

SIERRA PACIFIC

Quarterly

VISN 21 Newsletter

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Inside:

Palo Alto Veteran
employee wins
innovation award

Fresno chaplain
honored for service
to Veterans

Therapy dogs come
to Reno VA CLC

...and more

Transgender Veteran finds himself through yoga, community

story on page 4

Contents

<i>Veteran employee makes vinyl flags</i>	3
<i>Transgender Veteran finds himself</i>	4
<i>Fresno opens ATLAS site</i>	6
<i>Veterans Village opens in Mather</i>	7
<i>Sierra Nevada welcomes new director</i>	8
<i>Palo Alto introduces K9 program</i>	9
<i>San Francisco leads research efforts</i>	10
<i>Pacific Islands audiology improves</i>	11
<i>Palo Alto Veteran employee innovation</i>	12
<i>Fresno chaplain receives HOPE award</i>	13
<i>Canine comfort in Reno</i>	14
<i>Home-grown eye doc shines in Hawaii</i>	15
<i>High reliability corner</i>	16

Patient Experience Champions

For the third quarter of FY2021, Dr. Jessica Peltan, Deputy Associate Chief of Staff in the Mental Health Service at VA Sierra Nevada, was named VISN 21 Patient Experience Champion of the Quarter.

Other finalists for this award included: Jason Dazley, MD, Southern Nevada; Reshmi Maiki, Northern California; Germaine Okino, Pacific Islands; Lucas Corriea, Central California; and Lawrence Richard, San Francisco.

In the fourth quarter of FY2021, Dr. Andrea Bourne, Chief of Audiology and Chief of Rehabilitation Services at VA San Francisco, was named VISN 21 Patient Experience Champion of the Quarter.

Other finalists included: Jack Ford, Southern Nevada; Paul Grimes, Northern California; Mary Harlinger, Ph.D., Pacific Islands; Oscar Torres-Martinez, Central California; and Braden Sedran, Sierra Nevada.

Drs. Peltan and Bourne have both led by example to promote Veteran centeredness and excellent customer service.

Recipients of this award are recognized for:

1. Going above and beyond to provide service recovery
2. being a leader and role model
3. demonstrating the attributes of commitment, professionalism, advocacy and service

IMPROVISE, ADAPT AND OVERCOME: Veteran employee finds new way to safely honor fellow Veterans



Miguel Orozco joined the Marine Corps Reserves in December 2000. He deployed to Al-Anbar, Iraq in 2005 as a reconnaissance Marine. After suffering a bicep tear while deployed and undergoing two shoulder surgeries, he was medically discharged in 2007.

Miguel, now an RN at VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System, found a way to honor Veterans who were lost to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Due to pandemic-related safety regulations, the facility could no longer drape an American flag over gurneys used to transport a Veteran who had passed in their “Code Honors”: the escort through the hospital as a way to pay final respects.

Orozco, staying true to a concept that is very popular among Marines, found a way to adapt and overcome. He came up with an alternative solution: a vinyl flag, which could be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected after each use.

“The genesis of the vinyl flag began when the COVID

pandemic prohibited us from draping our interment flag over the gurney of deceased veterans, due to infection control policies,” he said. “The Honors Escort was one of my most privileged responsibilities as a House Supervisor and not being able to provide this honorable service to deceased veterans was heartbreaking to me. After the initial whirlwind of COVID year one was behind us, I was able to research and make the flag project a reality. I enlisted the help of a local sign shop. They used their CNC machines to cut out the stars and stripes so it looked perfect. I glued it and sewed it together at home with the help of my wife.”

The vinyl flag is able to be draped over the gurneys as these Veterans are honored one last time as they depart the medical center.

Orozco’s ingenuity and resourcefulness have allowed these Veterans to receive the send-off they have earned, while also keeping Veterans and staff safe from potential contaminants.



Marine Corps Veteran and VA employee Miguel Orozco made this vinyl flag, which is used to cover gurneys carrying Veterans who have passed during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Transgender Veteran finds himself through yoga and community

Jay Cambridge has embraced many changes on his life journey. He is a Veteran, a yoga instructor, and he is transgender. Each of those transitions have helped shape him into the person he is today.

Cambridge enlisted in the Air Force in 2008 and spent six years serving as a security forces airman. During that time, he served in Korea and traveled to more than 30 countries.

"The Air Force was an incredible journey for me," he said. "I got to see the world, I got to meet people from all over the world, and I got to find myself."

Cambridge's journey to find himself began at a very different place.

"When I joined the military, I joined as female," he said. "I was female-assigned at birth and so my entire military experience was as a woman." As a black female working in security forces, I was already a minority. It's a career field that is predominately white and male. I was very quiet and felt like I had to walk on eggshells."

As someone who describes himself as outgoing and expressive, Cambridge struggled with having to keep part of his life a secret.

"Serving in the military as a female, I identified as a lesbian, and served during the last few years of Don't Ask,

Don't Tell," he said. "That was a difficult time for me, as I was not allowed to truly be myself. Unfortunately, I did face investigation and reprimand for simply being who I was."

While serving in the Air Force, Cambridge began to associate himself with a more "masculine energy" and eventually realized he is transgender.

When Don't Ask, Don't Tell was repealed in 2011, he knew it would change his life. "I will never forget that day," Cambridge said. "I am so grateful that I got to experience that while serving active duty. It was a breath of fresh air and alleviated a lot of stress. However, identifying as transgender, that was another enduring struggle as well. I knew that it was a great start, but we still had a long way to go."

During the six years Cambridge served in the Air Force, he faced incredible adversity. "I endured discrimination and military sexual trauma," he said. "I lived in a lot of fear. It was extremely difficult. I faced depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideations."

"Unfortunately, many of these conditions afflict the transgender community at a higher rate than the general U.S. population," said Dr. Micol Levi-Minzi, a VA Southern Nevada Healthcare System psychologist who works with many LGBTQ Veterans. "Statistically, transgender people are nine times more likely to attempt suicide than other Americans."

With violence, discrimination, and self-injury affecting the transgender community at alarming rates, VA Southern Nevada recognizes the importance of the Transgender Day of Remembrance. This annual observance on Nov. 20 honors the memory of transgender people who were killed in anti-transgender violence, as well as those who died by suicide.

The Department of Defense announced in March that transgender servicemembers would again be allowed to serve openly and be provided gender-affirming procedures and care.

continued on page 5



Jay Cambridge, a transgender Air Force Veteran, provides instruction to a group of yoga students.

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Cambridge believes it is a step in the right direction for acceptance. "Reflecting on Transgender Day of Remembrance, it's important to recognize how far we've come, but also the work that we have left to do. The statistics with transgender women being murdered is high. It's even higher for transgender women of color."

According to both Dr. Levi-Minzi and Cambridge, one of the most important factors in the well-being of a transgender person is having supportive friends or family.

"My group of friends accepted me for who I was, and they were very diverse, from straight to gay to trans and everything in between," said Cambridge. "We all need a support system. We all need a place or a group of friends that will allow us to be ourselves. That can be the difference between life and death. Sometimes all you need is that one friend or family member who is going to be in your corner who can support you all the way through."

For Cambridge, his biggest supporter was his father, who passed away in 2020. "He always had my back, and he was my support system," he said. "If I didn't have him, I don't think I would be here today sharing my story. He was always such a strong source of optimism and positivity. I still know that he is here with me, and I still receive his guidance and support."

In 2014, Cambridge chose to leave the Air Force to continue his journey of self-discovery. He began his physical transition. The initial process was self-

funded, along with the help of private support. Since then, however, Cambridge has received most of his care through the VA Southern Nevada Healthcare System.

Throughout his transformation, Cambridge still struggled with depression and anxiety, however, and looked for something to help him heal mentally, physically and spiritually.

"When I was in treatment, they presented yoga to me," he said. "That was the first time that I ever really felt connected to my mind, my body, and my spirit. It became my first healthy addiction."

Cambridge knew that yoga would play a key role in the next phase of his life. He wanted to share this gift with others who needed guidance. He spent several months in India, living in an ashram and learning the art from renowned yogis.

When he returned, Cambridge founded an organization called The Intentional Movement. "The movement is for individuals who are transitioning and who could be transitioning with gender identity or those transitioning out of the military," he said.

Through this organization, Cambridge is carrying on his father's positive outlook by providing support and community to those in need. He's doing this by using the same therapy and life lessons he learned to help others walk their own path. "For me, this has not always been an easy journey, but I want to tell other transgender people that life does get better," he said. "I'm in a space now

where I live boldly, I live proudly, I live true, and I would like to use that to help inspire others to be their true authentic self."

Cambridge believes those lessons he has learned can apply to anyone. "We're all in a transition," he said. "It doesn't matter if it's a transition with your gender, your career, or your life. What can we do to smooth that transition? Be kind to one another. Build a more supportive community. Maybe it's just saying hello or giving someone a smile...because you don't know what that person may be going through."

That sense of community is one of the reasons Cambridge feels comfortable getting his care at VASNHS.

"The VA has come a really long way in caring for transgender Veterans," he said. "From hormone replacement therapy to prosthetics, the VA has really jumped on board to be inclusive to all Veterans. When I'm at the VA, I can let my guard down. I feel very accepted here, and it's been a pleasant experience. When I call to make appointments, I get addressed by my proper pronouns and my name, and it really means a lot."

Levi-Minzi believes that through simple gestures like pronoun recognition and usage, we are respectful of and addressing the needs of every Veteran and employee, regardless of their identity. "Everyone deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. We must all commit to that. We are proud to serve all who served."

Fresno VA, VFW host ATLAS open house



VA Central California Health Care System and VFW Post 2487 celebrated the opening of the new ATLAS House in Los Banos, California, on Saturday, Nov. 20.

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs hosted an Accessing Telehealth through Local Area Stations (ATLAS) open house with Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 2487 on Saturday, Nov. 20, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. The event was free and open to all Veterans and their family members and caregivers.

The open house showcased the private appointment space at Post 2487 in Los Banos, where Veterans enrolled in care at the VA Central California Health Care System can have video visits with their providers. Attendees were able to view demonstration of a video visit using the ATLAS site's state-of-the-art telehealth

equipment.

"We are excited to show the Veterans in Los Banos and surrounding communities what ATLAS has to offer," said Medical Center Director Charles O. Benninger. "The initiative provides Veterans with the high-quality care they need. It's a great way to serve Veterans who live far from our VA facilities, have limited internet access, or have unreliable transportation."

ATLAS sites offer services that do not require hands-on exams, such as primary care, mental health care and specialty services. Establishing these points of care closer to Veterans' homes is a

priority to reduce obstacles and increase access to care.

ATLAS is part of VA's Anywhere to Anywhere initiative, which works to better serve the more than 9 million Veterans who receive care through VA — no matter where they live. In addition to the Los Banos site, there are 11 other operational ATLAS sites across the country: Asheboro, North Carolina; Athens, Texas; Boone, North Carolina; Eureka, Montana; Fond du Lac, Wisconsin; Howell, Michigan; Keokuk, Iowa; Linesville, Pennsylvania; Gowanda, New York; Springfield, Virginia; and Wickenburg, Arizona.

Veterans, VA staff participate in Las Vegas Honor Ride



Veterans and staff from the VA Southern Nevada Healthcare System participated in the Las Vegas Honor Ride on Nov. 6. This event is held on the Las Vegas Strip around Veterans Day each year to raise money and awareness for Veteran-focused charities. Several of the participants are active members of the VASNHS recreational therapy cycling group. "This ride is a great opportunity for us to get together as a group and participate in an event that does so much good for the Las Vegas Veterans community," said Tracey Filicky, VASNHS Program Specialist.



VA NorCal welcomes Veterans, families to Mather Veterans Village



Left: VA Northern California Health Care System Director David Stockwell speaks at the dedication of the Mather Veterans Village (pictured, right and lower left). Lower right: Stockwell and other community leaders cut the ribbon on the facility, which will help support Veterans in need.

VA Northern California Health Care System Director David Stockwell and community partners welcomed Veterans and their families to their new home at the campus completion celebration for the Mather Veterans Village.

“At VA, we believe no Veteran should be without a place to call home. I know our partners and those here with us today share that belief,” said Stockwell.

“The Mather VA Medical Center and our homeless program team, both conveniently located across the street from this beautiful new facility, provide clinical services to many Veteran residents through long-term case management and liaison services. We’re honored to support this project

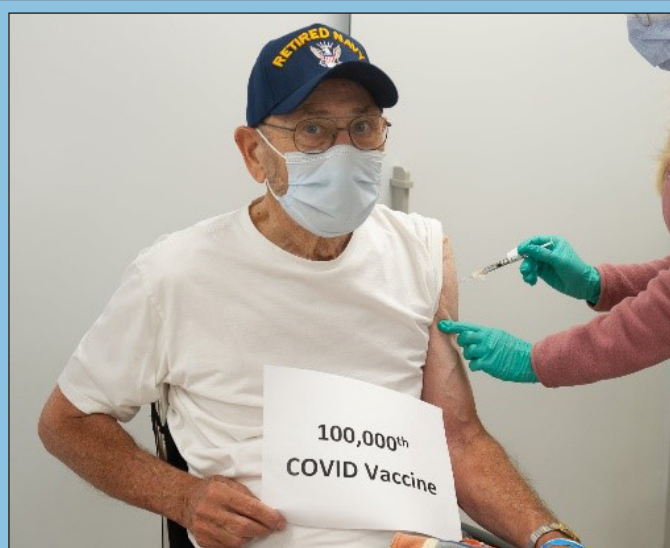
with 50 HUD-VASH vouchers and 47 transitional housing beds. But finding and sustaining permanent housing is just one of the first steps to better health and improving quality of life. In addition to offering primary and specialty care services directly across the street, our homeless team also partners with the Veteran residents by offering on-site flu and COVID-19 vaccine clinics, clinical consultation to Nation’s Finest, VA enrollment and eligibility support, financial management support, employment information, and so much more. We look forward to continuing to partner with you.”

Mather Veterans Village is one of the four Mercy Housing programs in California and completed its second and

third phases, which added 50 supportive homes and 47 transitional beds. VA provided 25 HUD-VASH vouchers and 25 permanent supportive housing on its first phase. All project phases bring the total housing capacity to 147.

This project was a partnership between VA Northern California Health Care System, Nation’s Finest, Sacramento County Department of Housing, Mercy Housing California, California Tax Credit Allocation Committee, Veterans Housing and Homelessness Prevention Program, California Department of Finance, The Home Depot Foundation, Exchange Bank, Wells Fargo Community Development and Local Initiatives Support Corporation.





VA Northern California Health Care System administered its 100,000th dose of the COVID-19 vaccine on Oct. 28. U.S. Navy Veteran Nills Pultz received a booster dose at the Sacramento VA Medical Center. Thank you, Mr. Pultz, for your service and for helping us beat the pandemic.



Bravo Zulu to Jeremy Bennett, a VA registered dietician based out of the McClellan Clinic, on his completion of the 2021 Boston Marathon. Jeremy practices what he preaches when it comes to diet and exercise and is an inspiration to us all!

VA Sierra Nevada welcomes new director

Faced with the extensive task of running VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System, new director Kevin Amick went straight to work.

"I look forward to serving our Veterans, but certainly know that COVID-19 has changed things," Amick stated. He addressed changes within the community and how those changes may impact Veterans. "What was available for care in the community might not be available anymore. Some places went under; some people decided they were going to retire."

Amick plans to assess the state of care throughout northern Nevada to best decide which resources are available versus which resources are in need. As he assesses needs in the local community, he's also keeping a door open for Veterans wishing to voice their opinions more directly.

A Veteran himself, Amick served over 21 years as a Navy Hospital Corpsman. He and his wife, Tammi, have been married for more than 31 years and have one son, Adam. He credits much of his success to his family for their support through both his military and VA career. His wife's support was so instrumental that when he retired from the Navy, Amick made sure to include her family's military heirlooms in his military shadow box.

"My shadow box wasn't really for me as it was for my wife," he stated as he began listing the various items and their significance. Included were original shoulder pads and replicated dog tags Kevin had specially made representing his wife's grandfather, a WWII POW/MIA during the Battle of Corregidor in the Philippines.

Her father was a naval



Director Kevin Amick, VA Sierra Nevada

chief radioman at sea when President John F. Kennedy was shot in 1963, and he provided the original broadcast teletype scroll detailing those events for Amick's shadow box.

An avid sports fan with a keen fandom for Baltimore teams, Amick is excited to jump into local sports in the Reno/Sparks area. Though it's unlikely he'll don any Raiders or 49ers gear, you may see him in a Reno Aces ballcap, discovering more of northern Nevada's beauty.

Amick previously served as Acting Director at Pittsburgh VA and as Director of VA Butler Health Care and associate medical center director at Durham VA Health Care System in Durham, North Carolina. Beginning his service to the Veterans Health Administration in 2010, he served in various positions at Durham VA and Hampton VA Medical Center in Hampton, Virginia. He also served as chief hospital corpsman in numerous other roles in the Navy Hospital Corps at various duty stations during his 21-year naval career.

Amick looks forward to serving and fostering relationships with local Veterans and community as VASNHCS' new executive diirector.

VA Palo Alto introduces K9 program for safer campuses



VA Palo Alto looks for unique talent when it comes to its Police Service. The range of talents within the team may rival the best police departments in the country, but their newest recruit, Atlas, brings a whole new level of skill.

Not only is he fully trained to track down lost patients and help with drug-related cases, but he can do it all with his nose. That is because Atlas is a European Labrador Retriever that was recently acquired to join VA Palo Alto Police Service.

“The addition of our VA Police K9 team and the unique skills they offer further exemplifies our unwavering commitment to provide the safest and most secure environment for our Veterans, visitors, and fellow employees,” said VA Palo Alto Police Chief and U.S. Marine Corps Veteran Martin Sizemore.

When Sizemore joined VA Palo Alto, one of his first initiatives was to implement a K9 program. With the support of executive leadership, Sizemore’s team was able to establish a contract with a kennel in western Pennsylvania that sought out the perfect dog.

The kennel sources all their dogs from Europe, so as soon as the contract was set up, the kennel owner flew over to Holland to find a sporting breed that matched the VA’s criteria for police dogs.

Christian Mattei, a Lieutenant Detective and Air Force Veteran, is Atlas’ K9 handler. He has more than 11 years of service with VA Palo Alto Police, and after making his way to lieutenant with a solid track record, he was the obvious choice to become the first K9 handler in the health care system. He also grew up training hunting dogs but admitted there is a big difference with police dogs.

“He’s a working dog, so I have a responsibility to make sure that he’s trained, well fed, and he can work when the time comes. It’s so much different than just having a pet or a service dog,” said Mattei, who also houses Atlas in his home during off-duty hours.

Atlas’ main purpose for his unit is to serve as a tracker. He can sniff out drugs as well as track humans when necessary. While drugs aren’t a frequent issue, he is based at the VA Menlo Park campus — home to several nursing facilities dedicated to elderly

patients, some suffering from dementia or Alzheimer’s Disease. The value of having an officer like Atlas is high when it comes to these populations.

Atlas even adds value to VA Palo Alto’s strong relationships with community law enforcement and can be an asset for cases like missing people. However, aside from tracking skills, certain dogs can make police officers more approachable. When looking at Atlas’ puppy face, that statement is undeniable.



VA Palo Alto Police Service recently added Atlas, a European Labrador Retriever, to their ranks. Atlas is shown here with his handler, Christian Mattei, a Lieutenant Detective and Air Force Veteran.

SFVAHCS researchers lead efforts in race-free approach to kidney health

by Angelo Dalmacio

In late September, a joint task force put together by the National Kidney Foundation (NKF) and the American Society of Nephrology (ASN), issued its recommendations on Reassessing the Inclusion of Race in Diagnosing Kidney Diseases. The national task force, which consisted of kidney clinicians and researchers, as well as patient advocates, was co-chaired by the San Francisco VA Health Care System's (SFVAHCS) very own Dr. Cynthia Delgado. The task force recommended that current race-based equations should be replaced by a substitute that is accurate, representative, unbiased, and provides a standardized approach to diagnosing kidney diseases.

The call for race-free medicine comes at a pivotal time in our history, where larger societal reassessments of race and equity have been brought to the health care conversation as well. It is through the concerted activism from health equity advocates, students and providers across the health care sector that removing race as a determinant of kidney function became an issue worth tackling.

This issue stems from the use of "estimated glomerular filtration rate" (eGFR), which is the current formula used to diagnose and capture the severity of chronic kidney disease. For over two decades, eGFR has been the leading test that is based on

measurement of the levels of creatinine in the blood. (Creatinine is a waste product predominantly from the normal breakdown of muscle tissue.)

Starting in 2013, a group of researchers, led by SFVAHCS' Dr. Michael Shlipak, published research that compared the creatinine-based eGFR test to a test that measured a protein in the body called cystatin C. The paper's findings include the conclusion that elevated levels of cystatin C more accurately predict higher rates of heart disease, stroke and death among elderly people with no known kidney problems than the creatinine test.

They showed that unlike creatinine, cystatin C was not dependent on muscle mass. The creatinine test was adjusted for use with Black individuals, who tend to have greater muscle mass on average than white individuals. However, the amount of muscle mass varied widely between all races and the overlap among races made the "adjustment" misleading in individual patients. The cystatin C test, on the other hand, provides an estimate of kidney function independent of muscle without the use of race as a factor.

In its report, the task force recommended increased use of cystatin C combined with creatinine for a reliable way to check kidney function. The NKF and ASN "now urge all laboratories and healthcare systems nationwide to adopt this new equation to estimate GFR as rapidly as possible so that we



can move toward a consistent approach of diagnosing kidney disease that is independent of race."

Dr. Carl Grunfeld, SFVAHCS' Associate Chief of Staff for Research and Development, celebrates these findings. "Simply put: this is the embodiment of research put into action for our patients," said Grunfeld. "The fact that we are leading the way in using a race-free approach to determining health diagnoses and outcomes is a testament to the strong-willed commitment of our health care system to innovative research and health care equity.



The Palo Verde High School Air Force Junior ROTC program honored Veterans and employees as they brought in their demonstration team to the North Las Vegas VA Medical Center to do a flag-folding ceremony in honor of Veterans Day. The team came to teach the importance of our flag, the significance of each fold of the flag, and to remember our current and fallen Veterans. "It was a great experience to understand why our flag stands tall and is always respected," said Roxanne Banting, Registered Nurse and coordinator of the event.

Veterans hear improvements with new audiology booths

Imagine seeing faces on a TV that you walk past but have no idea what they are saying. Imagine being able to see your friends and family but not hear what they are trying to tell you. Imagine a knock on your door that goes unanswered because you didn't even know it happened. This is a reality for many people who have worn the cloth of our nation.

The number one service-connected reason Veterans come to the VA is hearing loss, followed by tinnitus as the number two reason. This makes Audiology a huge component of Veteran health care. In addition, the third most prevalent reason for a Veteran to come to the VA is mental health issues, and many mental health issues stem from hearing loss.

"Not being able to hear is one of the most isolating things a person can experience," said Dr. Mark Sanders, chief of audiology, VA Pacific Islands Health Care System (VAPIHCS). "Feeling isolated like that can cause serious mental health struggles."

Audiologists are hard to come by everywhere, but there has been a persistent shortage in the Pacific Islands the VA has long sought to address. The way forward wasn't clear. To know what was required, someone with the knowledge and experience needed to step in and build a program that could deliver audio health care to Veterans in the region.

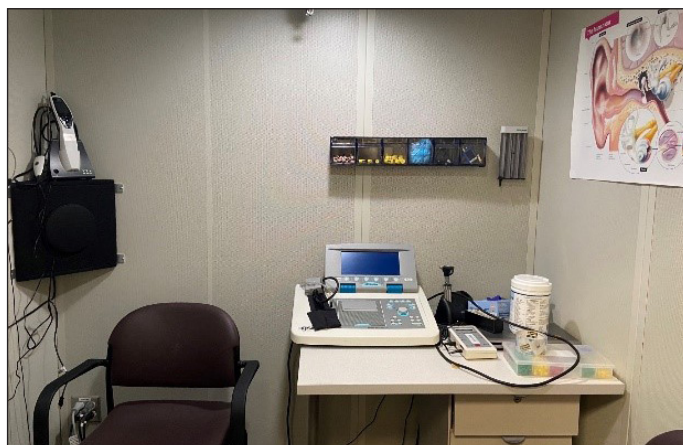
Sanders is originally from Colorado, earned his graduate degree at Arizona State University and accepted his first job in Boston. He was already an accomplished audiologist when he heard from a friend at Tripler Army Medical Center about a job working for the VA. He had done his fellowship in Hawaii and always wanted to come back, so he took the job.

When Sanders came to the VA, he was the lone audiologist trying to provide for the hearing health of more than 53,000 enrolled Veterans. Some might have found the task too daunting and walked away, but Sanders was inspired by the Veterans he served. He had the vision that had been lacking before, and he could see how care could be provided to all Veterans in the Pacific Islands.

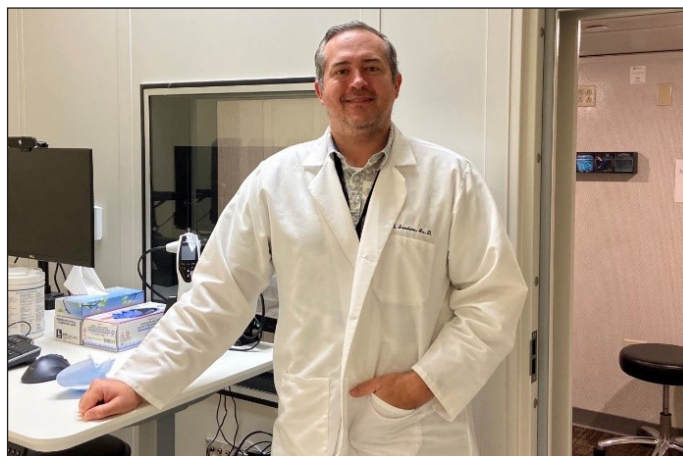
Sanders faced obstacles when applying for funding and trying to win others over to his plan for providing care. However, he never gave up. Through his tireless advocacy, VA agreed to hire more staff and build more audiology booths, allowing for a wide expansion in the care that could be provided.

The new Telehealth audiology booths include four so far; the first in Hilo VA Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) went live on Oct. 1. Two more opened in November, one on Maui CBOC and one on Kaua'i CBOC. Finally, a booth in Kona CBOC is estimated to be ready in the summer of 2022.

Face-to-face Audiology booths have also increased. Two were added to the Spark Matsunaga Medical Center in Oahu last year. A booth has also been ordered for Hilo CBOC and is scheduled to be installed in January 2022. There is also a booth ordered for the new Windward CBOC in Kaneohe, which Sanders hopes will open in February. In addition, there are plans to get a face-to-face booth for Kona in the summer of



Audiology booths like the one shown above have been instrumental in providing care to Veterans. Dr. Mark Sanders, below, has led efforts to get more booths and collaborate with other VA facilities to expand care for Veterans.



2022. And finally, there will be four face-to-face booths in the new ALOHA center, which will break ground in late 2021.

However, having new booths wasn't enough. There was also a need for doctors, which is where the San Francisco VA was able to help. They have seen a reduction in demand for audiology care recently, which allows them to use the new telehealth audiology booths Sanders set up to provide care for Pacific Islands Veterans from their offices in San Francisco.

"I love our partnership with the Pacific Islands," said Andrea Bourne, Au. D, San Francisco VA Medical Center. "It's been really rewarding to help, and of course, the patients are so grateful."

The program continues to expand. Each new booth allows VAPIHCS to reach a new community, improving audio health care as a result.

VA Palo Alto Veteran employee wins iNET Investee of the Year Award

Navy Veteran and VA Palo Alto employee Brian Higgins built a “smart white cane” prototype, which offers additional feedback to users with vision loss.

After losing his vision more than 20 years ago and having to give up his driver’s license, U.S. Navy Veteran Brian Higgins set out to overcome these challenges. His efforts paid off when he became the winner of the 2021 Innovators Network (iNET) Investee of the Year Award for his prototype of a smart white cane.

Higgins was diagnosed more than 20 years ago with retinitis pigmentosa, a rare genetic disorder that affects roughly 1 in 4,000 people with difficulty in seeing at night and loss of side (peripheral) vision. He has worked for the Western Blind Rehabilitation Center at VA Palo Alto Health Care System since 2004, serving as a certificated computer access and access technology instructor.

His work fit perfectly with his love for inventing. He has also been a long-time member of the Silicon Valley Robotics Club. This interest inspired his work on several inventions, including a robot guide and the prototype of his smart bike that he rides every day to work. However, the one tool he uses every day is the traditional white cane that most people with vision loss use to get around, which has not evolved since its invention nearly 100 years ago.

“I noticed major changes in technology with coding and artificial intelligence evolving, as well as computers getting smaller,” he said. “So when I saw a company experimenting with sensors on glasses, I began looking at how I could do the same with my white cane.”

People are normally trained to scrape the ground in a 3-foot arc in front of them with normal white canes. While it has been enough to help them get around, it still misses many obstacles above the ground that could potentially hurt them.

For the past 3 years, Higgins has been actively using his prototype of the smart white cane, which can be paired with an iPhone and features feedback tools such as sound and haptic feedback. The sensor package includes light detection and ranging, commonly known as LIDAR, as well as two ultrasonic sensors.

It was not until the past year when he joined VA’s Innovators Network Spark-Seed-Spread Investment Program that he got the right support he needed to potentially share his invention with

everyone. The program aims to identify and accelerate employee-inspired innovations to improve health care experiences for Veterans, families, caregivers and employees.

“I’m a thinker and inventor, but there were other pieces of the puzzle that I needed help with,” Higgins said. “That is what this innovation network is about: providing support. Every request was met with a yes, and I could not have done this without the support of Innovation Specialist, Kalyn Essex, and Director of the National Center for Collaborative Healthcare Innovation, Dr. Thomas Osborne.”

When asked about the next challenge, he mentioned, “My dream is now to patent my smart bike!”



Fresno VA chaplain receives award from local Veterans group

By Patrick Gordon

Chaplain Terry Rommereim, lead chaplain at VA Central California Health Care System, was presented with the HOPE Award by Central Valley Veterans at their annual Star Spangled Ball.

Central Valley Veterans (CVV) is an all-volunteer 501(c)(3) organization that helps Veterans in the Central Valley region with emergency needs and filling in the gaps VA or other Veterans organizations are unable to address, due to program restrictions. H.O.P.E. stands for “heart of philanthropy embraced,” and the award has been presented

each year since 2016 to honor and acknowledge a Veteran, an individual and a group that have demonstrated their heart for philanthropy within the community and with CVV.

Rommereim has worked with CVV for years, providing support at events, offering invocations, and volunteering whenever he can.

“We picked Terry because he is somebody that, whenever we need something, he has always been there for us,” said Deb Riordan, president of CVV’s board of directors. “I’ve known Terry for at least 8 years. He’s just one of those go-to people who I can call if there’s a situation where he’s a good fit.”

What stood out this year, however, was the care and compassion he showed to a Veteran who recently passed away.

Bill Gonzalez, a CVV board member and Army Veteran who served in Vietnam, passed away in March. Rommereim was on vacation at the time but cut his trip short to return and honor Gonzalez.

“When Bill Gonzalez passed away, Terry cut short his vacation to perform the funeral service,” said Riordan. “He was just so supportive during that time.”

Rommereim says that support has gone both ways over the years. He says he is always willing to volunteer when he can,

but he also relies on groups like CVV to help Veterans he meets who need specific types of assistance that VA isn’t allowed to offer.

“They’re able to meet needs of Veterans where we as a hospital aren’t able to,” he said. He said CVV has helped Veterans with monetary needs, automobile repair services and other needs that fall outside VA’s scope of service.

“VA puts a heavy emphasis on whole health and we at VA are always striving to help our Veterans in all aspects of their lives,” he said. “Getting their needs met as far as what CVV can accomplish, that will actually help them in relation to their spiritual, mental, emotional and physical needs. All of those things can be affected by what they’re able to do.”

“I think it’s very important that we help point them to the places, people and resources that can really make a difference in their lives.”



VA Chaplain Terry Rommereim and his wife, Kim, at the Star Spangled Ball.



Dr. Thomas Osborne, who serves as both the Chief Medical Informatics Officer at VA Palo Alto Health Care System and director of the VA National Center for Collaborative Healthcare Innovation, was a 2021 Service to the Citizen award winner, thanks to his efforts to bring 5G-enabled clinical care to VA Palo Alto. Congratulations to Dr. Osborne for this impressive achievement, which has improved care for our Veterans!





Reno Vets get canine comfort

By Shane Whitecloud

Two years ago, beautiful dogs in bright red vests roamed the hallways of VA Sierra Nevada Health Care Center's main campus. It was perfectly natural to see Veterans waiting patiently in the inpatient pharmacy, primary care, mental health and the infusion clinic smiling while pleasantly distracted by the fur babies lapping up the attention. For both animal and human, it was a perfect match.

In the beginning of the pandemic, the halls of our once-bustling medical center looked more like a scene out of a post-apocalyptic movie, empty and void of any emotion except fear and sadness. While medical and administrative staff came together to tackle an unknown scenario while creating lifesaving measures, these animals who aimed to please were kept in their homes with their owners, missing the smiles and personal interaction that made them feel special. The American Kennel Club even reported that some therapy dogs also struggled with depression.

Alynn Lupold and her husband, Doug, both employees with VASNHCS, had recently adopted an 8-year-old standard poodle, Aly. Doug is a retired Nevada State Trooper and Air Force Veteran, currently serving as a Recreation Assistant in the Community Living Center, or CLC. Alynn had always had a heart for charity work, having been a blood and platelet donor and often volunteering at the local food bank, but she hadn't found her volunteer "home." When her husband mentioned how isolated the Veterans felt in the CLC due to COVID and what

a benefit it would be to bring therapy animals back, she started her research.

After about a year, Alynn and Aly had their first visit on campus. It was worth the wait to see Aly's magic at work.

On Oct. 30, Alynn was excited and nervous for Aly to be the first official therapy pet visiting the facility in almost two years. The first Veteran Aly met with was a Navy Veteran, Ray. The two hit it off immediately. Alynn calmed down almost immediately, saying, "I noticed that Aly was more comfortable with Veterans that are seated or in a wheelchair. She walked right up to a Veteran in a wheelchair, Ray, who had several dogs in his life. You could see Ray relax when she came near him and he used such a sweet tone when talking to her." Lovable whispers passed from man to dog as he patiently stroked her head. At one point, Ray stopped

petting her to talk to Alynn and one of the Recreational Therapists, Joanne Ferris, but Aly was quick to make clear that she didn't like being ignored by her new friend. She pushed in closer to Ray and put her head in his lap, demanding more attention. Ray immediately chuckled and exclaimed, "Do you see this? She's such a sweetheart!" When asked what he thought about the program returning, Ray said, "I always look forward to seeing Aly come in! She's a sweetie and brightens my day."

In total, Aly had coaxed the softest words from the mouths of roughly 20 Veterans that day with her abnormally long eyelashes, fancy hairdo and purple toenails. One particular Veteran's reaction caught most of the surrounding witnesses off guard, as he was usually known for having a rather stern personality. His heart proved no match for

continued on page 15



Therapy dog Aly offers comfort to a Veteran in the CLC at the VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System's main campus in Reno.

continued from previous page

Aly's soft, honey-colored eyes.

Covered from head to toe in tattoos and well into his 70s, Michael had suffered a stroke on his left side and was sitting on his bed when Alynn and Aly came into the room on Nov. 6. This was Aly's second visit to the CLC and meeting with Michael. Alynn maneuvered Aly to the left side of the bed so that Michael could see and interact with her. Immediately Aly recognized Michael and jumped up onto his bed, catching everyone off guard. At first Alynn was worried, until she saw the reaction. The older Veteran laughed, teared up and hugged the lovable poodle. It quickly became clear who was in charge as all who stood by watched this man's heart melt with zero shame. "I love Aly and she loves me," said Michael with determination.



Joanne Farris followed up by saying, "Having pet therapy in the CLC has lightened the mood. When a Veteran sees Aly, their posture changes, like a cloud is lifted. The smiles she brings to the Veterans' faces is unmeasurable. It's amazing how much the Veterans respond to petting Aly. They don't always remember names of the medical staff assisting them, yet they always remember Aly's name."

For anyone wondering if their perfect pooch would fit the mold, Alynn advises, "Your dog needs to be well socialized with a calm demeanor, good natured and can't be timid or afraid. It's also important that the dog has no aggressive behavior towards other dogs or people, as you will be walking around the facility and other people will have their service animals with them."

When asked if all the Veterans' smiles made the long certification process worth it, Alynn simply replied, "Without a doubt."

Local 'rising star' helps Veterans see in Hawaii

Eye exams are extremely important. When an optometrist looks at your eyes, they aren't just assessing your vision. They are also checking for signs of diabetes, high blood pressure, and other serious illnesses. This is because the eye is the only place where a doctor can see your blood vessels up close without cutting you open. For this reason, full exams with pupil dilation are crucial.

For Veterans in VA Pacific Islands Health Care System (VAPIHCS), their self-referral system makes it easy for Veterans to schedule an eye exam.

Guidance for eye exam frequency changes with age. From age 20 to 39, you only need to have a full eye exam every five years. However, from 40 to 54, it's recommended to get an eye exam every two to four years. For Veterans aged 55 to 64, it's recommended that they are examined every one to three years. Veterans should come in immediately if they experience vision changes or other symptoms, and should come in every year or two years depending on health after age 65.

The optometry department at the Spark Matsunaga Ambulatory Care Center (ACC) opened in 1993 with the Chief of Optometry, Dr. Jon Sakuda. Now, it's a busy department with five optometrists that see an average of 700 patients per month. Sakuda refers to Dr. Kelly Moore as his "rising star within optometry." Moore had a lot to say about eye health in VAPIHCS.

"The most rewarding part is being able to catch a disease like diabetes early and get the Veteran help as soon as possible," she said. "It's the best thing that we get to do here because diseases that are caught early and treated properly can really improve someone's quality of life."

Helping Veterans is very personal for Moore, whose father served in the Navy as an optometrist. Moore grew up in the area, attending Moanalua High School before going to college in Southern California and pursuing a career in



Optometrist Kelly Moore, left, and Tiffanie Rodriguez, advanced medical support assistant.

optometry. She wants everyone to know how important eye health is, and how critical it is that Veterans get their check-ups on time.

"People don't know how important it is to get your eyes checked," she said. "Changes in your vision and changes in your blood vessels can tell us a lot about your overall health. I would encourage everyone to get their exams on time as recommended."

Within VA, more and more optometry services are done in-house. Like audiology, they are expanding and trying to provide directly for Veterans' eye health whenever possible. Through tele-health retinal imaging and new facilities like the ALOHA center in Kapolei, they are expanding direct care throughout VAPIHCS whenever possible. Some services are still only available to Veterans in remote locations through a Care in the Community program (CITC) but in all cases, VA provides for necessary equipment such as glasses and canes for those losing their vision.

Moore notes that there is even a blind or low vision rehab team. The blind rehab team includes a visual impairment services coordinator, blind rehab outpatient specialist, and low vision optometrist. They work together to provide clinical and functional assistance to Veterans experiencing vision loss so that they maintain a healthy and safe lifestyle.

High Reliability Corner

By Sue Holly, Pharm.D., V21 HRO Program Lead

Happy New Year! Not only is it a new fiscal year, but a new calendar year is right around the corner as well. To kick off the new year, I wanted to share a story that demonstrates High Reliability and ICARE principles in action. Elsewhere in this newsletter (page 3), you might have read a story about a wonderful and compassionate nurse, Miguel Orozco, who works as a nursing supervisor at the VA Sierra NV Health Care system.

A veteran himself, Miguel identified an opportunity to overcome a barrier that the pandemic put in front of us. When a veteran passes at the Reno VA, a "Code Honor" is called via the overhead notification system which alerts staff. This is an opportunity for staff to provide a final salute for the Veteran as they make their last journey through the facility. The pomp and circumstance of the situation is very impactful for the veteran's family as well as the participants. Draping of a US flag over the veteran's bed followed by precise and accurate folding with presentation to the family follows the time-honored military tradition. Due to infection control concerns, use of a cotton-type flag for these situations had to cease. Here is where Miguel stepped in to demonstrate the HRO Pillar of Continuous Process Improvement. Miguel designed, sewed and constructed a properly designed U.S. flag-prototype made of a cleanable plastic material. Miguel didn't stop there.

He demonstrated a preoccupation with failure where every staff member is a problem solver by working with a local company to further manufacture and produce the new flags. The eventual

implementation of the redesigned US flag provided that ultimate and final respect for a fellow Veteran (HRO value), clearly demonstrating Veteran-centric (HRO value) advocacy (ICARE tenet) for our nation's heroes. This new cleanable flag can still be positioned over our heroes' beds as they are escorted on their final journey.

Instead of accepting "No, we can't do that," Miguel asked, "How can we?" In his care of deceased veterans, Miguel demonstrated HRO and ICARE values. Thank you, Miguel. Such a beautiful display of compassion.

On another note, in the last newsletter as a way to introduce myself I shared my story of a significant medication error I was involved in that kicked off my journey and interest in High Reliability. This issue, I'd like to introduce you all to Dr. John Lim, our VISN 21 HRO Champion. Dr. Lim is a diagnostic radiologist at the Reno VA Medical Center. His journey in HRO began earlier this year when his Chief of Staff asked him whether he'd like to serve VISN 21 as its HRO Champion.

Not knowing exactly what this entailed, he accepted the challenge and has since grown to appreciate the immense importance of high reliability in healthcare and is passionate about reducing harm to Veterans and healthcare workers.

Dr. Lim and I make up your VISN 21 HRO team and are committed to doing whatever it takes to improve psychological safety and spread HRO principles throughout our VISN. We believe this will lead to greater employee engagement and, more importantly, safer care for our Veterans.



Sue Holly, Pharm.D.

As a side note, Dr. Lim is also passionate about all things finance, frequently writing and teaching on the topic. In the past, he lectured on personal finance and investing at the VA. Last year, he developed and taught an elective course on personal finance at the University of Nevada Reno School of Medicine.



Dr. John Lim
VISN 21 HRO Champion



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