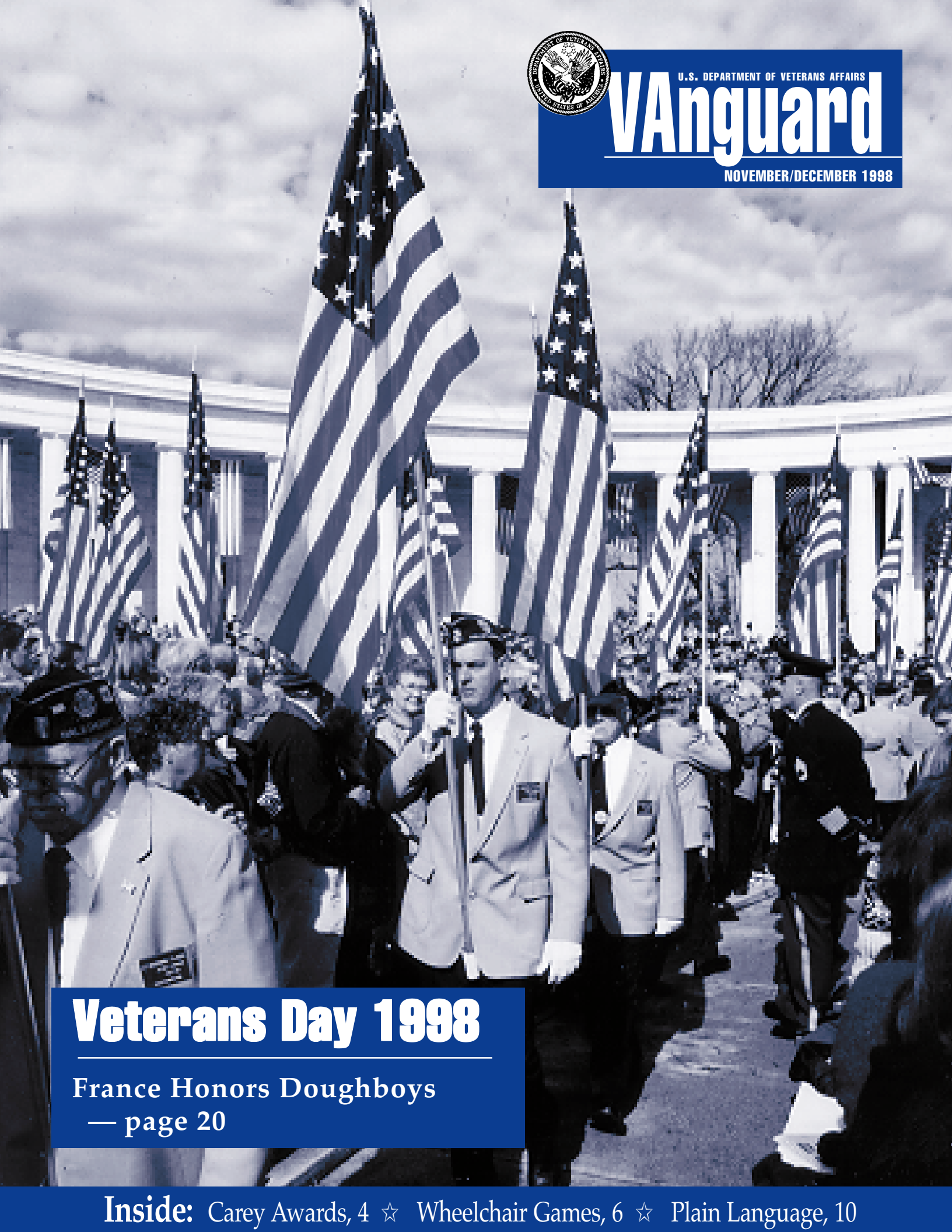




U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Vanguard

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 1998



Veterans Day 1998

France Honors Doughboys
— page 20

Inside: Carey Awards, 4 ☆ Wheelchair Games, 6 ☆ Plain Language, 10

CONTENTS

- ❑ **Carey Award Winners** 4-5
Denver Distribution Center takes trophy
- ❑ **Homeless Grants** 5
26 awarded to non-profit groups
- ❑ **Wheelchair Games** 6-7
Athletes go for the gold in Pittsburgh
- ❑ **Budget Bill Signed** 8
VA funded at \$42.6 million
- ❑ **Foreign Office** 9
Staff oversees international activities
- ❑ **Plain Language** 10-11
Government writing initiative launched
- ❑ **Workplace Violence** 13
VA employee offers prevention training
- ❑ **Veterans Day** 20
Observances held across the nation

COLUMNS 14-19

On The Cover:

Members of the American Legion "27 Flags" from Maryland parade into the Memorial Amphitheater at the start of the annual Veterans Day ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery. They represent the history of the American flag in the state — 27 versions have flown over Maryland from colonial times to the present as states were added to the union.

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INTRODUCING

Melodee Mercer

Melodee Mercer is a federal plain language pioneer whose time has finally come. She has worked 16 years at the VA Insurance Center in Philadelphia, but her expertise in clear, understandable writing has made her presence felt throughout government.

The October 1 launch of the President's Plain Language in Government Writing program has made clear, understandable communication the standard for federal writers. That's something Melodee has long advocated and is now doing something about as one of the federal government's leading plain language experts.

"Writing is something almost every VA employee does on the job," she said. "And plain language writing does make a difference. When you begin to focus as much on who you are writing for as on what you are writing about, you can't help but increase understanding, and that changes the entire process."

It made a big difference in Melodee's life. In 1993 she was called back to work early from a vacation to take part in local training aimed at helping the Insurance Center revamp its pattern letters used to respond to veterans' inquiries.

That work earned Melodee a place as eastern region representative on VBA's Simplified Communication Task Force, whose job was to develop a training program to export what the Insurance Center and other VBA facility writers had learned to the rest of VBA. By 1996, the task force, with the help of a contractor, had come up with VBA's Reader Focused Writing (RFW) program. Melodee became one of its principal instructors.

She was detailed to VA Central Office for four months during the summer of 1996 and, with the help of VBA's newly established satellite television network, taught the basics of Reader Focused Writing to 800 employees in 32 offices.

"We were on the air four to six hours a day, five days a week," she recalled. "We knew we had a great product and all that practice honed the presentation into an effective package."

Vice President Gore vouched for that in June when he presented VBA and its RFW team the NPR Hammer Award for leading the way in reinventing the way the government writes.

In five years, Melodee has seen a local initiative she helped start develop into a national program. She is VBA's lead satellite RFW instructor; is a charter member of

the NPR Plain English Network; and provides orientations for other agencies. Last year, she was detailed to NPR in Washington and wrote the "letter writing" guidance now on the NPR plain language web site at www.plainlanguage.gov.

The VA Plain Language Working Group, charged with implementing the President's directive throughout the Department, is working with Melodee and other VBA RFW experts to adapt that program for VA-wide use.

"The instruction does work," she said. "People come back after classes saying this is the right thing to do. When you write so people understand, you get something back. You fix the process. You make sure people know what they need to know." ❑

By Chris Scheer



Irwin Pernick,
Associate Deputy
Assistant Secretary
for Policy



First, a quiz. Which version of this letter from the VA Insurance Center do you prefer?

A) We are providing the following information about an

insurance payment you indicate you have not received or which is otherwise missing. We have given the Treasury Department the necessary information to trace the check in question; or

B) We received the missing check form you sent us. We asked the Treasury Department to find out what happened to your check. "B" is the obvious choice. Why? It's simple, direct and understandable. It is written in plain language. "A" was the original VA response. The goal of the recently launched federal government plain language initiative is to get all federal employees writing "B" letters as we reinvent the way we communicate with the veterans we serve, other customers and fellow employees.

In announcing the President's plain language initiative last June, Vice President Gore provided this thumbnail guide to plain language: short is better than long; active is better than passive; everyday terms are better than technical terms and it is all right, even preferable, to use pronouns like "we" and "you."

We in VA know these principles work. The Veterans Benefits Administration has packaged and taught them to hundreds of employees over the past year through its Hammer Award-winning Reader Focused Writing program.

Plain language shrinks complex sentences, reduces paragraphs, simplifies titles and, most of all, creates understanding instead of confusion and frustration.

Plain Language Writing Promotes Understanding, Reduces Confusion

Secretary of Veterans Affairs Togo D. West, Jr., issued a VA plain language memorandum and action plan in September directing implementation of the President's initiative.

The implementation schedule for plain language is to write all new documents, other than regulations, that explain veterans' benefits and how to apply for them in plain language as of October 1, 1998; to write all proposed and final regulations published in the Federal Register in plain language beginning January 1, 1999; and to rewrite all older documents still in use, including letters, forms, notices and instructions, in plain language beginning January 1, 2002.

Secretary West said that VA is and will continue to be a leader in the plain language initiative. The VBA Reader Focused Writing program has put us in the lead and the Plain Language Working Group I chair is now working with VBA to adapt that approach to VA-wide use.

Plain language provisions are being added to VA correspondence manuals and plain language guides and best practices web sites will be added to the VA intranet home page.

The National Partnership for Reinventing Government (NPR) has a very good plain language web site that all VA employees should review. It's an excellent introduction to what plain language is, how it works, and how it can work for you. Check it out at www.plainlanguage.gov.

Training will be critical to implementation of plain language in VA, but even more important will be the involvement and support of all VA managers and supervisors in making sure they personally write and communicate in plain language and expect the same from all VA employees.

You have heard colleagues scoffing about this initiative. Indeed, some may be deriding what they

claim is the "dumbing down" of bureaucratic language they hold dear. Well, they are wrong. Plain language works. It is real and it is effective. Its principles can be taught, practiced and perfected.

But ultimately it is more; it is writing with an attitude — an attitude of concern and respect for the person with whom you are communicating. When you start your sentence with that attitude, a lot more than your writing changes. □

New Data Center Opens

"The first place researchers should turn if they need information about VA databases." That is how Dr. Denise Hynes and Diane Cowper describe the new VA Information Resource Center (VIREC) they co-direct at the Hines, Ill., VA Medical Center.

VA recently approved development of the new national center to serve as a wellspring of information on VA databases and provide an information infrastructure to health-services researchers using these databases to address health-research issues important to VA.

VIREC staff also will act as liaison between health-services researchers and the Office of the VA Chief Information Officer.

The VIREC will provide one centralized location for researchers to ask questions on the numerous databases VA owns and stores throughout the country.

The VIREC can point researchers in the right direction to find answers to their questions. Center staff will lead investigators to specific databases likely to contain the information they require and to consultants knowledgeable with those databases.

The new center can be reached at (708) 216-2413. □

Robert W. Carey Award Winners Announced

Denver Distribution Center Takes Top Honor

W This is flag-waving achievement — the kind for which the American people should be willing to stand up and cheer,” said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Togo D. West, Jr., in praise of the productivity and “significant” cost reductions of some of the 1998 Robert W. Carey Quality Award honorees at the annual ceremony in late September.

Among the trophy winner, three category winners and three achievement winners, four had also won the federal government’s top honor for quality and reinvention, the Vice President’s Hammer Award.

Secretary West was quick to note that the best ideas for improving service to customers (or, in VA’s case, veterans) have come from employees who do the front-line work for them. It was also a recurring message from honorees who accepted awards on behalf of their staffs.

One of those, Bob Shields, said not only ideas but teamwork on the front line creates the quality and productivity that customers appreciate and that resulted in the Denver Distribution Center (DDC) winning the Carey trophy this year. And Shields, who has directed the procurement and supply source for prosthetic and audiology devices since 1980, knows about being a DDC customer — the Center supplies his prosthetic feet and socks.

He is one of more than 388,000 disabled veterans who receive assistive devices from the DDC; they place an average of 1,000 orders a day — filled by most of the 54 people who staff the Center. In addition to providing aids, batteries, components and prostheses, the DDC repairs hearing aids and tracks more than a million hearing devices through their life cycles.

Compared to purchasing these devices privately, DDC contracts save VA a lot of money. Software designed by DDC staff has saved even more money and time by allowing medical centers to order prescribed products electronically.

The Remote Order Entry System

has reduced waits for products and paper handling while improving accuracy for a 44 percent increase in productivity over five years. And new products have been added to inventory in the past year. The DDC is reducing its costs further by offering audiology services to five Army regional hospitals. While the Army facilities pay the same as VA facilities, they absorb the DDC’s overhead costs as well.

At the awards program, Shields said his employees had an 80 percent increase in workload in the last two years and expect another 40 percent increase next year with no additional staff.

He asked his own question: “How can such a small group of people handle a customer base such as this and maintain quality in customer service?” And answered: “Plan and follow through; continually provide training; encourage autonomy; delegate authority; build self-maintaining teams that work to achieve a common purpose.” Shields added, “We need to provide the tools to our customers and our employees. We must keep pace with technology; but it’s people who will make it happen. They have to have passion and that has to come from the heart.”

Category winners were: for health care, the Erie, Pa., VAMC; for benefits services, the St. Paul, Minn.,

VARO and Insurance Center; for national cemeteries, the Florida National Cemetery Complex based at Bushnell. Achievement winners also were named: the Walla Walla, Wash., VAMC, the Manchester, N.H., VARO; and the Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery, St. Louis, Mo.

Erie VAMC Director Stephen Lucas said with the reorganization into integrated service lines, the staff’s well-being was his first concern in developing a more productive operation.

“Reengineering is just one tool in the tool box,” he added.

The medical center began a 50-hour training program that covered leadership, coaching and mentoring, customer service and interpersonal skills and allowed employees to earn credit hours from a local university. The goal was to encourage employees to be engaged in their work and to work smart. Lucas said they have taken charge of their futures and the result is outstanding service.

Some of those results include: 33 percent improvement in medical care outcomes, reduced waits in several clinics and 11 percent cost reduction through reorganization. Eighty-four percent of surveyed patients rated their care as very good or excellent.

The St. Paul VARO took on the job of handling veterans’ calls that cannot get through to 13 other

Carey Quality Award Winners

Trophy Winner

Denver Distribution Center

Category Winners

Health Care

Benefits

National Cemeteries

Erie, Pa., VAMC

St. Paul, Minn., VARO & IC

Florida National Cemetery

Complex, Bushnell, Fla.

Achievement Winners

Walla Walla, Wash., VAMC

Manchester, N.H., VARO

Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery, St. Louis, Mo.



Team members from the Denver Distribution Center join Director Bob Shields in accepting VA's top quality award in Washington in September.

regional offices in the Central Area when lines are busy. Research with callers showed satisfaction ratings averaging 4.3 on a 5-point scale. More than 292,000 callers who otherwise would not have received prompt assistance were served between the Information Center's opening in 1996 and the end of August 1998.

The VARO opened a toll-free phone line for veterans and service officers to discuss their adjudicated claims. "Call George" (named for adjudicator/benefits counselor George Zechmann), has reduced the number of claimants who file disagreement notices and increased the number who reopen claims with more useful evidence.

When the Veterans Benefits

Administration created regional loan centers (RLCs), St. Paul started planning to become a consolidated RLC for six states, and soon will cover three more. Better telephone access and timeliness on policy service has resulted. The Vocational Rehabilitation and Counseling Division has doubled the number of veterans served with out-based sites and itinerant counseling. The Insurance Center exceeded the goal of 91 percent of customers being highly satisfied per quarter, with a 96 percent rating at the end of June.

Ronald J. Henke, director of the VARO & IC, accepted the award along with staff members.

"It's not rocket science," said Ron Pemberton, director of the Florida National Cemetery Complex, refer-

ring to the team-building leadership that earned the category award. Having started with the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) in the 1970s as a caretaker, Pemberton always believed managers could learn how to create a productive workforce from front-line employees.

Employees at the Florida complex developed mission statements and a team to create a business plan linking cemetery goals with those of NCA. Employee ideas that have paid off include: sharing water and vehicles with other federal facilities, providing information about the cemetery on a radio frequency message as vehicles enter the grounds, and developing new gardens for scattering cremation ashes, thereby conserving space.

The Florida National Cemetery is only 10 years old. The complex also includes the St. Augustine and Bay Pines cemeteries, which have no more space for casket burials.

Gary Williams, assistant director of the Muskogee, Okla., VARO, spoke for the Carey Award examiners and site visitors who chose the winners this year. He visited all of the nominated VA sites. Williams urged all VA facilities to use the Carey criteria each year to evaluate their performance — not to compete to win but to enlighten themselves and have a benchmark to measure success. □

By Jo Schuda

New Round of Homeless Grants Awarded

Twenty-six public and private nonprofit groups from 23 cities and the District of Columbia have been awarded grants totaling almost \$5 million from VA to develop new programs to assist homeless veterans.

Awarded under the Homeless Providers Grant and Per Diem Program, these grants will supplement up to 65 percent of the cost of acquiring or renovating facilities that will be used for supportive housing or service centers.

With this new round of grants, VA has assisted 127 grant recipients in 39 states and the District of Columbia, with new recipients in

three more states (North Carolina, Utah and Virginia).

The majority of this year's grant recipients will use the funds to acquire or renovate facilities to provide transitional housing for homeless veterans.

For example, the recipient of the largest grant awarded this year, Operation Dignity, Inc., of Oakland, Ca., will use its more than \$487,000 award to help renovate 28 housing units at the Alameda Naval Station to create transitional housing that will provide 100 beds for homeless veterans.

When these new projects are completed, approximately 2,500

community-based beds for homeless veterans are expected to be available. Veterans can generally stay in a transitional housing facility for up to two years before moving into permanent housing.

Four of the grant recipients will use the funds to create supportive service centers for homeless veterans. The organizations expect that when operational, these service centers will log a total of more than 900 contacts with homeless veterans each month.

Services available through these centers can include mental health and substance abuse counseling, job training and legal assistance. □



1998 Wheelchair Games Athletes Triumph at Three Rivers

More than 560 veterans from 46 states, Puerto Rico and Great Britain gathered in Pittsburgh, Pa., this summer to compete in the 18th National Veterans Wheelchair Games.

The Games, co-sponsored by VA and the Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA), were hosted this year by the VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System and the Keystone Chapter of PVA.

While this event has produced many world-class athletes in the past, for many newly injured veterans it is their first exposure to wheelchair sports. At this year's Games, which were one of the largest in the 18-year history of the event, veterans "went for the gold" in track and field, swimming, basketball, weightlifting, softball, airguns, quad rugby, billiards, bowling, table tennis, archery and wheelchair slalom. The competition also introduced the equestrian event as an

exhibition event.

One of the athletes who was successful in his quest for a gold medal was Ed "Frenchy" DeLauriers. "The excitement was just unbelievable," DeLauriers, President of the Keystone Chapter of PVA, said. "This year's Games in Pittsburgh will be talked about for years to come...for generations."

The VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System began preparing for the Games 18 months before the event and more than half of the healthcare system's employees were on hand to assist with the Games at some point during the week.

A spectacular ceremony at the Pittsburgh Convention Center opened the Games. Former

Pittsburgh Steeler and Army veteran Andy Russell served as master of ceremonies. Speakers included Secretary Togo D. West, Jr., Pennsylvania Governor Tom Ridge, Pittsburgh Mayor Tom Murphy, and Cappello.

The keynote speaker was former Pittsburgh Steeler and honorary chairman of this year's Games,

Rocky Bleier. Bleier was the ideal honorary chair for the event. Better than almost anyone, he could relate to the veteran athletes and their ability to overcome adversity. Seriously wounded in Vietnam, he was awarded the Purple Heart, Bronze Star, and two campaign ribbons.

After his injury, doctors told him he might never walk again and he certainly would never play football again. But like the 562 athletes who competed in Pittsburgh, Bleier refused to give up, and fought his hardest to rehabilitate from his injury. The results of his outstanding achievements include a great career with the Pittsburgh Steelers and four



MARK COWAN

Spirit of the Games winner Gil Garcia, of San Antonio, Texas, began competing in the Games in 1993, less than a year after he was injured in a diving accident while serving in the Army.



Secretary Togo D. West, Jr., greets former Pittsburgh Steeler and Honorary Chairman of the 1998 National Veterans Wheelchair Games, Rocky Bleier. At right is VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System Director Thomas Cappello.

Super Bowl rings.

"I experienced, in a smaller portion, what they've gone through," Bleier said of the Wheelchair Games athletes. "I know about going through the steps of doubt, about wondering how far they will be able to go with their recovery and what's going to happen to them. That is why these Games are so good because it gives individuals goals to work towards."

Bleier, a sought-after motivational speaker, commented that he did not have to give these athletes a pep talk. "These athletes were an inspiration to me and anyone who came and had the privilege to watch them compete."



Patricia Sapp, of Rockwell, Texas, and Ed "Frenchy" DesLauriers, of Lower Burrell, Pa., offer each other support and encouragement during a softball game.

Dr. Rory Cooper had the distinction of much more than just participating in the 1998 Wheelchair Games. In addition to being a competitor and a gold medal winner, Cooper, who is the chairman of the University of Pittsburgh Department of Rehabilitation, Science and Technology, helped put the bid together to bring the Games to Pittsburgh.

One of the pioneers in the field of wheelchair racing design, Cooper has long been one of the event's more accomplished athletes. He serves as a role model and mentor to many other wheelchair athletes and spends much of his time during the Games supporting and encouraging the novice athletes.

"The focus of the National Veterans Wheelchair Games is to keep veterans active and to get newly injured people out of the

hospital and involved — kind of a fitness for life thing," said Cooper.

The closing ceremony for the 1998 Games was highlighted by Luis Clemente, son of the late baseball Hall of Famer Roberto Clemente, passing the torch from Cappello to the team from San Juan, Puerto Rico — Clemente's home and the site of the 1999 Wheelchair Games. Deputy Secretary Hershel Gober, attend-

ing his fifth Wheelchair Games, delivered the closing address. "I still marvel at the ability of the athletes and the heart of the competition at the Wheelchair Games," he told the athletes. "You are truly heroes — you inspire me."

Next year's Wheelchair Games are set for June 20-27. For more information, contact Edgar Diaz, Chairman, Local Organizing Committee, San Juan VAMC, at (787) 766-5333. □

**By David Cowgill
VA Pittsburgh
Healthcare System**



Patricia Flynn, an Army veteran from Pace, Fla., competes in the discus event.



Kevin Moellenberndt, of Fayetteville, N.C., takes aim at his target in the archery competition.

Budget Adds \$438 Million to President's Request

President Clinton signed the VA, HUD and Independent Agencies appropriations bill for fiscal year 1999 (Public Law 105-276) on October 21. The bill provides nearly \$42.6 billion for VA, \$438 million above the President's request and \$1.6 billion above the 1998 spending level.

Of the total appropriation, more than half will be used for entitlement benefits programs, such as payments to veterans with service-connected disabilities, pensions, education benefits, death benefits, home loan guaranty and other credit programs. Nearly 90 percent of the remaining amount — a total of \$17.3 billion — will be used for medical care. In addition, since VA now has the authority to retain third-party collections, estimated to bring in another \$625 million in fiscal year 1999, discretionary resources for medical care total \$17.9 billion.

VHA's Medical Administration and Miscellaneous Operating Expenses (MAMOE) funding is appropriated \$63 million, including a one-time increase of \$3 million to allow time for VHA to explore options to support enhanced clinical, quality and performance management activities without the need for a reduction-in-force (RIF) in the Office of Facilities Management tactical support function.

VHA research funding is set at \$316 million, an increase of \$16 million over the President's request. Of that amount, \$6 million is earmarked for the Musculoskeletal Disease Center at the Loma Linda, Calif., VAMC.

The bill also includes language directing VA to maintain Gulf War illnesses as a high priority in fiscal year 1999, and to use up to \$10 million to continue and expand Parkinson's Disease research. Funding for major construction projects is \$142.3 million, \$45.3 million above the request. Included are projects for ambulatory care improvements at the Cleveland, Ohio, VAMC; an ambulatory care addition at the Tucson, Ariz., VAMC; nursing home renovations at the Lebanon, Pa., VAMC; and additional gravesite development at

the Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery in St. Louis, Mo. Funding for General Operating Expenses is \$855.7 million, with \$6 million earmarked for activities associated with restructuring VBA.

The bill also calls for \$27.4 million to be transferred from the medical

care account, \$90 thousand from the National Cemetery Administration and \$30,000 from the Office of the Inspector General to fund the Office of Resolution Management and the Office of Employment Discrimination Complaint Adjudication. □

Veterans Programs Enhancement Act

The Veterans Programs Enhancement Act of 1998 (H.R. 4110), a comprehensive veterans benefits package, also was signed by the President on Veterans Day.

This bill features the following provisions:

- Directs the Secretaries of Veterans Affairs, Defense and Health and Human Services to create a Military and Veterans Health Coordinating Board to improve the health protection and care provided to active duty military, veterans and their families by gathering data on the health risks associated with deployment, distributing information on those health risks and improving health record-keeping by the military;

- Extends VA's special authority to provide medical care to Gulf War veterans to December 31, 2001. It requires VA to work with an independent organization to develop a national center for the study of war-related illnesses and post-deployment health issues. It also establishes the authority for VA to provide priority health care to treat illnesses that may be attributable to a veteran's service in the Gulf;

- Changes the name of the National Cemetery System (NCS) to the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) and the title of the director to Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs. It also extends eligibility for burial in national cemeteries to those who served in the Merchant Marine from August 16, 1945 to December 31, 1946 and increases the federal share of grants to states for establishment of state veterans cemeteries to 100 percent;

- Provides a cost of living adjustment for service-connected disabled and survivor benefits;

- Simplifies and improves VA educational programs by expanding outreach and updating policy on employment rights for members of the Guard and Reserve;

- Increases the monthly pension for those on the Medal of Honor Roll from \$400 to \$600;

- Authorizes VA to guarantee loans for transitional housing for homeless veterans and extends the home loan program for Guard and Reserve members to September 30, 2003;

- Authorizes appropriations for fiscal years 1999 and 2000 of \$241 million for major construction projects;

- Authorizes VA to provide health care for treatment of cancer of the head or neck to veterans who can document nasopharyngeal radium irradiation treatment in service;

- Extends VA's sexual trauma counseling program through the end of 2001;

- Affords the Board of Veterans Appeals more scheduling flexibility to help eliminate delays; and

- Makes numerous changes to internal operations of the Court of Veterans Appeals. □

Special Office Assists Overseas Veterans



J.D. Nicholson, Canada's Deputy Secretary of Veterans' Affairs, visits with Washington VA Regional Office Director Fay Norred. Coordinating visits to VA facilities by foreign officials is one of the duties of VA's Foreign Office staff.

Who provides VA benefits to the 40,000 veterans and dependents that are on VA's benefits rolls but living overseas? It may be one of a number of offices.

The VA Foreign Medical Program Office, located at the VA Health Administration Center in Denver, handles medical claims of veterans living or traveling overseas. There are 6,200 veterans enrolled in VA's foreign medical program.

Reimbursement is provided for service-connected disabilities only. Exceptions are in Canada, where care is provided through the Canadian equivalent of VA, and in the Philippines, Puerto Rico and Guam, where there are VA medical facilities.

For compensation, pension and other non-medical benefits, U.S. embassies and consulates provide assistance to Americans overseas. Four different offices are responsible for compensation and pension claims. If the veteran or dependent is living in Canada, the claim is handled by the VA Medical and Regional Center in White River Junction, Vt. Claims in the Philippines are processed by the VA Regional Office in Manila. Claims from Mexico, South and Central America and the Caribbean are processed by the Houston Regional Office.

All other compensation and

pension claims from overseas are processed by the Washington Regional Office.

Education claims for veterans or dependents attending foreign schools are processed by the Regional Processing Center in Buffalo, N.Y. The exception is

attendance at foreign branches of American universities, which is processed by the Regional Processing Center having responsibility for the main U.S. campus of the university.

The coordinator for VA activities overseas is the Foreign Services Staff, headed by Diane Fuller.

Fuller, who has been with VA for almost 30 years, has worked with the foreign program for more than 19 years. "It has been a very challenging responsibility for me, but it has also been personally rewarding," says Fuller.

The job is a demanding one. As director, Fuller is responsible for:

- Monitoring the delivery of benefits in foreign countries, except for the Philippines;
- Coordinating briefings for foreign visitors and officials of foreign governments interested in VA activities;
- Dealing with foreign embassies and consulates on matters relating to VA benefits and services; and
- Monitoring policies and procedures of the allied beneficiary program established under reciprocal agreements with the United Kingdom and Canada.

Because of the sensitive nature of relations with foreign countries, the VA Foreign Office serves as the central contact point for clearing foreign visitor requests with the State

Department.

"Rarely do we have to turn down a proposed visit," says Fuller. "But it is just good policy to check with the Department of State before scheduling visitors to meet with VA officials and visit VA facilities."

The correct procedure when a foreign official contacts a local VA office directly is to call the Foreign Office, located at the Washington Regional Office, at (202) 691-3102.

One of the more poignant visits arranged by the Foreign Office concerned J.D. Nicholson, the Deputy Secretary of Veterans' Affairs, Canada. Nicholson's brother, Patrick P. Nicholson, was a Canadian who served in the U.S. Marine Corps and was killed in Vietnam. While in Washington, Nicholson visited the Vietnam Wall. Fay Norred, director of the Washington Regional Office, presented him with a photograph of the wall framed with a rubbing of his brother's name.

In recent months, visits have been arranged for a Romanian defense attache, military officers from Vietnam and a Chinese delegation. Working with the State Department is a two-way street. Each year, for example, Fuller leads a three-day training course for State Department employees charged with helping veterans overseas. State requests on VA matters come through Fuller's office.

Based on addresses on file, the largest contingents of American veterans overseas today are in Germany, Canada, Mexico, Italy, Japan and Korea. But there are Americans receiving VA benefits from Australia to Costa Rica, and most countries in between. One of the office's unusual duties is getting official passports for VA employees, usually top officials, traveling to foreign countries on official business.

But giving a paper at a medical conference doesn't count. There are only 150 active official passports on file for VA employees, and only a handful of official trips are made each year. □

By Bonner Day

VA Leading the Way in President's

Reinventing the federal government has been a top priority throughout the Clinton administration, and Vice President Gore recently unveiled the latest initiative in this effort — reinventing the way we write.

The President's Plain Language in Government Writing initiative, which went into effect on October 1, requires federal agencies to prepare all new letters, policy statements, forms, publications and other written information explaining their programs so readers can understand them. By January 1999, all regulations must be written plainly, and by January 2002, all documents for public use created before October 1998 must be rewritten in plain language.

Although plain language requirements differ from one document to another depending on the intended audience, these revamped documents do have the same general characteristics — they are logically organized, have easy-to-read design features, and use:

- common, everyday words, except for necessary technical terms;
- “you” and other pronouns;
- the active, rather than passive, voice; and
- short sentences and sections, with adequate white space.

In response to a government-wide request from the National Partnership for Reinventing Government (NPR), Secretary of Veterans Affairs Togo D. West, Jr., approved VA's action plan to implement the directive with the help of a working group representing nearly all VA components and chaired by Associate Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy Irwin Pernick.

The working group will develop ways to help VA employees implement the plain language directive, and will monitor the progress of the initiative throughout the Department.

The Vice President's interagency

Plain Language Action Network (PLAN) — which oversees government-wide implementation — recently distributed VA's action plan to its members as an example of how to get their own plain language programs started.

In part, that recognition reflects the fact that VA is already a leader in the plain language initiative. The Veterans Benefits Administration's Reader-Focused Writing (RFW) program, in place for more than two years, teaches employees how to



Members of the Reader Focused Writing Team in VBA's Education Service review correspondence. They are (left to right): Chuck Baxter, Lee Sherrill, Jim Palanchar, Giles Larrabee, Lynn Cossette, Jim Rudnick and Gerrit Dejager.

write clearly; the Veterans Health Administration has used plain language principles in developing information for veterans describing the new health care enrollment system.

The RFW program's 21-member task force received a Hammer Award for its success in June, capping off an exciting two days for VBA employees who worked on the RFW project. The day before the award was presented, Vice President Gore used VBA examples in his speech announcing the President's directive on plain language.

Standing in front of two large posters depicting before and after versions of a VBA letter, Gore read portions of that and another VBA letter at the beginning of his remarks, explaining that they represented how plain language principles can successfully be applied to simplify and improve written communications.

VBA launched the RFW program after officials recognized that simplifying their written communications had become a necessity. Focus groups, surveys and controlled studies had shown that too many VBA employees were not communicating clearly in writing with customers or each other.

Letters were taking a toll on efficiency by generating unnecessary calls from veterans struggling to decipher them, and employees were spending too much valuable work time plowing through complicated reference manuals.

At one focus group of veterans conducted in Philadelphia, customers vented their frustrations over unclear letters. “[VA letters] are worded in such a way that it's ‘doublespeak,’” one veteran complained. “They are not intended to be clear.”

“If they gave you a clear explanation up front of what they needed,” another said, “they wouldn't have to send you the additional letters.”

The VBA employees who served on the task force to create RFW believed the benefits of the program they envisioned would include: greater customer satisfaction with the easier-to-read letters, pamphlets and forms; fewer claims processing delays, because more veterans would supply all the information needed to process their claims the first time they are asked; and ultimately, better value for taxpayers from the reduced need for excess work on claims, fewer overpayments and less time needed by employees to find information in manuals.

Assisted by outside consultants, the RFW team led the effort to rewrite some 200 frequently sent VBA letters and other documents that reach millions of veterans each year. Revamped documents were tested with customers to ensure they were understandable. Team members also developed an instructional

Plain Language Writing Initiative

course called RFW Tools, through which more than 800 employees have been trained via satellite broadcasts on how to write using the new standards.

Now RFW leaders are lending their experience and support to the effort to make plain language and clear, understandable writing a government-wide standard.

In addition to Pernick, Marcelle Habibion, also of the Office of Policy and Planning, and Susan Wuchinich of General Counsel, several of them are members of the NPR's Plain English Network (PEN), which serves as a steering committee for PLAN, the interagency implementation group.

They are: Melodee Mercer, insurance specialist at the Philadelphia VA Regional Office and Insurance Center and on-air instructor for the RFW Tools course; Lee Sherrill, of Education Service in Central Office; and David Abbot, of Compensation and Pension Service in Central Office.

As PEN members, they helped draft the Presidential Memorandum on the plain language initiative announced by the Vice President in June, and are offering their assistance to introduce plain language letter writing techniques elsewhere in VA and to other federal agencies.

They'll also join the other members of VA's own Plain Language Working Group to develop an instructional course based on RFW as well as other products and tools to educate VA employees on how to write in plain language.

Plain Language Working Group members will have the additional task of screening nominations for the Vice President's "No Gobbledygook Award," presented monthly to a federal employee who has rewritten in plain language a letter, form or regulation.

But as Secretary West emphasized in his memo to employees announcing the launch of this initiative, the real incentive for writing in plain language is ensuring that the veterans we serve receive written communications from VA they can understand. □

Plain Language Writing Tips

Use common, everyday words, except for necessary technical terms

Plain language writing emphasizes the use of simple, familiar words instead of unfamiliar words. You may sometimes need to use a technical term to communicate accurately and convey a precise meaning, but try to substitute everyday language for jargon as often as possible. Here are some examples of simple words and phrases you might substitute:

Instead of:	Use:
accomplish	do
ascertain	find out
disseminate	send out, distribute
endeavor	try
in lieu of	instead of
utilize	use

Use "you" and other pronouns

"You" reinforces the message that the document is intended for your reader. More than any other technique, using "you" pulls readers into your document and makes it relevant to them. Using "we" to refer to the agency economizes words and makes your document more accessible to the reader.

Use the active, rather than passive, voice

Active voice is the best way to identify who is responsible for what action. In an active sentence, the person or agency who is taking an action is the subject of the sentence. In a passive sentence, the person or item that is acted upon is the subject of the sentence. Passive sentences often do not identify who is performing the action.

Example:

Regulations have been proposed by the Department of Veterans Affairs.
(passive)

We have proposed regulations. (active)

Use short sentences and sections, with adequate white space

Express only one idea in each sentence. Long, complicated sentences often mean that you aren't clear about what you want to say. Shorter sentences show clear thinking. Shorter sentences are also better for conveying complex information; they break the information up into smaller, easier-to-process units.

Short sections break up the material into easily understood segments and allow you to introduce a little white space. Short sections look easier to read and understand. Long sections can appear difficult and forbidding, even before someone tries to read them.

Additional details on these and other plain language writing tips are available on the Plain Language Action Network's web site at <http://www.plainlanguage.gov>. □

Washington, D.C., VAMC Helps Nation's Capital Prepare for the Unthinkable

WMD? It's not just another anonymous acronym. It stands for Weapons of Mass Destruction — the use of nuclear, biological and chemical agents by terrorists to disrupt our global society.

But how does WMD mix with VA? The VA health care system's "fourth mission" is to furnish the Department of Defense (DoD) a clinical emergency preparedness backup in wartime.

Most recently, VA's role in this area has been expanded to join other federal agencies in providing support in a catastrophic disaster or national security emergency, including responding to the use of WMD. During the last five years, terrorist acts in the United States and abroad — at the World Trade Center, the federal building in Oklahoma City, the Atlanta Olympics and most recently the embassy bombings in Africa have killed or injured hundreds and terrified thousands.

Attacks such as these resulted in the passage of congressional legislation to directly support the nation's efforts to respond to these attacks. The Defense Against Weapons of Mass Destruction Act of 1996 and several Presidential Decision Directives (PDDs) task VA to provide emergency clinical support — in the form of clinicians, pharmaceuticals, decontamination facilities and hospital beds — to lead federal agencies such as the Departments of Justice, Energy, Defense, Health and Human Services and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

In conjunction with these laws and PDDs, VA has been tasked to support four federally sponsored Metropolitan Medical Strike Teams (MMSTs). Based in Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, Denver and Winston-Salem, N.C., MMSTs are specially trained reaction teams that can be activated in the event of a WMD incident. With the exception of Washington, D.C., these MMSTs are mobile.

VA's role in support of MMSTs is significant. VA medical centers

store, maintain and stand ready to deliver critical supplies to strategic destinations in the event of a terrorist attack involving WMD.

The Washington, D.C., VAMC became the first VA medical center to support a MMST. In this role, the medical center pre-positioned designated supplies for the Atlanta Olympics, the 1996 Presidential Inauguration and the President's annual State of the Union address. Additional MMSTs are expected to be implemented in more than 120 locations by the year 2000, and the Washington, D.C., VAMC's support plan is being used as the national model for these new teams.

A key member of the Washington, D.C., Hospital Association Emergency Preparedness Committee, the Washington, D.C., VAMC has hosted numerous contingency exercises and educational activities in conjunction with the capital's WMD response efforts.

The Washington, D.C., VAMC chairs the Federal Capital Area Disaster Committee, which consists of all of the local federal clinical facilities in the capital area, including VA, Army, Air Force and Navy. These facilities account for the majority of clinical personnel, equipment and bed availability within the capital area.

Recently, Washington, D.C., VAMC Director Sanford Garfunkel made the decision to convert an unused research facility consisting of two climate-controlled rooms into a permanent decontamination facility for the medical center.

This gives the

medical center the distinction of having the first, largest and only climate-controlled decontamination facility in the nation's capital. This decontamination facility has the capacity to handle 250 casualties/patients per hour.

Washington, D.C., VAMC staff members coordinate and implement hospital emergency drills and ensure that hospital emergency plans are current. They have worked together as a team to ensure the facility's capability to support the nation's capital in the event of a national emergency, making them a recognized vital part of the first line of defense against terrorism and WMD. □

By Philip Forbes
Washington, D.C., VAMC



A decontamination team staff member from the Washington, D.C., VAMC hoses down a "chemical attack victim" during a citywide disaster drill in September. The VAMC is a designated decontamination facility for the nation's capital.

Violence in the Workplace

VA Employee Offers Prevention Training

“It changed my life,” is how Dr. Paul D. Kim describes a night several years ago when he found himself at the wrong end of a 9mm handgun pressed against his forehead. While working the night shift during his medical training, Dr. Kim found himself face-to-face with a very upset, angry and determined patient.

Fortunately, some two hours later the incident was resolved without physical injury to anyone. “The emotional scars never completely heal and every so often the incident returns and is very vivid. I had to find a way to help the healing process along and that is where my interest in violence prevention was born.”

Raised in Glens Falls, N.Y., Dr. Kim had the benefits of a close-knit community where violence was seldom a concern. A letterman in four sports during his high school career, Dr. Kim later was a varsity football player at Fordham University during the late 1970s. He earned a bachelor’s in psychology and the reputation as a tireless worker. After completing his medical training at the University of Juarez, Mexico, and the University of Massachusetts, he brought his work ethic to VA in 1989. Dr. Kim has developed a management program on workplace violence

prevention entitled, “Is Anyplace Safe?” The program stresses safety and emergency preparedness and is designed to accomplish four main goals: 1) raise awareness; 2) provide tools for creating a comprehensive violence prevention program; 3) assist in creating goals for both the organization and its individual members; and 4) stimulate thinking and action to stop violence long before it begins.

Dr. Kim has trained thousands of VA and non-VA employees in violence prevention techniques that stress safety in managing the risk through a strong proactive program based on “universal zero tolerance.” In customer service, the most critical time in any encounter is the first 15 minutes. Handling those 15 minutes correctly will ensure a positive outcome and provide a win-win atmosphere. Emergency preparedness is when a violent incident occurs and the organization responds immediately and appropriately.

Eight years ago, Dr. Kim began his odyssey to develop a training program that would teach people how they could be safe in the workplace. His journey led him to many dead ends where the prevailing viewpoint was: “If we do not talk about violence, it will go away and

besides, talking about it gives people bad ideas.”

According to Dr. Kim, “Managing the risk is key to any safety program and, unfortunately, we will never eliminate the risk. A strong, proactive, top-management supported program will effectively manage the risk and provide for a safe, secure working environment.”

To date, Dr. Kim has brought his dynamic, no holds-barred training program to 40 VA medical centers. Several more are scheduled. He is a much sought-after speaker on the national and international lecture circuit and has been the subject of several radio and television interviews dealing with the problem of workplace violence. His published articles have received international attention and he is currently preparing a draft manuscript dealing with workplace terrorism that will be available in bookstores later this year.

Dr. Kim is currently the Area Emergency Manager, Emergency Management Strategic Healthcare Group at the Stratton VA Medical Center, 113 Holland Ave., Albany, N.Y., 12208. He can be contacted at (518) 462-3311, extension 2364. □

By Bonner Day

Oncology Symposium Explores Innovative Cancer Therapies

Cancer is the nation’s second-leading killer after heart disease, and while there’s been a slight downward trend in the rate of new cases and deaths, it still kills more than half a million people each year.

VA currently treats approximately 170,000 cancer patients, with an estimated 50,000 new cases of cancer diagnosed in VA patients each year.

More than 300 VA cancer experts gathered recently in San Antonio, Texas, for the third annual National Oncology Symposium to share ideas and present innovative approaches for fighting this dreaded disease. “Emerging Therapeutics and Sup-

portive Care” was the theme of this year’s conference, and participants explored state-of-the-art approaches to cancer therapy, including radioimmunology, anti-angiogenesis agents, newer anti-proliferative agents and gene therapy.

A major focus of the meeting was a review of treatment options for esophageal cancer in all stages from diagnosis to metastatic disease. Cancer of the esophagus is a malignant tumor that ultimately causes difficulty in swallowing. Most esophageal cancers develop in the middle or lower sections of the esophagus.

VA treats a large segment of the country’s patients afflicted with this

type of cancer, and the symposium offered the latest in new therapies and clinical trials on esophageal cancer.

Another highlight was a presentation on studies and initiatives for improving end-of-life and palliative care.

More than 40 poster presentations were featured at the symposium, highlighting cancer research projects including treatment and prevention studies.

The symposium was a collaborative effort between VA, the Henry M. Jackson Foundation for the Advancement of Military Medicine, and other federal health care experts in the field of oncology. □



Secrets of Steroid Damage to Bone Cells Revealed

While physicians have known for years that osteoporosis is a side effect of treatment by steroids, the reason was not clear. Researchers at the VA Central Arkansas Healthcare System indicate they have found the answer.

“Basically, our findings revealed that when animals or humans take high doses of steroids, not only are fewer bone-forming cells made, but they are dying prematurely,” said Dr. Stavros C. Manolagas. He is associate director of the Little Rock VA Geriatric Research and Education Clinical Center. “It confirms our general idea that the fundamental problem in all forms of osteoporosis is abnormal birth and/or death of bone cells.”

Steroid treatment protects transplant recipients from rejecting new organs. Typically, the therapy is needed for many years. But more than one-third of patients taking steroids for more than five years have fractures.

The results of the VA study give hope that a way will be found to develop “designer steroids” that will have the beneficial properties of steroids without the bone-killing effects.

Hines Physician Awarded Grant for Brain Research

Dr. Gwendolyn Kartje, staff neurologist and health scientist at the VAMC in Hines, Ill., has been awarded a VA Research Career Development Grant to continue basic research into methods for promoting brain repair after injury caused by stroke. The three-year award will enable Dr. Kartje to investigate how nerve cells in the brain are injured and the growth factors that permit nerves to grow back and establish new connections in the brain. Presently there is no known treatment for restoring brain function after a stroke, one of the three leading causes of death and disability.

New Procedure at Richmond VAMC Drills Laser Holes in the Heart Muscle

A new procedure at the VAMC in Richmond, Va., involves drilling channels one millimeter in diameter into the heart as an alternative to artery grafting. The procedure, called Transmyocardial laser revascularization (TMR), relieves chest pain in cardiac patients who are unsuitable for standard treatment, such as coronary artery bypass graft surgery. The operation is fairly simple and lasts less than two hours. The TMR technique provides direct blood flow to the heart

muscle by laser-created channels. Under general anesthesia, 25 to 30 channels are drilled one centimeter apart in the damaged area of the heart muscle.

When the procedure recently was performed on a 55-year-old male patient, he suffered no major complications and was discharged after three days. Cardiac ultrasound imaging shortly before and immediately after the laser surgery showed no harmful effect on the functioning of the heart. The patient was free of chest pain in follow-up exams. The patient previously had disabling chest pain following two coronary artery bypass grafts.

In large-scale, multi-center clinical trials, 70 to 85 percent of patients who were treated with TMR experienced decreased chest pains compared with those receiving medical therapy. TMR-treated patients usually experienced significant improvement in blood flow in the heart. Studies show development of new, tiny blood vessels that supply the damaged area of the heart and relieve pain.

Mouth Rinse Spots Oral Cancer Cells

Research indicates a commercial mouth rinse is better able to spot oral cancer than visual exams. Dr. Roy S. Feldman, chief of dental service at the VA Medical Center in Philadelphia, says the rinse, OraTest, was evaluated in VA and other clinical centers in Europe, Canada and the United States.

Patients were first subjected to a visual exam, then examined using OraTest, which involves a series of oral rinses. Both exams were repeated 10 to 20 days later on lesions that stained positive. Lesions that stained at both exams were considered positive, and were biopsied and analyzed. Seventeen lesions identified proved cancerous or pre-cancerous, but 10 had gone undetected in visual exams. The study confirmed earlier research in 1996 that demonstrated 100 percent sensitivity by the rinse test. OraTest is approved for use in 18 countries. U.S. FDA approval is pending.

Two Drugs Relieve PTSD Symptoms

Studies show that two drugs on the market relieve the major symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Researchers at the Dallas VA Medical Center reported their findings on Serzone (nefazodone) and Zyprexa (olanzapine). Serzone, used for depression, reduced PTSD symptoms by almost 30 percent in veterans who took the drug during an eight-week treatment period. The VA study found that Serzone alleviated the core symptoms of PTSD, flashbacks and nightmares.

Dr. Frederick Petty, research coordinator at the Dallas VAMC, said there also are strong indications that Zyprexa, an anti-psychotic drug, stabilizes moods and reduces flashbacks. The Dallas VA Medical Center has received a research grant to confirm the initial finding about Zyprexa. At present there are no drugs designated for the treatment of PTSD. □

HONORS

and awards

VBA Deputy Under Secretary for Management **Nora Egan** received the VA Meritorious Service Award for exceptional service in her former role as VA deputy assistant secretary for planning. The award highlighted her leadership and guidance in Departmental efforts to function as "One VA" and her leadership in the Department's strategic planning process.

St. Petersburg, Fla., VA Regional Office homeless veterans coordinator **Kevin O'Donnell** received the Annual Outstanding Local Volunteers Award from the Tampa Bay NBC-affiliate television station. The award cited O'Donnell for going beyond the call of duty in serving the estimated 20,000 homeless veterans found in Florida on any given day. He was nominated for the award by a local homeless shelter.

CFO Magazine selected VHA Chief Financial Officer **W. Todd Grams** for its list of finalists in the 1998 CFO Excellence Awards program. The awards recognize innovation in 10 areas and Grams was selected in the cost optimization category. He was the only government CFO on the finalists list and one of only two health care professionals to make the list.

The New York VA Regional Office honored **Jacob Lipman** on his retirement after 56 years of federal service. Lipman began his federal career on May 14, 1945 as a clerk with the Veterans Administration.

During his VA career, Lipman worked in the regional office's administrative, adjudication and veterans services divisions and, finally, since 1965, with the vocational rehabilitation and counseling division. He entered the U.S. Army in 1942 and served until 1945. He participated in the Sicilian/Italian campaign and in the Northern France campaign. He earned four Bronze Stars and campaign ribbons in the European, African, and Middle Eastern theaters.

Oklahoma City VA Medical Center volunteer **Margaret Frey** was honored in June for more than 43,000 volunteer hours. She has been a volunteer at Oklahoma City VAMC for 43 years. In 1993, the center named its chapel after her for her years of support for the chaplains program. Her most recent honor came a month before her 100th birthday.

The Gerontological Society of America (GSA) has awarded Madison, Wis., Geriatrics Research, Education and Clinical Center researcher **Richard Weindruch** its 1998 Robert W. Kleemeier Award for outstanding research in aging. Created in 1965, the award is named for the former GSA president who made exemplary contributions to the quality of life through research in aging. An expert on the effects of dietary restriction on aging, Weindruch will present the Kleemeier Award Lecture at GSA's annual meeting next spring. The society is the largest professional organiza-

tion in the United States focused on aging.

Orville Lips, Ph.D., Chief of Psychology Service and Director of the Stress Disorder Treatment Unit at North Chicago VA Medical Center, has been honored by the American Psychological Association as the Outstanding VA Administrator of the Year. Dr. Lips joined North Chicago VAMC in 1977.

The **Philadelphia VA Regional Office and Insurance Center (RO&IC)** has received Buildings Magazine's 1998 New Construction Award in the public/government category and will be featured in an issue of the magazine. This national award recognizes exceptional performance of new construction projects' aesthetics, functionality, originality, use of materials, sensitivity to site, construction program and considerations of life safety. The entire building, constructed under the metric system, is 40,000 square meters and incorporates state-of-the-art systems intended to improve the flexibility, efficiency and reliability of the services provided by the RO&IC.

The **VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System** was honored at the annual Alpha Awards by the National Job Corps Coalition for its commitment to the Job Corps program. Named for the Alpha star, the brightest star in a constellation, the awards recognize individuals, communities and businesses who have made exceptional efforts on behalf of Job Corps during the past year. The VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System was recognized for its active support of the Pittsburgh Job Corps Center. VA Pittsburgh Director **Thomas Cappello** accepted the award in Washington from Secretary of

Labor Alexis Herman, and was invited to share his knowledge and best practices with the 113 Job Corps Center directors nationwide. Past winners of the Alpha Award include Pepsi Cola Company, Black Entertainment Television (BET) and State Farm Insurance Companies.

Employees of the **Travel Policy Division** of the Office of Administration in Central Office received a Travel Managers of the Year Award from Government Executive magazine. This award is presented to federal agencies to honor achievements in streamlining government travel management processes. VA's Travel Policy Division employees were recognized for their success in reengineering household good shipments for employees who transfer into and out of Central Office and for Central Office employees in the field. Winners are featured in the November issue of Government Executive.

Central Arkansas Veterans Healthcare System Chief of Radiology **Steven E. Harms, M.D.**, received the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Research Foundation's Award of Scientific Distinction for his pioneering work on highly advanced breast magnetic resonance imaging (MRI). Dr. Harms and his colleagues developed a new high-resolution MRI method called RODEO (Rotating Delivery of Excitation Off-resonance) that provides a highly accurate method for identifying the cancer and its extent. RODEO has twice the sensitivity and three times the specificity of mammography for the detection of breast cancer. Dr. Harms also is Director of Imaging Research at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences in Little Rock. □

HAVE you heard

After almost a half century, a former prisoner of war got the medal he deserved at last spring's meeting of the VA Advisory Committee on Former Prisoners of War. **Dr. William R. Shadish**, a Korean War veteran who was held by Communist forces from 1950 to 1953, received the Prisoner of War Medal he earned 45 years ago. Deputy Secretary Hershel Gober presented it. Mike Parra, VA program manager for the advisory committee, handled the verification and application process to secure the medal after Shadish's wife said he had never received it. As a prisoner, Dr. Shadish bargained away food or privileges for medicine and equipment to care for other soldiers. When he was released, he took a small piece of rice paper, concealed in the inkwell of a fountain pen, on which he had written the names and serial numbers of hundreds of soldiers who died in captivity. Later, he visited the wives and families of many of the deceased

prisoners he had attended. Shadish has served since 1989 on the committee, which advises the Secretary of Veterans Affairs on the administration of benefits to former POWs.

The National Capital Planning Commission approved a revised design for the **World War II Memorial** to be built on the Mall in Washington, D.C. and completed as early as 2002. The approved plan calls for an oval-shaped memorial with 36-foot-tall granite arches at the north and south ends. Bronze laurel wreaths will be suspended from each arch. Between the two arches, which represent valor and victory, is a memorial plaza open to pedestrians. A cascading pool will form the western edge of the memorial and a sloping walkway will mark its eastern edge. The privately funded project is expected to cost \$100 million.

VA has far exceeded its **Welfare-to-Work Program** goals, providing jobs for 1,027



James Scales, Environmental Management Service employee at the Central Arkansas Veterans Healthcare System, demonstrates his abilities in the obstacle buffing competition.

former welfare recipients in fiscal years 1997 and 1998. VA set an original goal in April 1997 to hire 800 welfare recipients nationwide by the end of fiscal year 1998. A variety of local recruitment efforts were used to achieve the goal. State employment services, state and local agencies and other community resources worked in partnership with VA to provide applicants. VA's own programs including compensated work therapy, homeless veterans' programs, vocational rehabilitation and counseling, and readjustment counseling outreach, in partnership with local veterans' service organizations, also assisted in locating candidates.

Jon Cruikshank, from Medical Administration Service at the VA Central Iowa Health Care System, received a surprise visit while enrolling veterans for VA health care at the Iowa State Fair. Iowa Governor Terry Branstad approached Cruikshank and asked to be enrolled. Cruikshank enrolled the governor and informed him that he was in priority group 7 of the enrollment system. Gov. Branstad replied that his status may change in January when his

term as governor concludes and he is no longer employed.

Environmental Management Service (EMS) employees of the Central Arkansas Veterans Healthcare System celebrated National EMS Week in September in a unique way — more than 50 of them competed in the first Arkansas Environmental Management Olympics at Little Rock VA Medical Center. The event was sponsored by the Arkansas Chapter of the International Executive Housekeepers Association (IEHA), and the 41 members of that organization were invited to participate. Contestants competed in events such as bed washing, obstacle buffing, mop bucket relay and johnny mop hop. Area vendors served as judges. Trophies were awarded to overall winners and all participants received a medallion from the IEHA.

Sheridan, Wyo., VA Medical Center Director **Maureen Humphrys** won three state golf tournaments in a month. She shot a 15-over-par 159 to win the senior women's amateur championship, a 16-over-par 232 to win the women's amateur title and a 25-over-par to win the



Jon Cruikshank and Dixie Ribar, from the VA Central Iowa Health Care System, and Kirk Sickels, from Iowa City VAMC, flank Iowa Governor Terry Branstad as he enrolls for VA health care.

women's mid-amateur title. Her achievements on the greens were featured in a recent edition of Sports Illustrated.

Holly Koester, Spirit of the Games winner at the National Veterans Wheelchair Games in 1996, won the women's wheelchair division of the annual Marine Corps Marathon in Washington, D.C., with a time of 3:08:16. Koester, an Army veteran from Cleveland, Ohio, is a frequent participant in the Wheelchair Games and the National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic.

Louisville, Ky., VA Medical Center Acquisition & Materiel Management employee **Al Nelson** sculpted the world's largest baseball glove from a 30-ton slab of limestone donated by the Lexington Quarry Company. Nelson and Kim Hillerich, wife of John Hillerich, Vice President of Hillerich & Bradbury — the company that makes Louisville Slugger bats — worked for 18 months crafting the glove. Resting on its side, with a ball in its pocket, the glove stands four feet high, and is 12 feet long by nine feet wide — roughly the size of a subcompact car. It took eight men, several inflatable air cushions and a gasoline-powered air compressor an

entire day to move the 17-ton sculpture down Main Street in downtown Louisville to its destination at the Louisville Slugger Museum. At its new home, the glove is a companion to the world's largest baseball bat, which leans against the outside of the museum building.

Secretary Togo D. West, Jr., helped the **Dallas VA Medical Center** dedicate a new \$108.8 million clinical addition recently. The clinical addition is the final and major component of a capital improvement project totaling \$154 million, the largest for any VA medical center in recent years. It resolves critical space issues in several patient care and support programs. The capital improvement project also included a Spinal Cord Injury Center, which opened two years ago, and a new Energy Center, opened in 1995, which provides utilities to the entire complex.

Like many leading medical researchers, this year's co-recipient of the Nobel Prize for physiology or medicine, **Dr. Ferid Murad**, has a strong VA connection. He was chief of Medical Service at the Palo Alto, Calif., VA Medical Center from 1981-1986 and professor of medicine and pharmacology at Stanford University

School of Medicine. Most of the research that led to Dr. Murad's Nobel Prize was done at the University of Virginia and the Palo Alto VAMC, where he supervised the work of a large laboratory and many research staff. Dr. Murad received the 1998 Nobel Prize along with Robert F. Furchgott and Louis J. Ignarro for discoveries concerning nitric oxide as a signaling molecule in the cardiovascular system.

VBA's **Vocational Rehabilitation and Counseling Officers** passed the hat at their national conference in Indianapolis and came up with a generous donation of \$500 for the VA Employees Disaster Relief Fund. The 1996 hurricane season left the fund severely depleted, and the fund's board has allocated \$5,000 for disaster assistance to VA employees in Puerto Rico suffering from the ravages of Hurricane Georges. Contributions are needed to replenish the fund, and can be sent to: VA Employees Disaster Relief Fund, c/o VA Central Federal Credit Union (831), 810 Vermont Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C., 20420.

Nearly 400 of New Jersey's 5,000 disabled veterans eligible for a state property tax exemption received reimbursements from the state totaling \$5.5 million thanks to the combined efforts of the **Newark VA Regional Office** and the state Departments of Military and Veterans Affairs and Treasury. These veterans, who are rated 100 percent permanently and totally disabled due to service-connected conditions, paid property taxes either because they did not know about this entitlement or they were waiting for their VA case to be approved. Municipalities are not required

to refund the money. Earlier this year, VBA provided a mailing list of 100 percent totally disabled veterans in the state so the agencies could contact them about applying for the reimbursement. It turned out that some veterans and widows were owed more than \$50,000. New Jersey Governor Christine Todd Whitman presented the \$5.5 million check from the state to Newark VARO staff and others who were involved in this project. The Newark VARO has revised the award letter it sends to all New Jersey veterans rated 100 percent totally disabled to include a statement about the property tax exemption along with the toll-free number to call for more information.

The **Danville, Ill., VAMC** celebrated its 100th anniversary in October with a week of special activities. Established by an act of Congress on June 4, 1897, as a National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers, the Danville Home opened its doors on October 13, 1898. Charles Butler was the first veteran admitted to the home, which housed as many as 4,000 by 1909. Danville became a VA hospital in 1935.

The **National Cemetery Administration's** home page has been rated among the top 5 percent of all web sites on the Internet by Lycos, a popular Internet search engine. Lycos also rated it as the number one site under the section of Government-Military-Armed Forces. Lycos, currently rated number one for web site review services by Internet World Magazine, bases its rating of web sites on factors such as content, design and overall quality. NCA's home page averages 11,000 visitors per month. The web site address is: <http://www.cem.va.gov>. □



Louisville, Ky., VAMC employee Al Nelson with the world's largest baseball glove, which he sculpted from a 30-ton slab of limestone.



Erica Clark took one of the first calls on the toll-free line set up to answer veterans' questions on enrollment and found herself on VA's front line. The veteran had things other than enrollment on his mind as he described the gun he was holding and how he was going to shoot himself with it. Erica established rapport with the caller while signaling her supervisor to the emergency. By keeping the caller on line, they were able to determine he was calling from Seattle. They contacted the Seattle VA Medical Center, which then contacted local authorities. Police provided guidance to Clark — how to keep the caller engaged, determine the type of weapon and whether it was loaded, whether alcohol or drugs were involved. The caller relaxed during the conversation, asking Clark if she had ever handled this type of call before. The police arrived and entered the caller's home without incident.

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Dr. Vichit Viturawong, a physician at the VA Central Iowa Health Care System, was waiting to board a plane at the Bangkok airport on his return from a vacation to Thailand when a man in front of him in the boarding line passed out. He and another physician determined that the man had no pulse and started CPR while an ambulance was called. They got a pulse after ten minutes and moved the patient to the ambulance before boarding their plane bound for Tokyo. As the plane touched down at Tokyo

airport, the pilot announced that the stricken man was stable and doing well and the pilot personally thanked Dr. Viturawong.

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Albany VA Medical Center employee **Jim Soulier** was walking the hospital's halls when he heard a woman screaming frantically for help. Rounding the corner, he came upon a veteran in a wheelchair slumped to the side, blue and unconscious. The emergency room was nearby, so Soulier grabbed the wheelchair with one hand and began pushing while steadying the patient with his other hand, all the while calling out for a code to alert emergency staff. The ER team heard him coming and were ready to begin immediate resuscitation, which revived the patient. After releasing the patient to the ER staff, Soulier returned to the victim's daughter whose screams he had heard and stayed with her until she was calmed and reassured.

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Quick action by Temple, Texas, VA Medical Center youth volunteer **Robert Meischen** got Voluntary Service program assistant Louvenia DeLuca the immediate medical attention she needed after passing out from a reaction to prescribed medication. The day had just begun in the Voluntary Service office when DeLuca fell to the floor unconscious. Meischen immediately followed procedures that all youth volunteers and new

employees learn through a mandatory orientation program. He notified the switchboard and a Code Blue emergency team was dispatched to assist DeLuca. "I am proud of the youth volunteers who helped me and the way they took the initiative to use their orientation training and act so quickly," said DeLuca.

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Wildfires raged throughout central Florida last summer and were within a few hundred yards of the Emory L. Bennett State Veterans' Nursing Home at Daytona Beach when evacuation was ordered. It was then that the staff of the **VA North Florida/South Georgia Health Care System** sprang into action. VA provided transportation for the nursing home's 120 veterans to temporary lodging facilities, and nurses from Gainesville and Lake City VA Medical Centers provided care at those locations. Firefighters stopped the fire just 50 feet short of the nursing home and VA returned the veterans safe and sound. Carlos Rainwater, executive director of the Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs wrote: "The bottom line is that 120 veteran nursing home patients were evacuated in a very short time, with no advance notice, without loss of life or any significant additional medical problems."

☆☆☆☆☆

Fargo, N.D., VA Medical and Regional Office rehabilitation specialist **Bob Redding** leads a volunteer effort that has networked St. Joseph Catholic School in Moorhead into the Internet. Redding heads up the small school's technology committee. Over the past few years, he and

fellow volunteers have "begged, borrowed and almost stolen" the equipment needed to build a school computer lab, wire the school's classrooms for computers and link the entire system to the Internet via radio. The school now has a system worth \$200,000 that cost it only \$18,000, thanks to Redding and his volunteers.

☆☆☆☆☆

The engine was on fire and the car was lying on the driver's side. The only way **Nick Jaremka**, nurse at the Buffalo, N.Y., VA Medical Center, could see to get the driver out was to get the car back on its wheels. So he and another passerby who stopped at the scene of the one-car accident pushed the burning car, righting it in order to drag out the seriously injured driver. The engine was racing as the car was pushed over and the fire spread. Jaremka couldn't turn off the engine because the ignition switch had broken off and was imbedded in the driver's head. He dragged him out and provided care and comfort until an ambulance arrived. The critically injured driver was airlifted to a trauma center and is recovering.

☆☆☆☆☆

Topeka, Kan., VA Medical Center police officer **Myron Thomas** was driving his truck along a city street when he noticed the driver of the car in front of him slump to the side and lose control of his car. As the out-of-control car headed toward a group of about 30 small children standing outside a childcare center, Thomas sped past the car, pulled in front of it and braked to stop the car. His quick and selfless actions may have saved the lives of some of the children. The driver of the car

was treated and released at a local hospital. Because Thomas risked not only damage to his truck but also possible injury to himself to protect the children, he was recently honored at the first annual Topeka/Shawnee County Gathering of Heroes.

☆☆☆☆

When a new neighbor began banging on the door of Memphis, Tenn., VA Medical Center nurses **Mike Alpha** and **Ron Thomas** late one night, she had no idea they were medical professionals. But she would soon learn that she had knocked on the right door. Alpha and Thomas quickly followed the hysterical woman to her backyard, where her mother had been taking a late-night swim. They found the woman's mother without a pulse and turning blue. The nurses quickly administered CPR and called 911. The woman was revived and taken to the hospital.

☆☆☆☆

Murfreesboro, Tenn., VA Medical Center Recreation Therapy Assistant **Floyd Adams** was transporting a vanload of patients to the Veterans Community Care Center through a driving rainstorm when he and his passengers witnessed a head-on collision. The vehicle in front of the van was struck by an approaching vehicle that had swerved out of control into the wrong lane. After safely stopping his own vehicle and securing his passengers, Adams dialed 911 to report the accident, and then went to the aid of those involved in the collision. Although the occupants of the first vehicle were conscious and without apparent injury, the second vehicle had careened into a ditch. The

injured driver removed a baby from an infant seat and handed the baby to Adams, while pleading for help for the baby's mother in the passenger seat. Adams transferred the care of the baby to another person at the scene, and assisted the baby's mother until emergency personnel arrived by gently restraining her from unnecessary movement and reassuring her that her baby was safe.

☆☆☆☆

New York Congressman James T. Walsh credits Albany, N.Y., VA Medical Center registered nurse **Rosemary Duncan** with saving his life on a harrowing evening in the Catskill Mountains last summer. Congressman Walsh was attending a dinner at a Disabled American Veterans conference when he suddenly lost the ability to speak. Duncan, who was also attending the dinner, immediately recognized that the Congressman was experiencing symptoms of a serious neurological problem. She rushed him to the Albany VAMC, two hours away. Doctors there discovered swelling on his brain which required immediate surgery. A tumor was removed, and the Congressman has since undergone radiation and chemotherapy. He is now back to work part-time, and doctors have told him and his wife that had he not received immediate medical attention that night in the Catskills, he would have died. "For allowing me to live and spend quality time with my family, I am grateful to Ms. Duncan and the quality of care I received at the Albany VAMC," Congressman Walsh wrote.

☆☆☆☆

Registered nurse **Steve**

Roth was driving to work at the Denver, Colo., VA Medical Center on one of the city's busiest streets when a car accident involving a child occurred directly in front of him. Roth angled his vehicle to protect the injured girl from traffic approaching the accident scene. He then stabilized her body position and determined the status of her respiratory, cardiac and nervous systems. Next he conducted a head-to-toe physical assessment, which indicated to him that the girl had possible head, internal, hip and lower limb injuries. Roth was joined by a city paramedic and continued to provide emergency aid and comfort to the injured girl until emergency crews arrived. He later called the girl's school to check on her condition, and was told that she was expected to make a full recovery.

☆☆☆☆

Dezra Dautrive, VA police officer at the Martinez, Calif., VA Outpatient Clinic, was driving to work for his scheduled midnight shift when he was flagged down by a disheveled woman. The woman told Dautrive that she had been carjacked in San Francisco, forced to withdraw money at several ATM machines, sexually assaulted and left for dead by her attackers. Dautrive comforted the woman, identified himself as a VA police officer and offered to transport her to his work station and call the proper authorities.

☆☆☆☆

A patient at the Hines, Ill., VAMC was eating a sandwich while waiting in the reception area of the Orthotics Laboratory when the secretary noticed that he was making strange noises. She quickly

alerted **Phillip Tirimacco**, chief of the Orthotics Lab, who found that the patient had the half-eaten sandwich in his hand and was struggling to breathe. When clearing the patient's mouth did not restore normal breathing, Tirimacco performed the heimlich maneuver, dislodging the food. By the time the emergency response team arrived, the patient was breathing normally.

☆☆☆☆

A Texas VA outpatient is alive and well thanks to the quick actions of staff at the Lufkin, Tex., VA Outpatient Clinic. **Anita Wood**, a primary care team clerk at the clinic, answered a call from the patient, who explained that he had received a new supply of nitroglycerin patches in the mail and was now experiencing shortness of breath. Recognizing the urgent nature of the call, Wood asked registered nurse **Betty Riley** to take the call. But during her conversation with the patient, he dropped the phone and Riley could not re-establish verbal contact with him. Wood then asked supervisor **Teresa Johniken** to try the patient's number from her phone. When her repeated attempts to reach the patient failed, she contacted the local Sheriff's Department, requesting that someone check on the patient. The Sheriff's deputy found the patient in extreme distress on the floor of his home and called for an emergency medical team. The patient was stabilized, transported to the local hospital emergency room and is now doing well. □

Veterans Day 1998: Honoring All Who Served

The most important day of the year for VA and veterans was observed in many ways, large and small, across the nation.


President Clinton placed the traditional wreath at the Tomb of the Unknowns during the annual Veterans Day observance at Arlington National Cemetery, just as he has done every year of his presidency thus far.

“Today, as a free nation, we come together to honor the men and women to whom we owe our freedom, to pay our own tribute here at this most sacred memorial to our nation’s past,” he said during his remarks in the amphitheater following the wreath-laying. “We cannot expect future generations to understand fully what those who came before saw, experienced and felt in battle. But we can make sure that our children know enough to say ‘thank you’ — those two simple words that can mean as much or even more than a medal.”

The program, sponsored by the Veterans Day National Committee, was hosted this year by the Catholic War Veterans, USA, Inc.

And while Arlington captures much of the national attention on Veterans Day, the rest of the nation’s observances are just as meaningful. To support nationwide activities, VA asked the 50 Governors to name Veterans Day chairpersons to coordinate state observances and to work with service organizations, military officials and communities that planned parades, ceremonies and other events.

Nineteen sites were designated as official regional observances by the Veterans Day National Committee.

The committee also sent a variety of materials to state and civic organizations and to more than 107,000 schools across the nation encouraging greater awareness of and involvement in Veterans Day. 



President Clinton pauses after placing a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknowns at Arlington National Cemetery, where more than 4,000 people attended the annual ceremony.



The posting of the colors at the annual Veterans Day ceremony at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, where a wreath-laying ceremony and readings and personal stories about the Vietnam War by both civilians and active duty military were among the highlights.



Secretary Togo D. West, Jr., congratulates World War I veterans James G. Dunton (left), 99, of Virginia, and Henry J. Mills, 103, of West Virginia, after they received the Legion of Honor, France’s highest national honor, at the French embassy in Washington on Veterans Day. The medals are being offered by the French government to all living Allied veterans who fought on French soil in the Great War.