


# SIERRA PACIFIC

## Quarterly

VISN 21 Newsletter

March 2021

Volume 1, Edition 2



## Project HERO rolls through Reno

*Bringing resources and camaraderie to Veterans while encouraging lifelong fitness*  
*Full story on page 2*

## Inside:

COVID-19 vaccinations are in full swing

VA employees honored for excellent service

New Santa Rosa clinic to open in summer 2022

...and much more!

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Page 1 photo courtesy of Samuel Mitrovich

## New robotic arm helps Veterans

By Maheen Mausood Adamson, PhD

The VA Palo Alto Health Care System's Headache Center of Excellence (HCOE) now houses a new and innovative robotic arm with a Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation (TMS) machine at its Livermore site.

TMS is used for research and clinical care for Veterans with various health problems. VA Palo Alto is only the second VA site in the nation to provide reduced provider-patient interaction and precise positioning of the stimulating coil to deliver this brain stimulation treatment.

Brain stimulation with TMS is an FDA-approved treatment for major depressive disorder and obsessive compulsive disorder, and is clinically administered at various VA hospitals. Using guidelines established by FDA and clinical researchers, the HCOE uses TMS to treat headaches, chronic pain, cognitive function, and depression in Veterans with traumatic brain injury.

The HCOE interdisciplinary team is currently supported by VA, the Department of Defense, and the National Institutes of Health in research clinical trials.



**The new and innovative robotic arm with a Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation (TMS) machine is used for research and clinical care for Veterans with various health problems.**

They hope to collaborate with other departments to provide this treatment clinically to Veterans.

Our state-of-the-art equipment and protocol

for treatment of these health problems highlight our commitment to Veterans, innovation, and precise clinical delivery through evidence-based research practices.

# Project HERO saves lives, restores hope and purpose for Veterans

By Shane Whitecloud

Started in 2008, Project HERO is a one-of-a-kind organization that brings together Veterans and first responders to help them heal through outdoor recreational therapy and community programs, primarily through bicycling and adaptive sports.

Reno is one of fifty-five nationwide program locations for Project HERO and is led by April Wolfe, a certified therapeutic recreation therapist for Parks and Recreation.

"Cycling has so many benefits related to whole health," said Wolfe. "The ability to not only provide bikes but also smart trainers and virtual memberships allows Veterans to continue to ride even in these uncertain times and during inclement weather."

VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System has partnered with Wolfe and the city of Reno's programs in the past. One highly successful collaborative program is Fit But Not Forgotten, which focuses on reintroducing Veterans to a full gym and trains them on proper lifting and health related activities. At the end of that program, Veterans are rewarded with a free annual gym membership and given a plethora of resources to continue pursuing a healthy lifestyle.

An avid bicyclist herself, Wolfe is personally invested in the success

of Project HERO, which led her to meeting with former VA Sierra Nevada Director Lisa Howard in hopes of expanding whole health initiatives with our Veterans.

Howard obliged by drafting a 5-year, six-figure contract with the city.

"I am aware of and fully support the Project HERO Collaboration with the City of Reno Project HERO Chapter," Howard said. "April Wolfe, City of Reno, partners with VA Sierra Nevada HCS on several programs that receive national VA funding.

These programs, such as Fit but Not Forgotten, are managed with fidelity and includes coordination with employee representatives from our facility."

Howard went on to say that the project would help increase quality of care as well as community and physical activity by our Veteran population.

"We have been an unofficial partner since 2016," added Stephanie Torian, Chief of Community Affairs at VA Sierra Nevada. "The City of Reno has volunteered 116 hours of time helping 58 Veterans receiving care in our Homeless Veteran program receive a bike."

Upon acceptance into the 6-month Project HERO program, Veterans will receive a new bicycle with all maintenance included,



**Project Hero has served as a unique opportunity for Veterans to spend time together in a way that is safe and promotes physical and mental well-being. VA Sierra Nevada's partnership with the City of Reno has helped to coordinate programs like this one and others.**

training, equipment, and a network of peers to ride with, even in cycling events and group rides. This includes adaptive bicycles.

The program's mission states that physical injuries should not stop a hero from recovering. They create one-of-a-kind specialty bikes from the ground up, no matter the injury or depth of disability.

For one member, this was the icing on the cake for him.

Bicycling was always a passion and form of therapy for Sam Mitrovich growing up, but it had to be put on hold when he enlisted in the U.S. Army. Twenty-five years later, he retired from enlistment and found himself struggling to

find an activity that was healthy, enjoyable, and provided social interaction on his terms.

"I had the bike and the knowledge, but I was missing that important social interaction piece," he said. "Since 2017, I have participated in 3 Project Hero Sacramento Honor Rides, two Tour de Tahoe rides, 2 Project Hero Las Vegas rides and countless group rides hosted by fellow Veterans in the Northern Nevada area."

For riders like Mitrovich, Project Hero provides an opportunity to share experiences with fellow Veterans, share support, get outdoors, and pursue positive physical and mental health goals, even during a pandemic.



## Patient Experience Champion

Tasha Sayama, Chief of Business Service at the San Francisco VA Medical Center, was named the VISN 21 Patient Experience Champion of the Quarter for the fourth quarter of FY2020.

Sayama led by example to promote Veteran-centeredness and excellent customer service.

Recipients of this award are recognized for: going above and beyond to provide

service recovery; being a leader and role model; and demonstrating attributes such as commitment, professionalism, advocacy, and service.

# VA nurse named Pathway Direct Care Nurse of the Year

By John Archiquette

Donia Till, a registered nurse in the special procedures unit at VA Southern Nevada Healthcare System (VASNHS), was recently honored globally as the 2020 Pathway Direct Care Nurse of the Year by the American Nurses Credentialing Center.

The award, which recognizes the outstanding contributions of nurses globally from a Pathway to Excellence organization, selected Till due to her exemplary contributions and commitment to ensuring VA Southern Nevada nurses have a voice in decision-making, shared governance, leadership, and professional development.

The Pathway to Excellence designation signifies health care organizations that demonstrate a commitment to establishing the foundation of a healthy workplace for staff. VASNHS was the first medical facility in southern Nevada and first VA health care facility in the southwestern United States to earn this distinction in September 2019.

Till was nominated for being the driving force behind VASNHS' pursuit of Pathway designation. "Donia's enthusiasm for and dedication to adopting and living

the Pathway Standards were essential to achieving VASNHS' designation," said Dr. Jennifer Strawn, VASNHS Nurse Executive. "As a result, current and future nurses at VA Southern Nevada will benefit from an organizational culture of sustained excellence, as well as a positive practice environment that supports, empowers, and engages staff."

Till put together a cadre of nurses who rounded from unit to unit, informing staff about the Pathway to Excellence framework and its benefits, including why it's suitable for the organization. "These types of nurse-led efforts are critical in the success of an organization's designation because they allow nursing staff to be engaged with the Pathway to Excellence journey and the benefits that come with it," said Strawn.

VASNHS Pathway Program Director Gregory Clark commended Till for her involvement in developing the organization's shared governance education team, which evolved into the steering committee for Pathway to Excellence: "Her passion inspires nurses' eagerness to have their voices



Donia Till, VASNHS Special Procedures Nurse, seated, discusses nursing information with Dr. Jennifer Strawn, Associate Director of Patient Care Services Chief.

heard, highlighting a knowledge gap for establishing a structure that supports unit-based councils." Clark said.

Till is an advocate for direct care nurses and, as a certified nurse, was directly involved in writing the Pathway Standards Document.

She was instrumental in the organization's "Let's Get Certified" campaign by providing education and leading the shared governance education team and steering committee as cochair and chair. And with her pursuit of advanced education, Till fosters the foundation of leadership and

provides safe and effective patient outcomes.

"She exemplifies what a Pathway champion looks like," Clark said.

"As a direct care nurse, 'Living Pathway' is the ability to make a difference at the lowest level that impacts practice and outcomes and be the change agent to improve processes," said Till.

"The VASNHS leadership team was an inspiration in my individual journey and encouraged me to go above what I thought was obtainable. The journey doesn't stop; it improves and endures as nurses continue to strive to make a difference."

## New Santa Rosa VA clinic to open in summer 2022

The San Francisco VA Health Care System (SFVAHCS) recently broke ground on a new clinic in Santa Rosa. Located at 2285 Challenger Way in southwest Santa Rosa, the new clinic will expand services to our Sonoma County Veteran patients. The facility is scheduled to open by Summer 2022.

The new clinic will employ 200 clinical and administrative staff and offer primary and specialty care services, mental

health, women Veteran health services, telehealth and telemedicine, dental, laboratory, occupational and physical therapy, prosthetics, pharmacy, radiology, and will also include space for clinical and administrative support staff such as information technology, logistics, scheduling clerks and housekeeping services.

Construction cost for the 58,000-square-foot clinic is an estimated \$12 million.



A rendering of the Santa Rosa VA clinic, which is scheduled to open in the summer of 2022.

# Screeners lead to improved care and patient safety

By Ryan Coverdell

When you walk through the entrance doors of a VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System (VASNHCS) facility, a staff member will greet you with a series of questions about possible symptoms or exposure to the coronavirus, then ask you to sanitize your hands before entering the facility. These screeners ensure the health and safety of all, especially the facility's most vulnerable patients. A screener's role requires tact and warmth that is in line with VA priorities and values.

"For our Veterans, our visitors and our fellow staff, we need to step up and treat everyone like we want to be treated," says Dawn Dollarhide, a registered nurse at VASNHCS.

Dollarhide was recently recognized as the 2020 VASNHCS Employee of the Year. She leads the team of screeners at the health care system's main facility, the Ioannis A. Lougaris VA Medical Center in Reno.

For her, it is vital to ensure everyone who steps through the door is met



**Dawn Dollarhide, 2020 Employee of the Year at VA Sierra Nevada Healthcare System.**

with a friendly face and professional demeanor.

"They are our brand-new frontline," she said. "Even if you're smiling under your mask, it will show to our Veterans, our staff and our visitors."

COVID-19 brought with it many changes, especially when it came to visiting VA facilities. For VASNHCS, it was critical not only to effectively communicate all the changes as they occurred, but to ensure staff were ready and able to help Veterans through these changes once they arrived.

Dollarhide embodies the VA's core values. She expects her screeners to do the same. It is clear they are following her lead, exemplifying the VA's golden rule in support of the VA's number one strategic priority – creating a positive customer experience.

# Like father, like son



Thomas Ramos did not think he would be receiving the COVID-19 vaccine this soon when he took his father to a vaccine appointment at the VA Palo Alto Health Care System's Livermore Division. He just made the cut when the health care system began offering the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine to Veterans who are age 75 years old and older.

"I took him to his appointment and found out

that I could also receive mine," said Ramos, a U.S. Army Veteran who served during the Vietnam era. His father, Frank Ramos, a 94-year old U.S. Navy Veteran who served on the USS Nevada in World War II, is one of many Veterans in this age range who are at a higher-risk for COVID-19.

When asked what he would tell other Veterans about receiving the vaccine, Ramos said, "Get it, for your own health and safety!"

## COVID vaccinations begin at San Francisco VA

The San Francisco VA Health Care System (SFVAHCS) began vaccinating its frontline health care workers with the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine on Dec. 22 following the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's Emergency Use Authorization.

"The San Francisco VA is eager to offer the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine to health care personnel and community living center residents," said Director Bonnie Graham. "Receiving the vaccine is like having hope delivered. As vaccine supplies increase, our ultimate goal is to offer COVID-19 vaccination to all Veterans and employees who want to be vaccinated."

Dr. Meshell Johnson, an Intensive Care Unit physician, was the first frontline worker to receive the vaccine on Dec. 22, followed by Community Living Center (CLC) nursing assistant Michael Mapp, and Maria Lee, a restorative care coordinator at the CLC.

Dr. Johnson acknowledges the hesitations from communities of color to receiving the vaccine, but states, "As a physician scientist, I believe in science . . . I would not get this vaccine if I did not believe it was safe and



**Dr. Meshell Johnson, right, an ICU physician at VA San Francisco Health Care System, receives the first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine administered to frontline workers at SFVAHCS.**

effective."

While Dr. Johnson hopes that the distribution of vaccines will be the beginning of the end of the pandemic, she stressed that the work is not done. She says, "I encourage everyone to get the vaccine, and to also continue wearing a mask, physically distancing, and washing your hands."

## 10k COVID-19 vaccine doses administered at Las Vegas VA



Veteran William Loveless receives COVID-19 Vaccine at VA Southern Nevada Healthcare System Medical Center.

By John Archiquette

VA Southern Nevada Healthcare System (VASNHS) administered its 10,000th dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine on Friday, January 29, 2021.

Since giving the first dose of the vaccine on December 16, VASNHS has vaccinated more than 5,200 Veterans and 2,400 health care workers. The vaccination rate for VASNHS Veterans is 8.89%, higher

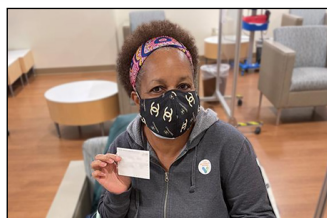
than the national VA average of 8.07%. VASNHS has also vaccinated 74.14% of the VASNHS staff, putting VASNHS above the national VA average of 61.89%.

“We are proud to be one of the leaders in vaccinations not only within Southern Nevada, but among VA facilities nationwide,” said William J. Caron, VASNHS Director.

## Hundreds of Veterans receive a dose of hope

U.S. Air Force Veteran Ann Elizabeth Martin-Stubbs was initially worried that not enough research had been done on the COVID-19 vaccines, and she was hesitant about getting one. Still, she went to the Sacramento VA Medical Center for her first dose.

Martin-Stubbs was one of 715 Veterans and caregivers who received their first dose of the vaccine at the Sacramento VA Medical Center’s first mass



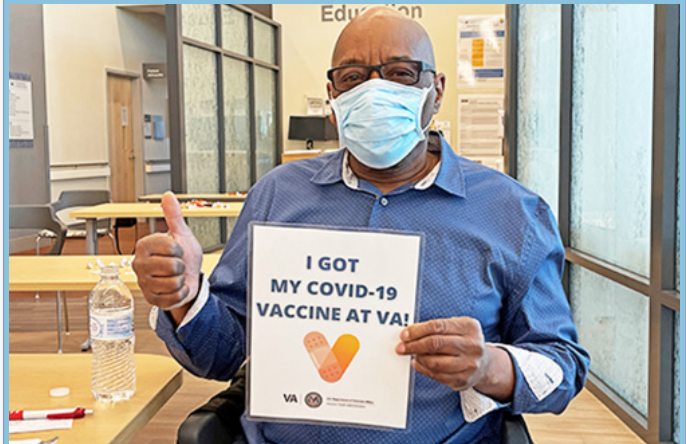
U.S. Air Force Veteran Ann Elizabeth Martin-Stubbs shows off her COVID-19 vaccine record card.

vaccination clinic on January 30.

As an African American Veteran and caregiver for her 92-year-old father, a retired Air Force Veteran, she was leery of the vaccine because of experiments like the Tuskegee study.

“Even though we have our doubts as a race about being guinea pigs, I’m glad I did it,” she said. “I now feel relieved and more confident. This was a wonderful experience.”

## 1,001 doses of COVID-19 vaccine given to Veterans in one day



Veteran Leroy Hansen gives a thumbs up after receiving a first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine at the Chico VA Clinic Saturday, February 20.

The VA Northern California Health Care System (VANCHCS) gave 1,001 doses of the COVID-19 vaccine to Veterans during Saturday mass vaccination clinics at the Sacramento VA Medical Center and community-based outpatient clinics in Chico and Auburn Feb. 20.

As of Feb. 22, VANCHCS has distributed more than 27 thousand doses of the COVID-19 vaccine to Veterans, caregivers, and VA employees and volunteers across Northern California. According to VA’s Access to Care website, 14,375 Veterans who receive their care at VANCHCS have received a first dose, and 5,374 have received both doses of either the Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna COVID-19 vaccines.

“Since we started offering the vaccine in late December, we’ve been busier than usual, as you can imagine, and the response from the Veterans, caregivers and employees has been extremely positive,” said David Stockwell, director of VANCHCS. “As a health organization, we’re happy to see that the number of new COVID cases is continuing to drop significantly across the state. Mass vaccination events like these are having clear impacts, not just on numbers and cases, but on the outlooks of many of the Veterans we serve. Veterans

have been telling us that these vaccines are giving them hope again.”



U.S. Air Force Veteran Ruby Bruce, 83, receives her first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine at the Chico VA Clinic Saturday, February 20.

“If I can take it, so can you”

Ruby Bruce is one Veteran who is now looking forward to 2021 after receiving the vaccine at the Chico VA Clinic Saturday.

On the day before her 84th birthday, the U.S. Air Force Veteran walked into the clinic with hope but also a few nerves. Even though she had a reaction to a flu vaccine in recent years, she said she wasn’t going to let that stop her.

“I checked with my doctor about getting the vaccine, and he said I could get it,” she said. “Shots don’t bother me. If I can take it, so can you.”

# VA Pacific Islands hosts vaccination clinic



VA Pacific Islands Health Care System (VAPIHCS) hosted a COVID-19 vaccination clinic on February 27 at Ke'ehi Lagoon Memorial Park. Hundreds of Veterans received vaccinations that day.

Overall, nearly 6,000 Veterans had received vaccinations from VAPIHCS to that point, including more than 100 homeless Veterans.

Photos by Henry Villarreal



# Homeless Veterans receive vaccines from VAPIHCS

By Amy Rohlf

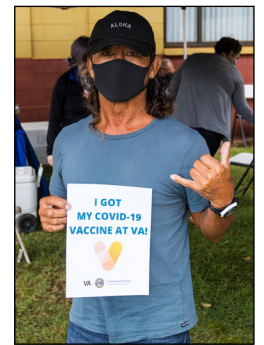
Some of VA Pacific Islands Health Care System's (VAPIHCS) homeless Veterans were among the first to receive the Johnson & Johnson (Janssen) COVID-19 vaccine. The hard-working staff at VAPIHCS, from medical support assistants to pharmacists to nurses, provide safe, compassionate, quality care to all Veterans.

"Our homeless Veterans could easily become one of the populations that is overlooked in a community, but we are making them a priority to ensure they get the vaccine," said VAPIHCS Director Dr. Adam Robinson. "They are among our most vulnerable Veteran groups; they often live in close quarters with one another, spending time with each other. Many of our Veterans spoke of how

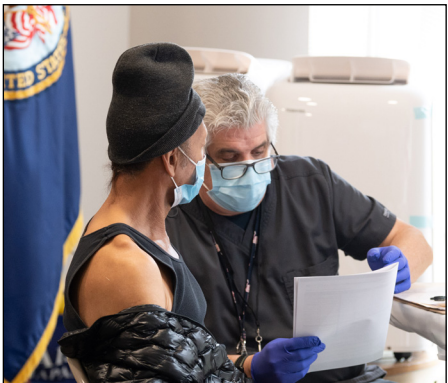
challenging this past year has been having to physically distance from others. They told me what they look forward to the most now that they have the vaccine is the camaraderie they have with one another. This is such an important part of their healing."

Lieutenant Governor Josh Green also attended the homeless Veteran vaccination event, expressing a commitment to Veterans and offering support if needed. VAPIHCS will work closely with his office to hold more outreach events, including vaccine events on other islands in the state.

At this event, VA administered more than 160 vaccines, making it a great success for VA and its Veterans.



Photos by Henry Villarreal



# VASNHS marks anniversary of first COVID diagnosis

Story and photo by John Archiquette

When U.S. Marine Corps Veteran Ronald Pipkins walked into the Emergency Department of the North Las Vegas VA Medical Center (VAMC) on March 2, 2020, he had a mild fever and some trouble breathing.

A little more than 48 hours later, the 55-year-old was diagnosed with COVID-19, becoming the first case at both the VAMC and the entire state of Nevada.

Following confirmation of COVID-19 from Southern Nevada Health District and Centers for Disease Control on March 5, Pipkins spent six weeks fighting for his life. One month of that time was spent on a ventilator in a medically induced coma. During that time, he remembers very little, and his dreams varied greatly from what was happening.

"When I closed my eyes, I woke up back in what I thought was reality. I felt like I was living in Alaska, and there was a whole different life in my mind," Pipkins said. "But toward the end, it got very dark. I prayed to God, 'take me away. Take me away from this.' And then I woke up."

He remained in VA care for three weeks after awakening from his coma. During that time, he underwent intense rehabilitation with VASNHS

physical and occupational therapists.

Pipkins' recovery has been difficult. "It's like, in my mind I'm stronger and healthier than I've ever been, but my body just can't run the race," said Pipkins. "It's muscles, joints, and endurance. I have arthritis in both of my hands. It took a while for my muscles to awaken."

Nearly one year later, Pipkins returned on February 24 to receive his first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine.

"More than anything, I did it for [my children]," he said. "After what they experienced, watching me lay in a coma for a month, I felt obligated. I didn't want to put them through that again."

Pipkins has been a strong advocate for masking following his release from the VAMC and is thankful to get vaccinated. "Half a million people have died without a vaccine. It makes me think about the AIDS epidemic. Will people still be dying five or ten years from now from COVID-19 because they didn't do anything? We all just need to get together and get vaccinated."

While he still finds it strange that he is famous for surviving, Pipkins hopes his



Nearly one year after a life-threatening battle as Nevada's first confirmed COVID-19 patient, U.S. Marine Corps Veteran Ronald Pipkins returned to the North Las Vegas VA Medical Center Feb. 24, 2021 to get his COVID-19 vaccine.

journey will help others struggling with their recovery from COVID-19. "I'm that story," he said. "I'm getting better, but it's still an ongoing battle." He is currently working on a book detailing his year-long ordeal with the virus.

When asked if he was nervous about returning to the VAMC after spending a month in a coma in the same building, he shook his head. "I'm always excited to be here because this is where heroes work. The people who saved my life are here. I'm always happy to be in the presence of heroes."



**VA COVID-19  
VACCINATIONS**

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