Wilkins, Stephen R. VISN 6 would like to recall the message, VOICES OF VISN 6.

Excellent Care – Earned by Veterans – Delivered Here

Dr. Bob Erdin, an orthopedic surgeon at Charlotte VA Health Care Center, recently was awarded the 17th annual Health Volunteers Overseas (HVO) Golden Apple Award for his work with Tanzanian medical residents.

He shares knowledge and surgical techniques with medical residents and believes in a hands-on approach to learning. He watches and instructs but allows the residents to get real-life experience.

"Unlike other traveling programs where you operate, operate, operate and then leave, this is more of a consultant/teacher so that when you return home they can use some of the surgical skills you’ve taught them," he said.

Erdin spent two weeks in Tanzania in 2019 prior to COVID-19 shutting down travel.

“For us, COVID was a pretty dramatic event, but Tanzanian shipments for ortho supplies just halted," he said. “How do you take care of a broken bone when no one is delivering the plates and screws you need?”

Erdin has remained a fixture in the residents’ lives throughout the pandemic.

“They weren’t getting any international instruction when COVID hit,” he said.

PHOTO ABOVE: Dr. Bob Erdin, orthopedic surgeon at Charlotte VA Health Care Center, leads a lecture with medical residents at a Tanzanian hospital.
Happy July!

I can’t believe we are just past the halfway mark of 2022. It has been a busy year, but significant progress has been made. For starters, with the arrival of Mr. Johnathan Benoit, our entire VISN 6 leadership team is now on board — something that has been in the works for a long time. Last month we announced the appointment of our new Salisbury VA executive director, Mr. Melton, and we continue to recruit for Fayetteville’s VA executive director position — more to follow in the upcoming months.

I wanted to take time this month to offer a mid-year update on VA’s targeted initiatives:

- Improving access and benefits for environmental exposures.
- Expanding suicide prevention resources.
- Our efforts to continue combating preventable diseases.
- Updates from the caregiver support program.

Update on the PACT Act of 2022 — improving access and benefits for environmental exposures

On June 16, 2022, The United States Senate passed the PACT Act of 2022 — the largest single bill in American history addressing our service members’ exposure to burn pits and toxic substances.

VA is closely following congressional action on this historic legislation. If signed into law, the PACT Act will be the most significant and meaningful expansion of benefits and care for Veterans and survivors in decades.

The law would ensure that tens of thousands of Veterans who suffer from toxic-exposure-related conditions — and their survivors — will get the benefits and care they’ve earned, and VA will seek to implement the provisions of the PACT Act as soon as possible, conduct outreach to affected Veterans and their family members with information about the new law and potential entitlements to benefits and health care, and work to ensure that the expansion of eligibility for health care does not result in the delay or disruption of care for those Veterans already receiving VA health care.

Updates on Expanding Suicide Prevention Resources

On July 16, 2022, the Veterans Crisis Line will have a new option for phone contact: Dial 988, then press 1 when prompted.

This new option is a result of the National Suicide Hotline Designation Act of 2020, which requires all telephone service providers in the U.S. to activate 988 by July 16, 2022, for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (Lifeline).

After full activation of the 988 phone option, Veterans can still call 1-800-273-8255 and press 1, chat at VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat, and text 988255 to reach responders. This launch is a whole-of-government approach to prioritizing mental health by strengthening access to crisis services, including 988 implementations.

Combating Preventable Diseases — COVID-19

The COVID-19 rates across the nation and in VISN 6 were level during June. Nationally, roughly 30,000 people are in American hospitals with coronavirus on an average day — a figure that has remained consistent since the start of the month. Daily deaths from COVID also remain level. Roughly 300 deaths are announced daily, a fraction of the thousands seen daily during the winter Omicron peak. It is imperative that Veterans and their family members get the appropriate booster and prepare for the colder months ahead.

VA Caregiver Support Program Update

VA is committed to supporting Veterans and their family caregivers by listening to concerns raised and working diligently to address them as we continue to ensure Veterans and their caregivers get the support they need and deserve. It is important to note that no Legacy Veteran or caregiver has been dropped from the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers (PCAFC).

Legacy Participants, Legacy Applicants and their Family Caregivers will remain enrolled in PCAFC and continue to receive support and services under PCAFC. National VA heard the concerns of our Veterans and their caregivers, and has taken immediate, intermediate and long-term actions, including:

- Suspending the annual reassessments for all participants until further notice is the fair, equitable and right thing to do.
- Leveraging the expertise of VBA to create efficiencies and consistency in processing future PCAFC applications and other best practices.
- Continuing stakeholder engagement sessions where we can share our plans with VSOs, Congress, caregivers, Veterans, other stakeholders, etc., and gain their insights and feedback.
- Administering a customer experience survey to capture the voice of the caregiver and Veteran.
- Changing our governance structure, ensuring an enterprise approach to supporting caregivers of Veterans.
- Appeal and review options for those who disagree with a PCAFC determination remain the same.

For questions regarding caregiver support in VISN 6, please reach out to your facilities’ patient advocates and they will get you in the right direction.

I want to thank you for your continued support. As always, have a great and safe summer, and I will be back with more updates in August.

PAUL S. CREWS

MPH, FACHE, VISN 6 Network Director
Salem VA Renames Women’s Clinic

On June 6, the Salem Women’s Health Clinic officially became the MSG Silverine Vinyard James Women’s Health Clinic, with the woman for whom it was named in attendance.

By Rosaire Bushey
SALEM VAMC PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Silverine James, who was born in Vinton, Va., and joined the U.S. Army in 1949, has been a patient with the clinic since its founding, and a patient with the Salem VA Healthcare System for more than four decades.

During a brief ceremony to honor her service, the Salem VA Women’s Health Clinic officially became the MSG Silverine Vinyard James Women’s Health Clinic. Congressman Ben Cline (Va. 6 Dist.) spoke to James’ legacy as a pioneer in civil rights, having joined the Army during a time of racial segregation, and being part of the movement toward full integration. Also speaking were Dr. Miguel LaPuz, Assistant Undersecretary for Health for Integrated Veteran Care at the Veterans Health Administration, and letters from Virginia Senators Mark Warner and Tim Kaine were read, adding their congratulations on James’ long record of service to the nation.

By the time James retired from the Army, she had served more than 22 years on active duty and attained the rank of Master Sergeant (E-8), often serving as the highest-ranking enlisted woman, in fully integrated Army units.

“The record of MSG James and her contributions to the military, being one of the first female veterans to rise to an E-8 rank, is impressive and is worthy of our admiration and recognition,” said Rebecca Stackhouse, Salem VA HCS Executive Director. “I am extremely grateful we were able to share this moment with MSG James and her family, and I hope that her story and her indomitable spirit will inspire everyone who walks past these doors for generations to come.”

Today, James proudly displays her five honorable discharges and a certificate of retirement from the Army at her home, while her name and likeness, to include the uniform she retired in and the boots she was given when she joined the Army, are displayed on the wall outside the Silverine Vinyard James Women’s Health Clinic.

Hampton Holds All Employee Survey (AES) Kickoff Week

Hampton VA Medical Center (HAMVAMC) kicked off All Employee Survey (AES) Kickoff Week May 31. Hampton staff members were treated to various events throughout the week to encourage engagement and participation. The AES anonymously surveys VA staff to discover areas of improvement. Leadership in each VA facility use the tool to implement changes to programs and operations.

Hampton’s leadership team set the standard on day one — walking the whole campus to promote whole health. Then the rest of the staff followed up, with four sequential walks, each by a designated senior leader. Canteen staff (supported by volunteers) served “Tacos 2 Go” — taco fixings in-a-bag and chips — from 11am till the cupboard was bare. Ever mindful of COVID restrictions, Hampton staff were asked to grab-and-go. More than 700 staff members did. But overwhelming attendance was only the rollout for this impactful HVAMC week!

IT WAS ALL FUN AND GAMES

The AES Team hosted HAMVAMC’s version of “Family Feud” on June 1st. Teams of four each (sometimes more), matched up head-to-head across from a like numbered team of their colleagues in a contest of wits, vying for the most popular answers. Sixteen teams of (at least) four signed up, showed up, then competed for campus bragging rights — and some really nice prizes.

LINE DANCING AND TALENT SHOW

The highlight of the week — as voiced by many — occurred that Thursday, the 2nd of June, when the staff gathered their leadership and line danced, next to the facility, to songs they requested of John and the DJ “JC.” There was the “Electric Slide,” “Cotton Eye Joe,” and for an hour, staff members put on their dancing shoes. All enduring — some even relishing — the high humidity. But they weren’t done yet! Later that same afternoon, the 2nd of June, some of these HAMVAMC staff members impress everyone, showcasing their individual talents in a friendly competition in which there could be only one winner. And she was Ms. Erika Patrick, who took home the prize for her vocals.
Hampton Hosts All Employee Survey (AES) Kickoff Week

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE '80S

Hampton's own The Hampton Players played several '80s tunes to set the mood for our '80s fashion day. Closing out the week, we added a “Speed Social.” The idea was to sit across from a staff member whom you did not know and ask questions provided to you by the facilitator. Then, every five minutes, each participant rotated to a new staff member. Our objective was for staff members to get to know each other.

AES week was a success in the extreme. With staff members responding appreciatively in their feedback to our Director and AES facilitators, and expressing support for all the work everyone involved put in. It was an HAMVAMC-all-hands effort that generated the desired results. The boost in morale at Hampton harvested an 80% AES participation rate after only four days. “It’s about engagement throughout the year, not just during the AES,” said Dr. Taquisa Simmons, HVAMC Director. “We make a concerted effort to communicate with each other. We’re not sure what we will do next year to top this one, but with a little creativity I’m sure we will be successful.”

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

Hampton Holds All Employee Survey (AES) Kickoff Week

On June 7, Hampton VAMC had its first-ever VA Mobile App Fair. This 3-day event highlighted all the great Mobile App products the VA has to offer, including My HealtheVet, Annie, VA Mobile App Store, and the Hampton VAMC App. The Mobile App Fair was a collaborative process including PACT, Veteran Experience Office (VEO), My HealtheVet Coordinator’s Office, Women’s Health, Mental Health, Education, Systems Redesign, Public Affairs, and Health Promotion. The goal of the fair was to educate and sign up both Veterans and staff for a variety of mobile products.

Signing up for or downloading the various apps was easy using QR codes, having staff guide patients, and using My HealtheVet authenticators to complete the enrollment process. Each of the Mobile App products have their own focus. My HealtheVet is the patient portal tool that allows Veterans to message their providers, look up labs and other health records, refill medications, and help manage appointments. The Annie Subscription service will send enrolled Veterans text message reminders on when to take medications, check blood pressures, and specific subscriptions like Hampton’s GI protocol to reduce no-shows before endoscopy. VA Mobile’s app store offers many apps that can help with mental health, weight loss, tobacco cessation, and stress.

Hampton also has its own mobile app. The Hampton VAMC app was created to be a collection of resources and information that is often requested by our Veterans and their caregivers. Information of services provided, Veteran benefits and exposure registries, mobile apps, decedent affairs, forms, and frequently asked questions (FAQs) are all available in one easy-to-find location. The System Redesign Department is also currently working on a wayfinding feature that will help guide Veterans to their appointments.

The Mobile App Fair was a big success, with staff and patients engaged and empowered by the technology products the VA has to offer. It will be important to leverage our technology to provide the best and most convenient services to our growing population here at the Hampton VAMC. Future plans include further promotion of Mobile technologies, Mobile App Fairs at CBOC locations, and developing further Annie subscriptions and additional features to the Hampton VAMC App.
This summer, VA staff at several VA hospitals in the Mid-Atlantic Health Care Network (VISN 6) located in North Carolina and Virginia will have an opportunity to better understand the stories behind the faces of Veterans they serve every day, before they even have a chance to speak with them. Trainers have just been deployed to medical centers in Asheville, Durham, Fayetteville, and Salisbury, N.C., and Hampton, Richmond, and Salem, Va., to share an intense course on military culture called Tour of Duty (ToD).

Tour of Duty is designed to orient federal civilian employees without military background to the life of the military member and to relate it to their own federal service in a way that creators hope enriches each staff member’s depth of understanding of the person in front of them. It is a considerable effort to standardize the professional education of the entire VA workforce, not just clinicians. Recognizing the deep devotion to military duty and our responsibility to care for the individuals who hold it sacred should also instill greater value in their own service to our nation, according to ToD documents.

“As a Veteran who is used to high-performing military organizations with a sense of organizational pride, patriotism and esprit de corps, I think our internal training programs should include a greater emphasis and understanding of the importance of teamwork, claimed Michael Broady, a patient experience coach in VA’s Veterans Experience Office. Broady also heads up the ToD national team effort.

Over 10 years, the team put together a comprehensive curriculum covering military history, military bearing and traditions, the oath to serve, and the experience of military families; the ones our troops came from, as well as the ones they made for themselves. The course draws parallels between civilian federal service and military service, while also distinguishing civilian service from the grave risk.
assumed by every military member upon their oath of enlistment or office.

The program is in pilot format at the moment, with plans for a more expansive rollout in the next fiscal year. For now, prospective trainers were invited to the VISN 6 headquarters office in Durham, N.C., for orientation and training June 14-17. During the weeklong intensive, they learned military history, tradition and heraldry, and the history of civil service. They learned about each other and received firsthand testimonies from Army, Air Force and Navy Veterans. They heard about combat and camaraderie, how it felt to lose buddies and what it felt like to dread what comes next, without ever knowing. “Our reputation is at stake with every interaction with a Veteran,” Broady said. “Ignorance of the facts about who our Veterans are can cause a Veteran to not want to receive service at the VA.” That seems a cost VA can’t afford.

But they also learned about the need to serve those brave men and women who answered the call and fell while defending our nation. They were shown our nation’s admitted responsibility to those who fought so we can all enjoy the liberty that comes with our citizenship. They were introduced to the concept of taking care of self to care for others. As the course unfolded, with each topic it became clearer a tie between their service and the oath they took upon entry to federal service and the service our Veterans provided for us and the oath they took to “protect and defend the constitution.” The course ended with the VISN Director Paul Crews re-administering the federal oath of service and cutting a cake to highlight the significance of the event. As the participants left the session, their resolve to share a deeper sense of purpose with co-workers was obvious.

Broady summed it up, saying, “The reaction from the VISN 6 trainers was extremely positive, and they collectively stated that they are excited about the program. They are also acutely aware of their responsibilities as trainers to make the program work at their facilities.”

began hosting monthly conferences via Zoom for the Tanzanians to teach different topics and techniques.”

For the Tanzanians, it’s not a lack of knowledge, but a lack of resources.

“Based on book knowledge, they would probably give us a run for our money,” said Erdin. “The biggest difference was when I put a tool in their hands that they’d never used. Here in the States, we’re blessed with the latest instruments, whereas in Tanzania it’s using first generation instruments as opposed to fourth-generation equipment.”

Seeing this firsthand gave Erdin a deeper appreciation of American medical care. It also impacted him as a surgeon.

“If you ever doubt what an amazing medical system we have, all you need to do is visit a resource-limited environment and see the dramatic differences,” he said. “It’s taught me to be a better surgeon by showing me that I don’t need the perfect instrument to provide a good surgery. They provide some amazing care with fewer tools than we have.”

Erdin plans to return to Tanzania in February to continue his outreach.

“After two and a half years of Zoom conversations, we’ve become friends,” he said. “Hopefully, we can get some good things accomplished while we’re there.”
VA Nurse Helps Save Life of Community Member

By Megan Kon

In the game of basketball, quick decisions can mean the difference between a win or a loss for the team. While at a recent community-based league, a VA nurse made a decisive move to help save the life of a fellow athlete.

Kelvin Allen, Army Veteran and licensed practical nurse at Central Virginia VA Health Care System (CVHCS), had finished a game and was watching the next game to see who his team would be playing in the championship. Allen heard a commotion and a referee blowing a whistle stopping the action. A crowd quickly formed around a man on the gym floor. Allen’s instincts to assist in a medical capacity kicked in.

“I really didn’t feel nervous or anything; I think my adrenaline kicked in, and I was in a zone,” said Allen, who immediately took control and began performing CPR on the man. “My main thought was, ‘Please don’t die on me.’”

Allen directed someone to fetch a nearby automated external defibrillator (AED). The man, Craig Gerow, soon regained consciousness. His heartbeat lasted less than a minute before stopping again. Allen began administering CPR again for several more minutes until Gerow regained consciousness.

Emergency services soon arrived and transported Gerow to a nearby hospital for continued care. The next day, Allen received a forwarded text message Gerow had sent to one of the league’s administrators.

The text read: “I wanted to thank you for saving my life Thursday night. Jim said you were so calm and just took over the situation.”

Allen, who works in the Spinal Cord Injury and Disorders service at CVHCS, credits his actions to training he received while on the job. The training is named Basic Life Support and is mandatory for all employees at the Dept. of Veterans Affairs who have clinical credentials and/or privileges. At CVHCS, the training is performed in a simulation setting.

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"After this experience, the first thing I did at work the next day was go up to that CPR mannequin and gave it a hug," Allen said.
WASHINGTON — By creating an account on Login.gov, Veterans can now use the same login and password to access a growing list of federal government websites, including the Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Personnel Management and Small Business Administration, to deliver a secure and streamlined identity verification experience.

Currently, Veterans can login to VA.gov, My HealtheVet and VA’s flagship Health and Benefits mobile app using Login.gov. Operated by the General Services Administration’s Technology Transformation Services, the availability of Login.gov at VA marks a major milestone in improving how Veterans access their benefits and services.

Implementing Login.gov fulfills a key objective of President Biden’s Executive Order on Transforming Federal Customer Experience and VA plays an integral role in innovative technologies driving simplified access to the world-class care and benefits Veterans have earned.

“Login.gov is a secure digital credential designed to streamline how users access government benefits and services,” said Chief Technology Officer Charles Worthington. “As part of the department’s digital transformation efforts focused on continuous improvement, we’re embracing the innovative technology designed by Login.gov to provide our Veterans a seamless sign-in experience to better serve, engage and enhance the customer experience.”

“This is an important example of using technology to deliver services that provide convenient access to benefits while supporting Veterans as they transition into civilian life,” said Director of General Services Administration’s Technology Transformation Services Dave Zvenyach. “It’s our mission at GSA to provide a secure and seamless digital experience for Veterans and those supporting them.”

The launch of Login.gov follows several other digital transformations including the relaunch of VA.gov, and the launch of VA’s flagship mobile application enabling Veterans to schedule and track health care appointments.

To learn more about the sign-in experience visit Login.gov.

VA Services 10K Loans in Last Year for Veterans Borrowing From Their Life Insurance Policies

WASHINGTON — The Department of Veterans Affairs has paid out more than $6.7 million across 10,000 loans since mid-May 2021 through Instant Loan Approval, a feature that automates the loan approval process for Veterans.

Provided through VA Insurance Service, the Instant Loan Approval process offers eligible Veterans the option to borrow the cash value of their VA-administered life insurance policy by streamlining the online loan request process and offering a quick automated decision.

Loan options are available for the following VA-administered programs: National Service Life Insurance, Veterans’ Special Life Insurance, Veterans’ Reopened Insurance and Service-Disabled Veterans Insurance.

“As the department modernizes efforts, it makes sense to include an instant loan approval feature in our approval process to improve the customer experience,” said VA Insurance Executive Director Dan Keenaghan. “When a Veteran with an eligible life insurance policy holding cash value applies and is approved for a loan online, the payment is deposited directly into their bank account within two to five business days, which is helpful in times of need.”

VA Insurance Service also helps Veterans with online application uploads and answers questions through its phone center, accessing benefits online faster and more secure than by postage mail. This fiscal year, VA has seen increased adoption of the online loan tool with more than 41% of requests processed using the Instant Loan Approval feature.

Learn more about Instant Loan Approvals and other online tools and features.
WASHINGTON — The Department of Veterans Affairs is suspending annual reassessments for participants of the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers while the department continues its review of PCAFC.

This applies to all Veterans and family caregivers participating in the program; additionally, VA will not discharge or reduce stipends based on a reassessment.

“President Biden has made clear ‘because Veterans are the backbone, the spine of who we are as a country,’ we have a sacred obligation to care for them, their families, caregivers and survivors,” said VA Deputy Secretary Donald Remy. “Although we’ve come a long way in supporting caregivers through the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers, we have much more work to do. In our effort to uphold our sacred obligation to families of Veterans, VA continues its review of PCAFC to ensure department requirements and procedures meet the needs of caregivers and Veterans participating in the program.”

Facility Caregiver Support Program staff will, however, continue to initiate reassessments for Veterans and family caregivers for certain purposes, such as when a Veteran or caregiver requests to be considered for an increase in stipend level, or if there is evidence of an increased need for personal care services. VA will also continue to conduct wellness visits. Appeal and review options for those who disagree with a PCAFC determination remain the same.

Visit VA’s reassessment updates for more information or contact your local CSP team with any additional questions.