Spring 2014

VOICE OF THE VETERAN

VA GREATER LOS ANGELES HEALTHCARE SYSTEM
BY VETERANS, FOR VETERANS

POWER UP
Health Ed for You

DENTAL HEALTHCARE
New Options

DON'T LOSE THAT NUMBER
Nurse Advice Line

WOMAN VETERANS
She Served Too

VOICE OF THE VETERAN
VA GREATER LOS ANGELES HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

Spring 2014

The Official Veterans Newsletter of the VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System

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VA GREATER LOS ANGELES HEALTHCARE SYSTEM
A Division of VA Desert Pacific Healthcare Network

VA HEALTH CARE | Defining EXCELLENCE in the 21st Century

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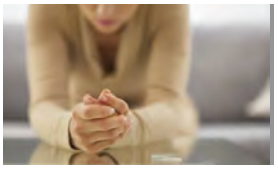

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PATIENT ADVISORY COUNCIL IS RUNNING AT LAACC

Pictured on the front cover of this edition of Voice of the Veteran Magazine are many of the members of the VA GLA Los Angeles Ambulatory Care Outpatient Clinic (LAACC). This group of vital, energetic and dedicated Veterans all receive care at LAACC, and care deeply about their fellow Veterans. They meet monthly as part of the Voice of the Veteran Program to learn more about the VA system and contribute their voice to our VA healthcare mission as an important part of patient centered care. Interested? Contact Marianne Davis at (310)268-3534.

POWER UP and TAKE CONTROL

Lots of things in life are beyond our control, but there is one thing you can do when it comes to health: you can get yourself informed. When you embrace the information, lots of good stuff starts to happen:

You know where to go to get help
You know when to get help
You know what to expect
You know what to do to help yourself

All of which leads to feeling like you're more in control. And if you can use information to head off more major health problems, all the better – it can save you time, money, pain and discomfort, and perhaps even your life.

There are a couple of excellent ways to find health information at the VA GLA: health education classes, and visiting one of the Patient Education Resource Centers (PERC). We interviewed Kenneth Cobb, MPH (U.S. Army) and Fiona Hwang, MPH, at the PERC at the LAACC.

"These days, we want to know what a Veteran's personal goals are, so we can help arrange services around that," said Kenneth Cobb. Working towards a personal health goal is a lot more fun and motivating than just doing something because the doctor says so. "If you decide yourself to make a change, that works. If we just tell you, it might not stick." So, for example, if someone really enjoys playing softball, but their joints hurt, the VA GLA team will work on helping to relieve that pain and get someone active again. If homelessness is the big problem, then the VA GLA team will concentrate on helping with that. It depends on what is important to the Veteran. Each of our clinics takes a careful look at the most frequent health issues for the Veterans using that site, and works on offering classes and education on that topic. For example, "Target Diabetes" at LAACC is a class that is about the whole person who is facing diabetes; not just the diet and the meds, but what's going on emotionally. A special event is held for Veterans who are coping with diabetes every quarter, and it is a one-stop shopping experience for all the needs of that patient.

Fiona Hwang and Kenneth Cobb at the LAACC PERC

Fiona Hwang commented, "We give you health information the way you want it. Have it your way! But make it healthy…" She also emphasized how health isn't just physical, but mindful. "Everything impacts on your health; your commute that day, your stresses in life; it all comes together, and we want to be aware of that as we talk about health."

For more information about the PERC contact:
Downtown (LAACC): Fiona Wong, at (213) 253-2677 ext. 4573
West LA (WLA): Laura Gunn, at (310) 478-3711 ext. 43964
Sepulveda (SEP): Rachel Rosen, at (818) 891-7711 ext. 9569

FRENCH LEGION OF HONOR MEDALS

FOR VA GLA VETERANS

In France, the Legion of Honor Medal is the highest award given for outstanding achievements in military or civilian life. France decided to give this prestigious award to U.S. Veterans who helped defend French soil during WWII. On January 30th, 2014, six Veterans from VA GLA received their medal at Bob Hope Patriotic Hall in Los Angeles, California. Samuel Cathcart, Murray Codman, Bruce Monkman, Richard O'Brien, Arthur Sherman and Leon Waldman were all honored for their service, and we learned what they had given to the cause through their stories and biographies. Axel Cruau, the Consul General of France in Los Angeles, commented, "The French will never forget that you helped restore our freedom. You will not be forgotten. Nor will those who sacrificed all, and remain in France."

Robert Johnson, Lt. Col. USAF (Ret.) was the Master of Ceremonies and the mastermind behind this awards ceremony, as well as many similar ceremonies that take place in California and the Southwest. Bob Johnson is on a one-man mission to make sure that all Veterans who qualify for the medal get it, and he has been remarkably successful to date. He works closely with the Consul General of France and arranges everything. VA GLA Veterans attended, many in uniform, most with large numbers of family and friends who joined them afterwards at a luncheon, and everything went according to plan. VA GLA salutes our heroes who served so bravely, and thanks the French Government for honoring them.

Lt. Col. (Ret.) Robert Johnson recognizes proud U.S. Veterans who are about to receive their Legion of Honor Medals.

NEW DENTAL OPTIONS FOR VETERANS

Oral health is an important part of your health care, and all Veterans want to have access to quality dental services. Veterans who do not meet the eligibility criteria for comprehensive dental care at the VA now have the opportunity to purchase dental insurance at a reduced cost through the VA Dental Insurance Program (VADIP), which has partnered with Delta Dental and MetLife.

Purchasing dental insurance through VADIP is voluntary. It will not affect your current eligibility for dental care and services. If you do not have dental eligibility, you can now purchase it. With Delta Dental and MetLife, there are no service-connected disability rating criteria for coverage, and costs will include a fixed monthly premium and any applicable co-payment, depending on the plan chosen. Plans offer such services as diagnostic, preventive, surgical, emergency, and restorative treatment. Once enrolled, Veterans will receive dental care from participating Delta Dental or MetLife dentists in their community.

TWICE A DAY!

TWICE A DAY!

ONCE A YEAR!

DENTAL HEALTH: GO GET IT!

For more information on VADIP, please visit http://www.va.gov/healthbenefits/vadip/
You may also contact Delta Dental at (855) 370-3303 and www.deltadentalvadip.org,
or MetLife at (888) 310-1681 and www.metlife.com/vadip

CUP O' JOE

Joe Grassman, VA GLA patient and volunteer on the Patient Advisory Council, shares more of his top tips for the best experience at VA GLA—stay tuned for more tips in future editions!

Be sure to get a copy of "Federal Benefits for Veterans, Dependents and Survivors" (VA Pamphlet 80-12-01) from your local VA. It's free and provides a complete summary of your benefits available to qualified American Veterans of the armed forces, including health insurance, claim process, pensions, education, vocational rehabilitation, etc. (you can also download it from the VA internet site).

If you feel a need to file a claim for a service-connected disability, Veterans Service Organizations can help you: The American Legion, Disabled American Veterans (DAV), Jewish War Veterans, The Order of the Purple Heart, and Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW). Los Angeles County Veterans Advisory Commision may also have representatives to help you.

Check out all information given to you by Veterans, but make sure you verify it yourself.

If you have questions, you can contact:

The Patient Advisory Council at Sepulveda by calling Voluntary Service at (818) 895-9325, or ask Voluntary Services for the numbers for Veterans Service Organizations or how to get started with MyHealth*e*Vet.

THE NURSE ADVICE LINE'S GOT YOUR BACK

Jesse James "Jay" Morales has been using the Los Angeles Ambulatory Care Clinic (LAACC) for his health care for years. A Vietnam Veteran, he was exposed to Agent Orange while he served, and now is experiencing significant health related problems.

"The VA did a big workup on me years ago, and I have 4 to 5 times the amount of toxins that I should have, so they monitor my blood levels. There are 11,000 of us Agent Orange Vets left now, and a lot of us have big health problems. Every once in a while my immune system goes haywire and I have dangerous bouts of swelling," Jay said. "It could stop me from breathing if I don't pay attention." When that happens, no matter what time it is day or night, Jay knows he can call the VA Nurse Advice Line and talk to a nurse right away.

"It's the best thing VA ever did – you don't have to stand in line somewhere, they are professional and they get you what you need. When you talk to them, it's "live", and they've already found you in the system."

Advice Line nurses will speak with you about your symptoms, and if it seems that you need an emergency appointment, they will make the appointment for you. When you come in, VA GLA staff are ready for you, and you go right in to be examined. Jay recalled an incident a few years back, while he was serving as a volunteer on the SS Lane Victory in Long Beach. He woke up with dangerous swelling, and another Veteran dialed the Nurse Advice Line. The nurse got Jay's information, listened to his symptoms, and instructed him to lie down while she arranged for him to be admitted to the VA Long Beach for immediate treatment. Because of incidents like this, Jay keeps the Nurse Advice Line on speed-dial on his cell phone, and knows he has to live close to a VA facility, "because I need a team that knows me."

We get you, Jay.
Thanks for staying close.

To speak with a nurse at any time, please call the VA Nurse Advice Line at (877) 252-4866.

HE'S HERE. HE'S A PEER. HE'S A PROUD VETERAN.

Army Veteran Tony Sadowski (1965-1967) is proud to have joined approximately 60 VA staff and Veterans who marched in the Los Angeles PRIDE Parade, marking VA GLA's first participation in the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) event. "I was right behind [the VA GLA] banner with my walker, loving every second of it," he said. "There was not a dry eye in the group." Tony has participated in LGBT parades since 1976, "but a group of us from the VA was something very special! I will march with the VA group again this year, and hope to see the group grow even more!"

"I had so many young people come up to me and ask if they could have their picture taken with me," Tony said. "They would tell me stories, saying they wish their uncle, or grandfather, or father could have had something like what we have. I was overwhelmed, and was really moved by what I was hearing. At one point I had to go off by myself and cry."

Tony understands how difficult it can be to conceal one's sexual orientation. Fearing prejudice, he remained closeted during his early life. In the Army, he felt like a "fraud and terrified someone would find out the truth." Since ending that secrecy, Tony has become closer to his mother and found an accepting and supportive community at VA GLA.

Dr. Carissa Klevens in the PERC with Tony Sardowski

Tony was struggling physically and emotionally when he first came to the VA. The healthcare team he found at GLA helped Tony get the medical and mental health care he needed, and he is grateful for their acceptance for who he is, but not for his excuses. “They were wonderful. They were tough on me when they needed to be, even when I didn’t like it, but in all honesty, I was not easy on them either!”

Tony likes the candid discussions he can have with his VA GLA providers. “The doctors will talk to me about sexual matters they may not discuss with straight patients, without concern about offending me. It gives them clues what tests to run on me. And I can ask them questions as well.” This honest communication has helped Tony manage his health care. “I feel better than I ever have.” One of the health care benefits Tony found at VA GLA is called Cognitive Processing Therapy for PTSD. “It was one of the most difficult things I’ve ever done, but [my provider] was there for me every step of the way. It was one of the most rewarding things I’ve ever done, and continues to be so.”

Tony is also involved with VA GLA’s Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Questioning Community Group (LGBQ), a weekly support group that provides a safe space and community connections for LGBQ Veterans at LAACC. “Everyone is very supportive of one another, and there is no judgment. It is a place to safely explore your feelings.” The group embraces people of all backgrounds, ages, and sexual orientation, even those who do not yet know where they fit into the LGBT spectrum. It also keeps its members informed of issues of interest in the LGBT community.

“I can be myself completely without reservation!”

For more information on GLA’s LGBT PRIDE Committee and support services, please contact:
Dr. Susan Rosenbluth at (310) 478-3711 ext. 42917 (West LA), or Dr. Carissa Klevens at (213) 253-2677 ext. 4260 (LAACC) and Dr. Margarita Krasnova at (213) 253-2677 ext. 4725 (LAACC).

ANIMAL ASSISTED THERAPY

You won't find any neigh-sayers when these Veterans horse around. Especially from the mane ringleader, Pearl.

Pearl is a miniature horse who for the past four years has been providing animal assisted therapy at VA GLA, charming Veterans, their families, and staff with her gentle manner and entertaining tricks. Trained as a therapy animal, Pearl and her handler, Victoria Nodiff-Netanel, visit Veterans in the inpatient psychiatric ward, oncology unit, women's homeless shelter, Community Living Center, and even the ICU. And Pearl is not a one-trick pony; she entertains patients with giving patients high-fives, squeaking a rubber chicken, and playing a keyboard. Sometimes, however, just Pearl's presence helps with the pain or boredom of a hospital stay.

Patients may become depressed about being separated from loved ones and familiar surroundings during long hospital stays and prolonged pain. Research has shown that contact with trained therapy animals helps improve patients' physical, emotional, social, and mental status, which in turn can decrease pain levels, anxiety, and blood pressure. VA GLA has several therapy dogs, a rabbit, and a parrot that provide comfort and therapy to our Veterans. Therapy horses are also being included in patient treatment plans, but mini horses offer the advantage of being able to visit patients in the hospital.

"When the patients see this little horse come into the room, they forget all about their pain or depression," says Victoria. With her gentle way, Pearl charms our Veterans, helping them better engage with and participate in their treatment process and healing. For some patients, just petting or talking to Pearl and Vicky helps to create a new mood.

"When the patients see this little horse come into the room, they forget all about their pain or depression ..."

"Suddenly the person comes alive," says Sether Hills, VA GLA Recreation Therapist. Offering comfort and companionship with no demands or judgments, therapy animals can often sense patients' moods more effectively than humans, and patients report feeling relaxed and a greater sense of well being after visiting with therapy animals. They find they are then able to progress faster and more effectively in their treatment and recovery. Nurses say they are amazed at how animal therapy helps patients who were previously negative about their treatment and recovery develop a more positive attitude.

"Raising the spirit is just as important and raising their immune systems," says Victoria. And sometimes, soothing the spirit offers more comfort than any prescription or procedure. This was the case with a patient staying in the Sepulveda Hospice. Having grown up an orphan on a farm, visiting with Pearl reminded him of happy and comforting times from his childhood. His last request was to see Pearl one more time. And Pearl, at his bedside, was able to fulfill that wish. "My main focus [with Pearl] has been the VA," Victoria says. "I just want to feel like I'm supporting Vets. We've been so honored to provide this service to the Vets."

For more information on the animal assisted therapy program at VA GLA, or to volunteer with your trained therapy animal, please contact Ms. Carrie Brandlin, Voluntary Service, at (310) 478-3711 ext. 49635.

TOP: Pearl and Victoria at work at the VA GLA.
MIDDLE AND BOTTOM: Pearl and her little sisters at the Pepperdine 9/11 display.

SHE SERVED TOO

They shared the same battledress pattern. They shared a common mission. They shared a distinct language, culture, and experiences, equalizing ethnicity, age, religion, income, and gender. So they should share the same respect when they return. After service, however, many women find they have returned to a population that does not recognize them as Veterans, discounts their experiences, or does not understand their challenges.

All of us benefit from respecting our women Veterans' service.

Currently, almost 10% of Veterans are women, but that will increase quickly as women are the fastest growing group within the Veteran population. This means that the percentage of women Veterans seeking health care at the VA is also increasing. The VA is responding with more services for women, yet some women Veterans do not know of the services available to them. Many think the VA caters only to men, just as much of the general population still thinks of Veterans as male.

"We have to do a lot of legwork to find things. It doesn't come to us," said Navy Veteran Leila Raffiee-Shirazi of her search for services for women Veterans. "I'm very happy to be here [at VA GLA], because there's a women's program. It's such a relief. If we don't have women-specific programs, it's like we're not a priority."

This does not mean that women have different physical and psychological responses to the stresses of service and combat or need different solutions than men, or that there is a single treatment for all women Veterans. "We're not cookie-cutter Vets," said Army Veteran Mickiela Montoya. Leila Ruffiee Shiraza stated, "My PTSD is unique," and cannot be neatly categorized as "simply MST or combat stress."

The stressors women may experience, however, may be what is different. According to the National Center for PTSD, women Veterans have a significantly high risk of developing PTSD from combat stress and military sexual trauma (MST). The VA is working to ensure women Veterans feel they have the medical and support services they need, and now screens all Veterans seeking care at the VA for MST.

Women Veterans have told us that they do not necessarily want gender-specific health care; they simply want healthcare. Yet many women Veterans find they must deal with unwelcome attention from men at the VA, which is offensive and even harmful, especially for those dealing with MST issues. Women said they are bothered by having to run "the gauntlet" of stares and comments on how they look. In comparing her experiences at VA GLA with those at private health care centers, Mickiela said, "the big difference is having an audience versus not having an audience." She said women do not want an audience when they get health care.

Women Veterans are here to get treatment, not a date. Having male Veterans commenting on their appearance is harrassment.

Women Veterans who come to the VA are seeking care, and yet are subjected to attitudes or behaviors that belittle them as women and as Veterans. "In the beginning, you look like a soldier and everyone loves you, but in the end…you feel embarrassed to ask for help…Do you know how lonely, how scary that is?" asked Army Veteran Marie Vargas. Already demoralized from MST and her superiors dismissively telling her to "be strong," Marie was initially resistant to come to the VA. And Marie is being strong, as are many other women Veterans, by seeking treatment and working on recovery. "I just want to focus on my treatment, not deal with these distractions," Leila said about the unwanted attention.

Some women said they are assumed to be the wife, mother, or sister of a Veteran rather than Veterans themselves, or that some male Veterans think they served in a lesser capacity than men. "Once those stereotypes are broken, I want male Vets to realize that not only are we equal because we served, but because we did the same jobs," said Mickiela. "I'm a combat Vet." The "front line" has become increasingly blurred with more weapons and types of attacks. Women serving in roles such as pilots, military police officers, drivers and gunners in convoys, and even those in administration on base are under constant threat or can be engaged in combat. Women Veterans are Warriors. We salute their service to country.

Inappropriate comments or behavior is rude and unwelcome, not only to women as individuals, but to all our Veterans.We are here to honor those who served their country. She served too.

For more information on VA services for women Veterans, visit: http://www.oefoif.va.gov/womenvets.asp or, contact Callie Wight, Woman Veterans Program Manager, at (818) 895-9555.

Did you know?

In January 2013, the Defense Secretary lifted the restriction on women serving in infantry, artillery, and other ground combat jobs. Services have until 2016 to develop gender-neutral physical and performance qualifying standards for front line combat roles.

"VETERANS IN PROGRESS"
A RECOVERY HOME BASE

For some Veterans, just getting back to normal activity and social contacts is a big challenge. That's where Psychosocial Rehabilitation and Recovery Center (PRRC), or "Veterans In Progress," can come to the rescue for many. This remarkable program gives structure and comfort to many Veterans who have issues with serious mental health issues. PRRC runs at the West LA and Downtown sites. Voice of the Veteran Magazine decided to check it out at the VA Los Angeles Ambulatory Care Clinic (LAACC).

About 20 Veterans gathered for the PRRC's regular Friday meeting at LAACC. Elected Veteran Officers sat at the front of the meeting room, and Roberts Rules of Order were used to keep the agenda on point and everyone on track. Officers read out their reports on budget, upcoming fun

outings, and many activities that the PRRC staff plan for Veterans, such as cooking, daily walking, art projects, current events, computer class, mindfulness, the recovery process, and life skills. As Samuel "Reggie" Mason said, "It's a community government model, and they are responsible for a lot of decisions themselves."

For example, a while back the PRRC decided to rename itself "Veterans in Progress," as they felt it better reflected what they do. Professional staff help Veterans In Progress (VIP) with therapy groups and keeping the activities going. Currently VIP is working on a large, beautiful mosaic of their logo, designed by VIP Alumni Glenn Towery, to submit to the Art Show at LAACC. VIP may even submit the logo to the VA National Creative Arts competition in the fall!

James Price
U.S. Army Veteran

Veterans In Progress (VIP) work on their logo art piece.

James Price, VIP member, said VIP has helped him grow. "In 2002, I wasn't doing much; I stayed at home and watched TV. The only reason I got out was to go eat." When a friend recommended VIP, he started making friends. Now he comes every day on the bus, and enjoys his group and friends. James spoke of recent VIP field trips, which he enjoyed intensely, particularly the National History Museum and the Autrey Museum. He also mentioned how friends in VIP watch out for each other. For example, when he was feeling extremely low a while ago, his VIP friends noticed he wasn't coming to VIP activities and were concerned. They tried to contact him, but he did not feel like answering. Finally they called the police, and they found Mr. Price extremely low, and intent on leaving this life. Fortunately, they arrived in time, and now he's much better. These days, his life is upbeat. "I'm taking math classes at the library, and working on my GED. I go to the YMCA and I work out. I am open to everything, and life is good. I want to keep going." We like that attitude, James! Keep it up.

For more information on PRRC/VIP and to get involved, call Ms. Andrea Serafin, PRRC/VIP Coordinator, at (213) 253-2677, ext. 4821 (LAACC) or (323) 725-7557 ext. 236 (East LA).

VOICE OF THE VETERAN
VA GREATER LOS ANGELES HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

It's your voice, so let us hear it!

What do you want more Information about?

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We welcome all suggestions and comments. Please us an additional sheet of paper if needed. Submit to:

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VA GREATER LOS ANGELES HEALTHCARE SYSTEM
A Division of VA Desert Pacific Healthcare Network

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DID YOU KNOW?

Three women recently graduated from the Marine Corps' enlisted infantry training course, the *Marine Corps Times* is reporting.

The women were subject to the same treatment and strenuous tests as the men, Marine officials told the *Marine Corps Times*.

During a signature 12.5-mile march that started on Oct. 28, for instance, the women and men were all required to haul almost 90 pounds of combat gear, the *Times* reports.

Word of this comes on the heels of news earlier that week that the Army's top officer is pledging that the service will not lower physical standards as it moves to comply with the Department of Defense order to open all Military jobs to women. "The standards will be the same." Gen. Raymond Odierno, Army Chief of Staff, told USA TODAY.