



QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER
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SPECIAL EDITION

VHA National Center for Healthcare
Advancement and Partnerships

In recognition of spring observances:
**National Kidney Month, Month of
the Military Caregiver, National
Professional Social Work Month and
Parkinson's Awareness Month**

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VA



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Veterans Health Administration



A Note From the Nurse Executive



With great appreciation to all Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and Veterans Health Administration's (VHA) scientists, researchers, clinicians, and support teams, we look ahead to spring knowing we are well on the way to protecting our Veterans, families, caregivers, survivors, employees, and communities at large from coronavirus. COVID-19 vaccinations are being administered across the country, with VHA leading the nation in terms of total vaccines administered to its populations, equality of vaccinations in terms of ethnicity, and daily communication from our Acting Under Secretary for Health, VHA Chief of Staff, the Assistant Under Secretary for Health for Operations, and the "COVID in 20" podcasts.

Spring has also ushered in a new era for the Office of Community Engagement (OCE) and Center for Compassionate Care Innovation (CCI). We've officially changed our name to the **VHA National Center for Healthcare Advancement and Partnerships** (HAP), reflecting the dual mission of our office, which is to foster partnerships and health innovations for Veterans. HAP is aligned under the VHA Office of Discovery, Education and Affiliate Networks (DEAN) as part of VHA's modernization efforts.

In this spring edition of our newsletter, we call attention to observances related to our partnership work. For instance, March is National Kidney Month. Learn more about one Veteran's advocacy efforts through American Kidney Fund on **page 3**. Parkinson's Awareness Month takes place in April, so please see **page 6** for a story about a Veteran who is diagnosed with Parkinson's disease and shares her experiences with others through the Parkinson's Foundation. Finally, in May, we observe Month of the Military Caregiver. Many of our partners have developed special resources for those of you who are doing this important work. Learn more about what our partners have to offer on **page 5**.

At HAP, we also focus on assisting with partnership development beyond our office. One of our team members is working on a plan to expand Veteran Community Partnerships to every VA medical center in the nation. Find that story on **page 9**.

We've also been involved with the President's Roadmap to Empower Veterans to End a National Tragedy of Suicide (PREVENTS). Learn more on **page 12** about where the program stands and how partnerships can address Veteran suicide through education and training. In addition, studies show that suicide risk is higher in people who are diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). On that front, HAP is continuing its work with VA clinicians to offer an adjunctive treatment for PTSD. See **page 8** for an update.

Although our name has changed to more accurately reflect our mission, we remain passionately committed to improving Veterans' lives by serving as a trusted resource and a catalyst for the growth of effective partnerships at the national, state, and community level and advancing the health and well-being of Veterans through exploration of innovative, safe, and ethical emerging therapies.

In good health,
Dr. Tracy L. Weistreich

Nurse Executive, VHA National Center for Healthcare Advancement and Partnerships

Through VHA partner, Veteran advocates for people diagnosed with chronic kidney disease

Navy Veteran Candie Gagne will talk to anyone and everyone—from strangers on planes to elected officials— about the dangers of kidney disease. This “silent killer,” by her count, has nearly killed her three times. Her goals are to educate people about the disease, because symptoms may not be apparent until the kidneys are badly damaged, and to lobby for legislation that can help kidney disease patients.

Ms. Gagne is an [ambassador](#) for American Kidney Fund, a nonprofit VHA has partnered with to leverage the strengths of both organizations to help Veterans who are diagnosed with chronic kidney disease live healthier lives. The partnership is managed by [HAP](#).

It is estimated that kidney disease affects one in six Veterans. [Risk factors](#) for kidney disease include diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity, and more. Ms. Gagne, a kidney transplant survivor, and her husband, Thom, who is also a Navy Veteran, trace their kidney disease diagnoses to their exposure to toxic chemicals while stationed at Camp Lejeune. Thom, who receives dialysis, is awaiting a transplant.

Ms. Gagne’s experience as a Navy chief hospital corpsman emphasized the “see one, do one, teach one” method, and as a result, she has a passion for educating others. She encourages people to ask their providers to do a renal panel because, especially when caught early, additional damage to the kidneys may be prevented through diet and exercise and by limiting alcohol and tobacco. VA’s [eKidneyClinic](#) and [American Kidney Fund](#) offer relevant health tips.

When it comes to advocating for legislation to help kidney patients, she says, “No mama grizzly has anything on me.”

Ms. Gagne has seen her weekly calls and emails to legislators pay off. For example, Congress recently passed legislation that covers the cost of anti-rejection drugs for all kidney transplant recipients for life regardless of age. Previously, the cost was covered for only 36 months after the date of transplant surgery for people under age 65, which caused serious financial hardships and deaths, according to the *New England Journal of Medicine*, because transplant recipients could not afford the medication.

There’s a softer, non-grizzly side to Ms. Gagne’s advocacy efforts, too. When she goes to a clinic for infusions, she wears her pre-transplant “I need a kidney” T-shirt as a conversation starter and hands out business cards to people “just to let somebody know that there’s somebody else out there that cares, somebody who knows what they’re going through.”

Approximately 500,000 VHA enrollees have chronic kidney disease.

“We encourage Veterans, who are more susceptible to this disease than the general public, to learn how to prevent it and to ask about screening for kidney disease,” said Ms. Georgeanna Bady, HAP health systems specialist.

March is National Kidney Month. For more information on American Kidney Fund, visit [kidneyfund.org](#). For more information on VHA’s National Kidney Program, visit [VA.gov/health/services/renal/index.asp](#).



Veteran Candie Gagne (at right) with her kidney donor, Carol Messe.

VHA social workers tackle racism to better serve Veterans

In celebration of National Professional Social Work Month in March, here is news about a major effort VHA Social Work has taken on to address racism.

The death of a Black man while in police custody last May sparked a watershed moment in American history. George Floyd's death brought the Black Lives Matter movement front and center with protests against police brutality occurring across the nation. It also inspired the National Social Work Program Office to release the National Social Work Action Plan to Address Racism.

Introduced last June, the action plan addresses systemic racism, starting with an inward look at how VHA Social Work's workforce can improve its racial diversity. VHA is the largest employer of master's level social workers in the United States. As of 2020, VA reported that 69% of VHA Social Work's workforce is White.

Dr. Angela Giles, the National Social Work Program Lead on the Action Plan to Address Racism, said that mentorship is a key component to recruit and retain underrepresented minorities.

"Creating a diverse workforce allows social workers to best serve Veterans of all backgrounds. Cultural competence is also an important factor because it encompasses the ability to understand and interact effectively with Veterans of all cultures. That can only enhance the Veteran's experience."

Racism is a public health issue that can impact a Veteran's mental and physical health, she said. After George Floyd's death, Dr. Giles, who is also a licensed clinical social worker, noticed her patients at Hampton VA Medical Center experienced increased stress that was already high due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Dr. Giles created support packets for patients, which contained tools designed to improve coping skills. She also recommends VA's [COVID Coach app](#), which includes information about coping with xenophobia and racism. COVID Coach is not intended to replace professional care related to COVID-19 or mental health conditions.

Dr. Giles said the opportunity to lead the action plan gives her a chance to examine cultural diversity on a macro level. One of the goals of the plan is to ensure that diversity is represented at all levels within VHA Social Work by coaching and mentoring minority employees. A woman of color, Dr. Giles said she has mentored colleagues focusing on supporting the growth and the development of the person.

HAP team member and social worker Heather Luper is also contributing to the plan.

"I appreciate that our leadership is taking racism seriously and is willing to open up the discussion and listen so we can address racism's effects on employees and Veterans," she said.

VA social workers are essential

The 2021 National Professional Social Work Month theme is "Social Workers Are Essential." The theme focuses on the daily efforts of social workers across the nation, specifically, their call-to-duty during the COVID-19 pandemic. During March, VHA social workers plan to host virtual events at VA medical centers highlighting these extraordinary efforts.

Social workers are embedded in all clinical programming across VHA and continue to lead and support our nation in times of crisis. During the COVID-19 pandemic, VHA social workers have shown persistent flexibility and adaptability to address the rapidly changing needs of the Veteran community including implementing the use of technology to provide critical interventions for Veterans, their families, caregivers, and civilians as part of VA's Fourth Mission.

Beyond their service during the pandemic, VHA social workers are essential in the identification of social determinant of health challenges, such as housing and food insecurity. They play an integral role in suicide prevention and treatment, and they provide clinical interventions addressing substance abuse and addiction at a time when overdoses are increasing across the country.

Contributed by Katie Papke, Project Assistant, VHA Social Work, Fisher House & Family Hospitality, and Intimate Partner Violence Assistance Programs.

VHA partnerships provide support for Veteran caregivers

VHA recognizes the vital role caregivers and families play in the care of Veterans. In recognition of Month of the Military Caregiver in May, here are some resources offered by VHA partners and potential partners that augment [VA's caregiver resources](#). The resources are grouped by specific health conditions.

Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS)

[ALS Association](#) has a [network](#) of chapters and support groups across the nation to support caregivers of those who are diagnosed with this disease.

Arthritis

[Arthritis Foundation](#) hosts [Live Yes! Connect Groups](#) which are currently online due to COVID-19. The groups are for people who are diagnosed with arthritis and their loved ones and are designed to help people build social connections.

Cancer

[American Cancer Society](#) offers [tips for caregivers and family members](#) of those who are diagnosed with cancer via a [caregiver support video series](#), an [interactive caregiver resource guide](#), and [support and online communities](#).

[Cancer Care](#) provides a [portal for caregivers](#) outlining its resources, including counseling, case management, and online support, all led by oncology social workers.

[Cancer Support Community](#) lends caregiver support through [its website](#) and a library of educational materials on various caregiver topics such as pain management and how to talk to a health care team.

[Imerman Angels](#) offers one-on-one support for caregivers through its Mentor Angel program.

Caregivers, cancer survivors, and those who are fighting the disease can request a mentor or become one themselves.

Diabetes

[American Diabetes Association](#) provides an [online support community](#) with discussion boards organized by topic, including caregivers.

Lung diseases/ Lung cancer

[American Lung Association](#) offers tips for caregivers of [lung cancer](#) and [pulmonary fibrosis](#) patients. They also can participate in a [Better Breathers Club](#) and discussion boards, such as [Caring for Pulmonary Fibrosis](#), [Living with COPD](#), and [Lung Cancer Survivors' Community](#). For one-on-one support, caregivers for people diagnosed with lung cancer are encouraged to reach out to [Imerman Angels](#) (above).

[GO₂ Foundation for Lung Cancer](#) provides support and education for those affected by lung cancer in its [Lung Cancer Living Room series](#), information about support groups, and a GO₂ Foundation membership area on the [Belong.Life app](#), a social network. For caregivers whose loved one is at the end of life or has died, the foundation offers a [special program](#) for peer-to-peer support.

Parkinson's disease

[Parkinson's Foundation](#) offers a free downloadable book, "[Caring and Coping](#)," which is designed to give caregivers tips on emotional, physical, and financial preparedness. It's one of the [Top 10 Essential Caregiver Resources](#) that is available on the [caregiver section](#) of the foundation's website.

HAP supports the development of these and many other partnerships that provide support for those VA serves.

VHA partnership assists Veterans diagnosed with Parkinson's disease

Ms. Lou Graul Eisenbrandt was one of only 13 women aboard her Army-chartered flight to Chu Lai, Vietnam, in 1969. She, like many service members, had a limited understanding of the war as they deployed overseas—but quickly learned why they were needed once arriving on the ground. The registered nurse would treat everything from malaria to massive head traumas in the upcoming year at the 91st Evac Hospital.

“I saw pretty much every injury you could imagine, and even survived some early morning rocket attacks,” said Ms. Eisenbrandt. “After coming home, I wanted to use my experiences to educate others.”

For the past 30 years, Ms. Eisenbrandt has been outspoken about her time as a female Veteran and has used her medical training to raise awareness about women's health and child nutrition. She even wrote a book in 2015—“Vietnam Nurse: Mending and Remembering”—which details how “a small town girl from Illinois decided to join the Army to help others and see the world.”

Her most recent advocacy, though, is more personal: Parkinson's disease.

“I was diagnosed in 2003, and my first question was why?” said Ms. Eisenbrandt. “I couldn't even say the word 'Parkinson's' for nearly a week after my diagnosis because it was so scary. I didn't go through denial—I went through depression.”

Today, Ms. Eisenbrandt is a steadfast champion for the [Parkinson's Foundation](#) and routinely [leads discussions](#) about the disease. The nonprofit is an international organization focused on caring for individuals diagnosed with Parkinson's disease.

In 2020, VHA created a partnership with the Parkinson's Foundation to promote access to more resources and better care for Veterans who

are diagnosed with the chronic neurological disease. Parkinson's Foundation's digital resources, training materials, and online forums are raising awareness among health care professionals who treat Veterans, both inside and outside the VA health system. The resources also help strengthen work being done at the six VHA Parkinson's Disease Research, Education, and Clinical Centers (PADRECCs) and 51 affiliated Consortium Centers across the country.

“Partnerships like the one between Parkinson's Foundation and VHA play an extremely important role in caring for Veterans diagnosed with Parkinson's disease because it amplifies the services VHA provides and reaches Veterans who are not currently enrolled with VA for their care,” said Dr. Tracy L. Weistreich, nurse executive for HAP, the program office that facilitated this collaboration.

“As we prepare to observe Parkinson's Awareness Month this April, we will engage in future partnerships to benefit Veterans faced with battling a wide variety of diagnoses.”

For more information on HAP's work or to contact HAP for partnership opportunities, please visit: [VA.gov/healthpartnerships](https://va.gov/healthpartnerships). To learn more about the PADRECCs, Consortium Centers, and Parkinson's disease care available through VA, visit parkinsons.va.gov.



Ms. Lou Eisenbrandt during her deployment to Chu Lai, Vietnam, in April 1970.

Veteran finds a battle buddy in fight against lung cancer

Army Veteran Julio Sanchez, who called the nonprofit GO₂ Foundation for Lung Cancer's [HelpLine](#) after his 2019 lung cancer diagnosis, was directed to GO₂ Foundation's [Phone Buddy](#) program, which pairs lung cancer patients and survivors for emotional support. Mr. Sanchez called his Phone Buddy his "battle buddy" when he was featured on GO₂ Foundation's [Veteran Spotlight blog](#) and [Lung Cancer Living Room](#) video series (see Mr. Sanchez's video [here](#)). "That personal connection helped me immensely because he was already in the same foxhole engaging the lung cancer opponent I was facing," Mr. Sanchez explained.

Miranda Goff, manager for support services at GO₂ Foundation, is one of the voices on the other end of the HelpLine. She said that for Veterans like Mr. Sanchez, this sense of a shared experience is valuable.

"I do have Veteran [volunteers] who are more than happy to talk to other Veterans about how they navigated the diagnosis, how they coped with it," Ms. Goff, who has been working on the HelpLine since May 2018, explained.

In June, VA announced a partnership with GO₂ Foundation, which aims to increase awareness about [lung cancer screening options](#) and improve outcomes for Veterans impacted by the disease. This partnership, which was facilitated by HAP, adds to the lung cancer and lung disease supportive services VA and VHA already offer.

The HelpLine and Phone Buddy programs are resources that Veterans can take advantage of at any time. Most people who call, Ms. Goff said, have recently received new information about a diagnosis or potential diagnosis and are looking for more information.

You don't actually have to know what you're calling about, it's much more of a conversation about the things we do," Ms. Goff said. If GO₂ Foundation doesn't offer a particular service, HelpLine staffers will reach out to GO₂ Foundation's network to find a resource.



Mr. Sanchez and his grandson.

Ms. Goff said that she and other HelpLine staffers share information about VA and VHA resources with the Veterans who call the line. She has directed Veterans to the [VA smoking cessation app](#) and other [smoking cessation resources](#), and has educated Veteran callers about the [Veterans Crisis Line and other VA mental health support](#).

Ms. Goff said she is proud to: "Just to be able to really help provide another layer of service for Veterans who have done so much for our country, to help them during a time of need."

Georgeanna Bady, HAP health systems specialist who helped facilitate this partnership, said: "It's rewarding for our team at HAP to work on projects that we know improve quality of life for Veterans, especially because many Veterans are so affected by lung cancer."

[HAP is VHA's resource](#) for establishing and growing nongovernmental partnerships that benefit Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors. For more information on HAP's partnership work, please visit [VA.gov/healthpartnerships](#).

Innovative treatment produces positive results for Veterans diagnosed with PTSD

Ms. Amy Treadwell has seen first-hand the effects that an injection to the neck can have on a Veteran diagnosed with PTSD. The relief is nearly instant—and they often break down in tears.

“Many Veterans say that it’s like taking a weighted vest off for the first time after a long workout,” said Ms. Treadwell, PTSD/SGB Program Care Coordinator at VA Long Beach Healthcare System. “The Veteran feels more relaxed.”

The procedure is known as stellate ganglion block (SGB) and clinical staff at VA Long Beach have been treating Veterans in southern California with the procedure since 2017. During the outpatient procedure, medical staff inject an anesthetic into a bundle of nerves, called the stellate ganglion, located at the base of the neck. The anesthetic lasts only a few hours, but the effects often reduce a Veteran’s anxiety and feelings of hyperalertness for months or longer.

“It’s always heartwarming when a Veteran immediately experiences positive results from SGB treatment,” said Ms. Treadwell. The registered nurse is also enlisted in the Army Reserves and has served in the military for 24 years. She says that the most rewarding part of her job is seeing the long-term benefits SGB treatment creates for a Veteran’s family.

“Veterans often share that the relief they experienced from SGB treatment allows them to overcome the stress of everyday situations—like work or parenting. Those are the stories I really love.”

SGB is not considered an established first-line treatment for PTSD; there is growing evidence that SGB may help alleviate PTSD symptoms. Each Veteran who undergoes SGB treatment at VA Long Beach is strongly encouraged to also participate in other [“gold standard”](#) or evidence-based psychotherapies that are known to effectively treat PTSD, such as cognitive processing therapy and eye movement desensitization and reprocessing.

HAP collaborates with staff in the VA Long Beach SGB Center of Excellence (CoE) as part of a program evaluation on the use of SGB in combination with psychotherapy for Veterans with PTSD.

“There is great potential to provide relief to more Veterans with PTSD thanks to the collaborative work between CCI and the VA Long Beach SGB CoE,” said Ms. Christine Eickhoff, HAP team member and health systems specialist for HAP. “This could be a powerful addition to current evidence-based treatment programs for Veterans who continue to struggle with PTSD symptoms and have trouble engaging in psychotherapy.”

Through the program evaluation, HAP and VA Long Beach clinicians will identify best practices for providing SGB in combination with evidence-based PTSD treatments and share these operational outcomes with VA providers.

Their goal is simple: To help more Veterans see the same life-changing results that Ms. Treadwell has seen in her patients since 2017.

For more information on SGB or HAP, visit: [VA.gov/healthpartnerships](https://www.va.gov/healthpartnerships).

VCP initiative will expand to every VA medical center by 2024

Plans to expand the Veteran Community Partnership (VCP) initiative to every VA medical center (VAMC) are full steam ahead thanks to the work of VHA staff members like Dr. Jamie D. Davis, health systems specialist for HAP and VCP collaborations lead. VHA will place a VCP at each of the [170 U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs \(VA\) medical centers](#) (VAMCs) by September 2024.

VCPs are partnerships—and each is part of the larger VCP initiative—that bring community leaders, some of whom are Veterans, and organizations together with VAMC programs to help Veterans access health care and supportive services at VA and beyond. VCPs offer help in areas like [palliative care and military discharge status](#), or hold [celebratory events and household donation drives](#) for Veterans, and much more. The VCP initiative is a joint project of HAP and the VA/VHA Offices of Geriatrics and Extended Care, Rural Health, Mental Health, Voluntary Service, and Caregiver Support.

There are currently 35 active VCPs, and another 26 VAMCs have received training to develop a VCP. These trainings, Dr. Davis explained, help potential VCPs develop a strategic plan for their projects; by the end of these one-day trainings, VCP members will have gained the knowledge needed to implement their initial plan. More trainings roll out virtually beginning in January 2021 on a by-VISN basis—VISNs ([Veterans Integrated Service Networks](#)) are areas in the country where VHA provides Veterans care.

The VCP expansion plan, Dr. Davis said, has a focus on helping older Veterans and those with life-limiting illnesses in areas like [bridging the digital divide](#) or increasing the number of people with experience in geriatric care who participate in



VETERAN COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

VCPs. To meet the expansion goal, the trainings and development of VCPs are all about teamwork.

“VCPs bring VHA programs and community agencies together to increase access to care and services, particularly those VA cannot provide,” Dr. Davis said. “This is a true collaboration where community programs and VHA are involved equally.”

As collaborations lead for the VCP initiative, Dr. Davis works with other VA programs to encourage them to participate with VCP. Because she represents HAP, VHA’s partnerships hub, her expertise in partnerships bolsters the initiative at large. In the end, Veterans benefit.

“VCPs bring greater access to benefits and services for Veterans, caregivers, and families because VA is unable to provide some services that community programs can. If a Veteran goes to a community agency that’s part of a VCP and isn’t enrolled in VA benefits, there’s an opportunity to educate that Veteran and help get them into VA,” Dr. Davis said.

Expanding VCPs throughout VA, she continued, “unites VHA and community programs and offers an opportunity to coordinate partnership activities that provide better care to Veterans and their families.”

To stay up to date on the VCP initiative, please visit: [VA.gov/healthpartnerships/vcp.asp](https://va.gov/healthpartnerships/vcp.asp) or contact the initiative team at VCP@va.gov.

For more on HAP’s partnership work, please visit: [VA.gov/healthpartnerships](https://va.gov/healthpartnerships).

New partnership will make VA stronger in its fight against Veterans' lung diseases

VA recently partnered with the American Lung Association to help improve life for Veterans diagnosed with lung diseases. This partnership will add to the support and resources VA and VHA already offer to Veterans and their families and caregivers. HAP will manage the details of this partnership.

American Lung Association and VA are partnering to contribute to VA's lung cancer treatment and prevention efforts because of how Veterans are affected by lung cancer—VA diagnoses 7,700 Veterans with lung cancer each year and an estimated 900,000 remain at risk due to age, smoking, and other environmental exposures during and after military service.

This collaboration with American Lung Association is yet another way VA is there for Veterans with lung cancer or lung diseases. [VA has a long history](#) of working to prevent Veterans' lung diseases and other respiratory issues and decrease their symptoms, from leading early research to connect cigarette smoking to cancer, to developing a blood test to determine the causes of respiratory illness. VA continues to conduct groundbreaking research, studies, and clinical projects on topics like the risks of e-cigarettes, tuberculosis treatment, and sleep apnea.

VA also has partnered with the [GO₂ Foundation for Lung Cancer](#)—a partnership HAP helped bring to life—which will help more Veterans get screened for lung cancer. VA also recently developed the [VA Partnership to Increase Access to Lung Screening](#) (VA-PALS) demonstration project. There are now 15 VA facilities that screen high-risk Veterans for lung cancer thanks to VA-PALS.

Randy Moler, program analyst and licensed clinical social worker at HAP, said the partnership has three main goals: helping Veterans access American Lung Association's online resources or support groups, including Better Breathers Clubs; giving American Lung Association's partners and providers a chance to learn more about Veteran-specific issues; and encouraging VA medical centers and regional American Lung Association affiliates to create local partnerships that can bring Veterans awareness and support.

This partnership, Mr. Moler said, "potentially opens up resources for Veterans who aren't enrolled in VA." American Lung Association and VA can share information with each of their networks about the lung disease services that both organizations already have for Veterans.

The Better Breathers Club groups, for example, have gone virtual in recent months but are still available for anyone, anywhere. These clubs offer Veterans, their families, and caregivers a chance to connect with other people going through the same thing and learn how to better manage their illness. VA, as it does with all its partnerships, will also share information with American Lung Association that is specific to Veterans' needs, including suicide prevention; American Lung Association will educate people about VA resources such as the [Veterans Crisis Line](#), [S.A.V.E. Training](#), and more.

"That's what makes this partnership so important—we have to meet these numbers with action," said Dr. Tracy L. Weistreich, nurse executive for HAP.

"American Lung Association will help expand what VA's already taking action to do, and Veterans will benefit."

For more information on HAP's partnership work, please visit [VA.gov/healthpartnerships](https://va.gov/healthpartnerships).

Veteran who volunteers with seniors: 'It turns into a friendship'

Ron Burge, a retired Army Veteran, said that a motto that held true during his years of military service applies to his volunteer work with senior Veterans in the Colorado Springs area.

"It was, 'Never leave a man down in the field of battle,'" Burge said. "Our seniors now are facing a new battlefield—it's called isolation."

Burge is one of the volunteers across the country who are helping Veterans in their homes, which requires flexibility and creativity during the coronavirus pandemic. The program Mr. Burge works with is [Silver Key Senior Services](#), which administers the VA [Choose Home](#) initiative at the VA pilot site in Colorado Springs, Colorado. The Choose Home initiative allows Veterans who are at risk of moving into a nursing home or other institution to stay at home.

There is a camaraderie, Burge said, between him and the 94-year-old Navy Veteran he helps. Both men are former educators and have bonded over that history as well as their military service. Burge makes sure the Veteran takes his medicine, brings him to doctors' appointments, and has even taken him fly fishing.



Ron Burge, left, and a Veteran he helps.

"Anything to get him out of his house," Burge said. "It starts out as assistance, but it turns into a friendship."

During COVID-19, Burge and other Silver Key volunteers have adapted to physical distancing protocols and have ensured Veterans' safety however they can, which means sitting outside, wearing masks, or socializing from a distance.

"I joke that if I had to sit in my truck with a bullhorn, it might tick off the neighbors but at least we'll still have a conversation," Burge said.

Over the past year, Burge and his client have developed a bond where they can talk about politics, religion, and sports—and they can also joke around.

"When he writes me a grocery list, he'll write in 'code.' He'll write a checkmark plus the letters E and N for 'chicken,' just to make me think a little bit," Burge said with a laugh.

Burge added that he's dedicated his life to various acts of service. He was an Eagle Scout, an altar boy, and served 23 years in the military.

"My grandmother told me a long time ago, we're on this earth to help people. There are no U-Hauls going to heaven. All the material things aren't going with you.

"It's just a very rewarding thing, and now that I've retired, it's become the purpose that I have." He credited Silver Key for offering him a chance to do this work and said he works with other volunteers to "compare notes" on how to support the Veterans they serve.

"All the volunteers have their own special ingredient to bring to the recipe," he said.

HAP, together with AmeriCorps, provides support for the Choose Home initiative. For more information on HAP's partnership work, please visit [VA.gov/healthpartnerships](https://www.va.gov/healthpartnerships).

HAP and its partnerships support national strategy to end suicide

In December, VA announced that the [President's Roadmap to Empower Veterans to End a National Tragedy of Suicide](#) (PREVENTS) had completed all nine of its priorities for 2020 to eliminate suicide.

HAP will continue to play an important role in the implementation of the PREVENTS executive order through the efforts of Dr. Tracy L. Weistreich, HAP nurse executive, who served as a deputy lead for the Workforce and Professional Development Task Force within PREVENTS, and HAP's work in facilitating public-private partnerships.

As the partnership experts within VHA, every collaboration HAP engages in includes a suicide prevention element: VHA agrees to share with its partners publicly available health-related information and resources, such as VA's [Veterans Crisis Line](#) and the [PsychArmor Institute S.A.V.E course](#), a free online training that was partly developed by VHA.

HAP is currently assisting with a partnership that is being developed between VA and [Expiration Term of Service Sponsorship Program](#) (ETS-SP). One of the collaboration's goals is to prevent suicide among transitioning service members who have an estimated 50% increased risk of suicide during their first year of separation from the military. The program connects these service members before they leave the military with certified sponsors who live in their communities and can help them transition to civilian life.

Many of HAP's partnerships are aimed at improving social determinants of health (SDOH), which are the conditions in the environments where Veterans live, learn, work, worship, play

and age. A [2019 VA study](#) found that lack of access to SDOH such as food security, education, social connectedness, housing, transportation, and more are strong predictors of suicide risk.

HAP has recently facilitated a partnership with [Salesforce](#), which provides technical skills training for Veterans and their spouses designed to lead to employment opportunities. In turn, a steady income can provide for safe housing and food security, and thereby decrease suicide risk.

"A tenet of PREVENTS is that suicide prevention is everyone's business," said Dr. Weistreich. "Our partnerships, which contribute to Veteran well-being, help both Veterans who are enrolled in VA care and those who are not, which is essential to promote a public health approach and reach as many Veterans as possible."

Everyone Has a Role to Play

By adopting a public health approach, PREVENTS is acting on the knowledge that suicide prevention is everyone's business, and that together, we can prevent it.

