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Things you may have not noticed
The VA is transforming to improve Veterans’ experiences in receiving health care and benefits. We are working to develop our relationship with our Veterans and the services we provide them. The MyVA plan will provide a seamless, unified Veteran Experience across the entire VA. This will put you in control of how, when, and where you want to be served.

The VA is changing to better meet our Veterans’ needs today. By 2017, there will be about 10 million Veterans over the age of 65, many with chronic and acute service-connected issues. OEF and OIF Veterans have different and sometimes complex service-connected issues. The need for mental health services, including PTSD care and suicide prevention, is rising. To better serve our Veterans, the VA is building better business practices, implementing new programs, and ensuring our employees have the training and resources they need.

The VA has already started to better address the most pressing issues Veterans face, and MyVA is scheduled for full implementation by the end of 2016. Specifically, the VA is working on increasing access to innovative health care and benefit services, eliminating the disability claims backlog, and ending Veteran homelessness.

MyVA will focus on improving Veterans’ experience with better customer service and a better experience when trying to follow their benefits from the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) to the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), and even to the Veterans Cemetery Administration (VCA). By the end of 2016, the VA will have a single website for Veterans, a VA-wide system for Veterans to easily find information by phone, a simple process for Veterans to update their data across the VA, more VBA presence in VHA facilities, and a Veterans Experience Office at the national and regional levels.

And now, at GLA, our Our “GLA+” customer service campaign regularly recognizes our employees who provide exceptional service to you, our Veterans. We have a strong Veterans Experience Office (formerly known as the Patient Advocate Office) and Peer Support Specialists, and many of our employees are also Veterans who understand the Veteran experience personally and in business with the VA.

GLA is your VA, and we hope that when you visit us, you feel “This really is MyVA.”
The Virtual Lifetime Electronic Record Health Exchange (VLER Health) is a program that shares your medical record between your VA and non-VA care providers over a secure network. This program is free and voluntary for Veterans.

If you see both VA and non-VA health care providers, signing up for VLER Health will make it easier for your team of health care providers to manage your care, TOGETHER, by sharing your medical record SAFELY, and electronically.

Why sign up for VLER?

You allow both your VA and outside providers to go online and find out about things like allergies, health issues, medicines, test results.

Also, it means that you shouldn’t need to fax, mail or carry paper records. It’s online. Your providers can see what tests and procedures you’ve already had done, avoiding duplicates.

This is safer, and could save you money.

Enrolling is easy!

You can visit the Release of Information Office at the front lobby of Building 500 in the VA West LA Care Health Care Center.

You can also enroll at your local Community Based Outpatient Clinic.

You can enroll online, or by mail, or by fax.

For more information, please visit http://www.losangeles.va.gov/vler/ or call 1-877-771-VLER (8537).
You will find David Kingsby making his rounds these days, quietly making sure that GLA’s wards and clinics look clean and sharp. If you greet him, his eyes crinkle up and his smile wraps you in warmth. He knows his job cold, and you get the feeling he is one of those folks who have been here forever. But not necessarily so, his has been a long path.

Mr. Kingsby was in the Army in 1974-76, infantry, a rifle and mortar man. He served in the Korean DMZ, and saw many disturbing things, including some of his fellow soldiers being killed by the North Koreans. Eventually he left the service and came home to a family life that was not supportive. After many years of problems with substance abuse, he remembered the VA.

“A spark of faith brought me here to the Domiciliary in 2011.” He achieved sobriety for a couple of months, and thought he was in control. He wasn’t. Finally, he got into The Haven, and spent 2 years there. After he got out, he didn’t practice the skills he had learned there, and everything fell apart again. “But I learned something from all that: Follow the program, seriously!”

Mr. Kingsby re-entered The Haven again in October 2013, and started a new way of living. He realized he needed the education, structure, and faith. “I practiced the entire Recovery Program with an open mind and heart, and started the AA Twelve Step Program.” Things began to turn around for him.

He started the Compensated Work Therapy Program (CWT), and got used to working a job again. “Compensation is critical to your self-worth – it’s quite the anti-depressant!” He worked in Environmental Management (EMS) in many of our buildings at the VA West LA. He took advantage of the Chrysalis Program, which teaches you how to seek and keep a job. He practiced interviews with Bill Pike, an employment counselor who volunteers at the Domiciliary. “Following directions was really hard for me. I was determined to do things my way. After being in the military and being told what to do every minute, I thought I could figure it out for myself. But doing it my way got me nothing but problems, so I had to learn to listen again.”

He recently got hired on permanently in EMS. He now has a spacious apartment through VASH, and the AMVETS organization furnished it for him. He gets to see his daughter a lot as well, and is excited to see her plans for college grow. He is pleased to be part of her life.

“IT WORKS, IF YOU WORK IT.”

DO THE THING THAT WORKS; DON’T FOLLOW A PATH IF IT DOESN’T WORK.

SEEK PEACE OF MIND.
At the West LA Campus, Building 257 is open to assist all Veterans, but especially those who are homeless and need help with finding a place to stay. Their hours are 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

At the Welcome Center, Veterans can find help with getting started on applying for VASH housing and other options. They also get assistance with social support and any other needs. There is a large and comfortable waiting area, washer/dryer, clothing, and other supplies. Building 402 is also a Homeless Center, but looks at medical needs first. So the Welcome Center in Building 257 is a good place to start.

The Welcome Center, Building 257, is looking for individuals and groups that want to volunteer. Some examples of volunteer opportunities are:

- Group to come and sponsor lunch for the day
- Entertainment for individuals who are waiting (music, singing groups)
- Hot beverage supply donations, as well as healthy snack options
- Clothing items like new socks, underwear, and especially sweatpants, hoodies, etc.
- Ziploc bags (all sizes)
- Supplies for the laundry center
- Supplies for the children’s corner – washable markers, coloring books
- Pens, cards and writing paper, stamps for Veterans to use

Questions about the Welcome Center? Contact Phyllis Barnes, (310)478-3711 ext. 49917
The National Veterans Golden Age Games (NVGAG) is the premier senior adaptive rehabilitation program in the United States, which was created by the VA. It is the only national multi-event sports and recreational seniors’ competition program designed to improve the quality of life for all older Veterans (55 years of age and up) including those with a wide range of abilities and disabilities.

The National Veterans Golden Age Games is one of the most advanced senior sports programs in the world. The games support the value of regular exercise, fun and friendly competition for all Veterans, even those dealing with age related illnesses. Veterans must be enrolled in a VA healthcare to be eligible. There are seven age categories and three divisions: ambulatory, wheelchair and visually impaired.

2015 NVGAG were held in Omaha, Nebraska, August 8 – 12, 2015. The Veterans of the Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System train all year round to prepare for the competition. A team of 48 Veterans attended with the following results:

**Everado Amaya**: Gold – Nine-Ball  
**Roscoe Frazier**: Gold – Bowling, Silver – Nine-Ball  
**Cecilio Garcia**: Gold – Nine-Ball  
**Jorge Gonzalez**: Silver – Badminton (Doubles), Bronze – Javelin, Silver – 400 M Dash, Gold – 400 M Dash, Bronze – 800 M Dash  
**Otis Kemp**: Gold – 100 M Dash (Track & Field), Gold – 200 M Dash (Track & Field), Gold – 400 M Dash (Track & Field)  
**Frances Landin**: Silver – 25 M Freestyle (Swimming), Silver – 25 M Backstroke (Swimming), Gold – 200 M Dash (Track & Field), Gold – Discus (Track & Field), Gold – 200 M Dash (Track & Field), Gold – Shot Put (Track & Field), Bronze – 1 Mile Power Walk (Track & Field), Gold – Horseshoes

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2015 NATIONAL VETERANS GOLDEN AGE GAMES MEDAL WINNERS

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Thomas Fletcher works at GLA’s West LA campus as the local Recovery Coordinator and the lead for the Recovery Model in Mental Health. When we asked what all of that means, Tom replied, “There is hope for anyone who has a mental health diagnosis to have a better quality of life. It’s all about people taking responsibility, building on their strengths, respect, surrounding them with peer support, teaching them empowerment, and self-direction.” That all sounds quite a bit like Patient-Centered Care, and Tom agreed that it is exactly like that.

Tom is in the Army National Guard. He joined almost four years ago and became a “Behavioral Science Officer,” using his social work credential. Tom reported that he “talks to the soldiers who are having difficulties, refers them to resources in the community and also at VA,” just like at work here at GLA. At GLA, Tom is involved with training, and last year he was able to secure over $500 million to help train Peer Specialists. He also uses the WRAP (Wellness-Recovery Action Plan) model to help Veterans develop their own recovery action plan and to plan for a crisis. Tom also facilitates the monthly Veteran Mental Health Council, which give Veterans a voice in how GLA is run and a forum to air any concerns.

When asked what drew him to social work, the surprising answer was the movie One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest. He said he was really moved by how the patients in the movie had strengths beyond their illnesses. He feels the same about the movie Silver Linings Playbook. Tom said he really wanted to be the change that made mental health have a better outcome, and started his career working in the New York State Hospital system for four years and then came to California to do the same. He transferred to VA because he felt welcomed by the staff and the Veterans.
Tom said he decided to join the National Guard because “I really like working with Veterans, I am inspired by them, and their stories of struggling with PTSD and long term problems.” Tom figures that by working in the Reserves, he can do early intervention so that Veterans don’t have to suffer alone for decades after they get out. GLA Veterans have embraced his Reservist status. “Veterans accept me as one of their own,” Tom commented. “I have always related well to Vets, but now there is much more to it; we talk about Basic Training, we complain about the food, the Mess Hall...all of it!”

Reflecting on the military experience, Tom talked about the “hurry up and wait” that happens a lot, being a Battle Buddy and taking care of your fellow soldiers, and doing your fair share, no matter what. But now at the VA, he adds that WRAP ramps things up a bit. “The expectation is that you’ll be responsible, and work on your recovery. No sitting around waiting for orders. Everybody has a strength, no matter what the disability. Dignity and respect are critical to the success of every day.”

“There is hope for anyone who has a mental health diagnosis to have a better quality of life. It’s all about people taking responsibility, building on their strengths, respect, surrounding them with peer support, teaching them empowerment, and self-direction.”

-Tom Fletcher
If you’re seeing some pretty fit seniors around site, they may be members of an elite group: the Gerofit team! Research has shown that, even if you haven’t exercised in many years, you can get back your muscle tone and even gain more strength. Not only that, but training can prevent falls and help with balance.

Taking advantage of this knowledge, Dr. Steve Castle (Chief, Geriatrics), decided it was time to get a real program together, and tackled it with his usual enthusiasm. “Durham VA started it 30 years ago, so we went there and learned how they did it.” Dr. Castle wrote a grant proposal for the right exercise equipment, got improvements in the Gym, and went about finding volunteers with the right skill set. “Kinesiology students make great volunteers, as well as pre-med students,” reported Dr. Castle. He also spoke of how the volunteers and Veterans made strong friendships, and how the combination of young volunteers helping our older Veterans get strong again was pretty magical. The students cue the Vets while they are doing exercises, so that they can succeed even if they can’t remember complex exercises. Some of the Veterans have had remarkable weight loss results and have gained strength (one 93 year old is doing bench presses and flys). Even folks with chronic pain benefit, and report that they feel better for having exercised.

“Healthy aging is the goal,” said Dr. Castle. “And our volunteers are really making a difference.” Everyone enjoys Gerofit.

If you are interested, please let your primary care provider know.
Veteran John Ray is a man of many talents: actor, comedian, and musician. At 87 years young, he had a lifetime of great experiences. However, time was not kind, and he faced pulmonary fibrosis, Parkinson’s, sciatica in his left hip, and quite a bit of anxiety. It was hard to get outside. Then he got into the Gerofit Program, and “they saved my life”. He works out three times a week, and has made amazing progress in the last year. For example, in the leg press, he started out at 10 repetitions of 45 pounds. Now he’s up to 30 repetitions, 114 pounds. He had never lifted weights before. “I’ve got lots of friends here; they’ve got a good sense of humor, and instructors to help you. This system should be at every VA Hospital! It decreases costs, and increases happy people!”
As military personnel, we don’t win metals for doing what’s expected in life - earning a living, being a great parent, or for digging deep to find the inspiration to thrive while attempting recovery from a military service disability.

Veterans find inspiration at the VA by swapping experiences, just as we did in the military. Veterans learn from one another by listening and passing along information. We enjoy telling jokes about each other that downright shock civilians until they realize that it’s meant with the utmost respect. Despite our differences, each of us seeks out new ways to understand life, to cope with change, and to simply be happy.

Happiness arrives at our doorstep when we help our fellow Veterans find the path of inspiration to embrace life and to feel human again. Like the words in the popular song we all know.

“It might seem crazy what I’m about to say…”

There’s a reason Pharrell Williams’ Happy was a juggernaut success. At our core, Veterans genuinely desire to be happy. We chant crazy lyrics while marching in formation that could easily be from this song, the images are freeing.

“…I’m a hot air balloon that could go to space …”

Whether jumping from a C-130 with a green parachute or floating through the sky in a hot air balloon with no particular destination in mind, it’s a breath of fresh air, there’s freedom in these moments.

“Can’t nothin’ bring me down, because I’m happy …”

Veterans have a right to be happy. As a group and individually, we have lived through and overcome crushing, lethal, life-threatening experiences.

“…I should probably warn ya I’ll be just fine …”

Whether on active duty or as a Veteran, we represent America’s finest. We served our country and continue to serve as leaders in our recoveries.

“…because I’m happy.”

After suffering desert heat, jungle humidity, and chewing sand, Happy is all we really want so we can feel human again.
I can recall many occasions when active duty personnel would pass the time by talking about returning home after service. Did you ever admit to being homesick while on active duty? Probably not. Perhaps you shared an event that changed your life forever. Unlikely. We’re trained to “suck-it-up” and we do it well. The emotions we harbor within ourselves can create an inner world of struggle and survival. PTSD becomes our new enemy, its face reminding us of our personal fears, our need for control, for balance and for inner peace from the wounds of war.

Perhaps our post-military survival kits should include a copy of this song with a P-38 multi-purpose can opener. After twenty-five years of navigating the VA, I’ve discovered several ways to regain control of my own life while getting medical care at the VA.

Our strength and happiness comes when we confront our inner struggles with honesty, transparency and balance. Only then will we be dependable partners to our spouses, playful with our children and leaders in our communities. Be selfish with yourself. Find moments of joy in every day—your dog chasing the ball, your children’s laughter, your spouse’s smile. Return that moment with a brief sentiment, and treasure a glimpse of happiness daily. It’s time that American Veterans stop defining themselves by their worst moments and just be human again.

Gayle S. Ocheltree is U.S. Army Airborne and a 100% service-connected Veteran.

Gayle Ocheltree is an active member of the West LA Patient Advisory Council (PAC). There is also a Council at Sepulveda, Los Angeles Ambulatory Care Center, Bakersfield Clinic, and at the Santa Maria Clinic. Any Veterans (and family members) who are interested on working on projects at their place of care with the PAC teams is welcome to contact Marianne Davis, (310)268-3534.
Captain Kristen Griest and 1st Lt. Shayne Haver not only graduated Ranger training, they excelled in the toughest combat training conditions available. Both Army West Point graduates, they proved themselves to be superior soldiers in the first ever gender integrated Ranger training program and they never quit. They chose to stay motivated and it paid off.

All branches of the U.S. military service attend jump training at the Airborne facility at Ft. Benning, GA. Out of the 19 women who began the course, only Griest and Haver were able to conquer its challenges. Out of 400 men, 94 were able to complete the course. According to Colonel David Fivecoat, Commander Airborne Ranger Training Brigade, “The women impressed me. There were no gender modifications made in the course. They met the standard and they are Ranger qualified individuals.”

After the Army sent out the All Army Activities (ALARACT) message looking for female Ranger School volunteers, they had nearly 400 female soldiers express a desire to attend the course. When asked why she chose to tackle Ranger training, 1st Lt. Haver, a helicopter pilot from Texas, said, “My motivation? Same as the men and that’s to get experience in an elite leadership school so we’ll be able to lead our soldiers as best as we can.” Captain Griest, a MP platoon leader from Connecticut, stated that she wanted to create an opportunity for future women, just as those who succeeded earlier did for her.

The female students dispelled any doubts of their abilities during the first few days in the field. Company grade infantry officer, Ranger Rudy Mac, said, “If I remember correctly, Ranger Griest carried the M240 for her squad on day one of patrols and another female in her squad carried the radio as the RTO. The next day of patrols, they switched, with Ranger Griest humping the radio and the other female student carrying the M240. Physically, they were studs. They carried their own weight and then some.”
There’s been a lot of changes in recent years in handling problems and complaints. Rather than waiting for things to go wrong, our staff are now in the business of getting out onto the floors and wards and asking how things are going. It’s part of the Patient-Centered Care frame of mind, where we put you in the center of your health care visit, and help you make decisions that are best for you.

How does the Veteran Experience Office (VEO) work, anyway? Well, a Veteran or family member can call or walk in and sit down with one of our Veteran Experience Specialists for a chat about their issue. When VEO staff fully understand the problem, they go into our VA system that tracks complaints and sends it to the Department. That Department could have their contact person be their Administrative Officer, the Chief, or just someone who is really good at problem-solving. Then we see what response comes back – it could be an email, a telephone call, or a visit to the Department. If we don’t hear back, we contact them again, and sometimes take a walk over for “face time”. When we get the matter settled, we let the Veteran know. That’s how it works, Monday – Friday from 8-4pm.

VEO staff also go out with a little computer tablet using a program called TruthPoint. They ask questions about how your visit went, and your answers go to a company that compiles the data and sends it back to us rapidly. We can quickly report back problems or compliments to departments. Some of the wards have decided to use the TruthPoint program to improve their methods of care in their areas with great success! We are always looking for ways to change things for the better, after all.
Having a safe place to stay is a basic need, but the number of homeless Veterans in Los Angeles is one of the highest in the country. In June 2015, GLA opened a new transitional housing unit in Building 209 on the West Los Angeles (WLA) campus for Veterans who have been homeless for a long time. Building 209 is also a paid work therapy program, so Veterans staying in the building get job training while they work on moving into permanent housing.

Building 209 can house up to 65 Veterans. It has a secure reception area, a multipurpose room for health activities and classes, a kitchen where Veterans can learn to cook, and an internet café. There is also a wing for female Veterans that has direct access to a beautiful garden. All these areas are great for learning to be social again, and how to build friendships.

If you have been on campus and heard a screeching racket overhead, you might have spotted happy flocks of green conures. These social little birds fly around WLA campus in large groups, enjoying our landscape and particularly any fruit that our mature trees have to offer. Enjoy their happy chatter and beauty.

Agave Attenuate is commonly called “lion’s tail”, or “foxtail”. As you can see from our picture of the ones blooming next to Building 301 on the WLA campus, when they bloom they have an amazing five-foot stem of greenish flowers. They are native to Jalisco in Mexico, but they seem to be enjoying California just fine!

Visit us at:
www.losangeles.va.gov

And don’t forget to join us on:
Facebook.com/LosAngelesVA
Twitter.com/LosAngelesVA