A Message from Executive Director and Deputy Chief Nursing Officer Dr. Jennifer Strawn

Welcome to the 2022 Office of Nursing Services (ONS) Annual Report. Whether you are a Veteran, nurse, administrator, or community member, we are thrilled to share our progress with you. This year’s report specifically honors our VA nurses, and I have a special message for them. This year’s report will celebrate you, the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) nurse, and all that you are achieving nationwide. This is your annual report. It’s a time to reflect on the past year and remember our successes.

VA nursing is unique. We represent the largest profession within the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), we work for the largest health care system in the U.S., and we work for the largest employer of nurses in the country. We also serve different geographic regions of the country, which experience unique challenges that require innovative solutions, including staffing and other flexibilities. This is where there are opportunities for nursing creativity and boldness in developing solutions to our most pressing challenges.

This annual report highlights the accomplishments VA nurses achieve every day. Each one of you continues to inspire me and allows me to have a positive outlook for not only stabilizing, but also dramatically improving the VA nursing workforce. As we continue to work together and support one another, our future is bright as we serve our nation’s Veterans. Since the early days of our profession, nurses have met challenges with a sense of purpose and determination to deliver solutions and to provide exceptional, quality care.

Despite the challenges of the ongoing staffing crisis, the prolonged pandemic and accompanying staff burnout, continuing supply chain issues, and the new electronic health record (EHR) deployment, VA nurses across the nation are meeting the moment for Veterans, their families, and caregivers. As VA Nurses, we are all connected in our solemn commitment to meet the four statutory missions of VA, including caring for Veterans wherever they are. This is a heavy responsibility that places a great deal of stress on many among our ranks. I encourage you to engage in self-care, including seeking out VA’s mindfulness and resiliency practices available to all. You’ll read about some of these initiatives in the pages that follow.

The 2022-2032 VHA Nursing Workforce Strategic Plan was designed to strengthen our nursing workforce and focuses on four pillars that frame this annual report: optimizing and informing nursing practice, strengthening the nursing workforce, reimagining lifelong learning and career development, and inspiring an industry-leading culture. These pillars are threaded throughout this document as we highlight the impacts, achievements, and learning moments of VA nurses in 2022. Thank you for all that you do for Veterans and VA Nursing!
About Office of Nursing Services (ONS)

ONS Mission: To honor the Veteran through excellence in healthcare delivery

How does ONS complete this high-priority mission? With a nursing workforce that, day in and day out, goes the extra mile to transform the lives of Veterans and their families by playing a pivotal role in their long-term, holistic health.

The pages that follow in this annual report will illustrate how VHA nurses remain steadfastly committed to the success of their patients, continuing to innovate, excel, and transform the lives of those they care for, even when facing challenge after challenge. ONS accomplishes this world-class, Veteran-centered standard of care through VHA nurses and the portfolios which support their work through advocates, leaders, and subject matter experts across varied nursing specialties.

ONS represents VHA nursing through a dynamic, diverse group of honored, respected, and compassionate professionals.
The Four Pillars of the VHA Nursing Workforce Strategic Plan

VHA’s 10-Year Vision Statement is to be the preeminent institution for patients and employees alike. The four aspirational pillars are key strategies to ensure an innovative, best-in-class nursing workforce while building unparalleled trust in Veterans and their families and caregivers.

Jim Roupe, CRNA, Martinsburg VA Medical Center, Martinsburg, WV

I may be compelled to face danger, but never fear it, and while our soldiers can stand and fight, I can stand and feed and nurse them.

—CLARA BARTON, FOUNDER OF THE AMERICAN RED CROSS

Pillar One: Optimizing and Informing Nursing Practice

» VHA leads the nation in developing national standards of practice across all geographies and care settings.
» Nurses hold leadership positions that define and drive the strategy in peer-to-peer collaboration with physicians to influence and improve health care delivery.
» VHA nursing is the gold standard globally for innovative health science research and translation of science into practice to maximize value to Veterans, the community, and the health care industry.

Pillar Two: Strengthening the Nursing Workforce

» VHA’s dynamic, streamlined, and employee-centric onboarding process offers accessible support and shortens times-to-unit for new hires.
» VHA is the employer of choice providing flexibility, mobility in career pathways, and best-in-class research and residency programs, attracting high-caliber and diverse talent.

Pillar Three: Reimagining Lifelong Learning and Career Development

» Nurses in all settings have protected time for an unparalleled breadth and depth of opportunities in education, research, teaching, and leadership experiences.
» Nurses have comprehensive, personalized developmental journeys, customized to meet goals and to guide their chosen career progression.
» VHA fosters an environment of intellectual challenge and pursuit.

Pillar Four: Inspiring an Industry-Leading Culture

» VHA cultivates a diverse and inclusive workforce that serves Veterans, families, and caregivers of all backgrounds, and builds trust, cultural competencies, and catalyzed, dynamic teams.
» VHA employs an industry-leading shared governance model across all settings of care.
» VHA benefits, compensation, and workplace environment together outpace private sector offers.
Pillar One: Optimizing and Informing Nursing Practice

The VHA nursing workforce is expert at making any situation, opportunity, and resource work for the benefit of Veterans. Keep reading for a small snapshot of what VA nurses did in 2022 to maximize their practices for the good of Veterans and the healthcare industry.
Transforming Healthcare Documentation

Transitions from active duty to Veteran status can create gaps in a patient’s medical history. The new Electronic Healthcare Record (EHR) system, when completed, will create an uninterrupted healthcare experience for service members transitioning to Veteran status. Nurses are the most significant users of the EHR. In 2022, ONS continued to ensure that field nurses’ input will help provide functionality to support all nurses. Many of the changes suggested have been adopted as model content. Full implementation of the EHR system across all VA facilities is scheduled for completion by 2028.

New Weapon in the Battle Against Pneumonia

We know nurses are heroes. They now have a new tool to add to their superpowers: the humble toothbrush. Oral care routines can prevent non-ventilator hospital-acquired pneumonia (NVHAP). The Hospital Acquired Pneumonia Prevention by Engaging Nurses (HAPPEN) program utilizing consistent oral care was implemented in every Veterans Affairs Medical Center (VAMC) in 2021. The work continued in 2022, leading to dramatically improved inpatient outcomes thanks to mentoring and coaching by ONS leads.

In 2022:

- 2,400 unique VAAES Health Factors were captured 433 million times and:
  - 455,830 admission assessments
  - 5.53 million shift assessments
  - 4.01 million frequent assessments
  - 685,000 IV assessments and inserts
  - 822,070 oral care assessments
  - 5.13 million skin assessments were completed on 811,527 unique Veterans

Seamless Service

In times of staffing shortages or crisis, VHA nurses should be able to go wherever they are needed most, regardless of their state-specific license, certification, or registration. ONS partnered with 49 disciplines to establish one standard of nursing practice regardless of state licensure.

A First in VHA History

ONS, Office of Nursing Informatics (ONI), and countless field-based nurses across VHA helped to standardize acute inpatient documents and templates across the entire VHA, a first-of-its-kind achievement. This standardization means Veteran status can create gaps in a patient’s medical history. The new Electronic Healthcare Record (EHR) system, when completed, will create an uninterrupted healthcare experience for service members transitioning to Veteran status. Nurses are the most significant users of the EHR. In 2022, ONS continued to ensure that field nurses’ input will help provide functionality to support all nurses. Many of the changes suggested have been adopted as model content. Full implementation of the EHR system across all VA facilities is scheduled for completion by 2028.

Excellence in Evidence-Based Practice

In 2021, ONS and frontline nurses partnered with the renowned Helene Fuld Health Trust National Institute (Fuld Institute) for Evidence-Based Practice (EBP), a national hub for the formation, teaching and dissemination of best practices to improve healthcare quality, safety, patient outcomes, and cost. The 2022 VHA cohort in the Fuld Institute Immersions was made up of 350 participants. The VA nurses participated in what they learned at their health care facilities.

One-Stop Shopping for Veterans

Managing different providers, specialists, medications, and therapists can be overwhelming for Veterans. VHA has found a solution to better assist Veterans in managing their care coordination needs. In 2022, with the launch of the second phase of Care Coordination and Integrated Care Management (CC&ICM) deployment, more than 120 healthcare systems are actively engaged in implementing strategies and clinical integration of all VHA programs and services offered to Veterans. For Veterans with moderate or complex care coordination needs, a lead coordinator can facilitate medical, psychosocial, and mental health needs across the continuum of care. By coordinating with other care managers and case managers, CC&ICM promotes continuity of care and positive outcomes.

“In the best way I can explain, care management to patients is that I am their gatekeeper. As their nurse, I evaluate their needs, assessing both physical medicine and mental health. Care managers are the first point of contact to get them to where they need when they need it. We build a rapport and trust, so they know they’ve got one lead coordinator they can always communicate with.”

— DEBORAH DAVIS, PACT NURSE, AUSTIN, TX

In 2022:

- 67% of participating facilities had at least one quality improvement outcome.
- 94% have instituted EBP councils to continue this work to improve Veteran care and outcomes.
- 60 VHA staff have received their EBP certificate/certification.

Leading The Way

ONS conducted two highly successful EBP Leadership Workshops to promote leadership support of EBP.

- 97% of participants increased in their knowledge in guiding others in EBP.
- 92% strengthened their confidence in building and sustaining an evidence-based culture.
- 95% increased their competence in building and sustaining an evidence-based culture.
Pillar Two: Strengthening the Nursing Workforce

With more than 113,000 nurses, VHA is the largest employer of nurses in the country. Our nurses are critical in every aspect of Veteran care. A nationwide nursing shortage puts patients at risk in understaffed facilities. ONS and VHA nurses are combating this for VHA by streamlining onboarding processes, providing more career mobility opportunities, and investing in high-caliber research and residency programs.
Recruitment and Retention SUCCESSES

91% turnover rate for VHA registered nurses compared to 18.7% in the private sector

45 VA Medical Centers held surge hiring events, leading to 2,100 possible new recruits.

7,240 RNs, NPs, and CRNAs left VHA in FY2022.

15,500 nurses per year for a total of 77,500.

REBOOT: Battling Nursing Burnout

It’s not news that a career as a nurse, while very rewarding, offers a disproportionate amount of emotional stress and physical fatigue. What is news—and good news, too—is an initiative to address burnout and promote professional fulfillment among all VHA employees. The Reduce Employee Burnout and Optimize Organizational Thriving (REBOOT) Task Force identifies the top contributors to burnout to help build a workplace where every nurse can thrive and find purpose, fulfillment, and joy in their work. The end goal will not only be to retain nurses, but also to support Veterans by ensuring our nursing staff can always give their best.

145 Health Professional Scholarship Program (HPSP) Participants

HPSP offers scholarships through the Army, Navy, and Air Force for students who attend medical school programs.

# of HPSP students per degree

16 Associate degrees in Nursing

117 Bachelor of Science degrees in nursing

12 Master of Science degrees in nursing or higher

$5.11 million is the 2022 annual budget administered by VALOR.

$3.0 million additional funds provided by ONS.

From 2007 through September 30, 2022, VA has awarded 6,742 awards to VALOR participants.

295 Veterans Affairs Learning Opportunities Residence (VALOR) Participants

VALOR is an honors program for select nursing students who have completed the junior year of a baccalaureate nursing program, providing structured clinical experience and educational coursework.

From Novice to Expert

Making the leap from nursing student to clinical practice can be daunting. Recent RN grads can switch from academia to a complex practice environment with the employee-based Registered Nurse Transition to Practice (RNTTP) Residency Programs. Under the guidance of an RN who has completed specialized training to aid new graduates, the RNTTP participants receive a 12-month curriculum built upon clinical, leadership, and professional development standards, along with Veteran-specific care content. This experience allows graduates to confidently keep growing and learning by taking on new challenges in patient care with expert help.

In 2022:

772 new nurses participated in RNTTP

117 medical facilities hosted RNTTP programs

115 medical facilities used the Elsevier Mosby Preceptor Program, the gold standard in enabling novice nurses to apply their critical thinking to clinical practice.

48 staff members learned to attract top-quality candidates in the Nurse Recruiter RNTTP training program.

 Interested in working as a VA nurse? Find your career path at www.vacareers.va.gov.

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Pillar Three: Reimagining Lifelong Learning and Career Development

Nurses make a commitment to lifelong learning to ensure their education remains relevant, deepen their knowledge, and become leaders in patient care. ONS strongly supports the belief that nurses in all settings should have access to opportunities in education, leadership experiences, and personalized developmental journeys to expand their career options.
The American Nursing Credentialing Center (ANCC) Magnet Recognition Program® is not merely an award for excellence in health care, it also recognizes a facility that focuses on nursing talent and supports nurses to be the very best they can be. In 2022, VA Portland Health Care System was recognized for earning its fourth ANCC Magnet designation and the Louis Stokes Cleveland VA Medical Center was designated as an ANCC Pathway to Excellence.®

60% of VA health care facilities have achieved or are pursuing an increased level of excellence status.

Next Generation of Nurse Leaders

When VA medical facilities need nurse managers, the best recruits are already among their ranks. The American Organization for Nursing Leadership conducted four virtual Nurse Manager Institute sessions in 2022 to prepare new VA nurse managers to be successful in this challenging and rewarding leadership role. Participants took part in lectures, case studies, and self-assessments.

347 nurses completed the Nurse Manager program.

Recognition Matters

For the first time, doctoral level nursing trainees were included in the 2022-2028 VA Strategic Plan.

Caring for Aging Veterans

Providing care to older Veterans requires attention to both age-related and Veteran-specific needs. ONS, the Office of Academic Affiliations (OAA), Geriatric and Extended Care (GEC), and frontline nurses all collaborated to establish a new Geriatric and Extended Care Nurse Practitioner Residency (GEC-NPR) Program. The program will enhance novice NPs knowledge and skills when caring for the aging Veteran population. ONS also partnered with GEC to develop and implement strategies to provide Community Living Center (CLC) staff with the skills and training to deliver the highest quality of care to Veterans.

The GE-C-NPR Pilot Request for Proposals was released February 1, 2022. Nine of the seventeen eligible facilities applied, and eight were awarded in March 2022. The pilot GEC-NPR cohorts began in Fall 2022.

Leaders in Their Fields

Clinical Nurse Advisors and their respective Field Advisory Committees (FAC) developed various evidence-based products and resources for use by nursing staff across the system, such as clinical practice guidelines, educational offerings, and documentation tools.

Let us never consider ourselves finished nurses. We must be learning all of our lives.
—FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE

Nurse Scientists

The Nursing Research Field Advisory Committee began the national Nursing Research Collaborative in August with more than 60 attendees. This collaboration’s goal is to link scientists across VHA in a network that will support multisite studies, mentoring opportunities, professional development activities, and sharing results of nursing science in VHA.

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The Bridge Between Classroom and Clinical Care

Simulation provides safe opportunities for nurses to practice their clinical skills to improve the quality of health care delivery to Veterans. National Facility Simulation Certification is awarded through the Simulation Learning, Evaluation, Assessment, and Research Network (SimLEARN), VHA’s premier program for simulation in health care training. SimLEARN provides resources to assist facilities in creating a safe learning environment and using cutting-edge technology. Mastering these skills enables VAMCs the opportunity to become nationally certified and recognized.

In 2022:

53 facilities had SimLEARN certifications:

19 Basic
15 Intermediate
9 Advanced

BONNIE BARTI LOWEN PATTIGAYON, BSN, RN, AND HANNAH BALBY, BSN, RN, AT SIMLEARN CENTER, SOUTHERN NEVADA LAS VEGAS MEDICAL CENTER

Also in 2022, the updated Facility Simulation Certification website went live with a more streamlined application process. To ensure the highest standards, intermediate-level facilities require a virtual interview, while advanced-level facilities require an onsite visit that includes meeting with faculty and instructors, a tour of the simulation spaces, and observation of simulation classes.
Pillar Four: Inspiring an Industry-Leading Culture

VHA nurses make a difference by serving those who have served our country. They care for our Veterans tirelessly and selflessly. To support nurses in this heroic mission, VHA is determined to offer a thoughtful culture that values inclusion, diversity, equity, and access, as well as benefits, compensation, and a workplace environment that outpaces the private sector and a shared governance model that empowers all nurses.
**A Nurse’s Viewpoint**

The National Nursing Practice Council (NNPC) continued to provide the staff nurse perspective in 2022. Their first-hand experiences regarding issues and activities that impact their practice are crucial in establishing best practice recommendations.

**More Help for Working Parents**

As one of VA Secretary Denis McDonough’s 10 major steps to invest in VA employees, VA increased the total family income threshold for its childcare subsidy program from $89,999 to $144,000 due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. This move, effective on March 15, 2022, helps more VHA nurses access affordable childcare.

**Wellness at Work**

Nurses work hard daily with fantastic care and compassion. Their humbleness makes it easy for patients, their families, and administrators to take for granted what they do. That’s why during Nurses Month in May 2022, ONS made sure to get the message out to all of VA that nurses make a difference with special events tailored to the given theme for each week:

- **Week 1** — Self Care
- **Week 2** — Recognition
- **Week 3** — Professional Development
- **Week 4** — Community Engagement

These widely attended events provided support, access to wellness and professional development resources, and official recognition of the many contributions of VA frontline nurses and nurse executives.

**New ONS SharePoint Site Goes Live**

In order to better serve more than 113,000 nursing staff, the internal ONS web site was consolidated and modernized this year. The improved organization, streamlined navigation, and updated search capability enables busy nurses to locate the resources they need with ease.

**Legislation at Work for Nurses**

In 2022, ONS joined forces with Workforce Management and Consulting (WMC) to collaborate on four legislative proposals:

- **VA Nurse and Physician Assistant Retention and Income Security Enhancement (R.A.I.S.E.) Act**
  - Lifts VA pay caps for APRNs and RNs, allowing the VA to offer more competitive salaries in specific areas of the country for nurses in highly competitive markets.
  - Passed March 2022

- **Amendment to Expand Coverage for Nurse Executive Special Pay**
  - Creates a financial incentive for internal candidates to move to positions with a broader managerial scope, complexity, and responsibility.
  - Pending

- **Reimbursement of Continuing Professional/Medical Education for Physician Assistants and APRNs**
  - Reimbursement for continuing education benefits to APRNs and PAs who have a state requirement for continuing education.
  - Pending

- **Ensuring a Strong and Capable Nursing Workforce to Meet all VHA Missions**
  - Establishes funding for up to 1,500 nursing resident positions annually and expands residency programs to address anticipated nursing staffing shortages by increasing the recruitment, preparation, and retention of nursing staff via formal nursing residency programs.
  - Pending

**The Voice of Advanced Practice Registered Nurses (APRN)**

The National APRN Practice Program serves as the voice for APRNs across the VHA. In 2022, the program:

- Conducted 2 National Town Halls
- Held 3 National APRN professional development series
- Created 6 new local VA healthcare system APRN councils
- Developed the first APRN qualification standards in VHA
- Established 6 specialty interest groups to provide opportunities for networking among colleagues, sharing best practices, and developing resources in the following areas:
  - Critical Care
  - Neurology
  - Ear, Nose, and Throat
  - Gastroenterology
  - Renal
  - Women’s Health

**Minority Mental Health Awareness Month**

Held in July, Minority Mental Health Awareness Month not only provides an opportunity for nursing staff to focus on promoting mental health equity and mental and emotional wellbeing for Veterans, but it also calls attention to the abundance of resources in support of the diverse nursing workforce.

Current VA nurses can find information about the programs, resources, and other opportunities mentioned in this report at the ONS SharePoint: dvagov.sharepoint.com/sites/vaons.
Nursing Workforce on the Move

VA is the #1 employer of nursing personnel in the U.S., with more than 113,000 nurses, including:

- 74,846 RNs
- 15,345 LPNs/LVNs
- 14,248 NAs
- 7,827 NPs
- 1,136 CRNAs
- 252 CNSs
- 3 CNMs

3 of the top 9 clinical shortage occupations at the VHA are RNs, LPNs/LVNs, and NAs.

Over the next five years, VHA will need to hire approximately 15,500 nurses per year (for a total of 77,500 RNs, NAs, LPNs, VN, NPs, CRNAs).

5% increase in external hires over 2021.

A Well-Educated Nursing Workforce

- 18% have a master's degree
- 12% have an associate degree
- 39% have a bachelor's degree
- 2% have a doctorate
- 29% have certification or other training

Travel Nurse Corps (TNC)

101,839 total hours worked by TNC nurses

69 TNC nurses were deployed daily

$322,000 in travel expenses saved with virtual visits

1,908 Veteran Functional Assessment Instruments completed

4,551 Caregiver and Veteran Assessments performed

Residents on the Rise

In 2021-22, the Office of Academic Affiliations (OAA) conducted:

- 116 nurse residency programs
  - Of the 116, 48 were at the RN level and 68 at the NP level
  - Out of the 68 NP residency programs, the following specialties were offered:
    - 26 Mental Health
    - 34 Primary Care
    - 8 Geriatrics and Extended Care
  - 10 Advanced Fellowship programs with nursing trainees and
    - 45 nursing trainee positions

Supporting Nurses in The Field

The Clinical Practice Program (CPP) comprises 13 Clinical Nurse Advisors who serve as subject matter experts in their area of practice and provide oversight to 13 individual Field Advisory Committees (FAC), consisting of over 143 front-line staff.

1. Cardiovascular Field Advisory Committee
2. Community Living Center (CLC) Field Advisory Committee
3. Critical Care and Inpatient Medicine Field Advisory Committee
4. Emergency Department Field Advisory Committee
5. Geriatrics & Extended Care Field Advisory Committee
6. Mental Health Field Advisory Committee
7. Metabolic Syndrome & Diabetes Field Advisory Committee
8. Oncology Field Advisory Committee
9. Pain Management Field Advisory Committee
10. Perioperative Field Advisory Committee
11. Polytrauma/SCI/Rehabilitation Field Advisory Committee
12. Pressure Injury Management & Prevention Field Advisory Committee
13. Primary Care Field Advisory Committee

VHA Nursing Workforce Diversity Demographics

- 24.8% Black
- 9.5% Asian
- 7.1% Hispanic
- 1.5% American Indian
- 0.4% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
- 6.2% of the nursing workforce is working with a disability.
- 29% have certification or other training
Mr. Washington went to two other ED departments before returning to the VAMC. Mr. Hall was determined to get to the root of the illness. After asking many questions, including how his wife was feeling (she was beginning to develop the same symptoms), Mr. Hall asked the question that cracked the case: Had there been any work done in their apartment recently? When the couple mentioned a new furnace that cracked the case: Had there been any work done in their apartment complex, Mr. Hall told them to call the energy company immediately. A carbon monoxide leak was the culprit. Mr. Hall saved their lives and the lives of other residents in the building.

“He was the only one who could tell me what was going on. Mr. Hall, he figured it out,” said Mr. Washington.

VETERANS INCARCERATED OR UNHOMESTAYING: A POPULATION AT RISK FOR HEALTH OUTCOMES

When Veteran Larry Washington showed up in the Detroit VAMC ED complaining of nausea, his wife gave me the biggest hug and said, ‘You saved our lives.’

—RICHARD HALL, EMERGENCY DEPARTMENT (ED) NURSE

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Celebrating Success

In 2022, VA nurses received recognition for their contributions to the advancement of nursing practice, the development of life-saving innovations, organizational leadership, and random acts of kindness. They were recognized so many times, we could not possibly list them all. Here is a small sample of the impacts made by VA nurses every day. Congratulations to all for these prestigious honors and for providing excellent care to Veterans!

Welcome Dr. Saslo as Chief Nursing Officer

Dr. Mark Christopher Saslo, DNS, ARNP-BC, FAANP, assumed the role of Assistant Under Secretary for Health for Patient Care Services/Chief Nursing Officer (CNO) in 2022. He brings more than 30 years of nursing experience, with 20 of those years with the VHA, to this role. As CNO, Dr. Saslo serves as the principal executive for oversight of Care Management & Social Work, Caregiver Support, Chaplain, Geriatrics & Extended Care, Health Outcomes Military Exposures, LGBTQ+ Health, Connected Care, Nursing, Sterile Processing, Patient Centered Care and Cultural Transformation, Pharmacy Benefits Management, Physician Assistants, Rehabilitation and Prosthetic Services, and National Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention, Public Health, Health Solutions, Health Equity, and Rural Health.

A Career Pinnacle

Three VA nurses have been selected as distinguished Fellows in the American Academy of Nursing for 2022: Richard Fidler, Ph.D., MBA, CRNA, NP, CHSE; Bernadette Jao, DNP, PMH-BC; and Marianne Shaughnessy, Ph.D., AGPCNP-BC, GS-C, are recognized with this great honor for their significant contributions to health and health care.

Nurse of the Year

For the second time in three years, a VA nurse has been named ANCC Pathway Nurse of the Year: Marika Widmann, BSN, RN, MS-BC, received this distinguished acknowledgement for her outstanding contributions to health and health care.

2022 Recognition and Awards

Juliet Aninye, LPN, LVN

Secretary’s Award for Excellence in Nursing

in the Licensed Practical Nurse Role

For increasing Veteran utilization of the AvaSure Telesitter program to prevent falls from 47% to 78% through her constant engagement

Clinta Che’ Reed, PhD, RN, CNL-BC

Secretary’s Award for Excellence in Nursing in the Registered Nurse in an Expanded Role

For developing multiple tools to monitor COVID-19 patient status, employee vaccination compliance, and other COVID-19 related data

Shimeca Tillis, RN

Secretary’s Award for Excellence in Nursing in the Registered Nurse/Staff Role

For demonstrating her leadership acumen in multiple ways, including improving transitions of care and increased enrollment for both Home Telehealth and Congestive Heart Failure clinics

Maria Cielo-Borrinaga, MSN, RN-BC, CNL, CCRN

Fellow of the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses

For contributions as an advocate on behalf of nurse practitioners and their patients

Kristine Theis, FNP, MSN

American Association of Nurse Practitioners State Award for Excellence

For outstanding contributions to Nurse Practitioner education, policy, clinical practice, and research

Brenda Shaffer, DNP, RN-BC, NE-BC

Secretary’s Award for the Advancement of Nursing Programs in the Nurse Executive Role

For executing a surge plan in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring the safety of both Veterans and staff

Paul M. Russo, MHSA, FACHE, RD

Secretary’s Award for the Advancement of Nursing Programs in the Medical Center Director Role

For supporting nursing staff by raising salaries, incorporating retention pay and incentives, and advocating for staff-driven evidence-based systems redesign projects

Marie Robinson-McLaughlin, MSN, BSN, RN

Promotion to Colonel, United States Air Force

For performing as an exemplary reservist with more than 700 flight hours logged in combat missions around the world, in addition to her civilian medical management expertise

Letha Joseph, DNP, AGPCNP-BC, FFNMRCSI, FAANP

Fellow of the American Association of Nurse Practitioners

For outstanding contributions to Nurse Practitioner education, policy, clinical practice, and research

Judith Bourque-Olmstead, Advanced Telehealth Clinical Technician

Secretary’s Award for Excellence in Nursing in the Health Care Technician Role

For leading the way in developing and establishing TeleDermatology, a system that allows providers to assist Veterans in locating and diagnosing skin conditions

Clinta Che’ Reed, PhD, RN, CNL-BC

Secretary’s Award for Excellence in Nursing in the Registered Nurse in an Expanded Role

For developing multiple tools to monitor COVID-19 patient status, employee vaccination compliance, and other COVID-19 related data

Shimeca Tillis, RN

Secretary’s Award for Excellence in Nursing in the Registered Nurse/Staff Role

For demonstrating her leadership acumen in multiple ways, including improving transitions of care and increased enrollment for both Home Telehealth and Congestive Heart Failure clinics

Maria Cielo-Borrinaga, MSN, RN-BC, CNL, CCRN

Fellow of the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses

For contributions as an advocate on behalf of nurse practitioners and their patients

Kristine Theis, FNP, MSN

American Association of Nurse Practitioners State Award for Excellence

For outstanding contributions to Nurse Practitioner education, policy, clinical practice, and research

Brenda Shaffer, DNP, RN-BC, NE-BC

Secretary’s Award for the Advancement of Nursing Programs in the Nurse Executive Role

For executing a surge plan in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring the safety of both Veterans and staff

Paul M. Russo, MHSA, FACHE, RD

Secretary’s Award for the Advancement of Nursing Programs in the Medical Center Director Role

For supporting nursing staff by raising salaries, incorporating retention pay and incentives, and advocating for staff-driven evidence-based systems redesign projects

Marie Robinson-McLaughlin, MSN, BSN, RN

Promotion to Colonel, United States Air Force

For performing as an exemplary reservist with more than 700 flight hours logged in combat missions around the world, in addition to her civilian medical management expertise

Letha Joseph, DNP, AGPCNP-BC, FFNMRCSI, FAANP

Fellow of the American Association of Nurse Practitioners

For outstanding contributions to Nurse Practitioner education, policy, clinical practice, and research

Judith Bourque-Olmstead, Advanced Telehealth Clinical Technician

Secretary’s Award for Excellence in Nursing in the Health Care Technician Role

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The Continued Fight Against COVID-19

VHA nurses play a significant role in fighting COVID-19. As trusted professionals, they can help stop the spread of misinformation, provide vaccinations, and care for those infected with the latest treatments. They’ve done this throughout the pandemic, putting themselves at risk, all to see Veterans safely through this time of crisis.

The Nurses Who Gave All

ONS recognizes the nurses who gave their lives in the line of service during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their memories will live on because of their commitment, kindness, compassion, and helping Veterans at ultimate risk to themselves. We acknowledge the pain of VHA staff and their families who lost their colleagues and loved ones. We offer our sincerest condolences and will never forget them.

Nurse Legion of Honor Medal

Cindy Jones, a former Birmingham VA Health Care System licensed practical nurse, was recognized in 2022 with the Nurse Legion of Honor Medal by the Alabama State Nurses Association. Ms. Jones worked on the frontlines, risking her safety, as she nursed Veterans living in the Gadsden, Alabama, community. Her dedicated care for her patients ended in her making the ultimate sacrifice when she succumbed to COVID-19 in 2020.

Remembering How it All Began

It’s important to remember the beginning of the pandemic, and the uphill battle VHA nurses faced. Paola Soler, RN at James J. Peters VA Medical Center, is one of the countless nurses who rose to the challenge during the unbearably stressful days of the early pandemic. Battling a lack of PPE, shortage of staff, negative pressure rooms, and trying to keep one patient alive while another patient was actively coding, all while worried about catching the virus herself. Ms. Soler went above and beyond to help a young man in the ICU. Before iPads were available for COVID-19 patients to see and speak with relatives, Ms. Soler took it upon herself to Facetime her husband and one-year-old son every morning and evening. The Veteran couldn’t talk because of intubation, but he would squeeze Ms. Soler’s hand to communicate with his family. He became that VAMC’s first successful extubation and discharge of COVID-19, thanks to Ms. Soler’s care of not only his physical body but his soul.

In 2022, we celebrated and bid farewell to our leader, colleague, and friend, Dr. Beth Taylor, on her well-deserved VA retirement. Through her visionary, passionate, and dedicated focus, Dr. Taylor strengthened the posture of VA nursing, leaving it resilient and more cohesive as a profession.

In addition to leading VA nursing through the COVID-19 pandemic, Dr. Taylor was instrumental in ensuring that nursing was represented at the highest level of leadership for executive decision-making across and throughout VHA. By “leaning in,” she not only transformed but also elevated the nursing leadership role, strengthening clinical and executive-level decision-making outcomes.

While serving as Chief Nursing Officer, Dr. Taylor was promoted and appointed as VA’s Assistant Under Secretary for Health for Patient Care Services, the first time in the history of Veteran care a nurse leader held such a position of authority and influence.

In addition to these accomplishments, Dr. Taylor also:
- Led the development of the 2022 VHA Nursing Workforce Strategic Plan
- Championed legislation for the National Standards of Practice across 50 different professional occupations, and for the successful enactment of the R.A.I.S.E. Act and Federal Supremacy, paving the way to achieve cross-national U.S. healthcare practice in their health care profession
- Advocated for enterprise-wide nursing EBP with an aspirational goal to have a Nurse Scientist in each facility

During her VA tenure, Dr. Taylor was awarded a Fellowship in the American Academy of Nursing in recognition of her longstanding and highly impactful influence on the nursing profession. Dr. Taylor’s leadership consistently championed clinical nursing practice, evidence-based decision-making, modernizing the nursing workforce, educating nurses and patients, and nursing research. Her work supporting nurses as clinical leaders will have a lasting effect as VA grows the next generation of nursing leaders.

A Nursing Legend Retires: Dr. Beth Taylor, DHA, RN, NEA-C, FAAN

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View Dr. Beth Taylor’s farewell video here.

A NOTE ABOUT THE IMAGES IN THIS REPORT: Wherever possible, the 2022 ONS Annual Report depicts photographs of current frontline VHA nurses. These faces from the field represent the diverse nursing workforce who all have one thing in common: a mission to provide the highest quality of care to Veterans at the largest healthcare system in the country.

The nurses on the front and back covers and the table of contents page represent the following VA Medical Centers:
- Hershel “ Woody” Williams VA Medical Center, Huntington, WV
- Hampton VA Medical Center, Hampton, VA
- Fayetteville VA Medical Center, Fayetteville, NC
- Galveston County VA Clinic, Galveston, TX
- VA North Texas Healthcare System, Dallas, TX
- Allentown VA Clinic, Allentown, PA
- West Palm Beach VA Medical Center, West Palm Beach, FL
- James J. Peters VA Medical Center, Bronx, NY
- Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center, Charleston, SC
- VA Greater Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA
- Bruce W. Harman Department of VA Medical Center, Miami, FL

Across the nation, VHA nurses work tirelessly to serve those who served. Hear from nurses why they do what they do. Watch nurses share their stories here.

I take care of them like they are the only person there.

—PATRICIA IKEM NURSE PRACTITIONER
To Our Nurses, Thank You!

Words are not enough to express gratitude for your daily dedication, caring with compassion, hard work, and perseverance. You have shown ongoing bravery through the most difficult of times. We honor you and all you do for Veterans.