

**WELLNESS**  
PACT Act

**CARE**  
Birthday wishes

**COMMUNITY**  
Now hiring

**INNOVATION**  
Rideshare program

# *New England* **Veteran**

**RIDE ON**

Rideshare program creator takes home award

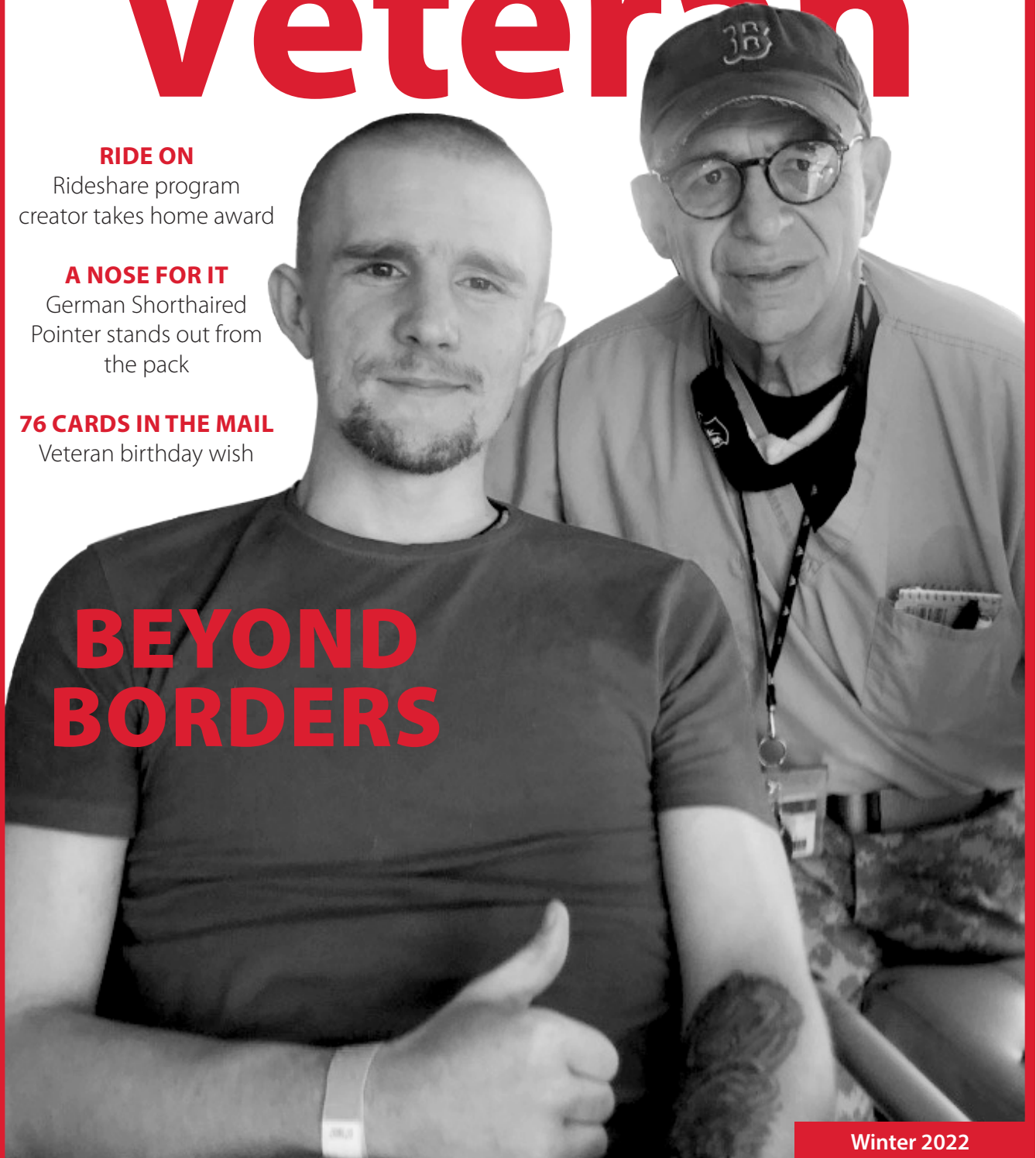
**A NOSE FOR IT**

German Shorthaired Pointer stands out from the pack

**76 CARDS IN THE MAIL**

Veteran birthday wish

**BEYOND BORDERS**



Winter 2022

# New England Veteran

**VA New England Network Director**  
Ryan Lilly

## Contributors in this issue

Deirdre Salvas, VA, Boston Healthcare System

Winfield S. Danielson, VA, Boston Healthcare System

## VISN 1 Communications Department

Gerald Culliton, Director, Communications, Veteran Outreach and Marketing

Maureen Heard, Chief, Communications & Public Affairs, Coast Guard and Air Force Veteran

Michael McNamara, Chief, Outreach, Community Education & Advertising, Army Veteran

Paul Corbett, Brand & Content Manager, Marine Corps Veteran

Russ Tippets, Senior Editor & Writer, Coast Guard Veteran

## On the Cover:

Army Veteran and VA Providence Doctor Michael Siclari poses with wounded Ukrainian soldier Liubomwyr Parandii.

## Website

[www.newengland.va.gov/news](http://www.newengland.va.gov/news)

*New England Veteran* is published by the VA New England Healthcare System as an educational service. The publication is intended to provide information about Veteran benefits from a military-culture perspective and offer stories of interest to our Veteran community. All articles may be reproduced for educational purposes. The publication is not intended to be a substitute for medical advice, which should be obtained from your VA health care provider.



# Message from the Network Director

Dear Veterans,

We closed out 2022 with great progress. As we faced the challenges of a nationwide healthcare worker shortage last year, our human resource staffs worked tirelessly behind the scenes to ensure vital healthcare positions were filled across the VA New England Healthcare Network.

In this issue, you'll read about the hiring and onboarding surge events we held across the VA New England Healthcare Network last November. In addition to our hiring events, new human resource tools were developed that will help our HR professionals to hire new workers more quickly and efficiently.

As we closed out the year, all of our facilities held in-person PACT Act events. The PACT Act is a new law that expands VA health care and benefits for Veterans exposed to burn pits and other toxic substances. This law helps us provide generations of Veterans—and their survivors—with the care and benefits they've earned and deserve. You can read much more about the PACT Act and Veteran eligibility in this issue.

Also, in this issue is a great story about one of our very own VA doctors who volunteered to help out the people of Ukraine. VA Providence Doctor Michael Siclari took 10 days of personal leave to provide care to help the people of Ukraine during their ongoing war with Russia.

In addition to these great stories, we also have great information on new award-winning innovations coming from our employees at the VA New England Center for Innovation Excellence.

I look forward to connecting with you all in this new year!

With thanks for your service,

Ryan Lilly, MPA  
Network Director

# 76 for a Veteran's 76th

*A birthday sparks creativity and joy for Veterans and students*

Story by Russ Tippetts,  
Senior Editor & Writer,  
Coast Guard Veteran

Roger Cabana, a New Hampshire Veterans Home resident, thought it would be fun to get 76 birthday cards for his 76th birthday. The timing worked out well as Mary Aufiero, a kindergarten teacher from Byam Elementary School in Chelmsford, Mass., was teaching her students about how to show support for Veterans over Veterans Day. To make the lesson fun, Aufiero had her students make birthday cards for Cabana.

"I have always found it important to recognize Veterans. My grandfather was a WWII Vet and I acknowledge the day as a way to remember him," said Aufiero. "The kids were very excited to be making something for someone else. It also made the project more concrete in the minds of the students by knowing that someone was going to receive their work."



*Navy Veteran Roger Cabana poses with his birthday cards on November 29, 2022. Cabana wished for 76 cards for his 76th birthday. Photo by Sarah Stanley, New Hampshire Veterans Home Public Affairs Officer.*

Cabana, a Navy Veteran, was thrilled to receive well over 100 cards for his birthday on November 29, 2022, and in addition to the birthday wishes from the Byam Elementary School students, Cabana received a special birthday card from New Hampshire Governor Christopher Sununu.

"I have always taken time in my curriculum to touch upon holidays, such as Veterans Day and Memorial Day, to honor those who have protected us and died for us. It will continue to be a part of my curriculum as long as I teach," said Aufiero.

The mission of the New Hampshire Veterans Home is to provide the best quality of life for Veterans with dignity, honor and respect. To see some of the great things they are doing, visit their [Facebook page](#).



# Helping people an ocean away

*One VA doctor responds to an inner call to help in Ukraine*

**Story by Russ Tippets,  
Senior Editor & Writer,  
Coast Guard Veteran**

In August 2022, Army Veteran and VA Providence Doctor Michael Siclari took 10 days of personal leave to volunteer to help the people of Ukraine during their ongoing war with Russia. Siclari, who turned 71 this past December, said his motivation for going to Ukraine was simply thinking, "What can I do to help?"

"In retrospect, as I think about why I wanted to go to Ukraine, I think it's more of a sense that I thought an injustice was happening," said Siclari. "It's more of a global thought that something wrong is happening to innocent people. Do you say, 'oh it's too bad but at least it's not us?' I thought, if not me, then who? It was just an intrinsic spirit or sense that spoke to me and said you have an obligation as a physician to help take care of people."



*Army Veteran and VA Providence Dr. Michael Siclari sits with an EMT after completing a medical evacuation in Ukraine.*

As a trauma doctor, Siclari desired to help the Ukrainian soldiers in combat zones, but that proved to be impractical with the short amount of time he had to be in the country. Instead, he was assigned to the medical care of refugees living in Stryiski Park in Lviv, Ukraine. His base was one medical trailer where he provided treatment for the refugees, many of whom had fled from Mariupol.

In addition to helping the refugees, Siclari also assisted in the medical evacuations of wounded Ukrainian soldiers. As Russians were in control of the airspace over Ukraine, wounded soldiers had to be evacuated by ambulance or trains. Siclari assisted convoys by stabilizing wounded patients so they could be evacuated out of the country for long-term medical care.

Service has always been at the forefront of Siclari's life. Inspired by seeing the many young men and women serving in Iraq and Afghanistan after 9/11, Siclari joined the military. As an emergency medicine doctor, he felt motivated to help.

"I was really interested in deploying," said Siclari. "It was the soldiers my kids' ages that were often among the casualties and I thought I would want my kids to get good care, so I wanted to try and contribute."



*Dr. Michael Siclari prepares wounded soldier Liubomwyr Parandii, 23, for medical evacuation. Parandii's leg was shattered by an artillery shell explosion.*

At age 58, he needed special permission to enlist. After many hurdles and signed waivers, he was finally accepted into the Rhode Island National Guard medical unit.

From June 2012 to October 2012, he served in Afghanistan as a part of Operation Enduring Freedom, where he was assigned to a small combat surgery hospital at Forward Operating Base Salerno.

Dr. Siclari is grateful for his time in Ukraine. He will be giving a presentation at the Rhode Island American College Emergency Physician fall meeting in October, where he plans to tell groups of healthcare providers that healthcare workers are in dire need in Ukraine and there are options for volunteering.

What's next for Siclari? He's open to more opportunities for volunteering and after VA, he would like to travel to do medical missionary work or humanitarian work. For now he will continue to enjoy working at VA Providence.

"Among my top reasons for why I like working at the VA, it is to provide care for Veterans. It's my major and primary reason for working at the VA and it's my source of satisfaction," said Siclari. "Being a Veteran myself and having deployed, I like being able to build a bond with my patients who have also served. The feeling is indescribable."



# On the scent

## *Belle, a VA Boston Police Dog, gives German Shorthaired Pointers a good name*

Story by Deirdre Salvas, Public Affairs Specialist, Boston VA

German Shorthaired Pointers typically aren't the breed you think of when you hear about police dogs. Often, German Shepherds, Labrador Retrievers or Belgian Malinois are among the top choices for law enforcement. However, Sgt. Nathan Dufault, a police officer at VA Boston, says German Shorthaired Pointers are becoming a lot more common, thanks to their unique qualities.

German Shorthaired Pointer Belle was eight months old when she arrived at the VA Boston police department. She comes from a family of bird-hunting dogs and is a great choice for police work at the VA due to her breed's incredible aptitude for tracking.

"Tracking and trailing is definitely her strong suit," said Dufault. "She is a tracking star. When we get her outside and tell her she must go find somebody, she's happier than my six-year-old at Christmas. That has a lot to do with her breed and her natural instinct of finding and chasing birds."



Sgt. Nathan Dufault trains the talented German Shorthaired Pointer police dog, Belle.

When it comes to emergencies and needing to identify and track a scent quickly, Belle's skills will really be put to good use.

"If we can get a good last known location and a clean scent sample, that's a huge time difference between having police officers do a search and having a dog do a track or a trail of the whole campus," Dufault said. "In New England, if somebody wanders off in the middle of winter, temperatures drop very quickly, so time is critical."

Dufault and Belle completed their training and certification earlier this year. The 16-week course was in West Greenwich, Rhode Island, and provided certification through the American Police Canine Association.

"The certification is only good if it's me and her together because we spend the entire training learning how to read our dog's behavior and how to read the surroundings," Dufault said.

"One of my happiest moments with Belle was right before we had graduated," he said. "It was a bad day out—raining, super windy, and with tracking, the conditions matter a lot. I was one of the last ones to go after no one else was able to complete their tracks that day. After about two and a half miles, I thought for sure she was running me in circles."

But, Belle was about to happily prove Dufault wrong.



"Suddenly, Belle's pulling," said Dufault. "I take this corner and she's sitting at the feet of one of my buddies from school. That really solidified the fact for me that you need to trust your dog."

Belle is trained in tracking both people and narcotics. She'll sit or lay down when she finds a scent, which is known as a passive alert. The indication is slightly different between detecting narcotics versus finding a person. If she's found narcotics, she'll lock up, sit and stare, look at the handler and then look back at where she thinks the odor is coming from. Both Dufault and Belle are required to maintain at least eight hours of training a month on both topics.

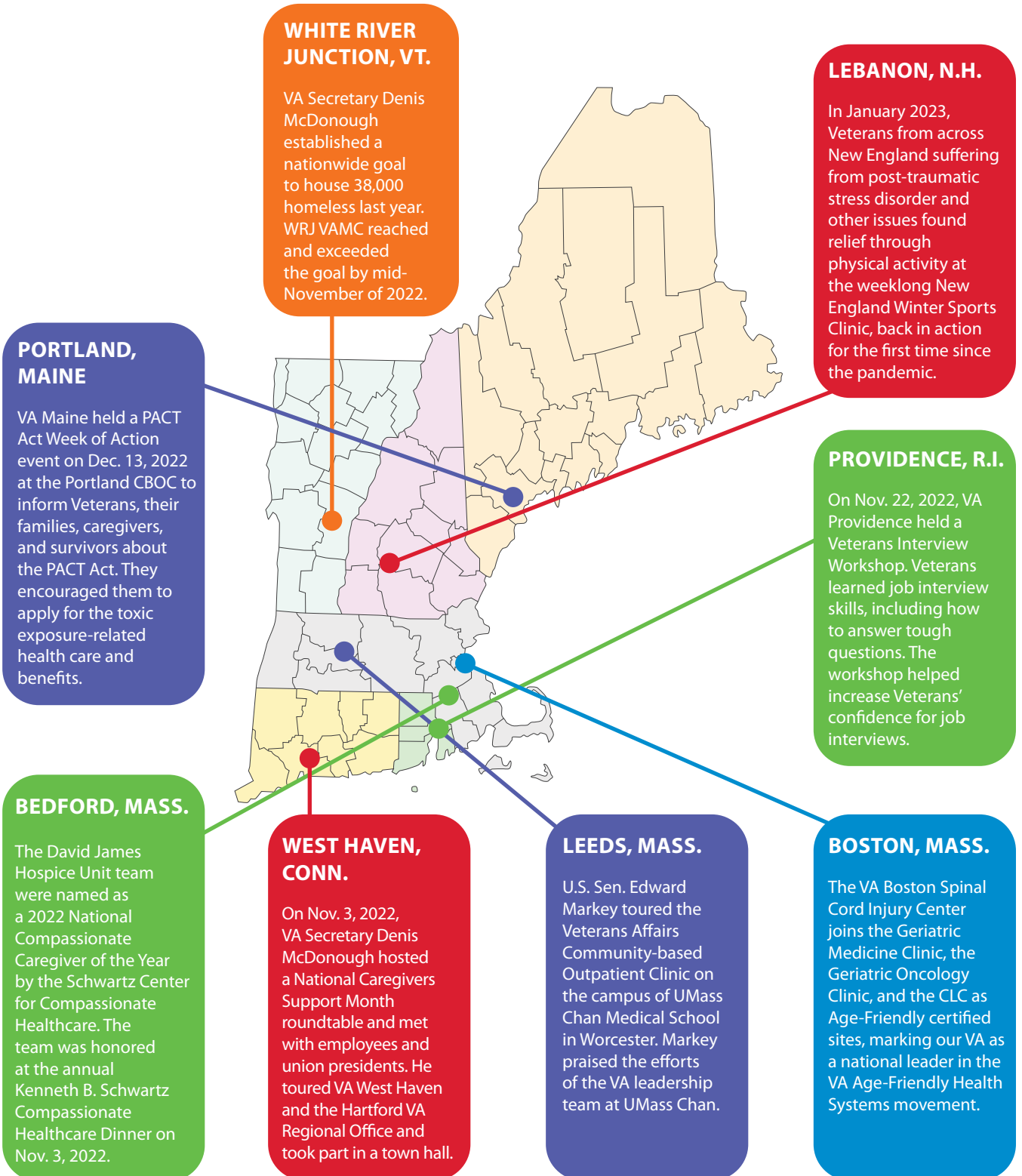
Dufault says that time is of the essence when it comes to scent tracking. And, decreasing the chances for scent compromising is vital.

"Scent work is so time sensitive and so dependent on the circumstances," said Dufault. "The sooner we know, the higher chance of a positive outcome—especially if it's after-hours, nights or weekends. The other big thing we have to tell people is, if you're going to request the canine's help, leave the scene alone and do not touch anything. When you touch the item that has the scent on it, my dog will then start tracking you instead."

K-9 vehicles are specially designed for dogs and help with maintaining good tracking abilities. "They're designed for her [Belle's] comfort," said Dufault. "She's got a constant supply of fresh water. Most canine vehicles always have one or both of their windows down. It's not just for temperature regulation," he said. "It allows the outside scents in, so she's always acclimated with what's going on outside."



To read about each of these headline stories, visit the VA New England “News” page at [www.newengland.va.gov/news](http://www.newengland.va.gov/news)





# NECIE employee recognized for innovation

Story by Russ Tippets,  
Senior Editor & Writer,  
Coast Guard Veteran

VA New England Center for Innovation Excellence (NECIE) employees, led by NECIE Director Leandro DaSilva, continue to inspire and innovate.

This past November, NECIE Project Manager Charles Franklin was honored with the prestigious Dr. Robert L. Jesse Award for Excellence in Innovation, in the category for Non-Clinical for IT and other non-healthcare-related innovators, for his contributions to the creation of the VA Rideshare program.

Each year, the VHA Office of Healthcare Innovation and Learning honors VA innovators with the Under Secretary for Health's Dr. Robert L. Jesse Award for Excellence in Innovation. The award gives distinction to VA employees who have demonstrated brilliance in enabling the discovery and spread of healthcare innovation that exceeds expectations, restores hope, and builds trust within the VA.

VA Rideshare began with 10 Veterans at Boston VA in 2018. Today, it has expanded nationally to over 165 VA Medical Centers and has facilitated more than 500,000 rides across 3.5 million miles for Veterans averaging over 12,000 rides weekly.



NECIE Project Manager Charles Franklin was one of four recipients of the Dr. Robert L. Jesse Award for Excellence in Innovation this past November, for his work in the creation of the VA Rideshare program. His award is pictured on the far right.

Stacey Lewis, NECIE Health System and Improvement Specialist and certified Lean Six Sigma Black Belt, has also been selected as one of seven VA employees to join the next cohort of Veterans Health Administration Innovation Fellows. These new fellows will seek ways to expand their innovations' capabilities.

Chartered in 2020, the NECIE is part of the VA New England Healthcare System and the VHA Innovation Ecosystem (VHA IE). It is virtually located in Manchester, New Hampshire, and focuses on developing technology solutions for chronic illnesses and injuries, improving accessibility for rural Veterans, and providing innovative healthcare solutions for the VA's aging population.

Past NECIE work has involved projects with partners, such as the VA Homeless Program Office, the VA Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, and companies like Mobius Mobility, LLC and Give Legacy, Inc. The projects have focused on Male Fertility, Fall Prevention PUP socks and Extended Reality (XR)/Virtual Reality (VR), with the goal of eliminating barriers to health care, housing and employment, while promoting Veteran independence and an improved quality of life.

To learn more about the NECIE and to follow their progress, visit [VHA Innovation Ecosystem](https://www.newengland.va.gov/vha-innovation-ecosystem).

# Take advantage of the PACT Act



The Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act of 2022 has been signed into law. This historic new law expands VA health care and benefits for Veterans exposed to burn pits and other toxic substances and it empowers VA to provide generations of Veterans—and their survivors—with the care and benefits they have earned.

I know you and your families will have questions about the PACT Act and what benefits and health care you may now be eligible to receive. See the next page for details.

I also encourage you to visit [www.va.gov/PACT](http://www.va.gov/PACT) to learn more.

Sincerely,

Ryan Lilly, MPA  
Network Director  
VA New England Health Care System

## Get Your Toxic Exposure Screening

**Who:** All Veterans enrolled in VA health care

**What:** A quick, 5-10 minute screening to identify and document any potential exposures to toxins during military service

**When:** At least once every 5 years

**Where:** At VA medical centers and clinics

**Why:** To support your long-term health plan and ensure you receive informed, whole-health care

**How:** Ask about the toxic exposure screening at your next VA appointment.

*If you do not have an upcoming appointment or want to be screened sooner, contact your local VA facility and ask to be screened by the Toxic Exposure Screening Navigator.*





# PACT ACT FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS



The **PACT Act** is a new law that expands VA health care and benefits for Veterans exposed to burn pits and other toxic substances. This law helps us provide generations of Veterans—and their survivors—with the care and benefits they've earned and deserve.

The Act **(1)** expands and extends eligibility for VA health care for Veterans with toxic exposures and Veterans of the Vietnam era, Gulf War era, and Post-9/11 era, and **(2)** expands eligibility for benefits for Veterans exposed to toxic substances.

## What new or expanded presumptions will the Act create and when will they be in effect?

VETERANS AND SURVIVORS CAN FILE CLAIMS FOR ALL CONDITIONS OUTLINED IN THE PACT ACT IMMEDIATELY.

### For Gulf War and post 9-11 Veterans, that includes:

Brain cancer, Glioblastoma, Respiratory (*breathing-related*) cancer of any type, Gastrointestinal cancer of any type, Head cancer of any type, Lymphoma of any type, Lymphatic cancer of any type, Neck cancer, Pancreatic cancer, Reproductive cancer of any type, Kidney cancer, Melanoma, Asthma (*diagnosed after service*), Chronic rhinitis, Chronic sinusitis, Constrictive bronchiolitis or obliterative bronchiolitis,

Emphysema, Granulomatous disease, Interstitial lung disease (*ILD*), Pleuritis, Pulmonary fibrosis, Sarcoidosis, Chronic bronchitis, Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (*COPD*).

### For Vietnam Veterans and other Veterans exposed to tactical herbicides, that includes two Agent Orange presumptive conditions:

Monoclonal gammopathy of undetermined significance (*MGUS*), High blood pressure (*hypertension*).

## How can Veterans apply for VA health care?

Apply **online** at [VA.gov/health-care/apply/application/introduction](https://www.va.gov/health-care/apply/application/introduction).

**Call** our toll-free hotline at 877-222-8387, M-F, 8:00 a.m. - 8:00 p.m. ET.

**Mail** a completed, signed Application for Health Benefits ([VA Form 10-10EZ](#)).

**Bring a completed, signed VA Form 10-10EZ** with you to your [nearest medical center or clinic](#) or get help through your state's Department of Veterans Affairs Service Officer.

**Get help** filing your claim by working with an [accredited representative](#).

## What are the PACT Act key components?



The Act **expands and extends eligibility for VA health care for Veterans with toxic-exposures** and Veterans of the Vietnam era, Gulf War era, and Post-9/11 era.



VA **will improve the decision-making process** for determining what medical conditions will be considered for presumptive status.



Every enrolled Veteran will **receive an initial toxic exposure screening** and a follow-up screening every five years. Veterans who are not enrolled, but who are eligible to enroll, will have an opportunity to enroll and receive the screening.



VA health care staff and claims processors will receive **toxic exposure-related education and training**.



The Act requires **research studies** on mortality of Veterans who served in Southwest Asia during the Gulf War, Post-9/11 Veteran health trends, and Veteran cancer rates.



The Act will help VA **build a stronger, more skilled workforce** to meet the growing demand for benefits and services.



The Act authorizes **31 new medical facilities** across the country, providing greater access to VA health care.

## How can a Veteran file a claim?



Veterans who would like to file a claim must complete [VA Form 21-526EZ](#) to apply for benefits and submit any supportive evidence.



To learn about standard VA disability claims, supplemental claims, secondary claims, and more visit: [VA.gov/disability/how-to-file-claim/when-to-file](https://www.va.gov/disability/how-to-file-claim/when-to-file).

## If a Veteran was previously denied a claim, what can they do?

VA will contact Veterans when a presumption of service connection is established or changed. However, **Veterans previously denied a toxic-exposure related claim** are encouraged to file a supplemental claim. Once a supplemental claim is received, VA will review the claim under the new law.



## VHA is hiring!

Story by Winfield Danielson, VA Boston Public Affairs Officer,  
and Russ Tippets, Senior Editor & Writer, Coast Guard Veteran

Veteran Health Administration needs to hire approximately 52,000 employees per year over the next five years to keep pace with the increasing demand for care. VISN 1 human resource officers are working towards improving the hiring and onboarding experience to ensure VHA remains an attractive place to work.

"We're hiring positions ranging from housekeepers and police officers to doctors, nurses and X-ray technicians," said VA Boston HealthCare System (HCS) deputy executive director Michael Payne. "Once we select a qualified candidate, the next challenge becomes getting them through in-processing and on the job quickly."



*A potential VHA employee rotates through various in-processing stations, including benefits, credentialing, and occupational health during a VA Boston HCS onboarding event, November 16, 2022. Photo by Winfield Danielson, VA Boston PAO.*

VA Boston Healthcare System is among those within the VHA looking to hire this year. They plan to hire 1,200 employees during fiscal year 2023, which runs through September 2023.

VISN 1 provides health care for over 250,000 Veterans and employs over 17,000 people. You can visit [USAJOBS](https://www.usajobs.gov) to see all of our current openings and visit the [VA careers page](#) to learn more about the application process.