

Veteran's Health Equity Podcast Transcript

Introducing VA's New Bystander Intervention Training

>> I want to welcome everyone and thank you all for joining. My name is Lauren Korshak, and I lead awareness and translation activities for the VA's Office of Health Equity. The Office of Health Equity was established in 2012. It championed the investment in health equity and the reduction of health disparities in veterans. My job means that I get to tell stories about the VA's work to help veterans and our data about veterans and their health. Today on the Health Equity and Veterans podcast series, we'll be discussing a new initiative, VA release, to help empower individuals with the tools and techniques they need to respond if they witness harassment or sexual assault at a VA facility. But before we begin, I really am looking forward to introducing our speakers. Mr. Harvey Johnson serves as the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Resolution Management and Diversity and Inclusion at the Department of Veterans Affairs.

He serves as the principal advisor to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs and Assistant Secretary for Human Resources and Administration Operation, Security, and Preparedness for the Veterans Affairs. He is responsible for formulating and implementing departmentwide policies and procedures to ensure the integrity, effectiveness, and impartiality of the complaint processing procedures within the Department.

Mr. Johnson is a seasoned executive leader in promoting race and gender equity, resolving conflict, building diverse and inclusive organizations, and driving large-scale organizational change, strategic planning, and business transformation. A native of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Mr. Johnson's career encompasses 33 years of service with the United States Army in the Infantry and Adjutant General Corps and as an executive within the Department of Defense and Veterans Affairs. Ms. Lelia Jackson is the Director of the Assault and Harassment Prevention Office in the Veterans Health Administration.

She has led several successful major VA transformation initiatives and sought to lead efforts to systematically improve the administration's harassment and sexual assault policies, processes, reporting, and post-prevention. Lelia was appointed to this critical role in October 2019 after completing a year-long fellowship in the prestigious White House Leadership Development Program.

She was among the first from the Department to be selected during the history of this program. Before her fellowship, Lelia served as the Center for Compassionate Care Innovation Director. She led VA's efforts to explore emerging treatments and therapies to enhance veterans' well-being. Under Lelia's enthusiastic leadership, a subset of the Veteran population now has access to cutting-edge medical treatments previously only available outside of the VA. Hailing from South Carolina, Lelia is an accomplished, results-driven professional recognized for productive performance, commitment to excellence, and exceptional team management in a critical, collaborative context. Lelia served 20 years in the United States Marine Corps and has been with the Department of Veterans Affairs since 2008. Okay, so you all are working on an important initiative the VA just released. Can you share what you're doing to support veterans?

>> Well, I'll begin and thank you, Lauren. I cannot tell you how excited Lelia and I are to be here today. VA has a tremendous mission, taking care of our nation's veterans. VA is committed to all VA staff, patients, their families, caregivers, survivors, visitors, and advocates ensuring they feel physically and psychologically safe, welcomed, and included. And I use the word included too. SINCE HIS FIRST DAY, the

VA secretary, Secretary Denis McDonough, has been clear that he will not accept discrimination, harassment, or assault at any level or facility within VA. But it's not just VA, am I right? This is a global shift that needs to occur, taking place in businesses and communities around our nation, around our world. All people are created equal, but what do you say to someone who may have strung negative beliefs about someone whose gender, race, or other defining categories are different from theirs? And for me, it begins with cultural humility, empathy, and love for all. And I start with the question, what if it were you? Should you expect to be physically and psychologically safe, welcomed, comfortable, and included? And the only answer is yes. Everyone should expect that. Everyone deserves it. My colleague Lelia and I have dedicated a tremendous amount of time and energy to this cause. We're delighted to share that with you today. Thank you.

>> Thank you, Harvey; that is so true. I mean, quite frankly, harassment and sexual assault just harm individuals. We are really focused on veterans and our visitors and employees in our facilities. Still, like you said, Harvey, anyone who experiences harassment or sexual assault could have a lifetime of dealing with that type of trauma or experience. And so, we really have made it our mission to stamp out any kind of bad behavior such as harassment or sexual assault in our facilities. We say this often, but we mean it; we want that type of behavior to stop at the door and not come into our facilities. We want every veteran, employee, or visitor who comes into our facilities to always expect to be treated with respect. Last year, we had 55 million inpatient visits in VA healthcare.

We have 9 million veterans enrolled in care. Having 55 million inpatient visits is a significant number, considering last year we were dealing with COVID. VA has the most extensive integrated healthcare system in the United States. It provides care at over 1400 healthcare facilities across the country. Most veterans would say in our reports from veterans through their surveys that they feel welcomed at VA. But we don't want not one person to not have that experience, and so we have made it our mission to make sure every person feels safe and welcomed in our facilities.

>> You know, Lelia talked about how big the VA is, and it is enormous. And part of that that we're working towards is a parody. So, no matter what facility you go to across our nation, we want that parody. So, to do that requires an enterprise effort on VA's part, so we have partnered with Congress to ensure that we have the resources we need. We are enjoying equal support from the White House through many executive orders, such as executive order 13985, ensuring that VA serves traditionally underserved communities and setting up a taskforce to address these things. We are partnering with the National Labor Unions. We recognize how important they are in this effort, and Lelia and I have briefed them. We're partnering with the Veteran Service Organizations, the VSO, and one that we really enjoyed is the National Association of Social Workers and White Ribbon USA. Lelia and I are incredibly proud to have partnered with White Ribbon USA, and I'll turn it over to her for more on that.

>> Harvey, I'm so happy that you brought up White Ribbon VA and our partnership with the National Association for Social Workers and White Ribbon USA. We have a national partnership with these two organizations because we have a shared goal of not tolerating harassment or sexual assault in our organization. In fact, we have joined together to form White Ribbon VA.

It's a national campaign where we say we personally commit to each person who takes the pledge to eliminate sexual harassment, sexual assault, and domestic violence in VA facilities and our surrounding communities. Really, it's an all-hands-on-deck movement, where every person, veteran, non-veteran, our community partners, our veteran service organizations, and all of the persons on this call can take

an active stance in helping us end harassment and sexual assault. Most recently, Secretary McDonough, our secretary, had a national call with all of his leaders across the country, plus he invited his veteran's service organization leaders, you know our partners, to get on a national call, a virtual call, where he talked about his stance and VA stance against harassment and sexual assault in our facilities. And then asked over 700 leaders on that call to join him in taking the White Ribbon VA Pledge. And it's a simple pledge; it just says that you know, you state your name, and then you say, I, Lelia Jackson, commit to never commit, excuse, or remain silent about sexual harassment, sexual assault, or domestic violence against others. It's that simple. We have about 12,000 people who have taken this White Ribbon VA Pledge.

We feel strongly about it, and we're asking folks to join us in just standing up to say something when you see something. Don't remain silent anymore, be that voice for a person who may have experienced harassment and doesn't know what to do or may feel helpless. Or just, you know, be the person who just does not commit harassment or be the person who just says, look, I'm going to do my part and make sure that my piece of the world is free of harassment and sexual assault. So, we are really excited about White Ribbon, VA. We last year, earlier this year, and then kicked it off last year. We've had even professional athletes and celebrities, veterans, folks like me, folks like Harvey. All of us are taking the pledge because we really feel firm that, you know, this is the thing that we can do. We can control ourselves, and if we see something, we can say something. If we know someone who is committing harassment or sexual assault, we can say something. Look, maybe none of us on this national podcast; we've never saved harassment. But because there's one in four women and maybe one in ten men who say in their lifetime they've experienced sexual imbalance, that means that perhaps we didn't commit it, but we know people in our circles who have experienced harassment and sexual assault, let's stamp it out.

>> You know, we wear our white ribbons with great pride. We take that commitment solemn. I understand, and you can hear the passion in Lelia's voice; it is a fantastic effort. For those of you that can listen to our voice and have not heard of it, please look it up, please get involved; it is a call to action. We're doing something else that the Department of Veterans Affairs, and trust me, there are many things we're doing, but these are just a few of the things that we can name. But one of them is the listening sessions. We recently concluded 55 listening sessions with veterans from varied backgrounds to hear their experiences with VA. We heard from veterans that are women, veterans that identify as LGBTQ+, and veterans that are disabled. We also had groups on race and religion, and we had a spot for DSO. All in all, there were 55 sessions consisting of those six groups. Core to VA strategy is a human-centered design and other experience insights to deeply understand the journeys of our diverse veteran populations, the bright spots and pain points, so that we at the Department may translate those insights into tangible tools and take the actions to fulfill the spirit and intent of serving our veterans. And one of the things I heard a lot is just really about the civil treatment of others. We know that some veterans came there, especially our female veterans, who have earned the right to be called veterans. So, they want to hear that the moment they walk in, not just from the VA staff but also from other veterans visiting the facility. We can do better in this area because, again, veterans we know are an eclectic group. They are male, female, disabled, those same groups I just went through. They are LGBTQ+, and they come from all walks. They are all ages. Because I think, you know, you look at the number of generations now that identify as veterans. Still, there is one thing in common, they've all earned that right to be called veterans.

We will continue to do journey mapping, listening success, White ribbons, etc. Thank you.

>> Thanks to you both for really setting the stage of how passionate VA is about making sure everyone feels safe at VA. One of the primary ways the VA addresses sexual assault and harassment is through this launch of bystander intervention training. Can you share more about this training?

>> Yeah, I can start. This is Lelia. Let me tell you, we are really excited about this Bystander Intervention training for veterans that we just launched. It's a web-based training, about 30, 35 minutes of exercise, interactive, that gives tools and techniques on responding if a person witnesses harassment or sexual assault. So first, I want to just say, sexual harassment is any unwelcome verbal or physical contact of a sexual nature. It can include, you know, offensive comments about a person's gender; it could consist of catcalls. And we are proud of the training, but we create this training because we've heard veterans and others talk about, you know I heard one specific veteran say, I wish that male veterans could understand how uncomfortable I feel when they make catcalls toward me. A catcall can be something like, you know, you're way too gorgeous to be a veteran, you know, women serve in the military. Things like that. You know, and when you serve like I have done in the military, you know, you just, you serve, and you're proud to serve. You put on your uniform. Many of us have gone to combat, and when we hear things like that, it diminishes how others perceive our service, and we don't feel like that's acceptable. And, of course, any type of sexual harassment and harassment is just not a place in VA. Really in our communities, but not in the VA. So, this training gives techniques like direct ways that you could respond. If you know the person, let's say that you're walking into a facility. You are with one of your friends. Perhaps your friends touch someone inappropriately, hopefully not, but do or say something inappropriate that might be sexual harassment or a sexual harassing comment. You could say, hey, knock it off, friend, knock it off, that's not appropriate; what are you doing? You can, you know, directly talk to someone you're comfortable with now; that's a technique for bystander intervention. Another example can be distracting, you know. Perhaps you see something happening, and you can just, you know, hey to the person whose being harassed, you could say, listen, can you give me directions to the commissary or the lab or something like that. Something that will distract the person. Or, very common, you could delegate it. You could tell the police, say to a management official, tell your provider, look, I see something happening there, I'm not sure what to do, I know that you could help, please help this person. And you know, you might say, oh, it's just harassment. Well, you know, we have heard that if a person experiences harassment, and if it happens to you, it could affect how you feel about getting your care at the facility. We believe that no one should experience harassment when they go into our facility. From listening to women veteran surveys, we understand that some women veterans have decided not to return to VA because they may have experienced harassment. We don't want that to happen. We don't want any veteran to experience harassment in our facilities. Still, even one person experiencing harassment is just one too many. We want everyone who walks into our facility to feel safe, so we believe that Bystander Intervention training will help empower any bystander who sees something that's not appropriate at our facilities to say something the proper way.

I'll also add this one other comment about our Bystander Intervention technique. You know you can use it in the VA. Still, you can also use it in your community. We have heard that one person learned these techniques, and I guess he was out to dinner at a local restaurant. He saw someone being harassed, and

he said something. But what he did was he used the Bystander Intervention techniques that he learned in training and used those techniques in that situation, in that restaurant. What do you say, Harvey?

>> You know, I'm sitting here smiling. I wish you could see me because I love when Lelia discusses this initiative. She mentioned the four D's. Harvey Johnson is a distracter, and I recently had a health appointment at a VA facility. I have completed the Bystander Intervention Training, so it was on my mind. And I found myself at that facility in the waiting room, looking around and I was prepared. If I saw inappropriate behavior or destructive or disruptive behavior, I was ready to distract and fix that situation. And that's really the call to action that we're asking everybody to do. I am a veteran. I was ready to act and not further escalate it to become disruptive. So, you know, when I think about the bottom-line, you know, to enable VA to sustain respect and collaborate amongst our multicultural workforce, our multicultural veteran population, I stand before you with my colleague Ms. Lelia Jackson to embrace the business case for something that we call, IDEA. Which is an acronym for Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Access. The philosopher Victor Hugo once said, nothing else in the world is so powerful as an idea whose time has come. And I can appreciate the power of that statement as VA is at this inflection point which provides a remarkable opportunity for the Department to examine and improve our culture and reimagine who we want to be, which is the best place to work, the best place, an industry leader for providing world-class healthcare, benefits, and services, to the veterans who have earned that right. Thank you.

>> Oh wow, this is very powerful to listen to. And I know that intervening can sometimes be intimidating for people, so it sounds like this training gives people information and techniques that are practical and ensures that people don't feel like they must get in the middle or escalate things. Is that right?

>> That's exactly right. In fact, we did a qualitative walking tour of our facilities. One person said, hey, I wouldn't know what to do if I saw something happening, so I chose not to do anything. And one of the things about this Bystander Intervention Training is that there are options that don't require you to directly engage with the offender. You can go tell somebody you're comfortable with, like the provider or the police or a leader at the facility. You can even just document it. If you see somebody doing something, you can write down what you're seeing and hand the note to the person later, you know, or hand a note to someone in charge. But you know, you're writing it down. I saw this happening in the cafeteria, and I want to hand this over to someone, so someone can do something about it. That's what's lovely about Bystander Intervention Training. It just gives you the tools. And you can pick which tool works best for you. Harvey talked about the distract tool. You know, I like the document tool because sometimes I'm not in the mood to talk so I might just write something down, maybe hand it to the person who offended, you know, who's the experiencer so that person can choose to do what they want to do with that information. But I refuse not to do it. I must do something. I can't just watch a person being harassed and not do something. And as a veteran, I'm used to, you know, my peers telling me, hey, Lelia, what do you think about this? Or, hey, how can I do this better? And veterans help each other, and I'm hoping that you know, peer to peer actions like that will help us stand up to stop the harassment.

>> You know, that's what this training is deployed. One of the things, and Lelia hit the nail on the head. I've had so many veterans come up to me and say that something happened a while back, and I wished I would have done something. And these folks aren't shy, but they were caught off guard, and I think

that's what happens a lot of time is it catches people off guard. But, like I said, I was very conscious of it when I visited. It was in my mind that I had taken the training. And I think many of our veterans will be better served after they have taken this training. Thank you.

>> You know what's great about this training, Harvey, Lauren, listeners. You can access the training on your cell phone, smartphone, tablet, or PC. It's so easy to access. It's interactive, and it's web-based, it's free, and it's easy to get to. You'll reach out if you just type in, [veterantraining.va.gov/bystander training](http://veterantraining.va.gov/bystandertraining). You all covered so much information about what VA is doing to ensure veterans feel safe and information about this training. But Harvey and Lelia, you're both veterans, so as we close, I want to ask you all those other veterans can do as a part of this effort?

>> What a great question. And I would say that in a time where we seem to have, you know, extreme polarization, acts of violence, and intense hatred, we must shift and practice radical forgiveness. It also starts with a dream, and I'm reminded of, you know, Dr. King in his famous dream. I have a dream, and that is I see a VA where 100% of our people are physically and psychologically safe. I see a diverse, inclusive VA that fairly represents those we serve in our communities. I see a VA where not only doctors, but all of us, find our purpose in helping to heal our veterans. I see a VA where we're asking, what about cultural health? As much as we're taking physical temperatures. I see a VA where millennials and Gen Zers choose us because there's no other rational choice. I see a VA where employees are free to innovate, not trapped by dogma. I see a VA with less structure or hierarchy rules, more openness, inclusions, principles, and acceptance. I see a scientific VA, an intelligent VA, a microcosm of our nation holding hands. I see a VA evolving, transforming, progressing into alignments, ability, and conscious equity. I see our awakening, reimagining, reemerging from a slumber into our role in a new civil rights era, always walking in kindness. We've got this. So, my call to action is that is my dream, and I know Lelia has goals. I know many people who can hear our voice today have plans. That call to action because these veterans have earned the right to be safe and included and welcomed at their VA. Thank you.

>> And so, as we close, Lelia, you have the link. I'm sure we can, our listeners can probably search for it, but you have the web address. Could you share that if anybody wants to directly hop on and take that training when they're done listening?

>> Yes, I hope that happens, Lauren. It's [www.veterantraining](http://www.veterantraining.va.gov/bystandertraining) which is [www.veterantraining.va.gov/bystander training](http://www.veterantraining.va.gov/bystandertraining). So, if you type in your Google, you know, veteran's bystander intervention training or bystander training and veterans, you'll find it. And I believe you're going to have a link associated with the podcast, right Lauren?

>> Yep, absolutely, absolutely. I want to thank Lelia and Harvey for joining me to talk about such a significant effort the VA is working on.