

# SIERRA PACIFIC

## Quarterly

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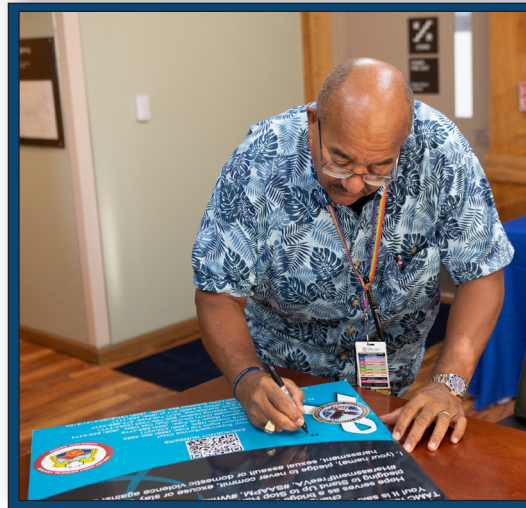
## VA Health Chat goes live in NorCal

VA Northern California Health Care System (VANCHCS) launched a pilot program for VA's Health Chat mobile application on Jan. 12.

VANCHCS is the first facility in VISN 21 to offer the convenient service, and it has received positive feedback from its Veterans. Once logged in, patients can connect with VA staff in as little as 60 seconds, schedule or modify appointments, get prescription information, find the closest VA facility or send non-urgent messages to their health care team.

VA Health Chat is available in the VA App Store and can be downloaded from the Apple App Store and the Google Play Store. Chat hours are Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

To access VA Health Chat, patients must have a My HealtheVet premium account User ID and password, DS Logon, or ID.me. To learn more, visit [mobile.va.gov/app/va-health-chat](http://mobile.va.gov/app/va-health-chat).



## VAPIHCS pledges to stand up against sexual violence

On April 8, VA Pacific Islands Health Care System (VAPIHCS) held a White Ribbon Pledge signing. In attendance were Assistant Director Katherine Kalama, Tripler Army Medical Center (TAMC) Medical Commander Col Martin Doperak, EEO Specialist Tobias Jones and other guests.

"This is not an Army problem or a Navy problem or a VA problem," said Col. Martin Doperak. "Sexual assault is a problem everywhere, and that's why I'm

honored to be here to pledge to stand up against sexual violence."

All in attendance took the White Ribbon Pledge, and the signing was streamed online so those who couldn't come in person were able to take part as well. This event showed the commitment of both VA and TAMC leadership to the White Ribbon Pledge.

VAPIHCS Director Dr. Adam Robinson (pictured, left) signed the pledge to show his support.

# VA Palo Alto reflects on its own women making history

By Michael Hill-Jackson  
Deputy Public Affairs Officer, VA Palo Alto

From the legacy of former Director and Distinguished Executive Presidential Rank Awardee, Lisa Freeman, to the steadfast leadership of current director, Lisa Howard, VA Palo Alto Health Care System celebrates a rich history of extraordinary women serving more than 5,000 enrolled women Veterans.

In honor of Women's History Month, VA Palo Alto closes out the month of March by reflecting on several women who have made a major impact on its history.

Lisa Freeman retired from VA in 2016, but not before setting in motion a nearly \$2 billion capital portfolio and maintaining a nearly billion-dollar health care system budget. As the first woman director to lead VA Palo Alto, she inspired many women leaders across every field in the hospital. She was an advocate for wellness, a legacy officially etched into the Wellness Center on the Palo Alto campus, where a mural is dedicated to her.

In 2021, Lisa Howard took the helm of the health care system. As her own journey includes humble beginnings as a clinic clerk, she has led by example, holding many administrative and executive leadership positions over her 36-year career in VA. Before coming to Palo Alto, she was the Director of the VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System in Reno, Nevada. Her previous posts include Phoenix, New Orleans, San Diego, North Chicago, Las Vegas, and Honolulu, as well as the VA Sierra Pacific Network (VISN 21).

Director Howard leads an executive team that includes several women leaders who have similarly inspiring journeys, including Associate Director and Veteran Chandra Lake, Associate Director Megan O'Connor, Deputy Chief of Staff Dr. Rina Shah, and Aileen Naungayan, Acting Associate Director for Patient Care Services/Deputy Nurse Executive.

Some of the influential people on our clinical team include Dr. Marianne Yeung, who serves as Deputy Chief of Staff for Acute Care Hospital Operations and has been a process improvement leader working on numerous projects to improve patient care and resource utilization.



VA Palo Alto Health Care System celebrates a rich history of extraordinary women serving more than 5,000 enrolled women Veterans. Some of these women include (top row, from left): Lisa Howard, Director; Dr. Odette Harris, Deputy Chief of Staff, Rehabilitation; Kathryn O'Melia, Chief, Prosthetics Service; (bottom row, from left) Lisa Freeman, former VAPAHCS Director; Megan O'Connor, Associate Director; Dr. Rina Shah, Deputy Chief of Staff.

She led the activation of the first Clinical Command Center (C3) in March 2020, which significantly improved admission times, and positively impacted the quality of care for Veterans admitted to the hospital from the Emergency Department.

Dr. Odette Harris, who serves as Deputy Chief of Staff for Rehabilitation, not only was recently appointed for the endowed professorship from the Paralyzed Veterans of America at Stanford School of Medicine but was also the first Black woman neurosurgery professor in the country. She also serves as Director of the Defense Veterans Brain Injury Center and Director of Brain Injury for the Department of Neurosurgery at Stanford. Her list of honors and awards is a force to reckon with!

Palo Alto also is one of the top research facilities in VA, with Dr. Jennifer Lee leading the VA Office of Research, and Elaine Staats leading VA Palo Alto's sponsored research partner, PAVIR. Together, they support many women-run studies and labs such as Huang Lab and Adamson Lab, where some of the most groundbreaking research occurs.

Leaders like Kathryn O'Melia, Chief of Prosthetic Services, are changing the landscape as they push the quality of care Veterans are receiving to exceptional levels. O'Melia is also a proud Marine Corps Veteran.

We have so many other inspiring women leaders as service chiefs, managers, leads, and throughout all levels of our health care system. What many of these women have in common is the commitment to serving our nation's Veterans.

Their contributions not only break the glass ceiling, but make the care we provide at VA Palo Alto Health Care System reach the satisfaction level of one of the top-performing health care systems in the country.

"There is power in the commitment of these amazing women that bolsters our workforce," said Director Howard. "If we can influence the next generation of women to become health care professionals and serve their country, we will have truly played our part in mentoring, coaching, and positively impacting our communities."



# 90-year-old VA volunteer celebrates 20 years of service

By Will McCullough  
Public Affairs Officer, VA Central California

On Saturday, April 23, VA Central California HCS (VACCHCS) hosted a VA Volunteer Appreciation drive-thru celebration at the main hospital in Fresno. The pirate-themed event was sponsored by the Center for Development & Civic Engagement and honored nearly 100 volunteers.

Among the volunteers was Norma Wallace, who proclaims she's "90 years young," and continues to volunteer five days per week in service to Veterans. A proud VACCHCS volunteer since 2002, Wallace earned the 2021 Volunteer of the Year award, having accumulated nearly 30,000 voluntary service hours.

When asked why she volunteers at VA, Wallace proudly exclaimed, "Veterans put their lives on the line for people like me. The least I can do is volunteer my time for them!"

"These last couple years have been challenging, especially for our Veterans and our staff, and the need for volunteers has risen dramatically," said Medical Center Director Charles O. Benninger. "Our volunteer workforce has braved the pandemic and made a significant impact

on the lives of our Veterans. We want to recognize the outstanding work our volunteers have contributed and all the time they've freely given. We appreciate their service to our Veterans and to our organization."

Despite service being suspended for several volunteers due to potential health risks, VACCHCS' volunteer workforce continued to contribute their collective services throughout the pandemic. Many offered virtual services, such as companionship through the Compassionate Contact Corps, care package preparation, crafts, posters, even mask-making prior to VHA and CDC standardized guidelines.

Volunteers received plaques, pins, and other items, along with lunch from Sam's Italian Deli during the event. Many volunteers drove through and picked up their certificates of appreciation along with a few goodies; however, some opted to stop and pose for photos with senior leadership. VACCHCS is thankful for all the volunteers for their outstanding contributions in service to Veterans.



VA volunteer Norma Wallace, 90, accepts the 2021 Volunteer of the Year award at a ceremony held on Saturday, April 23 at VA Central California Health Care System in Fresno, California. Wallace has volunteered at VA for 20 years and has accumulated nearly 30,000 volunteer hours to date.

## Mammography now available in Marina



On March 23, VA Palo Alto Health Care System opened the MG William H. Gourley VA-DoD Outpatient Clinic to mark the opening of the new mammography suite. The new suite expands diagnostic capabilities, allowing Women Veterans to get timely access to care all in one place. Mammography, traditionally offered through community providers, is now available on site.

## San Francisco VA celebrates Patient Safety Week



Maria Ubaldo, acting chief, High Reliability Service; James Goyena, nurse educator; and Alisa Chatrapachai, HRO lead. High Reliability Service celebrated Patient Safety Week (March 13-19, 2022) by encouraging all staff to strive for the highest levels of health care safety.

# Reno VA Announces 2022 Volunteer of the Year

by Glenna Smith  
Public Affairs Officer, VA Sierra Nevada

VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System's (VASNHCS) Executive Leadership is proud to announce Steven Hower has been named the health care system's 2022 Volunteer of the Year.

Each year, VASNHCS recognizes all its volunteers for their outstanding service to Veterans throughout northern Nevada and northeastern California. Hower's VA Volunteer service exemplifies his selfless gift of his time after serving more than 6,300 hours.

A prior recipient of the prestigious Presidential Volunteer Service Award, Hower has remained a constant and reliable volunteer for more than 12 years at VA and continued to serve throughout the COVID-19 pandemic once volunteers were allowed back into the facility.

A Veteran himself, he served in Vietnam in 1969 and 1970 as an Army military police officer. He was later stationed in Virginia, where he completed his military service. He moved back to southern California, where he raised his children and retired from the Chula Vista School District after 35 years. Upon retiring, he and his wife of 33 years, Marcia, moved to Reno, Nevada, to begin a new life.

"I was a patient at VA and loved the care I received," Hower said, when asked why he volunteers at VA. "I loved seeing the World War II and other older Veterans throughout the medical center and wanted to give back to them."

He wears the red coat and is one of VASNHCS' longest-serving "Red Coat Ambassadors," located at the main entrance of the facility. Hower has two children: a daughter who lives in Ohio and a son



Volunteer Steven Hower was named the 2022 Volunteer of the Year at VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System. Hower, a Veteran himself, has served as a VA volunteer for more than 12 years.

who lives nearby. He has many grandchildren and even two great-grandchildren. He and his wife love to drive to Tahoe and explore the area. He has an extensive movie collection and especially loves action films. He is an avid marksman, with a membership at a local gun range where he and his son practice weekly. He loves his recumbent bicycle and, weather permitting, will go out for a 10-mile ride a couple times a week.

Hower has found the secret to success when it comes to volunteering: Just because he's retired doesn't mean he should slow down.

His zest for life is contagious, and his love for his family and service to other Veterans is exhibited by his warm smile as one walks into VASNHCS. Yes, you can tell, even with his mask on, that Steven is smiling. So, if you visit the VA Medical Center in Reno and you are greeted by the tall, smiling Red Coat Ambassador, stop and say 'hello,' and let him know that you appreciate his gift of service and time. Congratulations, Steven Hower, for a job well done.

# DISRUPTIVE TECH AWARDS 2022 WINNER

The G2Xchange/FedHealthIT Disruptive Tech Awards are here and they have recognized some star innovators from VA Palo Alto Health Care System as Change Agents Shifting the Landscape for being disruptors that are leading and transforming Federal information technology. Dr. Thomas Osborne (Fall Prevention Socks) and Brian Higgins (Smart Cane) were both recognized as 2022 Disruptive Tech Program Award Winners. VA continues to be at the forefront of innovation.





*by Jenifer Delemont*  
Public Affairs Specialist, VA Pacific Islands

When a person has to rebuild their life, it takes a variety of building blocks to put it back together. VA has many programs to help Veterans whose lives have fallen apart, and one of them is called Transitional Work (TW). TW is based on the idea that people's lives are enriched through employment. For US Army Veteran Kirby Suginaka, TW was an important step in his recovery.

"The key is persistence," Suginaka said. "It was for me, and it is for all the people I see who are new coming into the program. They have to keep trying because it's not easy at first. It's a long road to recovery."

Suginaka has had his own long road to walk. When he took the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) he scored highly and could have qualified for any Military Occupational Specialty (MOS). That is, until he learned he was colorblind. Suginaka went from having a world of possibilities to having only a few jobs to choose from. He found himself working in Human Resources and working as a paralegal, a dual MOS, which involved mostly paperwork. When he deployed to Kuwait, he ended up working with people in prison. He would bring paperwork for them to sign and take statements.

"I was in there with the scariest people you could ever meet," Suginaka said. "They were rapists and murderers; people who had done really bad stuff."

After Suginaka decided not to reenlist, things went downhill. Suffering from high anxiety and stress, he turned to drugs to cope. He ended up homeless for five years before he reached out for help.

When the homeless outreach team gets a call from a Veteran, they immediately help them enroll in VA programs that will get them off the street. First, they find them housing through the Housing and Urban Development Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) program. Once Suginaka was housed, he tried to get clean but continued to relapse. Getting into housing was a start, but it wasn't enough to beat his addiction for good.

To distance himself from his problems, he was enrolled in an inpatient rehabilitation program in Utah. Upon completion, he

came home to Hawaii and was directed toward TW.

Suginaka was assigned to work at Punchbowl, the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, as a Cemetery Caretaker. TW allowed him the flexibility to tend to his medical, therapy, and substance treatment appointments. Suginaka excelled in the program and was soon hired as a full-time VA employee. He has since worked his way up from Cemetery Caretaker to Work Leader to Assistant Foreman.

"Being a VA employee at Punchbowl means a lot to me," Suginaka said. "First, I get to help families who are grieving through the process of laying a loved one to rest. That's meaningful. But second, I get to help new TW work employees when we get them. I see them right where I was, and I can help them to keep going and get better."

Suginaka is from Hawaii. He grew up in Aiea before attending college in Las Vegas. He traveled with the Army and even tried living in South Carolina for a while, but he's glad to be home now. He's grateful to all the people who have helped him, like Billy Kealoha from HUD VASH and Col. Rankin from Wounded Warriors. He's also glad to be working.

One of the most satisfying parts of his work is when unknown soldier remains are disinterred and DNA testing is done to help find the family. Giving closure to families who need it is rewarding work. At other times, it's not so easy.

"One of my mentors was this really great guy who I looked up to," Suginaka said. "I didn't even know he was a Veteran; he never told me. Then one day I was walking past a wall, and I saw his name. I didn't know he'd died, and that hit me pretty hard."

Even when it's sad, Suginaka's work makes him feel like he's making a difference. Many Veterans find that the key to staying sober is to feel useful. Making a difference in the lives of others helps Veterans find a place in the world and motivates them. TW helps many homeless and unemployed veterans join the workforce again. It gives them a place to fit in and serves as a bridge to a successful life.

## Bonnie Graham retires as director of San Francisco VA

*by Angelo Dalmacio*  
Public Affairs Officer, VA San Francisco

On Wednesday, March 31, San Francisco VA Health Care System (SFVAHCS) Director Bonnie Graham embarked on the next exciting era of her life -- retirement!

Graham, originally from Boston, was named director in August 2013 and has made a significant positive impact on SFVAHCS since that time. During her tenure, she led the health care system through many successes, like the expansion of telehealth delivery and championing of research excellence, and challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic, and social and racial unrest.

She developed and cultivated her commitment to making SFVAHCS an innovative, inclusive and compassionate center of care. She oversaw the creation of the health care system's first Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI). This office addresses the key issues of inclusion, diversity, equity and access, as they pertain to employees, Veterans, stakeholders and the community.

Employees, colleagues and external stakeholders gathered virtually on March 23 to wish her the best on her retirement journey. Numerous team members from across the health care system expressed their appreciation for her mentorship, while Talmadge King, Dean of the UCSF School of Medicine, thanked her for her partnership.



She was honored for her years of leadership by Representatives Mike Thompson (CA-05) and Jared Huffman (CA-02). They presented Graham with a Congressional Record Statement, which is a written statement of the honoree's legacy and accomplishments and will be read aloud on the floor of the House of Representatives.

On April 1, upon Ms. Graham's retirement, Deputy Director Jia F. Li began her role as Acting Director of the SFVAHCS. She plans to build on Ms. Graham's legacy of leadership, and to continue striving for health care excellence.

## Las Vegas VA conducts active threat training exercise with local partners



VA Southern Nevada Healthcare System (VASNHS) Police and Emergency Management staff coordinated with North Las Vegas Police and Fire departments to conduct an Active Threat Response exercise Feb. 23 to enhance the preparedness of VA staff and local community partners' ability respond to an active threat situation at a VA facility.

The North Las Vegas VA Medical Center administration building was chosen as the setting for the exercise to limit any disruption to patient care, and the area was closed off from the main campus to prevent any involvement from non-VA staff.



Prior to the exercise, VA staff participated in active threat response training, which included information and instructions on sheltering in place, building evacuation procedures, rally points and accountability procedures, and other safety and security items.

"The exercise tested VA Police response, tactics, training, communication, and coordination with our local partners and was also designed to increase VASNHS employees' knowledge of active threat response procedures," said VASNHS VA Police Chief Cristina Tobon. "The training was a great success for both VA and our community first responders."



# No Veteran leaves alone: Ensuring Veterans receive a hero’s final salute

*Veterans answered our nation’s call, surrendering their civilian constitutional protections so that we may live free. They have experienced combat, deployment, and many of the stresses that come with military life. They deserve our respect and gratitude at the time of death, not just on Veterans Day.*

by Désiré M. Kindarara, PhD, MSN, VA Northern California

**Editor’s note:** This article, written by a nurse at VA Northern California, originally appeared in the April 2022 edition of *Federal Practitioner*, a monthly, peer-reviewed clinical journal serving more than 35,000 physicians, clinical pharmacists, physician assistants, advanced practice nurses, and medical center administrators working within the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Department of Defense, and the Public Health Service.

It is a great honor and privilege to care for the men and women who have bravely served our country and to give a hero’s Final Salute in recognition of the Veteran’s service and sacrifices. US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and other non-VA health care facilities caring for Veterans find meaning and take pride in providing a Final Salute to Veterans who spend their last days of life at their facilities.

The Final Salute aligns with the mission of the VA: To fulfill President Lincoln’s promise “To care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan” by serving and honoring the people who are America’s Veterans. As health care professionals, we feel and grieve the loss when a Veteran dies within our facilities. While some VA and non-VA health care facilities honor Veterans at the time of death, others have yet to implement a Final Salute program. How can we ensure that Veterans at the time of death receive a hero’s Final Salute?

There are 26 million Veterans alive today, representing about 8% of the total US adult population. Yet more than 1,800 Veterans die every day, representing about a quarter of all US deaths. Most Veterans die in the community; only 4% of Veteran deaths occur in VA facilities. This article highlights the unique tradition that a few VA and non-VA health care facilities have launched to honor Veterans whose journeys end under their care. This article also is a call to action to raise awareness of the importance of instituting the Final Salute program that is part of the end-of-life protocol for Veterans.

A Final Salute ceremony (also called Honors Escort or Honor Walk) takes place when a Veteran who dies in the hospital or nursing home is transported on the gurney from the location of their passing to the funeral home vehicle or the morgue. Staff, family members, visitors, and other Veterans silently line the hallways from the Veteran’s

room to the health care facility exit and pay their respects to the deceased Veteran. A Final Salute is a quiet, yet profound and powerful way for care teams to ensure that the deceased Veteran does not leave alone.

***A Final Salute ceremony (also called Honors Escort or Honor Walk) takes place when a Veteran who dies in the hospital or nursing home is transported on the gurney from the location of their passing to the funeral home vehicle or the morgue.***

## VA-BASED CEREMONIES

There are many acts of remembrance at the bedside from the time of death to the time when the Veteran’s body approaches the funeral home vehicle or the doors of the morgue. Tonya Ross, social worker and Honors Escort program manager at the Robert J. Dole VA Medical Center (VAMC) in Wichita, Kansas, reported that following the death of a Veteran, there is a bedside remembrance that begins with a flag ceremony. Afterward, the Veteran’s gurney is draped with the American flag, and as the procession moves through the medical center, the Veterans salute, and all others place their hands over their hearts.

Chaplain Michael Halyard at the Ozarks VAMC in Fayetteville, Arkansas, reported that following the death of a Veteran, the chaplain greets family members with condolences and allows them to grieve and reflect on their life with the deceased Veteran. On arrival of the funeral home team, an announcement for an Honor Walk is made. Staff, visitors, and family are lined up on the first floor of the hospital waiting to pay their final respects to the Veteran. A slow processional of the Veteran covered by a handmade quilt is escorted by a VA police

officer and the chaplain. The processional stops in the middle and the chaplain announces, “Let us pause for a moment of silence as we honor one of our own US Army Veterans who has completed the journey of life.”

The Final Salute at the VA Wilkes-Barre Community Living Center (CLC) in Pennsylvania begins with a bedside flag ceremony. Afterward, the Veteran’s gurney is draped with the flag, and as the procession moves through the CLC, all who are standing along the route offer their respects. Throughout the ceremony, a team member remains with the family of the deceased, providing comfort and support. Once the ceremony is completed, the team member remains with the family to ensure all issues are addressed and all questions or concerns are answered.

Residents of the Philadelphia VAMC CLC in Pennsylvania have found a way to say a last goodbye to fellow Veterans in a unique and dignified manner. Bettyanne Corkery, nurse manager for the Heroes’ Crossing hospice and palliative care unit explains, “Our Honor Guard evolved from our residents’ requests. We used to drape a flag over the body of Veterans leaving us for the last time, but our residents came to us and said they wanted to do more.” CLC residents wanted to form an Honor Guard and say goodbye with dignity and grace. Gerry Donlon, a US Army Vietnam Veteran and president of the residents council and chief program coordinator, explained that Honor Guard members are called to the deceased’s room and stand guard until the hearse comes. Donlon adds, “We proceed forward, along with the family, and the speaker system for the hospital plays patriotic songs, including Taps. When we get to the lobby, we stop, and I say a prayer. We fold the flag military style and hand it over to the family members, we render a Final Salute, and then the Veteran is taken to the hearse.”

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# No Veteran leaves alone

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## NON-VA CEREMONIES

Texas Health Arlington Memorial Hospital (THAM) has honored 531 Veterans with Final Salutes since 2015. Before the official procession begins, designated employees drape the patient’s body with the flag. Physicians, nurses, and volunteers escort the body in a silent procession along with the family. On leaving, the Veteran’s family receives the flag in honor of their loved one. A specially designed medallion has been placed in the lobby floor at the location where the Final Salute is rendered. Christi Evans, RN, BSN, ACM, manager for care coordination at AnMed Health, Anderson, South Carolina, witnessed a Final Salute at THAM for a relative and took the idea to Mike Johnston, Director of Spiritual Care to establish the program at AnMed Health, which has provided 118 Final Salutes since 2018.

Central Maine Healthcare (CMH), which operates 3 hospitals, provides 2 ceremonies. The Final Salute occurs prior to the Veteran’s passing and the Honor Walk gathers hospital personnel outside the patient’s room as they are moved. During the Final Salute, with the approval of a Veteran’s family, a Veteran employed by CMF presents the Veteran with a folded flag and certificate and thanks them for their service and hospital employee salute. After the Veteran dies, staff members gather in the hallway for the Honor Walk. Ascension Sacred Heart (ASH), Florida, where on average 260 Veterans look for treatment every month, has taken the Final Salute to all 4 of their hospitals.

Sabrina Granese, BSN, RN, Military Service Line Director at ASH explains, “Patients that are active duty or Veterans are identified at the time of admission. When a Veteran passes away, with the approval of a Veteran’s family, ‘Code Veteran’ will be heard over the hospital intercom. Staff members will have 5 minutes to make their way to the main hospital entrance for the Honor Walk.” Similarly, the skilled nursing facilities operated by Bethesda Health Group, St. Louis, Missouri, have implemented the Veteran Escort Ceremony. Employees, volunteers, family members, and residents line the hallways during the procession to salute and honor the passing of the Veteran’s body.

***“When you see all 8 members of the Honor Guard get a call at 2 AM, and everyone shows up, you know there’s personal satisfaction. I’d like to see every CLC [throughout VA] do this. I really would.”***

## CLOSURE FOR FAMILIES

Simple yet magnificent, a Final Salute shows that a Veteran is “gone but not forgotten” and also shows families they are not alone as they too made sacrifices to allow their loved ones to serve in the Armed Forces; it signals the hope of healing and closure. “The staff came to pay their respects,” recalled Cindy Roberts, a social worker at the VA Bay Pines, when her relative died at the Ozarks VAMC. She explained, I wasn’t expecting as much because it was 2 AM. I have never in my life had an experience like that. I wish there were words to describe it; I wish every VAMC in the country did that.”

Hope Danishanko, social worker at the VA Wilkes-Barre CLC, said Veterans are appreciative of the program. “I have had many CLC residents tell me that the Honors Escort allows them to have closure. They also feel it provides respect to the Veteran who has passed.”

Bettyanne Corkery noted that the Philadelphia CLC Honor Guard program is unique because it is Veteran driven. “They have sessions in which they talk about what works and what doesn’t, and they recruit new volunteers themselves,” she said. “It has evolved into the most beautiful ceremony, and they are constantly tweaking it.”

According to Gerry Donlon, “When you see all 8 members of the Honor Guard get a call at 2 AM, and everyone shows up, you know there’s personal satisfaction. I’d like to see every CLC [throughout VA] do this. I really would.”

“Family members tell us they feel blessed and honored to be a part of the program,” said Leslie Schaeffer, support services manager and bereavement coordinator and coordinator of the Veteran Escort Ceremony at Bethesda Health Group communities. “They are so grateful for the way we pay tribute to their Veteran loved one,”

Privileged and humbled—that is how staff and family members describe feeling after participating in a Final Salute. Its impact on the families has been amazing. Between the tears, there are thanks for the recognition of the sacrifices their loved ones made.

When one family was informed of the ceremony by Reverend Tricia Lytle, Manager of Spiritual Care at AnMed Health, the “whole family responded by explaining how much that meant at such a difficult time. They began sharing stories about his service and how proud he was to be a Veteran,” she reported.

“As I leaned over to present the flag at the bedside, the wife reached up and took hold as she tearfully accepted it and embraced it close to her heart. The staff in the hallway looked on respectfully also in tears.”



**VA employees in Reno, Nevada stand for a Final Salute, a tradition in which employees, volunteers, family members and residents salute and honor a Veteran’s passing.**

## CONCLUSIONS

The Final Salute is a brief ceremonial procession demonstrating that the mission to care for America’s Veterans does not end at the bedside. It ensures that no Veteran’s body is alone when led out of the health facility room to the exit.

With these Final Salute practices, I hope the rest of VA and non-VA health facilities caring for Veterans will implement a Final Salute program to better honor Veterans who depart in their care.



# Redding VA Clinic moves into new building



Left photo, from left: Don Black, Redding VA Clinic site manager; Ada Clark, deputy network director for VISN 21; James Taylor, Medal of Honor recipient and U.S. Army Veteran; David Stockwell, medical center director for VANCHCS; John Hinson, associate director, Sacramento Valley division for VANCHCS; Kristine Brown, deputy associate director for Patient Care Services/nurse executive for VANCHCS; and Roberto Rizo, Northern California field representative for U.S. Sen. Alex Padilla officially opened the clinic (shown on right) during a ribbon-cutting ceremony Dec. 14, 2021.



VA Northern California Health Care System (VANCHCS) opened the doors to its new Redding VA Clinic Dec. 13.

“What makes this building special is the people inside the building,” said James Taylor, a Medal of Honor recipient and U.S. Army Veteran, during a ribbon-cutting ceremony on Dec. 14. “They have the heartbeat. They have the pulse to make this happen.”

The new 77,000-sq.-ft. facility is located at 3455 Knighton Road, across the street from the California Department of Veterans Affairs’ (CalVet) Veterans Home of California – Redding. The new location offers 520 parking spaces; 51 exam rooms for primary care, 21 for specialty care and 24 for mental health; and space to accommodate up to 27 providers. Services include primary care, mental health, home-based primary care, HUD/VASH, laboratory and pharmacy services, physical therapy, telehealth, social work, women’s health,

urgent care/same-day services and so much more.

“We are very excited to open this brand new building for our Redding-area Veterans,” said David Stockwell, medical center director at VANCHCS. “This new facility will allow us to continue to provide the best care to our North State Veterans and expand access and services.”

The first Redding VA clinic opened in 1988 in a 10,000-sq.-ft. building on Eureka Way and employed one primary care provider and a nurse practitioner. The clinic now serves approximately 15,000 patients across Northern California and has around 225 employees. The clinic is open from 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday to Friday, excluding federal holidays. VA Redding dental, eye and audiology services continue to be offered at the facility located at 760 Cypress Ave.

# Fresno VA participates in age-friendly health initiative

VA Central California Health Care System’s (VACCHCS) Community Living Center is now part of a movement to improve health care for older adults, contributing to a goal continuing to expand and grow Age-Friendly care.

As part of the Age-Friendly Health Systems initiative, the John A. Hartford Foundation and the Institute for Healthcare Improvement, in partnership with the American Hospital Association and the Catholic Health Association of the United States, are helping hospitals and other care settings implement evidence-based interventions specifically designed to improve care for older adults.

VACCHCS is a proud member of the Age-Friendly Health Systems Action Communities, whose collaborative initiatives bring together health care teams committed to sharing data and learning together. All teams strive

toward reliably implementing age-friendly best practices across emergency departments, intensive care units, medical-surgical units, general wards, and primary and specialty care settings.

VACCHCS now joins an international group of more than 2,700 health systems working to tailor care to patients’ goals and preferences and to deliver care that is consistently of the highest quality.

“The Age-Friendly Health Systems initiative is an important part of our overarching vision to provide older adults with the best possible care,” said Public Affairs Officer Will McCullough.

The initiative is based on a series of practices focused on addressing four essential elements of care for older patients: What Matters, Medication, Meditation and Mobility.

### What Matters

Know and align care with each older adult’s specific health outcome goals and care preferences including, but not limited to, end-of-life care, and across settings of care.

### Medication

If medication is necessary, use Age-Friendly medication that does not interfere with What Matters to the older adult, Mobility, or Meditation across settings of care.

### Meditation

Prevent, identify, treat, and manage dementia, depression, and delirium across settings of care.

### Mobility

Ensure that older adults move safely every day in order to maintain function and do What Matters.

# Air Force Veteran paying it forward after finding support through VA program

by Jenifer Delemont  
Public Affairs Specialist, VA Pacific Islands

Some people have a really rewarding time in the military, which is wonderful. However, some folks have a harder time for various reasons. One of the more difficult jobs in the military is the honor guard. These are the folks who perform a final salute for active-duty military and Veterans who have died. It’s known to be a tough job, and it often leads to depression among those who do it.

Derrick Ontai, Air Force Veteran, served for six years. He ended up working with the Base Honor Guard in addition to being an airplane mechanic. Ontai says that he began to feel depressed and began to drink more than was good for him. When it came time to reenlist, he decided against it and chose to get out of the military. Unfortunately, the depression followed him. Ontai continued to drink, and he struggled without the structure that the military had provided him. He ended up using drugs to self-medicate for his depression, and eventually landed in prison for felony theft. Things were not looking good for him, and he worried that when he got out of prison, he wouldn’t be able to find anywhere to live or get a job with a criminal record.

With assistance from the VHA Veteran’s Justice Outreach (VJO), Ontai applied to the Veterans’ Treatment Court to have his case reviewed with the hope that his charges

could be reduced. At first, they turned Ontai down, but when he appealed, they agreed to help him if he would participate in the VA Substance Abuse Treatment Program (SATP) and then get a job through the Transitional Work Program (TW).

Ontai wanted to do better, and so he went through all the programs that VA asked him to. He completed the SATP program and began working a few hours a week with TW.

“Knowing that I had somewhere to be and being held accountable was helpful,” Ontai said. “And because it was only a few hours a day at first, I could get back into working and still have time to take care of my mental health.”

While participating in the TW program, Veterans are supported with their mental health needs. Ontai had been struggling with depression, and so the focus on starting work with a few hours a day and then mental health care services helped him to get in the right headspace to succeed. He soon moved from working a few hours a day sanitizing chairs in primary care to working more hours each day in environmental services. When he excelled at that, TW staff moved him to full-time work as the recycling lead. He was soon looked to as a role model and mentor to his TW peers as the recycling lead.

After working in TW and seeing the impact he could have on others, Ontai soon developed the desire to become a Peer Specialist. He was fortunate to have the opportunity to be hired into a position in the Transitional Empowerment Center of Honolulu (TECH) program as a Peer Specialist Apprentice, where he was provided the necessary training for certification. Today, Ontai continues to be a positive support to his fellow Veterans, but now as a permanent VA employee.

“Sharing my story with Veterans really seems to help them,” says Ontai. “I see them thinking that if I can do it, then they can do it too.”

Unfortunately, opportunities within the TW program are limited right now. They mostly partner with departments within the VA to offer maintenance-type jobs,



Air Force Veteran Derrick Ontai provides support to his fellow Veterans at VA Pacific Islands as a VA peer support specialist apprentice.

warehouse and grounds-keeping work. However, the program is looking to expand to other departments within the VA, and they hope to partner with businesses in the community as well.

Not all Veterans who come through the program have mental health or substance abuse issues. Some of them have had challenges transitioning from military to civilian life. Others have stopped working due to physical limitations and are trying to get back into the workforce. In cases like this, it would be helpful for the program to be able to offer more of a variety of jobs other than manual labor.

“You have to give people opportunities they can take,” says Ontai. “We want everyone to succeed and do well, and for that to happen we need lots of different jobs for people to choose from so they can find something that fits them.”

If the program can secure partnerships with a wider variety of employers, then there will be a better chance of Veterans in the program having a good experience and going on to thrive in their future. These are people who have served their country honorably, and anything that can be done to help them recover from difficult circumstances is the responsibility of all of society. Veterans fought for our freedoms so that we may live in a peaceful and prosperous nation in safety. It’s very important to make sure that Veterans are taken care of when they get out of the military. TW is just one of the programs that helps to make that possible, but it’s an important step for many Veterans looking to get back on the path to a successful life.



Healthcare recruiters David Martinez and Jason Tafoya attend the Disabled American Veterans (DAV) Recruit Military Job Fair on April 7 at Levi’s Stadium in Santa Clara, California.



# What I have learned from Doris Howard

by Helena Russell, MD  
VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System

One of my joys as a geriatrician is I'm constantly learning from my patients. On March 23, Doris Howard celebrated her 102nd birthday. As a geriatrician, I have the pleasure of working with Veterans in their later years, but rarely do I meet such a youthful and vibrant centenarian. Each visit with her, I learn something that adds to my understanding and appreciation of her as a person, but I also learn skills on how to live a full and fruitful life.

Doris has lived all the practices known to promote longevity. She has kept physically active and spent years teaching adaptive swimming and adventuring outdoors. In just the past few years alone, she has taken excursions in the extended basin and range, staying in bunkhouses, as well as other grand adventures in Palm Springs, the Arizona desert and Washington D.C.

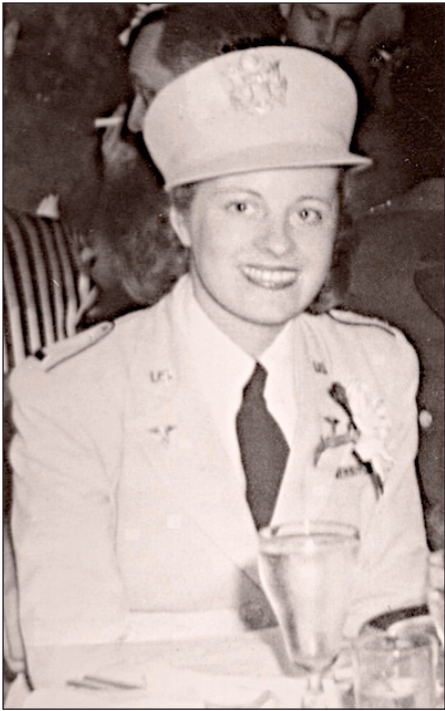
Her home, which she shares with her son, is full of plants, soothing music and gentle water fountain sounds. She continues to engage her mind and always has a stack of library books by her bedside, often autobiographies, and she offers tidbits of information on Prince Charles or other notables she has been reading about. She has maintained a plant-based diet and is ready to talk about the benefits of dark chocolate, avocados and other fresh foods. She knows the value of a well-organized kitchen and a good, sturdy chopping knife. She has made connections in the community, with family and friends, and she is supported by a truly dedicated son who remains unflappable with his devotion. As a lover of animals, home visits with Doris were often in the company of her dog Brooks, who sadly passed away this past month.

Yet, there is more to longevity than good genes and lifestyle. Doris has grit and resilience. She experienced many traumatic events during WWII as a young nurse, and sometimes these stories come up during our visits. Early in her military service, she was on a hospital ship, the USS Comfort,

which was hit by a kamikaze plane. Despite her own injuries, she stayed with her patients to provide them comfort while expecting to go down with the ship. Other stories she's shared were ones of helping soldiers wracked with PTSD returning from battlefields. She has been recognized, awarded medals, and was provided keys to the city of Reno for her time in the service.

During one visit, she said perhaps she's lived a long life because she has a story to share and a purpose. I continue to listen and learn from this great lady who always has a smile to share no matter how much she may be suffering, who brightens the room with her kindness, helping others to feel calm and peaceful.

Doris planted a dogwood tree on her most recent birthday and much like the dogwood tree, she is open and full of grace, and makes the world a more beautiful place with her timeless presence.



**Doris Howard served as an Army Corps nurse in World War II, and now serves as an inspiration to many, including VA geriatrician Helena Russell, who provides her care. She is pictured above during her military service, and below in a more recent photo as she enjoys the beauty of nature.**

About the writer: Helena Russell is a geriatrician at VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System in Reno, Nevada. She is the Interim Program Director of the University of Nevada School of Medicine Geriatric Fellowship, and VA Sierra Nevada's Home Based Primary Care Medical Director.



# Swimming with the sharks

VISN 21 team recognized in VA competition for leading efforts to streamline colorectal cancer screening process

by Patrick Gordon  
Public Affairs Specialist, VA Sierra Pacific Network (VISN 21)

The VISN 21 Mailed FIT Implementation Team (VMFIT), led by Dr. Mayan Bomsztyk and Chris Moore, MPH, was among the winners of the 2021 VHA Shark Tank Competition, thanks to their innovative approach to expanding Veterans' access to colorectal cancer screening.

Bomsztyk, a primary care physician, serves as VISN 21's Primary Care Integrated Clinical Community Lead and Deputy Chief Medical Officer. With assistance from a diverse cohort of clinical and administrative staff throughout the network, VMFIT spearheaded an effort to streamline the process through which at-risk Veterans can self-screen for colorectal cancer.

Colorectal cancer is the second-leading cause of cancer deaths in the United States, but many of those deaths can be prevented with regular screening. While colonoscopies are one way to screen for colorectal cancer, a more convenient (and often more appealing) option for many Veterans is a fecal immunochemical test (FIT). With a FIT, Veterans can take a stool sample from the comfort of their home and return it for testing. VA lab technicians can then determine whether the patient is at high risk.

Previously, colorectal screening had been tied to primary care appointments. At-risk Veterans would first see their primary care physician, and then they would be given the option to undergo a colonoscopy or take home a FIT.

However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, in-person appointments were scaled back in place of virtual modalities. Since they still needed to be screened regularly, it was necessary to de-couple the process and get Veterans tested regardless of whether they were able to be physically handed a packet. VMFIT plan was to proactively send out FIT kits to at-risk Veterans without requiring a primary care appointment. This required a collaborative effort.

"It's primary care, it's lab, it's logistics, contracting, gastrointestinal, and facility leadership all buying in," said Bomsztyk.

"It was important to us to have it be pretty meticulous in terms of doing it in the spirit of service. This isn't just a thought experiment. I want patients to be screened because I don't want them be diagnosed with late-stage cancer and I don't want them to die."

*"I don't think it can be stressed enough that every day, VHA staff work tirelessly to provide world class healthcare to our Veterans."*

She enlisted the assistance of William Walsh, MLS (ASCP), a lab manager at the Fresno VA, who wrote code that allowed for mass ordering of FIT kits. She then worked with Amy Robinson, PharmD, who at the time was VISN 21 chief data analyst, to create the reports and pull the data to identify which Veterans were at risk. Kris Taylor, MLS (ASCP) a lab lead from the San Francisco VA, helped select the appropriate tests, ensure quality control, and assisted with printing labels. Dr. Michael Tom, the chief of primary care at the Fresno VA, volunteered to have his site launch the program first. Hilary Mauch, a nurse at the Las Vegas VA, made a video to help instruct Veterans on how to use their FIT kits. Denise Digiorio, the VISN 21 Chief Logistics Officer, was instrumental in securing a partnership with the Government Printing Office for assembling and mailing out the kits. Dr. Jason Dominitz, VHA's National Director of Gastroenterology, provided his consultative support and expertise. Gina Godbout, MD saw value in the project from its conception, gave high level guidance and continues to be an executive sponsor of this project.

In short, it was a team effort that resulted in 30,000 FIT kits being sent out to Veterans who were due for colorectal cancer screening without requiring them to go through their primary care physician. The

process was exponentially faster and more efficient, thanks to VMFIT.

In late 2021, Bomsztyk participated in the VHA Shark Tank Competition, in which VA staff presents their innovative programs to a group of "sharks," which includes executive leadership team members from VA health care systems across the nation. Bomsztyk was given two minutes to pitch her idea to the group, and then the sharks would bid on the project for a chance to collaborate to bring the program to their facility. Katie Mosby, a systems redesign coordinator and innovation specialist at VISN 21, also helped Bomsztyk craft her Shark Tank presentation.

Two VA health care systems – Asheville, North Carolina and Amarillo, Texas – bid on the project. Bomsztyk accepted the offer from Amarillo and embarked on a partnership with them to bring the program to their facility. After the competition was over, other facilities sought help implementing a similar program.

"We were formally paired with Amarillo because their quality chief bid on our project, but we are currently supporting at least seven facilities that reached out to us for help because they want to replicate what we've done," noted Chris Moore.

While the program was led by Bomsztyk from the VISN 21 office, VA staff at local medical centers were instrumental in making it a success.

"I don't think it can be stressed enough that every day, VHA staff work tirelessly to provide world class healthcare to our Veterans," said Moore. "Some of that work involves innovations. Even in our case, where our process was a modification to an existing process that was initiated at the VISN level, the work was done at the facility level."

Thanks to the combined efforts across the network as well as the opportunities offered through the Shark Tank Competition, Veterans across the country will be more efficiently screened for colorectal cancer, which will give Veterans the chance to receive life-saving care when they need it.



# DEMPS program fills a need at Hawaii VA during staff shortage

*VA program provides assistance to ensure high-quality care for Veterans*

by Jenifer Delemont

Public Affairs Specialist, VA Pacific Islands

VA Pacific Islands Health Care System (VAPIHCS) recently experienced a nursing shortage due to the surge in COVID-19 cases. Leadership reached out to VA Sierra Pacific Network (VISN 21) for support.

When one VA health care system needs help, a program called Disaster Emergency Medical Personnel System (DEMPS) allows medical staff from one VA facility to come out and assist.

Joshua Michael Morales works for VA Northern California in Sacramento. He's one of the nurses who was sent to VAPIHCS to help during the staffing shortage. He works in the dialysis unit.

"I signed up because I wanted to help," says Morales. "We're one VISN; one team. I wanted to do my part."

When Morales signed up for the program, he didn't know where the next nursing shortage would be. He just knew that he

wanted to help facilities in need. When his supervisor announced that the VA in Hawaii was experiencing shortages, he volunteered.

"I didn't always think I was going to be a nurse," Morales said. "After high school I didn't know what I wanted to do. But I had some family who worked in nursing and I saw the impact that they made, and that's what made me fall in love with the profession. I'm very proud to be a nurse."

This year will be his third year with VA, and Morales has been a nurse for ten years. He says he's excited to continue his education and hone his skills so he can help more people in the future. VAPIHCS is grateful to all DEMPS nurses for assisting in their hour of need.

"Just an ongoing thank you to all our staff that are pitching in," said Dr. Richard Kynion, VAPIHCS Chief of Staff. "There's a lot of people working extra hours."



VA nurse Joshua Michael Morales is one of many VA employees who volunteered to assist other facilities in need through the DEMPS program.

## VA Rideshare Program offers free rides to eligible Veterans

After completing his medical appointment at the Sacramento VA Medical Center (VAMC) on April 19, Leonard Williams had no idea how he would get home. When a member of his care team heard the retired U.S. Air Force Veteran did not have transportation, she offered him a free ride through the VA Rideshare Program. Williams was grateful and relieved.

"It is an absolute godsend," he said. "I don't know what I would do without it."

The VA Rideshare Program, funded through a VA Innovators Network grant, aims to reduce the number of missed appointments due to transportation challenges. The program was launched at the medical center in 2020 and has paid for more than 700 Lyft and Uber rides for Veterans thus far. But best of all, it helps Veterans save a few bucks and gives some peace of mind.

"I really just can't believe how the government is taking care of its Vets," Williams said. "It warms my heart after what we did."

Enrolled patients without reliable transportation who receive medical or mental health treatment through the emergency department at the Sacramento VAMC are eligible to receive rides to and from the medical center on the day of their visits. Additionally, if patients cannot drive themselves or find a ride before or after undergoing a procedure, the program can help.

"Many Veterans receiving care in our hematology/oncology clinic live alone and are too weak after treatment to drive themselves



Veteran Leonard Williams, left, and Lisa Canty, acting chief of social work at VA NorCal, give a thumbs up before the Veteran embarks on his ride home.

home," said Lisa Canty, acting chief of social work at VANCHCS. "Rideshare enables them to safely return home without the added worry of finding a ride. This has truly been a game-changer for Veterans and their loved ones."

VA Rideshare offers free rides to and from the Sacramento VAMC to eligible Veteran patients on weekdays from 4 p.m. to 7 a.m. and weekends and federal holidays from 12 a.m. to 12 p.m. Eligible Veterans can contact their social worker or care team to request a free ride.

## VA nurse creates home kit to monitor Veterans with COVID-19

by Michael Hill-Jackson

Deputy Public Affairs Officer, VA Palo Alto

When Donna Lynch first started her capstone project for a master's degree in early 2020, she wanted to give back to VA, especially as the pandemic quickly crippled the U.S. health care system.

Lynch saw an opportunity to enhance VA's rapidly expanding home telehealth services being offered to Veterans by making a Home Respiratory Monitoring (HRM) kit.

The 21-Day Home Telehealth program was already created to monitor symptoms of stable Veterans who test positive for COVID-19 and reduce unnecessary admissions into VA hospitals. However, the HRM kits allow Veterans to self-monitor their oxygen levels with a pulse oximeter, the device used to estimate the oxygen saturation of the blood. Lower oxygen levels are a known indication of worsening conditions for COVID-19 patients.

"We know it is scary to find out you have COVID-19, so our kits not only help us monitor and reduce admissions, but it helps our Veterans feel safer as they navigate their condition," said Lynch, who is a Case Manager in Nursing Specialty and Hospital-Based Services at VA Palo Alto health care.

She initially worked with a vendor to put together the kits that also include face masks, alcohol wipes and educational handouts. Eventually, she worked with Supply Chain Services within the facility to create the kits on site, saving more than \$20 in costs. The kits can be ordered on demand by the Veteran's doctor once they are notified of the positive result or handed out during Emergency Department visits.

For her project, Lynch calculated the costs of admission against



Donna Lynch, a registered nurse at VA Palo Alto, created a Home Respiratory Monitoring kit for Veterans with COVID-19, which allows Veterans to self-monitor oxygen levels and help reduce unnecessary hospital admissions.

the creation costs of the kit. Based on a 7-night stay average, using a \$9,333.33 per night average, the kit is estimated to save \$65,253.48 per person. From the few hundred kits already sent out, she estimated a savings of nearly \$2 million for VA.

The kit also was named a local strong practice that is aligned with VA's Commitment to Zero Harm on its Journey to High Reliability. She is now working with various VA facilities to implement the kits around the country.

VA is a strong advocate for employee-led innovations, providing support through programs like the VHA Innovators Network, and helping to advance the careers of its employees with education support programs. Lynch was able to take advantage of a scholarship from VA's National Education for Employees Program to complete her master's degree in nursing management and organizational leadership in 2021.

## New year, new goals

by Ryan Coverdell, Public Affairs Officer, VA Sierra Nevada

Keith Ching, a 77-year-old Vietnam Era Veteran, yearned to get back into shape. He didn't need to get back to the 130 push-up days of his youth, but he wanted to live a healthy and long life where he could keep up with his family. Ching first learned of Whole Health Coaches at Move!, a weight management program offered by VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System (VASNHCS). Coaches could help him decide on specific goals that were measurable and provide resources and structure to help him reach them.

Ching knew much of his success in the military stemmed from structure. To him, a coach was the perfect solution; someone to not only encourage him and find resources so he could succeed but to also hold him accountable. That someone was Samuel Mitrovich, an Army Veteran and VA

Navigator who helps Veterans with their Whole Health plan. Ching called Mitrovich "a positive force and a Veteran who understands other Veterans."

With each new year, many people set new fitness goals. At VA, a Whole Health Coach is a great resource to help you create manageable goals with a self-imposed structure. The goals can go beyond fitness, too: new hobbies, giving back or nearly any interest can become a goal.

"Whole Health goes beyond traditional health care and centers on what matters to the individual Veteran," Mitrovich explained. "We help Veterans get more involved in their health care and as a result, more proactive rather than reactive in their care."

Though a Whole Health Coach can be an accountability partner, Mitrovich says they can also be there for support, leaving the



Veteran to be accountable to themselves. An initial meeting will typically include talking about what goals a Veteran wants to achieve and why they want to focus on those goals, why those goals matter. They'll then work to make the goal Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Time-based (SMART). Mitrovich tries to meet with each Veteran weekly, determining what short-term goals can be completed in that time to help the Veteran achieve their overall goal.

Ching encourages all Veterans to let VA support their goals. "No matter where you come from, you can succeed," Ching said.



# Fresno VA achieves geriatric emergency department accreditation

by Will McCullough  
Public Affairs Officer, VA Central California

VA Central California Health Care System (VACCHCS) is the first healthcare system in Central California to achieve Geriatric Emergency Department (GED) accreditation. GED accreditation is granted via the American College of Emergency Physicians (ACEP), ensuring optimal transition of care from hospital emergency rooms to other modalities of care, inpatient for instance, or home or a community-based care setting.

VACCHCS pursued GED accreditation to improve patient outcomes, deliver a standardized approach to care which remedies common complaints among older patients according to VA Emergency Department (ED) director Manavjeet S. Sidhu, MD, MBA. Geriatric patients treated at VACCHCS' Emergency Department are guaranteed ready access to wheelchairs, walkers along with other mobility aids, and transportation to either their homes or other care facilities.

The Health Care System has a partnership with the University of California San Francisco (UCSF), a regional graduate and undergraduate medical education campus, which conducts training and patient care through a network of affiliates. VA Central California Health Care System affords a highly valued training facility for medical students, residents and fellows to work and train in a number of scenarios. Veterans receive ideal care at VACCHCS and the GED accreditation provides additional opportunities for UCSF Fresno residents to witness and learn delivery of exceptional geriatric care in a real-world environment. "At the VA, one of our pillars is medical education," Dr. Sidhu said.

Dr. Sidhu, an alumnus and former chief resident of the Emergency Medicine Residency Program at UCSF Fresno, set out to achieve GED accreditation at VACCHCS, in August 2020. It was one of his first major endeavors after coming onboard as Emergency Department director at VACCHCS.

Dr. Sidhu was instrumental in the VA's successful application for GED accreditation, said Will McCullough, public affairs officer at the VA Central California Health Care System. "He has been a wonderful addition to our facility, our health care system. And we're very happy to have him aboard."



VA Central California's geriatric emergency department is the first facility in the local area to achieve GED accreditation, ensuring the highest quality of care for Veterans.



GED Accreditation involved several moving parts, including contributions from physicians, nurse champions, and several other areas of the hospital. Dr. Sidhu said "It was a huge team effort." "We're proud of Dr. Sidhu and the entire Emergency Department team and what they have been able to accomplish in a very short period," McCullough said. "The designation is a milestone, when you consider there are fewer than 300 health care systems across the country which have achieved this particular status." "Accreditation signals to our community that our institution focuses on a high standard of care for our communities' older adults," said Dr. Sidhu. "Fortunately, residents have the opportunity to rotate with our ED providers and work in an ED that meets the interdisciplinary geriatric standards set forth by the American College of Emergency Physicians."



VA Palo Alto Health Care System opened the new Radiology wing at our Palo Alto campus on March 9, 2022. From expanded diagnostic suites to the latest CT technology, the addition measures 34,000 gross sq. ft. and will ensure Veterans receive the best care possible. Thank you to all who made this possible!

# An equal celebration for all

by Michael Brogan  
Public Affairs Officer, VA Sierra Nevada

February was Black History Month. In this year's Presidential Proclamation on National Black History Month (also known as African American History Month), President Joe Biden wrote, "National Black History Month serves as both a celebration and a powerful reminder that Black history is American history, Black culture is American culture, and Black stories are essential to the ongoing story of America — our faults, our struggles, our progress, and our aspirations."

The stories referred to by the president continue to be written and told. It's not just during February that we honor and remember the Black Veterans who have been serving this country, fighting for and defending our rights and freedoms since the Revolutionary War. Year-round, we honor and remember the more than two million Black Veterans currently in the United States. Arzie Gordon is one such Veteran.

Gordon was born and raised in Kansas City, Missouri. His experiences growing up mirrored many of his fellow Americans – difficult home life, being bullied at school, etc. However, as an African-American, he also experienced the sting of racism on numerous occasions, amplified by being a student in a school system that employed segregated quotas.

Like many young people, neighbors and teachers played a significant role in shaping Gordon's life. His high school social studies teacher, along with neighbors across the street from his house, were two important sources of inspiration and affirmation.

"My teacher always landed on the thought that I could achieve anything I set my mind and efforts to be," Gordon said. "My neighbor always motivated me to keep my head up and get ready for bigger and better things."

With a sense of wanting to do something

no one in his family had done and a desire to serve his country, Gordon joined the Air Force in 1994. He possesses a passion to help people, so it was fortuitous that he first worked in the Personnel and Human Resources career field, then began working in Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO). He served his country for 20 years in uniform, retiring from the Air Force on May 1, 2014. Shortly thereafter, he began working for the VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System (VASNHCS) in Reno, Nevada.

Gordon wears many hats at VASNHCS, to include being the EEO manager; Diversity & Inclusion coordinator; Alternative Dispute Resolution coordinator; Anti-harassment Program coordinator; Minority Veteran Program coordinator; and Tribal Health Program Reimbursement Agreement manager.

There are common threads that connect the different roles he fulfills, primarily wanting to help people and ensuring all are given an equal chance – continuations of what had motivated him throughout his time in the Air Force.

That deeply rooted belief in equal opportunity and inclusion informs Gordon's worldview and the way he approaches his job.

"Celebrate all people and what their culture brings. Don't separate anyone based on stigma, racial under- and overtones, media, religion, politics, skin color, and personality," he said. "All people deserve respect and the fair chance to excel and be successful."

You can hear echoes from his social studies teacher and his neighbors in those sentiments.

Gordon sees Black History Month as its creators intended. "Black History Month to me is education and celebration of the



VA Sierra Nevada employee and Air Force Veteran Arzie Gordon.

African-American." The month of February was chosen for the observance because it's the birthdays of Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass, who both dramatically affected the lives of African-Americans. In an 1869 speech in Boston, Douglass declared, "In a composite nation like ours, as before the law, there should be no rich, no poor, no high, no low, no white, no black, but common country, common citizenship, equal rights, and a common destiny."

Those are sentiments Gordon can get behind. Whether observing African-American History, National Women's History, Asian/Pacific Heritage, Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgender Pride, National Hispanic Heritage, or any other of the EEO Special Emphasis Observances months, he sees an equal need for all.

"I believe all special observances are necessary," he said. "All cultures play a huge part in the progress and significance of our country and its freedom."

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. asked an audience in Montgomery, Alabama in 1957, "Life's most persistent and urgent question is, what are you doing for others?" It's clear how Arzie would answer: celebrating the immense cultural history of the United States with an eye towards inclusion and equality.

## Words from our Veterans:

Veteran patients of VA Northern California share positive feedback about their providers.

- Great service at Mather. Dr. Fisher is my hero!
- My neck pain was barely bearable. Mr. [Anthony] Tramma recommended exercises that gave me immediate relief. He referred me to Judy Arcala, who followed up with additional exercises. Judy was engaging and professional. I felt [I was] in good hands.
- Dr. [Reena] Heyer is highly competent, professional, and exceedingly thorough. She communicates well, discussing my condition without any sense of preaching or condescension. She accurately diagnosed my condition, and her prescription resulted in almost immediate relief. She keeps my entire treatment plan in consideration. I feel very fortunate to be under her care.
- I feel I'm getting great care at the VA Travis Clinic in Fairfield, CA. I appreciate having Dr. Francis Cummins, Dr. Brian Mundy and Dr. Cesar Rodriguez as my care team.
- I was in the COVID unit for 2 weeks. All of the doctors and staff were more than exceptional. I can't say more than "superb service." They saved my life along with God himself.



# VA: Where employee input matters

by Michael Brogan  
Public Affairs Officer, VA Sierra Nevada

Everyone has opinions. Everyone has complaints. Sometimes, if you ask someone if their opinions matter, you'll receive a resounding "no," at least when it comes to their job. Chances are that wouldn't be a response you'd receive from a VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System (VASNHCS) employee. One reason for that is the annual VA All Employee Survey (AES).

As with the rest of VA, VASNHCS values a healthy organization, where employees are engaged and satisfied while delivering the world-class care Veterans deserve. The AES is an annual, voluntary and confidential survey sent to all VA employees. It's a tool for employees to provide feedback to leadership on key areas such as job satisfaction, workplace perceptions and employee engagement. Survey results help leaders and managers make the changes needed to improve both the employee and Veteran experience.

A few weeks before the launch of the 2021 AES, which ran June 7-28, then-Acting Director Dr. Amy Sanguinetti sent a letter to all staff members, encouraging them to participate.

"When I complete a survey, I always ask myself what is going to come of this?" Sanguinetti said. "It is my intent that the results of the 2021 AES will further identify and drive our efforts to develop and enhance the VASNHCS work environment, truly making us the Employer of Choice."

Sanguinetti then laid down a marker, encouraging employees to reach her goal of 75% participation.

Hoping to meet the goal set by the director, Heather Lupkey, VASNHCS Chief of Education Service and the AES coordinator, made use of a highly valued asset to encourage survey participation in a message to all employees: "Your participation gives you a chance to win a parking spot from one of our executive team leadership members." With that, the survey opened.

So, what comes of all those opinions about job satisfaction,

workplace perceptions, employee engagement, etc.? They're compiled and sorted according to each service in the health care system, then made available for managers and leaders to discuss with their teams, who then identify one improvement project they agree is the most important to address. After that, an AES champion steps in to lead each team through their improvement project.

Amber Wright is a newly hired Service Specialist in the VASNHCS Community Affairs Service, but she's not new to VASNHCS. Prior to her arrival in Community Affairs, Amber worked in the Pathology and Laboratory Service where she had her first opportunity to participate in the AES.

Based upon that year's survey results, her team decided their improvement project would focus on coworker relationships.

"One of the biggest improvement processes we used was the True Colors Class (a model for understanding yourself and others based on your personality temperament)," she explained. "We all come from different backgrounds and lifestyles, and with that class, it was nice to learn my coworkers' work language."

Wright says by learning her colleagues' work language, the team's interpersonal dynamics improved. She can draw a straight line from the AES to better team dynamics that resulted in improved service, all to the benefit of the team and Veterans.

VASNHCS Executive Director Kevin Amick says the results of the annual AES affords the organization "a wonderful opportunity for all members of the VASNHCS team to help shape the future of this health care system." Amick adds that by participating in the survey, employees "directly contribute to improvements in the work environment and the delivery of care by and to our nation's most treasured assets – our health care heroes and our Veterans."

For Wright and the many others who have taken part in the AES process, that's exactly how it's supposed to work. And work it does.

## VA employees honored by SF Federal Executive Board

On May 5, several VA employees within VISN 21 were honored at the San Francisco Federal Executive Board's 40th Federal Employees of the Year Awards. Recipients, who were honored for their outstanding public service, hard work and dedication, included the following VA employees:

**Theora Canonica, VA San Francisco,** ensured VA could offer Veterans the best therapies available during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021. In addition to her regular daily duties, she led the education effort for staff and patients as information regarding vaccines and different drugs used in the treatment of COVID evolved and facilitated the complicated logistics to obtain investigational medications.

**Cynthia Chan, VA San Francisco** helped the global community through her bike fundraiser for Reacts Ministries. As a part of a team of 27 riders who rode a total of 4,478

miles and raised a grand total of \$31,127, she inspired many of her fellow coworkers to give back to the community as well.

**Arthur Hunt, VA San Francisco,** is a HUD-VASH RN who serves more than 800 veterans in the San Francisco area. He provides nursing case management to all veterans in the HUD-VASH program in San Francisco and has continuously conducted home visits to Veterans needing immediate mental health support during the COVID pandemic, preventing hospitalization and adverse outcomes.

**Dr. Janeen Smith, VA San Francisco,** has been an innovator in telehealth at the San Francisco VA and has expanded her expertise in primary and emergency care to build a new teleurgent care center serving the entire V21 region.

**Cedric Thurman, NP, VA San Francisco,** maintains connection with many medically

and psychiatrically complex patients, especially those at highest risk for suicide who are unwilling or unable to present to the medical center for care. On average, Cedric is the primary mental health provider for about 5-8 Veterans with High-Risk Suicide flags.

**Logistics Service Team, VA San Francisco,** played a critical role in VA's success. This team worked tirelessly to obtain protective equipment and consistently exceeded expectations.

**Lawanda Loken, VA Northern California,** is a dynamic leader who spearheaded numerous COVID efforts throughout the health care system. Through her leadership, the agency guaranteed Veterans access to COVID vaccines, testing, and treatment. She ensured strict screening and masking processes that effectively limited transmission among staff and Veterans.

# VA Palo Alto psychologist selected to advise U.S. Senate Committee

By Michael Hill-Jackson  
Deputy Public Affairs Officer, VA Palo Alto

For Dr. Ana Alfaro, her recent selection as a fellow for the Health and Aging Policy Fellows Program is right on track for the full circle journey that is her life.

She currently serves as a Research Fellow in the Advanced Fellowship Program in Geriatrics at VA Palo Alto Health Care System and is now detailed to the U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging, where she informs the U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging of issues related to the care of aging Americans.

Her determination remained unwavering from a young age as she watched her parents work hard to ensure she had a bright future. As the only child in her family who originated from Cuba and immigrated to the United States, the importance of education was instilled in her at a young age.

"Becoming a doctor has been molded by my parents, who were both engineers in Cuba but were not able to continue their profession here," said Alfaro. "I can say all of the sacrifices were not in vain."

She grew up in the predominantly Spanish-speaking and older community of Hialeah, Florida, where mental health was not a common conversation if it was even discussed at all. She was able to see firsthand how underserved this population was, and how few resources were available.

As an undergraduate in Psychology, she initially wanted to be a sport psychologist.

She worked at the school gym and had the opportunity of training an 85-year-old woman with osteoporosis. That experience sparked her interest in helping older adults, but it was an internship with a local senator that gave her a taste of policymaking.

"Being born under a communistic regime in Cuba, it was a thrilling experience to see people using their voice to make a change in the government," she said. "I realized pairing my love for older adults and helping



Dr. Ana Alfaro, a research fellow in the Advanced Fellowship Program in geriatrics at VA Palo Alto Health Care System, has been detailed to the U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging, where she will assist with and advise on issues related to the care of aging Americans.

to change policy could impact the lives of people in my community who don't often get the attention they need."

These two experiences set the stage for her career trajectory. She matched as a geropsychology intern at VA Palo Alto and, following the completion of her internship,

received her doctorate in clinical psychology. Dr. Alfaro went on to accept her current position in the Advanced Fellowship Program in Geriatrics at VA Palo Alto Geriatric Research, Education, and Clinical Center (GRECC) and became a Postdoctoral Scholar in the

Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University School of Medicine.

Dr. Alfaro's professional interest focuses on increasing access to mental health services to underserved aging populations.

**"It's important for those interested in this field to use their voice for the common good, and that is exactly what I am trying to do."**

## Ana Alfaro

One way she is doing this is by leveraging technology as a means of increasing access. For instance, through a GRECC clinical demonstration program, she teaches older Veterans how to use mental health mobile apps as an innovative means to address their well-being goals. Most recently, she received funding to test a 6-week telehealth group intervention for older Veterans with problematic drinking. The intervention aims to coach older Veterans on how to use a VA mobile app called VetChange for self-management.

In the meantime, she will be on a year-long track with the Health and Aging Policy Fellows Program, which will offer her a unique training opportunity, focusing on policy issues, communication skills development, and professional networking.

"As a psychologist, I feel like we are not typically trained to be in policy, so I hope I can open doors for others to get involved," said Alfaro. "It's important for those interested in this field to use their voice for the common good, and that is exactly what I am trying to do."



# From despondency to sanguine: How do we get there?

If you're like me, you may find yourself feeling despondent, saddened, or even angered by the recent high profile medication error case in the news: A non-VA nurse, RaDonna Vaught, was criminally convicted of negligent homicide and gross neglect of an impaired adult when she unknowingly administered a wrong medication that ultimately contributed to a patient's death. Conversely, you may find yourself feeling jubilant at the recent acquittal of an Ohio physician, William Husel, who was accused of hastening the deaths of 14 ICU patients by ordering for administration large doses of opioid medication in the vein of comfort care, and helping the patients pass peacefully and out of pain.

The ramifications of both of these cases on the Culture of Safety in healthcare organizations will be felt and talked about for years to come. Many speculate that not only will staff stop reporting errors and near misses out of fear, but that the number of people entering the healthcare field will dwindle as people ask themselves why they would want to enter a career field where being a human, making a mistake, could lead to criminalization. We can only hope this is not the case. Instead, the more we talk about errors, risks, system failures, safety science and mitigation strategies, the more likely we are to be truly successful in improving the care we provide to our Veterans every day. There is no better time than now to be preoccupied with failure, asking ourselves 'What can go wrong here?', 'Have we thought of everything?', 'Have we consulted our front-line staff?', 'Have we listened to everyone's concerns and

opinions?'

We need to look ourselves and our organization in the mirror and ask if these errors or situations could happen here, at our VA to our patients and to our staff. Have we done everything possible to covet the sanctity of healing, to hire the best and most qualified staff, and to empower them to do their very best work every day?

One area that I find curious about the cases I mentioned above is that they both have key factors and arguments related to automated dispensing cabinets (ADCs). I liken ADCs to ATMs for medications: you enter your credentials, tell the machine what you want, and out comes your medication or your Friday night spending cash. Like an ATM where use has to be granted and access is controlled, ADCs also have safety features that guard the integrity of its contents and require the user to have been given permission to access the medications inside. Unlike ATMs, however, ADCs can be configured to allow the user to override the system and bypass built-in risk mitigation strategies and allow the user to retrieve medications without safety mechanisms or guardrails. In rare or emergent situations, this capability is necessary. Can you imagine how dangerous it would be if you could override the ATM and pull out more money than you have in your account? It most likely would result in a financially perilous situation for you. In both of the cases referenced, staff used the override function of the ADC in order to obtain medications. Like me, many are now asking questions about the utility of overriding the system to obtain medications. Might there be opportunities to make the processes more



Sue Holly, Pharm.D.

fail safe? Both organizations involved in these cases implemented action plans and new processes related to overriding in their ADCs.

As a sanguine person, I do believe there are some bright spots for all of us in contemplating these cases. Firstly, humans learn through the power of story. There are lessons for us to learn as health care providers and as organizations, from both the Vaught and Husel cases. Sharing of safety moments and stories is a strong practice in High Reliability Organizations. Secondly, cases such as these allow us to ask ourselves tough questions, which by self-reflecting and answering those, we grow and improve, demonstrating Continuous Process Improvement, Leadership Commitment, and fostering that Culture of Safety. Thirdly, these cases validate VHA's case to invest countless resources into embarking on the enterprise-wide HRO initiative. Finally, these cases further cement our duty and obligation to our Veterans and our staff to fulfill our most noble mission.

So, how does one get from despondency to sanguine? Via Resiliency: bouncing back from mistakes.

*Commitment to Resiliency was VHA's HRO Theme of the month for April.*

**despondent** adjective

de-spond-dent | \di-'spän-dənt

**Definition of despondent**

: feeling or showing extreme discouragement, dejection, or depression

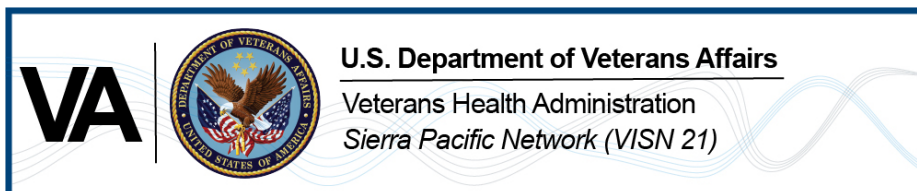
**RESILIENCY**

**sanguine** adjective

san-guine | \'saŋ-gwən

**Definition of sanguine**

: marked by eager hopefulness : confidently optimistic



For questions or comments regarding this newsletter, please email [armenthis.lester@va.gov](mailto:armenthis.lester@va.gov).