



LETTER FROM THE CHIEF

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Dear Colleagues,

Since I began serving as your Acting ADUSH just a few short weeks ago, you've given me the opportunity to expand both my knowledge and my network. By getting to know many people I'd worked with only peripherally before, I've learned so much about the different offices that make up ORE. It's a true pleasure to serve in a role that allows me to learn firsthand that every single office in ORE is staffed by extremely dedicated people who are highly skilled in their fields. I am continually amazed by the depth of knowledge on our team, the strength of ORE employees' shared commitment to Veterans and the level of staff engagement.

While my tenure as your Acting ADUSH is short, my career has been long and varied—so I thought I'd share a few small bits of wisdom I have gleaned over my 14 years of dedicated service and clinical experience within VA.

First, and most important: **If you put the Veteran as the priority, all the other concerns fall away and the issues become clearer.**

I joined the Office of the Medical Inspector (OMI) in 2016, and since then I have conducted many investigations at VHA facilities across the country. I like to say that OMI—an objective, independent office—concerns itself with “just the facts” as we investigate VA health care to improve the quality of care Veterans receive. But focusing on “just the facts” doesn't mean that our investigations are straightforward or uncomplicated. Regardless of methodology, when we keep the Veteran as our primary focus, we are guaranteed to meet our mission.

Good communication is essential. With rare exceptions, every person I've encountered as part of an OMI investigation is hardworking and passionate about the mission to serve

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Story ideas can be submitted to: oreteamdis@disconsulting.com.

Veterans. You may be surprised to hear that more than 90% of the referrals I've pursued stem from some kind of communication challenge. Often, investigators end up serving as the liaison to begin a dialogue between staff who have not been communicating effectively. The bottom line? Never underestimate the power of getting people to sit down and talk to one another.

Everything we need to know about leadership, we learned in kindergarten. You don't need an advanced degree to be a good leader, a good colleague, or a good human. Remember what we learned when we were young: play well with others. Be truthful. Do your best work.

Perhaps the most important thing I've learned during my VA career is what a really amazing job VA does serving Veterans. VA Medical Centers are second to none when it comes to continuity and coordination of care. Our patient outcomes are great. Our staff are passionate and we keep making the VA system better.

Thank you for everything you do to advance our mission to serve Veterans. Enjoy this issue of *CONNECTION*.

NEW FRAUD ALERT: COVID-19 VACCINATION CARD SCAMS

Office of Inspector General and ORE's Office of Integrity and Compliance Raise Awareness

Earlier this month, the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) and ORE's Office of Integrity and Compliance (OIC) released a [new Fraud Alert on COVID-19 vaccination card scams](#).

The use of fake COVID-19 vaccination cards remains an issue as Americans continue to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic.

Vaccination cards are intended to provide recipients of the COVID-19 vaccine with information about the type of vaccination they received, when they received it, and when they may be able to receive a second or booster dose (if eligible). Many businesses, workplaces, restaurants and other facilities require proof of vaccination before entering their establishments.

However, this requirement has stimulated some individuals to create fake vaccination cards to gain entry to vaccine mandating entities.

COUNTERFEIT COVID-19 VACCINATION CARDS ARE ILLEGAL

VA is working to protect Veterans by raising awareness of vaccination card scams.

"The Office of Integrity and Compliance (OIC) is charged with monitoring and reporting instances of fraudulent COVID-19 vaccination cards," says Dr. Tracy Davis Bradley, Executive Director of VHA ORE's Office of Integrity and Compliance.

"As champions of the [VHA Code of Integrity](#), VA employees have an essential role to play in helping us detect and prevent the use of these fake cards. Specifically, we ask that employees contact the OIC Helpline if you encounter or suspect a fake vaccine card in your work," she said.

Increasing VA employee's awareness of fake COVID-19 cards

helps to protect VA employees, Veterans and loved ones.

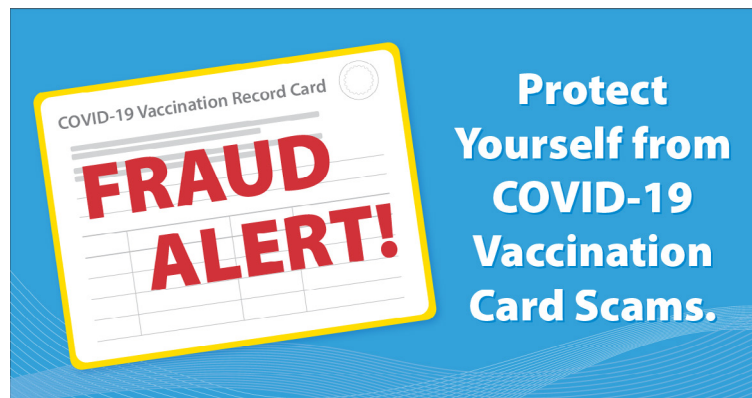
Key vaccine card safety tips include:

- **Do not** buy fake vaccination cards or make your own.
- **Do not** fill in blank vaccination cards with false information.
- **Do not** provide personal, medical or financial details to anyone in exchange for vaccine information. Only obtain vaccinations from trusted providers.
- **Do not** share photos of COVID-19 vaccination cards on social media, as this puts you at risk for identity theft.

REPORT SUSPICIOUS COVID-19 VACCINE CARDS

Criminal activity should be promptly reported to the VA Office of Inspector General: VA OIG Hotline at (800) 488-8244 or by visiting <https://www.va.gov/oig/hotline/>.

If you suspect use of a fake COVID-19 vaccine card, contact the OIC Helpline (available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week) at (866) 842-4357 (VHA-HELP) or email: VHAOICHelpline@va.gov.



VHA'S OFFICE OF OVERSIGHT, RISK AND ETHICS HELPS BRING SAFER PAIN MANAGEMENT TO MORE VETERANS THROUGH THE OFFICE OF INTERNAL AUDIT

VA Medical Centers Mandated to Help Veterans Find Safer Pain Management

In 2012, more than two million Veterans were diagnosed with chronic pain—and [one-third of those Veterans took opioids](#) for pain management. Since then, [VA has reduced prescription opioid use](#) in its patients by 64%.

In 2016, VA's efforts were further propelled with the [Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery \(CARA\) Act](#). CARA required all VHA medical facilities to implement interdisciplinary Pain Management Teams (PMTs).

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The goal of these PMTs? Provide a team at every VA medical facility to help Veterans find safer pain management treatments—avoiding the need for opioids altogether.

However, a few years after CARA was established, VA medical facilities still had trouble implementing PMTs uniformly across VA. Facilities had limited support, no dedicated budget and unclear requirements. They were set up for failure.

VHA ORE'S INTERNAL AUDIT TEAM DEPLOYED TO ASSIST

In 2019, to support VA medical facilities in meeting their charge to help Veterans avoid opioid addiction and overdose through PMTs, the VHA Under Secretary for Health charged the VHA's Office of Oversight, Risk and Ethics, through the Office of Internal Audit (IA), to help them.

IA deployed an interdisciplinary PMT Audit Team consisting of auditors, clinicians and statisticians to conduct an audit. Working collaboratively with Pain Management leaders, their first aim was to pinpoint the greatest challenges in standing up the Pain Management Teams.

WITH IA'S HELP, VAMCS GET WHAT THEY NEED—AND VETERANS CAN GET SAFER CARE

IA knew it needed to be able to create a birds-eye view of the VAMCs across the country. To do so, they collected pain management data from the medical centers and created the first centralized dashboard which could show where each VAMC was in implementation.



With this data, IA produced recommendations so that all VAMCs that required a PMT would have formal standards, documentation, expectations—and the resources required to put these teams in place.

Thanks to the needs and requirements outlined in IA's Pain Management Team report, all VAMCs will now receive the funding and resources they need to stand up fully functional and uniform PMTs. IA, as does all of VA, will continue to seek ways to continuously improve and provide Veterans with personalized, interdisciplinary care and pain management options that keep them safe as they manage their pain.

For a more in-depth look at IA's Pain Management Team Audit, you can [read the case study](#) or [watch the video](#). To learn more about IA's services, visit [Office of Internal Audit](#) or contact us at VHA10IAInternalAuditAction@va.gov.

REMEMBERING BLACK VETERANS' FIGHT FOR ACCESS AND EQUITY IN VETERAN HEALTH CARE

Despite segregation in the ranks, unequal compensation and even legal barriers to military service, Black Americans have always answered the call to duty, serving in every military conflict in United States history. But while Black soldiers fought with valor in every American war, their access to Veterans benefits—particularly health care—was historically unequal.

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has worked to remedy these inequities for decades—and at key moments in history, Black Veterans have driven important improvements to health care access and quality.

This Black History Month, we note and celebrate a few of the

milestone events on the journey to equitable Veteran health care, as well as the people who have worked to ensure that every Veteran has equal access to excellent patient care.

“SOLDIERS HOME” CARES FOR BLACK AND WHITE CIVIL WAR VETERANS

Founded in 1867, the [Central Branch, National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers in Dayton, Ohio](#), (now the Dayton Veterans Affairs Medical Center) provided medical and rehabilitative care to [Black and white Union Veterans alike](#) after the Civil War. It was the first government-civilian institution to admit the nation's first Black Veterans.

REMEMBERING BLACK VETERANS' FIGHT FOR ACCESS AND EQUITY IN VETERAN HEALTH CARE

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BLACK WWI VETERANS INFORM DEVELOPMENT OF VETERANS HEALTH SYSTEM

Black soldiers who served during World War I faced [extreme hostility from fellow soldiers](#). Upon returning to the U.S. after the war, many Black Veterans found it difficult to secure proper treatment in segregated VA hospitals, especially in the South. Those Veterans, called “activist patients” by some historians, “[helped shape the Veterans’ health system that emerged in the 1920s and remained in place for the following century.](#)”

FIRST BLACK VA HOSPITAL DIRECTOR NAMED

In 1923, the first and only VA hospital in the nation for Black Veterans was established, and—despite threats of violence—[fully staffed by African Americans](#). Lt. Col. Joseph Henry Ward, M.D., became the [first African American hospital director in VA’s history](#). Dr. Ward led The Tuskegee Veterans Administration Hospital for 12 years.

FIRST BLACK VA REGIONAL DIRECTOR NAMED

In 1954, racial segregation officially ended in VA hospitals. In 1962, Dr. Howard W. Kenney, who had served as the medical director at The Tuskegee Veterans Administration Hospital, became the [first African American to integrate a formerly all-white VA hospital](#) when he was hired as the director at East Orange, N.J. Seven years later, Kenney became VA’s first African American regional director.

VA’S CENTER FOR MINORITY VETERANS ESTABLISHED

In 1994, [VA’s Center for Minority Veterans \(CMV\)](#) was established by Public Law 103-446, to ensure all Veterans receive equal service regardless of race, origin, religion or gender. The CMV serves as an advocate for minority Veterans by conducting outreach activities to promote the awareness and use of VA benefits and services.

VA OFFICE OF HEALTH EQUITY (OHE) ESTABLISHED

In 2011 the Veterans Health Administration chartered a health care equality workgroup to determine how VA could provide a more equitable health care delivery system. The workgroup’s recommendations supported a dedicated national-level office to champion equitable health care for all Veterans. As a result, the [Office of Health Equity \(OHE\)](#) was established in 2012.

While VA has made significant strides in ensuring that all Veterans receive equitable access to quality health care, racial and other disparities persist. In 2021, the OHE examined inequities among racial minority groups as well as among other minorities including women, LGBTQ Veterans, and rural Veterans.

To learn more about equitable health care, visit: <https://www.va.gov/HEALTHYQUITY>. For more on how VA celebrates Black History Month, visit: <https://blogs.va.gov/VAntage/?s=black+history+month>.

HEALTHY HEARTS: SPOTLIGHT ON WOMEN’S HEALTH

February marks American Heart Month, a time for us to focus on our cardiovascular health. As one of the most common and complex health challenges, heart disease accounts for nearly [one in three deaths](#) in the United States.

The good news is that risk factors for heart disease can often be modified. Increasing your physical activity, following a heart-smart diet, and stopping tobacco use are three key paths to improving your heart health and avoiding heart disease.

During American Heart Month, VA Women’s Health has a special campaign focused on improving heart health among women Veterans. This campaign encourages all women Veterans to have a conversation about their heart with their VA health care providers. Focusing on heart health

is important for every woman, but especially for women Veterans as they are more likely than non-Veteran women to experience heart disease.

Even younger women Veterans may face additional risks that impact their heart health. Increased stress that is common in military service, and certain mental health concerns such as PTSD and depression affect women’s heart health. Additionally, Veterans may partake in unhealthy habits after leaving military service, like smoking or not exercising as often or as strenuously as they used to during their time in the service.

The racial and ethnic diversity of women Veterans is higher than non-Veteran women or Veteran men. Black or non-Hispanic African American women experience higher

HEALTHY HEARTS: SPOTLIGHT ON WOMEN'S HEALTH

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rates of heart disease and related risk factors, such as diabetes, obesity, smoking, and high blood pressure, than white and Hispanic women Veterans.

This February, and every month, it is important to encourage women Veterans to talk with their VA health care providers about their risks for heart disease and how to start a heart health plan with realistic and achievable goals. In addition to comprehensive primary care and women's health services, VA offers the following resources to help women Veterans protect their hearts:

- [VHA Women's Health Heart Health Resources](#): Information and resources to help women Veterans learn about the risk factors for and symptoms of heart disease and steps they can take to lower their risks.
- [VA Tobacco Cessation Resources](#): VA offers a variety of resources to help Veterans quit tobacco use. Tobacco cessation is one way to help women Veterans improve their heart health.
- [VA Mindfulness Coach App](#): Mindfulness has been shown

to reduce stress, a major risk factor for heart disease. The Mindfulness Coach App helps Veterans and service members practice mindfulness techniques to manage their stress levels.

- [MOVE! Weight Management Program](#): Being physically active and maintaining a healthy weight can help women Veterans reduce their risk of heart disease. The MOVE! Weight Management Program provides resources and encourages healthy eating behaviors, physical activity and exercise, and weight loss.

Remember, if you are a woman Veteran, if you know a woman Veteran, or if you encounter women Veterans inquiring about heart health, now is the time to have a conversation with VA health care providers. Planning today can help protect hearts tomorrow. Women Veterans can also call or text the Women Veterans Call Center at 1-855-829-6636. For more information on heart health and comprehensive health care services for women Veterans, visit <https://www.womenshealth.va.gov/WOMENSHEALTH/WomensHealthServices/wellness.asp>.

ORE RESOURCES

Check out the variety of tools and resources below, which are designed to streamline information sharing and improve ORE processes. If you have a project or tool you'd like to share, please email [Kelly O'Donnell](mailto:kelly.o'donnell@va.gov).

- IA Resources
 - [Pain Management Case Study](#)
 - [IA FAQs](#)
 - White board video #1 - [VHA's Office of Internal Audit Helps Employees Address Those Monstrous Issues That Keep Them Up](#)
 - White board video #2 - [VHA's Office of Internal Audit Case Study of the Pain Management Team Audit](#)
- ORE leadership videos
 - [Office of Internal Audit](#)
 - [Office of Integrity and Compliance](#)
 - [National Center for Ethics in Health Care](#)
 - [Office of the Medical Inspector](#)
 - [Office of Research Oversight](#)
- [Enterprise Risk Management video](#)
- [Online Risk Appetite Quiz](#)
- [Choose Your Own Compliance Adventure tool](#)
- [Weekly Emails](#)
- All [Videos](#)
- [Intranet](#)
- [ORE SharePoint](#)

IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENTS

ORE TOWN HALLS

ORE staff celebrated the new year during the January 2022

town hall. Dr. Hirshberg, Acting VHA Associate Deputy Undersecretary for Health, Oversight, Risk and Ethics shared important VHA-wide updates to kick off the year and

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celebrated colleagues' milestones across ORE. You can access the recording of this town hall in the [ORE SharePoint Site, Town Hall Folder](#).

Be on the lookout for the calendar invitation for the next Town Hall from [Alfreda Holmes](#).

BETTER TOGETHER CONVERSATIONS

Better Together Conversations continue in 2022! Thank you to everyone who attended the January session focused on tips and tricks for self-care and growth. Two years into the pandemic, we continue to need to make time to breathe and care for ourselves. Access tips from the session in the [ORE SharePoint site, Better Together Conversation folder](#).

If you haven't attended a session yet or are new to ORE,

Better Together Conversations or BTC are informal themed conversations for ORE staff to learn new skills, share tips and tricks and get to know each other better. Our next session will take place on Wednesday, February 9. Watch your inbox for a calendar invitation from [Alfreda Holmes](#).

ORE PROGRAM OFFICE VIDEOS

[ORE: The Veterans Among Us](#)

Meet the Veterans serving on staff at the VHA Office of Oversight, Risk and Ethics!

[ORE: The Veterans We Serve](#)

Employees from the VHA Office of Oversight, Risk and Ethics share how and why they serve Veterans.

VA



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Veterans Health Administration

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Thank you for reading *CONNECTION*. Have any ideas about how we can make the newsletter even better? Are there topics or individuals you want to hear more about? Send us an email: oreteamdis@disconsulting.com.