Special Issue
The Official Veterans Magazine of the VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System

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The Patient Advisory Councils of VAGLA

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This quarterly magazine is an authorized publication for GLA patients and their families, dedicated to supporting the holistic wellness and health promotion hallmarks of Patient Centered Care.

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Introducing your new GLA team

The VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System (GLA) now has a new executive team! You will find that they are focused on putting Veterans first and making sure you get the best health care services. Our Executive Team members come from military families, have extensive experience working in health care, know the VA well, and are excited to be working on providing top quality patient centered care for you and all our Veterans. Please watch for upcoming meetings and events that will give you a chance to personally meet with our Leaders. They want to meet you!

Let’s meet GLA’s Executive Leadership Team in this special issue of The Voice of the Veteran magazine.

GOOD NUMBERS TO KNOW

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<td>VA Call Center</td>
<td>(877)-251-7295 or (310)-478-3711</td>
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<td>VA Nurse Advice Line</td>
<td>(877)-252-4866</td>
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<td>VA Pharmacy Refill Line</td>
<td>(800)-952-4852</td>
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<td>VA My HealtheVet</td>
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<td>VA Suicide Prevention Lifeline</td>
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<td>VA Call Center for Homeless Veterans</td>
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<td>Veterans Benefits Regional Office</td>
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ANN BROWN, FACHE*
Director, VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System

Back when she was working at the South Texas Veterans Healthcare System in San Antonio, Texas, Ann Brown had the opportunity to help out with the National Wheelchair Games held there. That event made her realize that VA does really special things, and that working at VA is like being in a big family. Watching Veterans compete, no matter what their disability, and feeling their joy in working together towards a common goal, cemented her decision to stay on the VA path in her career. And now she has come to be our Director at GLA.

“For the last 20+ years, GLA has been on the forefront of innovation; great things have always come out of here, and we all noticed it,” reported Director Brown. And now, despite being the epicenter of the homeless challenge, and our land issues, she has found that the creative strength, and the staff who make that possible, are still here.

“If you look at the data, the trend is quite clear: we have made a remarkable impact on housing homeless Veterans. Despite all the commotion, and the public discord, we are making incredible strides in reducing the number of homeless Veterans, working with the community.”

[Note: the Los Angeles Homeless Service Authority reported homelessness among Veterans declined 30% between its January 2015 and January 2016 Point-in-time homeless counts – while overall homelessness in the County actually rose 5.7% during that same time period.]

Director Brown is determined to build up the innovative care that GLA is well known for, to improve community engagement, and to have GLA become known again for advances in caring for our Veterans. “We have great people here, doing wonderful things, and we need to focus on empowering them to serve our nation’s heroes. It is a great honor to serve them. That’s the mission, and it’s the best one you can have.”

Finally, Ann Brown cares deeply about integrity. “We have to be honest; if we don’t know something, we’ll do our best to find the answer. We have a pretty simple agenda: provide the best care we can for Veterans. And, we have to put our Veterans at the center of everything we do now; it’s called being Veteran-centered. It sounds fancy, but it’s pretty common sense; you treat people right, you do it reliably, even when it’s not an easy thing to do. We will honor the mission and tackle it with everything we’ve got.”

*Fellow of the American College of Healthcare Executives
Dr. Hartronft got started in his medical career as an orderly in a dementia unit at the age of 16. After high school he became a Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) so that he could work his way through college. That was quite the experience, and he went on to join the U.S. Army to get his medical school, internship, residency and fellowship training. He spent eight years on active duty, and four years as a reservist. He served at Brooke Army Medical Center at Ft. Sam Houston, the U.S. Army’s premiere medical facility, and many other sites around the country. At San Antonio, he became interested in and went on to get his specialty training in geriatrics. When asked about being a physician in the military, he answered right away: “The officer training in the military is unique; it gives you leadership skills. You learn how to take command and make things happen.”

His time at VA Puget Sound was also unique. “The VA Puget Sound is the most clinically complex healthcare system in the VA. It’s a lot like Los Angeles, in that we have to deal with geography. In Puget Sound, it was bodies of water, and Veterans that needed service far away...here in Los Angeles, it’s the same, but on the road. Our service area is huge, and it’s a special kind of problem. But I sure like the sunshine here.”

Reflecting on his work here at GLA, he spoke of providing structure. “We need to set up good ways for our staff to think differently, look at problems in new ways, and empower them to help our Veterans”. He also spoke of how everything we do should be data-driven; there should be scientific evidence to support what we do, we should measure our output and know what we are actually achieving, and have our staff focused on the mission. “GLA has been, and should continue to be, on the cutting edge of technology. We’ve always done that in VA, and indeed, the VA system has had Nobel Laureates because of our excellence.”

Dr. Hartronft also spoke about the important missions of GLA: healthcare, training, and research. “Trainees bring new information and the best practices from other top sites. If you have a problem, and you want the best care, you want a teaching site, because we have the newest, best and brightest people training here with us, and that’s a proud tradition that got started with General Omar Bradley in WWII. And our research is very applicable to what the Veterans need: specific things like PTSD and Traumatic Brain Injury, but also promoting overall health and vigor, aging well, and enabling Veterans to take control of their wellbeing. We are looking at the big picture here, not just one health problem. And my job will be to enable our staff to do that really well.”

*Doctor of Medicine, Master of Business Administration, Fellow of the American College of Physicians, Certified Physician Executive, Fellow of the American College of Healthcare Executives
SUSAN SHYSHKA, FACHE
Associate Director

Susan started out in a strong military family; her father, her grandfather, her sister, her in-laws were all in the military (Army and Navy), and Susan thought she would follow in the tradition. All the discussions in her family centered on military life, and she yearned to “join the club”. She was in ROTC in college and enjoyed it, and expected to serve her country. When the time came to sign up, she was devastated to learn that they would not accept her because of physical limitations. It was a huge letdown. What to do now, to “be of use”, as usefulness was her main driver.

Her next choice was to get an information and library master’s credential, and she worked at the VA. Soon she was moving up the line, and after being at four different VA facilities she has come to us at GLA. She says she was drawn to the field of operations, “because that’s where the action is!”

So far, Susan says that “GLA is the most complex and challenging assignment; the size of the facility, the geography, and the huge number of Veterans we serve.” It’s a big job to fix all the processes that need repair, and keep up the forward movement. “Sometimes it seems that we take three steps forward, and slide two steps back. But we can’t dwell on history when there are so many improvements that take our time and resources right now.” Susan cited the push to hire 17 more staff for the Call Center (should be done by the fall), and what a success the recent Job Fair was (94 new nursing employees hired). She is focusing on things that need urgent attention and action.

As Susan says, “there is nothing behind the curtain. With all of us, what you see is what you get. We are here, working hard to get it right. We are standing in front of the curtain, if you want the truth.”

As for her military family, things are working out. Susan is now the expert on everything VA for her family, and they ask for her help all the time. “It feels good – I am useful at work and at home!”
James Doelling came from a Veteran family – his dad was in the Navy, and his uncle was Army, Vietnam era. So he understood the service and sacrifice ethic, right away. Serving was the backbone of his decision to pursue nursing, and he got to work in the private sector, getting expertise in many areas, such as critical care, community health, hospice and home care. When he was at the VA Hines, Illinois, he had an opportunity to come and spend some time at GLA.

“I was so impressed with the excellence of the care at GLA, and particularly the caring and kindness of our front-line staff in nursing. I wanted to give them a voice, and be part of the movement towards change here. I want to make this place be regarded as a five-star facility!” stated an impassioned Doelling. “My motto is that our nation’s Heroes deserve the best care anywhere, and we’ve got to think out of the box sometimes to make that happen. My goal is to make it so Veterans love coming here, and our staff love coming to work.” He has wasted no time since he set foot here, and has already held 12 Nursing Service Town halls, spanning all of our sites, day and night tours, to make sure that GLA nurses have a voice in making the change that he sees so clearly coming in the near future. Hiring new nursing employees is part of that plan, and they are coming on board quickly (now at 94). “These fresh staff members will have a chance to work with our regular staff to create new structures, get new systems in place, and make our Veterans feel a new upbeat morale and passion for service. And that’s just the beginning.”

*Masters in Science in Organizational Leadership, Bachelors of Science in Nursing, Board Certified Nurse Executive
Richard Robinson comes to GLA from an impressive background of managing large hospital systems in many arenas. Ranging from for-profit to non-profit, as well as international healthcare consulting, his experience gave him the ability to pull complex systems together to serve the patients. He now has a new challenge at GLA, to manage our large system of ambulatory care centers and community health clinics over a large territory. “I believe in proactive and continued engagement with our community,” he said. “That includes pretty much everybody: Veterans, their family members, our staff, and community stakeholders.”

To achieve that, you won’t find him in the office, as he will be in the field, on the road, visiting all of our health facilities and programs. Right now he’s focused on learning about our Veterans, our staff, our leadership, and the culture at every one of our sites. He also reflected on his time spent while serving in the U. S. Air Force, and in his wide-ranging private sector healthcare career. “You really need to challenge and question the status quo to solve problems – you learn to do that real fast, if you expect to effectively compete in the private sector.” He spoke of his total commitment to engagement and support of his staff and colleagues. His plan now is “focusing on communicating with our VA staff and its Veterans, so that we can secure their input and understanding as how the VA system can best proceed. We will work towards delivering timely access to high quality and cost effective healthcare and support services to our Veterans.”

*Masters of Science in Public Health
KARI A. BLACKWELL, MHA*
Acting Assistant Director

Kari Blackwell came to the VA because both of her grandfathers were World War II Veterans. She said she works at the VA “in their honor”, and also for the women in her family who retired from the Army. She commented that Veterans’ service in World War II was critical to the history of our country, as were all conflicts that the USA has faced, and that all of our Veterans have made a contribution that she works to acknowledge every day.

When asked about her current duties at GLA, she replied, “I feel like a cheerleader for the support services.” While the health care at GLA is amazing, Kari stated that it’s the logistics teams that make it all possible. She feels that her task is to make sure that they get what they need to get the job done. She also pointed out that there are the highest number of Veterans in the employees she supervises: GLA Police is 100% Veteran, and many other services have a high percentage of Veterans. “These employees are Veterans, who served their country, and now they are here serving their fellow Veterans at GLA, which is pretty marvelous. And I am here to support them, get them what they need, and enable them to do their jobs successfully.”

*Masters of Health Administration

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