VA Director as 'Veteran of the Month'**

The Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs recognized Michael Anaya Sr., both an Air Force and Navy Veteran, as its October "Veteran of the Month." Anaya, who is director of the Jesse Brown VA Medical Center in Chicago, was honored Sept. 24 during a ceremony at the National Latino Education Institute.

The Illinois Veteran of the Month award is a distinction bestowed upon Veterans who continue to serve their communities after leaving the military. "Director Anaya has parlayed a distinguished career in military health care into highly effective leadership and advocacy in the Veterans health care system," said Erica Borggren, director of the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs. "[As] a staunch advocate on all Veteran-related issues, Michael has a keen understanding of Veterans' needs and has worked tirelessly to develop strategic relationships and partnerships to improve support for Veterans in the Chicago area."

Anaya was a pharmacy technician in the Air Force from 1979 to 1989, and served in the Navy's Medical Service Corps from 1989 to 2000. While serving, he earned a bachelor's degree in health care administration from Wayland Baptist University and a master's degree in public administration from Midwestern State University. Anaya retired at the rank of lieutenant commander in 2001.



*Michael Anaya Sr., director of the Jesse Brown VA Medical Center in Chicago, accepts his Veteran of the Month award from Erica Borggren, director of the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs.*

MIKE MOLINA

**VHA Employee Education System Receives Five-Star Award**

During the recent Society for Applied Learning Technology's annual Interactive Technologies Conference in Reston, Va., the Federal Government Distance Learning Association honored the Veterans Health Administration's Employee Education System with its 2012 Five-Star Award. The award recognizes VHA's demonstrated excellence in providing enterprise-wide distance learning solutions for the federal government.

In the words of the FGDLA president, the award recognizes EES "for providing a cost-effective distance learning training solution for medical personnel [that sets] you apart in the federal government." The award is based on peer nomination from the United States Air Force Air University for VHA's leadership and management of the Federal Healthcare Training Partnership. The FHTP, founded by EES in 2004, is comprised of 14 partner entities that collaborate to facilitate the sharing of continuing education and in-service training programs among federal agencies and organizations with a clinical training mission.



*Left to right: Russ Colbert, Polycom U.S. Federal Government Market director; Sheree Cramer, EES deputy chief learning officer for business operations; and Alex Autry, FGDLA president.*

COURTESY OF FGDLA

**MyCareer@VA Recognized for Innovation in Government**

Following its one-year anniversary in October, the MyCareer@VA program was designated one of Harvard University's "Bright Ideas in Government." MyCareer@VA is VA's powerful online program that organizes and simplifies career planning for current VA employees and potential applicants. The program offers users a number of innovative resources to help identify their interests, explore job opportunities, develop new skills, and create a step-by-step plan of action to pursue the career they will find most fulfilling at VA.

MyCareer@VA was created by the VA Learning University to engage and excite employees and potential applicants about long-term career opportunities at VA. The program ensures a passionate, dedicated and effective workforce that is prepared to meet the growing needs of Veterans and their families.

Designed to promote innovative government programs and partnerships, Bright Ideas is an initiative of Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, Ash Center for Democratic Governance. To learn more about MyCareer@VA, visit [www.mycareeratva.va.gov](http://www.mycareeratva.va.gov).



**Houston VA Physician Assistant Named Outstanding Clinical Physician Assistant**

Physician assistant Rubina Dasilva, of the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center in Houston, was named 2012 Outstanding Clinical Physician Assistant of the Year by the VA Physician Assistant Association and received her award during the annual VAPAA conference in August. Dasilva, a Navy Veteran, has worked at the Houston VA since March 2007, and provides care to medical center staff as a physician assistant in the Occupational Health Clinic.

Dasilva is a current member of the American Academy of Physician Assistants, Veterans Caucus, and the Veterans Affairs Physician Assistants Association. She graduated from the Drexel Hahnemann University physician assistant program in Philadelphia. VA is the largest single employer of physician assistants in the United States and currently employs about 1,900 PAs. Some 35 percent of Veterans Health Administration PAs are Veterans, which provides them with a heightened awareness of situations, stresses and experiences unique to Veteran patients.



Rubina Dasilva

**Longtime VA Researcher Receives Lasker-DeBakey Award**

Dr. Thomas E. Starzl, a longtime VA researcher often deemed “the father of human transplantation,” received one of the world’s top science awards from the Albert and Mary Lasker Foundation Sept. 21 in New York City. “We join the Lasker Foundation in celebrating Dr. Starzl’s lifetime of achievement in medical research,” said VA Secretary Eric K. Shinseki. “Dr. Starzl’s work is a shining example of what our physician-researchers accomplish on behalf of Veterans and all Americans.”

Starzl retired from VA in 1998, after nearly 50 years, and shares the Lasker-DeBakey Clinical Medical Research Award for 2012 with Roy Y. Calne of the University of Cambridge in England. Both men were honored for their development of liver transplantation, which has restored life to thousands with end-stage liver disease.

A World War II Navy Veteran, Starzl began his VA career in the 1950s as a resident surgeon in the Chicago VA Research Hospital, now part of Jesse Brown VA Medical Center. “Dr. Starzl’s selection as a recipient of the Lasker-DeBakey award is a well-deserved tribute to an exceptional career of service to Veterans and to all mankind,” said Dr. Robert Petzel, VA undersecretary for health. “Every successful transplant accomplished by VA surgeons, and by surgeons everywhere, is a tribute to his skill as a physician and a researcher.” The Lasker Foundation fosters prevention and treatment of disease and disabilities, honoring excellence in basic and clinical science, educating the public, and advocating for medical research.

**OIT Executive Named One of FierceGovernmentIT’s ‘Fierce 15’ Winners**

*FierceGovernmentIT* ([www.fiercегovernmentit.com](http://www.fiercегovernmentit.com)) announced its first annual “Fierce 15” list of the top federal employees in October. VA employee DJ Kachman, director of Mobile and Security Assurance, was included alongside 14 other winners from other federal agencies.

*FierceGovernmentIT* conducted interviews with government and industry officials to identify some of the most innovative projects and forward-thinking people working in government IT. From that pool, editors collaboratively selected this year’s Fierce 15. “The Fierce 15 is an opportunity to share some great stories happening in government. We’ve highlighted people from an array of areas and disciplines—from health information technology to cloud computing to mobility,” said David Perera, executive editor of FierceMarkets’ Government Group.

An internationally recognized thrice-weekly e-newsletter reaching more than 24,500 federal employees and IT executives, *FierceGovernmentIT* provides subscribers with a quick authoritative briefing on the latest technological developments in the federal government, with a special focus on developments in cybersecurity, Gov 2.0 and cloud computing.



Julie Bruhn

**Bruhn Awarded North Dakota Nurses Association Honor**

Julie Bruhn, associate director for patient care with the Fargo (N.D.) VA Health Care System, recently received the North Dakota Nurses Association Excellence in Administration award. The award recognizes her demonstrated knowledge of nursing research, effectiveness as a leader and teacher, and influence on the practice of nursing through modeling the Standards of Professional Performance.

Bruhn began her VA career in 1979, and during her tenure has held a number of nursing and leadership positions both locally and nationally. Most recently, she served as the director of Performance Improvement at the Fargo VAMC. Bruhn received her bachelor’s degree in nursing from the College of St. Scholastica in Duluth, Minn., and master’s degree in nursing from the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks.

### Atlanta VA Workers Risk Their Lives to Save Car Crash Victim

During 12 years of active duty as a Navy hospital corpsman, Sheila Bousson, a health technician in the Atlanta VA Medical Center's Ophthalmology department, gained plenty of experience responding to emergencies. Those skills served her well Oct. 23. She and eight other vanpool riders were traveling to work that morning when a car in front of their van suddenly swerved across four lanes of traffic and smashed head-on into a median wall.

"I just knew I had to do something," Bousson recalled. Her instincts kicked in, and without hesitation she, along with fellow riders Cynthia Moore, a VAMC primary care nurse, and Brandon Barnes, an Atlanta VA Regional Office Veterans service representative supervisor, made their way toward the car crash to rescue the passenger. "The doors were locked," Bousson explained, "so I shattered the back window to gain access, climbed into the front seat and quickly started administering first aid." When the victim stopped breathing, Bousson began rescue breathing until his heart stopped, and then began CPR.

Unfortunately, the young man did not survive, but Bousson had done everything she could to save him; so had Barnes and Moore. Bousson described them as courageous. "Brandon's actions to stop the van quickly and safely on the shoulder of the road played a key role," said Bousson. Moore, Bousson said, assisted with rescue breathing so compressions could be continued until help arrived. Bousson credited Atlanta VAMC's Dr. Tisha Titus for her CPR recertification course recently presented to Ophthalmology staff, which kept them current on CPR standards.



Sheila Bousson (left), Cynthia Moore and Brandon Barnes stand beside the van they rode on the morning of the car crash.

### Huntington VAMC Surgery Staff Help Accident Victim

As three members of the Huntington (W.Va.) VA Medical Center surgical staff were returning home from a recent workshop in Nashville, Tenn., they saw an oncoming driver lose control of his truck from a tire blowout. The vehicle became airborne, crashed into a patch of trees, and was barely visible from the interstate.

VA Health System Specialist Jill Stevenson quickly rerouted the van as operating room nurse manager Debbie Hilliard called 911. Then, Hilliard and fellow nurse Rena Black, VA Surgical Quality Improvement Program coordinator, rushed to assist the injured young man, administered first aid, and kept him calm until responders arrived on the scene.



Nurses Debbie Hilliard (foreground) and Rena Black sprang into action to help an injured young driver.

### VA New Jersey Occupational Therapist Saves Neighbors' Lives

In the early morning hours of June 13, Jen-Eve Frace, an occupational therapist with the VA New Jersey Health Care System, was out walking her dog when she saw smoke coming from a row of townhomes. She immediately started knocking on doors to alert residents of the situation.

Although the homes received extensive damage, because of Frace's actions, no one was injured in the blaze. Frace was honored for her outstanding community service by the Town of East Brunswick, N.J., on Oct. 13.



THE OFFICE OF INFORMATION AND TECHNOLOGY ON

# IMPROVING ACCESS TO QUALITY CARE



IT is here to serve you as we support our Veterans. When it comes to improving access to the highest quality healthcare we've helped make significant enhancements to MyHealthVet and Blue Button, providing a one stop shop for comprehensive health care information, delivered to over 1 million Veterans. IT's role in Telehealth and telemedicine helps nearly 500,000 Veterans receive quality care without having to drive hours to the nearest VA medical center. IT is at the heart of developing a single, joint, common, integrated Electronic Health Record (iEHR) with DoD giving the service member and Veteran one single electronic health record from swearing in to final resting. Our goal is not just easier availability, but access to the highest quality healthcare in the United States. Supporting You. Serving Veterans. <http://vaww.oit.va.gov/>

VA



U.S. Department  
of Veterans Affairs  
Office of Information  
and Technology