

VISN 23 Spring/Summer 2012



Veterans' Health

HEALTH | HAPPINESS | ENERGY | STRENGTH | SUPPORT | WELLNESS



Caring for the Whole Person

The Spirit of Volunteerism is Alive and Well!

Breaking the Cycle of Homelessness



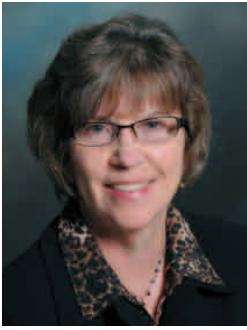
VA HEALTH CARE

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# Message from the Director

## New Tool Enhances Veterans Access to Their VA Health Care



Dear Veterans,

In this issue of Veterans' Health you will read about the importance of the program "No Veteran Dies Alone" on page 3. It partners Compassionate Companion volunteers with terminally ill Veterans so that Veterans have someone close by their side during their

final hours. The program's unique volunteers are essential because some of our Veterans are far from home, have very few family members nearby, or are homeless. Elderly Veterans, at times, have outlived close family members or even children, and the program helps to fill the gaps. It really takes a special person to be a Compassionate Companion volunteer and be able to go through the process of sharing the last hours of a Veteran's life.

The theme of volunteerism is continued through pages 4 and 5 as the benefits of being a volunteer are explored. As a country, we have a very altruistic foundation. When it comes to supporting Veterans, that sentiment comes through strongly as we honor and respect those, like you, who sacrificed and were willing to give so much for our country. Serving those who served our country is extra rewarding for our volunteers.

You can read about our ongoing efforts on page 6 to assist those who put their lives on the line and now have needs of their own, and the activities we are pursuing to help homeless Veterans get off the streets. Many are suffering from the residual effects of time in combat, and we have a special obligation to make sure those Veterans are housed and on their way to wellness.

Last but not least, you will read on page 7 about how vital protecting every Veteran's privacy is to us. Safeguarding health information is important to everyone and as a health care entity we are diligently doing our part to protect your information.

We thank you for your service and all of us at the VA Midwest Health Care Network, whether volunteering or employed, want you to know it is truly a privilege assisting you with your health care needs.

Sincerely,  
Janet Murphy  
Network Director

From northwestern Wisconsin to eastern Wyoming, Veterans can now take advantage of a new way to communicate with their VA health care teams that's as fast as email, but completely safe and secure!

The new communication tool is called "Secure Messaging" and allows Veterans to communicate electronically with their primary care team at any VA medical facility or clinic in the VA Midwest Health Care Network.

Secure Messaging is a great communication tool for anything other than urgent communication. It is meant for routine exchanges such as questions about appointments, prescriptions or other non-urgent health care matters.

To take advantage of Secure Messaging, Veterans need to create an account on My HealthVet ([www.myhealth.va.gov](http://www.myhealth.va.gov)), making sure to check both VA patient and Veteran when they register. Next, print out and complete the in-person authentication form.

Veterans can complete the form at home and drop it off during their next visit, or they can complete the form at the VA medical facility where they receive care.

After the form is completed, it might take a few days to be authenticated. Veterans can tell their account has been authenticated if they can view their VA appointments and VA lab results on My HealthVet.

Once the authentication is complete, Veterans should log in to their My HealthVet account, click on Secure Messaging and "Opt-in," which is agreeing to the terms and conditions of Secure Messaging. Once a Veteran is finished with the Opt-in process their health care team is only a message away.

### My HealthVet Coordinators

#### VA Black Hills Health Care System

Deann Arneson, (605) 745-2000, ext. 2060

#### VA Central Iowa Health Care System

Susan Solinger, (515) 699-5999, ext. 3938

#### Fargo VA Health Care System

Penny Ripperger, (701) 239-3700, ext. 4420

#### Iowa City VA Health Care System

Sarah Steen, (319) 688-3607

#### Minneapolis VA Health Care System

Brad Foley, (612) 467-3629

#### VA Nebraska-W. Iowa Health Care System

Janice Carlin, (402) 995-4966

#### St. Cloud VA Health Care System

Brian Vetter, (320) 255-6480

#### Sioux Falls VA Health Care System

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**On the cover:** Veteran plays a game of sled hockey at the National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic, March 26, 2012.  
**Photo by U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs**

*Veterans' Health* is published quarterly as a patient education service by VA Midwest Health Care Network, one of the 21 integrated networks of the Department of Veterans Affairs. The publication is intended to provide information to help you stay well, manage your health care and learn about the many health services available through VA. This publication is not intended as a substitute for professional medical advice, which should be obtained from your doctor. All articles may be reproduced for educational purposes.

# Caring for the Whole Person

## “No Veteran Dies Alone”

**A**s their lives come to a close, men and women who have partnered with the military to protect our nation’s freedom now have partners caring for them through the “No Veteran Dies Alone” program.

Each day approximately 1,800 American Veterans pass away. According to Mary Ann Herrboldt, RN, a VA nurse, hospice and palliative care director for the Black Hills Health Care System, many Veterans have no one—no family or friends to be with them at the end of their lives. She said, “We don’t want to see anyone in the Veteran population die alone. Many are homeless or have outlived their friends and family, especially World War II Veterans. The ‘No Veteran Dies Alone’ campaign provides dying Veterans with caring companionship as they approach the end of life.”

Volunteers, or “Compassionate Companions” as they are called, partner with the Veteran and their families to arrange constant bedside comfort at medical centers or hospice whenever family and friends are unable to be near. For Veterans separated from their families, the program provides the reassuring presence of a volunteer companion, especially during a Veteran’s final hours. Once trained, a Compassionate Companion assists with non-medical patient comfort. They might hold the Veteran’s hand, read aloud or play music, and provide simple assistance in making the Veteran comfortable in his/her last days.

Cheryl Rieniets, lead volunteer services specialist at the VA Black Hills Volunteer Service Program Office, emphasized that the program is “not related to service-connected disability, but is available to all Veterans as an entitlement.” Cheryl tells a story about the impact of the “No Veteran Dies Alone” program through the lives of Ed and Sandy Baier, volunteers at the Fort Meade Hospice unit. Ed, a retired Chief of Police, and wife Sandy, have been Compassionate Companion volunteers for 7 years. They



were drawn to become volunteers when their son became ill. In and out of the facility for 10 years, Ed and Sandy visited him regularly. But they also visited other patients on the hospice wing, determined to help make the hospice unit as home-like as possible for the Veterans residing there. Even after their son passed, they continued with their service to terminal hospice patients. They said that it had become their calling, and volunteering helped them heal from the loss of their son. Having completed the required program training, they now serve on the “No Veteran Dies Alone” Compassionate Companion volunteer group.

Ed and Sandy knew they were making a difference when they began to visit a Veteran who was in failing health. Upon meeting the Veteran, the Baier’s said, “We made a real connection.” The Veteran’s health continues to improve because the Baier’s have become his “family,” and he now has a quality to his life that he felt he was missing.

The Baier’s experience and presence as volunteers serves as encouragement for other volunteers. Through periodic visits, the Compassionate Companion is able to make a connection with the Veteran and develop a relationship, so that if those final hours come, he or she is not dying alone.

**For information on becoming a Compassionate Companion or becoming a part of the “No Veteran Dies Alone” program as a volunteer, contact Cheryl Rieniets at the VA Black Hills Volunteer Service Program Office at (605) 347-7206.**



# The Spirit of Volunteer

**G**iving is good, and now science can prove just how good it is. According to a study conducted by the Corporation for National and Community Service, “The Health Benefits of Volunteering: A Review of Recent Research,” there is a definite relationship between volunteering and health. “Volunteering makes the heart grow stronger,” said David Eisner, CEO of the Corporation. Some of the benefits are lower mortality rates, increased ability to function, and lower rates of depression in later years over those who do not volunteer. Volunteers giving approximately 100 hours per year are most likely to exhibit “positive health outcomes.” This research also noted that the overall satisfaction of incorporating service

to others into one’s life adds a sense of pride, accomplishment, and a feeling of positive contribution to society.

A Duke University study found that “individuals who volunteered after having a heart attack reported a reduction in despair and depression—two factors linked to mortality in post-coronary artery disease patients.” For adults age 65 and older, the benefits of volunteering had a distinct effect on their physical and mental health because of the sense of accomplishment and giving to others.

Nationally, a new Bureau of Labor Statistics report stated that 64.3 million people volunteered in 2011, an increase of 0.5 percent from 2010. Patricia Aljets, Voluntary Service Program Manager, said, “Almost 7,000 people are registered

volunteers at VA facilities that make up VA Midwest Health Care Network, and collectively they give approximately 670,000 hours of service. In 2011, VA Volunteer service and donations in this Network equates to a 26 million dollar contribution to the Department of Veterans Affairs,” Aljets said.

Dennis Erie, Volunteer Service Specialist with the St. Cloud facility, said, “There are many opportunities to volunteer here; everything from hospice, clerical and chapel to fishing, hunting at Camp Ripley, and the Ambassador and Escort Programs.” The Ambassador Program provides helpful advice and directions to outpatients arriving for daily appointments. The Escort Program is designed for volunteers to assist wheelchair-bound Veterans

**Check out these websites and organizations for more information about volunteering:**

**[www.volunteer.gov](http://www.volunteer.gov)**

Building America's  
Communities of Service

**[www.volunteermatch.org](http://www.volunteermatch.org)**

The Foundation's mission is to engage more people more effectively in volunteer community service to help solve serious social problems.



# Volunteerism is Alive and Well!

getting to and from their daily appointments.

For Sam Knudson, Corwin Randleman, Claude Kowalski and Eileen Decker, volunteering for VA, "is their pleasure to serve our Veterans." Knudson, who serves on the Escort Program, said, "After retirement, you need a purpose to get up in the morning and help make the world a better place. Most of the older Veterans here are in wheelchairs. I know I am helping them get healthy faster by volunteering. This facility (St. Cloud VAMC) is about 1.5 miles around. The exercise I get when I assist a Veteran keeps the old bones moving, but it can't compare to the sense of purpose I receive from volunteering."

Randleman, a volunteer and former state employee, said that, "Just being able to listen,

share my faith, and be able to do something compassionate for my fellow man has been fulfilling for so many reasons."

Kowalski said that as a Vietnam Veteran himself, he can "relate to other Veterans. The fellowship, the camaraderie, sharing my faith, and just being of service to others is what gives me purpose." Kowalski is diabetic and reports that the exercise he receives while volunteering is beneficial. "I plan on volunteering for as long as I can walk, and as long as the good Lord gives me grace," he said.

Decker struggled with grief and loss of purpose after her husband, a Marine, died. She felt compelled to volunteer to help her through her grief and regain her purpose. She said, "It's wonderful to see the Veterans smiling...we can bring things to

them that they don't have here."

Want to get involved and enjoy the healthy benefits of volunteering? There are plenty of opportunities in VA! Contact a VA Voluntary Service Officer at a VA facility nearest you.



Volunteers at St. Cloud VA Health Care System, L-R Sam Knudson, Eileen Decker, Claude Kowalski, Corwin Randleman, and Dennis Erie

Andria Marquardt,  
Jon Feiock, Tammy  
Reiff, Rebecca Hess  
and Karen Cordie ▶

# Breaking the Cycle of Homelessness

“Homelessness among Veterans is really a black eye for society. We really need to do a better job of getting Veterans off the street,” said Brian Wallin, Sioux Falls Veteran Center employee. Doing more for our Veterans in need is a shared sentiment of all VA employees all the way up to the chief executive of the country, President Obama, who has set a goal of sheltering all Veterans by 2015.

Working to assist Veterans who have fallen on hard times, the Sioux Falls VA Health Care System (SFVAHCS) Homeless Program engages homeless Veterans through outreach and connects them with a full range of services that can help break the cycle of homelessness. The program has several components, including outreach, education, referral, community case management, Health Care for Homeless Veterans, Veteran Justice Outreach, VA Homeless Substance Use Disorder, Homeless Veterans Supportive Employment Program, Housing and Urban Development-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing, Health Care for Reentry Veterans, and the National Call Center for Homeless Veterans. In partnership with Volunteers of America-Dakotas the SFVAHCS provides a “drop-in” for Veterans and their families at risk or experiencing homelessness. The facility is centrally located in the downtown area of Sioux Falls within walking distance of other community resources. The Veterans Outreach is open Monday through Saturday from 9am–4pm. The center has a laundry facility, showers and bathrooms, and a computer lab for job search and résumé preparation.

In conjunction with the outreach programs,



events such as Stand Downs are also held. A Stand Down is a military term that is used to mean a respite from combat. A Veterans Stand Down, however, takes on a new meaning as a respite from the hardships of homelessness. To date, the Sioux Falls VA Health Care System, Sioux Falls Vet Center, has organized six Stand Downs. The events include all the resources from the Homeless Program as well as on-site meals, personal care kits, flu shots, blood pressure checks, haircuts, and much more.

Clarence White, a Veteran who was homeless in 2010, attended a recent Sioux Falls Stand Down and said, “Within two months they had me placed in my own apartment, and I’m working at least part-time now. It’s been a great experience. This year I’m here so other Vets know they don’t have to be on the street.”

According to a report released by HUD, from 2010 to 2011 there was a reduction of 8,834 homeless Veterans. Currently, there are more than 67,000 homeless Veterans still in need of assistance, but with the continued hard work and dedication of those coordinating homeless programs and organizing Stand Downs, the goal of sheltering all our Veterans by 2015 is in sight.

The Department of Veterans Affairs has founded a **National Call Center for Homeless Veterans** hotline to ensure that homeless Veterans or Veterans at-risk for homelessness have free, 24/7 access to trained counselors.

Call **(877) 4AID VET** or **(877) 424-3838**

Information can also be found at <http://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/NationalCallCenter.asp>

# Veterans Privacy is High Priority for the Veterans Health Administration



**T**he Veterans Health Administration (VHA) has a long standing record of integrity and accountability, as well as strict ethical codes. Each Veteran's privacy is a high priority for the VHA, which is why extra measures have been taken to ensure Veteran's personal information and privacy is protected.

Recently, a project was initiated to reduce the use of social security numbers on forms and applications. "VHA is removing the identifier from Veteran Identification Cards, shipping procedures, correspondence including enrollment and appointment letters, and billing statements," said Janice Sandquist, Assistant Chief of Health Information, Alternate Privacy/FOIA Officer.

Logbooks are used in various departments for tracking purposes. It is recognized that paper logbooks create vulnerabilities in protection of patient information. Some examples of paper logbooks previously in use include laboratory disposition logs, wound care logs, facility access logs, and appointment logs. To eliminate vulnerability, paper logbooks are only used under a compelling business need, which is rare. These paper log books have either been abolished, or transferred to an electronic system with additional security protections. In addition, the amount

of identifying information included has been decreased for both paper and electronic logs that remain in place.

To ensure confidential patient information is not overheard during appointment check-in, a privacy perimeter has been established around the check-in desk. Veterans are asked to remain behind the established perimeters to respect the privacy of those being served until called upon to approach the desk. Staff have been trained on auditory privacy and instructed to request the least amount of identifying information needed to complete the process.

Veteran Identification Cards, or VIC cards, are issued to Veterans who are eligible for care. Previously, when a card was issued it included the Veteran's name, date of birth and social security number. In an attempt to increase confidentiality, the cards now only contain the name and a picture of the Veteran.

Those who have access to information also have new, more secure policies. "The Personal Identity Verification (PIV) Card is an ID card issued for all federal agency employees and contractors," said Sandquist. The card validates the identity for access to VA facilities' information technology systems. It allows employees and contractors to receive, store, recall, and send information by using a computer chip with encryption.

Sandquist added, "The encryption strengthens the security of Veteran's information and limits employee and contractor access to secured areas."

By reducing the use of personal information, adding heightened security features to PIV and VIC cards, transitioning or abolishing most paper logs, and even strengthening auditory privacy, Veterans can rest assured that the VHA is striving to ensure their privacy is protected.

## According to Consumer Reports, here are a few simple things you can do to help protect your identity:

- Never give your Social Security number or other information to strangers who call, text, or send email messages to you.
- Never leave your wallet or purse unattended.
- Store financial account statements, medical records, and tax filings in a secure place at home and shred those documents when you no longer need them.
- Don't post your date of birth, mother's maiden name, or other personal information on websites.
- If your bank or credit-card issuer offers free online or mobile alerts that will warn you of suspicious account activity as soon as it's detected, sign up for them.



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# VA MIDWEST HEALTH CARE NETWORK – VISN 23

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[www.blackhills.va.gov](http://www.blackhills.va.gov)  
Fort Meade Campus  
113 Comanche Road  
Fort Meade, SD 57741  
(605) 347-2511  
(800) 743-1070

Hot Springs Campus  
500 N. 5th Street  
Hot Springs, SD 57747  
(605) 745-2000  
(800) 764-5370

Sioux Falls VA Health Care System  
[www.siouxfalls.va.gov](http://www.siouxfalls.va.gov)  
2501 W. 22nd Street  
PO Box 5046  
Sioux Falls, SD 57117  
(605) 336-3230  
(800) 316-8387

Fargo VA Health Care System  
[www.fargo.va.gov](http://www.fargo.va.gov)  
2101 Elm Street  
Fargo, ND 58102  
(701) 239-3700  
(800) 410-9723

Iowa City VA Health Care System  
[www.iowacity.va.gov](http://www.iowacity.va.gov)  
601 Highway 6 West  
Iowa City, IA 52246  
(319) 338-0581  
(800) 637-0128

VA Central Iowa Health Care System  
[www.centraliowa.va.gov](http://www.centraliowa.va.gov)  
3600 30th Street  
Des Moines, IA 50310  
(515) 699-5999  
(800) 294-8387

Minneapolis VA Health Care System  
[www.minneapolis.va.gov](http://www.minneapolis.va.gov)  
One Veterans Drive  
Minneapolis, MN 55417  
(612) 725-2000  
(866) 414-5058

St. Cloud VA Health Care System  
[www.stcloud.va.gov](http://www.stcloud.va.gov)  
4801 Veterans Drive  
St. Cloud, MN 56303  
(320) 255-6480  
(800) 247-1739

VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System  
[www.nebraska.va.gov](http://www.nebraska.va.gov)  
4101 Woolworth Avenue  
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