

# SIERRA PACIFIC

*Quarterly*

VISN 21 Newsletter

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**Page 1 photo: VA Palo Alto hosted Operation Mobility tour on July 19. It was their first in-person event since the COVID-19 pandemic began. See page 11 for more.**

## NorCal, SF host virtual listening sessions

The VA Northern California Health Care System held Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DE&I) virtual listening sessions for Veterans, family members, caregivers, survivors and stakeholders Aug. 19.

“One of my goals as Director of the VA Northern California Health Care System is for all Veterans to feel welcome when they walk through our doors,” said David Stockwell, Medical Center Director for VA NorCal. “I’m grateful that so many Veterans and their families were able to attend. We heard some good recommendations for improvements that will improve outcomes for Veterans, family members, caregivers and survivors.”

VA NorCal was one of eight VA health care systems selected by the VA Central Office to hold the listening sessions. About



200 attendees from across Northern California joined the six sessions that focused on the experiences of Veterans who are racial and ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+, living with disabilities, women, religious minorities, and partners in the community. The feedback will guide VA and VHA’s strategies to improve health care services to underserved and underrepresented Veteran communities.

In addition to VA Northern California, VA San Francisco was also selected to hold listening sessions. Theirs were held on August 16 and 17.

For more information, visit [www.va.gov/ormdi](http://www.va.gov/ormdi).

## New Windward CBOC coming soon

Veterans Affairs Pacific Islands Health Care System (VAPIHCS) has announced that the new Windward VA Community-Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC), located in the Castle Medical Office Building at 46-001 Kam. Hwy, Kaneohe, Suite 301, will start seeing patients starting in fall 2021.

“We are proud to be expanding the much needed services to our veterans,” said Dr. Adam Robinson, VAPIHCS director. “This new Windward VA clinic will increase access to VA’s advanced technology, top providers and staff who will bring safe, compassionate, quality care to them. We appreciate all of the support from our community partners who have helped to make this a reality. Our Windward Oahu veterans will now have a new facility that will improve their access to health care closer to home.”

The CBOC will serve enrolled veterans along the Windward Coast from Kahuku to Waimanalo. Veterans who presently receive care at VA’s Ambulatory Care Clinic located at Tripler Medical Center (TAMC) will have the option and are being invited to use the Windward CBOC as their new medical home. This will minimize visits to TAMC, unless specific services are only available there.



The CBOC will offer Primary Care, Mental Health, Women’s Health, Specialty Care, Home Based Primary Care, Laboratory, Telehealth and Audiology care.

Eligible Veterans who would like to receive care at the new clinic should call 1-800-214-1306.

# VA Palo Alto researchers are turning sci-fi into reality

We see superheroes regenerate and people beat aging in many sci-fi movies, but how close are we to bringing these technologies into reality? The work performed in Dr. Ngan Huang's lab at VA Palo Alto Health Care System (VAPAHCS) is a good start. Her team's latest research is now onboard the International Space Station (ISS) to see if microgravity is a better environment to study the effects of "muscle wasting" with her engineered tissue samples.

On Earth, scientists have been studying syndromes like sarcopenia, or age-related muscle loss, which are a normal but gradual process in the human body that begins as early as 30 years old. It is most prominent in people older than 60, leading to them becoming frail with an increased risk for falls and less chance of recovering from diseases.

In space, scientists have seen astronauts often experience the same type of muscle loss within days. With the absence of gravity, they must keep a strict workout regimen to keep their muscles from deteriorating in the weightless environment. There are many studies looking to counteract this effect so humans can go deeper into space for longer without hurting their bodies in the process.

Enter Dr. Ngan Huang, a biochemical engineer and principal investigator at VA Palo Alto, who is already engineering muscle tissue to help Veterans who have experienced traumatic muscle injuries. Her lab has made great strides in this field but knew it would be a long time before they saw any promising results in treatment for conditions like sarcopenia because of the time it takes to see progress.

A joint program between the National Science Foundation (NSF) and the



Dr. Ngan Huang, center, with two colleagues.

Center for the Advancement of Science in Space (manager of the ISS U.S. National Laboratory) specifically looking for projects in the field of tissue engineering was their opportunity to make this happen.

"As we learned more about microgravity through this program, we were excited to see if our engineered muscles can mimic the qualities of sarcopenia at an accelerated pace," said Huang.

Working with an implementation partner, BioServe Space Technologies, they developed customized bioreactors to house the samples and created guides for the astronauts to fulfill experiments on the ISS. Once complete, the samples will be preserved until the next payload can pick them up and bring them back to Earth, possibly in October 2021.

"Our hopeful outcome of this particular experiment is that we will determine if these muscles have similar qualities to actual tissue samples from people who have sarcopenia," said Huang. "This will give us a powerful platform to expand drug screening for a number of different diseases that normally take a long time to study, including cardiovascular disease or osteoporosis."

The dream behind the science Huang grew up in New York to an immigrant Chinese family and was the first in her family to get her Ph.D. and become a professor. She always had a fascination with space and even interned for a summer with NASA during college.

Huang went on to complete her BS in Chemical Engineering from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, followed by a Ph.D. in bioengineering from the University of California Berkeley and University of California San Francisco Joint Program in Bioengineering.

She is now an Assistant Professor for Cardiothoracic Surgery and, by courtesy of Chemical Engineering, for Stanford School of Medicine. She also serves as a Biochemical Engineer and Principal Investigator for the VA Palo Alto Health Care System.

Dr. Huang has authored over 90 publications and patents, while receiving numerous honors, including a NIH K99/R00 Career Development Award and a Rising Star award at the Cell & Molecular Bioengineering conference. Her research is funded by the NIH, Department of Defense, California Institute of Regenerative Medicine, American Heart Association and Department of Veterans Affairs.

While she has done so much here on Earth, this opportunity was a way for her to still contribute to space science.

"Being a mother, I'm hoping my children and other inspiring scientists see that if I can participate in space research, they will realize the sky is not the limit and even gravity is not the limit!" said Huang.

[Visit the Ngan Huang Research Lab website to learn more about her groundbreaking work](#)



# VA NorCal holds virtual Town Hall for Afghanistan and combat Veterans

The recent events in Afghanistan have stirred up various emotions for service members, Veterans and their families. VA NorCal leadership held a virtual Veteran Town Hall on Sept. 1 and shared information on mental health resources available for combat Veterans and their families at VA NorCal and local Vet Centers.

More than 500 Veterans, families and stakeholders joined the event by phone, web and social media. Many attendees were able to ask questions and receive answers directly from leadership live during the event.

"Our Veterans and service members are driven and resilient, but everyone needs help sometimes, and that's o.k.," said Dr. McCarthy. "The last year and a half has been hard for all of us. Seeing the events in Afghanistan on television has only added to the stress for some of our Veterans who may have served overseas or know someone who did. I want to encourage any Veteran or service member who needs help to please reach out to us at VA NorCal or a local Vet



**Members of VA Northern California leadership, including medical center director David Stockwell, second from left, host a virtual Veteran Town Hall at the Sacramento VA Medical Center Sept. 1.**

*Photo by Kristi Morales-Scott*

Center. You are not alone."

The Veterans Crisis Line is a free, confidential resource available to anyone, even if you're not registered with VA or enrolled in VA health care. The Veterans

Crisis Line can be reached by calling 1-800-273-8255 and pressing 1, sending a text message to 838255, and chatting online at [VeteransCrisisLine.net](http://VeteransCrisisLine.net). To locate a Vet Center, visit [www.vetcenter.va.gov](http://www.vetcenter.va.gov).

## VA grants improve transitional housing, prevent Veteran homelessness in VISN 21

Starting Sept. 30, VA is awarding \$116.4 million in grants to more than 200 community organizations under VA's Grant and Per Diem (GPD) Program.

GPD provides funding to community organizations that provide transitional housing and supportive services for Veterans at risk of or experiencing homelessness and aims to help them achieve residential stability, increase skill levels and income and obtain greater self-determination.

Capital grants provide funding for community organizations to build or renovate facilities that serve Veterans experiencing homelessness and are authorized through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act established in 2020. Victory Village, a recovery program for disabled Veterans in Northern California, was awarded a capital grant for \$338,564.

Case management grants support case managers who provide services to help Veterans maintain self-sufficiency and housing stability.

Case management grants awarded within the VISN 21 catchment area include:

- \$675,000 to United States Veterans Initiative in Kapolei, HI
- \$225,000 to WestCare California in Fresno, CA
- \$488,526 to The Salvation Army in Rancho Palos Verdes, CA
- \$675,000 to United States Veterans Initiative in Las Vegas, NV
- \$185,000 to Operation Dignity in Emeryville, CA
- \$450,000 to Swords to Plowshares Veterans Rights Organization in San Francisco, CA
- \$847,739 to Vietnam Veterans of California in Santa Rosa, CA

- \$223,726 to Veterans Transition Center of Monterey County in Marina, CA
- \$142,514 to WestCare Nevada in Henderson, NV

Special needs grants provide funding for community organizations that help Veterans experiencing homelessness with special needs such as women Veterans, those with chronic mental illnesses and those who care for minor dependents.

Awardees of special needs grants within the VISN 21 catchment area include:

- \$765,120 to United States Veterans Initiative in Kapolei, HI for women Veterans
- \$1,100,000 to Dignity's Alcove in Stockton, CA for chronically mental ill Veterans
- \$660,000 to Vietnam Veterans of California in Santa Rosa, CA for women Veterans

# Prosthetically Gifted

By Shane Whitecloud, VASNHCS Public Affairs

Bill Van Aken's smile and wave are familiar staples at VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System's (VASNHCS) main campus. With his prior service in the Army, combined with 21 years serving as a rating specialist at the Reno office of Veteran Benefits Administration (VBA) and now eight years working in the prosthetics department at VASNHCS, Bill has certainly seen a lot of changes within the facilities. What was one of the largest improvements that directly impacted him? Doorknobs.

Bill is an amputee. While his coworkers poke at his age jokingly by mentioning he was there in person when they signed the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) 31 years ago, on June 23, 1990, Bill remembers the changes that were made almost immediately following the signing of the ADA. "The ADA has a broad reach that encompasses a lot of areas for people that are disabled and need assistance to work and live independently," he says.

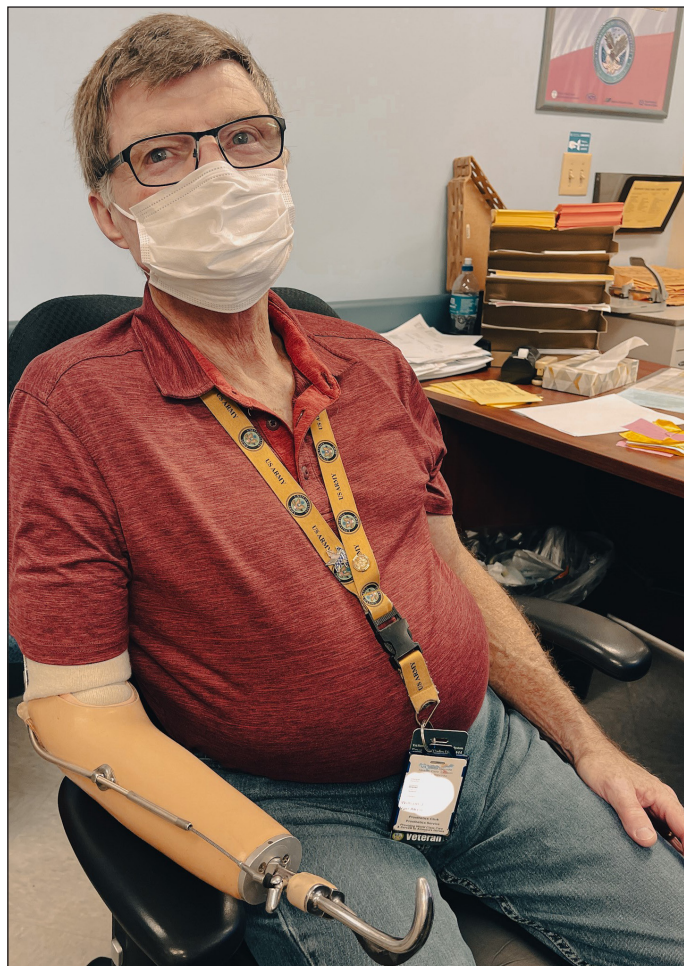
The ADA makes it unlawful to discriminate in employment against a qualified individual with a disability. The ADA also outlaws discrimination against individuals with disabilities in state and local government services, public accommodations, transportation and telecommunications. Employers cannot deny reasonable accommodations for proven or obvious disabilities. Employers also cannot retaliate against you for asking for disability accommodations.

Back to those doorknobs.

Imagine having a prosthetic device as your right arm and hand, holding an armload of documents in your left arm, and the only way through the door in front of you is by turning a doorknob. Bill's been left standing on the other end of that door many times, knocking and waiting for someone to open it. While at the VBA, Bill asked for one thing, which VBA accommodated almost immediately - replace the doorknobs with door handles. VASNHCS did the same. "I didn't have to rely on someone else to do my job, and for me that was huge," Van Aken admits.

VA also has many programs for Veterans with disabilities that not only help with finding employment, but even outfitting a home to meet ADA standards. For example, if a Veteran has stairs leading into their home and is in a wheelchair or using a walker, VA can provide ramps into the home that meet a very strict standard. "A proper ramp that allows a Veteran access to their home or job must be 1 foot in length for every 1 inch of elevation and also has railings, per ADA regulations," explains Van Aken. This only applies to a home that is owned by the Veteran and not a rental. "If it is a rental, then the homeowner is responsible for making those accommodations."

VA also has another program called Home Improvement Special Adaptation (HISA) that allows for a Veteran with disabilities to obtain a one-time grant of up to \$6,800 to refurbish their home to help them accomplish their activities of daily living. "We've done hundreds of bathroom remodifications, such as installing a walk-in or roll-in shower, elevated toilets, and we've even removed carpeting and had flooring put in, such as slip



**U.S. Army Veteran Bill Van Aken**

resistant tile or laminate flooring for Veterans in wheelchairs," he said. "Everything is installed by a VA employee who is certified to install all devices per ADA regulations."

Special Adaptive Housing and Special Home Adaptation are two more VA grants that can assist Veterans who are disabled with modifying a home that they own. These grants are typically only for use by Veterans who have lost at least two extremities and are classified as "more severely disabled." The Special Home Adaptation grant offers up to \$21,000, while the Special Adaptive Housing grant offers up to \$100,000 towards modifications. Both grants are administered by the VA Loan Guarantee program. "Here in the Prosthetics office, we work very closely with the representative for the VA Loan Guarantee Program for northern Nevada and northern California. We've done a lot of fantastic work together on behalf of our Veterans," Bill shares with pride.

When asked if he felt there was anything VASNHCS could improve upon in the workplace as an employer and provider of people with disabilities, Van Aken shares, "As a facility, I think we do an amazing job. There are still a few rare individuals, however, who are less than understanding. I think we could do better in making sure that everyone understands that just because you have a disability, whatever that disability is, it doesn't mean you're helpless. It doesn't mean that you can't accomplish things and do things independently."



# San Francisco clinic opens new annex building

*671 Annex houses the clinic's social work services and homeless support programs*

The San Francisco VA Health Care System's (SFVAHCS) community-based outpatient clinic (CBOC) in Downtown San Francisco expanded this year with a new building located at 671 Harrison in San Francisco's SoMa neighborhood.

The new 671 Annex encompasses over 5,000 square feet of new office space, with a capacity for over 50 staff members. The location houses the following programs:

- Housing and Urban Development-Veterans Affairs Supporting Housing (HUD-VASH) Program, which combines HUD's Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) rental assistance for homeless Veterans with case management and clinical services provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)
- The VA Grant and Per Diem Program, which provides transitional housing to homeless Veterans
- The Veteran Justice Outreach Program, which provides services to Veterans interacting with the justice system

"The expansion of our Downtown clinic to 671 Harrison provides our dedicated social work staff with the space needed to effectively serve our local San Francisco Veteran populations, especially those who are not housed," SFVAHCS Director Bonnie Graham said. "I am exceedingly proud to lead an organization whose utmost commitment is to improve the health and well-being of those who have served this nation. The opening of this new location furthers our efforts towards this goal."

The clinic held a ribbon-cutting ceremony to mark the opening of the 671 Harrison location on Wednesday, July 21, 2021, at 10 a.m. SFVAHCS leaders were joined by local community advocates, including Swords to Plowshares Executive Director



**VA San Francisco leadership cuts the ribbon at the new 671 Annex at the CBOC in downtown San Francisco on July 21, 2021.**

Michael Blecker and San Francisco Veterans Service Officer Elvira Flaviano.

Emphasizing the convenience of the new space, Blecker said: "It's very exciting to bring everything together [in one space]... We have been working relentlessly together to really address poverty and homelessness and all the layers that are involved with that. We are so fortunate to get federal resources to help out, to make a difference."

In closing, SFVAHCS Associate Director for Patient Care Services, Mary Ann Nihart, shared: "If you don't have the services where the people are, you are not going to get the needs met." With the addition of the new space at 671, the SFVAHCS is thrilled to be able to expand the services we provide to all the Veterans of our great city, especially those struggling with homelessness.

## VA Palo Alto participates in South Bay Stand Down



VA Palo Alto participated in the South Bay Stand Down in Monterey, CA on June 16, 2021. The event was organized by Veterans Transitional Center, one of the VA Contracted Housing Facilities for Homeless Veterans.

Left photo: Medical outreach staff and employees of the Monterey CBOC.

Right: Congressman Jimmy Panetta, left, met with Dr. Jean Lighthall and Nick Sasson, Medical Director of the Monterey CBOC.





# VISN 21 employee named 2021 Hepatitis Elimination Champion

The Coalition for Global Hepatitis Elimination has named VISN 21 employee Rachel Gonzalez a Hepatitis Elimination Champion for 2021.

Gonzalez, a management analyst for the VISN's pharmacy benefits management, received the award for work she did in her previous position, as the assistant director for the National Hepatic Consortium for Redesigning Care.

"Many Veterans lived with hepatitis C for years with the virus causing damage to their liver over time," said Gonzalez. "Treatments available before 2013 were only effective for about half of patients and caused challenging side effects. As liver damage progressed, Veterans faced the possibility of decreased quality of life due to their symptoms, liver cancer or need for liver transplant."

From 2013 to 2019, Gonzalez and her team worked tirelessly with VA medical centers across the country to

increase Veterans' access to hepatitis C testing and treatment. They identified opportunities for improvement and reduced barriers for Veterans.

Thanks in part to Gonzalez's efforts, VA has made tremendous strides in the fight against hepatitis C. 120,000 Veterans in VA care have been cured, VA has treated 90% of Veterans in VA care with known HCV, and has screened more than 85% of Veterans born between 1945 and 1965, the birth cohort identified as most at risk for hepatitis C.

VISNs across the country, including VISN 21, continue to work together to advance care for patients affected by hepatitis C and other liver diseases. According to Gonzalez, key strategies that made the hepatitis C program so successful include a focus on patient-centered care, process improvement and application of high reliability organization (HRO) principles.



VISN 21 employee Rachel Gonzalez was named a 2021 Hepatitis Elimination Champion by the Coalition for Global Hepatitis Elimination.

"We encourage all Veterans to get tested for hepatitis C, as infection can be present without any symptoms," Gonzalez said. "We know that approximately 16,000 Veterans in VA care remain untreated, and encourage Veterans to seek treatment from VA if they believe they have hepatitis C."



## A happy trip home to American Samoa for Veterans

Twenty Veterans from American Samoa made their way from Hawaii to the airport with their care-takers. It was finally time for them to go home. Due to Covid-19 travel restrictions, these Veterans, who came seeking necessary medical treatment at VA Pacific Islands, found themselves on Oahu for more than a year. They were happy to be going home. Beneficiary Travel Assistant Vitolio Laban went to the Daniel K. Inouye Airport to bid aloha to the Veterans and their care-takers on August 20, 2021.



# Housekeeper with a halo

By Shane Whitecloud, VASNHCS Public Affairs

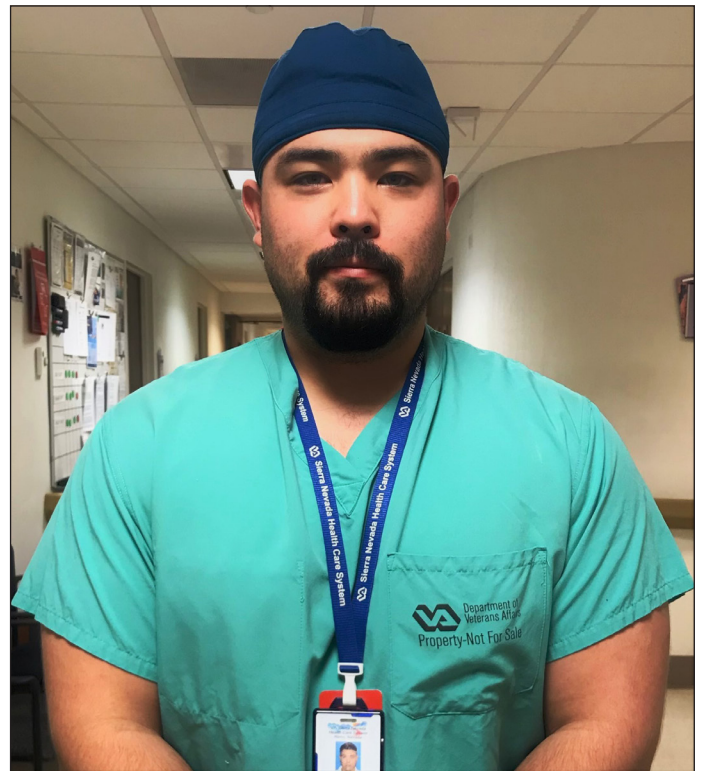
March 26, 2020, Micah Van Dreumel received devastating news: He was to be medically discharged from the Marine Corps. His immediate supervisors fought to retain him — they knew he didn't want to be discharged — but in the end, Micah was sent home. At the time, he had been going through a harsh divorce and didn't have a house to come home to. He asked a friend and fellow Veteran if he had space for him.

"It was this tiny mobile home," Van Dreumel said. "I was so embarrassed when I would bring my kid home and we would make a pallet on the floor out of blankets so we could sleep together. I felt like I had hit rock bottom. I had everything I needed in the Corps: meals, bed, shelter and a mission. When I deployed the last time, though, my wife had enough and left. My Marines and my kid were all I had left. I was literally eating green olives and canned chicken from the Dollar Tree."

Faced with a new reality, he knew he needed employment. He applied to the Post Office and was accepted as a temporary COVID hire, working six days a week and pulling 16-hour shifts in the warehouse. In August 2020, he began feeling under the weather. The plant manager ordered Van Dreumel to get a COVID-19 test, and he knew that was going to cost money he didn't have. At a loss, he wracked his brain before learning he could receive a free test at VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System's medical center.

"I walked into the VA hospital, and they told me that I wasn't on file. I admitted that I was nervous about getting my care at the VA because I had heard so many horror stories. They explained that I needed a provider and handed me a little blue phone. On the other end was a doctor who told me that they were now my provider and that I would be taken care of. It was incredible," Van Dreumel recalled. "Apparently they had been trying to get ahold of me as part of an inbound program they do now. She asked me what my housing was like and if I was drinking or using (substances). I told her that I don't use substances or drink. My housing situation wasn't too good, but I was getting money from this job at the post office and planned to change that soon. Then she scheduled me for my first appointment at North Campus. The care was awesome, and the people were great."

His new doctor told Van Dreumel that until he was evaluated, though, he couldn't continue to lift heavy stuff and work long hours on his feet for fear of harming his back more. The doctor sent him back to the post office with a note stating he couldn't work longer than eight-hour shifts for six days a week, nor could he lift more than 40 pounds for 30 days. The plant manager,



**VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System housekeeper Micah Van Dreumel was recently honored with a VA ICARE award for going above and beyond his scope of duty and offering unparalleled dedication and service to Veterans.**

Michelle, responded with, "I need you to work at least 12 hours. We don't make special accommodations for Veterans." When Van Dreumel told the plant manager he didn't intend to go against his doctor's orders and argued he could still do his job effectively and that it was only for 30 days, he was reminded of his temporary status and released from duty.

He returned to the VA and explained what happened. He was sent to Hali Ward, who immediately asked for his resume. Within a week, Van Dreumel was a VA employee in Housekeeping,

*(continued on next page)*



# Housekeeper with a halo

(cont. from previous page)

where he settled in quickly by speaking to the Veteran patients during his shifts at night. "It doesn't matter how old we are or the age difference between us, they are all family," he said. His housekeeping and conversation were needed in the COVID unit and the Emergency Department.

Gary was an elderly patient in the COVID unit and a fellow Marine. Van Dreumel made it a point to tell every patient hello and share words of encouragement, and Gary quickly formed a relationship with the 27-year-old housekeeper. The two shared stories from their service and laughed at Gary's jokes, and when Gary let it slip that he missed green tea, Van Dreumel got permission to bring some in for him. He remembers: "It was as if nothing was wrong while he sipped on that tea. He sat up straight and seemed like a new man."

Only days later, Gary's health began to decline drastically. He confided in Van Dreumel that he knew his time was coming to an end, and that he had four requests. He didn't want to be alone, and he wanted to go on his own terms. He also asked Van Dreumel to tell his children he loved them and to tell his wife that he went peacefully.

**“No matter what we are going through, we are Veterans, and we are family. Veterans are who we serve here, and this is what they deserve. This is how I would want to be treated. This is the kind of care I would want. For me, it's not going above and beyond the call of duty, it's doing what I'm supposed to be doing and what all of us should be doing.”**

**Micah Van Dreumel**

Van Dreumel called home and made arrangements for his grandmother to watch his children that evening. He sat next to Gary's bed, refusing to leave



**VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System acting director Amy Sanguinetti presented housekeeper Micah Van Dreumel with an ICARE award on September 15, 2021. Van Dreumel earned the award by going above and beyond the call of duty.**

his side. They shared more stories and laughter until Gary was finally ready to "go," pulling off his own oxygen mask and thanking Van Dreumel one last time.

Anita, an RN at the VA in the COVID unit, shared what she witnessed with tears in her eyes. "I thanked Micah many times for his compassion for this very special patient and he would always say it was nothing, that Veterans look after each other. He was modest and would never take the compliment that he so deserved. In my many 35 plus years of nursing, this has affected me and stood out to me, as I have witnessed something so special and met someone so caring. I am just overwhelmed with gratitude that my patient had this special person in their life. I had the opportunity to see Gary's daughters in the ED and they shared that they were very grateful as well."

Van Dreumel was awarded an ICARE award for going above and beyond the call of duty, but he doesn't see it that way. "We are family," he said. "No matter what we are going through, we are Veterans,

and we are family. Veterans are who we serve here, and this is what they deserve. This is how I would want to be treated. This is the kind of care I would want. For me, it's not going above and beyond the call of duty, it's doing what I'm supposed to be doing and what all of us should be doing."

Only days later, Van Dreumel went to Gary's funeral and met with his wife and daughters, fulfilling a promise he made to his fellow Marine. That evening, he was back at work whispering words of encouragement with the other Veterans in the COVID unit.

Two Marines, one old and one young, who only knew each other for two weeks, shared a lifetime of memories.

Van Dreumel insists Gary changed his life, but it would appear this humble housekeeper was put on a path to end up by Gary's side in his last days. The COVID unit at VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System has a guardian angel dressed in scrubs: a housekeeper with a halo.

# VA Secretary recognizes Las Vegas nurse for dedication, service to Veterans

A VA Southern Nevada Healthcare System nurse recently won the Secretary's Award for Excellence in Nursing and Advancement of Nursing Programs for helping to improve health care services for Veterans.

Emergency Department (ED) Nurse Maria VanHart was one of six selected to receive the 2021 award, announced by Veterans Affairs Secretary Denis McDonough. VanHart was recognized for demonstrating leadership, selfless dedication to Veterans, and providing patient-centered care in a safe, efficient, and cost-effective manner.

"Over the past year, our incredible professionals have answered the call to serve," said McDonough. "Our teammates, who have displayed superior performance throughout this challenging pandemic, not only cared for Veterans enrolled in our system, but stepped up to support VA's Fourth Mission efforts to care for civilian patients in communities across the nation. In the face of uncertainty, they cared for our most vulnerable and saved lives."

VA established the award in 1984 as a way to honor nurses and executives across its health care system.

In her role as an ED Nurse, VanHart performs comprehensive physical, psychological and spiritual assessments to a wide variety of patient populations with complex medical and surgical conditions requiring emergency care. She applies the nursing process to systems at the unit, team and workgroup level to improve the care Veterans receive.

"In line with VA's vision of quality care and service, Maria VanHart works tirelessly as a Registered Nurse in our Emergency Department to ensure our team and the Veterans who depend upon us for care have the very best experience,"



**Maria VanHart (right) receives the Secretary's Award for Excellence in Nursing from Acting Nurse Executive Dr. Desiree Crawford.**

said William Caron, VASNHS director/CEO. "We are so proud of her and of all our nurses who have performed with selfless dedication during this pandemic."

VanHart was also recognized in June 2020 for providing life-saving care while off duty when she was a first responder to an overturned passenger van containing 10 people. Local police and emergency personnel noted that her triage, trauma care and calling for helicopter medivac likely saved the lives of several of the critically injured.

## Las Vegas VA celebrates Veteran's 96th birthday



**Veteran William Jackson celebrated his 96th Birthday with his wife, Chi-Fen, and VA Southern Nevada employees on July 18, 2021. Jackson is a Veteran of World War II and the Korean and Vietnam conflicts. He also spent more than 1,000 days as a POW in Korea.**



# SCOUTS pilot streamlines care for older Veterans

The National Center for Health Statistics reports the highest users of emergency department (ED) services were people over 65 years old. With this being around the average age of Veterans in the U.S., VA continues to find ways to innovate care for these Veterans with pilot programs like S.C.O.U.T.S, or “Supporting Community, Outpatient, Urgent Care, and Telehealth Services.”

VA Palo Alto Health Care System (VAPAHCS) became one of only 11 VA facilities to offer this geriatric Veteran program within the emergency department, screening Veterans who are 70 years or older for high-risk conditions such as caregiver burden, limited mobility or risk of falls.

The program was first launched at the Cleveland VA Medical Center, aimed to reduce readmissions of older Veterans, while staying on top of their health care. ED leadership recruited Intermediate Care Technicians (ICT) to perform the screenings and provide these Veterans with the tools to streamline their care with virtual options.

“With the Cleveland VA’s foundation, along with support from the ICT Program and our leadership at VA Palo Alto, we were able to launch this pilot quickly,” said Joseph Bascos, Assistant Nurse Manager for the ED at VAPAHCS.

Bascos worked with his department and other key players in the health care system to implement S.C.O.U.T.S within 90 days of funding, launching in June 2021. One month later, they expanded the pilot to complete the screening process in the comfort of a Veteran’s home.

During a home visit, the ICT provides a digital consult to ensure Veterans have a smart device and a good connection for virtual appointments. They assist with the first appointment to troubleshoot any technical issues and can enhance the virtual visit with a digital stethoscope that allows doctors to virtually listen to heart health in real time.

Working with social workers, the ICTs also check on their well-being, including access to food and ensuring a safe environment.



**ICT Reyhan Viajar stands with emergency department leadership: Priya Rajagopal, Chief; Joseph Bascos, Assistant Nurse Manager; LeisaAnn Bunte, Nurse Manager; and Sharlene Burgos, Acting ICT/Geri-VET/SCOUTS Program Coordinator.**

“As a Veteran that served as a Navy Corpsman, I truly believe in this program. All of the fellow Veterans that we have helped so far have said they are astonished of the level of care we provide and are very appreciative of S.C.O.U.T.S,” said ICT Reyhan Viajar.

The integration of the ICT program, a nationwide effort to place former Navy Corpsmen and combat medics within VA medical centers, falls right in line with many VA initiatives that have Veterans providing care for another Veteran.

Learn more about the VA’s Intermediate Care Technician program and how ICTs are helping to improve care for our nation’s Veterans.

## Kudos: Veterans offer high praise for VA clinicians

“Dr. Richard Zumwalt is an excellent dermatologist. I am fortunate to have such a great doctor giving me care.”

“Dr. Joel Bonilla-Larsen is an excellent example of a doctor who puts his patient first. I look forward to seeing him for years to come!”

“Dr. Anne Espinoza is a true professional gem. She listens and has well-informed answers. The team is a compliment to your health care service.”

“Dr. Stephen Kolpakoff is always friendly and very helpful.”

“Dr. Anita Patil is great. Everyone at Oakland VA is exceptional.”

# Veteran: 'VA saved my life' after years of PTSD, MST

Post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, can be caused by anything from combat experiences and personal traumas, to natural disasters, to physical assaults.

For Noelle Porter, a retired police officer and former Army reservist and National Guardsman, it was an incident of military sexual trauma, or MST, that led to decades of dealing with PTSD.

"I was a survivor for 25 years," said Porter of her trauma. "Becoming a cop was due to me protecting myself."

Following her career as a police officer in the state of California, coupled with a transition from the military, put Porter in a bad place with many challenges.

"I moved around without a purpose and moved six times in...five years," she said. "I didn't know I was eligible for VA care until I talked to a colleague who told me I could get help at VA with Mental Health."

By engaging with peer support specialists at VA Southern Nevada Healthcare System, Porter is managing her PTSD and other personal demons. She began her treatment at VASNHS via the PTSD Program in late 2019, just

before the coronavirus pandemic. When in-person group therapy sessions were cancelled, she continued her therapy via VA Video and graduated from the program in late summer 2020.

"The first, biggest step for me was to admit that I needed help and having the courage to walk through [the door]," said Porter.

Getting involved with VA started Porter on the road to recovery. After years of not discussing her struggles with anyone, she worked with VA peer support specialists and began the recovery process by learning coping skills, participating in group therapy and acquiring other tools to make the process easier.

"We are VA employees and fellow Veterans who have similar, lived experiences with mental illnesses and/or addiction," said Darrell Mendiola, a certified peer support specialist at VASNHS. "[We] provide guidance and encouragement to aid Veterans in their recovery."

He went on to say that peer support provides role models and mentors for Veterans in their recovery paths

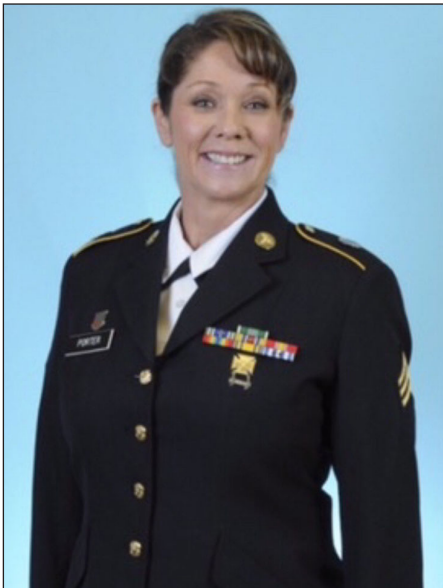
and instills hope by sharing their stories. In addition to coping skills and empowerment, the group advocates for Veterans by eliminating stigmas, bridging gaps between treatment teams, and facilitating recovery-focused group and individual mentoring sessions.

Since joining the program, the peer support process has helped Porter make positive life changes.

Porter said after years of heavy drinking, the peer support team at VASNHS was key to beating her addiction. "June 24 was one year sober," she said. "[The team] was so non-judgmental, kind, and compassionate. They didn't force me to do anything."

The empathy and understanding from VA peer support allowed her to once again feel like part of a team that had her back.

"I didn't understand how I could function," said Porter. "When I had the body armor on, I felt invincible. [VASNHS] saved my life. I was in transition, changing my life. They never left me alone. They accepted me with open arms."



Noelle Porter, a retired police officer and former Army reservist and National Guardsman, credits VA Southern Nevada Healthcare System with saving her life. She graduated from the PTSD program in 2020, and has also achieved one year of sobriety.



# VA Palo Alto hosts Operation Mobility Tour



On July 19, VA Palo Alto Health Care System held their first in-person event since the start of the pandemic, participating in the Operation Mobility Tour, where their Spinal Cord Injury/Disorders (SCI/D) Center received a new iBOT® Personal Mobility Device as part of a national donation of 25 devices to VA SCI/D Centers around the country.

This unique personal mobility device allows Veterans with spinal cord injuries to move over various terrains and even climb stairs.

The iBOT PMD donation is the first engagement coming out of the VA New England Center for Innovation Excellence (NECIE), benefiting Veterans by providing life enhancing technology solutions for those who are experiencing chronic and/or complex illness and injury.

The event also featured an Innovation Fair, where attendees could see the latest innovations in healthcare.

# VA assists Veterans impacted by wildfires



From left: Tim Whalen, Veterans Outreach Program Specialist at the Citrus Heights Vet Center, Deborah Bruner, Nurse Manager at the Chico VA Clinic, and Tanya Wright, Administrative Officer of the Day at the Sacramento VA Medical Center, offer resources, sleeping and duffel bags, phone charging and other support to Veterans and their families impacted by the Caldor Fires at the Green Valley Community Church in Placerville Aug. 30.

*Photo by Jason Dominguez*



In coordination with emergency management specialists, these and other VA nurses and support staff were part of an outreach team visiting Veterans in shelters who had been evacuated due to wildfires in Northern California and Nevada. They helped obtain and deliver a walker, provided aid to help feed an 89-year-old Veteran gave medical consultations and more.

# HRO: On our journey toward zero harm

By Sue Holly, Pharm.D.

My passion for High Reliability was born out of a medication event that I was involved with when I was a Pharmacy Practice (PGY 1) Resident. Picture a cold, dark night in November and the 'on call' phone rings, jolting you from a sound sleep.

"Get to the hospital right away – a patient in ICU is crashing and we need you to make a K rider," said the caller. A 'K rider' is a potassium infusion for abnormal electrolytes. After rubbing the sleep out of my eyes, I jumped in my car and headed for the facility.

So many questions ran through my mind. Where do I park? What doors are open after hours? How do I turn the pharmacy alarm off again? Did I remember my key?

The 15-minute drive to the hospital seemed like hours. Upon successful entry into the pharmacy – no loud alarms or VA police came running – I retrieved the faxed physician order, deciphered the handwriting, and entered the order into the Vista pharmacy package. I noticed there was a second order on the same fax. The fax read as follows: "Potassium phos(phate) 15mmol, IV STAT" signed by the resident physician. The second order read "Add 1 amp calcium gluconate to above IV" signed by the same physician.

Next, I had to figure out where the medications and IV bag were stored. I had to wash up and don my PPE (personal protective equipment) and enter the IV room to compound this infusion.

After frantically searching, I found the materials and made the IV as ordered. I affixed the patient label, doffed my PPE and ran to the ICU to deliver it. The nurse was very thankful and immediately took the IV and hung it for administration.

Whew, I survived my first on-call event.

The next morning, with tired eyes and all, I made it into work where my boss immediately greeted me, inquiring about the night's events. As I shared with her what I was called in to make, I immediately caught myself. Phosphate and Calcium do not mix! They are incompatible. This is pharmacy 101. In fact, in a chemistry lab, they have you intentionally mix them so you can see what a precipitate is – essentially it looks like the "snow" in a snow globe—not something you want in your veins. I had made an IV with "snow!" This hit me like a ton of bricks. That ton then became two tons when my boss shared with me that the patient had passed away.

Why did I go into excruciating detail about this event for you? Because although I made a mistake, there were so many more systems issues that contributed to the event. In situations like these, it is important as a practitioner to own our mistakes (accountability), but also to examine the processes and the system that led to the mistake. I did a lot of soul searching, questioning myself, and deciding whether my 12 years of college led to this moment of possibly contributing to a patient's death. It took me many months before I trusted myself again, and it took me several years before I could tell this story without crying.

I am happy to report that out of this event, many systems changes were made, truly exemplifying high reliability principles and practices. An on-call checklist was created. Drills were held with other pharmacy residents and staff, allowing them to practice turning the alarm off/on. A 'phone a friend' list was created so that if there was ever any



**Sue Holly is the VISN 21 High Reliability Organization Program Lead. She joined the VISN 21 office in July, having come from 21 years of service at the VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System in Reno, NV. Her background is in clinical pharmacy practice (12 years), patient safety (5 years) and quality management (5 years).**

question or concern, a subject matter expert could always be called, no matter the hour. Trainees were scheduled time in the compounding room to become familiar with location of key items and practices.

Perhaps the most important High Reliability principle that occurred was the practice of a Just Culture. My boss didn't shame me, write me up, or scold me. She listened to me, cried with me, and collaborated with me to make changes so that no other new pharmacy resident would have to endure what I did. We shared my story with all pharmacy staff, we talked about the systems failures, and together we learned.

I hope this story has illustrated for you how HRO principles and practices can be life changing and career-saving. As your High Reliability Organization Program Lead, I look forward to working with you and your teams at improving our systems so that we can provide the utmost quality and safe care for our Veterans.



VA Sierra Pacific Network (VISN 21)  
391 Taylor Blvd., Suite 200  
Pleasant Hill, CA 94523

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