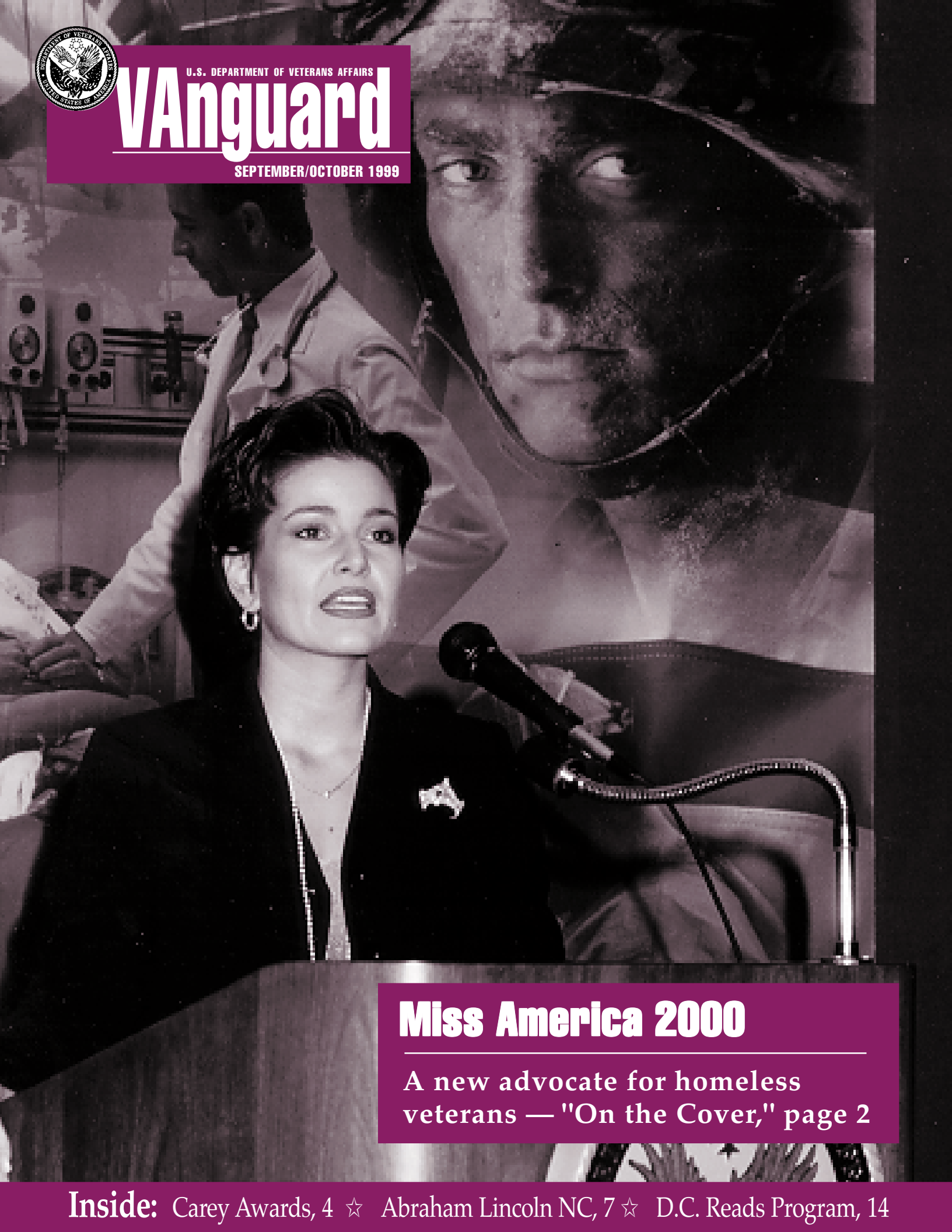




U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

# Vanguard

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 1999



## Miss America 2000

A new advocate for homeless veterans — "On the Cover," page 2

## CONTENTS

- Carey Awards 4  
*Innovation, teamwork honored*
- 2nd One VA Conference 6  
*500 employees attend in Atlanta*
- Cemetery Dedication 7  
*Abraham Lincoln NC opens in Illinois*
- Golden Age Games 8  
*Participants go for the gold in New York*
- Partnership Awards 10  
*VA facilities receive national honor*
- HACU Interns 13  
*VA hosts its largest class yet*
- D.C. Reads Program 14  
*VACO employees lend support*

## COLUMNS 17-20

### On the Cover:

The newly crowned Miss America, Heather Renee French, visited patients and staff at the Lexington VAMC in her home state of Kentucky. The daughter of a disabled Vietnam veteran, French has selected homeless veterans as the cause she will support during her reign. Look for more coverage of her activities on behalf of homeless veterans in future issues of VAnguard.

### VAnguard

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# INTRODUCING

Jim Brown

When he helped initiate the minority veterans program at the St. Petersburg, Fla., VA Regional Office, Jim Brown never imagined that it would become one of the largest and most active in the country. The success of the program can be attributed to Brown, whose character and concern are perhaps best reflected in his personal motto: "Regardless of race, color, creed or gender, all veterans are of the minority."

As the program's coordinator, Brown is responsible for reaching out to and encouraging an estimated 185,000 minority veterans to come to VA and receive the care and benefits for which they are eligible. He works side-by-side with local chapters of the NAACP, Hispanic societies and Native American organizations, and has traveled more than 14,000 miles and participated in 115 outreach events in his efforts to reach minority veterans.

Unfortunately, Brown says, "Many minority veterans don't even apply for benefits and they don't tend to get involved in veterans organizations." He thinks this is because they just don't "trust the system." His task is further complicated by the fact that minorities make up nearly half of Florida's homeless veteran population.

To reach these veterans, Brown has helped conduct 11 stand downs — where homeless veterans can get showers, hot meals and learn about VA's many services. "Stand downs are there to get them off the street, to educate them...with education comes awareness and with awareness we are beating this thing," said Brown.

Brown's tireless efforts, which include working on many weekends and holidays, have brought him both state and national recognition. During the past 12 months, he has appeared on five television programs, two radio talk shows and was interviewed for articles in three veterans magazines. In addition, Brown represents VA on the Board of Directors for the Homeless Emergency Project Inc., as well as several local homeless and veteran advocacy

groups. "When I visit Florida, I always call on Jim — he is one of our star coordinators," said Willie L. Hensley, director of the Center for Minority Veterans in VA Central Office.

A native of Florida, Brown has been with the St. Petersburg VARO since 1991. Prior to that, he was a veterans service officer with the Florida Department

of Veterans Affairs and also served 29 years in the United States Air Force. Jim Brown's reputation and credibility are known throughout the state. Since initiating the minority veterans program, more than 700 veterans have traveled to the St. Petersburg office to see him. His dedication to the minority veterans program led his colleagues there to recently name him Employee of the Quarter.

While the majority of Brown's outreach efforts have been directed to urban areas, where most minority veterans are located, his future plans for the program include expanding his outreach to minority veterans in rural areas of Florida, as well. "Minority veterans and dependents in these areas are equally deserving of our services," he said. □

By Matt Bristol



Togo D. West, Jr.  
Secretary of  
Veterans Affairs



Our VA mission of service and care for veterans requires a high-performing workforce. Harassment, including sexual harassment in the

workplace, impairs our ability to perform our mission and demeans us all. It cannot be permitted.

Harassment is unwelcome verbal or physical conduct based on an employee's race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, disability, or sexual orientation. It is unlawful if it unreasonably interferes with an individual's work performance or creates an intimidating, hostile, or abusive working environment. It also undermines the integrity of the employment relationship, weakens morale, and creates a harmful and threatening atmosphere. I embrace a three-part fundamental strategy to fight harassment, which I am requiring all managers and senior executives to follow.

The first part is prevention. Education and deterrence are critical to preventing sexual and other forms of harassment and discrimination. VA employees must know the full meaning of harassment, its impact on the work environment, and what actions will occur should employees be found to have engaged in or suffered from it.

The second aspect is immediate and aggressive executive action. VA will swiftly and fully investigate complaints of harassment. Our new Office of Resolution Management (ORM) has independent authority to thoroughly investigate allegations of discrimination, including sexual harassment, and to elevate allegations of sexual harassment to the appropriate executive level. When notified by ORM of a complaint, senior VA management is respon-

## A Three-Part Strategy to Fight Workplace Harassment in VA

sible for 1) immediately intervening to correct the problem, 2) communicating to the victim his or her right to pursue a complaint of discrimination, and 3) providing for the victim's safety and security. VA must seek to ensure that no employee is subject to retaliation because he or she has alleged or cooperated in the investigation of alleged unlawful harassment.

Last, should an investigation reveal that misconduct occurred, we will take appropriate disciplinary and adverse action, up to and including removal, against those who engage in harassing behavior or other discriminatory conduct, or who retaliate against any VA employee who cooperates, participates, or testifies in cases involving alleged harassment or discrimination. Appropriate action will also be taken against any supervisor or manager who condones or fails to act promptly to correct harassment brought to his or her attention.

Finally, we will offer corrective action to any employee found to be a victim of harassment in an effort to make the victim whole. If you

believe you have been subjected to sexual or other prohibited harassment, you should report it immediately to a supervisor, any higher level manager, an Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) Counselor in ORM, a union representative if you are a member of a bargaining unit, the Office of Inspector General, or the local EEO Program Manager.

You may also contact the Office of Civil Rights for the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) or the Office of Civil Rights for the Veterans Health Administration (VHA). Please remember that employees who want to file a formal complaint of harassment and preserve their legal rights must contact an EEO Counselor within 45 days of the occurrence of the conduct believed to be unlawful harassment. To reach an EEO counselor, you may contact your local ORM servicing office or call 1-888-RES-EEO1 (1-888-737-3361).

Our success depends upon the willingness of each VA employee to practice fairness, respect, and tolerance. Your full cooperation and adherence to the law is expected. □

## President Signs VA's 2000 Budget Bill

President Clinton signed the Departments of Veterans Affairs, Housing and Urban Development, and Independent Agencies FY 2000 appropriations bill on October 20. He approved a VA appropriation of \$44.3 billion for FY 2000, including more than \$19 billion for medical care. This is an increase of \$800 million over the amended president's budget request for medical care.

Also, the appropriation includes a \$5 million increase for medical and prosthetic research. The approved bill includes a decrease of almost \$1.5 million from the president's original budget request for medical administration and miscellaneous operating expenses, nearly \$3.3 million below the 1999 level.

Prior to the Congressional conference meeting on the VA appropriation bill held on October 7, Conference Committee staff met with representatives from the White House to finalize an agreement for this spending bill. The approved conference bill met the White House spending levels. The agreement provided a \$1.7 billion increase over the 1999 level for medical care without an emergency contingent funds designation.

The signed bill includes an increase in funding for Grants for State Extended Care Facilities (up \$50 million) and Grants for State Veterans Cemeteries (up \$14 million). □



## 1999 Carey Awards

# Winners Honored for Innovation, Teamwork



Grand Junction, Colo., VAMC primary care team members John McElroy, physician's assistant (left), and Tiberiu D. Corduban, M.D., look over patient files.

Innovative programs and an emphasis on teamwork were cited by the staff of the Grand Junction, Colo., VA Medical Center as their keys to success in winning the 1999 Robert W. Carey Quality Award. Established in 1992, the Carey Award recognizes organizations within VA that excel in quality management while providing an effective quality transformation model.

The Grand Junction VAMC's road to success began in 1988 with the development of a creative, team-based approach to providing primary care. This approach has since become the model for VA medical centers throughout the nation.

"Our primary care teams follow their patients through any type of procedure, forming a virtual circle of care around each patient," said Dr. Kurt Schlegelmilch, the medical center's director. A physician, nurse, clerk and a social worker make up the "virtual circle of care" by coordinating and overseeing all of a patient's needs. In the past, a different health care provider might have treated patients each time they visited the facility.

Other programs leading to Grand Junction's success include hosting the National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic — where amputees, paraplegic and blind veterans are

given the opportunity to experience thrills they never dreamed possible, and the opening of a community-based outpatient clinic designed to serve an estimated 8,000 veterans.

The other award winners also reflected innovation and teamwork. During the Carey Award symposium,

employees of the Florida National Cemetery Complex (FNC), winner in the Cemetery category, said that when Ron Pemberton arrived as director, he brought leadership that emphasized the ability of teams to accomplish more than individuals.

The staff teams developed a Phase III construction project, increasing cremated and in-ground burial space by 45,000 gravesites. They partnered with state authorities to identify alternative water sources for irrigation, reducing water costs 100 percent. "This has been one of the most rewarding projects I have ever seen NCA go into," said Pemberton. "We are saving thousands of gallons of water from the

Florida aquifers and also saving lots of taxpayer dollars."

The VA Ann Arbor, Mich., Healthcare System won in the Health Care category by setting new standards for both VA and private health care providers. Its Picture Archive and Communication System (PACS), one of the few fully filmless radiology systems in the world, is among the medical center's innovations.

"PACS produces higher quality images while eliminating the storage requirements and costs associated with film," said Tom Sklis, administrative officer of radiology at the medical center.

Another innovation is Ann Arbor's transition to an outpatient cardiac care program. The outpatient focus allows the medical center to treat as many as 300 additional patients per year and has become a model for several VA facilities. "We have tripled our savings since moving to the outpatient arena," said Dr. Mark Starling, chief of cardiology. According to Starling, technological advances will allow the Ann Arbor VAMC to lead VA and the health care industry into the 21st century.

The St. Paul, Minn., VA Regional Office and Insurance Center, winner in the Benefits Services category, uses several innovative approaches in the delivery of veterans benefits. Among them, a newly developed Automated Response System that has provided services to more than 600,000 callers in this year alone —

## 1999 Robert W. Carey Awards

### Trophy Winner

Grand Junction, Colo., VA Medical Center

### Category Winners

#### Health Care

VA Ann Arbor, Mich.,  
Healthcare System

#### Benefits Services

St. Paul, Minn., VA  
Regional Office and  
Insurance Center

#### National Cemeteries

Florida National  
Cemetery Complex





VA Ann Arbor, Mich., Healthcare System Chief of Cardiology Mark Starling, M.D. (left), performs an outpatient cardiac catheterization with Cardiology Fellow Sharlene Day, M.D.



VA Under Secretary for Benefits Joe Thompson presents a Scissors Award — one of three the St. Paul, Minn., VA Regional Office and Insurance Center has received for innovations in benefits delivery — to Loan Production Section team leader Grace Cooper as fellow team members look on. The facility's Regional Loan Center Assistant Chief Jon Helgason and facility Director Ronald J. Henke are at right.

callers who would have been lost under the old system. A post-decision review team, a call away at "1-800-Call-George," has been established to offer veterans a single point of contact for following benefits claims, obtaining information and voicing their concerns. With five Hammer Awards and three Scissors Awards, the regional office has consistently provided quality customer service to veterans and their families.

The Carey Award judges gave the Manchester, N.H., VA Regional Office the Achievement Award for

the work of its labor/management partnership council in improving services to New Hampshire's 135,000 veterans and their families. The partnership council fosters employee empowerment, continuous improvement and quality training. In 1990, the Manchester VARO established VA's prototype Regional Loan Center, serving as a model for eight other centers across the nation. The awards were presented by VA Secretary Togo D. West, Jr., during a recent ceremony in Washington. □

By Matt Bristol

## Kizer Dedicates Memorial Rose Garden



Six red Veterans' Honor™ rose bushes were planted and a bronze plaque honoring VA health-care system employees was donated and dedicated by Dr. Kenneth W. Kizer, former VA Under Secretary for Health, at Willamette National Cemetery in Portland, Ore., in August.

Dr. Kizer told those gathered for the dedication ceremony that the rose garden was inspired by the memory of his late father, Homer Martin Kizer, who was buried at Willamette in 1958. Among those participating in the ceremony were several members of the Royal Rosarians, official ambassadors of Portland, the "Rose City."

The plaque reads: "This memorial rose garden is dedicated to the employees of the Department of Veterans Affairs Veterans Health Administration for their outstanding service to veterans by Kenneth W. Kizer, M.D., M.P.H., Under Secretary for Health. It is inspired by the memory of Homer Martin Kizer who is interred at this cemetery."

The rose garden will continue to grow as additional rose bushes are donated. The Willamette National Cemetery volunteer garden club helps landscape the cemetery grounds. Above, Dr. Kizer accepts a plaque from Bill Ihle, of Jackson & Perkins, the Portland-based company that developed the Veterans' Honor rose at Dr. Kizer's suggestion. The plaque includes a photo from the May dedication of the rose at Arlington National Cemetery. □



## Atlanta One VA Conference

# 500 Attendees Make Commitments to Action



Kathleen Pachomski, R.N., reports on potential actions that representatives of the Memphis VAMC and the Nashville VARO decided their facilities could undertake. Listening are host/News Chief Jim Deykin and Sarah Carter. Pachomski and Carter are from the Memphis VAMC.

**W**

ith football-style team rallies pitting Alabama against Mississippi, and the Veterans Health

Administration against the Veterans Benefits Administration, takeoffs on VA versus veteran news interviews, and down-home discussions at a fictional Bubba's Catfish House, the second One VA conference finished in high gear.

The wrap-up session of the Atlanta regional conference in early September had more than 500 people cheering for their state and local team members, who gave hilarious and heartfelt presentations about the commitments they had made to each other with the goal of better serving veterans.

In Bay Pines, Fla., Medical Center Director Tom Weaver, Acting Regional Office Director Sandy Bowron and Florida National Cemetery Complex Assistant Director David Wells pledged to become a news media board. The board will take local success stories — employee heroes and new services — to the media and develop a file of subject experts and future events to publicize.

A Mississippi group pledged to combine VBA and National Cemetery Administration information into the VHA Web site and newslet-

ter, to produce a staff directory including all three administrations, to give medical center staff access to veterans benefits records, and to train medical staff on the compensation and pension awards process.

Advising participants to empower themselves to carry out their ideas, Deputy

Secretary Hershel

Gober said, "In case anyone gets in your way, here is my e-mail address: [hershel.gober@mail.va.gov](mailto:hershel.gober@mail.va.gov)." He promised to reply.

Gober said his personal One VA goal is to take care of veterans and make employees' jobs easier. To make it easier for employees to take care of veterans effectively, Gober announced he was directing the conference Design and Implementation Committee to disseminate best practices in serving veterans that will be reported quarterly to headquarters. "If someone has a good idea, steal it and make it better," the Deputy Secretary urged. The committee will also examine national operational issues that surface through the field reports.

Citing the 46 different initiatives Atlanta participants proposed to implement themselves or at

the national level, Deputy Under Secretary for Benefits Nora Egan exhorted, "Become champions when you go home."

Acting Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs Roger Rapp said not just field facilities but staff offices that help and advise the administrations are important. "Don't forget to include them in these One VA initiatives," he added.

VHA's Chief Network Officer, Kenneth Clark, told participants even though they had now developed ways to improve the compensation and pension process and made plans for information guides and local councils, they should not view these activities as *extra* work but simply as the basic work they have to do. The local initiative participants most frequently voted to adopt was creation of local councils to coordinate activities of VA components.

Reflecting on the journalistic theme of the conference, Clark added, "We're all reporters on the VA beat. We should not just bemoan how the media treat VA. We are VA and have to portray One VA in our attitudes." □

By Jo Schuda



Kathy Bishop, chief information officer for VISN 8 (Bay Pines, Fla.) explains the Automated Medical Information Exchange (AMIE II) program in Florida and Puerto Rico to (left to right): Mitch Hinkle of the Paralyzed Veterans of America (Atlanta), Dr. Neil Nusbaum of VISN 5 (Linthicum, Md.), and Joe Johnson and Rebecca Chavez of the Beckley, W.Va., VAMC. AMIE II is a pilot project of data sharing between VHA and VBA facilities to streamline eligibility determination and claims processing.

# Abraham Lincoln NC Dedicated in Illinois



An Abraham Lincoln re-enactor read the Gettysburg Address during the dedication ceremony.

Nearly 1,500 people braved a steady downpour to attend the dedication of Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery in Illinois on October 3. The new cemetery, VA's 117<sup>th</sup> and the seventh in Illinois, is located south of Joliet, about 50 miles from downtown Chicago.

VA Deputy Secretary Hershel Gober delivered the keynote address, and former Illinois Congressman George E. Sangmeister, chairman of the Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery Veterans Support Committee, served as master of ceremonies.

Highlights of the ceremony

included two flyovers by the Illinois Army National Guard and an Abraham Lincoln re-enactor reading the Gettysburg Address. The 16<sup>th</sup> president, who is buried in a private cemetery in Springfield, Ill., is considered to be the founder of the country's system of national cemeteries for veterans. In 1862, he signed legislation

authorizing the purchase of cemetery grounds to be used as national cemeteries "for soldiers who shall have died in the service of the country."

Fourteen national cemeteries were established that first year. By 1870, the remains of nearly 300,000 Union dead had been buried in 73 national cemeteries around the nation.

The \$19 million national cemetery that bears Lincoln's name will provide more than 400,000 burial spaces once the 982-acre site is fully developed. The 150-acre first phase project will contain approximately 27,000 gravesites, including 2,000 pre-placed graveliners, 3,000

columbarium niches and 2,300 garden niches for cremated remains.

Also included in the first phase of construction are the cemetery's entrance area, a public information center with automated kiosk for quick information access, an administration and maintenance complex, a flag/assembly area, a memorial walkway, committal service shelters and roadway and utility systems.

With additional expansion projects, the cemetery is projected to provide burial space for eligible veterans and their families well into the next century. More than one million veterans in northeastern Illinois and northwestern Indiana live within 75 miles of the site. Before the new cemetery opened, the closest VA national cemeteries were 95 miles to the south and 135 miles to the west.

The new cemetery is the second largest national cemetery, after Calverton National Cemetery in Long Island, N.Y., and will be a focal point for patriotic observances and ceremonies. Two more VA national cemeteries are expected to open this fiscal year: Dallas-Fort Worth National Cemetery in Texas, and the Ohio Western Reserve National Cemetery near Cleveland. □

## Punchbowl Marks 50th Anniversary in V-J Day Ceremony

When the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, better known as Punchbowl, was dedicated in 1949, Taro Suzuki was on duty as the new cemetery's first superintendent. Fifty years later, the now 95-year-old Suzuki was on hand to help celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this national shrine.

Suzuki joined VA and military officials, state and local leaders, veterans groups and local citizens at the V-J Day ceremony on September 2.

Keynote speaker Roger Rapp, VA acting undersecretary for memorial affairs, told the audience of about 300 that the Department is making improvements to the cemetery, including a \$1.5 million addition to the columbarium, a \$4

million rim stabilization project, and a new administration building that will include a computerized grave locator.

In his remarks, Cemetery Director Gene Castagnetti thanked the VSOs, local military commanders and citizens of Honolulu for the volunteer support they have provided over the years. "You all contributed to the success of making this cemetery an international symbol of sacrifice," he said.

Punchbowl is the final resting place for more than 41,400 veterans and their family members, and attracts more than 5 million visitors each year. The Army began turning the dry, empty volcano crater into a cemetery in 1948 to bury the remains of thousands of U.S. servicemen

killed in the Pacific during World War II. At the time, the remains were being brought to Hawaii and stored in mausoleums.

Burials of 12,000 World War II servicemen began in January 1949 at the 112-acre cemetery. It was opened to the public in July of that year, and formally dedicated on V-J Day.

In addition to honoring the community for their support, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration also recognized 17 local veterans service organizations for participating in the cemetery's adopt-a-tree program. The 17 monkeypod trees the VSOs "adopted" will line a new access road to the cemetery and will contain plaques bearing the names of the VSOs. □



# Turning Gray Into Gold in Upstate New York



Former L.A. Dodger Maury Wills (second from right) played golf with Golden Age Games participants, handed out medals and spoke at the Closing Ceremony.

Network, this year's Games were held in Geneva, N.Y., on the campus of Hobart and William Smith Colleges. And although the competition and camaraderie were as strong as ever, it was clear that many long-time participants and staff felt the loss of two well-known figures at these Games — Bill Givens and Ivan Kornutik.

Givens, a supervisory recreation therapist at the Topeka, Kan., VA Medical Center who had served as the Games' national meet director for many years, died of liver cancer in January. A memorial

award in his name has been created to honor the local meet director for the Golden Age Games each year.

"Wherever he went, he made a positive difference in the lives of others," said Dewayne Vaughan, national director of the Golden Age Games. "And perhaps that's the greatest thing you can say about anybody."

Givens' experience and enthusiasm for this event played a key role in the selection of the facility where he spent his entire 25-year VA career — the Topeka, Kan., VA Medical Center — as the host for the 2000 National Veterans Golden Age Games, Vaughan said.

Kornutik, the first National Veterans Golden Age Games Most Inspirational Athlete Award winner in 1990, died earlier this year at the age of 86 after a long battle with cancer. A World War II combat veteran from Bayonne, N.J., he was known for his positive attitude, winning spirit and ability to inspire fellow athletes.

Though totally deaf, Kornutik had no problem communicating. Whenever he was unable to read the lips of his partner in conversation, he

would flash a small sign that read: "I'm deaf. Please speak slowly and distinctly. If that doesn't work, write me a note!" One way or another, he managed to get his message across.

A paraplegic, Kornutik also competed in the National Veterans Wheelchair Games, where he was often the oldest participant. While in his 80s, he learned to ski at the National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic. And with a 1995 win at the National Veterans Creative Arts Festival for one of his metal sculptures, Kornutik had the distinction of being the only veteran to have participated in all four of VA's annual national recreation therapy events.

Nine years after Kornutik captured the honor, Houston Brumit, a 77-year-old World War II Army veteran from Denison, Texas, was selected as this year's Most Inspirational Athlete Award winner. He has competed in the Games steadily since 1993, after hearing about the event from a national Games official at the Bonham, Texas, VA Medical Center.

Brumit credits staying active in sports with helping him maintain excellent physical fitness, and keeping him as healthy as he is today. "My health has always been

**R**ain showers may have sent participants and volunteers scurrying for the shelter of tents set up on the scenic lakefront grounds of a local American Legion post during the opening ceremony for the 13<sup>th</sup> National Veterans Golden Age Games, but they didn't dampen the spirits of the more than 400 athletes.

"I'm not going to let anything rain on my parade," said first-time participant Ken Zavis, 61, from the Hines, Ill., VA Medical Center, echoing the sentiments of many others. He had worked hard to get there, he said, and intended to savor every moment of the experience.

Co-sponsored by VA and the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S.A. (VFW), the National Veterans Golden Age Games are open to all U.S. military veterans, 55 or older, currently receiving care at any VA medical facility. Participants compete in events such as swimming, bicycling, horseshoes, bowling, croquet, and a pentathlon.

Hosted by the Canandaigua, N.Y., VA Medical Center and the Upstate New York VA Healthcare



Houston Brumit, winner of the Most Inspirational Athlete Award, competes in horseshoes.





*Offering proof that you're never too old to try something new, 92-year-old Peter Cassullo (foreground), of Bayonne, N.J. — the oldest competitor in this year's Golden Age Games — was participating for the first time.*

good. But staying active also gives you a better frame of mind," he said. "Your mind set is much, much better, and it gives you a better attitude and disposition. Then, too, I like to have fun!"

Among the week's other highlights was a visit by former Los Angeles Dodger Maury Wills, who played golf with participants, handed out medals and spoke at the event's closing ceremony. Wills, now 66, played shortstop and third base in the 1950s and 1960s, and is still the

Dodgers' all-time stolen base champ. A frequent visitor to hospitalized veterans in California, he heard about the Games from a VA employee and wanted to be a part of it.

As the week's activities drew to a close, many competitors said they were already looking forward to the opportunity to challenge themselves and renew old friendships again next year at the 14<sup>th</sup> National Veterans Golden Age Games over the Labor Day weekend, September 3-7, in Topeka. □

## New HR LINK\$ Component Rolling Out to VA Employees

**W**ith the kickoff of fiscal year 2000, another component of HR LINK\$ technology is rolling out to VA employees. Coho, a new software application, will provide position classification to managers and supervisors, enabling them to create and classify job descriptions from their desktop computers. It will automate what is now a manual process performed in the field by human resources (HR) staff. Rollout of this technology began in mid-September.

Currently, managers/supervisors write position descriptions and send them to their HR offices for classification. With HR LINK\$

position classification, managers/supervisors will automatically generate position descriptions, performance standards and rating and interviewing guides. And, just like in the old system, HR LINK\$ position classification uses the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) standards to ensure accuracy and integrity.

But now, managers/supervisors will also classify those positions or Coho will do the classification work and give managers/supervisors immediate feedback on the grade, series and title.

The rollout of Employee Self Service (ESS) from HR LINK\$ to all facilities should be completed soon,

ending the first phase of delivering HR LINK\$ technologies to VA employees. By the end of November, all employees will be able to make personal and benefits record changes and get important information about their employment status.

They will do this either by using a touch-tone telephone and the supporting interactive voice response (IVR) system or by calling the Shared Service Center and requesting the change. Very soon, employees will also be able to make these same changes from their desktop work computers or from a HR LINK\$ access point at their facilities. The access points have personal computers, printers and telephones linked directly to the HR LINK\$ applications.

As facilities are brought on line to use ESS, employees will receive a personal identification number (PIN) through the mail at their home address. The PIN and Social Security number are needed to access HR LINK\$ for all transactions. Types of transactions employees will be able to do with ESS include:

- change name, address, marital or dependent status, emergency contacts;
- change life or health insurance information;
- change federal withholding, state or local tax status and Earned Income Tax credit information;
- arrange direct deposit for paychecks and savings allotments;
- allocate deductions for the Combined Federal Campaign, U.S. Savings Bonds and Thrift Savings Plan.

Through ESS, employees can also get information as varied as leave status and union representation. HR LINK\$ is a joint project of the Offices of Financial Management and Human Resources Management and is designed to fully automate human resources and payroll services for VA employees.

For more information about the different phases of technology that will be rolled out, visit the HR LINK\$ web site at [www.hrlinks.aac.va.gov/home/index.htm](http://www.hrlinks.aac.va.gov/home/index.htm). You can also read the latest about HR LINK\$ in the newsletter "The Link," distributed every few months to employees at every VA facility. □

# VA Facilities Win National Partnership Awards

**T**he Waco, Texas, VARO and the Shreveport, La., VAMC, along with their union partners, were among six nationwide federal winners of an annual labor-management partnership award. The Kansas City, Mo., VAMC partnership received an honorable mention. The John N. Sturdivant National Partnership Award is given by the National Partnership Council with support from the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), and is named for the former national president of the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE).

"The partnership concept is an evolution in labor-management relations," said Steve Wilbur, public affairs officer at the Waco Regional Office. "Instead of management saying what they want to do, there is a collective effort and determination of the best way of tackling a problem."

What the VARO tackled was the problem besetting many VAROs — a backup of claims and more phone calls from veterans than staff could handle quickly. Part of the solution was to merge the duties of benefits counselors and claim adjudicators, putting more of both of them on the phones and into claims processing.

Another was to use a team approach to both the work and the monitoring of members' own performance, with the group handling claims from inception to award. Thirteen supervisory positions were eliminated, the salary savings put into positions to increase production.

Making these changes required negotiations with the AFGE local

unit, which also produced alternative work schedules and incentive awards. Not only did management listen to union representatives, it listened to veterans at town hall meetings and involved the union in addressing veterans' concerns. The result has been a 25 percent reduction in pending claims and elimination of telephone busy signals. VARO Director Jerry McRae and AFGE Local 2571 President Barbara Cook accepted the award in Washington, D.C.

The Shreveport, La., VAMC Partnership Council approved a quality and cost consultation by primary care staff and administrators which resulted in some adjustments to procedures. Their findings in fact brought more resources to primary care, improving employee attitudes and patient care. With the union's sign-on, the added funding permitted temporary transfer of medical staff from other parts of the hospital.

One impetus for succeeding as partners at Shreveport was to avert staffing decreases by improving efficiency and treating more patients. Union representatives are active on the primary care restructuring team, helping employees adjust to the changed delivery of health care. That involvement is credited with a large increase in the number of patients seen by primary care providers and reduction by more than 50 percent over three years in the number of bed days of care.

Union participation in medical center committees and performance improvement teams contributed to a greater number of mental health

patients receiving post-discharge care as well as higher overall patient ratings for courtesy.

AFGE sponsors "lunch and learn" sessions to keep employees aware of major local and national issues. It has worked with nursing staff to create a training program that allows nursing assistants and LPNs to develop skills to become health technicians (with the attendant progression in grade level). Billy Valentine, VAMC director, and Shirley Carson, president of AFGE Local 2525, accepted the Sturdivant Award.

In Kansas City, management and AFGE Local 2663 withdrew all pending formal labor-management disputes and moved to resolve them through interest-based problem solving. The union gained membership on management committees to assure its pre-decisional involvement in major issues and also joined a work group that recommended reorganization along product lines. The partnership council has recommended solutions in problem work areas that have increased productivity and has participated in customer service retreats and quality improvement teams.

All three facility partnerships have shifted markedly to alternative dispute resolution, reducing the number of formal arbitrations.

The NPC Awards have showcased 41 partnerships since 1995 and recognized their success in such areas as saving money, increasing productivity and improving service. □

By Jo Schuda

## Search Commission Named to Recruit New VHA Chief

The search is on for a new VA Under Secretary for Health to succeed Dr. Kenneth W. Kizer, who asked the President to withdraw his nomination for a second term. A nine-member search commission has been formed to recommend candidates.

Under a representation formula dictated by law, the search commission's composition reflects interests in such areas as clinical care, research and education.

Deputy Secretary Hershel W.

Gober and retired Congressman G.V. "Sonny" Montgomery, former chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, are among the members. Other members were drawn from military and private sector health care, university affiliates and veterans service organizations.

The position of Under Secretary for Health is a presidential appointment for a term of four years subject to Senate confirmation. Under federal law, the search commission

recommends at least three candidates. The Secretary of Veterans Affairs forwards the list to the President along with any comments by the Secretary.

VA's Under Secretary for Health directs more than 200,000 full- and part-time employees in one of the world's largest health-care systems. Deputy Under Secretary for Health Dr. Thomas Garthwaite is currently serving as Acting Under Secretary for Health. □



# NPR Presents Welfare-to-Work Hammer to VA

**O**n behalf of the vice president, the National Partnership for Reinventing Government (NPR) presented the Hammer Award to Secretary Togo D. West, Jr., in a standing-room-only ceremony in VA Central Office in September. Morley Winograd, NPR director, presented the honor for VA's exceptional achievements implementing the President's Welfare-to-Work initiative. Winograd also presented framed awards to recognize the efforts of nine VA organizations or field facilities that hired the most employees in that program as of September 30, 1998.

They were: VA medical centers in Phoenix (43 hires), New Orleans (38), Lexington, Ky. (35), Dallas (35), Tampa, Fla. (32) and Oklahoma City (31); the Veterans Benefits Administration Records Management Center,

St. Louis (24); the National Cemetery Administration (17); and the Veterans Canteen Service. A substantial number of employees hired at VAMCs work in the canteen.

The award recognized VA exceeding its goal of hiring 800 welfare recipients by the end of fiscal year 1998. At that time, 1,284 had been hired. As of August 31, 1999, the number reached almost 1,400. Ninety-seven individuals, in positions as varied as hospital director, first-line supervisor and human resources specialist, were honored for their recruitment, mentoring and other supportive efforts. More than 40 of them were present for the awards ceremony to receive certificates and "hammer pins."

Secretary West's second annual report to Vice President Al Gore on VA's Welfare-to-Work implementa-

tion cited VA's accomplishment as resulting from the commitment of facility leaders and the collaboration of their staffs with state and local employment counselors and social services agencies.

Training programs for new hires contributed to their productivity and retention as did training guidance for their supervisors. System-wide informational support is available to local Welfare-to-Work coordinators on VA's intranet. In addition, VA contracting officers promoted participation in the national effort by suppliers and contractors. Program officers in VA administrations encouraged other government agencies to use such mechanisms as VA's compensated work therapy program and the purchasing provisions of the Javits-Wagner-O'Day Act. □

## More Hammers...

Teams of VA employees continue to be honored with Vice President Gore's Hammer Awards for their initiatives to cut red tape, streamline operations and save money.

A team at the **Detroit VA Medical Center** received a Hammer Award for their partnership with the Michigan Family Independence Agency, Disability Determination Services (MFIA, DDS) to improve the process of providing VA medical records to that agency. The MFIA, DDS has been given direct access to the Detroit VAMC's computerized medical record database through a modem link.

Results have included a decrease in record processing time from more than 28 days to same-day service for veterans treated at the VAMC, as well as improved quality and fairness in the adjudication of Social Security disability claims. Marginal handling, photocopying and postage costs also have been eliminated for both agencies. The team also received a Scissors Award for this initiative.

The **Indianapolis VA Regional Office** received its second Hammer

Award, this one for its involvement in the 19<sup>th</sup> Star Partnership, a combined effort between the VARO, the Indiana Department of Workforce Development, the Indiana U.S. Department of Labor, Veterans Employment and Training Service, and private resources working together to provide job placement assistance to disabled veterans. Since it was implemented in 1996, more than 600 Indiana disabled veterans have obtained employment through the Partnership.

The VA Cares Team at the **Togus, Maine, VA Medical & Regional Office Center (VAM&ROC)** received a Hammer Award for reinventing the way in which ratings and award letters are delivered to veterans service organizations (VSOs) that serve as Powers of Attorney (POA) for veterans.

When a claim for compensation or pension benefits has been approved and is ready for release, the approving official at the VAM&ROC clicks on an icon that pulls both the rating decision and notification letter into the MS Exchange e-mail system as documents to be sent electronically to the VSO that holds the POA.

Staff no longer need to devote time to printing, collating and preparing the correspondence to be sent through interoffice mail, and the problem of misrouted or lost correspondence has been eliminated.

The **Subsistence Prime Vendor (SPV) Management Team** in VA Central Office received a Hammer Award for reinventing the VHA subsistence procurement process into a consolidated volume group purchasing program that has resulted in cost savings, operational efficiencies and improved quality care. The new direct vendor delivery system has streamlined operations for Acquisition & Materiel Management, Nutrition and Food Service, and Fiscal/Financial Management Services at VA facilities.

The changes in the procurement process resulted in personnel reductions for all three services, reduced distribution costs, and improved patient satisfaction by offering a wider food selection at competitive market prices. This team also received a Scissors Award for their efforts. □

# 'Angel' Helps Bring Tucson VAMC Project to Fruition

*Former POW Madge Ullom set the wheels in motion to get the funding needed to complete the facility's new POW Remembrance Park.*



*Former prisoner of war Madge Ullom cut the ribbon opening Tucson VAMC's POW Remembrance Park.*

In this era of limited resources, it is likely that the director of virtually every VA facility in the country has a “dream sheet” — a list of projects he or she would like to accomplish if only there were funds.

What may distinguish Jonathan H. Gardner, acting director of VISN 18 (Phoenix) and director of the Southern Arizona VA Health Care System, is that he actually had a donor step forward and ask to be permitted to fulfill one of his dreams. The Arizona dreammaker was Lucius D. Legg.

In 1998, as he remembers it, Legg was looking for a way to conclude his annual giving. He asked his good friend, Madeline (Madge) Ullom, whom he knew had been associated with VA for years, to check into the prospects. He could hardly have picked someone with better connections, ideas or background.

In 1942, Ullom had been an Oneill, Nebraska, girl serving as an Army nurse in the Philippines. She was taken captive and held as a prisoner of war (POW) for nearly three years — one of the women later referred to as the Angels of Bataan and Corregidor.

Freed in February 1945, having earned the Bronze Star with two Oak Leaf Clusters and POW Medals, Ullom continued to serve in the Army until her retirement in 1964 as a lieutenant colonel (Lt. Col.).

Always forthright, Ullom articulately testified before the War Crimes Office about the circumstances of her captivity. Although hampered by bouts of recurrent ill health and arthritis as a result of captivity, Ullom moved to the somewhat warmer climate of Arizona and has since kept busy in retirement.

She speaks on veterans' issues, works with many veterans service organizations (VSOs), including the American Defenders of Bataan and Corregidor (ADBC) and American Ex-POWs, and has received numerous honors.

In 1982, Ullom became the first “Angel” to break the silence about her service and post-service circumstances when she was called to testify at hearings held by the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, then investigating the alleged lack of appropriate care for POWs and women. Ullom later served an unprecedented three terms as a

member of VA's National Advisory Committee on POWs — the first female ex-POW to do so.

Legg was well advised that Ullom also knew her way around the local VA facilities. She introduced him to Gardner, who provided Legg with a list of “dream projects.” A Memorial Park project was already underway in front of the main building at the Tucson VAMC, with some concrete curbing having already been poured by a local Navy Seabee reserve battalion volunteering on weekends.

For Legg, the Seabee involvement was the clincher. He fondly recalls his long, positive association with former Seabees while he was a young engineer with El Paso Natural Gas Pipeline, and later, working with other Seabees in the Texas construction industry and at Bechtel.

By March 1999, work was underway to complete the Park with Legg's financial assistance. Legg is quick to point out that VA made the substantive decisions. There are poles for American, POW and all five service flags. The flags are set off by an eagle carved with a chainsaw from remnants of a huge tree felled on the spot by a storm in 1998. Additional contributions to complete the project were provided by local VSOs.

The Tucson VAMC's POW Remembrance Park was dedicated in late July 1999 in remembrance of the sacrifices endured by POWs held captive on foreign soil, and specifically, on behalf of Lt. Col. Madeline M. Ullom. In attendance were VA dignitaries and many ex-POWs. Ullom, still wearing the plastic hospital bracelet from what she described as excellent care at the VA facility for a toe amputation, was there in her wheelchair.

Legg said he anticipates contributing more money to VA projects in the future. “I like the way they do things,” he explained.

“Moreover, I like the people you come in contact with out there. This includes employees, volunteers and patients. Good people, good Americans.” □

**By Alice A. Booher  
Board of Veterans' Appeals**



# VA's HACU Internship Program Growing



Members of the summer 1999 class of HACU interns, the largest class VA has hosted.

**T**he theme for Hispanic Heritage Month this year is "A Vision of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century." Since 1996, the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) has helped VA achieve its vision of a diverse 21<sup>st</sup> century work force through the HACU National Intern Program. In those three years, 150 HACU interns have worked at VA offices, hospitals and clinics across the country. As they train within VA, these young leaders are also being exposed to possible careers with VA.

Idaho State University nursing major Mathew Amonson spent this summer in Tuscaloosa, Ala., working with patients in a psychiatric day program and developing educational materials for them.

Mabel Crescioni, a law student at the University of Puerto Rico, did legal research and writing on tort claims cases handled by the U.S. Attorney's Office in Washington, D.C.

Lori Nuce, a public relations major at Miami's Barry University, worked with news media to promote and publicize national events.

They recently completed ten weeks as Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) interns doing the work they are training for in paid positions with an organization of national scope — the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Mathew, Mabel and Lori were part of VA's largest class of HACU interns yet, 82 students representing

a broad range of interests and disciplines matched by VA's broad and varied operation. Twenty-five of the interns worked at VA Central Office in Washington, D.C., in staff offices ranging from budget to public affairs. The

other 57 students worked at VA facilities across the country; most in VA medical centers and clinics where 80 percent of VA employees work.

This was, by far, the largest VA class of HACU interns since VA began its partnership with the association in 1996 with a grand total of one summer intern. By the end of this year, when 11 HACU students complete their fall VA internships, the Department will have provided paid intern experiences to 162 students — an investment of nearly \$1.5 million.

This is more than an investment in student development — it's an investment in VA's future.

As in the rest of federal government, the percentage of Hispanic employees within the 235,000 VA work force is below that of the private sector. VA's partnership with HACU and its growing HACU internship program are key parts of the Department's plan to increase Hispanic employment in the federal government's second-largest agency.

As Secretary of Veterans Affairs Togo D. West, Jr., said earlier this year at the Hispanic Federal Executives' Summit II conference in Washington:

"We are happy about the growth in [HACU] interns in our Department from a low single-digit number to more than 80 this year."

VA's partnership with HACU promises to grow on a number of fronts. VA has participated in HACU national conferences for the past two

years and received the HACU Partnership of Excellence Award in 1998.

HACU is a national association of higher education institutions established in 1986. It represents Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) where Hispanics constitute a minimum of 25 percent of the total enrollment at either the graduate or undergraduate level and associate members where Hispanics constitute a minimum of ten percent of the total enrollment. The association represents more than 200 colleges and universities that collectively enroll two-thirds of all Hispanics in higher education.

For more information about the VA/HACU partnership, call VA HACU Coordinator Lenore Jacobs at (202) 273-5866. □

By Chris Scheer

## VA Awards 51 New Homeless Assistance Grants

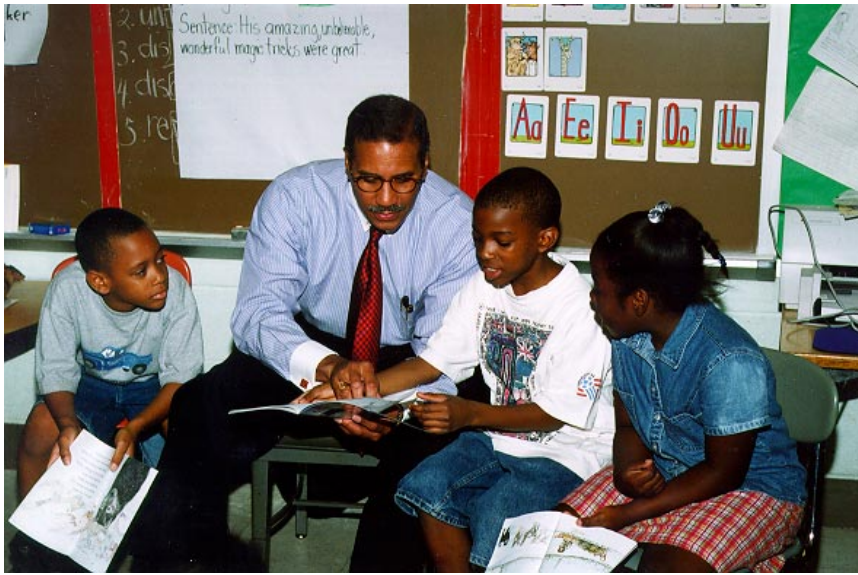
Fifty-one public and private nonprofit groups from 26 states and the District of Columbia will receive grants from VA totaling approximately \$15 million to develop new programs to assist homeless veterans.

The grants, awarded under VA's Homeless Providers Grant and Per Diem Program, range in amount from \$25,000 to nearly \$1.5 million. They will provide up to 65 percent of the cost of acquiring or renovating facilities to be used for housing or service centers. Nearly 100 organizations applied for this year's VA grants.

With this new round of grants, VA has assisted 178 public and private nonprofit grant recipients in 42 states and the District of Columbia, with new recipients in three more states (Arkansas, Hawaii and Mississippi).

VA has awarded more than \$41 million in grants since this program began in 1994. □

# VACO Employees Tutor Local Students



Secretary of Veterans Affairs Togo D. West, Jr., reads with students at Seaton Elementary School during the “D.C. Reads This Summer” program.

**F**or Sheldon Bolasny, an attorney in VA’s Office of the General Counsel, tutoring a student through the “D.C. Reads This Summer” program was particularly meaningful — it was a chance to give something back to a school he had attended years ago. “The opportunity to help the D.C. community, especially Seaton Elementary, the school I attended as a boy, was very heartwarming,” he recalled.

“I found my experience with ‘D.C. Reads’ to be more of a parenting experience than a teacher/student experience. As I tutored DeAndre Williams each week and helped with other students, I was reminded of reading to my own children when they were small. I have read for pleasure throughout my life, a habit instilled in me by my parents.”

Bolasny is one of more than 80 VA Central Office employees who, in spite of one of the worst heat waves in the history of the nation’s capital, turned out in record numbers to participate in “D.C. Reads This Summer.” VA’s Human Resources staff from the Career Transition Center and the Office of Public Affairs coordinated the training of VA volunteers, and worked with the Office of Administration to provide

transportation.

“D.C. Reads This Summer,” an initiative triggered by the President’s Executive Memorandum “Strengthening our Commitment to Service,” paired federal employees with children at 25 D.C. public elementary schools and ten community sites. VA employees supported Seaton and Van Ness Elementary Schools by tutoring first- and second-graders in reading and literacy skills. Employees committed to tutor one hour per week for six weeks.

Secretary of Veterans Affairs Togo D. West, Jr., who gave strong support to the program, joined VA staff to read with the students at a session at both Seaton and Van Ness. West, the son of a schoolteacher and a principal, had nothing but high praise for this cooperative effort.

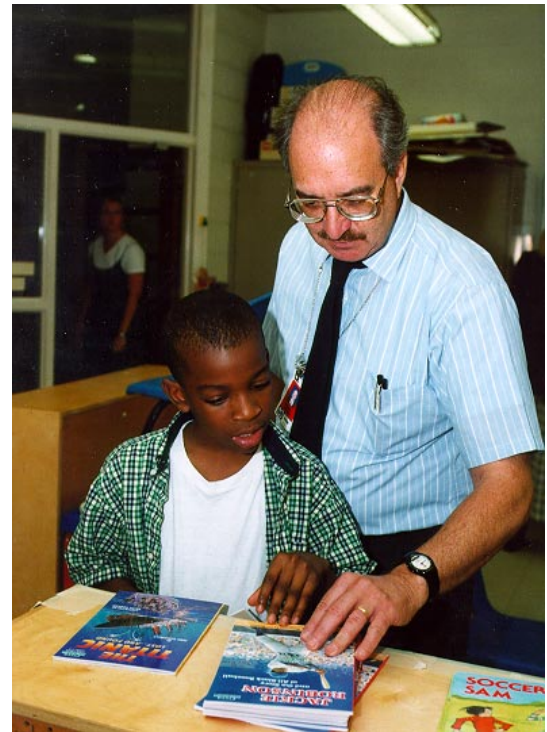
In his welcoming remarks to students at Van Ness Elementary, the Secretary asked, “Has anyone here ever traveled to China?” After some thought, the students acknowledged they had not. “Well, the wonder-

ful thing about reading,” West told them, “is that it enables one to visit all kinds of people, learn about different cultures and climates, and travel to lands as far away as China, without ever leaving your chair.”

VA Budget Analyst Kathleen Hamilton’s experience perhaps best describes the children’s response to the Secretary and to all the tutors. Her student, Hannah During, was always waiting at the door with her book of the day. When the session was over, Hannah’s question each week was the same: “Are you coming back next week?” To which Hamilton always replied, “I wouldn’t miss it for the world!”

Sharon Draves of VA’s Compensation and Pension Service believes that a commitment for the entire school year would enable tutors to make an even more significant contribution to their student’s development. Based on the success of this summer program, plans are underway to expand the program through the school year. □

**By Pam Gates**



VA attorney Sheldon Bolasny and Seaton student DeAndre Williams choose a book to read together.



# Stories of Remarkable Centenarian Veterans Emerging Through French Medal Campaign



World War I veteran Henry R. Gulbranson, 106, and his granddaughter, Sandi Horack, a rating analyst at the Milwaukee VA Regional Office, hold certificates presented by the VARO and the County of Waukesha, Wis., at the French Legion of Honor medal presentation ceremony.

**A**s VA continues to help the government of France identify American World War I veterans who are eligible to receive the French Legion of Honor, that nation's highest award, stories of remarkable centenarian veterans are emerging all over the country.

Henry Gulbranson, a 106-year-old veteran from New Berlin, Wis., who received the Legion of Honor in August, has a special connection to VA — his granddaughter, Sandi Horack, is a rating analyst at the Milwaukee VA Regional Office.

Horack, who said her grandfather rarely speaks of his wartime service except to say that it was an experience he hopes no one ever has to go through again, was at his side along with other family members when he received the award from French Counsel General Jean-Rene Gehan.

"All the French people," Gehan told Gulbranson, "have kept in their memories the terrible war that took family and friends. Dear Mr. Gulbranson, you brought the French people hope."

"I want to thank each and every one of you for being so good to me," Gulbranson said when it was his turn to speak, perhaps not realizing that the thanks he offered was not necessary.

team to deliver ammunition for field guns.

Today, at 111, he is the oldest veteran in Tennessee — a state treasure. He still leads an active life, residing with his daughter and son-in-law in Mt. Juliet, Tenn. When his daughter broke her hip recently, the family needed temporary care for Painter, so Murfreesboro, Tenn., VAMC's Nursing Home Care Unit admitted him for a few days.

But because Painter takes no medications and needs the aid of only a walker to get around, the staff mostly just needed to keep a watchful eye on him and make sure that he ate well. Eating is a particular pleasure for Painter, especially the five eggs he downs each day. He also drinks lots of water and mineral oil.

When Painter's son-in-law arrived to pick him up after a few days' stay in the nursing home, most of the staff went outside to see him off. As he hopped into the family pickup truck, he paused to call out, "I hate to go, but I have to!"

At 103, former World War I Army Corps nurse Dorothy Kohlars is the oldest veteran in Barstow, Calif. She also is one of only a handful of WWI female veterans eligible to receive the Legion of Honor. Late last year, in fact, she became the first American woman to receive the award.

To be eligible to receive the honor, veterans must have served in one of three battles fought on French soil during World War I — John G. Painter fought in all three. As a member of the U.S. Army's artillery unit, he drove a four-horse

The Massachusetts native joined the Army Nurse Corps in 1918, and served on the Meuse-Argonne battlefield in northern France, where she was one of about 200 nurses who tended the wounded. Kohlars was visibly moved as French Counsel General Guy Yelda presented the award to her. "It's so lovely and so nice of the French to honor me," she said.

Only living American World War I veterans who fought in France are eligible to receive the Legion of Honor. An estimated 3,400 American World War I veterans are still living, about half of whom are believed to have served in France. To date, approximately 400 medals have been presented. □

## VA's First Chief Actuary Appointed

Stephen A. Meskin has been appointed VA's first chief actuary. His duties include developing an estimate and projection of the nation's veteran population, analyzing veteran demographics, forecasting workload for VA programs, and studying the cost effects of changing benefit amounts or eligibility rules.

The chief actuary oversees the work of the Actuarial Analysis and Data Development Service, which is responsible for designing and conducting the National Survey of Veterans, collecting and disseminating existing data within VA, establishing data exchanges with other government and private sector organizations, and identifying and obtaining access to useful non-VA data.

Meskin has more than 25 years of experience as an actuary. He came to VA from the private sector, where he most recently was consulting actuary at Actuarial Sciences Associates. Before taking that position, he was vice president at The Segal Company. □

# VBA Opens Point of Presence on the Internet

The evolution of the Internet is offering VA innovative new ways to provide better service to veterans, particularly in the area of benefits delivery. At the Philadelphia VA Regional Office and Insurance Center (VARO&IC) recently, Under Secretary for Benefits Joseph Thompson cut the ribbon to officially open an important new road toward realizing the potential of the Internet to provide information and assistance to veterans and their beneficiaries.

The Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA)'s Point of Presence (POP) on the Internet provides a gateway to allow employees, veterans, veterans service organizations and other stakeholders worldwide access to VBA's information systems. The Internet POP gives VBA its own system to allow secure access to



*VA Under Secretary for Benefits Joseph Thompson cuts the ribbon officially opening VBA's point of presence on the Internet as Herb Rubel, VFW, and Dick McCleary, AmVets, look on.*

benefits information.

Initially, the VBA Internet server will improve access to information systems supporting VBA employees and VSO representatives. And for

the first time, veterans will have direct access to information about the status of their request for a home loan guarantee. An IBM Multiprise Server for processing veterans' life insurance benefits also was inaugurated.

Seven newly developed Internet applications were demonstrated after the ribbon-cutting, including Webshare, an application that allows the display of information from multiple, independent information systems on the Internet, and Virtual Private Networks, which provide a secure method of communicating over the Internet.

The first VBA Internet application to be made available nationally is a loan guaranty program that allows veterans to obtain the status of their home loan application online. □

## Electronic Commerce Initiative Saving Money, Time

A variety of electronic commerce initiatives designed to reduce the time and money typically spent processing paper are spreading rapidly through the Department.

Fiscal Service employees of the Dallas VA Medical Center, for example, are leading the way in the use of a form of electronic commerce called electronic data interchange (EDI) to recover funds that can be added to direct patient care.

Private sector health care facilities commonly use EDI to verify insurance eligibility and transfer billing information to and from insurance providers. In 1997, the Dallas VAMC became the first VA medical center to use EDI for processing claims for care provided to TRICARE (the medical program for civilian dependents provided by the Defense Department) patients. The VA North Texas Health Care System (VANATHCS), of which Dallas VAMC is a part, expects revenues for fiscal year 1999 of approximately \$500,000 from these recoveries, three times that received from the first year of the program. The success of the program in North Texas has led to

national expansion of electronic claims processing for TRICARE. According to Third Party EDI Project Manager Barbara Mayerick in VA's Revenue Office, the national vision is to process through EDI the more than seven million claims VA's 172 medical centers generate annually.

Because the North Texas system began processing claims three years ago, it has had a head start in reaping the benefits of EDI. Fiscal Service employees there are now expanding the EDI program from TRICARE claims to the 3,000 to 5,000 monthly claims for care provided to veterans.

Here's how the electronic claims processing works. After a patient is seen at the VANATHCS, information about the visit is automatically transferred from VISTA (Veterans Health Information System Technology Architecture) to EDI software. Developed by EDIComm., Inc. in Woodland Hills, Calif., this system electronically checks the data for accuracy and rejects any claims with incomplete or inaccurate information. It automatically sends completed claims to the EDIComm clearinghouse where the data is

translated into a format the TRICARE administrator's system can accept, and then forwarded for adjudication.

Prior to implementing the EDI system and upgrading the VISTA software, TRICARE staff in Dallas keyed bills by hand, placed them in envelopes and sent them through the mail. Processing and tracking was time-consuming, complex, and more susceptible to error. "Electronic transactions reduce the amount of redundant data entry overall and make things more efficient," said Mayerick.

The VANATHCS currently processes about 90 percent of its monthly TRICARE claims electronically and Fiscal Service staff expects similar results for veterans' claims. In addition to the procedure already in place at the VANATHCS, EDI can also be used for such procedures as verifying eligibility, electronically transferring funds and obtaining insurance authorization before a health care visit. □

**By Belinda Switzer**  
VA North Texas Health Care System





## VA Researchers Lead Shingles Vaccination Study

At 21 VA medical centers across the country, researchers are launching a search for 37,000 volunteers to participate in a groundbreaking shingles study, a major step toward developing a vaccine for this painful disease.

Each year, more than 500,000 Americans develop rashes, blisters and experience severe pain as a result of shingles. Although initial symptoms last only a few weeks, the pain associated with shingles can remain for months or even years. "It can be a nightmare," said Michael Oxman, chairman of the VA Shingles Prevention Study and professor of medicine and pathology at the University of California, San Diego.

Shingles is caused by the varicella-zoster virus, the same virus that causes chickenpox. After a person has chickenpox, the virus remains dormant in the body and can be reactivated years later when the body's immunity to the virus begins to fade. Most cases of shingles occur in people over 60 years old.

The shingles vaccine had been effective in smaller studies, and researchers are hopeful that this larger experiment will again provide positive results and ultimately lead to FDA approval of the vaccine. People who are 60 or older, have had chickenpox, are in generally good health and have never had shingles are being invited to participate in this study.

## Seattle VAMC Laboratory Team First to Maintain Live Stem Cells

A team of researchers from the Seattle, Wash., VAMC has done what scientists have failed to do for nearly two decades — keep stem cells alive in a laboratory setting. In a recent *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, Drs. Mayumi Yagi, Kindred Ritchie and Gerald Roth reported their discovery of the biochemical recipe needed to maintain live blood stem cells.

Stem cells are the fundamental, ever-dividing cells from which all other cells in the body are created. Stem cells are one of the hottest areas in biomedical research today because of their potential ability to grow into any tissue type and regenerate healthy body parts. These findings represent a major breakthrough for stem cell researchers, who until now have been unable to keep live stem cell cultures once they have been removed from the body.

To test their findings, researchers injected the stem cells into mice that had received the same type of radiation and high-dose chemotherapy as bone marrow recipients. If the cells were in fact stem cells, then the mice would survive. Nearly one year later, the mice are healthy as can be.

VA doctors are hopeful that they can replicate their findings with other stem cells cultures. "If we can do this with human stem cells, we could revolutionize gene therapy for blood

disorders and have a major impact on bone marrow transplantation," said Roth.

## VA Researchers Link Low-Fat Diet with Dementia in Stroke Victims

In a study funded by VA and the National Institute on Aging, investigators have uncovered a possible link between low-fat diets and the onset of dementia in stroke victims. Although researchers are cautioning against changing eating habits based on these initial findings, the study found that participants who preferred a diet high in animal fat and protein over a diet high in complex carbohydrates were 57 percent less likely to develop dementia after a stroke.

"This shouldn't be interpreted as advice to get in line at the Burger King or McDonald's," said Dr. G. Webster Ross, co-principal investigator of the aging study and a neurologist with the Honolulu VA Medical Center.

The study's findings, published in a recent issue of the journal *Neurology*, are the latest from an ongoing study of cardiovascular disease that began in 1965 and initially involved more than 8,000 Japanese-American men living in Hawaii. All of the men involved in the study were born between 1900 and 1919 and were required to answer questions about their food preferences.

It is estimated that one to two million people in the United States suffer from stroke-related dementia. Symptoms often involve a deterioration of emotional and cognitive abilities that can affect memory, language and even personality traits. Researchers are hopeful that these findings can be used to reduce the onset of dementia in stroke victims.

## VA Doctors Hope to Remove Needles from Immunization Process

In a move that would ease the fears of children around the world, doctors from VA and Stanford University are looking into replacing painful needle immunizations with a vaccine that can be rubbed into the skin. The results of early tests, published in *Nature Biotechnology*, indicate that the new vaccines could be used to provide immunizations against a range of bacteria and viruses.

Vaccines work on the principle that the body can be trained to recognize and attack invading organisms. Typically, vaccines such as tetanus or polio are made up of a weakened version of the virus and are injected into the muscle tissue.

The new vaccines, however, are made up of the DNA of the microbe being targeted and can be absorbed through the hair follicles in the skin, says Dr. Paul Khavari, a dermatologist with the Palo Alto, Calif., VA Healthcare System. To test the theory, Khavari and his colleagues applied DNA from the hepatitis B virus to the skin of mice. They found that the mice became partially immune to the virus in two ways — they began to produce antibodies against the virus and their immune system learned to recognize and attack the virus.

Although the new vaccines must undergo extensive testing before ever being applied to humans, researchers are hopeful that if they can do away with needles then they can erase the fear children often associate with a visit to the doctor. □

# HAVE you heard

If you love to sing or can play a musical instrument, then the **VA-National Medical Musical Group (NMMG)** is looking for you. The NMMG is currently recruiting new members for its chorus and symphony orchestra. The group will hold its National Veterans Day Concert on November 11 at DAR Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C. The following day, the group travels to Sweden and Denmark for additional performances. For information on auditions and travel dates, call (202) 797-0771, write Medical Musical Group, POB 8337, Waukegan, Ill., 60079-8337, or e-mail [vanmmg@hotmail.com](mailto:vanmmg@hotmail.com).

One of professional bowling's biggest names, **Johnny Petraglia**, has joined the **Bowlers to Veterans Link (BVL)** as a bowling instructor. The BVL is a national charity dedicated to providing recreational and therapeutic programs for hospitalized veterans. For the past 50 years, the BVL has organized special bowling classes to provide veterans with a physical and emotional outlet during their stay at VA facilities. "BVL does many great things for our veterans and I want to be a part of that," said Petraglia, a Vietnam veteran and bowling Hall-of-Famer. Petraglia has been a professional bowler since 1965 and served three terms as president of the Professional Bowlers Association.

The life of **Father Philip Salois**, chief of Chaplain

Services for the Boston VA Healthcare System, is motivated by a search for peace. A Vietnam veteran and president and founder of the National Conference of Vietnam Veteran Ministers, Father Salois helps veterans cope with the physical and emotional scars of war. "I help veterans see that they cannot change the past, but they can change what is in their hearts and minds," he said. Father Salois recently traveled to the Republic of Georgia to attend a conference he co-organized, the first international conference of veterans and victims of war. The conference was a success, and Father Salois plans to conduct additional training programs in that region to develop veteran leadership in self-help programs.

**VA** and the **Disabled American Veterans (DAV)** have agreed to continue their tradition of working together to assist disabled veterans. Through VBA's Vocational Rehabilitation and Counseling program, select disabled veterans will receive academic and on-the-job training, ultimately leading to the position of National Service Officer with the DAV. Graduates of the program are fully prepared to advise and assist veterans or their dependents in presenting claims for disability compensation, pensions, education and vocational rehabilitation.

**Dave Brigham**, former chair of VA's Special Working Group on the Homeless and long-time homeless veterans advocate, recently retired

after a distinguished VA career. As chair, Brigham was responsible for coordinating, monitoring and implementing all of VA's homeless activities. Many colleagues, veterans service organizations and homeless advocacy groups have credited Brigham with laying the foundation on which today's VA homeless programs have been built.

**Alfonso Batres, Ph.D.**, director of Readjustment Counseling Service in VA Central Office, **William D. Montague**, director of the Cleveland VA Medical Center, and **Forest Farley**, chief operating officer of the Cleveland VAMC, were

discussing the concept of "One VA" when they envisioned a unified VA providing better services for veterans in a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood. That vision has now become a reality as VA and community leaders celebrate the opening of the **McCafferty Clinic** in Cleveland. The venture unites employees of VA's Vet Center with those of a community-based outpatient clinic, creating a single facility where veterans can receive a wide range of services. "When we compared our needs and our options, working together simply rose to the top as the best course of action," said Batres. □



When the Vocational Rehabilitation and Counseling (VR&C) Division at the **Buffalo, N.Y., VA Regional Office** was asked to host a group of special needs/special education students for a tour with a career day theme, the teacher expressed her concern that the students might not be able to grasp the concept of a veteran. So the VR&C staff came up with a unique approach — they would introduce the concept by comparing Star Wars heroes protecting the galaxy to veterans protecting the nation.

The students prepared for their visit by asking about veterans in their families. On the day of their visit, VARO Director Gregory Mason greeted the students while standing in front of his son's Star Wars movie theater display, and opened the program with brief clips from Star Wars movies. During a discussion about veterans and their contributions to the country, they eagerly volunteered information they had gathered about veterans in their families. Mason later received a letter from the teacher thanking him and the staff for the extra steps they took to help her students learn about veterans. Above, Buffalo VARO's MaryJane Wagner and the students look at the Star Wars display.



# HONORS

and awards



**Tracie C. Collins, M.D.**, a research investigator at the Houston VA Medical Center, is the first in the center's history to have been selected as a finalist for the prestigious Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) Minority Medical Faculty Development Award. The RWJF is the nation's largest foundation devoted to health care. The Development Award is presented to ethnic minority physicians who have demonstrated superior academic and clinical skills and who are committed to careers in academic medicine.

**David Macheel**, chief of Engineering Service at the San Francisco VA Medical Center, will receive a 1999 Federal Energy and Water Management Award, the premier energy award presented to federal employees, from the U.S. Department of Energy during an October ceremony in Washington, D.C.

**Freade K. Wood**, a volunteer at the VA Sepulveda, Calif., Ambulatory Care Center and Nursing Home, was recently honored with the annual Woman of Valor Award for her longtime efforts to enhance the care of female veterans. Wood has been a volunteer at the care center for the past 18 years. In 1997, Wood coordinated a trip to Washington, D.C., with 25 female veterans for the dedication of the Women in Military Service for America Memorial.

**Nancy A. Thompson, Ph.D.**, associate director of

the VHA Office of Special Projects in VACO, has been appointed the American College of Healthcare Executives' (ACHE) Regent for the District of Columbia, March 1999 - March 2000. Thompson is the only ACHE Regent in North America who works for VA.

**Dr. Terrence P. Collins**, vocational rehabilitation and counseling officer at the Milwaukee, Wis., VA Regional Office, received one of the Disabled American Veterans' (DAV) most prestigious awards, the Hoban Davenport Award, at the annual state DAV convention. The award is presented to an individual who has gone beyond the call of duty in assisting disabled veterans. Collins was recognized for his outstanding accomplishments in providing disabled and homeless veterans assistance in obtaining employment and training opportunities.

**Helen Duval**, honorary co-chair of the Bowlers to Veterans Link, received the Secretary's Award from VA Secretary Togo D. West, Jr. Duval was honored for her dedicated service to veterans and her commitment to the 13th National Veterans Golden Age Games. Since 1972, Duval has used bowling as a way of teaching physically and emotionally challenged veterans how to overcome the isolation of hospital life.

**Ralph Zehe**, a chaplain with the VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System (VAPHS) was presented the Distinguished

Service Award for 48 years of service to the VAPHS and 52 years of total government service. Zehe earned the Bronze Star during World War II and now has the great distinction of having the most service time of any employee in the VAPHS as well as the VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network.

**Wade Sparks**, a registered kinesiologist at the Lyons, N.J., VA Medical Center, won a Gold Medal in the 1999 Pan-American Masters Weightlifting Championship. The Pan-American Masters competition attracts men and women ages 35 and older from throughout South America, Canada and the United States. In addition to winning the Gold Medal, Sparks set a new Pan-American Masters record by lifting 237.6 lbs. in the snatch, a movement that involves lifting the weight from the ground to above the head in one motion.

The **Geriatric Evaluation and Management (GEM) Team** at the Madison, Wis., VA Medical Center received the 1999 Customer Service Award from the Greater Madison Federal Agency Association. This award recognizes the team's success in meeting or exceeding the needs of both internal and external customers. The GEM team recently initiated a Memory Assessment Clinic and a Geriatric Women's Health Clinic to provide more complete services to the aging veteran population.

**Sharon Ricketts Williams, Diane Allison, Patty Edington and Trina Hyatt** represented the Danville, Ill., VAMC Recycling Program Coordination Team to accept the White House Closing the Circle Award during a

ceremony held in the Presidential Hall of the Old Executive Building in Washington D.C. These unique national awards, signed by the president and the vice president, are presented annually to federal civilian agencies whose recycling efforts make a significant impact on the environment.

**Mindy Aisen, M.D.**, director of Rehabilitation R&D Service in VA Central Office, will be a Distinguished Alumni Lecturer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) during a series of lectures designed to expose students to outstanding graduates. Before taking her current position, Aisen was associate professor of clinical neurology and adjunct professor of physical medicine and rehabilitation at Cornell University Medical College.

**Paul M. Hoffman, M.D.**, director of Medical Research Service in VA Central Office, has been named the 1999 recipient of the University of Florida (UF) College of Medicine's Wall of Fame honor. Hoffman, who earned his undergraduate and medical degrees at UF, will be recognized for his distinguished career in medicine as an investigator, educator, mentor and administrator.

**Clare S. Duvernoy, M.D.**, supervisor of the cardiac catheterization program at the VA Ann Arbor, Mich., Healthcare System, is one of only three grantees nationwide to receive the 1999 Pfizer/Society for Women's Health Research Scholars Grants for Faculty Development in Woman's Health. The competitive Scholars Grants program provides research opportunities for physicians wishing to pursue original research in women's health issues. □

# HEROES



106-year-old World War I veteran and French Legion of Honor recipient Roy Pettit was heartbroken when thieves stole the cherished medal from his home in Chicago. As soon as the Chicago VA Regional Office's **Julie Culberson-Watts**, a senior management analyst, heard the news, she was on the phone with the French Consulate. Within 24 hours she had secured a replacement medal for the very grateful Pettit.



When **David Connolly**, administrative officer of the day at the White City, Ore., VA Domiciliary, received a phone call from a blind 85-year-old veteran, he knew he had a chance to make a wish come true. Veteran Anita Stanley explained that she was having difficulty assembling a flag that her late husband used to fly every Fourth of July. Without a second thought, Connolly offered to stop by and help her assemble the flag. When he arrived and began assembling the flag, Stanley asked if she could place her hands over his so she could feel how the pieces fit together. Once assembled, they placed the flag in its holder and talked for several hours.



**Ray Toczek**, a veterans benefits counselor assigned to the Chicago Westside VA Medical Center, traveled to Siguatepeque, Honduras, to help with the damage caused by Hurricane Mitch last fall.

Toczek was part of a church group that volunteered to help local residents, many of whom had lost everything. By the end of the week, Toczek and his group had built and distributed 25 table sets to grateful residents.



**C. Fay Norred**, director of the Boston VA Regional Office, recently demonstrated the *true* meaning of the term "One VA." In June, Norred donated one of her kidneys to save the life of Arlene McCann, a computer specialist with the Office of Inspector General in VA Central Office. The transplant was a success and both Norred and McCann are doing well.



Working as a team, employees of the **Pittsburgh VA Regional Office** were able to expedite payment processing to meet the critical needs of a disabled veteran. The veteran's disability award had recently been increased from ten to 40 percent and she desperately needed money to purchase food for her child. Realizing that the retroactive payment would take some time to process, the VARO initiated an out-of-system payment to alleviate the veteran's immediate financial crisis.



**Sheryl Knop**, an employee in Prosthetics and Sensory Aids at the Las Vegas VA Medical Center, was riding the city bus one

morning when she noticed a young child sitting unattended at one of the bus stops. The child was wearing pajamas, so Knop knew that something must be wrong. She quickly jumped off the bus and took the child to a nearby business to call the police. As it turns

out, the three-year-old toddler had wandered away from home and was unable to find his way back. Thanks to Knop's concern and thoughtfulness, the young child was safely returned to his parents. □

## In Memoriam

**Dr. Hyman J. Zimmerman**, 84, a prominent physician who was associated with the VA health care system in various capacities for 50 years, passed away on July 12 after a long battle with cancer.

He was widely regarded as one of the foremost experts in hepatology, a discipline he helped create. He developed his interest in liver disease while serving in the Army as chief of medicine at a military hospital in France, where he cared for a ward full of young men suffering from hepatitis.

Zimmerman is credited with defining the characteristics of liver injuries from drugs and other chemicals, and authored a book on the subject that became the most highly regarded text of its kind. He had just completed work on the second edition when he became ill.

His association with VA began in 1949 when he was appointed assistant chief of medicine at the Washington, D.C., VA Medical Center. Two years later, he became the first chief of medicine at the new Omaha, Neb., VA Medical Center. He also later served as chief of medicine at the Chicago Westside, Boston and Washington, D.C., VAMCs. From 1984-1988, he served as a Distinguished Physician at the Washington, D.C., VAMC. After retiring from that position, he continued to serve as an attending physician in hepatology at the D.C. VAMC.



**Donald E. Johnson**, 75, former VA chief executive who led the Veterans Administration as its eighth Administrator from June 1969 through April 1974 under President Nixon, died August 10 in Fredericksburg, Va., of complications of cancer. He led VA during a period of significant change and challenge which saw major growth and reorganization of veterans' benefits programs in response to the needs of a generation of Vietnam veterans.

President Nixon appointed Administrator Johnson to his Domestic Council in 1972, giving VA a major voice in government response to domestic issues. Johnson was a combat veteran of World War II from West Branch, Iowa. He was involved in business and active in civic and veterans' issues after returning to Iowa from the war. He held a number of local, state and national positions in the American Legion, culminating with his election as national commander in 1964-65. □