

# COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT QUARTERLY



The Quarterly Newsletter of the Office of Community Engagement & Center for Compassionate Care Innovation

Volume 02 Issue 05 |  
Winter 2018/2019  
Special Edition

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## ABOUT US

### VHA Office of Community Engagement

The mission of the Office of Community Engagement (OCE) is to serve as a trusted resource and a catalyst for the growth of effective partnerships at the national, state, and community levels. OCE also is a facilitator/access point for public and private entities interested in partnering with the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) to benefit Veterans and their families, caregivers, and survivors.

### Center for Compassionate Care Innovation

The mission of the Center for Compassionate Care Innovation (CCI) is to explore emerging therapies that are safe and ethical to enhance Veterans' physical and mental well-being when other treatments have not been successful. CCI primarily focuses on treatments that address posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), chronic pain, and suicidality.

## OCE FEATURE STORY

### OPERATION: HERO-ANIMAL BOND EVENT ENCOURAGES VETERANS TO KEEP PETS FOR THEIR OWN HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

On November 14, 2018, an Operation: Hero-Animal Bond event was a first initiative to meet the operation's mission: to inform Veterans about the benefits of petkeeping and volunteering with animals, which promotes health and well-being through the human-animal bond. Through a partnership between the VHA and the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), Operation: Hero-Animal Bond fosters relationships between Veterans in need of companionship and animals in need of good homes.

OCE collaborated with HSUS to host the event during Veterans Month at the Perry Point Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Medical Center, part of the VA Maryland Health Care System (VAMHCS). About 100 people participated in the event, including Veterans and their pets and representatives from VHA, local shelters and rescues, and community-based businesses. On that day, petkeeping was the focus.

Representatives of Cecil County Animal Services, Maryland Animal Sanctuary & Rescue, Canine Humane Network, Pets for Vets, and two PetSmart stores provided information on petkeeping. They encouraged Veterans to consider adopting or fostering a pet as well as volunteering with local animal shelters and humane societies.



The Operation: Hero-Animal Bond event emphasized that Veterans can reap important health benefits from the companionship of animals. Research shows that spending time with animals can reduce blood pressure, heart rate, stress hormones, and feelings of isolation. And volunteering at animal rescue and shelter sites can improve Veterans' well-being by encouraging community interaction and social integration.

Jill Murray of OCE said the event was a great success, mentioning two Veterans who received direct assistance onsite. One Veteran brought a dog he had adopted two days before, which had not yet received vaccinations. Cecil County Animal Services was able to meet with the Veteran on-site to arrange for the needs of his new pet. Another Veteran, who sought to arrange for required community service, was able to make an immediate connection with a local shelter where she will volunteer her time.

“That’s exactly what this partnership is about: to improve Veterans’ health and well-being by making petkeeping and volunteering less confusing and more accessible for Veterans,” Ms. Murray said.

Dr. Heidi Ortmeyer, a VAMHCS research physiologist and investigator with the Geriatric Research and Education Clinical Center, said that the Veterans she spoke with that day were enthusiastic and interested in learning more about companion dog and cat programs in the community. “Our programs serve as a win-win for our communities — providing companionship for our Veterans seeking a furry friend and saving the lives of companion animals!” she said.

VAMHCS, HSUS, OCE, and local community shelters and rescues are expanding the Baltimore-based Operation: Hero-Animal Bond program throughout Maryland. Additionally, five VA medical centers across the country are in various stages of participating in the pilot partnership project.

VHA announced the Operation: Hero-Animal Bond partnership in December 2017 and will continue to work with the HSUS to create mutually beneficial relationships between Veterans and animals. VHA and HSUS are also developing an adoption tool kit and rollout plan for the Operation: Hero-Animal Bond program.

### LEARN MORE

For more information, please visit [va.gov/healthpartnerships](http://va.gov/healthpartnerships).

## FIRST VHA EXPERT FIELD INTERMEDIATE CARE TECHNICIAN OF THE YEAR AWARD GOES TO HURRICANE RESPONDER

Henry Velazquez, an intermediate care technician (ICT) and former Army medic, was one of the first to volunteer when Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico in 2017. Using his medical evacuation (known as medevac) experience transporting wounded military personnel, he worked countless hours caring for people injured in the storm. A casualty care unit leader for the VHA Caribbean Healthcare System (VACHS), Mr. Velazquez is the first recipient of the VHA Under Secretary for Health's Expert Field Intermediate Care Technician of the Year Award.

VHA Chief of Staff Lawrence Connell presented the award in a virtual ceremony on November 15, 2018, attended by Mr. Velazquez's family members, friends, VACHS leaders, and fellow VHA staff. Mr. Connell spoke about Mr. Velazquez's dedication, commitment, and skills, noting that these qualities set him apart even among the outstanding competition for the first annual award. Mr. Connell also highlighted Mr. Velazquez's contributions to VACHS and the survivors of Hurricane Maria.

"Let me congratulate you on this achievement," said John Wagner, VA principal deputy assistant secretary, Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs. At the ceremony, Mr. Wagner presented Mr. Velazquez with the VA Secretary's Challenge Coin, a token awarded to people for their hard work and excellence. "There was keen competition. I know you are not surprised by that, since the best brightest former medics and corpsmen are filling the VA intermediate care technician role," Mr. Wagner said.



The submission letter nominating Mr. Velazquez detailed his exceptional attributes: He exemplifies the success of the ICT program. He is highly respected by his co-workers and patients and recognized as an excellent ICT mentor in San Juan, Puerto Rico. His military experience with difficult and unusual clinical scenarios has proven invaluable to VACHS.

In times of emergency, VACHS is designated to receive victims evacuated from the U.S. Virgin Islands. During the acute period of Hurricane Maria, Mr. Velazquez led other ICTs as they worked extended shifts and overtime hours to support the emergency department. For close to two weeks following the hurricane, he worked long hours coordinating and leading the Patient Reception Team, which includes ICTs and other team members who may not have medevac experience.

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In this role, Mr. Velazquez oversaw the reception and transfer of more than 90 people to local hospitals within the San Juan metropolitan area. In the aftermath of the hurricane, he continues to play a leadership role within the department and is constantly looking for ways to contribute to the care of Veterans.

Across the VHA health care system, thousands of Veterans benefit every day from the ICT program. ICT employees, who are military-trained medics and corpsmen serving as clinicians, deliver health care services to their Veteran comrades at 25 VHA medical facilities across the country. ICTs often work in emergency departments and can be found in multiple clinical settings where their special skills and training are beneficial. These clinical areas include mental health, geriatrics, primary care, and surgical services.

The ICT program is a part of VA's Transitioning Military Personnel initiative. The initiative serves as a pipeline for well-trained clinical staff who can be hired as VA medical professionals; it also creates a civilian career path for former medics and corpsmen to apply skills honed in the military to care for other Veterans.

The recognition and virtual award ceremony for the Expert Field Intermediate Care Technician of the Year is one of the many Veterans Month events coordinated this year by OCE.

#### LEARN MORE

- On the VA ICT Program, visit <https://www.vacareers.va.gov/Careers/IntermediateCare>
- On other OCE partnerships and programs, visit <https://www.va.gov/healthpartnerships/>

## DURING VETERANS MONTH, VA CELEBRATED A COMMITMENT TO LEGAL SERVICES FOR VETERANS

Before he worked with a pro bono attorney – one who does not charge clients for legal services – to address his medical and legal needs, Veteran Patrick Taylor was in a tough spot. He faced food insecurity as he prepared to undergo extensive surgery.

Everything changed for the better when he was connected with an attorney, Antoinette, through a Medical Legal Partnership (MLP) at Mr. Taylor's VA facility. He's just one of the many Veterans who have benefitted from an MLP.

MLPs are formal partnerships between attorneys and VA medical facilities. Through these partnerships, lawyers can train VA health care teams to screen Veterans for unmet legal needs. Then, the medical teams refer Veterans to on-site legal clinics, where attorneys provide pro bono services on a variety of legal issues. Services available to Veterans through MLPs include counseling on Veterans benefits and Social Security, family law, guardianship, landlord-tenant disputes, and elder law.

These services available on-site at VA facilities have been particularly helpful to Veterans at risk of or experiencing homelessness. Since VA's MLP Task Force formed in early 2016, the number of MLPs at VA facilities has grown from five to 27.

VA's MLPs were the focus of an event at VA Central Office in Washington, D.C., on November 5, 2018. The day was a celebration of VA's expanding array of MLPs and a recognition ceremony of the attorneys who have served at the Washington DC VA Medical Center's legal clinic.

The VA Office of General Counsel (OGC) and OCE co-sponsored the event, during which representatives from VA, the Navy, and the departments of Defense, Homeland Security, Justice, and Labor, among other agencies, signed a joint statement in support of improving Veterans' access to free legal services.



*Acting Deputy Secretary, Jim Byrne delivering remarks at the VA Medical Legal Partnerships Celebration and Recognition Ceremony on November 5, 2018.*

The statement read, in part: "Recognizing the contributions that personnel of our agencies can make to address Veteran homelessness, we come together to note our joint commitment to encourage and further the provision of volunteer legal services to Veterans." Veterans, many of them experiencing homelessness, ranked affordable legal assistance high on their list of unmet needs in a 2016 VA survey. On November 13, 2017, VA — along with the American Bar Association, the Veterans Consortium, and the National Law

School Veterans Clinic Consortium — signed another agreement aimed at improving Veterans' access to free legal services.

Lara K. Eilhardt of OGC, who leads the VA MLP Taskforce, explained after the ceremony how legal issues directly affect Veterans' health. For example, a Veteran experiencing stress because of a child custody dispute cannot fully focus on recovering from a health issue.

"Many do not realize that having a driver's license revoked is a significant legal issue Veterans face that affects their health," Ms. Eilhardt said. "If their license is revoked, they can't get to a job, they can't get to medical appointments."

At the November 5 ceremony, Deputy General Counsel for Veterans Programs Richard J. Hipolit presented certificates of appreciation to 12 government attorneys who have provided pro bono services at the Washington DC VA Medical Center. Eighteen other local attorneys will receive certificates of recognition.

Nombeko Payne of OCE, who helped organize the event, spoke about VA's goal of making Veterans aware of MLPs.

"Once the awareness is out there, many people are able to go and take those steps forward in getting help," Ms. Payne said.

#### LEARN MORE

For more information on free legal clinics in VA facilities, visit [va.gov/ogc/docs/LegalServices.pdf](https://www.va.gov/ogc/docs/LegalServices.pdf).

*"Recognizing the contributions that personnel of our agencies can make to address Veteran homelessness, we come together to note our joint commitment to encourage and further the provision of volunteer legal services to Veterans."*

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