



QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER
VOLUME 6 ISSUE 4
SEPTEMBER 2022

VHA National Center for Healthcare
Advancement and Partnerships

VHA and Partner Resources Lend Help and Hope

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VA



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Veterans Health Administration
National Center for Healthcare
Advancement and Partnerships

A Note From the Nurse Executive

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) National Center for Healthcare Advancement and Partnerships (HAP) team hopes you took time this summer for self-care, relaxation, and rejuvenation.

As the seasons turn and we head toward the end of 2022, the HAP team is continuing to facilitate nonmonetary partnerships and health innovations between VHA and outside organizations to help Veterans live their lives to the fullest. Despite the global challenges we have faced in recent years and continue to face, our partnerships add resources that provide help and hope. HAP's focus remains on meeting the [social determinants of health](#) (SDOH), the conditions in which people are born, grow, work, live, and age. It is through this lens that HAP explores partnerships and health care advancement initiative that promote whole health and Veteran-centered care.

Annually, VHA recognizes outstanding VHA-community partnerships in the field through VHA's National Community Partnership Challenge. These partnerships meet Veterans' needs in the local community and leverage expertise in regional variations and requirements. This newsletter includes information about the kind of work these partnerships continue beyond the challenge (p. 9).

Nationwide, Veteran Community Partnerships (VCP) augment VHA's services for Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors at a local level. Some VCPs engage with multiple community partners to address individual or multiple health care needs, such as mental health, transition between sites of care, or food insecurity. For example, the Boston VA Healthcare System and the New England chapters of the Alzheimer's Association closely coordinate to aid Veterans diagnosed with dementia and their families and caregivers (p. 8).

Another VHA partner, Salesforce, has developed a new training module on Veteran suicide prevention, VHA's top clinical priority (p.3). This free training is designed to help increase awareness, reduce stigma, and provide resources for Veterans and their loved ones. This partnership also has expanded economic security for Veterans, Service members, and their spouses, which impacts housing security, food security, and emotional well-being.

In addition, Service members transitioning from active duty to civilian life receive support through the Veteran Sponsor Partnership Network initiative. Advanced training is available for "peer sponsors," who connect transitioning Service

members to resources in the community where they intend to live after military service (p.6). This initiative is one of many ways HAP is leveraging partnerships to support this population.



In Indianapolis, VHA and a local YMCA share space to better serve Veterans and provide resources for well-being as part of Whole Health, VA's approach to person-centered holistic care. The area-wide partnership will kick off Breast Cancer Awareness Month (October) with a Women Veteran Health Fair (p.4). The partnership with Y-USA is the longest-standing collaboration HAP oversees and has resulted in many positive outcomes for Veterans.

This season marks several other important observances that affect Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors. In consideration of National Disaster Preparedness Month in September, HAP highlights the resources VHA and its partners provide for emergencies and the work that VHA's Care Management and Social Work Services, National Emergency Tiger Team does to help Veterans, caregivers, and employees prepare for natural disasters (p. 5).

As the holidays approach and food is a focal point during gatherings for many Americans, it is also worth noting that October is Food Security Month. VHA partners help Veterans access nutritious food and benefits like SNAP (p. 14). Access to nutritious food is one of the key SDOH for Veterans. Veterans may experience challenges with several SDOH such as food, housing, and economic insecurity, which places them at greater risk for death by suicide. Partnerships are force multipliers that expand what VA and VHA can do.

At the center of this work is the HAP team's commitment to the values of I CARE (Integrity – Commitment – Advocacy – Respect – Excellence) and I-DEA (Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Access). HAP uses these values to support VHA's mission and its journey to becoming a high-reliability organization for Veteran communities (p. 12), expanding services, building trust, and supporting public and private sector engagement with Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors.

We invite you to read more and hope you have a warm and fulfilling fall season.

In good health,
Dr. Tracy L. Weistreich
Nurse Executive, VHA National Center for
Healthcare Advancement and Partnerships



Training offers help in Veteran suicide prevention

Veterans and their loved ones have a new way to learn about suicide risks and prevention strategies. Recent data indicate that Veterans have a [52% higher suicide risk](#) compared to non-Veterans. The Veterans Health Administration's (VHA's) [top clinical priority](#) is prevention of Veteran suicides.



[Salesforce Military](#), a Veterans Health Administration (VHA) partner organization, recently launched its new [Veteran Mental Health and Resiliency Resources](#) module on Trailhead to help Veterans and their families learn about the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) [mental health resources](#) available to them. Trailhead is Salesforce's free online learning platform that helps anyone skill up for jobs in the Salesforce ecosystem. To date, more than 4.5 million learners have skilled up on Trailhead.

"Suicide prevention remains VA's highest priority," said Dr. Tracy L. Weistreich, Nurse Executive of VHA's [National Center for Healthcare Advancement and Partnerships](#) (HAP), which manages the partnership between VHA and Salesforce Military. "Our partnership with Salesforce supports that priority with resources like this training module—as well as the partnership's other resources that augment VHA's efforts to help Veterans and their spouses achieve their economic, career, and health goals."

The resources in this module are designed to help increase awareness, reduce stigma, and provide resources. Participants learn about [signs that someone may be considering self-harm](#), [communication and outreach tools](#), [evidence-based therapies](#), and [lethal means safety](#).

"This project is important to me because of the impact Veteran suicide has on our military community," said Michael Nolan, senior manager of Salesforce's Military Recruiting Program.

"Too often Veterans who need help the most do not know where to seek help or do not know who to

turn to. They may be reluctant to reach out because they are under-resourced or feel overwhelmed or stigmatized," said Mr. Nolan. "This issue is a daily occurrence, so it is my hope that this new resource is accessible to and received well by anyone who wore a uniform, our military spouses, and civilians to better understand how to spot and address a Veteran who may be struggling."

VHA's partnership with Salesforce began [in 2020](#). The [VHA-Salesforce partnership](#) aims to help Veterans [upskill and reskill](#) to transition to new careers in technology after they leave the military. In the last 2 years, the partnership has helped 1,200 Veterans and Veteran spouses earn [new](#) and [high-paying](#) jobs in tech industries.

"Salesforce is dedicated to furthering its commitment to the military community," said Mr. Nolan. "Partnering with VA to create the new mental health Trailhead module allows us to have a lasting impact on military Service members, Veterans, and their families."

The free, 50-minute training module now welcomes participants to sign up and dive into resources like the [Veterans Crisis Line](#), [Coaching Into Care](#), [Talking to a Veteran About Firearm Safety](#), and the [PsychArmor Institute's S.A.V.E. training](#).

Mr. Nolan also noted that not enough people know about one resource featured in the module, which is [Maketheconnection.net](#), a VA site that allows users to access information designed for the military and Veteran community and find local resources.

To learn more about the Salesforce's new Trailhead module and sign up, please visit: trailhead.salesforce.com/en/content/learn/modules/veteran-mental-health-and-resiliency-resources.

To learn more about HAP, which manages the partnership between VHA and Salesforce Military, among others, please visit va.gov/healthpartnerships.

VHA and Y-USA partnership offers health and well-being opportunities to serve Veterans

Since 2015, [the partnership](#) between the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) and Y-USA (the entity that oversees YMCA facilities nationwide) has leveraged the resources and expertise of both organizations to promote the well-being of Veterans and their families.

One local YMCA and Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) facility have taken the partnership to another level. An Indianapolis VA clinic and OrthoIndy Foundation YMCA share space at the only combined facility of its kind.

According to Keri Maloney, Whole Health program manager for the Indianapolis VA Medical Center, “We have a VA clinic housed inside of the OrthoIndy YMCA. It’s a pain clinic that does a lot of Whole Health and holistic type of work, focusing on managing pain and not just medicating it.” The [Indianapolis YMCA VA Clinic](#) also provides art therapy, weight management, physical rehabilitation and therapy, and prosthetic services.

[Whole Health](#) is VA’s approach to care that is person-centered, focusing on “what matters to you, not what is the matter with you.” The joint facility, located in Pike Township, links VA’s clinical services, including Whole Health, with access to YMCA services.

Ms. Maloney noted that the Whole Health approach and YMCA services integrate well. “We offer tai chi, yoga, and mindfulness classes throughout the region but largely within the OrthoIndy YMCA location,” she said. YMCA services at the facility include personal training, fitness equipment and pool, exercise classes, chronic disease prevention programs, and even a teaching kitchen. Veterans and their families receive a 20% discount for YMCA membership.

“They have a really nice indoor track that our recreation therapist uses for walking groups, for Veterans with chronic pain” Ms. Maloney added. The facility is also easily accessible, with plenty of parking available near the door.



PHOTO COURTESY OF SCHMIDT ASSOCIATES

The partnership between VHA and the YMCA of Greater Indianapolis goes beyond the shared facility in Pike Township. Ms. Maloney said a Whole Health Veteran camp is being planned, possibly using a YMCA camp in the area.

In addition, National Breast Cancer Awareness Month (October) kicks off with a Women Veteran Health Fair on September 30 at the Irsay Family YMCA in Indianapolis from 3:00 to 7:00 p.m. The event is free of charge and open to the public.

Ms. Maloney, a U.S. Veteran, helped plan the breast cancer awareness event, sponsored by the YMCA along with the Indiana Department of Veteran Affairs and Operation Job Ready Vets. The event will feature vendors and other resources for Veterans, such as the opportunity to ask medical professionals questions about breast cancer and breast cancer screenings. Operation Job Ready Vets will provide dinner for all attendees.

“The collaboration between VHA and YMCA in the Indianapolis area is a great example of how local partnerships can connect Veterans to resources in their communities and improve access to services,” said Dr. Kimberly Pugh, health system specialist for VHA’s National Center for Healthcare Advancement and Partnerships (HAP). HAP facilitates and oversees the partnership between VHA and Y-USA.

To learn more about HAP and its work with VHA partners, visit the HAP website at va.gov/HEALTHPARTNERSHIPS/.

VHA and partners provide vital resources during emergencies

Emergencies can happen anytime, but September, which is National Emergency Preparedness Month, is a time especially vulnerable to hurricanes, flooding, and wildfires. The Veterans Healthcare Administration (VHA) provides numerous resources for Veterans regarding disaster preparedness and response.



VHA's Office of Emergency Management provides [up-to-date information for Veterans and VHA staff](#) on the latest federal disasters, along with instructions on preparing for emergencies and links to find the status of their local VA medical center (VAMC) during an emergency.

Randy Moler, program analyst and licensed clinical social worker (LCSW) for the National Center for Healthcare Advancement and Partnerships (HAP), noted that some VHA partners provide information for emergencies specific to chronic illnesses. "For example, the [American Lung Association](#) has a [webpage](#) dedicated to air quality precautions for a wide range of emergency situations. Veterans on kidney dialysis can read how to prepare for a natural disaster on the [American Kidney Fund's website](#)," he explained.

Mr. Moler also serves as a facilitator and SharePoint expert for VHA's Care Management and Social Work Services, National Emergency Tiger Team. "No matter what time of year or type of emergency, the tiger team is ready to provide support to field-based social workers who are helping Veterans, their caregivers, and their families with anything that poses a risk to their health and well-being," he said.

"Information also includes impacts from natural and other types of disasters," said Alita Harmon, national program coordinator, Social Work in Patient Aligned Care Teams, on special assignment with Care

Management and Social Work in the National Social Work (NSW) Program. "That's the overall lens through which social work looks at how we can assist our Veterans, their families, and caregivers," Ms. Harmon explained.

The team, which originated as the NSW COVID-19 Tiger Team, includes specialists in social work from across the department such as the Atlanta

VA Health Care System in Georgia, Bay Pines VA Health Care System in Florida, and the VA Gulf Coast Veterans Health Care System in Mississippi.

"We help provide resources to social workers and other professionals within the VHA system, who might reach out to our SharePoint site to find resources that can be useful to Veterans, their families, and caregivers in the event of national emergencies," said Endsley Real, professional practice specialist for the Social Work Service line at the Atlanta VA Health Care System and lead for the NSW National Emergency Tiger Team.

The team works to build a one-stop shop for social workers and other VHA frontline workers across the country. They'll upload resources from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the National Hurricane Center, and the American Red Cross to their SharePoint site. If a resource they believe would be helpful isn't readily available, they create it. They also conduct email outreach to social work leaders and VA medical centers across the country after a natural disaster impacts VHA facilities.

"We'll make those available in one place for VHA staff to easily access. It's a quick read that includes links to resources related to emergent events so that people can access it quickly and easily," stated Ms. Real.

The team has recently focused on hurricanes, wildfires, and extreme heat and is already thinking

Emergency resources continued on p 6

about winter weather. Its members have experience with all types of emergencies.

“Our team members are from facilities across the country. Most have some level of experience dealing with natural disasters, either personally, professionally, or both. We have folks who have been on DEMPS [Disaster Emergency Medical Personnel System] deployments following natural disasters,” explained Cristina Ward, social work supervisor and LCSW with the Bay Pines VA Health Care System and the lead for the natural disaster team within the National Emergency Management Tiger Team.

One of the team’s efforts—in partnership with the VHA Office of Emergency Management—is to focus on Veterans who may be particularly vulnerable during a natural disaster.

“That can include such things as planning for home oxygen, or needs similar to that, to make sure that Veterans have what they need in a disaster, are able to maintain if they’re not able to get easy access to what they may need during that time, and are prepared” said Ms. Real.

The team provided resources in the aftermath of recent tragedies such as the mass shootings at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, and the Tops Friendly Markets supermarket in Buffalo, New York.

“We pulled together resources right away to be able to offer those to our social workers who were able to share them with Veterans or other people who might need those resources at that time,” Ms. Real noted.

The team works hard to be prepared no matter the type of emergency.

“Our expertise is [social determinants of health](#). So, when folks have Veterans who may be affected in some way related to a social determinant of their health, we’re able to assist,” explained Ms. Real. “We’re accessible, we’re there, we’re prepared, and ready to help.”

VA employees can access the VA’s National Emergency Management Tiger Team’s [SharePoint site](#). (This link is accessible by [va.gov](#) account holders only.) For more information about HAP and its work with VHA partners, please visit [va.gov/healthpartnerships](#).

Sponsors connect transitioning Veterans to community support

While transitioning from military service to civilian status can be an exciting time, it can also be challenging when it comes to such things as finding housing and employment and getting finances in order.

Through its Veteran Sponsor Partnership Network (VSPN) initiative, Veteran Health Administration’s (VHA’s) National Center for Healthcare Advancement and Partnerships (HAP) helps active-duty Service members who are transitioning back into civilian life access local, regional, and nationwide resources designed to support the health and well-being of Veterans, their families, and caregivers.

Community partners within the VSPN identify and manage individuals as “sponsors,” matching sponsors with transitioning Service members. These peer

sponsors often live in the area where a Service member plans to relocate after active duty. The community-based sponsor can assist with finding resources to help with anything a Service member needs to reintegrate into the civilian world—job search, education, VA health care or benefits, even resources for their spouse or dependents. The sponsor also serves as social support and a connection in their new community.

“Housing, social needs, financial needs—you name it. Anything that is going to make a transitioning Veteran have more holistic health in their life,” said Leah Smith, regional community coordinator at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Center of Excellence for Research on Returning War Veterans and U.S. Air Force Veteran. As part of her job, Ms. Smith works with

community partners to connect transitioning Service members with VHA care and other services. In addition to instruction offered by community partners, VHA provides free training to sponsors. “We at VA want to be sure that a sponsor who we’re training is well connected, so we work with community partners to make sure they have a robust resource list that sponsors have access to so they can serve their transitioning Service members.”



To properly serve new Veterans, sponsors need to know more about their world. That’s why the VA curriculum for the training session, which was created by a VA employee who is a Veteran, covers everything from Veteran cultural competency and active listening to rapport-building skills and how to connect with community organizations that are available to support Veterans. For those new to these topics, the training typically takes 1 day. However, for those who have already taken VA’s [Veteran cultural competency course](#), the training can be as little as 3 hours. The VHA Transitioning Servicemember/Veteran and Suicide Prevention Center (TASC) facilitates the training.

“In the trainings that the TASC team at the VA has developed, we talk about all of the various difficulties that transitioning Service members face,” said Ms. Smith. “We teach them how to establish positive personal relationships, how to set goals, and how to respond to difficult situations, particularly when a transitioning Service member is in a crisis, and how to access resources and how to use their community partners to best serve the transitioning Service members that they’ll be matched with.”

Ms. Smith has served as a volunteer sponsor outside her job, working with a transitioning Service member in Orlando, Florida.

“In my case, this person was really having difficulty navigating, getting their service-connected disability

benefits, so that process was just really foreign to them,” said Ms. Smith. “They also wanted some help with getting placed in a good employment situation. I used the sponsor training to tap into the community partner that was associated with the training. Instead of just being on their own and being lost, they had someone to provide them with a warm handoff to some helpful Veteran

service organizations that had a good reputation in the area.”

And when Ms. Smith says partner organizations need to have a good reputation, she means it. The training stresses not all organizations are equal, and it might take some searching to find the right match. VHA and HAP team members [evaluate organizations](#) to protect Veterans from harm or exploitation.

“You’re not just working as a sponsor out there and volunteering and hoping you’re doing a good Google search,” said Ms. Smith. “You’re working with people who face these questions and face the various needs of Service members every day because the people who partner with the VA to put on these trainings and to manage sponsors are not just a random organization in the community—they are connected in the community and in the Veteran space.”

A sponsor doesn’t have to be a Veteran, just a willing volunteer open to supporting Veterans.

“It takes a big resource base to serve everyone and to meet the needs of everyone. It’s not just going to be one organization or person who is going to be able to meet all the needs,” said Ms. Smith. “I think that’s really something neat about being involved as a sponsor. It takes a village to bridge the gap between military service and transitioning to civilian life.”

For more information about the VSPN initiative and how to become a sponsor, visit va.gov/HEALTHPARTNERSHIPS/VSPN.asp.

Alzheimer's Association and VHA team up for Veterans with dementia

As part of [Veteran Community Partnerships](#) (VCPs) with the VA Boston Healthcare System, the New England chapters of the [Alzheimer's Association](#) works with Veterans diagnosed with [dementia](#) and their families and caregivers to improve the quality of life for all.

VCPs are organized partnerships through which local Veterans Health Administration (VHA) facilities connect with state and local community services and agencies, such as the Alzheimer's Association that focuses on care, support, and research for Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia. As a VHA partner, the Alzheimer's Association services supplement [those provided by VHA](#), which include caregiver support and education, adult day care, respite care, nursing home services, home health services, and hospice care.

The biggest factors for developing Alzheimer's disease or other types of dementia are age and family history, but Veterans are at [increased risk](#) when diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder or traumatic brain injury.

According to Liz McCarthy, regional director of health systems for the Alzheimer's Association, the New England chapters help coordinate care for dementia patients referred to them from local VA medical centers through a program called Dementia Care Coordination. "It really is a two-way street. When VA refers someone with dementia symptoms to us, we do a [care consultation](#). From there, we make recommendations on an action plan," she said.

Ms. McCarthy noted that the information is included on the Veteran's electronic health record, which can be easily shared between medical providers and care coordinators (in compliance with federal privacy laws). "A care coordinator is assigned at both the



Alzheimer's Association and at VA," she said.

Using care coordinators in this way has [proven effective](#) at reducing the number of hospital admissions and emergency department visits for Veterans with dementia. Ms. McCarthy explained that, although they work for two different organizations, the care coordinators work

as a team using shared electronic information and regular meetings, along with contacting Veterans and caregivers at 1, 3, and 6 months following the original care consultation. The coordinators also help Veterans and their caregivers navigate resources and develop simple actions steps.

"The partnership between the VA Boston Healthcare System and the New England chapters of the Alzheimer's Association exemplifies how a VCP works, as a true, nonmonetary collaboration where community programs and VHA are involved equally. The close coordination results in better care for Veterans and their families," explained Dr. Jamie Davis, health systems specialist for VHA's National Center for Healthcare Advancement and Partnerships (HAP) and VCP collaborations lead.

In addition to providing care for Veterans, the Alzheimer's Association provides education and support for patient families and caregivers. [Workshop topics](#) for family members and caregivers include the 10 signs of dementia, communication with dementia patients, and safety measures to take in the home of a dementia patient. In some areas, the association offers "Dementia Live: A Simulated Experience," a virtual reality immersion where participants learn what it feels like to have dementia and gain a better understanding of how to help loved ones with dementia.

Dementia is particularly difficult to navigate for caregivers, often spouses or adult children who take on the responsibility. Ms. McCarthy's knows these difficulties firsthand—her own mother was diagnosed with frontotemporal dementia. "We really seek to lessen the burden on caregivers. Most family caregivers need help in managing behaviors such as paranoia, agitation, or sundowning, which is a sudden onset or worsening of their behaviors in the evening," said Ms. McCarthy. "But on their own, caregivers often don't reach out for help until they are in crisis. With

Dementia Care Coordination, we proactively reach out to them first."

In addition, VHA and Alzheimer's Association staff hold support group meetings for Veterans and caregivers. All workshops and meetings have virtual options, since caregivers may not be able to leave their loved ones. The association also provides a [24/7 helpline](#) for caregivers.

For more information on HAP and its work with VHA partners, visit va.gov/HEALTHPARTNERSHIPS/index.asp.

Winning partnership continues and expands cancer support to Veterans

Since winning the 2019 Veterans Health Administration (VHA) National Community Partnership Challenge, the James A. Haley Veterans' Hospital and the American Cancer Society in Tampa, Florida, have continued working together to provide programs, activities, and events to raise awareness among Veterans about cancer and cancer prevention.

"It's been a mutually supportive partnership. Haley VA providers have participated in local American Cancer Society events to raise awareness among Veterans in the community," says Dr. Leah Strickland-Marmol, Haley VA pathologist and chair of the hospital's Cancer Program Committee. "It's been wonderful to see how the partnership has grown over the last 8 years and is flourishing now that we are back from COVID. We're getting everyone back into the swing of things with awareness and education."

"But we are back. I mean, we have hit the ground running since then," added Stephanie S. McLean, cancer support strategic partnership manager for the American Cancer Society/Tampa.

The Haley VA holds two large annual events with the American Cancer Society to increase awareness of cancer prevention and support services available. The annual Cancer Awareness Fair, held each spring, provides education about cancer prevention,



Stephanie McLean (American Cancer Society/Tampa), Dr. Leah Strickland (Haley VA), and Dr. Dawn Johnson (Haley VA) help motivate smokers to give up tobacco at the annual Great American Smokeout.

screening, and survivorship. The last two fairs before the COVID-19 pandemic also provided skin cancer screening and information about prostate cancer from Haley VA surgeons. In the fall, the Great American Smokeout celebrates those who "commit to quit" tobacco and has featured speakers who discuss good nutrition, physical activity to help when trying to quit smoking, and tips to stay tobacco free.

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This year's Great American Smokeout, to be held on November 16, will include an educational event for health care providers across Veterans Integrated Service Network 8, with speakers from both Bay Pines and the Haley VA. Dustin Lawhorne, Health Promotion Disease Prevention program manager at the Haley VA, and Gregory A. McClain, Whole Health nurse from Bay Pines VA, are coordinating this virtual program.



The next day, on the Haley VA campus, Dr. Dawn Johnson, clinical psychologist and “tobacco cessation champion,” and other VA staff will distribute “quit kits” to patients, family members, and VHA employees as they support and celebrate those who commit to quit. Hundreds of quit kits will be assembled by American Cancer Society volunteers for the event. Attendees can take a photo with a 7-foot-tall inflatable turkey, with the message to “smoke a turkey, not a cigarette.”

Recently, Haley VA staff and faculty participated in the American Cancer Society's Relay for Life and Making Strides Against Breast Cancer, fundraising run/walk events that include celebrating cancer survivors, with special recognition of Veteran survivors.

Hospital staff also increased engagement with the women's program at the primary care annex and focused on early detection and prevention such as skin, colon, and lung cancer screenings and breast cancer support.

For example, Reach to Recovery is a one-on-one breast cancer support program for newly diagnosed patients who are matched up with volunteers throughout the country.

“It's kind of like a dating app—the newly diagnosed breast cancer patient can go in and can develop their profile, and then the best match volunteer will reach out to them,” said Ms. McLean. The pairs usually connect via phone or text and, when possible,

face to face. The program has a 96 to 98% patient approval rating.

The partnership also provides direct patient services to Veterans, their caregivers, and family members. The American Cancer Society helps with transportation through its Road to Recovery Program, which just restarted, where volunteer drivers pick

up patients at their home and take them to their treatment facility.

“We've found that one of the biggest barriers to cancer care is transportation,” Dr. Strickland said.

In fact, the American Cancer Society/Tampa recently awarded a \$10,000 grant to the Haley VA to help Veterans get to cancer-related appointments, complementing the transportation services offered by VHA. A team from the Haley VA, led by Mitra Gobin, chief, Center for Development & Civic Engagement, and Brandi Thomas, chief, Continuity of Care Social Work Service Section and licensed clinical social worker, developed the grant application.

Ms. McLean added, “Often, Veterans with cancer are elderly, live alone, and don't drive any more. Or if they do live with someone, they may not be able to drive. In some cases, any transportation they do have may not be reliable.” The grant money can be given to Veterans in the form of gift cards for shuttle services, wheelchair enabled transport, gas, cab fare, and ride share costs to help them get to their cancer-related appointments.

Hope Lodge, located near the Haley VA, also just reopened and provides accommodations for cancer patients who are receiving three or more treatments in the area. Patients can stay with a caregiver at the Hope Lodge for no charge.

“Some people have stayed 6 months, some people have stayed 6 weeks, some people have stayed a

year and a half depending upon their treatment,” said Ms. McLean.

The American Cancer Society/Tampa hosts a series of webinars, called Learning Communities, which focus on lung cancer and colorectal cancer. Providers from the Haley VA are invited to attend the series. Speakers, including Dr. Johnson, encourage providers to expand their treatment approach, for example, talking with patients using [motivational interviewing](#) to urge them to quit smoking.

This successful partnership supports Veterans during their entire cancer journey—from diagnosis through survivorship.

“I want Veterans to know that they have a place here where they can get support from their providers, but also from the community and all sorts of things that they would need or that they don’t even know that they might need,” said Dr. Strickland. “It’s all here, and we can give it to them because of this partnership with the American Cancer Society.”

The partnership between VHA and the American Cancer Society is facilitated by the National Center for Healthcare Advancement and Partnerships (HAP). For more information, on HAP’s initiatives and partnerships, visit va.gov/HEALTHPARTNERSHIPS/index.asp.

2022 VHA National Community Partnership Challenge Winners Announced

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) National Community Partnership Challenge (CPC) is an annual event recognizing outstanding creative and impactful partnerships that advance the health and well-being of Veterans and their communities. In August, the Office of the Under Secretary for Health recognized this year’s winners during the National CPC Awards Ceremony:

- Corporal Michael J. Crescenz VA Medical Center’s Heroic Gardens partnership project that offers nature and plant-based healing opportunities to Veterans through virtual gardening workshops and community-based nature walking meditation groups
- Robert Dole VA Medical Center’s work with the Wichita Animal Action League and Safe Paws Alliance to provide pet care support for Veterans receiving inpatient care and who do not have a support system to otherwise care for their pets
- VA Boston Healthcare System’s work with the Veterans Voice Radio Network to broadcast and market critical care information, such as suicide prevention resources to military Service members, Veterans, and their families, at no cost



For more information on the challenge, visit va.gov/HEALTHPARTNERSHIPS/CPC.asp.

HAP helps VHA put all Veterans first by following core values and initiatives for equity and safety

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has four statutory missions that include health care, research, training/academic affiliations, and improving the Nation's preparedness for response to war, terrorism, national emergencies, and natural disasters. To advance those missions, the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) has established guiding values and initiatives to ensure the mission is accomplished at all levels and in every action.

The National Center for Healthcare Advancement and Partnerships (HAP) supports VHA's mission using these values and initiatives in establishing partnerships and its own operations. These efforts allow the HAP team and VHA partners to make it *all about the Veteran*.

Core values best serve the Veteran

I CARE represents VA's core values:

Integrity, **C**ommitment, **A**dvocacy, **R**espect, and **E**xcellence. [These values](#) are integral to VA's mission. As part of the [Code of Federal Regulations](#), the core values define the standards of ethical conduct and related responsibilities of VA employees, articulate what VA stands for, and underscore its moral obligation to Veterans, their families, and other beneficiaries.

HAP upholds the I CARE values by providing partnerships that supplement VHA services and support healthcare advancement initiatives. "I CARE is inherent in everything we do at VHA," noted Christine Eickhoff, health systems specialist for HAP.

The value of *integrity* means being honest and transparent with Veterans. An example is the information HAP provides on stellate ganglion block (SGB) treatment for PTSD, a topic of one of HAP's healthcare advancement initiatives. "VHA is up front about what treatment options are available and their potential risks and benefits. For example, when discussing [SGB for PTSD symptoms](#), it's important to share that this is an available treatment option that helps some Veterans, but at this time it is still

considered experimental and research on the efficacy and long-term outcomes is ongoing. We share all the facts so Veterans can make an informed decision," Ms. Eickhoff said.

HAP reinforces *commitment* to the Veteran by partnering with community organizations that can augment VHA services. "Bringing more services, support, and resources to Veterans through partnerships and research reflects VA's commitment to them. That also speaks to *advocacy*," she said.

Furthermore, commitment to the Veteran starts well before separation from active duty. For example, community partners within the [Veteran Sponsorship Partnership Network](#) specifically work with Service members transitioning from the military into civilian life.

Ms. Eickhoff explained that as far as *respect* and *advocacy* go, VHA prioritizes listening to Veteran experiences to inform health care processes and individual health care plans, and HAP looks for that in partnerships as well. She explained, "We want to be leaning forward to meet folks where they are and help them, giving them the information to make choices that makes the most sense for them and their families."

In facilitating partnerships between outside organizations and VHA, HAP ensures that partners adhere to the same values in serving Veterans. "Any partnership is a two-way street. We collaborate and learn from them and vice versa. We can't collaborate with groups who don't adhere to the same standards of *excellence*, another core value," said Ms. Eickhoff.

Care and services must be Veteran-centric and inclusive

VHA recognizes and embraces the individual attributes and needs of Veterans, their families, caregivers, survivors, and employees. To meet these needs, VHA empowers employees to promote I-DEA,

Inclusion Diversity, Equity, and Access, in every interaction. First and foremost, HAP supports the I-DEA initiative by ensuring a partnership actively supports inclusion, diversity, equity, and access for all Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors. This includes those Veterans who do not receive care and services through VHA.



“Will it be diverse? Will it serve the diverse and be equitable? And will it have an inclusion element? We ask those questions when we’re determining whether we are going to enter a formal partnership or whether the concept or the relationship would remain informal,” noted Georgeanna Bady, health systems specialist for HAP.

Ms. Bady cited the [American Kidney Fund](#) (AKF) as an example. Because African Americans are [much more likely to have kidney disease](#) than others, “the American Kidney Fund has vigorously pursued equity for African Americans regarding chronic kidney disease,” she said. In the coming year, VHA and AKF will examine how to help more underserved communities, including communities of color and has begun conversations on working with the VHA [Office of Health Equity](#).

Furthermore, all applicants for VHA’s National Community Partnership Challenge must meet I-DEA principles. Ms. Bady explained, “No matter what the annual theme is, we have undergirded it with the foundation of I-DEA. Each partnership that applies must operate according to the I-DEA concepts and must have pursued serving and meeting the needs of those underserved communities.”

Ms. Bady said *diversity* and *inclusion* are related but different. Diversity has to do with physical and cultural characteristics of a minority group; inclusion means

creating a space where the contributions of minority groups are valued. “My favorite quote is ‘Diversity is being invited to the party; inclusion is being asked to dance’ [Verna Myers], and that’s a great way to put it,” she explained.

HAP also supports the I-DEA concept through training staff

in the [Office of Discovery, Education and Affiliate Networks](#) (DEAN), HAP’s parent organization. In fact, Ms. Bady is in the process of becoming certified as an adjunct Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion trainer through the [Office of Resolution Management, Diversity & Inclusion](#).

In addition, Ms. Bady said the HAP team itself models I-DEA in its composition and culture. “The diversity in our team brings so many perspectives and we are empowered by our nurse executive to contribute from our own experiences in planning to meet the needs of underserved communities.”

High-reliability principles promote patient safety

VA’s journey to becoming a [high-reliability organization](#) (HRO) formally began several years ago. The purpose of VA’s HRO initiative is to strive for “zero harm” to patients and employees despite the high-risk, highly complex environment of health care. A foundational principle of an HRO is a “preoccupation with failure.” In practical terms, this means all those involved with Veteran care, regardless of job title or function, maintain a sharp focus on anticipating and catching errors before they happen and eliminating or mitigating risks before they cause harm. VHA empowers every employee, no matter their role, to speak up and sound the alarm about a safety problem without fear of reprisal, knowing that management will heed their concerns.

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Another HRO principle is “deference to expertise,” which involves relying on those with the most knowledge of a situation regardless of position or rank. In some situations, a caregiver or family member may be the expert. Other times, it is the health care professional with specialized training, education, and experience. HAP facilitates partnerships on behalf of VHA and ensures partnerships leverage and expand expertise in support of meeting the needs of Veterans.

According to Randy Moler, licensed clinical social worker and program analyst for HAP, “In some cases, the expert could be a frontline worker such as an X-ray technician, or sometimes it’s an agency or organization that has the relevant expertise to address the situation in the community where Veteran’s live.” Two partnerships that Mr. Moler work with, the American Lung Association and the Parkinson’s Foundation, supplement VHA services in educating patients about the disease, conducting research on these diseases and treatment options, and helping Veterans access VHA benefits.

Furthermore, when evaluating a potential VHA partner, the HAP team looks for HRO principles within that organization. “When we are looking at an organization that VHA is considering partnering with, we want to know how they operate. Does their management get feedback from their frontline employees or their subject matter experts? Reviewing information from multiple sources, including employment sites, can shed light on the culture of a particular organization. Assessing these factors is part of our due diligence in determining partnerships.”

“As the largest integrated health care system in the U.S., delivering care to more than 9 million Veterans, VHA is committed to Veteran safety. By striving for high reliability in a workplace where harm prevention and process improvement are second nature to all employees, VHA places Veterans first,” noted Mr. Moler.

For more information on HAP and its work with VHA partners, please visit va.gov/healthpartnerships.

VHA and partners address food security for Veterans

Some Veteran subgroups have significantly higher rates of food insecurity than the general U.S. population. The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) and its partners combine efforts to fight hunger and food insecurity among Veterans and their families.

Food *security* speaks to more than hunger. It means having reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food. Food *insecurity* is a lack of access to enough food for a healthy life.

For several years, VHA has increased coordinated efforts to address food insecurity in Veteran households. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the problem became more urgent. According to Megan Bowman, assistant chief of Nutrition & Food Services at the Salt Lake City VA Medical Center, “The pandemic, for better or worse, really shined the light on food insecurity in the United States in general, and that of course translated over to VA. All of a sudden, people were losing their jobs, inflation rose, and even access to food became an issue. We saw long lines to get into food pantries with people who hadn’t previously experienced food insecurity. Many people understood for the first time what food insecurity meant.”

To help Veterans experiencing food insecurity, VHA and partners have established 47 food pantries in VA medical centers across the country along with food box programs. “VA alone isn’t able to provide food beyond that needed for inpatients. We rely on partners such as the [Rockefeller Foundation](#) and [Feeding America](#),” Ms. Bowman explained. Another VHA partner, [MAZON: A Response to Jewish Hunger](#), advocates for food security among Veterans and other groups.

Currently, the Rockefeller Foundation connects VHA with funding for “produce prescription” programs at certain sites through organizations like [Fresh Connect](#). Fresh Connect provides cards for Veterans to use at grocery stores to purchase fresh produce. Fresh food isn’t usually available at food pantries, typically stocked with boxed and canned foods. “When you have a Veteran with, for example, congestive heart failure, processed food containing high sodium could make the condition worse,” Ms. Bowman said.



mostly occurs out of primary care. Once a patient is identified as food insecure, they’re offered a consultation with a social worker to be connected with resources such as SNAP [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program] or local resources or other government programs they’re entitled to. Or they can see a dietitian, who is going to help them manage those resources. Dietitians or social workers can help Veterans with healthy eating on a budget, grocery shopping, and maximizing their food dollars,” Ms. Bowman explained.

Ms. Bowman also co-leads a VHA workgroup addressing Veteran food security and is helping to stand up a new VHA Office of Food Security. The workgroup’s first order of business was to set up a formalized screening of Veterans for food insecurity. “It was implemented in the electronic medical record across the country. VA primary care providers are regularly screening patients for food security. Since 2017, we’ve screened over 10 million Veterans,” Ms. Bowman noted.

From there, the workgroup began educating VHA staff across health care disciplines, including primary care, social work, and nutrition. “The screening

The multidisciplinary approach also helps providers address co-morbid, chronic conditions. These include type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and obesity (due to the fact that nutrient-poor, processed foods are inexpensive). Cancer patients can also struggle with food security. Ms. Bowman explained “Cancer patients are certainly a population that we look after, because they’re so prone to wasting and malnutrition.”

For more information about the work with VHA and its partners, visit va.gov/HEALTHPARTNERSHIPS/partnerships.asp.

VA



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To share a partnership opportunity or consult with HAP on a non-monetary partnership, please contact our office via email:
VHA_Partnerships@va.gov
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