COURAGE
HONORING ALL WHO HAVE SERVED
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VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System Honors all Veterans both past and present.
You may have seen Estevan Vigil in the halls of Building 500 at West LA, stopping and asking Veterans about their experience in clinic, and recording it on a tablet. Estevan is here as part of the Operation Warfighter Program, and is the first person we’ve hosted in this great program. Operation Warfighter is for active duty personnel who are transitioning out of the military. Estevan is here on a Federal internship, and is learning about working in a hospital environment. “This is so great,” Estevan said. “I am learning skills that I hope to use once I get back to civilian life.”

When you see Estevan, you would never guess what his life has been like. While in the Air Force and the National Guard, he had responsibilities such as serving as a regional honor guard, being a medic, and lastly, being a Space System Operations specialist at Vandenberg AFB. “It was amazing; I was learning how to fly satellites. Then they noticed that I was good at computers – hey, computers are easy, people are complicated!” Estevan says, with a smile. That led to a position as an Information Systems Security Officer, and he started going to First Sergeant Academy. While things were going really well, it was stressful. In May 2015, while on duty he crashed into a tree, and suffered a Traumatic Brain Injury. “After I woke up, I didn’t remember anything. I had really bad amnesia,” and to this day he still doesn’t remember much that happened before his accident. He has had to start all over: “learning my ABCs, tying my shoes, EVERYTHING. But my family was there for me.” He’s now on a discovery journey, rebuilding his life.

He’s now trying out working in Inpatient Operations, learning about what it takes to support our inpatient clinical teams. Ian Smith, Inpatient Operations Manager (and a fellow Veteran) is his new supervisor, and said “Estevan is learning all the facets of our Service, and he’s got the fortitude, motivation and professional attitude that I would want in every GLA employee.”

Estevan reflected, “When you are a Wounded Warrior and recovering, just getting out of bed every day is the most important thing. Working at GLA makes me want to recover and to move forward. I love being here.”

Roger that, Estevan.
Yes...I remember about a year ago looking up at the ceiling from my bed in the VA West Los Angeles Emergency Room, and asking myself just how I got there. This was not my first visit to the ER with chest pain and other symptoms, indicating a heart attack...I remember thinking of how much I had in life. I am happily married. I have two teenagers (a fact that in itself was stressful, yet not so stressful as to cause a real heart attack.). I have enough friends and I feel I have a good purpose to continue living a fruitful life. So again, why was I there and why did I feel so miserable?

Little did I know at the time that there were others in the VA asking the same questions. At our VA Los Angeles Clinic, Dr. Owens, and Dr. Garcia, my primary care doctor, had started to work on my physical needs, but they also thought about my mental health. On the medical side, different doctors examined parts of my body that were causing me pain, while also providing me with the education I needed to combat my physical symptoms. On the mental health side, Dr. Karakashian introduced me to the practice of Mindfulness. This is a way to find peace and clarity, and calm the mind, so you can reduce anxiety, stress and negative thinking. Dr. Lo started seeing me for 30 min sessions. Also, I saw Dr. Serpa and Dr. Wolfe for a special kind of Mindfulness, Self-Compassion. Sometimes we have to be gentle with ourselves, and this helped me get to that place mentally.

Although I was unsure of the quality of care I would receive at the VA, I consider myself lucky to receive such high quality of care from my local VA. But my story is not the best part of this article. There are teams of individuals (primary care doctors, mental health professionals, and administrative staff) who are devising ways to make your experience so much better than mine. The goal of these teams is “Whole Health”. For me, Whole Health means not just looking at one or two symptoms or complaints of a person, rather it is looking at the entire patient and building a program for that Veteran for enhanced medical and mental health care.

I am excited about the future at my local VA. I am also excited for all the patients who could positively impact their lives with this way of providing care.

This is the beginning of something big...

Interested in Whole Health? Ask your Provider.

VOICE OF THE VETERAN / ISSUE NO. 8 / BY VETERANS, FOR VETERANS
Julie Stranges, devoted volunteer at GLA’s Sepulveda site, was chosen this year as the VA’s top Volunteer (female category). Julie, who is at Sepulveda most days, is an integral part of the Voluntary Service shop in Building 22. She enters donations, helps with most of the events, and is personally responsible for making the GLA Annual Woman Veterans Recognition Luncheon happen during the fall. Using her connections with service organizations, community foundations, and faith-based groups, Julie secures large amounts of support and manpower to help our Veterans. She always says that she serves Veterans in honor of her father, who was a Veteran. Congratulations to Julie!

Interested in Volunteering?

Call Voluntary Service
(310)268-4350
Melvin Hilliard, U.S. Army Veteran, is a regular visitor at Building 220 at West LA – he is an avid participant in our Integrative Medicine Program, and he is there several days a week. While he has full healthcare coverage elsewhere, Melvin decided that he wanted to try out the VA system, and also felt it was right to put himself on the line, as a Veteran, and check it out.

His program started with chiropractic therapy for his back troubles. Then his physician talked him into Tai Chi, which he enjoys. Melvin used to teach Hatha yoga himself, back in the 1950’s, and is still enthusiastic about it. “Some people think it’s weird, alternative medicine, but it’s really helpful, and I thrived on it,” he said. He is also dedicated to the art of breathing technique, which is an important part of yoga. “I do an hour of breathing technique every day, and it settles me”, he reported.

His other project is to be a sort-of mystery shopper at the VA. “I go around greeting everyone cordially, and I compliment the employees when they do a good job”. When he finds something that he finds troublesome, he reports it out. He wants the VA to be as good as it can be, and wants to help get it there. He also is a very active member of the GLA West LA Patient Advisory Council, and helps out there with projects and issues that come up.

Melvin Hilliard just celebrated his 83d birthday; he said, “I don’t feel any different than when I was 50.” Nor does he look any older than 50. “I am at the point now, where there isn’t much that disturbs me. Oh, my feelings get hurt every once in a while, but if I give it a little time, it just becomes an opportunity for growth. And I’m not done doing that yet.”

Thank you, Melvin, for being part of TEAM GLA.

Interested in the Patient Advisory Councils? Call Marianne Davis (310)268-3534
The Zika virus is usually spread by through the bite of an infected mosquito. Since most of the areas we live in around the Los Angeles area don’t have a large summer mosquito problem, it hasn’t been a big issue here yet. But given how much people travel these days, it could become a problem. The number of cases is rapidly growing in areas of South America, the Caribbean, and areas of Central America. Given that the Olympics took place in Brazil, it’s become a global concern. So far in the U.S., a small number of cases have been reported.

When the average adult gets it, they may not notice much of anything. But, they might also have fever, rash, joint pain and “red eye” (conjunctivitis). The illness is normally mild, lasting for several days to a week, and people don’t get sick enough to go to hospital. The big problem is when a pregnant woman gets the virus, it may cause severe birth defects. They are also beginning to find that the virus can be given to a woman through sexual contact, even though her partner might not even know he has the virus. There are now two children that were born in California with microcephaly, a very small head and severe disabilities that is most likely a result of a Zika infection in the mother (both moms had traveled to countries with Zika outbreaks).

**WHY IS IT CALLED “ZIKA”?**
The virus was discovered in 1947, and was named after where it was found, in the Zika Forest in Uganda. The first human cases were reported in 1952, but since the symptoms are like many other diseases, it might not have been recognized.

**WHAT DO WE DO?**
Pregnant women should not travel to the areas of risk. And if a sexual partner does travel there, use condoms. We should all protect ourselves and our families against mosquito bites anyway, as West Nile virus is transmitted by mosquito bites in our local area, and that is a very unpleasant disease, to be avoided as well. West Nile disease is reported out in the summertime, but it’s usually not a big outbreak. There is no vaccine for either disease, so prevention is your best bet. The mosquito that transmits Zika bites during the day, so cover up and spray repellent. At night, continue to cover yourself and use repellent, as other mosquitoes are out and hungry. When it’s hot, use a room fan, as it disrupts the mosquito’s ability to find you.

**WHY IS THIS HAPPENING NOW?**
That’s hard to say. Some say that global warming is creating environments that make it easier for mosquitoes to spread. Reasons for disease outbreaks can happen with change of habitat for the disease and its carriers, or simply because an opportunity came up. At this point, we don’t know. But our government and healthcare institutions are taking this very seriously, and heavily investing in prevention. The Army Institute of Research is very close to testing a vaccine. They are good at this, so we just need to stay vigilant at home for now.
HEPATITIS C: NEW TREATMENTS FOR THE CHRONIC LIVER INFECTION

In March 2016, the VA expanded its coverage to all Veterans with Hepatitis C. Drugs for treating Hepatitis C are costly, so the VA had to prioritize treatment for Veterans in the late stages of the liver disease. Congress has increased funding for the VA to cover the costs of treatment for Veterans with Hepatitis C at any stage.

The Hepatitis C virus (HCV) is the most common infection of the blood and affects the liver. The liver is one of your largest organs. It acts as a filter to clean out toxins from your blood, helps process nutrients from food, helps you heal after injuries, and keeps your immune system strong. When your immune system tries to fight a HCV infection, it kills infected liver cells as well. Over time, this can damage the liver and your health, and even cause liver scarring (fibrosis and cirrhosis), liver cancer, and liver failure.

You may be at risk for HCV if you have come into contact with the blood of someone infected with it. Some risk situations are if you: received a blood transfusion before 1992; are a Vietnam-era Veteran; ever were on kidney dialysis treatment; were treated for blood clotting before 1987; ever shared drug needles. There are many other risk factors for HCV, so it is important to talk with your VA doctor about being tested for it. HCV symptoms can be mild—such as yellowing of the eyes and skin (jaundice), tiredness, and joint pains—but sometimes people can carry HCV for years with no symptoms. People infected with HCV can pass it to others through contact by blood or other body fluids. You cannot spread HCV by coughing, sneezing, or sharing food or water.

There are different lab tests to find out how healthy your liver is. These are called Liver Function Tests. If you are diagnosed with HCV, there is treatment and the VA can help! Antiviral medications are only needed for 2-3 months and for about 90% of people can get rid of HCV and stop more damage to the liver. Also, people who are cured of HCV do not get it again and cannot transmit it to others. You should also get tested for Hepatitis A and Hepatitis B and vaccinated against them if needed (there is no vaccine for HCV). Talk to your health care team about treatments, healthy lifestyle changes, and classes, and make sure you follow your treatment plan. Take care of your liver by limiting alcohol, eating healthy, exercising, and maintain a healthy body weight. Your liver and all your organs will thank you!

Talk to your doctor for more information about HCV testing and treatment. A good list of questions to ask your doctor can be found at http://www.hepatitis.va.gov/patient/hcv/questions-to-ask-doctor-index.asp. You can also find more information about HCV at http://www.hepatitis.va.gov/patient/index.asp.
Disability compensation covers a lot of areas for Veterans, from injuries to PTSD to exposure to contaminants while on active duty. As we learn more about the environmental conditions our Veterans faced during service, the VA wants to make sure they get disability compensation for the risks to their health. The VA is working to expand disability compensation benefits to Veterans, including those in the Reserve and National Guard, who may have been exposed to contaminated water while on active duty at Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, North Carolina from 1953 to 1987.

Health experts at the VA and the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (under the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) found that from the 1950s through the 1980s the drinking water at Camp Lejeune was contaminated with industrial chemicals that have been linked to certain health conditions. These health risks include: kidney cancer, liver cancer, non-Hodgkin lymphoma, leukemia, multiple myeloma, scleroderma, Parkinson’s disease, and aplastic anemia/myelodysplastic syndromes. Almost one million servicemen and servicewomen, their families, and civilian employees stationed there during this time were exposed to these chemicals in the water supply.

For now, the VA will continue to review disability claims associated with exposure to contaminants under current regulations. If an open claim shows evidence of a medical condition possibly related to exposure to contaminated water at Camp Lejeune, the VA will wait to make a decision on the claim until the final regulation is issued. Veterans who have been denied before for such claims may ask for their claim to be reevaluated.

For more information on Camp Lejeune contaminated water, go to http://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/camp-lejeune/. For eligibility and evidence requirements for a claim, go to http://benefits.va.gov/compensation/claims-postservice-exposures-camp_lejeune_water.asp. Veterans can apply for healthcare benefits by submitting VA Form 10-10EZ online at www.1010ez.med.va.gov/ or by calling 1-877-222-VETS (8387).

Family members of Veterans who lived at Camp Lejeune may also be eligible for the costs of health care related to certain medical conditions. More information on Veteran family benefits and eligibility can be found at https://www.clfamilymembers.fsc.va.gov/ or by calling 1-866-372-1144.
It’s Not Easy to Talk About, but…

Sometimes you need legal help. When a Veteran is charged with a crime, there are many statutes that may help. In California, some laws allow for military and Veterans to receive treatment instead of going to prison. Two important ones to consider:

Penal Code Section 1001.80 provides for Veterans to have a misdemeanor charge dismissed when they successfully complete a treatment program.

Penal Code Section 1170.9 provides for alternative sentencing for some misdemeanors and some felonies, with the completion of a treatment program. It might allow for a decrease of a felony to a misdemeanor, dismissal of fines, and sealing of records once the treatment is finished.

Both of these important statutes require proof of Veteran status, a service-connected mental health condition, and a treatment program. The statutes can be used in all criminal courts, as well as a Veteran Treatment Court, VTC. In Los Angeles, the VTC hears only felony matters, but the statues are for misdemeanors as well. Military service may be considered as a mitigating factor for a lesser sentence in all cases, without the statutes. The U.S. Supreme Court stated that our country has a “long tradition of according leniency to Veterans in recognition of their service, especially those who fought on the front lines…” Porter v. McCollum 558 U.S. 30 (2009).

So, what does this mean to you? Always tell your attorney you are a Veteran! And, at your first court appearance, ask for the MIL 100 form, which lists all the Veteran statutes (you don’t have to fill it out). Or, you can download the form at http://www.courts.ca.gov/documents/mil100.pdf. You can then talk to your attorney about taking advantage of them in your case. Those Veterans who have used these laws, and completed the treatment programs have gone on to successful careers, and have less than a 10 percent repeat problem.

Who can help you? Veterans Justice Outreach workers (or, VJ0s) are VA social workers who to jails and help Veterans use the statutes. Attorneys, family, and others can contact VJ0s for help. Here are our local contacts: Gregory.Cain@va.gov (310)597-5016, Raymond.Adams@va.gov (310)709-7302, Delbert.Thompson@va.gov (310)864-1292, James.Egler@va.gov (310)597-3542. Pamela.Davis1@va.gov (310)485-5552, Sergio.Antoniuk@va.gov (310)597-3495.

My name is Jennifer Hayward, and I am a United States Navy Veteran. After becoming a victim of military sexual trauma, I suffered for the majority of my military career and time after service. I had PTSD, and isolated myself. I was depressed, afraid of going outside, anxious, and started medicating myself with drugs and alcohol, and other poor choices. I received a General (Under Honorable Conditions) Discharge from the Navy and was discharged early due to a previous incarceration while on active duty. In no time, I was in jail again in 2013 for theft, evading the police, and leaving the scene of an accident, among other things. I was lost, and felt out of control.

Clearly, if something didn’t change, I was facing a future in prison. I was interviewed by a social worker in jail, and realized I might have other options. I requested to go into treatment, and thankfully the court agreed to give me an opportunity to heal, under strict probation terms, of course. I participated in Veterans Treatment Court gratefully and utilized the penal code 1170.9 to clear my record. I plead guilty to all charges against me. Afterwards I focused all my energy on successfully attaining my new lifestyle, and I was rewarded with my record being expunged and sealed! I’ve got a job with the VA, and now my prospects look good. I am hopeful for a good life.

I have the Ventura County Military Collaborative Kim Evans and team to thank, Probation officer Patty Ortiz, Judge Colleen “Toy” White, The Public Defender’s office Rod Kodman, and law students, along with Veterans Justice Outreach Coordinator Greg Cain and West Los Angeles Salvation Army, and VA Domiciliary staff to thank for their support. I thank God for seeing me through it all. I was lost and now I am found!
In any survival situation, it’s our attitude that empowers us to reach the top. To me, the fact that I’m a Veteran means that I’ve already made it. I wiggled and squiggled through every abhorrent business the military threw at me, and because of those challenges, I am proud to have earned the honored post as an American Veteran. They called us WHISKEY’S because we had a number on our helmets, “W” for women. I felt it was an honor to be an Airborne Whiskey, and I use it as a nickname even decades later.

As one of the first women to attend Army Jump School at Ft. Benning, GA I watched every nail-biting moment and championed the accomplishments of the two new Army Rangers Captain Kristen Griest and 1st Lt. Shayne Haver. As I watched the gruesome details of their field training, I wondered what they thought about in their darkest moments, how they made the choice to stay motivated and have the character not to tap out.

Quitting is a little devil that stands on my shoulder always begging for attention. I remember my own experience during a twenty-five mile forced march. The rain poured down on us, and just when we didn’t think we could bear it one more second, it began to snow. I was so wet and cold that the desire to quit was unbearable.

During those three hours of endurance training, I discovered a way to keep my mind focused. I opened my All Weather Field Book and sketched a picture of my grandmother’s home-cooked food, a complete turkey dinner with all the trimmings. I could see the deep red cranberry sauce, those little marshmallows in the sweet potatoes, and that crazy green bean casserole. My stomach growled. Slowly and carefully, I ripped the meal, course by course, from the pages. I shoved a piece of paper turkey in my mouth, and to this day, I swear that it was the most delectable, world-class turkey dinner that I’ve ever devoured because of the memories of family connected to that food. I learned that during those moments when I’m tested beyond reason, I just take time out for a walk down memory lane.

What keeps me from quitting on dreams, on people, or on life is my military training. As I ate my all-weather turkey dinner, I realized the gift that was given to me by the U.S. military, and that was the awareness of my own personal power. One of the many Airborne mottos is: “Airborne, All the Way and Then Some.” Every day we ran and sang Airborne songs about being champions with no limits.

As a result of my training, my personal power grew from a solid inner belief in myself to a much higher level of confidence. I became an independent leader fully able to survive anything and lead others to survive as well. As an Airborne soldier, I feel an obligation to be a leader in helping other Veterans understand the VA system.
AH-CHOO? NO, THANKS!

It’s that time of year again: Flu Season. GLA has flu shots available for all Veteran patients. We also have a partnership with Walgreens drug store, so if you are a Veteran patient, you can choose to get your shot at your local Walgreens too. There is no cost at Walgreens for the flu shot for enrolled Veterans, but make sure you tell them you are a Veteran and show them your VA I.D. card.

Why all the fuss about the flu? It is a respiratory illness that can make you very sick, and many people are hospitalized and even die each year in the U.S. as a result. The flu season usually starts in October and lasts through the end of March. It spreads easily from person to person through sneezing, coughing, and even talking or laughing. The flu virus can spread to your hands and then if you touch your eyes, nose, or mouth, you might get it. If you pick up a baby, or shake someone’s hand, you can pass it on to them too. People can spread flu to others about one day before they feel sick and up to five days after getting sick. Your best protection against flu is the vaccination.

Besides getting a flu shot, another important way to protect yourself from catching the flu is by washing your hands often with soap and water or by using hand sanitizers. Make sure you clean surfaces that are touched often, such as: phones, faucets, light switches, counter-tops, door and cabinet handles, keyboard and mouse, and TV remotes. And remember to cover your coughs and sneezes! Tissues should be thrown away after each use. And if you are sick, please stay home until you are no longer contagious.

Still not convinced that you need to worry about the flu or getting sick? What about other people in your family? Babies and children, as well as older adults, and anyone that is already fighting another illness have a greater chance of catching the flu. So even if you aren’t concerned about yourself, there may be someone else in your life that you don’t want to get sick. Staying healthy not only affects you, but could save the life of someone around you.

At GLA, each of our primary care clinics offer the flu shot, so when you come in for your appointment ask about it! Even if you are going to a specialty or mental health appointment, we can make sure you get the flu shot. We will also probably ask you if you want the shot, so don’t be surprised. At West LA, we have a walk-in flu clinic in our lobby in Building 500, so please feel free to stop by and get your shot!

**QUESTION**: Walgreen’s offers an “extra-strength” shot. What’s that?
**ANSWER**: Fluzone High-Dose is an influenza vaccine, manufactured by Sanofi Pasteur Inc., designed specifically for people 65 years and older.

**QUESTION**: What is the difference between Fluzone, Fluzone High-Dose, Fluzone Intradermal Quadrivalent, and Fluzone Quadrivalent?
**ANSWER**: These products are all flu vaccines produced by one manufacturer. These are all injectable influenza vaccines made to protect against the flu strains most likely to cause illness for that particular flu season. Fluzone High-Dose vaccine contains four times the amount of antigen (the part of the vaccine that prompts the body to make antibody) contained in regular flu shots. The additional antigen is intended to create a stronger immune response (more antibody) in the person getting the vaccine.

**QUESTION**: Does the U.S. Center for Disease Control recommend one vaccine above another for people 65 and older?
**ANSWER**: NO. The CDC and its Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices have not expressed a preference for any flu vaccine indicated for people 65 and older. CDC recommends flu vaccination as the first and most important step in protecting against the flu.

**QUESTION**: Does the VA program at Walgreen’s pay for the “extra-strength” shot?
**ANSWER**: NO. VA only pays for the regular flu shot. There is a charge for the higher dose vaccine, which may be as high as $60.

[Here are some links for more information:](http://www.publichealth.va.gov/flu/prevention/index.asp)
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d6vemR2RKQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d6vemR2RKQ)
The Pentagon announced in March that U.S. troops engaged in operations against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) are eligible for a new medal. The Inherent Resolve Campaign Medal recognizes service in Iraq or Syria, as well as the airspace or contiguous waters of both countries.

The start date for the medal is June 15, 2014, with an end date “to be prescribed by the Secretary of Defense.” Troops must serve in the eligible areas for 30 consecutive or 60 non-consecutive days. The 30-day minimum is waived for troops killed or wounded in combat.

According to the Defense Department, some 11,000 troops are already eligible for the medal. Up to 5,000 U.S. military personnel are currently serving in Iraq.