

# VOICES OF VISN 6

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## FAYETTEVILLE VA EMPLOYEE EARNS VA'S

## First National Peer Support Specialist Award



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**COVER STORY** | By Jeff Melvin | FAYETTEVILLE NC VA COASTAL HCS PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Heather Hennessey, a certified peer support specialist from Fayetteville NC VA Coastal Health Care System, is the recipient of the inaugural VA National Peer Specialist of the Year Award.

“Heather’s dedication and outstanding work ethic, combined with her compassion for Veterans, service work in multiple Veterans organizations and volunteer work in the community among various organizations ... earned her this national recognition,” said Daniel O’Brien-Mazza, National Director, Peer

Support Services, VHA Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Services.

O’Brien-Mazza travelled to Fayetteville VA Medical Center Oct. 17 to present Hennessey, a U.S. Army veteran and military spouse, with the award, an engraved plaque, on Global Peer Support Celebration Day.

Hennessey, he said, distinguished herself from the field of 14 other network-level nominees by not conforming or staying in a narrow, rigid way of just doing what she is supposed to do.

**TOP PHOTO:** From left, Daniel O’Brien-Mazza, DeAnne Seekins, Heather Hennessey and Dan Dückler. Hennessey has earned the first Department of Veterans Affairs National Peer Specialist of the Year. O’Brien-Mazza, Seekins, and Dückler are National Director, Peer Support Services, VHA Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Services; VA Mid-Atlantic Health Care Network (VISN 6) Director; and Fayetteville VA Coastal Health Care System Executive Director, respectively. (Photo: Brad Garner)

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## Message from the Network Director

During the holidays when my kids were little, they could find joy in the most unassuming places. My husband and I spent time making sure the house was decorated, that it smelled like cookies and delicious food, and that the kids had a few presents that were just what they wanted. Then with much anticipation, the big moment came when the shiny box would reveal their most coveted toy.

With huge smiles, they hugged their new toys; then moments later we'd watch them building a fort with the same boxes and wrapping paper they just ripped open. Their new toy sat on the couch. Watching the kids play served as a gentle reminder to me that the holiday season; no matter what is celebrated or how much work is put into it, is always about being there for one another.

In my story, the kids really loved being with one another. We all looked forward to

being there, to grow closer. Now I'll ask you to take a look at your inner circle (especially family members and friends who seem to put on a strong front) and ask, 'how can I be there for them during the next two months?' This is an exciting time for most, but for many, the season concentrates grief and loneliness. VA has the "Be There" campaign that we've been running for a few years, and I think it's a perfect mantra for this year's holidays.

Like the kids' toys, gifts and party invites come and go. Each of us seeks an authentic connection. I try and remind myself to stop and be present. Trust me, with work, family, and my grandkids; the cooking, shopping and cleaning, I can get overwhelmed. It's so important to take a few moments and reach out. Maybe it's a call or text, or a quick note in the mail; anything to say, 'I am available,' if they want to talk. Invite them to coffee or lunch. You, too, could benefit from briefly escaping the holiday chaos...being there has a small

price tag, but can mean so much.

But remember, it's hard to be there for others if we haven't taken a few moments for ourselves, to center and summon balance. Before the holidays really start, think about setting a pattern of mindfulness. Don't go overboard; think in small, manageable bits. Take a morning walk before starting your day; or give your mind a break; put down the phone and pick up a fun read (maybe a magazine article, not a whole book!) – it might be enough to find moments to breathe a bit more throughout the day. Mindfulness is intentional. It doesn't just happen. Now is the perfect time to get into a mindful habit, so you have enough energy to take on the next few months.

Take care of yourself, so you can be there for others this holiday season.

**– DeAnne M. Seekins**  
VISN 6 Network Director

# DVAHCS Receives MAKO Robotic Assistant

By Joshua D. Edson | DURHAM VAHCS PUBLIC AFFAIRS

On Sept. 25, Durham VA Healthcare System (DVAHCS) became the first VA health care system in the nation to receive and install MAKO, a robotic-arm-assisted surgery technology. The robotic arm will be used for total knee, hip and joint replacement. For Veterans, this means a personalized surgical plan, faster recovery time, less time in the hospital, less trauma to the area of surgery, and more natural joint movement.

Known as RIO (Robotic Arm Interactive Orthopedic System), the system allows surgeons to make more precise cuts for knee and joint implants, as well as hip replacements. It allows for more accurate placement and lowered risk for soft tissue damage since surgeons aren't working by "feel." Because of the increased accuracy and efficiency, surgery time is reduced, and the veteran has a smaller chance of infection or other possible complications, goes home and heals more quickly.

"This is a promising new piece of equipment," says Orlando Figuerres, Implant Coordinator and nurse at the DVAHCS. "It's state-of-art, which is great for our Veterans. You can't get much more advanced than this. Not to say we're not doing a great job here, but this equipment will make our operations way more efficient."

A CT scan of the affected joint is uploaded into the MAKO System software, which creates a 3D model of the joint. The surgeon uses the model to map a plan for the joint replacement. The relationship



A MAKO Technician reads MAKO Robotic Arm Interactive Orthopedic System (RIO) for use. On Sept. 25, 2019, the DVAHCS became the first VA Healthcare system in the country to receive the RIO. The robotic arm will assist orthopedic surgeons in hip, knee and joint replacements.

between the surgeon and the robotic mechanism is symbiotic, as they depend on one another to navigate the procedure. The surgeon relies on the map to manipulate the arm during surgery, and the MAKO System ensures that the surgeon works within the prescribed plan.

Presently, surgical staff are training to use the new equipment, with the first surgical procedures scheduled for the beginning of November. Veterans in need of hip, joint or knee replacement using the new apparatus will be qualified on a case-by-case basis. The majority of surgeries will continue using traditional surgical techniques, as staff incrementally increase proficiency.

"It's a win-win for everyone," says Orlando. "Our Veterans deserve our very best, and RIO helps us make a bigger impact on their care."



nation. In 2013, he set the lofty but attainable goal of QOPI certification with his team. It took many hours of research to map out the steps to make this dream become a reality. They encountered some challenges, and with growing pains like rapid Veteran enrollment and staff recruiting, QOPI was temporarily pushed aside.

The quality project became an essential need in 2018, as Oncology and General Infusion leadership aimed to take their clinic to the next level. They wanted to provide the utmost oncological care for Veterans and lead the way for VA participation. Over the next several months, staff reviewed and tweaked policies and processes, and developed note templates. The team met weekly, mapping out next steps and discussing QOPI standards.

With everything in place to surpass the standards, the team applied for certification in late July 2019. The survey, conducted on Aug. 27, 2019, consisted of two QOPI auditors. Every employee in the clinic united with one objective: to give the best care possible to Veterans and show the surveyors that this team provides the highest quality of care in Oncology. Two patients were selected for observation and two others were selected for chart reviews. Following the survey, the



Salisbury VAHCS Oncology Team (Left to right): Dr. Richard Williams; Dr. Michael Goodman; Hope Schenk, PharmD; Amy Franklin, PA; Lisa Robbins, RN Nurse Manager; Ellen Alvens, RN; Heather Moor, RN; Kristen Miller, RN (Photo: Amanda Reilly)

auditors rendered a verdict: the Salisbury VA Health Care System became officially QOPI certified! One surveyor told them she was so impressed with what she observed that if she had cancer, she would be comfortable receiving her treatment at the Salisbury VA Health Care System.

## Richmond Pilot Study for Substance Abuse Treatment Proves Successful

By Megan Kon | RICHMOND VAMC PUBLIC AFFAIRS



A national Dept. of Veterans Affairs program is helping to fulfill one doctor's purpose of delivering compassionate and effective care to Veterans at Central Virginia VA Health Care System. Dr. Jarrod Reisweber and colleagues created Transcending Self Therapy to improve substance abuse treatment for Veterans.

His grandfather served as a bomber pilot who survived World War II and lived with an internal battle affecting his family for years to come. Despite suffering from Alcohol Use Disorder, his grandfather was a proud patriot who doted on his wife and provided for his family.

Reisweber is a clinical psychologist and author of Transcending Self Therapy (TST). TST is an addition to Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). While CBT is a psychotherapy focused on improving a person's thought and behavior patterns to boost emotions, TST identifies what a person's higher moral standard is and helps them to reach that standard.

"I believe my grandfather's drinking was influenced by his

time in combat and may have gotten worse when his son, my uncle, died by suicide," Reisweber said.

Reisweber remembers his uncle was a great athlete, popular and very likeable, yet he struggled with substance abuse. His suicide came as a shock to the family. For Reisweber, it influenced his career choice. Reisweber was drawn to psychology after years of noticing himself offering compassion for others, who struggled with suicide, mental health issues and substance abuse. He proudly serves Veterans now.

Reisweber says he is proud of his grandfather's service and thought about serving at one point in his life. After seeing what his grandfather went through, he was encouraged to take a different path.

"I would love to have my uncle alive," Reisweber said fondly of his uncle.

Reisweber's mission is to dramatically improve the quality of life for Veterans by helping them reach their highest potential. He understands the toll and struggles Veterans face, no matter how many programs and services are offered.

"I truly believe the VA system is

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(LEFT PHOTO) Dr. Jarrod Reisweber proudly holds his grandfather's photo in his hands. (Photo: Megan Kon)





# Asheville CLC Designated as an Honorary Military Unit

By Amber Brown | CHARLES GEORGE VAMC PUBLIC AFFAIRS

On Oct. 25, Asheville's Charles George VAMC Community Living Center (CLC) became the first CLC in the country to be recognized as an Honorary Military Unit. With the assistance of the 14th Weather Squadron, staff, volunteers, CLC residents and the community joined together to celebrate, recognize, and honor our Veterans during this ceremony. The idea for recognizing the CLC in this regard was formed in our Story Art Class, which has been meeting for several months.

CLC residents have shared their love of our arts program and point to their ability to write, draw, paint, sing or play a musical instrument as a means of reminiscing about their time in service. This often leads to positive feelings of self-worth and contribution. The art program has also been a way for our Veterans to create more fellowship.

While attending the Story Art Class, Veterans reflected on their combined years of services, the wide variety of ranks and the broad representation of all the military branches. Realizing this broad scope of diversity amongst them, the idea was born

to build an identity that captures this and mirrors their time in service. Each Veteran agreed that their time at the CLC is like a deployment, and thus began the process of

our Veterans to create a patch, like the one you receive when deploying, and recognition of the CLC as an Honorary Activation.

Our Veterans set out to design the patch that will be affixed to hats, shirts and wheelchairs. During our Story Art Class, Veterans worked to make their designs and held a competition in which fellow Veterans voted. The chosen design was that of Mr. William "Bill" Thomas, an 87-year old Navy Veteran.

Mr. Thomas has been a resident of the CLC for the last 7 years. He served as active duty during the Korean War, and is well loved by his family, CLC Peers and VA staff. Mr. Thomas has also frequently noted his love of the arts and his appreciation of being able to draw while residing at the CLC.

All our CLC residents started out in a military unit and it is fitting that these Veterans have chosen to honor the CLC as their last unit. The patches with the winning design were given out to attendees during the ceremony. The flag, which will be flown outside of our CLC like a base flag, was presented by the local 14th Weather Squadron, an Active Duty Air Force unit, to Mr. Thomas.

Kristie King (MSN, RN-BC, CRRN), Chief Nurse of Geriatrics and Extended Care, shared "The residents of the CLC have served in all branches of service, have served in every conflict and battle since World War II, have held all varieties of jobs and duties, and with all of this the commonality is their support of one another. The CLC is thrilled to be part of this wonderful project."

The Western North Carolina VA Healthcare System is hopeful to begin a new tradition in honoring our CLC residents and recognizing not only their time in service while in the military, but also at the CLC. We are privileged to serve our Veterans and are excited to be learning new ways to show how much we value them.



# Hunter Holmes McGuire VA Receives Donation From the Bank of Southside Virginia

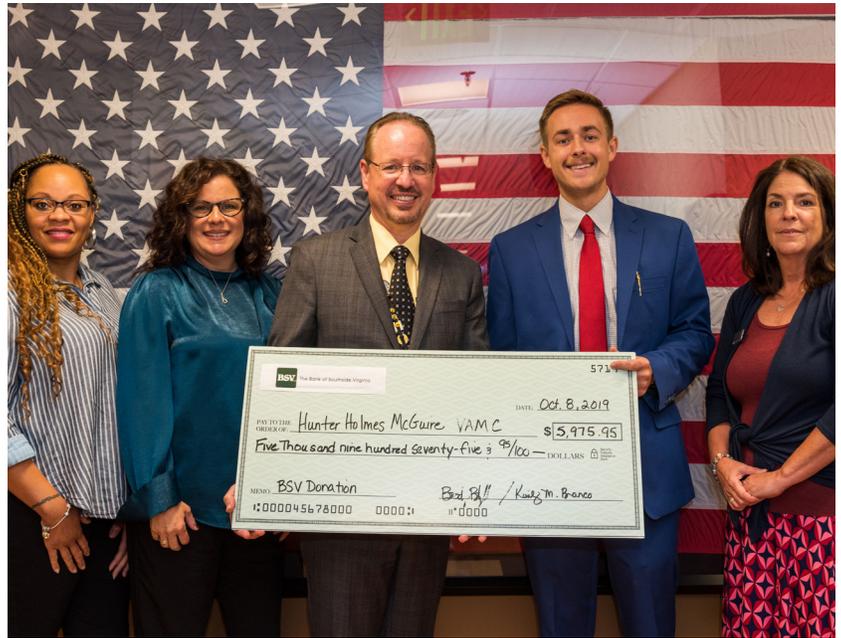
By Megan Kon | RICHMOND VAMC PUBLIC AFFAIRS

The Bank of Southside Virginia (BSV) and its customers banded together and raised nearly \$6,000 to help renovate the Central Virginia VA Health Care System's hospice family room and purchase a new flagpole for its Avenue of Flags.

All 15 branch locations from Chester to Smithfield collected monetary donations at their branches for this universal cause.

"We pride ourselves in being fully vested in the community," said Brody Rotzoll, brand manager for BSV. "Because of the wide reach of Central Virginia VA Health Care System, we felt we could do the most good with our donation dollars. Also, considering the hospital has helped friends and family members of our employees, we had a vested interest in helping out as much as we could."

Brody Rotzoll and Kim Branco (right) from BSV pose for a picture with Central Virginia VA Health Care System Director J. Ronald Johnson and VA Voluntary Service staff, Kristy Coie-Day and Mee Mee Graham (left) in appreciation of BSV's donation. (Photo Credit: Jason Miller, Visual Information Specialist)



Patient Advocates provided popcorn to staff and Veterans in recognition of Customer Service Week at the Central Virginia VA Health Care System in Richmond. (Photo: Megan Kon, Public Affairs Specialist)

## Hunter Holmes McGuire VA Medical Center Celebrates Customer Service Week

Central Virginia VA Health Care System's customer service team planned a week's worth of festivities to celebrate and encourage world-class customer service for our Veterans. Patient advocates from the Patient Experience Center recognized their peers and service-level patient advocates.

(LEFT PHOTO) Nothing like a little pick-me-up to brighten your night. During Customer Service Week, the patient advocate team stayed late to serve cake to staff on second shift. (Photo: Carmen Quinones, Customer Service Manager)

Employees gathered for a photo opportunity sporting red shirts for Fridays to remember everyone deployed. (Photo: Mary Beatty-Brooks, Visual Information Specialist)





(Photo-Above) Director Collins (Center, 7th from right) and the Rattlers.

## Rattlers Honor Hampton Vets

By John Rogers | HAMPTON VAMC PUBLIC AFFAIRS

On Sept. 27th, Hampton VA Medical Center was honored to host Florida A&M University's Rattlers Football players and personnel. Members of the team and coaches spoke with Veterans and staff. Special thanks to the FAMU Rattlers Football Team for visiting our facility, and for spending time with our Veterans and staff.

When asked why this visit was important for the players, Coach Willie Simmons said, "We try to expose these guys to new things as much as we can. A lot of our guys have family members who have served in this area. Any chance we get to give back to a group of people who have done so much for us, we want to take advantage of it. It's a great experience and I'm glad we were able to do this. This is our first time coming to an actual hospital. I think our guys got much more out of coming to see what goes on in an actual VA hospital."

"This was a huge trip for us to have

the opportunity to visit the Hampton VA Medical Center," FAMU linebacker Elijah Richardson said. "Veterans are great people for this country and what they did. Just to see the way they look at life — there is a lot you can learn from this experience. For me, I am just taking it in and never take things for granted. It's a huge experience for us as a team."

The Rattlers were given a tour of the facility, greeting Veterans along the way. They also handed out several gift bags containing team memorabilia. As they journeyed into our Spinal Cord Unit and Community Living Center, players posed several questions to staff members and Veterans about their experiences in the military. All the players took time to shake hands, take photos and share how grateful they were for their service. The Rattlers wrapped up their trip to the area by defeating Norfolk State 30-28.



(TOP-PHOTO) Rattlers running back Bishop Bonnett shares a moment with a Veteran. (BOTTOM-PHOTO) Coach Willie Simmons (center) and the Rattlers welcomed by staff members.

## VA, Health and Human Services Partner to Improve Health Care Protections for Veterans

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) and Department of Health and Human Services' Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) recently announced the two agencies will compare information on questionable Veteran health care providers both in VA treatment facilities and through purchased care programs in their communities.

VA and CMS expect the first Medicare Sanction data exchange to occur by the end of the year and continue at recurring intervals.

"CMS is an industry leader when it comes to identifying questionable providers and nefarious medical practices," said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. "Their willingness to

partner with VA puts Veterans first by allowing us to identify providers who do not meet our quality standards."

"CMS is proud to work with VA and share our innovative data analytics and best practices for detecting and preventing potential fraud, waste and abuse across other federal healthcare programs to improve care to our nation's Veterans," said CMS Administrator Seema Verma.

Medicare Sanctions include abusive billing practices, felony convictions or improper prescribing practices. Employing CMS protocols provides VA with a proven tool to use data to address potential problems earlier and

more systematically. VA will carefully review matches to determine employees' continued suitability for VA employment and providers' continuing participation in community care programs and will take swift action to protect Veterans.

This data match for provider enrollment information is one of many efforts planned as part of the VA and CMS partnership first announced in January 2018. The agencies are actively exploring additional data sharing focused on identifying fraud, waste, and abuse in health care payments.

# Charles George, Other VA Hospitals Research Veteran Post-Surgery Recuperation

By Amber Brown | ASHEVILLE VAMC PUBLIC AFFAIRS

VA is conducting a study of transfusion procedures for Veterans at high cardiac risk and undergoing surgery, and surgeons at Asheville's Charles George VA Medical Center are the only VISN 6 participants.

The Charles George VA is one of 15 VA Medical Centers in the TOP Trial: Transfusion Trigger after Operations in High Cardiac Risk Patients. The study will help determine if Veteran patients who have a high cardiac risk, or history of ischemic heart disease, peripheral artery disease or ischemic stroke, need a transfusion after they've had a vascular or general surgery operation.

While there is no clear threshold for when patients should be transfused after surgery, the current VA study is based on the belief that providing transfusions earlier could result in more positive recovery outcomes.

The principal Asheville investigators for the study are Dr. Mark Kadowaki, General Surgeon and Dr. Jeff Nienaber, Vascular Surgeon; Whitney Sprinkle, ANP, is the research coordinator in Asheville.

Charles George VA Associate Chief of Staff for Academic Affiliation Dr. Douglas Huntley, who also chairs Research and Development, states, "Something that has worried surgeons for years is that we have an innate sense that we have waited too long to transfuse people who have bad coronary artery disease. This study is questioning [the national standard]."

An estimated 5 million patients receive transfusions every year. Roughly 60-70 percent occur in surgical settings. Adverse outcomes, such as acute renal failure or death, have been associated with low blood levels following surgery, and are more likely with high cardiac risks.

The VA study will either provide clear guidance that restrictive policies are inappropriate and then improve outcomes by making the needed change or, if the current strategy proves safe, create a generalized statement supporting these practices and providing this to patients.

The TOP Trial is funded by the VA Cooperative Study Program. It is unique because it examines a previously unstudied population of general and vascular surgery patients, and utilizes a wider transfusion threshold difference than previous trials. Additionally, it only includes patients at high risk for postoperative cardiac complications.

The study was recently featured on the front page of *General Surgery News*, and as summarized by Dr. Huntley, "How can we best take care of our Veterans and prevent them from having a heart attack or stroke? This research is vitally important in how we take care of our patients. A lot of our Veterans have heart disease, and a lot of our Veterans require Vascular or Major General surgery. ... A lot of the medical research that has changed the world comes out of the VA system, and we're doing that right here in Asheville. This is information that will potentially be used internationally as it is that important to a growing population."

The plan will enroll about 1,520 Veterans by the end of 2022. To date, about one-fifth of the enrollment goal has been achieved. Interested Veterans should contact their VA Provider about the study.



TOP principal investigators for the study are Dr. Mark Kadowaki, Whitney Sprinkle, ANP, and Dr. Jeff Nienaber.

## VA, DOD to Fund Up to \$50 Million in New Research on Traumatic Brain Injury

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the Department of Defense (DOD) launched the Long-Term Impact of Military-related Brain Injury Consortium (LIMBIC) Oct. 1, for which the two organizations pledged to fund up to \$50 million, to research mild traumatic brain injuries (TBI) or concussions.

The five-year effort will receive \$25 million in funding from DOD and up to \$25 million from VA, depending on availability of funds.

"VA and DOD share an urgent, ongoing commitment to better understand the long-term impact of TBI," said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. "Through this overarching effort, we are harnessing the best work of our nation's scientists and will lay the groundwork for meaningful progress in diagnosis and treatment."

LIMBIC is composed of researchers and resources from more than 20 organizations, spanning VA, DOD, the National Institutes of Health, universities and nonprofit organizations. VA and DOD's funding will support a consortium led by a team at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) and the Hunter Holmes McGuire VA Medical Center in Richmond, Va. The lead investigator, Dr. David X. Cifu, is a senior TBI specialist for VA and a professor at VCU.

The consortium extends the work of a previous collaborative effort known as the Chronic Effects of Neurotrauma Consortium, or CENC, also led by Dr. Cifu. The existing CENC cohort, consisting of more than 2 million Veterans and service members, started in 2012 and has become the world's largest and best-characterized research cohort dedicated to the study of military TBI. It will expand the cohort; integrate with other government, academic and nonprofit research, and spur new public-private partnerships.

Researchers associated with CENC, and now with LIMBIC, have already documented links between combat concussions and dementia, Parkinson's disease, chronic pain, opioid usage and suicide risk. They have also developed specialized diagnostic tests using questionnaires, physical exams, brain imaging, fluid biomarkers and electrophysiology to probe how the brain recovers from injury.



