

Greening the Government

VA's approach to reducing the toll federal agencies' operations take on the environment is winning accolades from the federal community.

In 2001, President Bush issued Executive Order 13148, a policy intended to improve federal agencies' management of environmental programs, reducing the toll their operations take on the environment. The order, Greening the Government Through Leadership in Environmental Management, contains many environmental requirements, but none more important than the order that federal facilities develop and implement environmental management systems by Dec. 31, 2005.

An environmental management system is a management tool, an organizational structure, a system for examining and addressing an organization's impact on the environment. How do VA functions impact the environment? As one of the largest public or private entities in the world, VA's need for land, buildings and infrastructure, energy, water, paper, furniture, computers, consumer goods, fuels and indus-

trial chemicals, fertilizer and pesticides is nothing less than enormous. Each of these necessary products has the potential to despoil the environment through production, use, storage or disposal. And it's the VA employee who orders, uses, stores or disposes of these products who holds the key to environmental management.

The Veterans Health Administration's response to the executive order was to create the Green Environmental Management System, or GEMS, program. The "Green" was added to differentiate it from other VA programs and services.

From the start, GEMS program development was a collaborative effort. Arnold Bierenbaum, director of



Members of VA's "Green Team" include (left to right) Freddy Martinez, Barbara Matos, Arnold Bierenbaum and Jack Staudt.

Safety and Technical Services in VHA's Office of the Deputy Under Secretary for Health for Operations and Management, led a Professional Advisory Group consisting of representatives from VA Central Office, the Center for Engineering & Occupational Safety and Health, Veterans Integrated Service Networks, VA medical centers, the National Cemetery Administration, and the Office of Acquisition and Materiel Management, which has department-level responsibility for EO 13148. Additionally, experts from the Environmental Protection Agency played a key partnership role in assisting VA staff with developing GEMS technical guidance.

To prepare for the development of environmental management systems at VA's 154 medical centers and more than 800 clinics, EPA was asked to conduct environmental management reviews at 17 facilities. "These environmental management reviews helped show where the regulatory risks were. They differed from facility to facility, illustrating the need for flexibility throughout the system," Bierenbaum said. "We saw that local GEMS committees at medical centers and VISNs would need the ability to set their own priorities and objectives."

With environmental challenges identified, VHA developed two guidebooks to provide direction to field facilities in meeting the requirements of the executive order. The Environmental Compliance Guidebook is a ready reference with detailed information on environmental requirements and regulations for the operation of a VAMC. The GEMS guidebook is, as Bierenbaum describes it, "a collection of best practices" that medical centers can use to identify strengths, weaknesses and gaps in their existing environmental programs, and it provides proven improvement strategies.

Most significantly, the GEMS guidebook addresses EO 13148 directly, providing detailed guidance on how to build and implement a GEMS program, laying out a nine-step process for each facility: 1) Appoint a GEMS coordinator and form a GEMS committee; 2) Train the members of the GEMS committee; 3) Conduct a GEMS gap analysis; 4) Identify significant environmental aspects; 5) Establish operational controls; 6) Set objectives and targets; 7) Train staff on GEMS policies and standard operating procedures; 8) Conduct environmental compliance baseline and periodic follow-up audits; and 9) Issue an annual program effectiveness review and report.

This nine-step GEMS process emphasizes the "Plan-Do-Check-

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Act" model, focusing on continual improvement; pollution prevention; employee involvement; top management visibility and leadership; and the integration of environmental consideration in day-to-day operations and long-term decision-making processes.

Jack Staudt, a VHA environmental engineer and member of the GEMS Professional Advisory Group, says that this is a familiar approach for VAMC employees, since it is used by all health care facilities in maintaining compliance with Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations requirements. "We felt it best to create a cookbook approach to the system, one that employees could get their arms around."

To facilitate communication

among facility GEMS coordinators, Bob Matthes, VHA's national GEMS program manager, established an e-mail distribution group and holds monthly GEMS conference calls. Freddy Martinez, chief of materiel policy, training and operations staff with the Office of Acquisition and Materiel Management, and Barbara Matos, who manages that office's Environmental Affairs Program, use these calls to convey department-level policies and guidance.

The two have discussed hazardous waste and green purchasing issues during the calls. According to Martinez, "There are so many products where life cycle analysis shows that buying the cheapest item is likely to cost you the most with disposal. We talk about product com-

parisons, costs over product lifetime, recycling and disposal fee issues."

Matos is enthusiastic about the forum and credits the GEMS coordinators with blazing the trail for VA's environmental programs. "GEMS coordinators must be leaders as well as team players and think outside the box," she says. "They work top-down, bottom-up and sideways to ensure that all VA services, programs and activities consider their impact on the environment."

Training is another key element in a successful GEMS program, and resources are specifically outlined in the GEMS guidebook. Many facilities have used the GEMS brochure, *Nine Steps to a Successful Green Environmental Management System* (GEMS), and the GEMS awareness PowerPoint training presentation



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To be successful, GEMS coordinators “must be leaders as well as team players,” says Matos.

for the development of their local environmental efforts.

The VHA Employee Education System has produced and broadcast a number of training videos on the VA Knowledge Network, including the *GEMS Briefing for VAMC Top Management*, and *GEMS Implementation*, a course designed to train VA staff responsible for the deployment of the GEMS program using case studies and exercises.

For a complete list of GEMS-related Web sites, links and training materials, contact the Center for Engineering & Occupational Safety and Health at 314-543-6700, or go to their Web site at vawww.ceosh.med.va.gov.

GEMS progress is being measured in several ways. Matthes coordinates monthly GEMS Program Tracking Reports, and sends results to VHA senior managers for review

and action. In addition, VHA has developed an annual environmental survey administered by the VHA Healthcare Analysis and Information Group. The survey serves multiple purposes, including as a data source for the annual EO 13148 progress report.

Successful GEMS implementation depends on top to bottom ownership throughout a facility. Each employee must be aware that their actions have an impact on the environment. The GEMS programs at facilities are very local programs dealing with very local environmental concerns, requiring individualized priority and goal setting. Collective assessment and decision-making is the recognized route to success.

Edward Piñero, the White House Federal Environmental Executive, recognizes the role of senior

management in GEMS success. “Top level management commitment sets the tone for implementation and use of the environmental management system,” he said. “Success depends on the ability of senior management to communicate support for the goals of the EMS, and maintain the organization’s focus during the implementation process.”

The VHA GEMS Program has earned both VA’s top environmental award and accolades from the federal community. At a ceremony held in conjunction with the VACO celebration of Earth Day in April 2005, the GEMS Professional Advisory Group was recognized for their initiative and leadership efforts with a 2005 VA Environmental Excellence Award in the Environmental Management Systems category. **VA**

By Robert Turtil