

Jesse Brown Pulse

Celebrating Black History Month



MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR



Dr. Clifford Smith
Director,
Jesse Brown VA
Medical Center

This month we celebrated Black History Month and renamed the Prescription Room to the Brig. Gen. Dr. Hazel Johnson-Brown Conference Room. Dr. Johnson-Brown was a trailblazer, first African-American female general officer in the Army, and the first to earn a doctorate degree as a general officer.

Dr. Johnson-Brown served honorably from 1955-1983 and was awarded distinguished medals, including the Army Distinguished Service Medal, Meritorious Service Medal, and the Army Commendation Medal with an Oak Leaf cluster. She was also awarded Army Nurse of the Year twice. After she retired from the Army in 1983, she headed the American

Nurses Association's government relations unit as well as the George Mason University's Center for Health Policy as a professor.

During the month, Jesse Brown's Special Emphasis Program provided the workforce with weekly trivia about Black history, mental health awareness in the African-American community, and a fashion show was held at Auburn Gresham's Community Based Outpatient Clinic.

African Americans have a long and distinguished history in the United States military, according to the Department of Defense. They have defended our nation with loyalty, honor, and patriotism, during peace time and in every war fought by or within the United States.

Women as well as men have served honorably, especially women who have enlisted as men to serve the nation. For example, in 1866, Cathay Williams enlisted in the Army using the name William Cathay. She told the recruiter she was a 22-year-old cook. She was even given the OK by an Army surgeon who examined her and said she was fit

for duty. Williams' enlistment was historic because she is documented as being the first Black woman to enlist in the U.S. Army even though Army regulations at that time forbade women from enlisting.

At Jesse Brown VAMC we are committed to ensuring all Veterans are treated fairly and with respect. Our Veteran population is aging and that also includes African Americans. According to Veterans Affairs Office of Health Equity, from 2019 to 2045, the racial and ethnic composition of Veterans will change, which means Black Veterans will increase from 12% to 15%.

It is fitting that we remember the contributions African Americans have not only made to the U.S. military, but to the nation. Many served and contributed to the country during a time when Black people were considered second-class citizens, yet they continued to serve, and some even made the ultimate sacrifice by giving their lives to our nation.

We must remember that Black History Month extends beyond February, it is part of American history and our everyday lives.

MISSION

The Jesse Brown Pulse seeks to celebrate all the amazing things our employees do, in and out of work, as well as highlight resources across the medical center for our Veterans.



NEWSLETTER STAFF

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CONTACT

This newsletter is for you, so if you have a story you want to share, please reach out to CHSPAQ@va.gov.

COMMUNICATIONS TASKFORCE

The Communications Taskforce is a group of your peers who volunteered to search out and tell the stories of our medical center and the Veterans we are honored to serve.

COMMUNICATION TASKFORCE MEMBERS

Francis Agyei	Christina Chiu
Jessica Gardner	Catrina Francis
Tenena Soro	Vanita Williams
Lacretia Henderson	Shari Pollack
Helen Morrison	Kimberly Palmer
Kristen Lake	Cynthia Robertson

Strategic Planning Introduction

Working on today to better the future

Derek Witkowski - Chief of Strategic Growth

The Jesse Brown Veterans Affairs Medical Center has prioritized meeting and exceeding the expectations set forth by Veterans Affairs and Veterans Health Administration. By establishing the Department of Strategic Growth, JBVAMC now has the capability and capacity to track existing strategic goals and implement new ones while ensuring all strategic activity is properly nested to higher organizational goals and strategy.

- **Goal 1:** Veterans choose VHA as their health care provider and coordinator, built on trusted, long-term relationships
- **Goal 2:** VHA delivers high-quality, accessible and integrated health care
- **Goal 3:** VHA maximizes performance through shared ownership and is on the forefront of innovation
- **Goal 4:** VHA optimizes assets across the enterprise

Over the course of the next operational period, JBVAMC plans to continue adding local goals that can best achieve the VHA's mission. The medical center also plans to review its goals annually to determine if they require market adjustment or can be discontinued if no longer relevant or completed.

The purpose of this operational plan is to establish the local strategic actions JBVAMC plans on taking over the course of the next operational period (fiscal year 2024-2025) and how these goals meet the purpose and intent of higher organizational goals and objectives (Level 2 and 3 plans). This plan will serve



to capture all the facility's strategic efforts to provide the staff with a single source for all information related to strategic planning.

If anyone has some ideas or are willing to help reach out and get involved, all questions, comments, concerns, or ideas can email Kimberly Palmer at Kimberly.palmer@va.gov and she will reply as soon as she can.

JBVAMC Chief of Staff meets Dr. Anthony Fauci



On Feb. 29, a luncheon held at the University of Illinois Chicago, Jesse Brown Chief of Staff Dr. Sarah Unterman meets with Dr. Anthony Fauci, the former Chief Medical Advisor to the president of United States. The event was an opportunity for medical professionals to network and share best practices.

Jesse Brown celebrates Black History Month

Compiled by Catrina Francis -Public Affairs Officer

In February, Jesse Brown Veterans Affairs Medical Center celebrated Black History Month.

Each week, employees were emailed trivia questions to test their knowledge about Black history. There were also events held each

week beginning with “Mental health awareness, a change is going to come with guest speakers Drs. Keisha Battle and Gregory Winstead and ending with more Black history trivia and a display of African-American art.

Employees had an opportunity to learn the importance of mental health and how it affects the African-American community. After the Black history trivia, employees also had a chance to listen to various genres of African-American music.

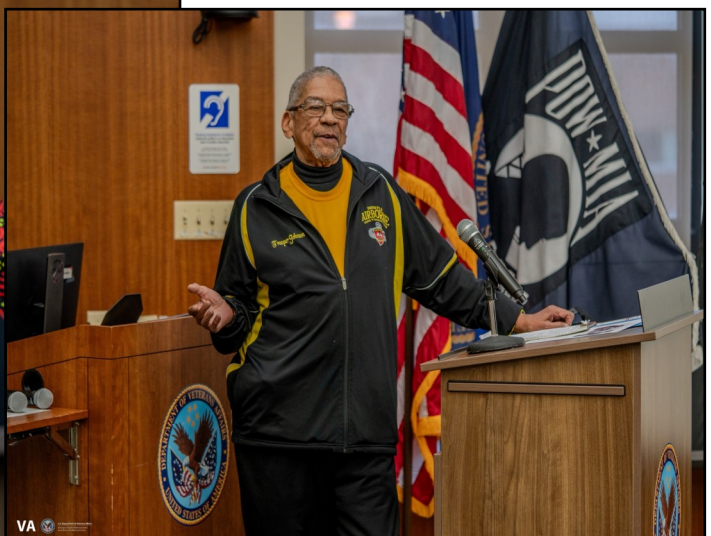


(Top left) Employees listen during a Black History Month event in the Brig. Gen. Dr. Hazel Johnson-Brown Conference Room. An event was held each week during Black History Month to celebrate African Americans.

(Bottom left) Former Jesse Brown Veterans Affairs Medical Center EEO Manager/ADR / HPP Coordinator Jacquelyn Wilkerson speaks during a Black History Month event. During the events, employees had an opportunity to dress in African clothing as a way of paying homage to African Americans.

(Bottom right) Cecil Johnson, a volunteer at JBVAMC since 1996, talks about his time serving in the U.S. Army as an airborne medic from 1954-1966. Johnson earned a Bronze Star in Vietnam by trying to save his fellow soldiers who were in an unmarked live minefield by entering the minefield himself.

Photos by Kenny Jones



Bridging health care disparities: The inspiring journey of Dr. Natasha Nichols

Christina Chiu – Health Systems Specialist

Growing up on the south side of Chicago, Dr. Natasha Nichols witnessed firsthand the disparities in access to health care and the impact of socioeconomic factors on health outcomes. In an insightful interview, Nichols shared her journey from childhood observations to becoming a passionate advocate for underserved communities, with a special focus on Veterans.

Reflecting on her upbringing, Nichols recalled the stark differences between her early education in Chicago and the suburban environment where she later moved. As a young girl she recalled a noteworthy memory of finding books in the classroom along with after-school programs which highlighted the stark differences in resources between her two environments. At the age of 5, Nichols developed a deep curiosity about how to prevent medical conditions like strokes and heart attacks from impacting her family and community. These experiences planted the seed her future pursuit of a career in medicine.

Her journey led her to prestigious institutions like Duke University, Georgetown University School of Medicine and

later Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine for residency, where she honed her skills and passion for serving others.

Returning to Chicago, Nichols found herself reconnecting with her grandfather, a Vietnam Veteran battling lung cancer. This experience deepened her understanding of the complexities within the health care system and fueled her determination to advocate for patients' rights and bridge the gap between patients and providers. She played a pivotal role in helping her grandfather navigate his treatment for lung cancer, spending time with him at Jesse Brown Veterans Affairs Medical Center, where she felt a deeper connection to him and her work caring for Veterans.

As a current physician at Jesse Brown VAMC, Nichols also co-chairs the Jesse Brown 4 Black Lives Task Force, along with Drs. Cheryl Conner and Sheryl Lowery, a hospital committee created by staff dedicated to addressing racial and ethnic disparities in health care. The task force's initiatives range from mentoring programs, improving access to treatment for opioid use disorder, and advocating

for health policy changes within the VA system to name a few notable areas.

One significant achievement of the JB4BL was the removal of race from clinical algorithms, such as kidney function tests and pulmonary function tests. Nichols and her colleagues recognized the inherent biases in these algorithms ongoing efforts advocating for the elimination of race-based decision tools across all VA hospitals, that will lead to more equitable health care practices.

Beyond her work with the task force, Nichols is deeply committed to providing compassionate care to her patients. She emphasized the importance of listening to patient' concerns, building trust, and addressing barriers to access, such as extending clinic hours, establishing clinics sites in frequently visited stores, and improving transportation options.

Nichols' dedication to advocating for underserved communities and driving systemic change exemplifies the transformative impact that individuals



Dr. Natasha Nichols

can have within the health care system. Her tireless efforts not only improve the lives of her patients but also pave the way for a more equitable and inclusive health care landscape for all.

As Nichols continues to champion health care equity, her unwavering commitment serves as an inspiration to health care professionals and advocates alike, reminding everyone of the power of empathy, advocacy, and community-driven change.

For more information about Jesse Brown 4 Black Lives Task Force team and ongoing projects, please visit SharePoint website <https://dvagov.sharepoint.com/sites/vhachsjb4bl>.



Crucial Conversations. FOR MASTERING DIALOGUE



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Sign up for Jesse Brown Veterans Affairs Medical Center Education Department's Crucial Conversations Class for Mastering Dialogue. The department is now offering the class virtual for all employees. TMS # VA 4651466 classes are held in three sessions and three hours for each session. The classes are instructed by Rome Frazier.

- **Session 1:** Get Unstuck and Master My Stories
- **Session 2:** Master My Stories II and Start with Heart
- **Session 3:** State My Path and Make it Safe

(The next course will be held April 2 to 4. For questions, please contact Rome Frazier at extension 595078)

Crucial Conversations gives people the skills to step into disagreement rather than over or around it and turn disagreement into dialogue for

improved relationships and results.

JBVAMC Leadership Course Catalog



Valerie Reid, Chief of Education/Designated Learning Officer

Photo courtesy of Education Department

Dear Colleagues, It is with great pleasure that I introduce to you our Leadership Development Catalog, designed to help you enhance your skills as a leader and contribute to the success of our health care organization. As the

Chief of Education, I am committed to providing you with the resources and opportunities necessary to achieve your full potential as a leader.

Employees can access the Leadership Course Catalog on the Jesse Brown VAMC SharePoint Hub at the bottom of the page. Individuals cannot get to where they are going if they do not know where they are now. The tool below is designed to help employees identify where they are in the current stage of their

career, as it relates to the Leadership Development Framework. While using this tool, it is important for employees to remember they can grow in their career horizontally and vertically.

Leadership Team of LILD/Education Department

If employees have questions concerning the Leadership Course Catalog, please contact Uros Cemerikic at extension 56019.



The leadership team, which consists of (left to right) Uros Cemerikic, Devan Knox, and Antwaun Paige.

Photo by Julian Calderon

Walk to Healthy Beat

Shari Pollack – Employee Wellness Coordinator

Employee Whole Health and Jesse Brown 4 Black Lives teamed up again this year to co-sponsor the second annual *Walk to a Healthy Beat* team challenge. The aim of this four-week walking challenge, held Feb. 1 through 29 in recognition of American Heart Month, was to get employees walking at least 7,000 steps per day. With more than 300 employees on 59 teams, this challenge boasted the highest participation of any team competition in the last decade at Jesse Brown Veterans Affairs Medical Center.

Before the first steps were counted, employees flexed their creative muscles in coming up with their team names. Among the most nota-

ble were I-CARE about Steps, The Code Runners, The Pace Makers, Best Pace to Work, N'Syncope, This Means WARfarin, and Make LOVE-nox not WAR-farin.

The Code Runners (team captain: Rachel Garza), Red Hot Chili Steppers (Rodolfo Gonzalez), and Team Strides (Lacretia Henderson) took first, second, and third place, respectively. Forty-nine of the 59 teams hit the target of 7,000 steps daily per person, and 24 teams had averages of 10,000 steps or more per day per person.

A Teams channel created for challenge participants — where silly walking GIFs were traded freely — helped foster a spirit of friendly competition among the teams. Kris-

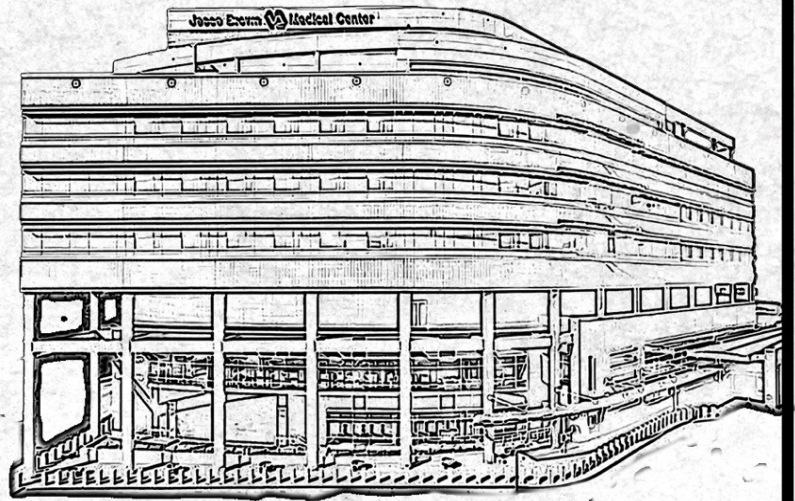
ten Deshida-Such, a Clinical Dietitian, and a member of I-CARE about Steps, enthused “What a success this walking challenge is. It was super fun! I think the way everyone got involved was awesome.” As far as its impact on her activity level, Deshida-Such reflected, “I’m taking more stairs, etc. but am surprised how hard it is to break 10,000 steps.”

If employees missed out on the *Walk to a Healthy Beat* team challenge, the next opportunity to face off against JB colleagues comes this spring, with the fourth annual *2K-A-Day* challenge, which begins April 18 and end with the *VA2K Walk & Roll* event May 15.

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Jesse Brown
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SCAN
ME



Recognizing unsung heroes: Environmental management services in health care

Lacretia Henderson – Administrative officer

In the realm of health care, attention naturally gravitates toward doctors, medicine, specialized care, and other prominent aspects.

However, one vital component often overlooked is Jesse Brown Veterans Affairs Medical Center's Environmental Management Services, specifically, Darnel Keys, a dedicated environmental management service worker at the facility.

Keys has worked at JBVAMC for 3 ½ years, and he brings a unique perspective as a former Navy service member with four years of experience as an electronic technician. Arriving during the COVID-19 pandemic, Keys underwent rigorous training on various devices, including ultraviolet machines aimed at germ eradication to ensure patient safety. As the pandemic unfolded, he witnessed the continuous evolution of safety protocols and innovative

measures to combat the spread of germs, including the introduction of new cleaning machines every few weeks.

Working in the area administering vaccines, Keys emerged as a staunch advocate for vaccination, believing in and supporting the initiative. Recognizing his dedication, Keys was nominated to encourage hospital staff and patients to get vaccinated. In fall of 2023 with the slowing down of machine deliveries, Keys remained proactive, always ready to assist and ensure the smooth functioning of operations within the hospital.

Keys reflected on how his service has helped him overcome various challenges on the job, which improves communication skills with stakeholders. He takes pride in being part of a team dedicated to the safety of Veterans, actively listening, and responding

to their needs promptly. Keys' dedication mirrors the commitment of staff at JBVAMC, ensuring that every contribution, even when unseen, is deeply appreciated.

A heartfelt gratitude to Keys and all environmental management service workers for their tireless efforts in safeguarding the health and well-being of JBVAMC's Veterans and staff. It is vital that everyone at JBVAMC remembers to acknowledge and appreciate their invaluable contributions to the medical center's health care system.



Darnel Keys
Photo by Lacretia Henderson

African Sweet Potato Stew

Recipe by Allison Hyzy - Dietician

Yields ~ five servings
Serving size ~ 1 ¾ cups

Ingredients:

2 teaspoons olive oil
1 1/2 cups onion chopped
~4 cups sweet potato (peeled and diced into ~1/2-1-inch cubes)
2 teaspoons garlic, minced
2 cups low sodium vegetable broth
1 can (14.5 ounces) no salt added diced tomatoes
1 can (4 ounces) fire roasted diced green chiles
2 tablespoons no salt added tomato paste (optional)
1 tablespoon curry powder
¼ teaspoon black pepper (plus more to taste if desired)
½ cup peanut butter

1 can (15.5 ounces) low sodium garbanzo beans
2 cups fresh kale, chopped, stems removed

Preparation:

Add oil to a large pot and heat on medium high, add the onion and cook for four to five minutes (stirring as needed, until translucent).
Add the sweet potato and cook for ~four minutes more, stirring occasionally.
Add the garlic and cook for ~one minute.
Add the broth, diced tomatoes, chiles, tomato paste, curry, and black pepper. Stir and bring to boil. Cover with lid and simmer for ~10 minutes.
Stir in the peanut butter, beans, and kale. Replace the lid and let cook for

about five minutes more.

Estimated per serving:

403 Calories, 56.2 grams carbohydrate, 15.3 grams of fat, 14.3 grams of protein, 13.6 grams of fiber, 458 milligrams of sodium

Tips:

4 cups of diced sweet potato equal about 1 ¼ pounds (you'll want to start with at least 1 ½ pounds sweet potato before it's cleaned and peeled)
You can swap out the kale with a few handfuls' fresh spinach, Swiss chard, or collard greens

