



Spotlight ON EXCELLENCE

A Special Publication of the Office of Organizational Excellence

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Editor's Note

The Office of Organizational Excellence invites you to enjoy this Veteran-focused special edition of Spotlight on Excellence to learn more about your colleagues in Organizational Excellence, the Office of Research and Development and elsewhere in VHA who are both VA employees and Veterans themselves.

There's also an article on My Life, My Story, a VA Diffusion of Excellence Gold Status Practice that originated at the William S. Middleton Memorial Veterans Hospital in Madison, Wisconsin. In this

program, VA staff and trained volunteers conduct interviews with Veteran patients and write brief stories about their lives. The stories honor the voices and lived experiences of the Veterans who participate, and also support more effective patient-centered care.

The Office of Organizational Excellence thanks our colleagues for their service to our Nation and hopes that you enjoy reading what they do everyday for our Veterans. ♦

Veteran Highlight

During the summer of 2017, a new employee spotlight series began appearing in OE staff's inboxes — one that introduced them to their Veteran colleagues and reminded VA employees just how many of their colleagues are the very same Veterans that they work to serve every day.



Mike Abril

The series creator, Mike Abril, had this concept in mind when he recognized the need for such a publication. "I created the Veteran Highlight to provide us all with constant reminders about why we're here and who we're working for," Abril said — but his goal for the series is two-fold. "It is my hope," he continued, "that the series' focus on individual Veteran achievement also encourages

knowledge sharing and collaboration by helping staff stay informed about other working group activities."

After serving in the Marine Corps from 2004 to 2008, Abril struggled to navigate through VA's process to access health care benefits and receive education assistance using the Post-9/11 GI Bill program. It was an experience that ultimately pushed him to pursue employment with VA.

"Instead of complaining about what was going wrong with my separation from the military, I wanted to be part of the solution,"

– Mike Abril

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This same dedication to improving the VA was what led Abril to research how many OE staff members are Veterans. He soon learned that more than 70 staff members served. This discovery led him to create the Veteran Highlight series. Each newsletter shares an employee's time in military service and identifies their current VA office and position, so colleagues can get a better understanding of who they are and how they continue to serve Veterans. Throughout the series, Abril has interviewed Veterans from the U.S. Air Force, Air Force Reserves, Marine Corps and Navy, and his interviewees' service spans from 1983 through 2004.

Readers of the newsletter can learn about Trinia Smith, who, as an Air Force Reservist, was a mental health and medical technician. She uses the skills she cultivated in that role to aid her in her current position at VA's Center for Improving Coordination within OE's Office of Reporting, Analytics, Performance, Improvement and Deployment (RAPID). They can read about Capt. Cliff Anckaitis, who served with the Air Force from 1993 to 2001 as a business analyst and a resource management officer. They can follow the story of Jasmine Rush, who was an Aviation Boatswains Mate Handler with the U.S. Navy and served from 2000 to 2004. Her current role with the Compliance and Business Integrity Office helps ensure that her fellow Veterans receive their health care efficiently and effectively. When these Veterans were asked why they wanted to work at VA, all three had



Trinia Smith



Cliff Anckaitis



Jasmine Rush



Eric Taylor

the same answer: to serve their fellow Veterans. Each of them continues to have the heart to serve and support their fellow soldiers, whether they are retired or active duty.

There is one staff highlight that is unique: on September 14, 2017, Abril introduced his colleagues to Eric Taylor, a former Sergeant with the United States Marine Corps. Taylor assisted VA as an IT Specialist with the National Center for Patient Safety. Sadly, Taylor passed away unexpectedly on August 18, 2017. Throughout his service at VA, he continued to serve his fellow Veterans by helping enable National Center for Patient Safety to prevent inadvertent harm to Veterans while receiving care at VA facilities.

It is these interviews and the engagement with his fellow Veterans that remind Abril why he came to work at VA. As a Veteran himself, Abril says he has been directly impacted by the creation of the series. While developing the highlights, Abril listens to Veteran staff members speak about their time in service, the jobs they've held, and the locations to which they've traveled. He relates to the excitement and pride on their faces as they share what they've accomplished and how it connects to their current roles. "It's clear to me that everything they've done while serving has molded who they've become and brought them to where they are now," he says. "It is humbling to know Veterans like myself and the people who know us are proud and grateful for our service." ♦

Veteran Spotlight

Jacob B. Gadd

Acting Special Assistant to the Secretary for Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs), Veterans Health Administration/Veteran Service Organizations Liaison

Jacob Gadd knows a lot about service to his country. As a Navy Veteran who served as a hospital corpsman, he joined his grandfathers, father and uncle in a long-standing family tradition of military service and sacrifice. This lifelong exposure is what Gadd credits for inspiring him to not only serve, but also continue to give back to Veterans long after his military commitment ended.

After serving in the Navy, Gadd worked for The American Legion for eight years visiting VA health care facilities and made recommendations to Congress and VA senior leaders to improve health care benefits and services for Veterans. Today, Gadd serves as the Acting



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Special Assistant to the Secretary for Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs) and the VHA/VSO Liaison, shaping policy to enhance training, communication and outreach to Veterans. “I felt by joining the VA I could be an advocate in the system to drive improvement and change,” Gadd says.

Gadd’s VSO background has enabled him to appreciate Veterans issues and concerns from more than one perspective. In his Veterans Health Administration (VHA)/Veteran Service Organizations (VSO) Liaison role, Gadd’s focus is on improving strategy and communications among VSOs that play important roles in giving guidance to Veteran programs. He is fortunate to be able to work on critical issues impacting

caregivers, and addressing issues including prosthetics, patient advocacy, electronic health care records and suicide prevention. In 2017, Gadd supported activities to form a VSO Advisory Council to enhance VA’s collective effort to prevent Veteran suicide.

No workday is ever the same, according to Gadd. “One day I could be planning a Veteran executive director breakfast with the Under Secretary for Health, another day I am traveling to a VSO convention or conference or working on projects and initiatives that improve Veteran health care.” Gadd is currently working with the VA Office of Modernization and recently helped the team develop a modernization listening session plan to collect feedback from

Congress, State partners/VSOs and enrolled Veterans. Earlier this year, Gadd also worked with VSOs, VA/VHA leadership and the Office of Community Care to develop VA’s new Community Care program.

Each day, Gadd makes sure to keep the voice of the Veteran at the center of his work. He remains committed to improving VA’s programs and services based on their feedback and needs. “I am reminded every day that we must stay focused on continuous improvement and making our system better. Our Veterans depend on us for their care and treatment, and we want to make sure we make each day count.” ♦

My Life, My Story: Advancing the Veteran Experience

Veterans have compelling and deeply moving stories to tell — stories that may shed greater light on their overall health status. In addition to honoring their military service, these stories give voice to each Veteran’s unique life experience, often yielding clinical information that might otherwise go undetected. By helping Veterans connect their stories with their VA health care providers and inpatient and primary care teams, My Life My Story supports more effective patient-centered care.

The program is part of VA’s Diffusion of Excellence initiative, which discovers practices implemented locally at VA medical centers nationwide and determines the if they could be implement at other VA care locations. Among the practices identified are several cohorts of Gold Status Projects — the best of the best. My Life, My Story, was developed at the William S. Middleton Memorial Veterans Hospital in Madison, Wisconsin, and

is “one of a dozen Gold Status projects currently diffusing across VA and having an impact on Veterans’ care and experience,” said Dr. Ryan Vega, Diffusion of Excellence lead. “VA is fortunate to have incredibly innovative and compassionate staff who are deeply committed to our Nation’s Veterans. My Life, My Story is a perfect example of how we are continuing to advance the Veteran experience and solidify VA as the greatest health care system.”

The program began in Madison’s mental health service in 2013 with a grant written by Drs. Dean Krahn and Eileen Ahearn. Since then, the facility has completed 1,500 interviews and produced 1,000-word, first-person narratives for each one.

In this program, VA staff and trained VA volunteers conduct interviews with Veteran patients and write brief stories about the Veterans’ lives. “The interviews are open-ended,” says



My Life, My Story invites Veterans to share their stories, both service and civilian related with their VA care team to further the quality of their care and treatments.

Ringler. “We have topics to touch on, but no set list of questions. Veterans are free to talk about what they want. I always begin interviews by saying, ‘What do you want your care team to know about you as a person?’”

In addition to fostering a deeper relationship between a Veteran and his/her care team, sharing the stories can change a Veteran’s treatment plan. Hypothetically, a mental health provider caring for a Veteran with depression

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may link the patient's condition to his or her military service. By reading the Veteran's story, however, the clinician may learn that the patient was also the primary caregiver for his or her parents, and that both had recently passed away. This information can change the way the care team looks at the sources of the Veteran's depression and may ultimately change their treatment plan.

According to Thor Ringler, a writer/editor at the Madison VA and the Gold Status Fellow for the practice, 16 VA facilities are now using My Life, My Story.

"The program touches a lot of different people, both within and outside VA," he explains. "Its heart is making connections between people and using stories to do so."

My Life, My Story was started to help VA health care providers better understand their patients and provide them with insights and information

that might not otherwise manifest through single visits. If the Veteran chooses to participate in the program, their story becomes part of their medical record. Ringler soon learned that giving them copies of the finished product provided a way for Veterans to share their life stories with their friends and families.

In a recent Madison VA facility survey, the program drew an "overwhelmingly positive" response from VA providers as to whether reading these stories was a good use of clinical time and whether they would help improve clinical care. Some clinicians use the stories to establish rapport with their patients; others use them to help develop treatment plans.

Madison is actively diffusing the project throughout VHA. "Being selected as a Gold Status practice has been a big help in that," says Ringler. "We've received great support from

different offices within VA. Our goal is to spread 'My Life, My Story' to any VA facility that would like to have it, and to support them in getting it up and running. We offer three two-day workshops a year here in Madison."

In 2018, the project will be recommended for implementation nationwide by VA's Office of Veterans Experience.

Outside of the workshops, Ringler provides interested facilities with additional help. "We have training guides, videos and toolkits we make available. It's just a matter of finding a champion for the project."

"I believe stories are important," says Ringler, "and there's a need to make these stories available. As the program spreads, it tells Veterans and their families they matter to VA — and there's more to it than just their health." ♦

New Project Honors VA Researchers Who Are Also Veterans

For more than 90 years, VA's Office of Research and Development (ORD) has improved the lives of Veterans — and all Americans — through health care discovery and innovation. Many of the pioneers who placed VA research at the forefront of health care were Veterans themselves. Now, a new project recognizes VA employees who proudly hold not one, but two honorable titles: those of "VA researcher" and "American Veteran."

["VA Researchers Who Served"](#) is a new feature on the ORD website honoring those who once served our Nation in uniform and who continue to serve through their medical research. Here, readers can be inspired by the story of Dr. Rory Cooper of the VA Pittsburgh Health Care System), a spinal cord-injured Veteran whose pioneering work in wheelchair technology has greatly improved the function, mobility and lives of disabled Veterans. Or, they can read about Dr. Mary Jo Pugh, an investigator at the South Texas Veterans Health Care System, whose work includes studying the quality of care for adults with epilepsy, as well the simultaneous presence of chronic diseases among Veterans from Afghanistan and Iraq. Or, they can follow the continuing career of Dr. Michael Simberkoff of the VA New York Harbor Health Care System who, after retiring from VA after 46 years in 2016, still performs research and sees patients as a VA volunteer. A Navy Veteran, Dr. Simberkoff is one of America's leading experts on infectious disease.

"There are many great stories to be told about VA research, but there are also great stories to be told about the people doing this important work," says Mitch Mirkin, who manages the editorial team in VA's Office of Research Communications (ORC). "I think this series provides an effective framework for sharing these stories, and we hope it will foster a sense of connection to VA research on the part of Veterans.

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Dr. Rory Cooper is an electrical engineer and Director of the Human Engineering Research Laboratories, a collaboration of VA and the University of Pittsburgh.

Mike Richman, a writer/editor for ORD, came up with the idea. “I was trying to provide a human-interest touch to the way we highlight our researchers’ work,” he explains. “I wanted to tell more of their stories and help others understand more about the amazing work that they do.”

Before joining VA, Richman was a contributing writer for Investor’s Business Daily and wrote a column called “Leaders and Success.” He took elements that he used for that column and incorporated them into this project. “I want to tell readers what drives successful people and what motivates them. Hopefully, readers can learn from that and improve what they themselves are doing.”

“One of the questions we ask the researchers,” he says, “is how they relate to Veterans today, given that they also once served in the military. Is there something that drives them and their interactions with Veterans since they know the challenges Veterans face?”

Richman emailed the public affairs officers at all VHA facilities to find subjects for the project. His appeal was so successful that ORD now has a long list of names and future stories to tell. Richman continues to welcome researchers who are Veterans to contact him if they would like to be profiled.

“Human interest stories can be much more appealing to readers than complicated articles with difficult medical terms and concepts,” he says.

This latest generation of researchers join the ranks of previous investigators whose work has resulted in hundreds of awards, including three Nobel Prizes in Physiology or Medicine and seven Lasker-DeBakey Awards — an award partly named in honor of surgical pioneer Dr. Michael DeBakey, whose association with VA spanned nearly 60 years.

Among the giants of VA research who were also Veterans are Dr. DeBakey, Dr. Ludwik Gross, who discovered viruses that cause certain forms of leukemia and cancer, and Dr. Thomas E. Starzl, who performed the world’s first successful liver transplant. ♦



Dr. Mary Jo Pugh is a research health scientist at the South Texas Veterans Health Care System in San Antonio, Texas.



Dr. Michael Simberkoff is an infection diseases specialist at the VA New York Harbor Healthcare System.