

VA New England Healthcare System

FALL 2013

# VETERANS'

*healthy living*

**Operation  
Thank You  
Salutes Our  
Veterans**

**VA Supports  
Caregivers**

*VA Goes Above and Beyond  
to Care for Veterans*



**VA  
HEALTH  
CARE**

Defining  
**EXCELLENCE**  
in the 21st Century



# Dear Veterans

## A Message from the Network Director

Michael F. Mayo-Smith, M.D., M.P.H.  
Network Director

This edition of *Veterans' Healthy Living* is filled with a wide range of topics that includes information on current research, caregiver support programs, a salute to our Veterans, and how you can nominate an employee or volunteer for a Network Director I CARE Award.

On page 3, you will find the heartwarming article *Operation Thank You Salutes Our Veterans*. Operation Thank You is an organization started in 2009 by Bob Page and Irene Finneral but has since expanded to include a large group of dedicated individuals who go out and visit with Veterans at nursing homes or Veterans' homes.

What is Gulf War Illness? Read *Working to Solve the Mystery of Gulf War Illness* on page 4 to see if you can help VA answer the question and solve the mystery.

For years, Patti Crimmin-Greenan, Palliative Care Coordinator at White River Junction VA Medical Center in Vermont, noted that numerous Veterans had little or no family or caregiver support available at the end of life, and many died alone. Read page 5 to find out what she did to ensure that no Veteran dies alone.

"How sweet it is to get recognition for the work I love, employees I love, and Veterans I love," said Laurel Holland, recipient of the Network Director I CARE Award. Read page 6 to see how you can nominate an employee or volunteer who you feel has gone above or beyond demonstrating the I CARE Core Values.

On page 7, you will find the article *Women's Health Sciences Division Meets Changing Needs*. With the drastic changes in military service in recent years, VA is meeting the changing needs with interesting and informative research for our women Veterans. Also on page 7 is the *VA Supports Caregivers* article. VA recognizes the struggles that caregivers face, and we are here for you every step of the way!

We at the VA New England Healthcare System want you to know that it is truly a privilege assisting you with your health care needs.

Thank you for your service. Now let us serve you!

Michael F. Mayo-Smith, M.D., M.P.H.  
Network Director



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**On the Cover:** Greg Reynolds paddles in an adapted boat in the New England Summer Sports Clinic.

VA Boston and VISN 1 offer many adaptive sports as part of a Veteran's rehabilitation, including summer and winter sports clinics.



## VA Mission:

Honor America's Veterans by providing exceptional health care that improves their health and well-being.

# Operation Thank You Salutes Our Veterans



*“We Serve Those Who Served”*

For more information about Operation Thank You, contact Bob Page at 978-458-0793.

**Contributions can be sent to:**  
Operation Thank You  
26 Fremont Street  
Lowell, MA 01850

Operation Thank You was created by Bob Page, Irene Finneral (a Gold-Star Wife and Mother), and a group of dedicated individuals visiting nursing homes or Veterans’ homes every 12 weeks to serve pizza, cookies, and soft drinks to Veterans and to give each one a gift bag filled with things they didn’t usually get. The visits were so successful that Bob started doing little fund raisers to help pay for more visits. With some accumulated funds, Bob is now able to host an event every six weeks instead of 12, but he admits he would like to do even more.

The most important part of the program is not the food or gifts. “It’s the time spent talking with the Veterans and listening to their stories of service,” Bob said. “It’s important to learn what branch of the service they were in, how long they served, and where they served. When we sit down and talk with them, you

can see them brighten up. Most of the time in nursing homes, no one speaks to them about their service to our country, so we recognize them. Our goal is to make life better for the Veterans in the time we are there.”

Bob fondly recalled one specific visit. “We went to one nursing home and talked with an 86-year-old man who had been awarded the Silver Star for his heroic action of saving a crew mate who had fallen overboard in the Pacific during a kamikaze attack. He was so proud to tell that story—he probably hadn’t talked about it in 20 years. A couple of weeks later, we read in the newspaper that he passed away, but it made us feel good that we got to listen to him.”

Since the program kicked off in 2009, Bob has had so many volunteers step forward to take part that he had to break them

down into companies: alpha and bravo. “I tell them ‘if you come once, I own you’ because you feel you are a better person for what you have done.”

In addition, Bob is hoping to “light a fire” under people and inspire them to begin programs in other areas. He is even offering seed money for startup if people show an interest. He said, “Once a group throws a party, they are there for life.”

Bob explained that the process is easy. “It’s very simple,” he said. “All you do is call a nursing home and speak to the director of activities. They set the whole thing up. Some places go all out and set up special rooms, play patriotic music, and put up flags, which really makes the day special for our Veterans.”

Photo above: Operation Thank You co-founder Bob Page. Photo courtesy of Paul Corbett

# Working to Solve the Mystery of Gulf War Illness

## What is Gulf War Illness?

At this time, Gulf War Illness, also known as Gulf War Syndrome, cannot be clearly defined because the root cause is unknown, and the unexplained chronic symptoms emerge differently among 1990-1991 Gulf War Veterans.

Dr. Christopher Brady, Director of Scientific Operations, VA Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses Biorepository, explains. "The clusters of symptoms present differently across Veterans, and that's part of the complexity of understanding the disease. For example, some folks may have muscular problems, whereas others may have problems with attention, memory, and thinking. That is one reason we are now 22 years down the road and still trying to figure out what exactly is going on with these Veterans," he said.

## What is VA doing to help solve the mystery of Gulf War Illness?

The Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses Biorepository (GWVIB) brain bank is seeking Veterans of the 1990-1991 Gulf War who would like to participate in research about conditions affecting Gulf War Veterans. Veterans enrolled in the GWVIB complete surveys about their health every six months, and upon their death,

donate their brain and other body tissue for future Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses research.

## Should you wait until you are older or experiencing health complications to enroll?

No! "We want Gulf War Veterans to enroll as soon as possible so we can give them regular health questionnaires," said Brady. "Then, upon their death, when they donate their brain and other tissue, it will be immensely valuable because we have all of their health history while they were living and will be able to analyze how those conditions may affect the brain. It's a living study even though the end point is after the Veteran's death."

## Is the GWVIB seeking only Veterans who are experiencing problematic symptoms?

This is another misconception! Brady says that healthy Veterans, from the same Gulf War era, regardless of whether or not they were deployed to the Gulf, are needed so that

researchers can study varied factors. "If two Gulf War Veterans were in the same place, in the same company, and one becomes ill but the other one doesn't, then comparing one Veteran to another will help us understand why one is ill and the other is not. Participation by healthy Veterans is equally important."

## How can you take part in this research and help make a difference in the future?

Initially, enrollment for this groundbreaking pilot program has been low. The continuation of this program and research will be determined by the interest and enrollment of Gulf War Veterans. Without Veterans willing to participate, this program simply is not possible and may not continue.

If you are interested in learning more or have additional questions, please call the Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses Biorepository toll free at 1-855-561-7827.

Additional information about this study can be found at [http://www.research.va.gov/programs/tissue\\_banking/gwvib/](http://www.research.va.gov/programs/tissue_banking/gwvib/)

# No Veteran Dies Alone

For years, Patti Crimmin-Greenan, Palliative Care Coordinator at White River Junction VA Medical Center in Vermont, noted that numerous Veterans had little or no family or caregiver support available at the end of life, and many died alone. So, she took the initiative to begin the No Veteran Dies Alone program at the facility.

No Veteran Dies Alone is a program that matches trained and compassionate volunteers with Veterans who might otherwise spend their last days alone. For the launch of the program, there was an overwhelming response from caring volunteers willing to help. Currently, there are 25 trained volunteers, but 58 signed up! At this time, Crimmin-Greenan is working to match more Veterans with volunteers. She stressed that the program can also assist Veterans who have support but who may require someone with them on occasion. “There are family members or caregivers who try to be with the Veteran at all times, but it is not possible,” she explained, “so volunteers can help fill gaps of time to ensure the Veteran is not left alone.”

When a volunteer visits a Veteran, cues are directly from the patient. Sometimes a Veteran wishes to have a conversation. Other times, the Veteran isn’t able to speak, so the volunteer simply is present and at the person’s side. Sometimes a Veteran asks to be read to or to listen to music—the volunteer’s effort depends on what the Veteran wants.

One Veteran in particular simply preferred to be alone and refused a volunteer when offered, raising the probability of him dying alone. Crimmin-Greenan didn’t know how to deal with this unexpected situation at first, but she reached out to the Veteran anyway. Instead of constant interaction, she asked a couple of volunteers to check in on him from time to time. Soon, the Veteran bonded with the volunteers who brought movies and listened to music with him, thereby finding a common ground.



An outside hospice organization called Crimmin-Greenan for assistance when another Veteran who was receiving home hospice care was looking for a Veteran to share military experiences. With help from her newly trained No Vet Dies Alone volunteers, Patti managed to meet this request.

Before the program started, Veterans without support were unable to use the hospice suites at the facility. Crimmin-Greenan said, “The criteria for using the hospice suites are that Veterans must have a family member or caregiver with them 24/7. The ward staff would accommodate and supplement help whenever possible, but the staff alone is unable to provide as much one-on-one personal care a terminally ill person may need. For that reason, some of the Veterans would remain on the wards in the general hospital population.” Because of the No Vet Dies Alone program, Veterans who would have otherwise not been able to use the suites have now done so.

For more information about the No Veteran Dies Alone program, contact Pat (Patti) Crimmin-Greenan at 802-295-9363, ext. 5226.



What are the core values that help guide VA employees in decision making?

### VA Core Values are:

#### Integrity

Acting with high moral principle. Adhere to the highest professional standards. Maintain the trust and confidence of all with whom I engage.

#### Commitment

Working diligently to serve Veterans and other beneficiaries. Be driven by an earnest belief in VA's mission. Fulfill my individual responsibilities and organizational responsibilities.

#### Advocacy

Being truly Veteran-centric by identifying, fully considering, and appropriately advancing the interests of Veterans and other beneficiaries.

#### Respect

Treating all those I serve and with whom I work with dignity and respect. Show respect to earn it.

#### Excellence

Strive for the highest quality and continuous improvement. Be thoughtful and decisive in leadership, accountable for my actions, willing to admit mistakes, and rigorous in correcting them.

# VA Goes Above and Beyond to Care for Veterans

Actions often speak louder than words, and the actions of the extraordinary staff and volunteers in VISN 1 are a true testament that they **do care** about the Veterans they serve. Their efforts did not go unnoticed by Network Director, Dr. Michael F. Mayo-Smith, who said, "Many wonderful employees demonstrate these values in their day-to-day work. In this spirit, I have created the Network Director I CARE Awards."

Ruth Wheeler was among the recipients. She received the award for demonstrating exceptional **commitment** after dedicating more than 60 years and 21,000 hours of volunteer service for Veterans at the Northampton campus of VA Central Western Massachusetts HCS. She is the longest serving VA volunteer in the nation.

"I am in shock," said Laurel Holland, LICSW, Bedford

VAMC, after being recognized for demonstrating **excellence**. "Everyone participated in this. Everyone added an ingredient. I just stirred the pot. How sweet it is to get recognition for the work I love, employees I love, and Veterans I love." Holland, along with other dedicated staff members in Bedford, created a tool to help Veterans navigate their VA care.

LaRhonda Harris, RN, BSN, Women Veterans Program Manager for the Maine Healthcare System, was awarded for **advocacy** for her efforts in developing an elective course at the University of New England (UNE) that covers the needs and issues of Veterans. "I was part of the brainstorming and groundbreaking efforts, but UNE staff and the Maine Military Community Network pulled this together. Hopefully, this will grow to other college campuses here in Maine," said Harris.



Photos left to right: ICARE award winners Cindy Lavalliere of Manchester VAMC (serving a patient); VA Connecticut Case Management Team; and Dr. Lori Lerner (in the OR).

Visit <http://www.newengland.va.gov/icare> to nominate an employee or group of employees you feel have gone above or beyond displaying the I CARE Core Values. Be sure to include a brief summary that explains the extraordinary actions your nominee has demonstrated.



## VA Supports Caregivers

In the past, and not just with VA, health care was completely focused on the patient alone. But, sometimes handling an illness can be just as hard on a caregiver as the patient. VA recognizes struggles that caregivers face, and we are here for you every step of the way!

“VA might see the Veterans that we are serving once a week or less depending on needs, but the family member or caregiver is there with them continually, so

we are trying to reach out and support them,” said Andrew Leonard, Caregiver Support Coordinator, VISN 1 Lead.

Although the program is there for the caregivers of all Veterans receiving services at VA, a large portion of Andrew’s current responsibility is to oversee a stipend program developed for caregivers of those who

served on or after 9/11/2001 and have suffered an injury. The stipend is in the caregiver’s name and not attached to the Veteran’s pension. Andrew said, “The feasibility of opening the stipend up to other eras besides 9/11/2001 is being investigated at this time.”

We also ensure that caregivers of Veterans are getting services available to them, such as Home Health Aid or Adult Day Health. Andrew makes referrals for services or directs caregivers to the appropriate contact for programs. He said, “I look at it like it’s an umbrella program, connecting people to what they need within VA and outside of VA as well.”

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For more information about the Caregiver Program, visit <http://www.caregiver.va.gov>.

## Women’s Health Sciences Division Meets Changing Needs

“The military has changed dramatically over the last 10–15 years as more women are joining the service and then coming to VA, so the dynamic for VA is changing as well,” said Brian Walker, Psychology Research Assistant and Operation Enduring Freedom Combat Veteran. Walker is studying mental health risk and resilience factors for women regarding their military and deployment experiences. The study, conducted under the direction of psychologists Dr. Dawne Vogt and Dr. Brian Smith at the Women’s Health

Sciences Division of the National Center for PTSD at VA Boston Healthcare System, is producing interesting findings on how women’s deployment experiences and their post-deployment health are similar to, and different from, men’s experiences.

Walker talked about how today’s military is breaking gender barriers by moving past the former stereotypical roles of women. “When you think about the Army,” he said, “you think about men being on the front line. But now, women are serving in combat, and they are

entering new roles in the other branches of service, too.”

He added, “This has been an eye-opening experience for me because I have been exposed to a lot of issues that women face. It gives me a better appreciation for what they go through.”

As VA strives to stay ahead of constantly changing needs, research studies like this provide the tools needed to meet the demands of this group of Veterans. The findings of this nationwide research project will be released later this year.

## VA MEDICAL CENTERS

### CONNECTICUT

#### VA Connecticut Healthcare System

**Newington Campus**  
 555 Willard Avenue  
 Newington, CT 06111  
 (860) 666-6951

**West Haven Campus**  
 950 Campbell Avenue  
 West Haven, CT 06516  
 (203) 932-5711

### MAINE

#### VA Maine Healthcare System

1 VA Center  
 Augusta, ME 04330  
 (207) 623-8411  
 (877) 421-8263

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 Memorial Veterans Hosp.**  
 200 Springs Road  
 Bedford, MA 01730  
 (781) 687-2000

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 Boston, MA 02130  
 (617) 232-9500

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 West Roxbury, MA 02132  
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#### VA Central Western MA Healthcare System

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 Leeds, MA 01053  
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### NEW HAMPSHIRE

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 (603) 624-4366  
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 Providence, RI 02908  
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 VT 05009  
 (802) 295-9363

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 7 Germantown Road  
 Danbury, CT 06810  
 (203) 798-8422

**New London CBOC**  
 4 Shaw's Cove, Suite 101  
 New London, CT 06320  
 (860) 437-3611

**Stamford CBOC**  
 Stamford Health System  
 1275 Summer Street  
 Stamford, CT 06905  
 (203) 325-0649

**Waterbury CBOC**  
 95 Scovill Street  
 Waterbury, CT 06706  
 (203) 465-5292

**Willimantic CBOC**  
 1320 Main Street  
 Tyler Square (next to  
 Social Security Office)  
 Willimantic, CT 06226  
 (860) 450-7583

**Winsted CBOC**  
 115 Spencer Street  
 Winsted, CT 06098  
 (860) 738-6985

### MAINE

**Bangor CBOC**  
 35 State Hospital Street  
 Bangor, ME 04401  
 (207) 561-3600

**Lincoln Outreach Clinic  
 (Bangor Satellite Clinic)**  
 99 River Road  
 Lincoln, ME 04457  
 (207) 403-2000

**Calais CBOC**  
 50 Union Street  
 Calais, ME 04619  
 (207) 904-3700

**Caribou CBOC**  
 163 Van Buren Road, Ste. 6  
 Caribou, ME 04736  
 (207) 493-3800

**Fort Kent CBOC**  
 Medical Office Building  
 197 East Main St.  
 Fort Kent, ME 04743  
 (207) 834-1572

**Houlton Outreach Clinic**  
 Houlton Regional Hospital  
 20 Hartford Street  
 Houlton, ME 04730  
 (877) 421-8263, ext. 2000

**Lewiston/Auburn CBOC**  
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 Lewiston, ME 04240  
 (207) 623-8411 Ext. 4601  
 (877) 421-8263 Ext. 4601

**Mobile Medical Unit**  
 Main Street  
 Bingham, ME 04920  
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**Portland CBOC**  
 144 Fore Street  
 Portland, ME 04101  
 (207) 771-3500

**Rumford CBOC**  
 431 Franklin Street  
 Rumford, ME 04276  
 (207) 369-3200

**Saco CBOC**  
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 Saco, ME 04072  
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**Fitchburg CBOC**  
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 Framingham, MA 01702  
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 Quincy, MA 02169  
 (617) 376-2010

**Springfield CBOC**  
 25 Bond Street  
 Springfield, MA 01104  
 (413) 731-6000

**Worcester CBOC**  
 605 Lincoln Street  
 Worcester, MA 01605  
 (508) 856-0104

### NEW HAMPSHIRE

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 71 Hobbs Street  
 Conway, NH 03818  
 (603) 624-4366, ext. 3199  
 (800) 892-8384, ext. 3199

**Keene Outpatient Clinic**  
 640 Marlboro Street  
 Keene, NH 03431  
 (603) 358-4900

**Littleton CBOC**  
 658 Meadow Street, Ste. 4  
 Littleton, NH 03561  
 (603) 444-1323

**Portsmouth CBOC**  
 302 Newmarket Street  
 Portsmouth, NH 03803  
 (603) 624-4366, ext. 3199  
 (800) 892-8384, ext. 3199

**Somersworth CBOC**  
 200 Route 108  
 Somersworth, NH 03878  
 (603) 624-4366, ext. 3199  
 (800) 892-8384, ext. 3199

**Tilton CBOC**  
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 Tilton, NH 03276  
 (603) 624-4366, ext. 3199  
 (800) 892-8384, ext. 3199

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 One Corporate Place  
 Middletown, RI 02842  
 (401) 847-6239

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**Bennington CBOC**  
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 Bennington, VT 05201  
 (802) 447-6913

**Brattleboro CBOC**  
 71 GSP Drive  
 Brattleboro, VT 05301  
 (802) 251-2200

**Colchester CBOC**  
 162 Hegeman Ave., Unit 100  
 Colchester, VT 05446  
 (802) 655-1356

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 1734 Crawford Farm Rd.  
 Newport, VT 05855  
 (802) 334-9700

**Rutland CBOC**  
 232 West St.  
 Rutland, VT 05701-2850  
 (802) 772-2300

