

SIERRA PACIFIC

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VISN 21 Newsletter

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VA Nurse offers life-saving care after fatal crash

VA employees' impact spreads through DEMPS deployments

Telehealth: the future of health care

...and more

Veteran beats COVID after 2-month battle

He was the first of many Veterans to fight COVID-19 at VA Central California

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Page 1 photo by Kristopher Morrow, VA Central California Healthcare System

Fresno: 81-year-old Veteran beats COVID-19 after 2-month fight

by Will McCullough, VA Central California Health Care System

On Thursday, June 18, VA Central California Health Care System (VACCHCS) staff and volunteers wished a fond farewell for an 81-year-old Veteran coronavirus survivor.

After 63 days in the hospital, Air Force Veteran Leroy Brown was discharged from the main hospital. Brown was admitted to the emergency department on April 15, after testing positive for COVID-19 (coronavirus).

Once discharged, Brown was reunited with his daughter Lynette and his sister Juanita, who had been unable to see him for two months.

"Here I am, live and in living color," said Brown. "I thank the Lord."

Brown was the health care system's first COVID-19-positive inpatient. The executive leadership team thought it only natural to celebrate his recovery, as a Veteran who fought coronavirus and won.

Medical Center Director Charles O. Benninger was eager to celebrate a fellow Veteran. "It's

just so great to see one of our Veterans survive this terrible virus," said Benninger. "This is truly a cause for celebration!"

His family was grateful for the care their loved one had received from VA.

"We appreciate everything you guys have done," said his daughter, Lynette. "Everything. All the prayers, the hands-on, the communication. We love you. Thank you, thank you, thank you."

VA Voluntary Service presented Brown with a balloon bouquet. Observing social distancing rules and protocols, staff and volunteers lined the walls of the main corridor to wish Brown farewell.

Brown continued his recovery with the aid of skilled nursing care in the hospital's Community Living Center before returning home.

Elated with the turnaround, Brown exclaimed, "I just want to live! I was so happy; I cried a whole bucket full of tears!"



Photo by Kristopher Morrow

81-year-old Air Force Veteran Leroy Brown is wheeled out of VA Central California Health Care System on June 18, after winning his 63-day battle with COVID-19. Brown was the facility's first COVID-19-positive inpatient.

Las Vegas: Off-duty VA nurse takes charge at fatal highway accident

by John Archiquette, VA Southern Nevada
Healthcare System

On the afternoon of June 20, an SUV traveling a lonely stretch of highway between Las Vegas and St. George, Utah, experienced a sudden tire blow-out, overturning and flipping off the road. The event threw several passengers from the vehicle and trapped others inside.

Maria VanHart, a VA Southern Nevada Healthcare System (VASNHS) emergency department nurse, was heading home to Utah after her shift at the North Las Vegas Medical Center. Nearly 30 minutes into her commute, she happened upon the single-vehicle accident. While a few onlookers had stopped to assist the victims, none of them were trained to manage the scene.

VanHart assessed the situation, and then quickly acted. "I did what I was trained to do," she said. "I didn't panic... just immediately did what needed to be done."

One of VanHart's first challenges was communicating with the victims. She soon learned that the family had travelled to the United States from Syria for a wedding. Of the 10 passengers, only a 10-year-old boy was able to speak English.

"He was walking around with some minor bumps and bruises, but overall looked OK," said VanHart. He would serve as translator for all her patient care questions. "The first thing I told him was 'I need you to show me everyone who was in the vehicle.'"

The driver of the vehicle was the father, who had suffered only minor bruises. An older



Photo by John Archiquette

Maria VanHart provides care to a Veteran at the North Las Vegas VA Medical Center.

teenage girl holding a baby was walking around the scene, both seemingly unscathed. The boy's immediate concern was for his brother, a 14-year-old who was trapped inside the overturned vehicle.

"He was not breathing and (based on his condition) I knew immediately that he was dead."

VanHart quickly turned her attention to others who needed immediate care. The mother of the family was thrown from the vehicle during the accident and was laying 10 feet behind the wreckage. VanHart concluded that she had suffered a severe pelvic injury and had potential internal bleeding.

At the front of the vehicle were two more victims on the ground: a boy in his late teens who had a broken leg and an infant girl who didn't initially appear to have any injuries. While bystanders told VanHart that the infant was fine, she wanted to examine her just in case.

"When I did my assessment on her, I could see some facial bruising, agonal breathing, and one of her pupils was blown, so I knew she had a head injury. She may have been having some seizure activity because her eyes were fluttering. She and the mother needed to be flown to a hospital immediately."

Soon after, the Moapa Police Department arrived on site. "The scene was very active," said Officer Alex Cruz. "Between attempting to stop traffic, rendering first aid and requesting

additional units, it was hectic to say the least. Maria was calm and knew what she was doing. She was directing people on what to do while rendering aid herself. She was like an orchestra conductor."

Based on the severity of the victim's injuries, VanHart asked Cruz to request immediate evacuation. "I trusted her expertise and ended up calling three helicopters and four ambulances due to her triaging the scene," he said. "You could tell that she knew what she was doing and there was no time to question her capabilities."

After the helicopters were loaded with patients, VanHart finally took a step back and realized what had happened. She had been on the scene for two hours in 105-degree heat and was exhausted. "When the adrenaline goes away, there's a crash. It's an emotional and physical crash. I was dehydrated and physically shaky afterwards. I sat down, drank some water and called my friends for reassurance."

VanHart has a unique philosophy when it comes to assessing her work:

"At the end of the day, there are two things that let me know if I have done my job that day. One is 'what was my patient-to-hug ratio?' And the other one is 'had my mother been the last person I had cared for, would I have done anything differently?' Everyone out there is someone's parent or child and they all deserve to be cared for as if they were my own."

NorCal Veteran finds healing through music and service

by Diana Penman, VA Northern California Health Care System

Tommie Shorter fell in love with music when he was a boy. Some of his earliest memories are of his mother, who worked as a nurse, singing Aretha Franklin songs around the house. From an early age, Shorter wanted to help people and found healing in music.

He had no idea that one day he'd be helping America's Veterans at the VA Northern California Health Care System and building guitars in his free time.

Shortly after graduating from high school in 1974, he joined the Navy, where he was eventually assigned to the USS Kamehameha.

In 2005, his mother became ill, and he was committed to caring for her. Motivated by his mother's dedicated service in the nursing field, he took a job at the Sacramento VA Medical Center in 2009 and became a Certified Nursing Assistant and received Certification as a Telemetry Technician. Shorter currently works as a Program Support Assistant in the Cardiology Clinic.

It was during his eight years of service in nursing that Shorter began to truly appreciate the value of helping those who served.

"I always come in to work with a smile on my face," Shorter said. "Here at VA, I know I can help my brothers and sisters who also served in the military."

While enjoying a rewarding career, Shorter was also caring for his mother at home. To cope with the worry and stress of his mother's illness, he learned to build custom guitars in his free time.

He worked as an apprentice with master guitar makers Woody Boyd and Doug Kauer and would eventually begin building and selling his own.



Photo by Kingston Dillard

Tommie Shorter, a Navy Veteran and VA employee, has built 42 guitars to date. He performs at shows and donates some of his guitars to charity.

"I never thought I could do this," he said. "There's a sense of accomplishment. I wanted to build a guitar with a blues sound."

Shorter has built 42 guitars to date. He performs at various guitar shows and has even donated his creations to charity.

"There's a joy in adding some light in a time of darkness," he said. "Being able to share music with others can be healing."

SFVAMC opens new Veterans Experience Center

by Angelo Dalmacio, San Francisco VA Health Care System

Now, Veterans who come to the San Francisco VA Medical Center (SFVAMC) for care can enjoy the comfort and convenience of a brand new Veterans Experience Center. Opened Nov. 10, the center serves as a gathering place for Veteran patients and functions as a one-stop shop for a variety of useful services.

The Veterans Experience Center is designed to provide ample lounge space—perfect for Veterans to be able to spread out and watch television, enjoy the picturesque view of the Pacific Ocean, and properly social distance while waiting for doctor's appointments or other services.

"This new center was built from the ground up with the comfort, safety, and convenience of our Veterans as priority number one," said Stephen Ruggirello, SFVAHCS Associate Director.

Several useful Veteran services have been relocated into office space within the Center, providing visitors with immediate access to valuable

services, including the optical shop, a lactation room for female Veterans and employees, the Patient Experience office, the Patient Library, the Patient Transportation office, a satellite police office, and an office for Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF)/Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) Transitional Veteran services.

"I have been coming to this VA for over 12 years," said Army and Air Force Veteran Rupert Lopez, of Pacifica, California. "Turning this space into the new Veterans Experience Center is very innovative, and I appreciate the convenience of it."

The Veterans Experience Center is the culmination of robust planning and active collaboration across many facility services, including Engineering, Capital Planning, Voluntary Service, and Business Services.

The result is a space that honors our commitment to providing Veteran communities with the high-quality care that they deserve.



Photo by Angelo Dalmacio

The new Veterans Experience Center at SFVAMC opened Nov. 10.

3D printing saves time, money at VA Palo Alto

by Michael Hill-Jackson, VA Palo Alto Health Care System

VA Palo Alto Health Care System (VAPAHCS) has often used 3D printers for many applications including surgical modeling and simulation training, but during the pandemic, this high-tech tool has helped two services at VAPAHCS fix a small issue that had large implications on the COVID-19 response efforts in the health care system.

When Supply Chain Services (SCS) received a new model of Powered Air Purifying Respirators, or PAPRs, they were excited to distribute the new units. SCS had hoped the new devices would enhance safety for staff providing care to COVID-19 patients but within the first week, they proved

to cause more problems than they solved.

“The quality of the clips that connected the disposable lens cuff (DLC) was not very good and would break as staff took it off,” said Linda Johnson, Deputy Chief of SCS.

Ms. Johnson and her team immediately notified the vendor, who was aware of the issue but had not come up with a solution. However, SCS was able to work with a local organization that uses 3D printing to support COVID-19 efforts. Their design of the clip helped alleviate the issue. They connected SCS to a vendor to print the tabs but each clip would cost \$3.64. The SCS team knew

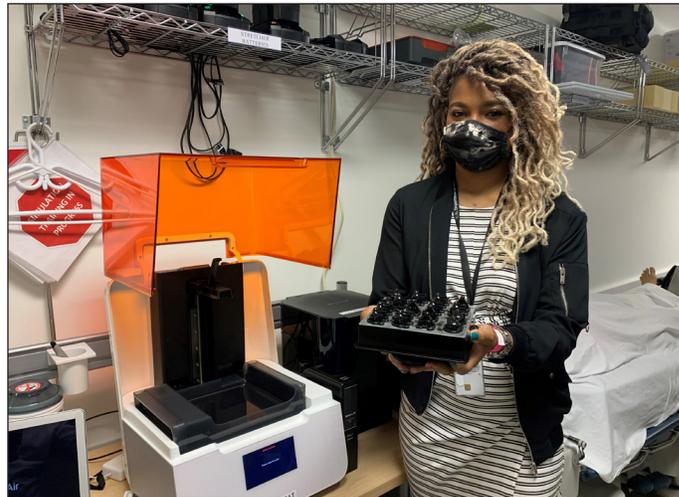


Photo by Michael Hill-Jackson

3D printing technology has helped two services at VAPAHCS fix a small issue that had large implications on the COVID-19 response efforts in the health care system.

the cost would start to add up due to the number of units that were deemed non-operational because of missing clips.

They took the design to the Simulation Center staff on campus who have a 3D printer and created a successful first prototype, cutting costs to only \$0.50 per tab. This new solution now provides up to 17 tabs every

12 hours and there have been no reports of any broken tabs yet.

“This innovative mindset is what we strive for in VA,” said Thomas J. Fitzgerald III, VAPAHCS Director and U.S. Army Veteran. “These employees have saved hundreds of dollars per week in taxpayer dollars and kept our COVID-19 response efforts fully operational.”

VA Sierra Nevada staff volunteers for VA's Fourth Mission

by Shane Whitecloud, VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System

VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System (VASNHCS) recently welcomed home staff members Joseph Pena and Rose Ngongimbous from Disaster Emergency Medical Personnel System (DEMPS) voluntary deployment in support of VA's Fourth Mission.

This was Pena's fourth deployment, with his first in 2017 to Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria and more recently to New Jersey to a nursing home during the coronavirus pandemic.

He returned in early November from the Missouri State Veterans Home after COVID-19 caused shortages in staff at that facility.

Ngongimbous returned from her deployment to Virginia Veterans Care Center, where she worked 12-hour days for 11 days in a

locked-down COVID-19 unit.

VASNHCS has supported 14 two-week missions across the US during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Both staff members returned healthy and took precautionary measures to ensure the safety of their coworkers and families. COVID-19 tests were administered promptly upon their return home.

“They are long days, sometimes between twelve to sixteen hours of constant treatments, assessments and wound care, helping med techs, other CNA's, and, of course, the patients,” Pena said. “Everyone is scared, frustrated and even temperamental sometimes, because of the current climate in the world and healthcare concerns, but at the end of the day this is what I do. I'm not going to run away from my



Photo courtesy of Rose Ngongimbous

Photo by Michael Brogan

Rose Ngongimbous, left, and Joseph Pena recently returned after serving on DEMPS deployments to Virginia and Missouri, respectively.

responsibilities and my pledge to help anyone in need of medical care.”

DEMPS is VHA's main deployment program for clinical and non-clinical staff to an emergency or disaster.

The DEMPS program can be used for an internal VA mission, but also to support VA's Fourth Mission, which is initiated by a Presidential Disaster Declaration and allows federal assistance to a state after catastrophic events.

Telehealth comes through for Veterans during pandemic

by Angelo Dalmacio, San Francisco VA Health care System

It's no understatement to say that COVID-19 has changed the face of health care. In a time when face-coverings, six feet of physical distancing, and Shelter-in-Place orders are the new norm, the conventional expectations of health care delivery have been turned on their head.

Fortunately, providers at the San Francisco VA Health Care System (SFVAHCS) have confronted this challenge head-on, embracing innovative telehealth technologies, and adapting to constantly changing protocols—all while delivering the same level of high-quality care to Veterans from the Oregon border to the San Francisco Bay Area.

Telehealth is the use of digital information and communication technologies, such as computers, tablets, and smart phones, to access and manage health care services remotely. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has embraced telehealth as a transformational approach to

care delivery that ensures patient convenience and accessibility. It allows Veterans more flexibility in how they receive care, and its popularity is only growing.

In 2019, more than 900,000 Veterans received their health care through VA telehealth. Since the onset of this year's COVID-19 health pandemic, requests for telehealth video appointments have increased ten-fold.

To adapt to this rapidly changing landscape, the SFVAHCS recently launched Express Care, a virtual urgent care program where Veterans with pressing, non-emergency health needs can be seen by a VA provider using a computer or mobile device.

Bay Area resident and U.S. Air Force Veteran David Leeper can attest to just how effective telehealth technology can be. Leeper had been in declining health, with noticeable weight gain, increased blood pressure, and worsening edema.

After several remote telephone appointments, Leeper was diagnosed with Congestive Heart Failure (CHF) exacerbation.

His care providers, Dr. Joseph Yang and Nurse Practitioner Robert Malloy, worked closely to develop an in-patient treatment plan, but Leeper expressed concern about being admitted to the medical center in light of potential COVID-19 exposure.

His providers transitioned his initial treatment plan to an outpatient one. He was monitored closely via regularly scheduled at-home telehealth visits, in addition to occasional, as-needed face-to-face visits. The multi-pronged approach worked.

"Through motivational interviewing, frequent telehealth visits, optimization of medical therapy...and close monitoring



Photo by Cynthia Chan

U.S. Army Veteran Earl Wells meets with a Veterans support group using a tablet. Particularly since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, telehealth has been an increasingly valuable tool for Veterans to receive care in a way that is both safe and convenient. Recently, a virtual urgent care program has expanded to all VISN 21 facilities.

of weight, blood pressure, and lab results, Mr. Leeper was able to safely stay at home without hospitalization," said Malloy.

After eight weeks of treatment, Leeper showed marked

with the care he received through telehealth technology.

"For long distance care, it worked great...and is still exceptional," said Leeper. "The care was well done, well-managed, and quite informative. Thank you for restoring me to a normal life."

Dr. Michael Nejad, an attending physician in the SFVAHCS Emergency Department, is not surprised by such sentiments.

"The feedback I have gotten from Veterans [on telehealth] has been universally positive," he said. They express a high level of appreciation."

Nejad believes telehealth is the future of health care delivery, and sees it as a positive for Veterans seeking care from the VA.

"Telehealth is convenient, saves time and money... and is a way to keep Veterans in our system, where they get a higher quality of care delivered in a manner that reflects our appreciation of their service."

improvement in his condition. In addition to improved breathing ability and increased energy levels, he reported losing almost 30 pounds. Leeper is pleased

"The feedback I have gotten from Veterans [on telehealth] has been universally positive."

**Dr. Michael Nejad,
attending physician,
SFVAHCS Emergency
Department**



Photo by Edgardo Caballero

Dr. Michael Nejad, an attending physician at the SFVAHCS Emergency Department, believes telehealth is the future of health care delivery, and sees it as a positive for Veterans.

New deputy director enhances high reliability journey

by Michael Brogan, VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System

In 2019, VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System's (VASNHCS) embarked on a journey to high reliability to eliminate preventable patient harm. Through applying high-reliability practices currently used in the commercial aviation and nuclear power industries, VASNHCS aims to produce predictable and desirable quality and safety outcomes for its Veterans. Now, VASNHCS has a newly arrived high reliability organization (HRO) proponent.

Lisa Hamilton, VASNHCS' new Deputy Director, intends to use lessons learned from previous assignments to keep VASNHCS focused on its HRO journey.

Ms. Hamilton assumed the newly created Deputy Director position in early October after having served as the Associate Director of Alexandria VA Health Care System in Pineville, Louisiana. There, she developed process improvements and operational efficiencies as she helped develop a culture of high reliability within the Operational Services Teams.

Hamilton is excited to help VASNHCS continue its journey towards HRO, particularly because it's an ongoing and empowering process.

"The journey of high reliability is not something we say we reached – there is no end point – but rather a continual process," she said. "We look for ways to eliminate errors by engaging our staff to speak up, demonstrate their commitment to excellence,

and help VASNHCS be the health care provider of choice, and the health care employer of choice."

Lisa Howard, VASNHCS' director, has overseen the health care system's journey towards high reliability and created the position of deputy director to further that goal. In Hamilton, she sees an experienced leader ready to take the health care system to the next level. She noted Hamilton "has experience at multiple VAs and many services and programs, bringing technical acumen, energy and enthusiasm that equals the pace of our environment to help us build our future."

Hamilton is acutely aware of the challenges ahead. COVID-19 has added to that list.

"We currently have a number of staff still teleworking, and face-to-face meetings are not being held," she pointed out. "Teamwork is a big part of the HRO journey, so these small impediments create challenges to creating a collaborative workforce."

To deal with these barriers, Ms. Hamilton looks to engagement.

"Although separated by computer screens and remote locations, high engagement helps keep us all focused on the bigger picture day in and day out," she said.

Engagement and collaboration are key, and Hamilton is not a fan of business as usual.

"I focus on strategic thinking and identifying



Lisa Hamilton is the new Deputy Director at the VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System.

efficiencies and effective changes that break the mold from this is the way it's always been done," she said.

With a new deputy director in place, the path required for VASNHCS to produce predictable and desirable quality and safety outcomes for its Veterans is more clearly defined.

Hamilton's role in the health care system's high reliability journey is critical, but that doesn't mean it isn't enjoyable.

"I like to have fun, and I want my team to enjoy coming to work," she noted. "I believe in taking care of my team who in turn I entrust to take care of our Veterans."

WWII-era Marine, 99, celebrates dual birthdays

By John Archiquette, VA Southern Nevada Healthcare System

The United States Marine Corps was established November 10, 1775, at Tun Tavern in Philadelphia. Almost 146 years later to the day, Mary Del Vecchio was born in Minneapolis, MN. Both were celebrated by Marines, family members, and VA Southern Nevada Healthcare System staff on November 10, 2020.

"It's so nice to celebrate today with fellow Marines," said Del Vecchio. "I have so many fond memories of my time with the Marine Corps and it's great to spend the day with other Marines."

Del Vecchio, 99, enlisted in 1943

and served as one of the first members of the Women Marines Reserve until 1945. She filled many roles, including clerical work, nursing, and even driving a truck.

Marine Veterans and VASNHS staff paid tribute to Del Vecchio with a cake, honorary flag display, and challenge coin.

"She paved the way for female Marines like me," said VASNHS Chief of Prosthetics and fellow Marine Veteran Deb Bolda.

"She opened doors to a lot of opportunities for those who followed in her footsteps."



Photo by John Archiquette

Mary Del Vecchio, 99, celebrates both her birthday and the 245th anniversary of the U.S. Marine Corps alongside fellow Marine Veterans Eric Lord and Deb Bolda at an event held at the North Las Vegas VA Medical Center on November 10.

Pacific Islands team shares spirit of ohana with Veterans from American Samoa stranded on Oahu

by Douglas D. Anderson, VA Pacific Islands Health Care System

In November, a group of 71 Veterans and medical attendants from American Samoa were stranded on Oahu due to COVID-19 travel restrictions. Some had been there since February.

To assist these Veterans with travel vouchers and reimbursements, the VA Pacific Islands Health Care System (VAPIHCS) Beneficiary Travel Outreach Initiative was formed. This was an informal meeting with the Veterans where the beneficiary travel team helped them during this challenging time.

This also provided an opportunity to introduce the new Beneficiary Travel Self-Service System (BTSSS) program. BTSSS allows Veterans to submit travel claims using a computer or mobile device and receive their reimbursement within two days.

The team also answered Veterans' questions and addressed their concerns about the situation. At first, one of the biggest obstacles was the lack of education on beneficiary travel benefits. The team briefed the Veterans on their continued benefits and eased fears about lodging during their stay.

Due to the COVID-19 travel restrictions in place on American Samoa, VAPIHCS provided flights to Oahu for Veterans who required urgent medical attention. The first flight took place on November 1, transporting nine Veterans. There will be additional flights monthly for Veterans who need assistance.

Veterans also expressed difficulty in getting fresh, healthy food and other necessities during the pandemic shutdown. The Veteran Transportation Service created a weekly commissary run program for both locations. The first run was successfully initiated on November 18.



Photo courtesy of Douglas Anderson

A multi-disciplinary team from VA Pacific Islands Health Care System joined to help a group of 71 Veterans and attendants from American Samoa who were unable to leave Oahu due to COVID-19 travel restrictions.

For Veterans who passed away while waiting to return home to American Samoa, the beneficiary travel team helped families with arrangements, including chaplain services and a funeral with military honors.

Other VAPIHCS staff stepped in to support the cause. Johnny Mapu, a social worker, has been stranded on Oahu since March, due to travel restrictions. Making the best of the situation, he has been a tremendous asset, assisting the travel team and Veterans. His experience and assistance in patient advocacy, caregiver program, VA fiduciary program and decedent affairs have been instrumental.

Another challenge was ensuring healthy living for the displaced Veterans and attendants. The Healthy Living Team

joined in the collaboration for extended assistance. Nurse Jessica Spurrier offered self-management support and health education. She also ensured the Veterans received their seasonal flu vaccines, community resources for vaccinations for family members and answered questions regarding COVID-19 and pending vaccines.

VAPIHCS' efforts were recognized with a news article in the American Samoa media. As the holiday season approaches, many VA staff and volunteers have offered to help provide the Veterans and their family members on Oahu with holiday festivities. This outreach initiative has built a better rapport with Veterans from American Samoa and will be used as a blueprint for future endeavors.



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