

workforce

resource newsletter

VA



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Office of Human Resources & Administration



MARCH 2019

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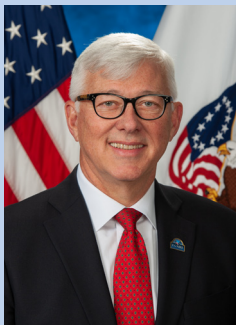
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FROM THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY

Engagement As An Imperative



Daniel Sitterly

As we move further into the new year, it's a good time to focus on developing new habits that benefit ourselves just as much as the workplace around us. I'm sure many of you are hard at work making

progress on your goals for the New Year, however I'd like to suggest adding a new one – becoming more engaged.

Earlier this month, I had the exciting opportunity to meet and speak with many of our talented colleagues as part of the community townhall meeting. Among the many great questions posed to me during that time was "What would I do to lift morale among our employees?" I couldn't help but answer that question with one of my own, – "What are you doing to help lift morale?"

It's something I spoke about at length during my recent appearance (see <https://govmatters.tv/veterans-affairs-employee-survey-shows-improving-morale/>) on Government Matters. VA has worked hard to improve employee engagement and morale, and the Department's latest internal survey results show we are making progress. In addition to

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OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY

Appeals Modernization is Here!

On Feb. 19, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) celebrated a historic day for the Veterans it serves. On this day, full implementation of the Veterans Appeals Improvement and Modernization Act of 2017 (Appeals Modernization Act) officially launched. The Appeals Modernization Act was signed into law by President Trump on Aug. 23, 2017. Veterans and stakeholders have long sought reform to the previous appeal system, and VA is proud to now offer Veterans greater choice in how they resolve a disagreement with a VA decision.

To celebrate this historic achievement, an implementation ceremony took place on Tuesday, Feb. 19, with VA Secretary Robert Wilkie as the keynote speaker. Opening remarks were provided by Paul R. Lawrence, Ph.D., Under Secretary for Benefits; Cheryl Mason, Chairman of the Board of Veterans' Appeals (Board); and David McLenachen, Director for the Appeals Management Office. Attendees included VA leadership, Veterans Service Organizations, attorney partners, and members of Congress, or their designees. The ceremony was broadcast live.

Veterans who disagree with a VA decision will have three decision review lanes to choose from: Higher-Level Review, Supplemental Claim, and appeal to the Board. VA's goal is to complete Supplemental Claims and Higher-Level Reviews in an average of 125 days, and decisions appealed to the Board for direct review in an average of 365 days. This is a vast improvement to the average 3-7 years Veterans waited for a decision in the legacy process.

Appeals Modernization is one of the components of VA's modernization initiative to improve delivery of benefits and services to Veterans and their families. Thank you for your continued efforts in ensuring we provide the best customer service to Veterans and in celebrating one of the most significant changes in decades to affect VA and the Veterans it serves. For more information, please visit <https://vaww.insider.va.gov/appeals-modernization-is-here/>. ■



Secretary Robert Wilkie

Remembering the 9 Merit System Principles

Daniel Sitterly, Assistant Secretary of the Office of Human Resources/Operations, Security and Preparedness, reminds all employees to keep in mind the nine merit system principles which are designed to ensure fair and open recruitment, competition and employment practices free of political influence or other nonmerit factors. The Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 incorporated the merit system principles into law at section 2301 of title 5, United States Code.

More information about the principles can be found on OPM’s website at <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/performance-management/reference-materials/more-topics/merit-system-principles-and-performance-management/>. Listed below, is the complete list of the nine merit system principles.

1. Recruitment should be from qualified individuals from appropriate sources in an endeavor to achieve a work force from all segments of society, and selection and advancement should be determined

solely on the basis of relative ability, knowledge and skills, after fair and open competition which assures that all receive equal opportunity.

2. All employees and applicants for employment should receive fair and equitable treatment in all aspects of personnel management without regard to political affiliation, race, color, religion, national origin, sex, marital status, age or handicapping condition, and with proper regard for their privacy and constitutional rights.
3. Equal pay should be provided for work of equal value, with appropriate consideration of both national and local rates paid by employers in the private sector, and appropriate incentives and recognition should be provided for excellence in performance.
4. All employees should maintain high standards of integrity, conduct and concern for the public interest.
5. The Federal workforce should be used efficiently and effectively.
6. Employees should be retained on the basis of adequacy of their performance,

inadequate performance should be corrected and employees should be separated based on who cannot or will not improve their performance to meet required standards.

7. Employees should be provided effective education and training in cases in which such education and training would result in better organizational and individual performance.
8. Employees should be – (a) protected against arbitrary action, personal favoritism or coercion for partisan political purposes, and (b) prohibited from using their official authority or influence for the purpose of interfering with or affecting the result of an election or a nomination for election.
9. Employees should be protected against reprisal for the lawful disclosure of information which the employees reasonably believe evidences – (a) a violation of any law, rule or regulation, or (b) mismanagement, a gross waste of funds, an abuse of authority or a substantial and specific danger to public health or safety. ■

IN THE NEWS

Corporate Senior Executive Management Office Provides Outreach at VA Symposium

Executive coaches, available to VA’s senior leaders through the Corporate Senior Executive Management Office (CSEMO), proved to be an attraction during the VA Patient Experience Symposium held Feb. 5-7. Many of the more than 300 conference attendees stopped by CSEMO’s table, which featured information on its Executive Coaching.

Three coaches, Birgit Zacher Hanson, Terry Hildebrandt, and Susan Pinsker, joined CSEMO Senior Employee Development Specialist Ruth Hicks-Oglesby, who manages the Executive Coaching Program and Bryan Vidal, TechWerks Assistant Program Manager, who helps manage the program. They provided feedback and answered questions from attendees. Based on the presentations by the Executive Coaches and Hicks-Oglesby, three attendees signed up for coaching.

“Executive Coaching is a major benefit for VA’s senior leaders,” said Hicks-Oglesby. “It gives them a chance to better develop their leadership capabilities and see how they can improve their performance.”

Attendees and other executive coaches

echoed Hicks-Oglesby. Jennifer Gutowski, Director of the Pacific Islands Veterans Affairs Health Care System praised the coaches for their valuable input.

“VA uses career coaches to help Senior Executive Service, Senior Leaders, and Title 38 SES equivalents improve their managerial and leadership skills. They’re very valuable, they give me a chance to reflect on what I’m doing, particularly what steps are working and what aren’t,” said Gutowski.

Executive Coach Cynthia Way echoed this view, “Executive Coaches are very good for helping new leaders develop an enhanced leadership role.”

Another attendee, Stephen Black, Director of the St. Cloud Veterans Affairs Health Care System in Minnesota, said “The coaches are invaluable. They provide good insights and assessments, particularly to new SES. It should be expanded, if possible.” Several other Medical Center Directors and Senior Executives echoed this view.

Richard Crockett, Medical Center Director for Brooks Overton VA Medical Center in Shreve-



(From left to right) VA staff Richard Crockett, Skye McDougall and executive coach Birgit Zacher Hanson.

port, La., said the coaches provide a “good sounding board” and helped him see things in a different light.

“They help better team alignment to goals and strategic priorities, and more leaders could benefit from their advice,” said Crockett.

Based on the feedback, CSEMO leadership is reviewing the recommendations provided by those senior leaders who are working with Executive Coaches. ■

Corporate Senior Executive Management Office Welcomes Five New Senior Executives

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) Corporate Senior Executive Management Office (CSEMO) welcomed five new senior executives to the department's senior executive ranks on Jan. 22.

Christopher Bjornberg, who joins VA from the private sector, was appointed as the Executive Director, Jonathan M. Wainwright Memorial VA Medical Center, Veterans Health Administration (VHA), Walla Walla, Wash.

Chaplain Juliana Leshner, a current VA employee, was appointed to her first Title 38 Senior Executive Service equivalent position as the National Director for Chaplain Services, VHA, Hampton, Va.

Scot Burroughs, a current VA employee, was appointed to his first Title 38 position as the Director of Physician Assistant Services, VHA, Iowa City, Iowa.

Dr. Anne Utech, also a current VA employee, was appointed to her first Title 38 position as the National Program Director, Nutrition and Food Service, VHA, Washington, District of Columbia.

Homero Martinez III, a current VA employee, was appointed to his first SES position as the Executive Director, VA Texas Valley Coastal Bend Health Care System, VHA, Harlingen, Texas. ■

Office of Human Resource Management Promotes 'Financial Fitness' Events Beginning in April



The Office of Human Resource Management (OHRM) announced the theme for the 2019 VA Retirement Financial Literacy and Education Program (RFLEP), titled "Financial Fitness – Pump up your Knowledge and Strengthen your Stride all the Way into Retirement," along with a series of events starting in April. The program provides VA employees with tools and information to help them achieve their financial goals and make informed decisions about retirement. Beginning in April, which is nationally recognized as Financial Capability Month, employees will be able to attend live webinars and speak directly with

agency representatives on how to be financially capable and make informed decisions about retirement.

Individual webinar announcements will be shared with the human resources community throughout the year and will be advertised on the OHRM Benefits and Retirement website located at <https://vaww.va.gov/OHRM/Benefits/>.

For more information about the VA RFLEP, please visit the program's website <https://vaww.va.gov/OHRM/Benefits/RFLEP/>. ■

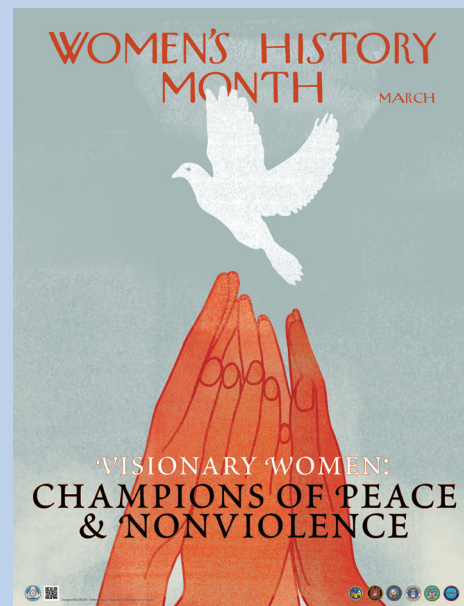


Image courtesy of "Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute"

VA Commemorates Women's History Month

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) joins the nationwide commemoration of Women's History Month in March by acknowledging past and present achievements of women along with their ongoing work to positively impact our country's future.

This year's National Women's History Month theme, as established by the National Women's History Alliance (NWAH), is "Visionary Women: Champions of Peace and Nonviolence." The NWAH celebrates women who have worked to resolve conflicts on inequality, war and social injustices. Their bravery and resolve have helped women throughout the country to realize full inclusion in society, the workplace and human rights.

In 2019, NWAH will honor eleven extraordinary women who have impacted the world in unique ways. One of the honorees is Deborah Tucker, who dedicated her work to ending domestic violence at the local, state, national and international levels through founding and leading several organizations. She also co-chaired the Defense Task Force on Domestic Violence which examined the military's response to domestic and sexual violence. She is the current President of the Board of Directors of the National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence.

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A Message from the Secretary: Best Places to Work Survey

We want to continue hearing from employees, and that is why I am pleased to kick off the VA Best Places to Work survey. Please click on my video message to hear more.

Participation in this 2-minute survey is completely voluntary, and I encourage you to have your voice heard. Please click on the following link to take the survey: <https://www.VABPTW.org>.

The VA Best Places to Work survey is open from Feb. 25 through midnight Hawaii time on March 11. If you have any questions, please email the VHA National Center for Organizational Development at vhancod@va.gov. ■

ODDS AND ENDS

From the Assistant Secretary (continued from Page 1)

surveys, we measure engagement in a variety of ways. We have an employee engagement council that consistently meets to address and implement solutions. Leaders at all levels seek feedback year-round, in person and online, to ensure we continue making progress. Our one-on-one engagement strategy with supervisors is only part of our ongoing effort to ensure our colleagues bloom wherever they are planted.

The only way we can continue to provide and improve service to Veterans and their families is by making sure VA is a place where we want to serve. While we can attribute much progress to the strategies put in place by senior leadership and our predecessors, it is the responsibility of everyone to proactively engage each other daily, at all levels, to develop solutions that will help create the environment we want to work in.

I'm eager to hear your thoughts. Whether we meet in my office, or in passing, or through a brown bag lunch meeting, we owe it to ourselves and each other to be part of the solution. I also encourage each of you to take further steps to improve your leadership and engagement skills. Read highly-regarded books on leadership and management. Consider mentoring someone whom could benefit from your expertise and experience. Seek out mentors from those who are successfully leading and providing solutions with integrity.

Through our daily actions, we can demonstrate the culture we wish to foster throughout VA. Each of us can help cultivate the kind of engagement and morale that keeps our moral compass headed north, and ultimately provide Veterans the level of care they truly deserve. ■



(From left to right) Government Matters Host Francis Rose, VHA National Center for Organization Development Executive Director Dee Ramsel and Sitterly.

VA Commemorates Women's History Month (continued from Page 3)

This March, VA encourages organizations and facilities to recognize achievements of women by organizing activities targeted at raising awareness, increasing knowledge and addressing any barriers to the full employment and inclusion of women at VA.

For more information about Women's History Month, please contact your local Equal Employment Opportunity representative or Federal Women's Program Manager or Sehar Minhas, VA's National Federal Women's Program Manager, at 202-461-4036 or Sehar.Minhas@va.gov. For more information on VA's Federal Women's Program, visit the Office of Diversity and Inclusion website at <https://www.diversity.va.gov/programs/women.aspx>. ■

workforce
resource newsletter
EMPOWERING OUR FRONT LINE

The Workforce Resource Newsletter is intended to inform VA employees on HR policies, strategies, benefits, training, career resources and department news. Its primary audience is the VA workforce. The newsletter is published on a bimonthly basis.

Managing Editor *HRA senior leadership*
Writers/Editors *Belle Rascoe, Jonathan Garris*
Graphic Designer *Sheryvonn Burrell*

The Office of Human Resources and Administration/Operations, Security, and Preparedness sets the strategic direction and articulates the vision placing the VA Human Resources community at the very cornerstone of the VA mission of care and service to the nation's Veterans and their families. VA service begins with VA people, and HRA ensures that VA is positioned and resourced to hire, develop and retain a world-class workforce in service to our Veterans.

For more information, please visit the HRA website at <http://vawww.va.gov/EMPLOYEE/>.

If you have questions concerning the articles in the HR&A Workforce Resource Newsletter, please contact us at Workforce.Resource@va.gov.