



## *Vision for Excellence – Issue 22*

### **The Path to Providing a Better Experience for Veterans**

---

In VISN 4 and across the country, the Office of Veterans Experience is working to design better customer interactions and implement better ways to help Veterans navigate through VA's range of services.

The Veterans Experience teams are looking for new, proactive ways to influence change and build stronger, more productive relationships.

Read our cover stories to learn more about how you can help them, and how they are working to help you.



### **Message from the Director**

---

**Dear Veterans, fellow employees, volunteers and friends of VISN 4:**

In order to consistently provide the best – and most timely – care and services, the Veterans Health Administration has identified five critical priorities. These priorities will support the transformation of VA health care, and will have far-reaching impact throughout our system.

The first and most urgent priority is improving access. We are determined to provide timely access to Veterans as determined by their clinical needs. Here in VISN 4, we've significantly expanded the care provided at our network of outpatient clinics, increased Telehealth usage, added services and staff, and extended our hours in order to improve access to VA care. We have also increased utilization of the Choice program when necessary.

VISN 4 will continue to identify what is working and what is not to ensure that Veterans are getting the care when and where they need and want.

The second priority is employee engagement. VA is seeking a work environment where employees are valued, supported, and encouraged to do their best for Veterans.



VISN 4 employs more than 14,000 people. More than 4,000 of those are Veterans. We have nearly 3,000 nurses and more than 1,000 physicians.

We are working to give staff greater input into their work environment. We know that empowerment is a powerful thing. And empowered employees aren't afraid to think 'out-of-the-box' when it comes to tackling significant challenges.

VHA priority number 3 is ensuring that Veterans receive the highest level of coordinated care within VA or from participating providers.

The Veterans Health Administration is the largest integrated health care system in the United States, providing care at 1,233 health care facilities. VISN 4 currently encompasses 9 medical centers, 44 outpatient clinics, and 1 mobile clinic while working closely with 17 Vet Centers.

Since April 25, we have established hundreds of provider agreements in VISN 4 (including with UPMC, the Geisinger Health System, and The University of Pennsylvania) and authorized their use for thousands of episodes of care.

Additionally, four VISN 4 facilities conduct research to advance the health care field. Last fiscal year, 260 investigators utilized more than \$45 million to work on 513 projects.

Our fourth priority is seeking to identify and disseminate best practices throughout VA. Here are a few examples of that:

In fiscal year 2015, nearly 40,000 VISN 4 Veterans utilized virtual care. Each day last year, more than 1,900 Veterans who live in rural areas used either a telehealth service or secure messaging to receive VA care. This issue of Vision for Excellence highlights just a few of VISN 4's recent Telehealth achievements.

In May, VA announced that one of four new Mental Health Telemedicine Clinical Resource Centers will be established in Pittsburgh. These Centers will provide Veterans, particularly those living in rural areas, with rapid access to mental health services where local barriers exist. This expanded effort will help close the gap in access to mental health care, in particular, in those traditionally underserved communities.

VISN 4 is a part of the "Integrated Reach Database System/Perceptive Reach" pilot; this work will test a software application package that leverages VHA clinical data to identify individuals who may be at elevated risk for adverse events.

These are just a few examples of the many ways that we are sharing best practices within VISN 4 and all of VHA. And we are continuously looking for more opportunities like these.

The final VHA priority is putting Veterans First and giving them the confidence to Trust in VA Care. We will be there for our Veterans when they need us.

The very first objective of VA Secretary Bob McDonald's MyVA transformation is to improve the Veteran Experience. VA's North Atlantic District, of which VISN 4 is a part, was the first district to launch a Veterans Experience office. It became fully operational in May, and is the subject of this e-zine's lead story. We have embedded staff from this new program into our Wilmington and Philadelphia VA medical centers as well as the VISN office.

The ultimate goal of the Office of Veterans Experience is to increase the percentage of Veterans who trust VA from the current measure of 47 percent to 90 percent. To build trust, we need to achieve a high level of performance and consistently earn the confidence of our Veterans.

By working closely with the Office of Veterans Experience, we hope to improve Veterans' trust in VISN 4 care and also engage and empower our employees. It is only through our employees that we can offer great service to our Veterans.

Today, VA faces unprecedented scrutiny of its programs and performance. We have much work to do, and we have already accomplished a lot.

Thank you for your support of VISN 4, and thank you for reading this e-zine.

Sincerely,

*Michael D. Adelman, M.D.*

Network Director  
VA Healthcare – VISN 4

## **VA Healthcare – VISN 4 Leadership**

Michael D. Adelman, M.D.  
Network Director

Carla Sivek, MSW  
Deputy Network Director

Timothy Burke, M.D.  
Chief Medical Officer

Charles R. Thilges  
Chief Financial Officer

Moira M. Hughes, FACHE  
Quality Management Officer

David E. Cowgill  
Communications Manager

Kimberly Butler, MPH  
Executive Assistant

## Cover Stories

---

### Office of Veterans Experience

#### *Improving each Veteran's experience with the Department of Veterans Affairs*

"I do a lot of listening," says Lamont Taylor, a Veterans Experience Field Consultant in VISN 4.

Listening. Collaborating. Uniting. Connecting. Sharing ideas. Finding solutions. Building and mending relationships.

These are the undertakings for the Office of Veterans Experience across the Nation. Here in VISN 4, Eugene W. Skinner Jr. and Carlos Robinson, along with Mr. Taylor, have planted their boots on the ground and commenced a significant effort to increase the percentage of Veterans who confidently place their trust in VA. As military Veterans, all three are working from the perspective of a Veteran; utilizing their collective VA experience, knowledge, and a spirit to serve fellow Veterans and their families.



"I have always been told to treat others in the same manner I want to be treated," says Mr. Skinner. "This rings true for Veterans, and, as a Veteran, I am committed to ensuring all Veterans are treated with the same attention, dignity, and respect that I wish to be treated with."

The Office of Veterans Experience (VE) was created in response to VA Secretary Robert A. McDonald's top priority for the MyVA transformation: Improving the Veteran Experience. This new, permanent office reports directly to Secretary McDonald – it is not aligned within the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), or National Cemetery Administration (NCA). They do, however, work closely with all three administrations.

According to the MyVA Integrated Plan Overview, the VE office will bring a new lens to how VA analyzes and designs the services we provide to Veterans. It will not be another layer of management or bureaucracy, but will:

- Work collaboratively with local facilities in analyzing and designing better customer interactions and the tools that support them;
- Develop and deliver customer service training curricula and methodologies;
- Keep a close eye on customer service performance to make sure the right issues are being addressed in the right ways; and
- Implement better ways to help Veterans navigating through the range of services within VA.

VE teams nationwide, and here in VISN 4, are looking for new, proactive ways to influence change and build stronger, more productive relationships.

## **MyVA Community Veteran Engagement Boards** *Bringing together local resources to address the full range of Veterans' needs*

MyVA Community Veterans Engagement Boards consist of Veteran-centric community stakeholders (such as Veteran service officers, non-profit organizations, and community businesses). They are co-chaired by community stakeholders and supported by VHA, VBA, and NCA leadership. These



boards are designed to develop local solutions for Veterans and their families and ease of access to all of the resources available to Veterans. They leverage community assets, not just VA assets, to help ensure the solutions we implement meet the needs of Veterans in our own communities.

Current boards in VISN 4 include:

- MyVA Community Delaware (Wilmington)
- MyVA Southern New Jersey (Cape May, Atlantic, Cumberland, Salem Counties)
- Delaware Valley Veterans Consortium (Philadelphia)
- Still Serving: Military and Veterans in Greater Pittsburgh

One role of the VE Team is to help build and support these boards. The Community Veteran Engagement Boards are a community-driven initiative focused on bringing together local resources to address the full range of a Veteran's needs, which may include medical, psychological, financial, housing, and others. Local VA facility leaders are members of the boards and serve as active participants to help develop the best solutions for local Veterans' issues.

Mr. Skinner, Mr. Robinson, and Mr. Taylor are currently at the ground level of establishing additional MyVA Community networks in VISN 4, and hope to interconnect them all upon completion. The boards may be able to help each other with resources, even if that resource is simply guidance.

"We serve as ambassadors for improving the Veterans' Experience, when and where Veterans interact with VA, and as sentinels for partnerships between the local MyVA Communities and the Veterans they serve in the local area," says Mr. Robinson.

### **A Daily Purpose** *Strengthening the trust between Veterans and VA*

"As change agents, our responsibilities range from facilitating and sharing best practices between VA facilities, to building relationships with the sole goal of reestablishing, and strengthening the trust between Veterans and VA," says Mr. Skinner.

Each day, VISN 4's three VE team members spend time meeting with VA leaders, VA frontline employees, and



community partners. They discuss ways to improve interagency partnerships. They learn about internal VA business lines. They learn about services, providers, and locations available for Veterans to establish a network of partners able to provide services to Veterans when and where they are needed.

"We are working to ensure that everyone—government or not—knows exactly where to go and how to help a Veteran with needs outside of their respective area or expertise," says Mr. Skinner.

When he identifies organizations or individuals who can benefit from each other's skillsets and resources, Mr. Taylor always says: "Let me link you up." He adds, "The more knowledgeable I am about what different people and groups are doing, the better matches I can make."

"We are committed to improving Veterans' experiences through better networking, community collaboration, outreach coordination, and the use of local, state, and national resources to deliver excellent customer service and to foster better experiences with VA for Veterans and their families," says Mr. Skinner. "Through collaboration and coordination with VA employees and senior leaders, Veterans advocates, and local stakeholders, the entire VA team strives to create a seamless transitional journey for our Veterans across lines of business, administrations, facilities, and external organizations."

## **Measuring Success**

### ***Rating each Veteran's experience with VA***

VE is designed and measured from the Veterans' point of view. The Office is using four dimensions to measure each Veteran's experience with VA. Together, positive experiences with effectiveness, ease, and emotion will increase trust in VA.

- **Trust** - "I trust VA to fulfill our country's commitment to Veterans."
- **Effectiveness** - "I got the service I needed."
- **Ease** - "It was easy to get what I needed."
- **Emotion** - "I felt like a valued customer."

Effectiveness and Ease are planned and delivered by well-designed systems. Emotion is delivered by employees' abilities to connect with Veterans through their hearts. Veterans will notice questions related to these three dimensions popping up on VA surveys, and employees will notice benchmarks related to them popping up in performance plans.

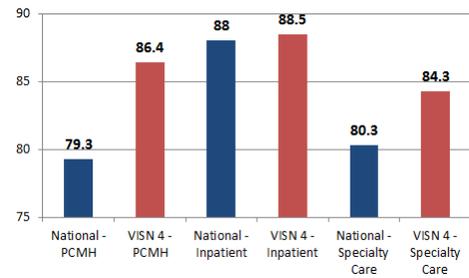
## **Trust in VISN 4**

The Survey of Healthcare Experience of Patients now measures each Veteran's experience with VA and gauges their trust in VA through four "Trust in VA" statements. The charts below show the percent of responses between October 2015 and April 2016 that were either "strongly agree" or "agree".

Responses are divided into three segments: outpatients receiving primary care and mental health care (PCMH), inpatients, and patients receiving specialty care.

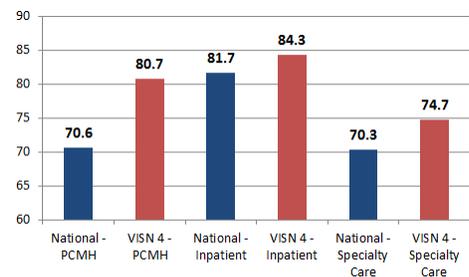
### ***"I got the service I needed." (Effectiveness)***

Nationally, 79.3 percent of outpatients receiving primary care and mental health care agreed with the statement "I got the service I needed." In VISN 4, 86.4 percent of outpatients agreed. Nationally, 88 percent of inpatients agreed with the same statement; in VISN 4, 88.5 percent of inpatients agreed. Nationally, 80.3 percent of patients receiving specialty care agreed that they got the service they needed; in VISN 4, 84.3 percent of specialty care patients agreed.



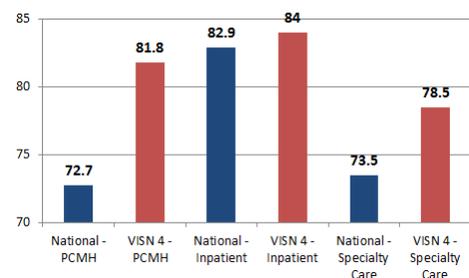
### ***"It was easy to get the service I needed." (Ease)***

Nationally, 70.6 percent of outpatients receiving primary care and mental health care agreed with the statement "It was easy to get the service I needed." In VISN 4, 80.7 percent of outpatients agreed. Nationally, 81.7 percent of inpatients agreed with the same statement; in VISN 4, 84.3 percent of inpatients agreed. Nationally, 70.3 percent of patients receiving specialty care agreed that they got the service they needed; in VISN 4, 74.7 percent of specialty care patients agreed.



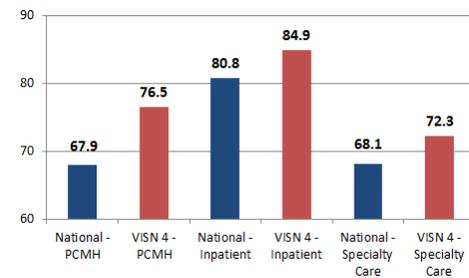
### ***"I felt like a valued customer." (Emotion)***

Nationally, 72.7 percent of outpatients receiving primary care and mental health care agreed with the statement "I felt like a valued customer." In VISN 4, 81.8 percent of outpatients agreed. Nationally, 82.9 percent of inpatients agreed with the same statement; in VISN 4, 84 percent of inpatients agreed. Nationally, 73.5 percent of patients receiving specialty care agreed that they got the service they needed; in VISN 4, 78.5 percent of specialty care patients agreed.



### ***"I trust VA to fulfill our country's commitment to Veterans." (Trust)***

Nationally, 67.9 percent of outpatients receiving primary care and mental health care agreed with the statement "I trust VA to fulfill our country's commitment to Veterans." In VISN 4, 76.5 percent of outpatients agreed. Nationally, 80.8 percent of inpatients agreed with the same statement; in VISN 4, 84.9 percent of inpatients agreed. Nationally, 68.1 percent of patients receiving specialty care agreed that they got the service they needed; in VISN 4, 72.3 percent of specialty care patients agreed.



## Get to Know the Veterans Experience Team in VISN 4

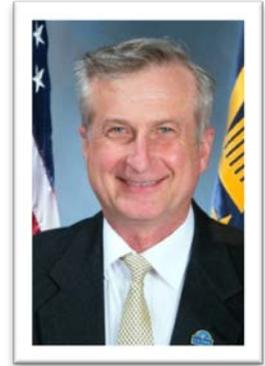
### Jim Wartski

District Veterans Experience Officer

**Primarily Covers:** the North Atlantic District, from Maine to North Carolina

**VA Background:** Received presidential appointment to this position in July 2015

**Military Experience:** Retired Army Col. Wartski is a proven subject matter expert in customer relations, client satisfaction, and organizational results. He is a graduate of West Point with a distinguished military career, having completed Airborne School, Air Assault School, the Armor Basic and Advanced Schools, Combined Arms Services Staff School, Military Acquisition Management School, and the Command General Staff College.



### Joy White

Deputy District Veterans Experience Officer

**Primarily Covers:** the North Atlantic District, from Maine to North Carolina

**VA Background:** Prior to joining Veterans Experience (VE), Ms. White served in the Office of the Secretary as an executive assistant for support and mission operations. She also served as senior health system specialist in the Office of the Deputy Under Secretary for Health for Policy and Services and the Office of the Deputy Under Secretary for Health for Operations and Management for the Veterans Health Administration. In the field, Ms. White was an integral member of the senior executive team at the Hampton VA Medical Center in Hampton, Virginia, serving as the chief of service excellence and Veteran advocacy, with responsibility for Veteran experience and non-VA care coordination.



**Military Experience:** Ms. White is the proud wife of a U.S. Army Veteran.

### Eugene W. Skinner Jr.

Relationship Manager

**Primarily Covered (in VISN 4\*):** Philadelphia and Wilkes-Barre VA Medical Centers, but also oversaw the Veterans Experience program across all of VISN 4.

**VA Background:** Joined the Department of Veterans affairs in January 2013 with the Office of Small and Disadvantaged Business Utilization, where he was responsible for programs that promote small business participation in VA procurements, with special emphasis on Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Small



Businesses and Veteran-Owned Small Businesses; was specifically responsible for the development and deployment of small businesses' informational tools, professional services requirement development, resource management, and networking activities.

**Military Experience:** Served in the U.S. Army for 31 years, including assignments with The Federal Republic of Germany and The United Arab Emirates; served as an air defense artillery officer with the 82nd Airborne Division in Fort Bragg, North Carolina, where he commanded and led his organization during Operation Just Cause in Panama.

Was assessed into the Army Acquisition Corps in 1990 after serving in Operation Desert Shield/Storm; acquisitions assignments included assistant project manager, Department of the Army system coordinator, and deputy program manager. The highlight of his acquisitions career was being board selected to serve as product manager and project manager. He completed 2 ½ combat tours in Iraq, and a deployment to Afghanistan.

**Editor's Note:** Effective Nov. 1, Mr. Skinner transferred to VISN 6 to continue to serve as a relationship manager with the North Atlantic District. We wish him luck and thank him for his service to VISN 4. Ms. Toni Bush-Neal, the current relationship manager for Virginia and North Carolina in VISN 6 will replace Mr. Skinner in VISN 4.

**Carlos Robinson**

Field Consultant

**Primarily Covers (in VISN 4\*):** Wilmington, Coatesville, and Lebanon VA Medical Centers, and South New Jersey VA Outpatient Clinics (Atlantic County, Cumberland County, Cape May County).

**VA Background:** Joined the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) in 2000 as a Veterans service representative; also served as a Veterans claims examiner (training specialist). Served as a national management analyst for the Caregiver Support Program within the Veterans Health Administration, and a management and program analyst for the Executive and Employee Recruiting Service, Office of Human Resources Management & Development, Office of Information Technology.

**Military Experience:** Joined the Louisiana Army National Guard in 1987, and was activated to active duty on November 30, 1990, to serve in Operation Desert Storm and Operation Desert Shield; was honorably discharged in 1991.



**Lamont Taylor**

Field Consultant

**Primarily Covers (in VISN 4\*):** Pittsburgh, Altoona, Erie, and Butler VA Medical Centers.

**VA Background:** Joined the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) in 2004 as a



Veterans service representative; also served as a field examiner and management analyst. Served as a supervisory Veterans service representative and an assistant supervisory Veterans service representative at the Pittsburgh VA Regional Office as well as the assistant Veterans service center manager at the Atlanta VA Regional Office. Most recently served as the supervisory management analyst at VBA's National Work Queue.

**Military Experience:** Served in the U.S. Army and Army Reserves from December 1995 until May 2002; assigned to Fort Carson, Colorado; Fort Hood, Texas; and Kuwait; served as a fuel supply specialist.

*\*The Veterans Experience Team also works closely with the local Veterans Benefit Administration, National Cemetery Administration, and, especially, the community.*

## **Around the Network: Volunteer News**

---

### **National Salute to Veteran Patients**

#### ***VISN 4 facilities participate in national, annual observance***

All VISN 4 medical centers observed the National Salute to Veteran Patients earlier this year.

The Salute is a time of caring and sharing, of expressing honor and appreciation to inpatient and outpatient Veterans. Visitors learned about the important roles volunteers play in VISN 4 throughout the year and made a positive difference in the lives of Veterans, lifting their spirits at special events and delivering refreshments, gifts, and Valentines.



## **Around the Network: Facility News**

---

### **Construction Progress on VA Butler's New Health Care Center (HCC)**

Construction continues on the 168,000 square foot Health Care Center (HCC) in Butler, Pennsylvania. Construction will be complete next year.

On April 6, 2016, VA Butler celebrated the construction progress with a "Topping Out Ceremony." At the ceremony, the final steel beam was placed for this new facility.

Once complete, the HCC will be a two-story building located



on North Duffy Road, approximately 1.4 miles away from the VA Butler campus. The HCC will expand VA Butler Healthcare's outpatient services and will include primary care, specialty care, dental, lab, pathology, radiology, mental health, and ancillary and diagnostic services.

At the end of 2014, VA awarded a lease contract for a Health Care Center (HCC) to Cambridge Healthcare Solutions PA, LP (Cambridge), of Vienna, Virginia.

Visit [www.butler.va.gov](http://www.butler.va.gov) for more information, including live updates at the construction site.

## Wilmington VA Recognized for Equality

The Wilmington VA Medical Center was one of eight hospitals in Delaware to be named a "2016 Leader in LGBT Healthcare Equality" for participation in the Human Rights Campaign Healthcare Equality Index. This is an annual survey conducted by the Human Rights Campaign Foundation, the educational arm of the country's largest lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) organization.

Wilmington VAMC earned recognition for its commitment to equitable, inclusive care for LGBT patients and their families, who can face significant challenges in securing adequate health care. Criteria for the award also included non-discrimination policies for LGBT patients and employees, a guarantee of equal visitation for same-sex partners and parents, and LGBT health education for key staff members.

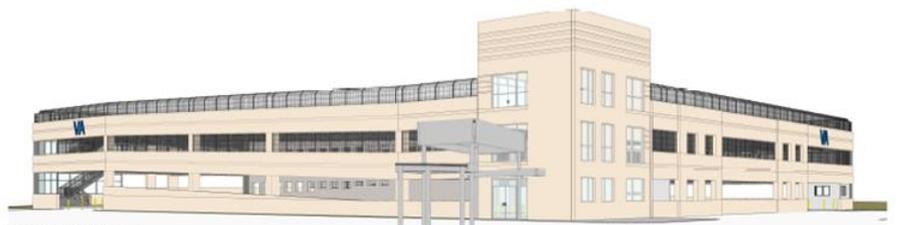
## Behavioral Health Building Opened

The James E. Van Zandt VA Medical Center in Altoona, Pennsylvania, held a ribbon cutting and open house for the new Behavioral Health Building this spring. The building houses 50 staff who offer general mental health, trauma services (including Military Sexual Trauma and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), and substance abuse to support the mental wellbeing of more than 4,000 Veterans.



## Coming Soon: New Parking Garage

The James E. Van Zandt Medical Center in Altoona, Pennsylvania, is building a 117,000 square-foot, three-tier parking garage that will provide a total of 324 parking spaces and an additional 79



surface level parking spaces. Just some of the garage's features are: two elevators, a covered walkway from the garage to the medical center's main entrance, improved traffic flow around the garage, a police office, and the ability to add three additional tiers in the future.

## Around the Network: Community News

---

### Telehealth Update

*VISN 4's telehealth programs are once again garnering national attention.*

#### Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

The Corporal Michael J. Crescenz VA Medical Center (CMCVAMC) in Philadelphia was recently recognized with gold status by VA Under Secretary for Health David J. Shulkin for their innovative use of Telehealth to tackle liver disease and cancer.

Dr. David Kaplan spearheaded an effort there to improve collaboration amongst VA facilities engaged in caring for Veterans with advanced liver disease and liver cancer. By sharing knowledge and education across VISN 4 (and four other Veterans Integrated Service Networks), and providing consults for Veterans through clinical video telehealth, CMCVAMC is improving access and timeliness to liver care for their Veterans.



#### Erie, Pennsylvania

In Erie, a behavioral health provider requested help for a Veteran who has severe PTSD and lives more than two hours from the VA medical center. He was missing most of his appointments.

While clinical video telehealth into the home was the best option for him, he had no way to obtain a working computer. Erie VA's lead health care technician and voluntary services made arrangements to get the Veteran a computer. Now, the facility telehealth coordinator is looking to expand the Veteran's care in the home to include social work, caregiver support and primary care.

#### Camden, New Jersey

Veterans Haven, a transitional housing facility, in a rural section of Camden, New Jersey, is not close to public transportation. Eighty-one homeless Veterans live at the facility; they have limited incomes and few transportation options.

CMCVAMC has established clinical video telehealth services there, including for one Veteran with significant medical and mental health issues whose anxiety prevented him from being able to enter a VA facility for a primary care visit.

He began meeting individually with a psychiatrist and a psychologist via clinical video telehealth, developing a rapport with his providers and improving to the point where he was able to seek in-person care. Now, he is well connected with his primary care team, several specialty clinics, stays current on his medications and continues a close connection with the mental health providers. As a result, his physical and mental health well-being has significantly improved.

These are just a few examples of how VISN 4 is using innovation and determination to provide Veterans care whenever and however they need it.

Learn more about VISN 4's Telehealth program at [www.visn4.va.gov/VISN4/services/telehealth.asp](http://www.visn4.va.gov/VISN4/services/telehealth.asp).

## Around the Network: Ask the Staff

---

### "How did EDF help you?"

The purpose of the Employee Development Fund (EDF) is to provide support to employees at all levels as they strive to develop in areas related to communication, interpersonal effectiveness, critical thinking, organizational stewardship, Veterans and customer focus, personal mastery, building coalitions, global perspective, business acumen, championing innovation, leading people and fostering accountability.

We asked three employees at VA Butler Healthcare "How did EDF help you?" Here are their answers:



*"I used the EDF to achieve a degree and currently I am using the fund towards another degree. The EDF has been great for me to achieve my educational goals. I was working part-time in our kitchen when I received my associate's degree with help from the EDF. Soon after graduation, I had multiple calls requesting interviews from administrative departments with open positions. Now I have a job in our centralized scheduling department!"*

— **Christopher Anthony**



*"Using this fund has, without doubt, helped me in my professional career and my personal growth. The main reason I try to take advantage of this funding is so I am better able to assist the Veterans that I serve. As a Veteran myself, and having gone through the program that I now work in, my main goal is to help other Veterans recover from many different social issues that have affected their lives. Through using the EDF, I have been able to work with Veterans on how to properly advocate for themselves and empower each other."*

— **Cary Adkins**



*"I decided to take advantage of EDF to help off-set the costs of tuition in obtaining my health administration degree. EDF was a quick and easy process that helped pay for many of the classes I completed. I would recommend EDF to any employee in VA that wants to further their education."*

— **Heather Painter**