



QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER
VOLUME 4 ISSUE 2
MAY 2020

Special Edition Newsletter

VHA's Office of Community Engagement and the
Center for Compassionate Care Innovation

**In challenging times, VHA
partnerships and innovations offer**

Good News for Veterans

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VA



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Veterans Health Administration





A Note From the Chief Officer:

Welcome to May! The staff of the Veterans Health Administration (VHA)'s Office of Community Engagement (OCE) and Center for Compassionate Care Innovation (CCI) sincerely hopes you are staying safe and healthy, especially during a season in which so many aspects of daily life have been upended by the coronavirus disease pandemic. VHA and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) as a whole have been working tirelessly to make resources available to Veterans and coordinate emergency responses over these past months. See more about VA's department-wide response on **page 7**. OCE and CCI continue to work with partners within VA and in other industries to offer programs, resources, and support for Veterans, their families, caregivers, survivors, and the VA employees diligently working to support them. We remain focused on the mission to care for and honor America's Veterans during this public health challenge.

In that spirit, we are offering in this edition of the OCE and CCI quarterly newsletter some good news about how various VHA partners have been stepping up to help in light of COVID-19. VHA partner American College of Emergency Physicians (ACEP), for example, is fighting on the front lines of the pandemic, and emergency health care providers are working around the clock to help patients, including Veterans. Another partner, Y-USA, is giving Veterans the opportunity to stay active from inside their homes through free online fitness classes. See **pages 3 and 4** for those stories. We are proud to spread the word about how these and other partners are ensuring Veterans get the care they need no matter how challenging these times are.

We are providing an update on **page 5** on OCE's annual Community Partnership Challenge, which will continue this year on an adjusted timeline. It is so important to uplift the stories of how employees throughout VHA are working all year long on partnerships that benefit Veterans, and this year is no different. Also, we are rolling out in this newsletter an ongoing series highlighting the faces behind our work—we hope you will enjoy learning more about two of OCE and CCI's staff members and the compelling stories behind the work they do. It is important to keep in mind the individuals behind the efforts in times like these—we really are all in this together. OCE and CCI look forward to continuing to work on behalf of Veterans and their health, well-being, and safety—this is the driving mission behind everything we do.

In good health,

Dr. Tracy L. Weistreich

*Chief Officer, Office of Community Engagement and
the Center for Compassionate Care Innovation*

American College of Emergency Physicians, a VHA partner directly fighting the COVID-19 pandemic, makes information and resources available to the public

A VHA partner is on the front lines of the battle against the COVID-19 pandemic. The American College of Emergency Physicians (ACEP), which partnered with VHA in 2018, advances emergency care on behalf of millions of patients as well as its 40,000 emergency physician members, many of whom are risking their lives daily to provide care to patients affected by COVID-19.

ACEP, a nonprofit corporation, has a mission to offer quality emergency medicine and emergency care to everyone, including Veterans. VHA and ACEP **identified several goals for their partnership**: to educate non-VHA community emergency department providers on Veterans' benefits and VHA resources; to provide non-VHA medical professionals with education around Veteran-specific care; and to place additional qualified emergency medicine professionals in VHA. ACEP **recently issued** critical guidance to the public about how to combat the spread of COVID-19: "Stay home, save lives." This VHA partner has issued many resources to keep Veterans and the public informed during this pandemic, such as: "Stop the Spread: A Patient Guide to the Novel Coronavirus" (COVID-19); tips on minimizing the risk of contracting the virus; and guidance on how to determine whether a person should visit an emergency department. Many other resources and reports from ACEP can be found [here](#).

Since the partners came together in support of Veteran patients, more resources are available in emergency departments, VHA has been able to implement technologies made available by ACEP, and Veterans' access to VHA's tele-urgent care

program has expanded. This partnership is managed by VHA's Office of Specialty Care Services and facilitated by OCE. OCE supports many partnerships throughout VHA that directly support Veterans' access to quality health care.

"We could not be more grateful for and humbled by the service of ACEP's emergency professionals who have been working with VHA on behalf of Veterans for many months," said OCE's Chief Officer Dr. Tracy L. Weistreich. "This VHA partner is doing the critical work of not only caring directly for affected patients but providing information to the public that can offer some clarity in this potentially overwhelming moment."

OCE supports this partnership and many others throughout VHA. Many VHA offices utilize OCE's partnership expertise to create and strengthen collaborations with nongovernmental organizations. For more information about OCE's work, please visit va.gov/healthpartnerships/index.asp.



Y-USA, a VHA partner, is keeping Veterans moving even if they're staying indoors at home

A VHA partner, Y-USA (the national entity that oversees YMCA facilities across the country) is helping Veterans stay active, even at home, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since 2015, this partnership has seen VHA employees throughout the country work with local YMCAs to connect Veterans to needed resources in their communities, as well as services and benefits in the areas of healthy lifestyle programming and community reintegration. Local YMCA facilities throughout the country typically offer opportunities for exercise and physical movement.

Y-USA, also known as “The Y,” is offering free, online, on-demand fitness videos through its “**YMCA 360**” platform. In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal government **has issued the guidance** for many Americans to stay at home and avoid gathering in groups, which means in-person fitness classes are not a possibility.

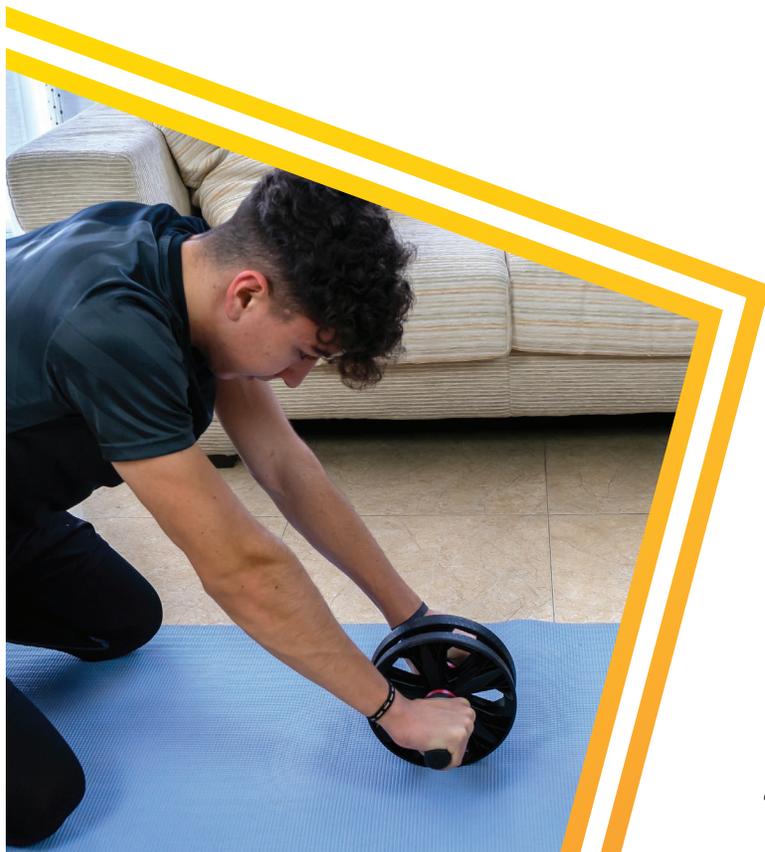
Through the YMCA 360 platform, however, any Veteran can access dozens of videos—for activities such as yoga, barre, and those for active older adults—from the safety and comfort of home, even when social distancing.

The benefits to Veterans’ health of physical activity, even in the home, are well-documented: “Sport and physical activity enhance subjective well-being in Veterans through active coping and doing things again, PTSD [posttraumatic stress disorder] symptom reduction, positive affective experience ... and quality of life,” according to The Institute for Veterans and Military Families.

OCE, which supports this and many other partnerships throughout VHA, works to inform Veterans and the public about the social determinants of health (SDOH), which are conditions in the environment where Veterans live; positive SDOH are directly connected to better health outcomes for Veterans. The availability of community-based resources, as well as recreational and leisure-time activities, are positive SDOH that are supported by this Y-USA online resource.

“When Veterans have access to opportunities for physical engagement, they feel better in both body and mind,” said Dr. Tracy L. Weistreich, chief officer of OCE. “These online classes allow for movement but also a connection to the kind of physical routine Veterans may have had before this pandemic hit. We want Veterans to continue to have access to the resources they’re used to.”

OCE supports this partnership and many others throughout VHA. Many VHA offices utilize OCE’s partnership expertise to create and strengthen collaborations with nongovernmental organizations. For more information about OCE’s work, please visit: va.gov/healthpartnerships/index.asp.



A note from OCE and CCI's Chief Officer Dr. Tracy L. Weistreich, on COVID-19 and the 2020 VHA Community Partnership Challenge

To Veterans, VA and VHA staff, and the public,

I wanted to make you aware of the status of what OCE considers its signature annual event: The Community Partnership Challenge. This contest is one of the ways OCE stays true to its mission to support the creation and growth of non-monetary partnerships that help Veterans. Each year, VHA employees submit for consideration the partnerships they're executing on behalf of Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors. Every year the Challenge has a theme: this year's is the social determinants of health, which are conditions in the environments where Veterans live.

Positive social determinants of health, such as access to education, employment, food security, housing, spiritual support, and transportation, make life—and health—better for Veterans. Partnerships are an important component of VHA care that can address needs across all social determinants of health, which many Veterans need support with more critically now than ever during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since the three winners of the Challenge each year are highly publicized and receive the VHA Community Partnership Award, this contest helps provide inspiration to other VHA employees to create their own partnerships to help Veterans and allows colleagues to share best practices and ideas with one another. Through the local media attention the winning partnerships receive, the public is also made aware of the great work being done throughout VHA each year.

For these reasons, our Challenge this year will move ahead—the announcement of the winners of the 2020 VHA Community Partnership Challenge will take place later this summer, and the awards ceremony date will be announced at some point later this year in accordance with **all public safety regulations around COVID-19**. VHA remains focused on the mission to care for and honor America's Veterans and is committed to providing quality health care and Veteran support, in addition to emergency response, during this public health challenge. Our team knows we will all be even more grateful to come together in celebration after we weather the current storm together.

For the time being, please read OCE's article series on how other VA and VHA offices and initiatives support Veteran's needs in terms of the social determinants of health [here](#) and [here](#).

If you have any questions, please reach out to: communityengagement@va.gov.

More information can also be found on our public website: va.gov/HEALTHPARTNERSHIPS/updates.asp.

In good health,

Dr. Tracy L. Weistreich,
*Chief Officer, Office of Community Engagement and
the Center for Compassionate Care Innovation*



Veteran with TBI says LED treatment has significantly improved his sleep, activity levels, and well-being

Michael Sellars, a former U.S. Army field artillery officer, experienced multiple traumatic brain injury (TBI) events during his 32 years of military service. By 2018, he says his chronic TBI symptoms had grown so intrusive that he was sleeping only one or two hours at a time. He also was dissatisfied with how the standard medication for his symptoms made him feel.

“You do the best you can to live with it the best you can,” Mr. Sellars says of his experience dealing with symptoms of TBI, including headaches and difficulty sleeping, which gradually worsened over time. He personally felt that the medications he was taking weren’t the best choice for him among the **variety of treatment options available at VA**. He wanted to explore other ways to treat his TBI symptoms.

Since he started a home-based course of treatment using light-emitting diode (LED) therapy equipment in 2018, Mr. Sellars has experienced a noticeable improvement in his overall well-being. “I sleep so much better. I’m much more likely to be active and engaged in doing things. In general, I feel better. It really has made a significant change to me, personally,” he says.

The treatment that Mr. Sellars is receiving is part of a collaborative, three-year clinical demonstration project that is led by the VA Boston Healthcare System (VABHCS) LED TBI clinic and supported by CCI.

The LED treatment can be done at home, which is in line with the **latest recommendations** from VA and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

in response to COVID-19 concerns. Recently, all LED treatment sessions for Veterans have been conducted as telehealth appointments, in accordance with social distancing recommendations in light of COVID-19.

CCI’s mission 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. TBI is one of CCI’s focus areas, along with suicide prevention, posttraumatic stress disorder, and chronic pain.

After being referred to and evaluated by VA Boston’s clinicians, Mr. Sellers started wearing an LED headset for 25 minutes, three times a week, in the privacy and convenience of his home. The headset is affixed with LEDs, which do not generate heat. The process is painless and noninvasive, and the equipment is portable so that Veterans can still access the treatment if they travel.



Research on LED therapy to date suggests that the treatment may help with symptoms associated with TBI — such as impaired mood, memory, or attention — and that it promotes healing at the cellular level, due in part to the specialized light’s ability to increase blood flow. More than 120 Veterans have benefited so far from VABHCS’s LED therapy offering, which is not part of the clinical research program. Many of the Veterans treated in

this clinical demonstration project have reported improvements in health factors that have persisted for years, such as sleep and mood issues.

One year after he started the treatment program, Mr. Sellars continues to use the LED equipment, which he calls “extremely relaxing,” three times a week. He talks once per month by phone with his VA health care provider, who ensures that he is using the device properly, records his treatment activity, and determines if he needs any follow-ups with other providers.

Mr. Sellars says he highly recommends that other Veterans give the technology a chance. He also advises that Veterans follow the prescriber’s

instructions, including using the device in quiet conditions. “You can’t sit in a room with several people or have the TV on,” he says.

When asked about his overall experience with the LED treatment, Mr. Sellars says: “I’m solidly behind it. I hope it can be expanded because I think a lot of Veterans can benefit from it.”

For the latest information on this and other innovative treatments, please visit: va.gov/HEALTHPARTNERSHIPS/CCIMission.asp.

In case you missed it: VA’s response to COVID-19:

What is VA doing?

VA has implemented an aggressive public health response to protect and care for Veterans, their families, health care providers, and staff in the face of this emerging health risk. We are working directly with the CDC and other federal partners to monitor the outbreak of the virus. On March 27, VA shared its COVID-19 response plan. This best-practice guide is a valuable tool, which may be useful nationwide for the medical community.

- [Read the VHA COVID-19 response plan](#)
- [Read the VHA COVID-19 response plan press release](#)

VA is administering COVID-19 tests nationwide and taking aggressive steps to prevent COVID-19 transmission. These measures include outreach to Veterans and staff, [clinical screening at VA health care facilities](#), and [protective procedures](#)

for patients admitted to community living centers and spinal cord injury units. For more on what VA is doing in response to COVID-19, please visit: va.gov/coronavirus-veteran-frequently-asked-questions/.





Meet an OCE/CCI staff member

In each of the next few editions of our quarterly newsletter, we are introducing you to the people behind OCE/CCI's work.

» Georgeanna ("Georgi") Bady

*Health Systems Specialist,
VHA Office of Community Engagement*

Ms. Bady has 13 years of federal service with VA, and more than 30 years of experience in her field, health care administration. As a member of OCE, her primary responsibilities focus on the establishment of public-private partnerships. She is skilled in the areas of benefits administration, practice management, compliance, ethics, policy analytics, internal control management, and audit. She received her degree from DeVry University and is currently pursuing a graduate degree in business administration.

What is the most rewarding thing about the work you do, and why?

There are many rewarding things about the work I do, but the most important is to me is to be able work on projects that I know impact and improve the quality of life for Veterans and their families, caregivers, and survivors. Knowing that these individuals are able to receive services through partnerships that VA is sometimes unable to provide gives me a sense of purpose that is unimaginable.

What motivates you during challenges in the course of your work?

I am the daughter of a World War II Veteran, the wife of a Vietnam-era Veteran, and the mother of an Operation Enduring Freedom Veteran. I have experienced their sacrifices and their wounds. Seeing how the Department helped them motivates me to get up every day. I want to contribute to our organization to make it better for the Veterans we serve today.

What partnership within OCE or innovation within CCI holds special meaning for you, and why?

My husband and my son, both Veterans, were both diagnosed with cancer. My husband is a cancer survivor. My son did not survive his illness. The very first partnership I oversaw as a member of OCE was a partnership with GO2 Foundation for Lung Cancer. Knowing the importance of screening for cancer is not academic to me—it's personal. I promised my son that I would do all I could to make life better for the next Veteran.

What is the best part about working with your team?

The best part of working with this team is that there is a sense of being part of a family. We care for one another. Since joining OCE, I have felt that I belonged and that it was a natural fit. We can laugh, cry, and press on together. We don't focus on ourselves as individuals, we focus on the work we do.