

# National Partnership Council Meeting Minutes

## 4/25/23 – 4/27/23 (Hybrid Meeting)

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### NPC Members:

Alma Lee- AFGE (Not present)  
Burke Mary-Jean- AFGE (acting Co-Chair)  
John Stead-Mendez- NNOC/NUU  
Kevin Mitchell- NFFE  
Mark Bailey- NAGE  
Denise Biaggi-Ayer- LMR (Co-Chair)  
Doris Gruntmeir -OGC (Not present)  
Michael Stephens-VBA  
Linda Parker-Cooks-AFGE/VBA  
Robert Sheena-VBA  
Gia Chemsian-OGC  
Michael Salazar-OIT  
David Perry-VHA

Bill Wetmore- AFGE  
Irma Westmoreland- NNOC/NUU  
Jeffrey Shapiro-NFFE  
Claudia Moore-NAGE  
David Palmer-SEIU  
David Perry-VHA  
Terri Beer-NCA  
Christine Polnak- SEIU  
James Leahy-VCS  
George Cannizzaro-NCA  
Sarah Porter-OIT (Not present)  
James Zeveski-VHA

### April 25, 2023

Meeting began at 10:15 a.m. ET

Denise Biaggi-Ayer, Executive Director LMR (Co-Chair Management) and MJ Burke acting as Union Co-Chair in Alma Lee's absence. Meeting is a hybrid of in-person in Washington, DC and virtual via Webex.

Denise and MJ welcomed everyone and reviewed the agenda.

### ADR Updates – HRA/OSP OCHCO

➤ Katherine Manderson, Director Alternative Dispute Resolution, HRA/OSP OCHCO

Katherine - Map of program structure and ADR team lead provided by VISN. Upcoming ADR training being rolled out. There will be more face-to-face training made available in FY24. Virtual training is going very well. Contract mediators are available for requests for Mediators outside of VA. ADR Council is being put together and should come out soon. Conversation followed about the need to have equal managers and union representatives involved in training. There are 35 participants for the virtual trainings and concerns that the schedule needs to be released further in advance for scheduling purposes and requesting to attend, especially for nursing staff. Irma mentioned there may not be enough classes for those who want to take the training. Applicants must apply and get selected. Mark asked whether public postings are made of those who are trained Mediators in VA for conflict resolution. This information is not currently posted because it is being brought up to date, but anyone can email the ADR office or local Coordinator for assistance. Mark had audio issues but raised concerns about VA lacking qualified individuals for groups of employees, but Ms. Manderson had already left the room and so the concern was not immediately addressed. **Denise will follow up with Katherine. MJ asked: Are managers still required to meditate - via VA policy-- I thought way back, in Clinton Administration, if they refused the Director had to sign off--Don't know if that policy still exist or not? Denise will follow up.**

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### Nursing Service Updates, ONS

- Karen Ott, Director for Policy, Legislation and Professional Standards, Office of Nursing Services

Karen – Covered strategic goals of 10-year nursing plan. Reviewed VHA priorities and Nursing. Optimizing and Informing Nursing Practice; Strengthening the Nursing Workforce; Reimagining Lifelong Learning and Career Development; Inspiring an Industry-Leading Culture. Provided information concerning Medication Administration Training Overview: Eligible UAPs.

Qualification Standard update is getting very close to being done to eliminate PSBs. LPN/LVN qualification standard update is being finalized and reviewing state of proof programs. Once in-depth review is complete, the qual standards update can be completed. Surgical Technologists qual standards are being worked and VA is attempting to make them a hybrid Title 38 position and added to the 0649 series. Nursing Assistant qual standard are being opened for revision with two labor partners selected as SMEs. Nursing Workforce current and moving forward: 1 in 5 RNs retirement eligible. Facilities will need to hire 77,500 across all education levels in the next 5 years, or 15,500 nurses each year. Nursing entry to practice pathway. RN Transition To Practice benefits reviewed and program evaluation analysis will be brought to NPC some time next year to attract and retain new Nurse graduates. OAA program also has training programs. Elsevier Mosby 3.0 Preceptor program can enhance retention rates and patient cares. Sites using this program is expanding greatly. A SharePoint site will also be set up for preceptors to use and share for best practices. Staffing methodology is a budgeting and forecasting tool for a safe and effective quality of care. It can reduce costs and maximize productivity and also improves retention. VISNs trainings have been conducted over the past 2 years. Looking at reestablishing Let's Get Certified initiative but looking at ways to do it differently. The Magnet Recognition Program Journey and the Pathways to Excellence programs reviewed. VA employees 118,000 nurses at all levels. Nursing workforce has grown 3.3% in first 6 months of FY23. Heat map of nurses needed and provided by VISN was provided. Recruitment and retention tools were shown.

Irma asked about hiring projections and whether we're keeping our head above water or if we're having greater successes. The projections do account for increases through PACT and anticipated losses. Irma also asked about EDP eligibility and nurses are told it's available but that is then rescinded upon employment. Also, the GNT program enrollees get their license but are stuck in the program and aren't being converted over timely. Karen responded that she will have to follow up for that information. Nurses may come as a graduate nurse at the bedside and then leave. Karen will get data about whether or how that is tracked. Kevin raised concerns about CRNAs being pulled from VAs to perform outpatient procedures. The schedule reviews are being worked on now after the move to the 610 occupation, so those review are occurring now. There isn't a set timeframe for that, the review should happen quickly from 120-180 days to have all the schedules reviewed. **David will update and brief at the next NPC meeting.** Concern that private facilities will outbid. 72/80 schedule memo moving forward and will be more prevalent in the future and ONS supports it. VA Handbook 5005 will determine NPSB and training will follow, hopefully by end of FY and unions will be invited to the training.

### OIT Updates, OIT

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- Nathan Tierney, DCIO, Chief People Officer, Office of Information Technology

Nathan – Review of pain points that were received at the end of Quarter 2. Dedicated POCs for onboarding. Increasing service awards and doubling special contribution awards and tripling quality step increases. Leadership development is virtual instead of DC, dedicated mentoring and coaching and employee rotation for cross-functional experience. Special Salary Rate is close to the finish line. Standby duty requires coding with FSC. HR Authority was lost 11 years ago and taking a third party vendor doesn't make organizational sense, so OIT is looking to regain functional control so they can staff and implement those functions, which is pending approval. Starting new position descriptions as bargaining unit is key. Irma asked about how OIT is moving things down the line to front line workers instead of Office of People Science. Organizational development, training, customer experience and workforce planning all fall under Office of People Science. Irma asked about supporting data. Nathan provided examples of QSI's and Special Contribution awards.

### **General Discussion:**

OIT's presentation ended early, so NPC finalized plans for next meeting:

\*Next NPC is scheduled for August 15-17, 2023, in Washington, DC for face-to-face.

Mark began raising issues/problems with VISN level partnership struggles. General conversation that facilities need resources for creating forums and charters, though some stations need direct interventions.

### **Security and Law Enforcement Updates, HRA/OSP**

- Frederick R. Jackson, Director, Security and Law Enforcement

Frederick – Body worn cameras are currently the biggest issue police is working. VA has been ahead of cameras. Modified Infrastructure Assessment Tool with give police the best results possible to identify vulnerabilities at each VAMC and then utilize additional resources. Staffing policy is being implemented by VHA. Current announcement out for the Alaska police department. Also looking at training current members of the military for a more seamless transition into VA police. Policy for body worn cameras policy has been vetted and notified to all unions. All facilities will have it in FY24. Special pay rates and continuous watch. Irma mentioned her appreciation of having PDI opportunities.

### **NCA Updates, NCA**

- Terri Beer, Director, HCM Office of Workforce Relations, National Cemetery Administration
- George Cannizzaro, Deputy Director, Cemetery Operations, National Cemetery Administration

Terri - Provided an overview of NCA and demographics. There has been a greater push for diversity and inclusion. Further review of AES results from 2022. A lot of time is spent on diversity and inclusion and employee engagement. It is more difficult because of the size of the Agency. Employee recognition awards provided in 9/2022 and time off award provided employees in 2/2023. George spoke to commemorative urns and plaques.

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### **PIV Card Issues, HRA/OSP**

- Daniel Galik, Executive Director, Office of Identity Credential and Access Management

Daniel – USAccess is a GSA managed shared service that is used for PIVs. GSA provides most services for machinery. Creating PIVs in virtual environment in lower population centers is a challenge. Worldwide chip shortage is creating issues but administration is attempting to onshore chip production. PIV card shortages are occurring and GSA notified VA to take advantage of GSA Central Print Services, so VA has met demand and not run out of PIV cards. VA is converting to PIV 8.1 cards which is occurring across all of the Federal Government. Earlier version cards are currently being replaced now so there is not a last minute surge. Bill raised that in Beckley WV, they do not have PIV cards and that VACO is mailing them. There is a misunderstanding with the team in Beckley and they have been working with them to resolve.

### **April 26, 2023**

Meeting began at 10 a.m. ET

### **VHA Policy Development Process**

- Molly Berger, Chief VHA National Policy Operations
- Laura Arcadipane, Deputy Director

Molly – VHA National policy is issued under the VHA Undersecretary for Health. Two types of policy: VHA Directives which operate on a 5-year lifecycle. VHA Notices expire after 1 year. They both go through VIEWS processes. VHA Directives are standalone, and Notices are infrequent, maybe 10 per year, and are usually 1-10 pages and are considered interim policy but do not go through the entire SharePoint review. They are quick, out to the field documents but are still routed through LMR. Overview of informal review vs. formal review. During informal, non-concurs are resolved and then it goes to senior leaders, often OGC, and then to LMR for union notice. Irma asked about the SharePoint site and anyone having access for comments. Molly then provided the SharePoint link and a demo on how to access the SharePoint site. Mark raised concerns about not receiving policies from VA and how policies are sent out for all employees, but the unions are not receiving them. Mark stated NAGE needs to request that policies NAGE hasn't received and came out through this portal, which bargaining unit employees may have commented on them. Laura mentioned that feedback received has made a huge, quantifiable difference in how policies are developed. Denise clarified that LMR is involved at the end of the concurrence process and that not every policy is provided to the unions if they are recertifications or if the changes are minimal. Mark stated he has a major concern that formal discussions are occurring between Department officials and BUEs without NAGE knowing anything. Jim clarified that not every policy will go to LMR from VHA and VHA has so many minor changes to policy that deal with pinpointed changes to small groups that don't create an impact. Mark stated that the unions should determine what is de minimis. Jeff asked if the goal is for all unions and BUEs to provide comments and it was confirmed that was the goal. Jeff then stated he wants to have briefings for how comments are addressed and whether something is de minimis could then be explained to the unions. Bill stated that reaching out to employees for their opinion without involving the union would be an unfair labor practice and that every time comments are opened up to BUEs, the unions would need to be involved or invited. Also, that the Department can't determine if something is de minimis or negotiable until

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they see the unions proposals. The unions needs access and the Department should notify the union of every change and let the unions decide if a bargaining obligation exists.

### **Priority to Action Initiative, VHA**

- Valerie Mattison Brown, Chief Strategy Officer for VHA

Valerie – VA is the largest integrated health care system in the nation. Hire faster and more competitively are recent accomplishments, where VHA hired 22,000 employees in FY23 through February. Growth rate has increased greatly in the first 5 months of the year, most in the past 20 years. Connect veterans to the soonest and best care is a major initiative. With PACT Act passage, serving veterans with military environmental exposures has been a major accomplishment with screening of over 2.7 million veterans for toxic exposure to date. Support Veterans Whole Health, VHA has provided services. VHA is also actively working suicide prevention among veterans and in 2022 released the National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report. Kevin raised the concern that there can be a tug of war regarding the number of positions available and the funding behind it and where it comes from. Bill asked about current best practices being considered. Valerie responded that her office wants to share what is possible and show promising practices without mandating. MJ discussed the complexity of delivery care for virtual/remote staff.

### **VA Suicide Prevention Updates, VHA**

- Edgar Villarreal, Director, Suicide Prevention Program
- Clairmont Barnes,

Edgar - [2022 Annual Report](#) only represents data through 2020. 2018 – 2020 shows a downward trend in veteran suicide rates. 2020 represented the lowest number of veteran suicides since 2006, when data collection began. Bill asked for clarification about data presented regarding suicide rates and it was explained the majority of Veteran who die by suicide do not receive VHA care. Mission Daybreak is the name of the grand challenge or 10-year strategy to end Veteran suicide through a public health approach. The program awarded \$20 million dollars to 10 winners to develop innovations to reduce veteran suicide. SSG Parker Gordon Fox suicide prevention grant program also provides grants with requirements to coordinate with VA with respect to VHA enrollment and provision of clinical services. Suicide postvention constellation of services that provide organized, immediate and on-going support following a suicide loss to promote healing and reduce suicide risk. Many resources were provided for postvention and tools for veterans and supporters. “Don’t wait. Reach out.” Campaign is about not waiting for crisis to brew, but to keep a watchful eye out for people in your life or veterans and especially those going through major transitions. MJ raised issues of tracking high risk populations for suicide, such as PTSD or substance abuse, and that this should be something that is worked into evaluations. Additionally, MJ expressed concern with providers ability to get high-risk, suicidal patients back into clinics and ensuring they receive evidenced-based, psychological follow-ups with metrics in place to track progress. Dr. Villarreal stated that screening testing does take place and that a comprehensive evaluation occurs to mitigate risks. Primary care partners are utilizing screening and a workgroup is established to develop a competency-based training so providers have tools they need to engage veterans and mitigating access to lethal means. Kevin asked about resources staying in place and

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whether these resources are being provided to employees. In NFFE facilities, the majority of mental health is outside of VA because a lack of providers in-house. With PACT Act, it is anticipated that people will be more encouraged to seek VA and patient flow and capacity is being tracked and looked at. Jeff raised that the number of referrals that providers receive is increasing and creating additional demand on employees, impacting employee's ability to meet their performance requirements, which in turn leads to retention issues.

### **VHA Workplace Violence Prevention Program Updates, VHA**

- Lynn M. Van Male, Director, VHA Workplace Violence Program

Lynn – VHA is required by law to keep patients in healthcare, which is a form of violence prevention itself. There has been an increase in violence reports but with a decrease in trained staff. Help is needed for supervisors to release front line staff to attend this training. Unions are invited members to the Disruptive Behavior Committees. Jeff raised that NFFE locals are not voting members or part of the core members and that they're being minimized or dismissed, and are only there as a necessity under the Directive. Lynn stated that is not the way it should be run or the way it was designed. VA Directive 1160.08 requires the employee threat assessment team be invited to participate. At some facilities labor partners don't show up, others where the facilities do not want them to be there but have to invite them. If you have taken the training you are a real and contributing member. Labor partners are intended to be present to represent. But there has to be role awareness...the person on the team has to represent the safety of the entire workforce, rather than representing as a person's personal representative. You also have to do the training. Without the training, you're jeopardizing the safety of other people as a voting team member. VA doesn't want an employee's behavior issue to go to the wrong team. Jeff said some of our NFFE reps can come to the table but are not core members in disruptive behavior, but I think management is looking at the disruptive behavior side and only a core member of the Employee Threat Assessment Team. Lynn said there is not ancillary team, there is not junior varsity, or there to watch. There is no voting on the Disruptive Behavior Committee and that is in policy. Jeff said that they're in a diminished role. Linda asked if VBA and NCA have a similar program to WVPR? Lynn stated they have partnered with NCA and VBA has hired someone to work with them to develop training for VBA. A model exists for the program to be VA-wide. AES has new questions regarding violence prevention added. VA Insider pages have also been added.

### **OMB Memo M-23-15 Measuring, Monitoring, and Improving Organizational Health and Organizational Performance in the Context of the Evolving Agency Work Environments, HRA/OSP OCHCO**

- Tracey Therit, Chief Human Capital Officer

Tracey – The memo tasks federal agencies with creating work environment plans. Agencies may look at plans to see how they're working and whether there are any adjustments that they need to make. Increasing in-person presence is an expectation in the OMB memo. We will have processes in place for reevaluating and reviewing to make sure what is developed is working. And how that is meeting performance goals and expectations. Work environment is policies, workforce management strategies and capacity. Organizational health is about what we need to create or maintain a healthy work environment. Organizational performance is about the

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effectiveness in delivering mission results. 2022 VA telework policy currently allows up to 8 days of telework per pay period and the Remote Work Policy was published in December 2022 and mirrors OPM guidance. VA's number of positions that are eligible to telework are lower than the government average, and VA's numbers have been increasing in who teleworks and eligible. Jeff asked about when the numbers break down, how do those numbers look between managers and employee teleworking. Tracey stated the number show how OPM collects, but that it can be broken down to a granular level. The question is whether we keep doing what we're doing now and if that works or going back to some things that we did pre-pandemic. Jeff asked if the Agency would rely on management only to provide that information. Mark stated that he understands President Biden wants to back off telework and the economic concerns, but asked for an explanation regarding retaining employees if the change is drastic or if employees have come onboard because of VA's telework flexibility, or employees who have onboarded in remote positions. Or if employees are returned to work and employees can't find a job or space at their home VA. Tracey said that based on feedback received back, we could have it right now and not need to make changes. There is nothing that says across the board changes have to be made. There are no decisions that we're going to change 5011 and VA will meet our collective bargaining obligations. Mark asked about the clinical contact centers specifically where positions are remote and that people in the field are already discussing and concerned that they'll have to go in. Mark said that PDI should be utilized. Tracey offered to hear or engage with any ideas the unions can present. Irma mentioned that the CCCs are working really well in terms of staff, productivity and meeting with virtual appointments. Many people did take work based on the telework or remote aspect. Tracey stated that if the plan makes organizational health or performance worse, then VA will miss the boat. Bill mentioned that he is the Treasurer for Local 17 and there was a union town hall with 377 people on it and they all want their telework agreements unchanged. It would be very difficult for bringing many people back. BVA has never been more productive. Tracey mentioned the Telework/Remote work policy that was published in December 2022 is strong in terms of military spouses, which we will continue to support and will not go away. Tracey said there would be more opportunities for engagement but that she wanted to get this information in front of NPC. Mark stated that he hopes the Administration isn't double dipping on the unions by saying one thing but doing something different. Tracey stated that she understand the space issue and that all of this could impact hiring and retention and that we need this engagement. David mentioned that even though we have hit our projected growth, we are not letting our foot off the gas and to focus on retention.

### All Employee Survey (AES) Updates, NCOD/VHA

- Kassie Ford, National AES Program Manager

Kassie – Additional text for 2023 AES regarding survey responses never going to a respondent leadership. For the race demographic question “prefer not to answer” is an option and respondents do not have to provide a response to every question to proceed to the next question. DEI Module and Workplace Violence Prevention and Response Module have been added to 2023. A new PACT Act module will be added with two questions but if employee responds yes, 5 additional questions will be added. Jeff asked about a list of AES Coordinators. Each site has at least 1 coordinator but many sites have several. **Kassie will provide that listing to LMR for sharing with the unions.**

MJ raised whether policy recommendations be included in the conversations tomorrow.

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## **April 27, 2023**

Meeting began at 10:00 a.m. ET

A general discussion followed regarding telework and remote positions. There are significant retention or recruitment concerns if remote or telework are not heavily utilized. Irma raised an example where the CCC advertised for a remote position and had 1,000 applications in 2 days. Jeff stated NFFE's concern is that position eligibility is not being updated at the VISN level. The new 5011 policy does require review to be done and employees can always submit an application to their supervisor for a new review. Denise asked everyone to send her feedback regarding the Memo so that it can be passed along to leadership and eventually OMB.

## **NPC Subcommittee PDI Briefing, NPC**

- Don Stephen, Office of Labor-Management Relations

Don went through the presentation and solicited feedback. The presentation covers PDI and will be provided to the field. Jeff asked about whether PDI then qualifies the unions for automatically receiving the midterm notification. PDI does not automatically make an issue negotiable or mean a midterm notice will come, since permissive or mgmt. rights issued can always be discussed during PDI. Slide 6, bullet 3 will not use the term "education" but instead "informing." Lack of patience on slide 7 will be changed to lack of understanding. Trust will be kept in as many slides as possible. The Group Discussion slide should show a best case scenario of PDI or what types of topics can lead to PDI or lend itself to PDI. Irma asked about whether there is any enforcement mechanism for PDI or forums. There is none, since there is no requirement to do so via EO or solid OPM guidance, other than May 2021 OPM guidance that loosely references it. This will be worked into the training (see below). Gia suggested having specific examples of benefits to PDI utilized in the training. Kevin raised the example Nursing board handbook changes and the negotiations being a success and getting through very quickly.

- <https://www.chcoc.gov/content/guidance-labor-management-relations-executive-branch>
- "OPM believes the establishment of labor-management forums and use of pre-decisional involvement can be beneficial and useful to agencies and labor unions"

## **VA Employee Trust and Experience Survey Results, Veterans Experience Office**

- Airis Gill, Executive Director, Employee Experience and Organizational Management
- Eitan Naftali, Director, Employee Experience

Airis – Information and data is presented from first quarter survey. Survey was 1-5 scale. First quarter survey resulted in 13.9% response rate. Overall employees are extremely dedicated to the mission and feel they are serving a great purpose, over half of employees would recommend VA as a place to work, but trust remains low at VA. Irma disagrees that 13.9% is a disappointing response rate. Irma also thinks that 50% of employees believing they are recognized is a problem and that trust, ease, recognition and empowerment are all areas where work needs to be done. Airis agrees that we are not at where we should be and that VA needs to pay attention and focus on these areas to get them to higher levels. Jeff spoke to aggregating



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the data between management and non-management to see what that can indicate. Airis agrees with this approach and seeing how it can be broken down that way. The issue is about highlighting, in a transparent way, the concerns and issues with the workforce. The team is confirming the breakout of supervisory status in the data to see if this is possible. Kevin asked about what is done to improve things. Many of the changes that occur will be done at the local level and not necessarily by the VEO. VEO provides this data locally and the goal is not to provide VACO driven changes. VEO is different from AES in that support is not provided by NCOD in the same manner, but if locals need assistance with interpreting or aggregating the data, VEO would accommodate that.

Following the presentation, there was discussion regarding 'trust' in general and how it is very important for PDI. There was discussion about adding a 'trust' element to the PDI training, but concerns were that we will need an expert who can facilitate that discussion and training regarding trust.

### **NPC Forum Survey Subcommittee Briefing, NPC**

- Ryan Fulcher, Office of Labor-Management Relations

Ryan – Walked through survey and solicited feedback for finalizing questions and responses for NPC Forum Survey. Tentative plan for survey to be administered by early summer, though AES blackout dates could impact. Drafted leadership support statement for survey presented for feedback and finalized. Challenges remain in ensuring all current union Presidents and email addresses are known for survey administration. Some unions have provided current information, but missing information for others. Union POCs are needed for survey administration email for union questions. NCOD will assist in aggregating results and subcommittee will present results once they've been collected and analyzed.

### **NPC HR Subcommittee Briefing, NPC**

- Sylma Vargas, Office of Labor-Management Relations
- Gia Chemsian, Office of General Counsel

Sylma – Reviewed first NPC HR Recommendation. Mark recommended having the Department build a system that will fix the lack of responsiveness in HR for employees. If the employee doesn't do their job, employees receive disciplinary actions. The second recommendation centers on a marketing campaign or push to make employees aware how SBUs work and how they differentiate between VISN aligned HR Staff. There was a lot of general discussion about HR issues and customer service. Denise asked how we should handle these recommendations. Gia responded that it would be beneficial for the subcommittee to meet one more time and discuss some of the feedback and discussion from today. The plan moving forward is that the subcommittee meets once again and then will forward the updated recommendation to the NPC for final approval.

### **NPC Discussion, NPC**

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If members want topics recommended for the next agenda, email Denise for NPC's overall consideration. The final 2023 NPC Meeting will be October 24 – 26, 2023, with the location to be determined during the August session. **Denise will attempt to coordinate for leadership to come to next NPC.**

Meeting ended at 4:05 p.m. ET