INSIDE

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• Honor Flight Tribute: Army Air Corps nurse travels to Washington to honor her husband
SECRETARY’S MESSAGE

Since my confirmation as Secretary just over three months ago, I’ve learned many things about our department based on my travel to VA facilities, talks with thousands of Veterans and VA employees, hearings, meetings, and phone calls with over 120 Members of Congress, and numerous conversations with Veterans Service Organizations and other Veteran’s stakeholders.

First, fixing access to VA care is critically important. We have a plan to do that, and we are dedicated to implementing it. That process will take time, but we will succeed by working together to provide Veterans the care they have earned.

Secondly, I have learned about the exceptional, wide spectrum of care and benefits that you, VA employees, provide to millions of Veterans, their families, and their survivors.

As an example, no one honors Veterans as does our National Cemetery Administration. NCA maintains approximately 3.4 million gravesites. Last year, alone, NCA conducted over 125,000 interments. For the past decade, the American Customer Satisfaction Index has ranked NCA the top public or private customer-service organization in the Nation—better than every customer-oriented corporation, industry, manufacturer, or organization.

That’s the sort of excellence we want to achieve VA-wide.

That’s the kind of excellence we began moving toward on our “Road to Veterans Day,” an initiative that begins with our mission and our immediate objective:

To better serve and care for those who have borne the battle and for their families and survivors by achieving three goals:

• Rebuilding trust with Veterans and stakeholders;
• Improving service delivery, focusing on Veteran outcomes;
• And setting a course for long-term excellence and reform.

But many parts of our “Road to Veterans Day” will not end on November 11. VHA’s “Blueprint for Excellence” is a template to re-establish VA’s preeminence and leadership in health care. Developed with the leadership and insights of former Under Secretary for Health Dr. Jonathan Perlin and Interim Under Secretary and leadership in health care. Developed with the leadership and insights of former Under Secretary for Health Dr. Jonathan Perlin and Interim Under Secretary for Health Dr. Carolyn Clancy, this is one example of our continued quest for excellence.

The Blueprint lays out four broad themes and supporting strategies for transformation to improve the performance of VA health care now—making it not only more Veteran-centric, but also Veteran-driven by putting our customers in control of their VA experience.

And, to better meet the expectations of our customers, we are going to reorganize for success—perhaps the largest restructuring in the history of the department. We call that reorganization and our customer experience solution MyVA—also part of our overarching Road to Veterans Day strategy. It’s called MyVA because that’s how Veterans should view us—as an organization that belongs to them and provides quality care in the ways they need and want to be served. Veterans’ and employees’ ideas and initiatives will drive reorganization under MyVA. They will tell us what must change to better serve our customers.

MyVA will continue for the foreseeable future as we find ways to restructure, to combine functions, to simplify operations, make process improvements, leverage technology, enhance efficiency, increase productivity, and effectively implement the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act. MyVA is a 360-degree effort to provide Veterans with a seamless, integrated, and responsive VA—whether they come to us digitally, by phone, or in person.

It’s imperative that we all regain and retain a laser focus on our customer base—everyone from the 90-year-old Veteran of Omaha Beach to the 19-year-old who fought in Afghanistan’s Korengal “Valley of Death.”

Our goal is simple: Provide quality, timely care and benefits with proactive, real-time, courteous, coordinated service.

Continued on page 11 ▶

Confidential help for Veterans and their families
Veterans Crisis Line
1-800-273-8255 PRESS 1

• • • Confidential chat at VeteransCrisisLine.net or text to 838255 • • •

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It Matters.
Because you mean so much to them.

My VA | Images from around the Department

Robert Turtil
Photographer/VACO
I covered the dedication of the American Veterans Disabled For Life Memorial in Washington, D.C., Oct. 5. There I met Joseph Bacani (right), whose likeness graces one of the walls at the memorial. Joseph was a combat wounded OIF Veteran and had come to see President Obama dedicate the memorial, with friends from the University of South Carolina, where he’s studying psychology, under the GI Bill.

Steven Goetsch
Staff Photographer/Richmond VAMC
Marine Corps Veteran John Peck answers questions from Hunter Holmes McGuire VA Medical Center’s prosthetics chief, John Fox (foreground); Sept. 25. It’s a team effort during the fitting of a new prosthetic leg. From left, William (Bill) Lovegreen, Jessica Smith-Armstrong and Konrad Walz make adjustments based on the Veteran’s feedback. Peck has been at the prosthetics service many times, because fittings require precise measurements to ensure patient comfort and safety. Walz has a personal stake in his work. “My father was a combat Vet, and my twin brother is still in the Navy after 20 years; and fortunately they have all their limbs,” said Walz. “I cannot think of a patient population more deserving of the best possible care available, as well as our thanks. It is very rewarding.”

Do you have a great photo that should be featured in My VA? Submit it (at least 2 MB) with a short description to newmedia@va.gov.
Dr. Chan Park served in the U.S. Navy from 1999-2009. Dr. Park entered service through the Navy Health Professions Scholarship Program and went on to complete his residency training in emergency medicine at Naval Medical Center San Diego. As a medical officer, he was assigned to the USS Dubuque (LPD8) out of Naval Hospital Guam, Combat Logistics Battalion 5, Shock Trauma Platoon in Ramadi, Iraq, and at Naval Medical Center Portsmouth, Virginia, where he served as an academic faculty member.

In 2011, Dr. Park joined the Hunter Holmes McGuire (Richmond, Va.) Veterans Affairs Medical Center staff and served as the site director for the Combined Emergency Medicine and Internal Medicine Residency Program, as well as the Director for Medical Simulations.

Currently, Dr. Park serves as the Director of Simulation Education at the Durham (N.C.) Veterans Affairs Medical Center, where he and his colleagues are actively engaged in examining best practices, procedural competency, team dynamics, and leadership training in cardiac and respiratory arrest, as well as reinforcing the principles of patient-centered care to provide the best care for our Nation’s Veterans.

Do you know a VA employee who should be recognized in CONTINUED SERVICE? Submit two photos and a short bio to newmedia@va.gov.

November is National Smoking Cessation Month, and while most people are well aware of the detrimental general health effects of tobacco use, fewer are aware of the problems that tobacco can cause in the mouth. For example, you probably know that tobacco use is related to an increased risk of oral cancer, but did you also know that it is tied to gum disease, cavities (dental caries), failure of dental implants, and even birth defects such as cleft lip and/or palate?

The Department of Veterans Affairs has many programs in place to help Veterans break their tobacco use habits. Here are a few:

- **SmokefreeVET** is a free text messaging program to provide daily support, advice, and encouragement to you when you quit smoking. You can sign up for the program in English by texting the word VET to 47848 from your mobile phone or by visiting smokefree.gov/VET.

- The **Stay Quit Coach App** was designed to help Veterans with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) quit smoking. The App guides users in creating a tailored plan that takes into account their personal reasons for quitting.

- **Tobacco quitlines** can double your chance of quitting compared to getting no support at all. You are even more likely to be successful when you use a quitline and take smoking cessation medication. Any Veteran receiving health care through VA is eligible to use the Quit VET quitline.

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**Call the quitline today**

**1-855-QUIT-VET**

Quitting smoking is the single best thing you can do to improve your health. You have the power to quit smoking and to stay smoke free, and the VA has resources available to help.
THE ROAD TO VETERANS DAY

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has an important mission: caring for Veterans and their families, and VA has strong institutional values—mission-critical ideals that must influence day-to-day behavior and performance: Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect, and Excellence.

To better fulfill our mission and to improve our service to those who have “borne the battle,” their families, and survivors, VA has developed The Road to Veterans Day 2014—a series of strategies and actions that will enable the Department to create a better VA for Veterans and employees.

To assure that these strategies are implemented, Secretary Bob McDonald has visited 22 cities and more than 35 VA facilities in the past 90 days.

ON THE ROAD

35

The number of VA facilities Sec. Bob McDonald has visited since August 2014.

35,000

The approx. number of miles Sec. Bob McDonald has traveled since August 2014.

STRATEGIES MOVING FORWARD

Rebuild trust with Veterans and the American people
Improve service delivery
Set the course for long-term excellence and reform

THE FIRST 90 DAYS

Bob McDonald sworn in as Secretary.

Road to Veterans Day:
We have reaffirmed our commitment to our mission and our “I-CARE” values—Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect, and Excellence—and are working to make reaffirmation an annual requirement.

The number of VA facilities
The approx. number of miles
Sec. Bob McDonald has traveled
since August 2014.

200+

The number of town halls held at VA facilities for Veterans to express their concerns. All town halls were held before Oct. 1, 2014.

40

The number of VSO and stakeholder meetings Sec. Bob McDonald has held since being sworn in.

The number of town halls held at VA facilities for Veterans to express their concerns. All town halls were held before Oct. 1, 2014.

I'm here for one thing and one thing only—to get you to come work at VA.

Continued recruiting

Oct. 8

Sec. McDonald announces VA to continue town hall events nationwide.

Oct. 16

Speech to VA:
Over these next several months, I am going to keep traveling, extensively, to hear directly from our employees, Veterans, and other stakeholders.

Aug. 26

Speech to the

Like you, I don’t want VA to be known for just “standard” care; I want it known as “THE Standard” in health care.

Sec. McDonald proposes pay increase for VA physicians.

Sept. 30

Sept. 17

Road to Veterans Day:
We have reaffirmed our commitment to our mission and our “I-CARE” values—Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect, and Excellence—and are working to make reaffirmation an annual requirement.

Sec. McDonald travels to Florida with Rep. Jeff Miller (HVAC).

Aug. 9

July 30

Bob McDonald sworn in as Secretary.

Aug. 24

Speech to DAV:
Over these next several months, I am going to keep traveling, extensively, to hear directly from our employees, Veterans, and other stakeholders.
ON THE LINE

VA’S SOCIAL MEDIA ROUNDPUP

VETERAN OF THE DAY: Every day we honor a Veteran through VA’s official Facebook and Twitter accounts. On point is a Veteran of the Day submission from Facebook that had the most “social media reach” during the month of October with 1.6 million people reached.

NOAH GALLOWAY/ October 7, 2014

THE READER ISSUE! Men’s Health

vaappstore: VA Mobile Health releases new Apps for Veterans regularly. Here are a few of the best rated ones in the VA App Store.

ACT Coach

This app helps you work with a mental health professional during Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). ACT Coach is not a self-help tool and should only be used while in therapy with a provider.

Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry

This app is an online database of health information provided by OEFFOF/OND or 1990-1991 Gulf War Veterans and Service members and collected through a questionnaire about exposures to airborne hazards.

Visit mobilehealth.va.gov/appstore/all to see all the apps VA has to offer!

I recently had the opportunity to interview with 60 Minutes. I told them how your hard work is already making a difference—providing care to more Veterans and reducing wait times in recent months, among many other successes. While we have more work to do, I am confident we will be successful for one reason. You. Thank you for what you do, and God bless you all. Happy Veterans Day!

Secretary’s Message Continued

You see, there is no substitute for VA. Veterans need their VA for the unique care and benefits you provide for them — services that produce tangible results for Veterans, their families, their survivors, and our Nation.

I need your help in making sure Veterans and the American public understand the full spectrum of care and benefits you provide, what you do, and how many things we do exceptionally well as a department. We must do a better job of conveying this in order to insert a degree of balance and truth to the previously one-sided conversation about VA care and services.

I know NCA is not the exception — there is excellence in every administration of VA! Whether making unique contributions in medical research, education, and clinical care, PTSD and TBI treatment, spinal cord injuries and disorders, polytrauma care, disability and education benefits, home loans, homeless rescues, or final honors in our national cemeteries—there’s no other single institution like VA positioned to deliver a broad spectrum of Veteran-specific care and services to the one percent of our population who currently serve in uniform.

We know that VA makes unique contributions that help Veterans live better lives—and produce positive results for all Americans. We know that VA researchers have earned three Nobel Prizes in Medicine or Physiology, and seven prestigious Lasker Awards—recognizing people who make major contributions to medical science. We know that an estimated 70 percent of all U.S. doctors receive training at VA. We know that the hardworking employees of VBA reduced the backlog of pending claims by 60 percent in the last 20 months, completed 1.32 million claims for Veterans in FY 2014 — 150,000 more than last year’s record of 1.17 million—and have delivered over $46 billion dollars in educational benefits under the Post-9/11 GI Bill to over 1.3 million Veterans and eligible family members. Help me spread the word of the good work you do and the accomplishments on behalf of Veterans you make possible.

We need every hand on deck as we move forward to improve our department. I seek and value your input. I appreciate and deeply respect every member of our team who works hard to produce results for those who have served our Nation.

We have the greatest opportunity for improvement in our history. We will succeed because of you, our dedicated workforce, through your commitment to our mission and to rebuilding trust, to reorganizing and reforming VA to best serve Veterans.

I recently had the opportunity to interview with 60 Minutes. I told them how your hard work is already making a difference—providing care to more Veterans and reducing wait times in recent months, among many other successes. While we have more work to do, I am confident we will be successful for one reason. You. Thank you for what you do, and God bless you all. Happy Veterans Day!

VANGUARD recently visited the Tampa VAMC to see what Veterans are saying about VA. Here’s what some of them had to say.

David Freed, U.S. Army

I’ve never had a problem; they’ve always treated me good.

Podiatry treats me like a king; I suppose my least favorite thing is whenever I have to go to the emergency room. I’ve been using VA since 2005.

Susan Hopp, U.S. Army

Do I think the VA is getting better? That is a really complicated question. I have been very lucky at the VA here in Tampa. I feel as though I’ve had wonderful doctors. On a scale from one to ten, I’ve had more 10s than I’ve had threes. I feel as though some of the doctors I have had have put at a huge disadvantage.

Harry Gurr, U.S. Air Force

I’ve never had any problem here in the 30 years I’ve been coming. It’s the best care you are going to get anywhere. The place is great. I’m just coming out of surgery right now; they are sending me home.
“I am here for one reason – and one reason alone – I want you to come work at VA.”

Through its affiliation with more than 1,800 educational institutions, the Department of Veterans Affairs health care system prepares doctors and nurses for a career in medicine like no other with more than 70 percent of U.S. doctors receiving training by VA. However, to keep up with current and future demands on the country’s largest healthcare system, VA needs to not only keep its current doctors, but also recruit more of the medical professionals it trains across the country. That’s where Secretary Bob McDonald’s new recruitment initiative comes in. He has visited more than 20 medical and nursing schools all over the country – from Duke to Morehouse – during his first 90 days, and is spreading the word about the higher calling of serving the more than 9 million Veterans enrolled in VA healthcare.

“I am here for one reason – and one reason alone – I want you to come work at VA,” he recently told a group of medical students at the Morehouse School of Medicine. “At VA, we have a noble and inspiring mission to serve Veterans, their survivors and dependents. There is no higher calling.”

He invited students to join the ranks of medical professionals who made notable contributions to medicine and research like the creation of the nicotine patch, implantable cardiac pacemaker, and revolutionized the modern electronic medical record, with the help of VA. He also laid out the incentives he hopes will tip the scales in favor of working at VA, such as repaying student loan debt and relocation incentives for doctors and nurses who want to work in rural areas.

McDonald wants to make working for Veterans a no-brainer for recently graduated medical professionals and also pushed for an increase in pay for physicians to keep up with the private sector.

“We’re taking the steps we need to take to get Veterans off of wait lists, into clinics and in the longer term, we’re working to provide timely access to care,” he said, “and we need to build our capability by having more medical providers.”

Accomplishments:
Notable accomplishments contributed to medicine and research by VA employees.

- Developed the implantable cardiac pacemaker.
- Conducted the first successful liver transplant.
- Created the nicotine patch to help smokers quit.
- Crafted artificial limbs that move naturally when stimulated by electrical brain impulses.
- Received three Nobel Prizes in medicine / physiology and seven prestigious Lasker Awards.

Visit http://www.vacareers.va.gov/ for more information.

On the Recruiting Trail:
Hiring the Best and Brightest Improves Access for Veterans

By Reynaldo Leal

Incentives:
Recruitment and retention incentives related to paying off student loan debt and enhancing the educational preparation of VA staff.

- Education Debt Reduction Program (EDRP): Loan reimbursements up to $120,000 over five years.
- Student Loan Repayment Program (SLRP): Paying institution student loans of up to $10,000 per year, with a lifetime cap of $60,000.
- Employee Incentive Scholarship Program (EISP): Scholarship to employees for degree or training in select healthcare areas.
- Recruitment and relocation incentives to increase clinical providers for rural areas.

Competitive Pay:
Sec. Bob McDonald proposed salary rate adjustments commensurate with the private sector for physicians and dentists.

- TABLES 1 and 2: Maximum annual pay ranges increased by $20,000
- TABLES 3 and 4: Maximum annual pay ranges increased by $30,000 to $35,000
- TABLE 5: Maximum annual pay ranges increased by $25,000
LIFE IN THE FAST LANE

U.S. Army Veteran finds his calling in NASCAR

By Reynaldo Leal

Chris Clayton grew up with two passions in life: military aviation and racing. The first was from listening to his grandfather’s stories of working on P-51 Mustangs during World War II, and the latter from spending countless summer nights at racetracks with his father.

He recalls his father giving him a choice between attending other sporting events or going to the local speedway. There was never a question in the young boy’s mind — Chris always picked racing.

“If it went fast, I loved it,” he said with a smile.

But the dream of somehow being involved in racing would have to take a temporary backseat to make room for another calling.
His grandfather’s stories, and the respect he had for the family patriarch’s military service, inspired Chris to join the U.S. Army in 2007. He served as a CH-47 crew chief with the 160th Special Operations Aviation unit and deployed six times to Afghanistan during his six years of service. Flying over Afghanistan in a Chinook helicopter, Chris was seriously spurred on by his wife, but it got the attention of the coach. “I’m sure I wasn’t the first person to ask him what it took to be a part of the team,” he said, “but I wanted to show him that I was serious.”

Morin gave him his card, told him to stay fit and come back when he was out of the Army … no promises, but that’s all the sergeant needed to hear to keep the dream alive. From that point on, all his free time was dedicated to reaching his goal. Prior to leaving for his last deployment, he regularly showed up at the Hendrick practice facility to watch and take notes on everything the coaches said. He bought a lug-nut impact wrench to practice, and watched as many Internet videos as he could find, always paying close attention to the “choreographed chaos” of pitting.

His peers in the Army didn’t know what to think of Chris’ new routine, but he kept working at it until, just months from getting out of the military, he got his chance to try out for Hendrick Motorsports. It was a big leap of faith to not reenlist and continue his military career, but all the hard work and dedication paid off when he made the team.

He walked over to his wife, who was watching the tryout from afar, and told her the good news. “We made it!” he told her.

“It was a big personal goal, and it was so competitive,” he said. “Now that I’m here, we’re just going to make the best of the opportunity.”

Nothing is Impossible

The roar of the engines was deafening as Chris ran fuel and tires back-and-forth from the team hauler to pit row – vital tools for the 88 team during the NASCAR All-Star Race at Charlotte Motor Speedway in North Carolina on May 17, 2014. Chris was back in Charlotte, where this journey started, and living his dream as an integral part of Dale Earnhardt Jr’s team on pit road that night.

The path wasn’t easy, but Chris is certain it was worth the sacrifice to fulfill his lifelong dream. He credits the Army and his training for much of his success – from the discipline to follow through with goals and his eagle eye for details developed through years of working on mission-essential aircraft, to the high value placed on teamwork. He’s convinced he wouldn’t be working for Hendrick Motorsports – one of the most successful teams in NASCAR – if it weren’t for the skills he gained while in the military.

Understanding that the goals are different, “there are a lot of similarities between the military and a [racing team],” he said. “It’s all about integrity in the little things. One loose lug nut can cost the entire team, just like one missing part on a helo can affect the entire mission.”

He cautions other Veterans who might think their dreams are too far-fetched to “never set limits” for themselves.

“When you get out [of the military] there is always a mental battle,” he said. “You ask yourself, what if I don’t make it and what if I can’t do it?” But the message Chris wanted other Vets to remember is that, “… you are good enough.” And he is proof that setting goals, believing in yourself and hard work can truly pay off.
HEALING THROUGH ART

By Jordan Schupbach

Each year, submissions come from all over the country: pictures, photographs, paintings, and sculptures. They are all unique and poignant; yet in even the most beautiful painting you will find a hint of a struggle. These are the artistic works of Veterans, and many represent the battle against PTSD. “Chasing the ghost,” as one Veteran calls it ...

But they also represent healing. “It is not just that art allows a Veteran to express the tragedies [of war], it is the belief that someone will see or hear it and relate to it,” said Army Veteran and Creative Arts Festival participant Jason Moon. “This validates it and lets me know I am not alone.”

VA’s National Veterans Creative Arts Festival has been encouraging healing through art for more than 30 years. The festival is the culmination of months of competition at local VA facilities around the country. This year, 3,208 Veterans from 129 VA medical facilities submitted entries to the competition. The gold medal-winning artwork entries from 53 categories were showcased in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Oct. 29–Nov. 2.

The festival is open to Veterans who are enrolled at a VA Medical Center or Outpatient Clinic before entering the local competition. An eligible Veteran can enter local competition at only one VA facility per year in the divisions of art, creative writing, dance, drama, and music.

Learn more about how VA uses the healing power of art in its holistic approach to health care at www.creativeartsfestival.va.gov.
World War I – known at the time as “The Great War” – officially ended when the Treaty of Versailles was signed June 28, 1919, in the Palace of Versailles outside the town of Versailles, France. However, fighting ceased seven months earlier when an armistice, a temporary cessation of hostilities, between the Allied nations and Germany, went into effect on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month. For that reason, Nov. 11, 1918, is generally regarded as the end of “the war to end all wars.”

In November 1919, President Wilson proclaimed November 11 as the first commemoration of Armistice Day, with the following words: “To us in America, the reflections of Armistice Day will be filled with solemn pride in the heroism of those who died in the country’s service and with gratitude for the victory, both because of the thing from which it has freed us and because of the opportunity it has given America to show her sympathy with peace and justice in the councils of the nations…”

The original concept for the celebration was for a day observed with parades and public meetings, and a brief suspension of business beginning at 11 a.m.

The United States Congress officially recognized the end of World War I when it passed a concurrent resolution June 4, 1926, with these words:

Whereas the 11th of November 1918, marked the cessation of the most destructive, sanguinary, and far reaching war in human annals and the resumption by the people of the United States of peaceful relations with other nations, which we hope may never again be severed, and

Whereas it is fitting that the recurring anniversary of this date should be commemorated with thanksgiving and prayer and exercises designed to perpetuate peace through good will and mutual understanding between nations; and

Whereas the legislatures of twenty-seven of our States have already declared November 11 to be a legal holiday: Therefore be it Resolved by the Senate (the House of Representatives concurring), that the President of the United States is requested to issue a proclamation calling upon the officials to display the flag of the United States on all Government buildings on November 11 and inviting the people of the United States to observe the day in schools and churches, or other suitable places, with appropriate ceremonies of friendly relations with all other peoples.
employees by celebrating four national holidays on Mondays: Washington's Birthday, Memorial Day, Veterans Day, and Columbus Day. It was thought that these extended weekends would encourage travel, recreational and cultural activities and stimulate greater industrial and commercial production. Many states did not agree with this decision and continued to celebrate the holidays on their original dates.

The first Veterans Day under the new law was observed with much confusion Oct. 25, 1971. It was quite apparent that the commemoration of this day was a matter of historic and patriotic significance to a great number of our citizens, and so Sept. 20, 1975, President Gerald R. Ford signed Public Law 94-97 (89 Stat. 479), which returned the annual observance of Veterans Day to its original date of Nov. 11, beginning in 1978. This action supported the desires of the overwhelming majority of state legislatures, all major veterans service organizations and the American people.

Veterans Day continues to be observed on Nov. 11, regardless of which day of the week it falls upon. The restoration of the observance of Veterans Day to November 11 not only preserves the historical significance of the date, but helps focus attention on the important purpose of Veterans Day: A celebration to honor America's veterans for their patriotism, love of country, and willingness to serve and sacrifice for the common good.

For nearly 150 years, VA has existed to serve Veterans and their families. Today, the Office of Information and Technology plays a key role in supporting over 350,000 employees and associates who serve more than 10 million Veterans and their families a year. Information Security and protecting the privacy and integrity of employee, patient, and beneficiary data remains one of OIT's highest priorities as we support all stages of Veteran care. Supporting You, our customer, is our goal while Serving Veterans is our mission. Tell us how we are doing by taking the IT Customer Satisfaction Survey at www.itsatisfaction.oit.va.gov
VA’s Veterans Day Poster throughout the years

The Department of Veterans Affairs’ mission to fulfill its promise to Veterans exists because of the service and sacrifice of our Nation’s heroes. Each year — often through a national Veterans Day poster contest — VA’s National Veterans Outreach publishes a commemorative Veterans Day poster, soliciting and selecting from the numerous creative contributions of U.S. citizens nationwide. Through the years, these posters have illustrated the rich history of our country’s protectors, and continue to remind all who see them of the accomplishments and struggles faced by our Veterans, past and present. From Revolutionary War battles, to an Old Guard soldier rendering a salute in a solemn ceremony, vivid images and artwork call on us to pause and reflect in homage to those who paved the way for our freedom. The poster is distributed to VA facilities and military installations around the world, and graces the cover of the official program for the Veterans Day ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery.

To see past posters from 1978 to the present, visit http://www1.va.gov/opa/vetsday/gallery.asp
The bus carrying Veterans of past conflicts pulled up alongside the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial on Sunday afternoon. It was the first time a group from the Honor Flight Network had visited the memorial, which had been officially dedicated just a week before.

The group from Austin, Texas, included 20 Veterans of World War II, Korea and Vietnam. Among them was former Army Air Corps nurse Lois Crook. Now 92 years old, Lois was excited to see the new memorial, and have her picture taken in front of a quote from Dwight Eisenhower.

“I took care of them, that’s why I want to see this,” Lois told me, not only during the war, but as a nurse at her local VA.

But Lois’ story of service is also one of sacrifice. While serving in the Army Air Corps, Lois and her late husband, Clyde Jones, were stationed in England and he was stationed at Manston AFB. He had orders for Korea in three days. I have a letter he mailed that day to his family in which he said, “I don’t mind going, it’s just that I hate to leave Lois and Leslie for so long.”

So on Sunday, the Honor Flight moved on from the new memorial to make another stop: Arlington National Cemetery. The group witnessed the changing of the guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

But it was another stop that had special meaning to the lone female Veteran on this flight. Lois and her fellow Veterans paid their respects graveside to Clyde Ray Jones Jr., an experience the Honor Flight staff described as “humbling.”

Lois Crook is a charter member of the Women in Military Service for America Memorial, located at Arlington National Cemetery. We honor her service and sacrifice.
Though VA’s top priority is to provide world class care and service to America’s Veterans, eventually there comes a time when our heroes pass on.

Determined to give the Veteran and his or her family a meaningful and unique way to pay tribute in a manner reflecting the nobility of the Veteran’s service, VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System staff provide an Honors Escort.

“The Honors Escort program is recognized as a Best Practice as it touches the hearts of family and staff because of military bearing and protocol,” said Celia M. Ranson, creator and coordinator of the Honors Escort Program.

The coordinator recruits and trains staff to provide a dignified transfer of the recently deceased Veteran from their hospital room to the facility morgue. Upon receiving notice that death is imminent or has suddenly occurred, key members of staff, who serve as escorts are notified and preparations commence. A special gurney is prepared that has a frame designed to cover the body of the Veteran and support a draped American Flag.

After the procession, the family is given the opportunity to assist with folding the Flag.

“One especially touching moment was when a Desert Storm Veteran assisted with folding the flag for his Vietnam Veteran father. He was so grateful that Honors were provided,” Ranson said.

Allison Baca, like many other family members, said the procession was an experience she'll never forget. Her father, a WWII and Korean War Veteran, had been a longtime resident of the Sierra Nevada VA’s Community Living Center. She was at her father’s side when he passed recently.

“I was absolutely honored and touched by the respect and love shown to my father,” Baca said. “To be included in the procession was something I will always cherish as a memory with my dad.”

During a recent visit to the Sierra Nevada VA, Secretary McDonald was given a presentation on the Honors Escort program as an example of how the Reno VAMC “Honors Service and Empowers Health.” Subsequently, training has been developed to instruct all VA medical centers on how they can form an Honors Escort Program at their own facility. A training course along with an instructional video is currently being developed and should be available by the end of the year.

**Veterans Receive a Final Walk with Dignity**

*By Darin Farr*

Escorted With Honor — A fallen Veteran at the Sierra Nevada VA is given a final escort, accompanied by family members, patients, and VA staff. From left to right are Vietnam Vet Scott Bowman (in wheelchair), VA Staffer Ron Cook (walking behind wheelchair), VA Staffer Marc Launtz (center) and Nurse Rachael Hambleton. (Photo by Darin Farr)
VA Employees on the Frontlines of Information Protection

By Josh Laredo

With high-profile data breaches becoming regular occurrences in recent years, Americans are becoming increasingly concerned about how large organizations who hold personal information are protecting data. VA’s Office of Information Security within the Office of Information and Technology (OIST), is responsible for establishing policy and monitoring systems to help protect Veteran information. However, the responsibility for protecting Veteran information belongs to each and every VA employee.

The agency’s size alone – VA operates the largest hospital network in the U.S. and delivers benefits to millions of Veterans annually – makes it a target for cybercriminals seeking sensitive information. To protect Veterans and VA employees from ever-evolving cyber threats, OIS has developed a layered, defense-in-depth cybersecurity system that is constantly guarding VA’s network perimeter and reinforcing the agency’s networks and systems from within. In September 2014 alone, VA’s network defenses detected and prevented more than 1.9 million spam emails and 2,400 viruses from entering VA’s networks. In that same time span, OIS’s cybersecurity measures also stopped more than 159 million malware attacks targeting VA information.

VA Chief Information Security Officer Stan Lowe knows that VA has to keep up with a constantly evolving cyber threat landscape, but that’s not what keeps him up at night.

“For me,” Lowe says, “it’s all about people, paper, and process. Security begins and ends with employees.” Lowe has numbers to back this up. While VA has no evidence that cybersecurity intrusions have led to extraction of Veteran data from VA systems, more than 90 percent of VA’s information security and privacy awareness training has translated to care. Does having good social support lead individuals with PTSD to seek care?

The answer, it would seem, is not really. While social support can play a role in whether or not a patient sought treatment for PTSD, it is not really. While social support can play a role in whether or not a patient sought treatment for PTSD, it is not really. While social support can play a role in whether or not a patient sought treatment for PTSD, it is not really. While social support can play a role in whether or not a patient sought treatment for PTSD, it is not really. While social support can play a role in whether or not a patient sought treatment for PTSD, it is not really. While social support can play a role in whether or not a patient sought treatment for PTSD.

Interestingly, because one of the symptoms of PTSD is withdraw- al, symptom severity may adversely impact social support. So worsening PTSD symptoms may result in diminishing social support. In any case, say the researchers, understanding the role of family, neighbors, and peers is integral to helping Veterans with PTSD manage their symptoms, and to improving treatment rates.

If you or a Veteran you know is in crisis, call the Veterans Crisis Line at 1-800-273-8255 and PRESS 1.

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STUDY: Social support is only part of PTSD treatment-seeking for Veterans

By John Crawford

When it comes to post-traumatic stress disorder, strong social support can often mean the difference between recovery and deterioration. Research has consistently shown that a person’s social network—that is, the people he or she can rely on—can play a mitigating role in both PTSD development and severity. It stands to reason, then, that patients with PTSD and strong social networks would be more likely to seek treatment and get help. But new research suggests that might not be the case.

A study published in Psychiatric Services on Oct. 1, 2014, suggests that, social support, on its own, has little impact on whether a patient chooses to seek treatment. More important are severity of PTSD; demographic factors like age or marital status; and whether the patient has any other illnesses.

Study based on 3,000 people with PTSD.

“This isn’t about developing PTSD,” says Dr. Rebecca Sripada, a postdoctoral fellow with VA’s Serious Mental Illness Treatment Resource and Evaluation Center and the University of Michigan. “We know that lack of social support is associated with an increased likelihood of developing PTSD and with greater severity of PTSD symptoms. What we weren’t sure of was how that translated to care. Does having good social support lead individuals with PTSD to seek care?”

The answer, it would seem, is not really. While social support can play a role in whether or not people develop PTSD in the first place, and can play a role in easing symptoms, it may not influence them to seek treatment.

For the study, Sripada selected a sample of almost 3,000 people with PTSD from the National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions. In the survey, participants rated their social support on a 12-point scale by indicating their agreement with statements such as, “If I were sick, I know I would find someone to help me with my daily chores,” or, “If I wanted to go on a trip for a day, I would have a hard time finding someone to go with me.”

Sripada calculated the association between level of social support and the likelihood of receiving treatment for PTSD, and adjusted for sociodemographic information. Sripada says sociodemographic factors appeared to play a significant role.

Mobilizing family members and friends

“Traits like age, household income, marital status, geographic region, and race did play a part in whether or not a patient sought treatment for PTSD,” she says. Traits linked to a greater likelihood of seeking treatment included having higher education or greater income; being divorced, separated, or widowed; and having greater PTSD severity.

Interestingly, because one of the symptoms of PTSD is withdraw- al, symptom severity may adversely impact social support. So worsening PTSD symptoms may result in diminishing social support.

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Advisory Committee Management Office Expands After Reorganization

By ACMO Staff

The Advisory Committee Management Office (ACMO) provides administrative oversight and management support to the Department’s 24 federal advisory committees. In January, ACMO reorganized and began to improve collaboration with committees and key offices such as the Executive Secretariat and Office of the General Counsel.

ACMO’s vision has remained consistent throughout the year: provide expert advice regarding the management of advisory committees and deliver exemplary uniform procedures for advisory committee activities; ensures that all advisory committees comply with the provisions of the Federal Advisory Committee Act and other federal laws and regulations as applicable; and verifies that advisory committee meetings are open to the public, as appropriate, and that those meetings are announced in the Federal Register.

In March, ACMO sponsored four half-day committee management training sessions, which included lectures, interactive exercises and, most importantly, enhanced collaboration among VA’s committee management staff. In May, the General Services Administration Committee Secretariat, which has oversight of all federally-chartered advisory committees, named this initiative a “Best Practice in the Federal Government.” ACMO staff members continue to work toward improving the management of VA’s advisory committees.

In September, ACMO published the updated VA Advisory Committee Management Guide and sent it to senior leaders, DFOs/Alternate DFOs and committee support staff. The guide had not been updated in 11 years, and many processes had changed. ACMO will publish an addendum every six months, which will be published on the ACMO website in November.

VA’s committees have made many recommendations, which have led to positive outcomes, such as:

- Establishing the Office of Health Equity to improve health outcomes impacted by racial, ethnic, and gender differences;
- Discovering blood pressure vaccine;
- Establishing the Office of Veteran Employment Services (VESO), Office of Human Resources and Administration.

The D&R team actively provides outreach, resources, consultation, and training pertaining to the deployment lifecycle. The DLC is a 5-phase cyclic process that employees undergo from initial hire at VA through their return to VA after completing their military service.

The VA for Vets website (http://vaforvets.va.gov) provides a comprehensive source of references and tools for our stakeholders pertaining to each phase of the DLC. A key component on this website is the Deployment Lifecycle Guide that provides useful tips for our stakeholders throughout the DLC.

As a preventative approach, D&R also focuses on reducing complaints related to the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA) which “protects individuals performing, or who have performed, uniformed service from employment discrimination on the basis of their uniformed service, and provides for their prompt restoration to civilian employment when they return to civilian life.”

The regional managers have oversight and support responsibilities for five geographical regions. Those with questions or concerns relating to deployment and reintegration and/or have an issue that requires immediate assistance, please contact a regional manager via the contact information below.

Deployment and Reintegration Program

By Darrin Pope

Did you know that VA has a dedicated team of employees who provide outreach, consultation, and support services to VA Reserve and National Guard employees?

The Deployment and Reintegration (D&R) team consists of five regional managers located within the Human Resources Services Section, Veteran Employment Services Office (VESO), Office of Human Resources and Administration.

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Supporting our Veterans, their families and loved ones: VA nurse partners with Yellow Ribbon reintegration program

By Travis Bartholomew

When she’s not working as a nurse practitioner and primary care provider at the VA's outpatient clinic in Ramsey, Minnesota, Cynthia Rasmussen, a retired lieutenant colonel, continues her support of our nation's military as a speaker for the Department of Defense's Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program.

Yellow Ribbon hosts nationwide events that connect National Guard and Reserve members -- and their families -- to find the support they need before, during and after deployments. Most Guard and Reserve members live far from a military installation and may not have the resources to navigate the challenges when they are called to duty.

Yellow Ribbon's Cadre of Speakers, including Cynthia, offers guidance at weekend-long events, on subjects ranging from financial and legal planning to family readiness and relationship building. Cynthia leads workshops, like Coming Home and Communication, that focus on helping single service members and couples work through deployment-related issues and strengthen their relationships.

The impact of these events is tremendous: saving relationships and families, preventing suicides, supporting children, and building resilience,” she said. “My background as a mental health professional and reservist helps me to understand what they may be experiencing.”

Cynthia spent more than 23 years as a psychiatric nurse in the Army Reserve and served as the Sexual Assault Prevention & Response Coordinator and Director of Psychological Health for the 88th Regional Support Command (RSC). Her unique experience as both a retired Service member and VA employee help her relate to the Yellow Ribbon participants, who may be silently struggling and unsure how to find help.

“I’m able to walk people through the processes and see the bigger picture, since I understand the VA system and know what it’s like to be a reservist,” Cynthia said. “At some point, these Service members will transition to Veteran status and I can provide insight about that transition as a speaker at Yellow Ribbon events.”

Cynthia supported the 88th RSC’s deployment cycle preparation program before the Department of Defense launched Yellow Ribbon in 2008. She has been a member of Yellow Ribbon’s Cadre of Speakers ever since she retired from active duty. Cynthia has been a VA employee for the past 15 years and believes the Yellow Ribbon is integral to helping Service members move from active to veteran status.

“Yellow Ribbon is the only program for the reserve components that provides information and resources to help service members reintegrate with their families, employers and communities,” she said.

“At Yellow Ribbon events, we help service members and family members gain skills to successfully reintegrate and to understand their benefits and how to navigate the VA system. Working together, Yellow Ribbon and VA can ensure that we take care of the next generation of Veterans and their families.”

To learn more about the Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program, visit www.yellowribbonmil.org. To find an upcoming event in your area, visit www.yellowribbonevents.org.

Germ-fighting Robots join the ranks at VA Medical Center in Fayetteville

By Sarah McBride

“Meet George Jetson, His boy Elroy, Daughter Judy, his wife Jane,” greeted Veterans, family, and staff earlier this year as they entered the clinical addition at the Fayetteville medical center in Arkansas. The song, being sung by Chief of Environmental Management Service (EMS) Mitch Goodwin, was his way of bringing attention to a robot naming contest EMS was having for their new germ-fighting robots.

The medical center took a giant leap into the future with the addition of five germ-fighting robots that can eliminate hard-to-kill bugs in hard-to-clean places. These robots, vaguely resembling R2D2 from Star Wars, use pulsed xenon ultraviolet (UV-C) light that is 25,000 times more powerful than sunlight, to destroy harmful bacteria, viruses, fungi, and even bacterial spores.

In just 5–10 minutes each device can disinfect a patient room by pulsing ultraviolet light, which washes over the surfaces where germs reside without leaving a chemical residue. This is all done while staff completes their standard cleaning procedures in other rooms.

“Our robots don’t replace what a staff member can do, nothing can replace the physical cleaning that EMS staff go in and do, but these robots are an extra safety precaution, and we want people to know that they are stepping into, what we strive to make, the cleanest hospital in Arkansas,” says Dr. Mark Enderle, medical center director.

As a way to not only personalize these new tools at VHSO, but also to lessen the stigma of using robots, EMS staff at VHSO set out to give life to these robots. The final selection of names was the 5 most popular name submissions: Rosie, Violet, Xena, Germinator, and R2D2.

New Tele-ICU unit “Goes Live” at Dorn VA

By Chris Conklin

The Wm. Jennings Bryan Dorn VA Medical Center continues to take leaps into becoming the VA of the 21st century by implementing the latest technology to serve Veterans at its various sites of care in Columbia and the upstate region. On October 21, the facility unveiled its latest healthcare tool as it initiated its new Tele-ICU unit.

This new patient care asset allows for Veterans to be monitored via telemetry units to VA providers based out of Cincinnati, Ohio. The system works through a remote controlled high-definition camera and networking capabilities that allow real-time patient data and vital signs to be monitored at the Cincinnati location.

According to Dr. Myron Kung, of Dorn VA, the Tele-ICU staff who monitor patients at Dorn are a fully functioning ICU staff that have critical care experience and serve as an extra set of eyes and ears for patients being treated at the Dorn VA.

“We certainly have many more patients and Veterans than we do providers and the demand for care is great,” said Kung. “What this system does is provide a force multiplier for our population of providers, so this allows us to bring on extra help to provide care for Veterans,” he said.

The system is not intended to take the place of bedside physicians, according to Kung. It will be used to supplement care at Dorn for the Veterans.

The program is part of a $15 million investment to partner with PHILPs Healthcare to provide Tele-ICU units at VA hospitals at sites across the country.
I think the VA can use more of these. This will come in handy for all kinds of tests and care that Veterans need,” said Paradise. “Things like tests that don’t take a lot of time, this is great you don’t have to drive all the way to Columbia,” he said.

The VA staff members who operate the MMU say Paradise’s reaction to the unit was very similar to all of the Veterans who had received their care in the previous day.

Stephen Coffey, cardiology nurse practitioner, examines Army Veteran Billy Joe Paradise at Dorn VAMC’s Cardiology and Vascular Medical Mobile Unit. (Photo by Ken Holt)

Veteran Billy Joe Paradise climbs the steps to Dorn VA’s Cardiology and Vascular Mobile Medical Unit (MMU) October 21 during a ribbon cutting ceremony and tour. The unit will travel to rural parts of the Upstate Region to provide specialized cardiology and vascular care to Veterans.

The MMU was the idea of Yvette Twum-Danso, Cardiology Clinical Nurse at the Dorn VA. Twum-Danso saw a need for Veterans in the rural Upstate areas where Veterans would have to travel up to hundreds of miles to attend appointments for cardiology and vascular care. She began the process of brainstorming how to ease the burden for those Veterans and knew there was a better way. A way that would open up access to care and positively impact quality of life for Veterans traveling from rural areas of South Carolina.

“We have many Veterans in the outlying areas in need of this type of care,” said Twum-Danso. “As a cardiology team, we looked at every option; nothing was really off the table. Our goal was to be able to continue the quality care we provide at our main facility in Columbia with easier access. We understood the burden of drive up to hundreds of miles to travel to the Veterans in rural areas and also understood that it is not ideal in regards to their health for these patients to have to travel that far—not to mention quality of life,” she said.

What Twum-Danso found was the opportunity for a grant through the VA’s office of Rural Health to purchase and equip the MMU, bringing care to Veterans instead of those in the Upstate Region having to make the lengthy drive to Columbia for care. The outcome of the grant is the MMU with the capability for heart and vascular testing including EKG, echocardiography, and peripheral vascular imaging. It is staffed by trained cardiovascular providers of the Dorn VA Medical Center. This unit will provide care in six federally-designated rural countries near the Orangeburg Community-Based Outpatient Clinic and the upstate Greenville, Spartanburg and Anderson areas.

Veterans who used the MMU for their appointments in the first week of its operation were overwhelmingly pleased by it, including Paradise who had his appointment the second day the MMU was put into service.

“I really did not know what to think of it at first, but I did know it was saving me a trip to Columbia,” said Paradise.

Paradise and his wife in the past have had to drive more than 300 miles round trip from Seneca, S.C. to Columbia for cardiology appointments at the Dorn VA Medical Center. For many appointments the couple would have to leave before 5 a.m. to be on time.

“Coming to my appointment (on the MMU) has cut my drive by more than half. This is a benefit to me, especially when I have an appointment at 8 a.m.,” said Paradise.

Paradise said the Dorn VA’s investment in the MMU is telling of its commitment to give Veterans better services and easier access to care.

“It’s definitely a step in the right directions. I think the VA can use more of these. This will come in handy for all kinds of tests and care that Veterans need,” said Paradise. “Things like tests that don’t take a lot of time, this is great you don’t have to drive all the way to Columbia,” he said.

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MIND & SOUL

Collaboration and integration between service lines have always enhanced Veteran-centric care. At VA Maine Healthcare System in Augusta, the chiefs of Mental Health Service and Chaplain Services have made this a priority. VA Maine serves a state that is largely rural and has over 125,198 Veterans with a current enrollment of 54,986. In order to reach all of its Veterans, VA Maine Healthcare System in Augusta, the chiefs of Mental Health Service and Chaplain Services have made this a priority. VA Maine serves a state that is largely rural and has over 125,198 Veterans with a current enrollment of 54,986. In order to reach all of its Veterans...
Explore VA to see how VA benefits help Veterans live life to the fullest after military service.

U.S. Army Veteran Laura Ortiz runs on the beach with a prosthetic leg provided to her by VA.

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