

VA



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
Veterans Health Administration  
VA Healthcare – VISN 4

# VISION

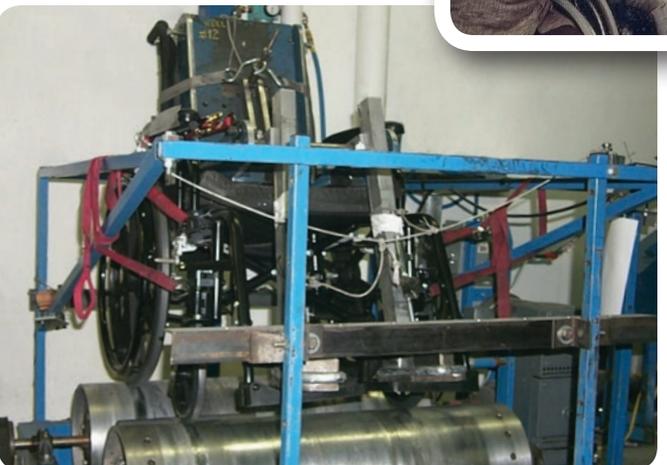
*for Excellence*

Newsletter for Veterans and Stakeholders in VISN 4

Issue 27

# 25

*Years of  
Changing Lives*



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

I am very honored to now serve as the permanent network director for VISN 4 after serving as the interim network director since February.

Our feature story highlights many of the great accomplishments of the Human Engineering Research Laboratories based in Pittsburgh. HERL was founded by Dr. Rory Cooper at the now closed Highland Drive campus of VA Pittsburgh. Despite the many changes that have taken place over the years, and the tremendous growth that HERL has experienced, HERL's core values of integrity, service, dignity, inclusion, excellence, creativity, impact, and team remain as relevant today as they did in 1994. Happy 25th Anniversary to the staff from HERL and to all the Veterans that benefited from their innovation over the years!

I am very proud of all our dedicated health care professionals in VISN 4. They work together to provide Veterans in our region with reliable access and a satisfying care experience no matter how or where the care is provided. Inside this issue, I am pleased to highlight three winners of our VISN 4 I CARE Award. This award is presented quarterly to an employee or team who not only demonstrates our I CARE values, but who go the extra mile to live by our I CARE ideals.

I hope everyone had an enjoyable and healthy summer. I enjoyed seeing many of you while I visited the medical centers and participated in community meetings while I was the interim VISN 4 director over the past few months.

On behalf of all VISN 4 employees, I thank all Veterans and their families for continuing to utilize VISN 4 for your health care needs. It is our honor to serve you.

Sincerely,

Timothy W. Liezert  
Network Director



## VA Healthcare-VISN 4 Leadership Team

**Timothy W. Liezert**  
Network Director  
Since September 2019

**Charles R. Thilges**  
Deputy Network Director  
Since January 2018

**Timothy Burke, M.D.**  
Chief Medical Officer  
Since March 2016

**Joseph Haverstick**  
Chief Financial Officer  
Since May 2019

**Maira M. Hughes, FACHE**  
Quality Management Officer  
Since April 2014

**Teneal Caw**  
Human Resources Officer  
Since August 2012

**David E. Cowgill**  
Communications Manager  
Since January 2007

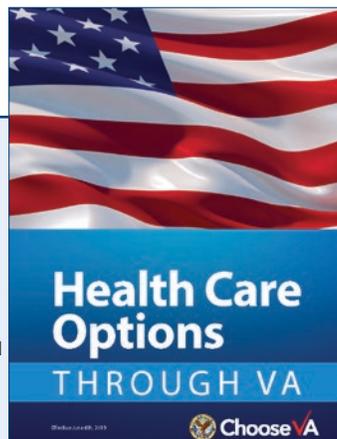
**Jo Petro**  
Executive Assistant  
Since January 2018

### Health Care Options Through VA

At VA, Veterans are the center of everything we do. We are constantly working to make sure you know about the health care and benefits you have earned through your service to our country.

The VA MISSION Act of 2018 strengthens VA's ability to provide you with state-of-the-art care and services. The law makes several improvements to VA care that began on June 6, 2019.

To help you understand your health care options through VA, download our educational brochure available online at <https://missionact.va.gov>.



## Employees Receive Statewide Honors

*Two staff members from VISN 4 recently received statewide honors from the VFW.*

Karen O'Neal, Chief of Voluntary Services at Erie VA Medical Center, received the "VA Healthcare System Employee of the Year" Award from the Pennsylvania Veterans of Foreign Wars at their annual state convention on June 13.

O'Neal was recognized for going above and beyond to help ensure Veterans and their families have the resources they need. Her "we can accomplish more together" mindset has solidified invaluable community partnerships that have connected Veterans and their families with countless resources including a Thanksgiving Dinner Food Basket distribution for more than 175 Veterans in need, to a Veteran Children's Christmas Project to provide holiday gifts for more than 65 Veteran families, to a school supply drive which donated 128 bookbags filled with school supplies to children of Veterans, and many more.



"Our organizations support the needs of our Veterans more than anyone knows, and they do this without any recognition at all," said O'Neal.

"I value the relationships that I have built with these organizations and am forever grateful for everything they do to help our Voluntary Service office meet the needs of our Veterans. To know that the VFW thought highly

enough of me and my work to even nominate me for this award fills my heart! There's absolutely no way I could accomplish meeting the needs of our Veterans without their support."

Jennifer M. Stevey, a Lead Medical Support Assistant, was also named the "VA Healthcare System Employee of the Year" by the Pennsylvania Veterans of Foreign Wars. She received her award in presentation from VFW district leadership, which was held at the Lebanon VA Medical Center.



The award recognizes VA health care providers who go the extra mile in helping veterans and their families. Stevey was nominated by members of Carlisle VFW Post 477.

"I am humbled to receive such an honorable award and blessed to be a part of an amazing team at the VA," said Stevey. "It is with great pride that I have been given the opportunity to serve the Veterans who fought for our freedom and now to be recognized for what I felt was 'just doing my job.'"

Stevy is a Lebanon County resident and a graduate of Cedar Crest High School. She has worked at the Lebanon VA Medical Center for more than 5 years.

Human Engineering Research Laboratories

# 25 Years of Changing Lives



*Wheelchairs and other types of technology for people with disabilities have come a long way in the last 25 years. Many advancements are thanks, in part, to researchers from the Human Engineering Research Laboratories (HERL), celebrating its 25th anniversary this year.*

*Since its founding in January 1994, HERL has been at the forefront of science that has real-world applications and affects the lives of people with spinal cord injury and other mobility impairments.*

*We talked candidly with Army Veteran Rory Cooper, PhD, the founder and director of HERL, and a strong advocate for all Veterans.*



**V4** How did the HERL start 25 years ago?

**RC** I was the Director of the Rehabilitation Engineering Program and the Human Engineering Laboratories at California State University in Sacramento when I was approached by my post-doctoral advisor, Charles Robinson, about visiting Pittsburgh. Dr. Robinson was a VA Career Scientist and Chair of the Department of Rehabilitation Science & Technology at the University of Pittsburgh. Eventually, this led to me being recruited to come to the University of Pittsburgh and

VA Highland Drive to start a Center, which was established as the Human Engineering Research Laboratories in January 1994. I came to Pittsburgh with two graduate students, David VanSickle and Steve Albright, and my wife Rosemarie – together we formed the core of HERL. Originally, HERL was located in part in our home and in the basement of Building 4 at the Highland Drive VA Medical Center.

**V4** What was your vision for the HERL in the early years?

**RC** The vision of HERL has remained largely unchanged,



we have always wanted to create and encourage advances in technologies that would enable a world where all people with disabilities could fully participate and contribute to the best of their abilities. What has changed is HERL's capacity to contribute towards this goal as we have grown the number of people who share our vision and who are working towards it. Also, early on it was a rather audacious goal given that we were a rather small and nascent team in this field. However, HERL has been fortunate enough to have a committed team of people that believed and continue to believe in the vision.

**V4** What inventions and patents do you feel have made the most significant impact on Veterans lives?

**RC** HERL's SMARTWheel has changed wheelchair biomechanics/ergonomics studies, wheelchair provision and training, and led to breakthroughs that have greatly improved the health and function of Veterans who use wheelchairs. The SMARTWheel subsequently contributed to many advances – power assist devices, ergonomic pushrims (e.g., Natural Fit and Surge), Americans With Disabilities Act Standards and Guidelines, and improvements in wheelchair design,



▲ The Mobility Enhancement Robotic Wheelchair (MEBot) can navigate curbs and challenging terrains.

insurance coverage, provision, and fitting/training.

**V4** What single accomplishment are you most proud of?

**RC** HERL itself is what I would consider my most important accomplishment, next to that it would have to be the people who have trained in HERL and have gone on to carry the mission forward. HERL has contributed a number of technologies, standards, and clinical practice guidelines that have transformed people's lives.

**V4** Do you have an ah-ha moment when you knew the HERL was destined to have an profound impact on the lives of Veterans?

**RC** That would have to be 1999 when HERL was awarded both the VA Rehabilitation Research and Development Center and the National Institute for Disability and Rehabilitation Research "Model Center for Spinal Cord Injury." These grants raised HERL to national prominence. After that it happens with ever greater frequency when we see people using our technologies or practicing health care using our research.



▲ The PneuChair is a waterproof and submersible wheelchair device that runs solely on compressed air.

**V4** What are a few of the key HERL milestones?

**RC** HERL was established in 1994. It became home to the VA and NIDRR Center in 1999. In 2006, HERL was awarded a NSF Engineering Research Center in partnership with the Robotics Institute at Carnegie Mellon University. HERL moved to Bakery Square in 2011. In 2015, Dr. Dicianno became the HERL Medical Director and COO. In 2017, Dr. Cooper was awarded a SAMMIES (Oscar or Nobel prize for federal employees).

► Continued on Page 6



◀ From left to right: a 19th century wheelchair; a depot-style wheelchair circa 1935-1975; a folding manual wheelchair invented at HERL; an ultralight manual wheelchair, the concept of which was invented at HERL; MEBot; and Strong Arm, a robotic transfer device we invented, on a power wheelchair.

**V4** Can you tell us about a funny HERL memory you have?

**RC** HERL was originally housed in the basement of Building 4 at the now decommissioned Highland Drive Campus. When we first moved into the space, the campus had a large number of inpatient Veterans. HERL was located in rooms off of the hallway that led to the cafeteria. In one of those rooms directly off of the hallway was our destructive test facility that included machines to break wheelchairs. These machines often made loud and eerie noises, such as chains rattling, which started rumors among some of the Veterans that Dr. Cooper was torturing people in the basement. However, since I am a Veteran and use a manual wheelchair for mobility, many of the Veterans who were patients at the time did not realize that I was Dr. Cooper and would warn me to avoid myself because of the noises coming from our test facilities, which were actually helping Veterans receive safer and more effective equipment.

**V4** How many staff and students does this HERL have?

**RC** We have approximately 70, and it goes up to nearly 100 in the summer months.



**V4** What impact do you feel wheelchair sports play in the rehabilitation process for our disabled Veterans?

**RC** Wheelchair sports are an essential component of the rehabilitation process, and for ongoing health maintenance for Veterans with disabilities. The military is a physically active culture, and the desire to be active is strong. Sports helps to restore or maintain strength, flexibility, and coordination leading to sustaining or gaining function. Sports also help to

### ***HERL Mission:***

*To continuously improve the mobility and function of people with disabilities through advanced engineering in clinical research and medical rehabilitation.*

### ***HERL Vision:***

*To create a world where all people with disabilities have unencumbered mobility and function so that they can fully participate in and contribute to society.*



▲ The staff, researchers and graduate students from HERL celebrate 25 years of success serving Veterans, service members, people with disabilities, and older adults.

[www.herl.pitt.edu](http://www.herl.pitt.edu)

◀ The CAREN system is a computer-generated immersive 3D simulation, projected on huge screens. Floor rollers can simulate rolling over a variety of surfaces with the user's own wheelchair.

develop a healthy perception of self and strengthens the bonds among Veterans and with their families. Sports have always been an important part of my life, and literally have made it possible for me to be where I am today. Activities such as the National Veterans Wheelchair Games and the National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic transform and sustain the lives of Veterans with disabilities.

**V4** What is your vision for HERL going forward into the future?

**RC** The number of Veterans and people with disabilities continues to grow due to medical advances. Medical rehabilitation and technological advances need to at least keep pace with the needs of emerging and persistent disabilities to provide Veterans with disabilities (and people with disabilities in general) the opportunity to live fulfilling lives and contribute to their families, and communities. The vision for HERL is to remain ready, relevant, agile and impactful to address those needs that we know of today and those that will face us and Veterans (people) with disabilities, their families, and the VA in the future. This will take resources, talent, creativity, and courage.

**“Our goal, our vision, is to create a world where everyone can participate fully in society with minimal barriers.”**

**Rory Cooper, Ph.D.**  
**HERL Founder and Director**

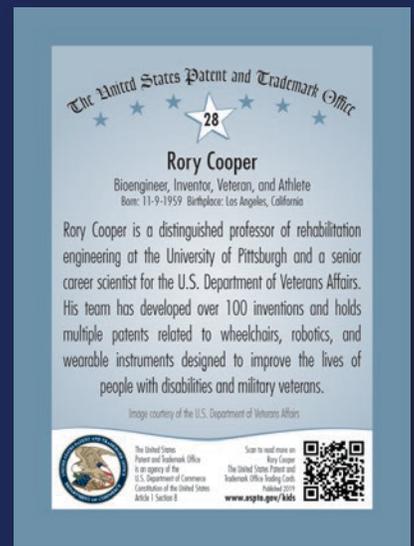
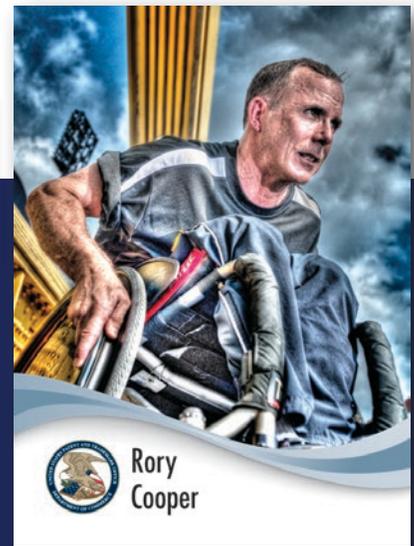
## HERL Founder and Director Rory Cooper Honored with Inventor Trading Card

Rory A. Cooper, director of the Human Engineering Research Laboratories at the VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System was recently honored with his U.S. Patent and Trademark Office inventor trading card and portrait.

Cooper is the 28th inventor and the first VA employee to receive this honor, which was established in 2012. Other inventors who have received this honor include Thomas Edison, George Washington Carver, Abraham Lincoln and Hedy Lamarr, among others.

Cooper has over two dozen patents in his name, with his portrait featuring one of them — the Ergonomic Dual Surface Wheelchair Pushrim, a wheelchair accessory designed to relieve stress on the wheelchair pusher's upper body. He is also the associate dean for inclusion and the FISA/Paralyzed Veterans of America Distinguished Professor at Pitt's School of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences.

See Rory's inventor card at [www.uspto.gov/kids/Cooper.html](http://www.uspto.gov/kids/Cooper.html).  
Congratulations, Dr. Cooper!



# Continuing the Mission for Veteran's care in VISN 4

In early June 2018, the Mission Act was signed into law with the expectation that high quality, timely health care be available to Veterans. On June 6, 2019 the Mission Act was implemented, opening new opportunity for care in the community and treatment of our Veterans with urgent care, home services, and specialized therapy benefits.

The Community Care Offices in VISN 4 have been working extremely hard in building a robust health care network ensuring our community partners are either on a Veteran Care Agreement or

part of the Third Party Administrator contract for Veteran care.

The Corporal Michael J. Crescenz Medical Center located in Philadelphia was one of two medical centers chosen in Region 1 to start health care delivery with our new third party administrator Optum/United. Referrals for dental service began on June 26, 2019 with all other medical services beginning on July 29, 2019. The remaining eight medical centers within VISN 4 are expected to have full deployment of health care delivery with Optum/United by November 7, 2019.



## Earning Your Trust

In 2016, VA's Veterans Experience Office lead a nationwide initiative to improve our customer experiences. The goal is to foster the delivery of effective and easy customer experiences in which Veterans feel valued. To achieve this goal, they developed a customer survey using the trust questions listed below.

VA believes that trust is built one interaction at a time, and trust is earned by knowing our Veterans and showing them that we care; by understanding and anticipating their needs; by providing fair benefits and timely services; by being there when they need us; and by keeping our promises.

Today, we continue to monitor Veterans' responses to questions related to effectiveness, ease, emotion, and trust on VA surveys. Our goal is to have 90% of Veterans respond that they agree or strongly agree with these four statements, although VISN 4 is exceeding the national average in most of the measures.

Statement for Response	Inpatients				Outpatients				Specialty Care Outpatients			
	FY17	FY18	FY19*	AVG	FY17	FY18	FY19*	AVG	FY17	FY18	FY19*	AVG
<b>EFFECTIVENESS:</b> "I got the service I needed."	87.8	89.6	<b>87.8</b>	88.1	86.2	87.6	<b>87.8</b>	82.8	85.3	85.5	<b>85.4</b>	83.2
<b>EASE:</b> "It was easy to get the service I needed."	83.7	83.4	<b>83.4</b>	83.3	80.4	81.3	<b>81.9</b>	74.8	78.1	76.8	<b>79.0</b>	74.4
<b>EMOTION:</b> "I felt like a valued customer."	85.0	84.2	<b>85.4</b>	84.9	81.8	83.0	<b>83.8</b>	77.4	79.9	79.9	<b>81.5</b>	78.0
<b>TRUST:</b> "I trust VA to fulfill our country's commitment to Veterans."	84.0	85.3	<b>85.5</b>	84.8	78.2	81.0	<b>80.0</b>	74.6	76.8	76.1	<b>78.8</b>	75.5

\* FY19 compared to VA national average through May 2019

# Improving Access

So far in fiscal year 2019, nearly 96% of appointments in VISN 4 were completed within 30 days of the Veteran's preferred date. Our facilities

have conducted more than 2.1 million appointments already this year, and the average wait time has been 5 days. (Data as of August 14, 2019)

Clinics	Number of Appointments	Wait Time <30 days (#)	Wait Time <30 days (%)	Average Wait (days)
All Clinics	2,117,982	2,001,804	95.7%	5.0
Mental Health	309,057	297,631	97.6%	3.4
Primary Care	477,800	467,897	97.9%	3.5
Specialty Care	834,492	755,652	93.0%	7.4

## Average Wait Times at VISN 4 Facilities

The table below shows how many days new or returning patients waited for a primary care or mental health care appointment in the last 30 days as of August 5, 2019. Coatesville, Philadelphia, and Wilmington are all considered high Medicaid-accepting communities.

The data on the table was obtained from VA's access and quality website

located at [www.accesstocare.va.gov](http://www.accesstocare.va.gov). The website also shows the wait times for each outpatient clinic and specialty care clinics (where available), and it includes Veteran satisfaction data and some comparisons with other local hospitals.

This information is not offered by any other major national hospital organization in the country.

VISN 4 Facility	Primary Care		Mental Health Care	
	New	Returning	New	Returning
ALTOONA	17	7	6	4
BUTLER	16	1	11	4
COATESVILLE	15	3	14	3
ERIE	20	5	11	2
LEBANON	17	4	12	3
PHILADELPHIA	24	5	15	2
PITTSBURGH - UNIVERSITY DRIVE	18	7	6	1
PITTSBURGH - H.J. HEINZ	20	5	11	4
WILKES-BARRE	14	3	15	7
WILMINGTON	18	4	10	2

Above data routinely updated and obtained from [www.accesstocare.va.gov](http://www.accesstocare.va.gov).



**Smoke free VHA**  
Better starts today

Join the VHA  
as we go  
smoke free on  
**OCTOBER 1st**

VHA cares about your health  
and is going smoke free  
per Directive 1085\*.



**U.S. Department  
of Veterans Affairs**

Veterans Health  
Administration  
VA Healthcare-  
VISN 4

\* VHA Directives 1085 and 1085.01 implement a smoke-free policy for employees, patients, visitors, contractors, volunteers and vendors at VA health care facilities.



*I CARE represents the core values that define the basic elements of how we go about our work—“who we are”—and form the underlying principles we use every day in our service to Veterans.*

*VISN 4 established a new, quarterly I CARE award to recognize employees who not only demonstrate our I CARE values, but who go the extra mile to live by our I CARE ideals. There are many wonderful examples of employees demonstrating these values in their day-to-day work.*

## Integrity • Commitment • Advocacy • Respect • Excellence

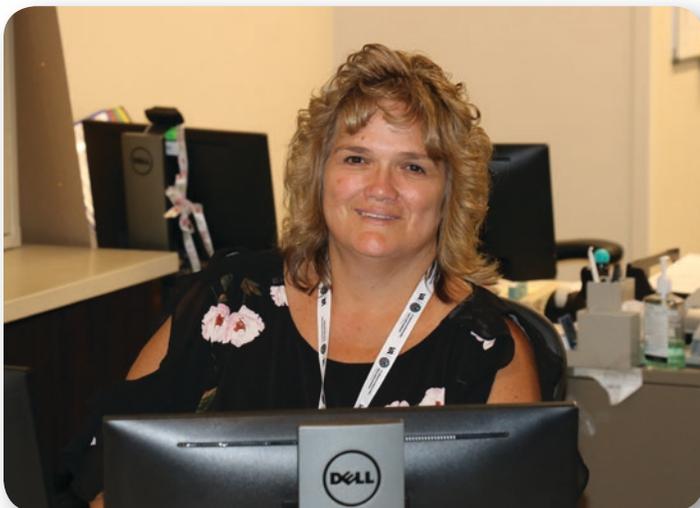
### 2nd Quarter Winners

#### **Tina Tarr**

*Butler VA Health Care System*

In January, a social worker notified Tina Tarr that a Veteran had left a voice mail message saying that he was threatening suicide at his residence. Tina worked with the social worker, police, patient care coordinator, and clinical staff in notifying 911 and following up with his spouse to verify his location and to arrange transfer when stable. Tina was committed to ensuring the Veteran and his spouse were safe.

Additionally, the registration office had been running short staffed due to staff vacancies. Tina worked extra Saturdays in addition to coming in early and staying late during the week. Tina was dedicated to enrolling Veterans by ensuring the Veteran’s interfacility consults and video on demand registrations were entered the same day, ensuring they receive timely care.



#### **Suelayne Stultz**

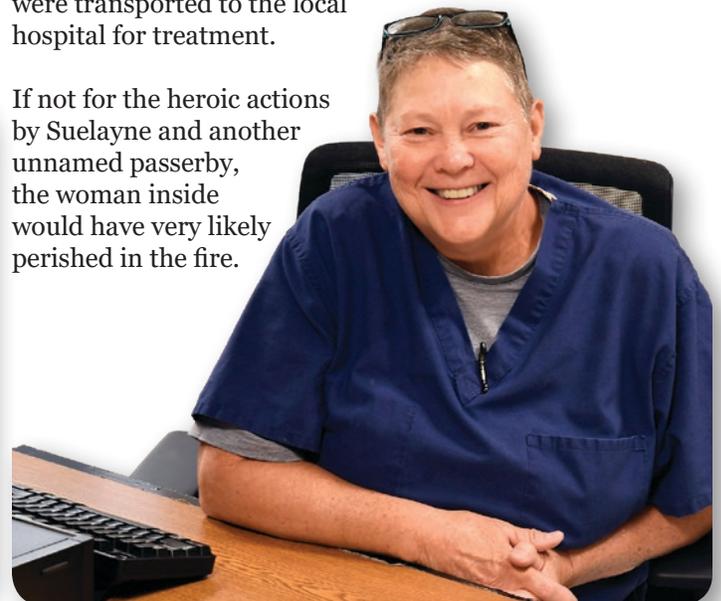
*James E. Van Zandt VA Medical Center*

One Saturday in March, Suelayne Stultz was driving with her nephew when they drove past a house that was completely engulfed in flames.

An elderly gentleman was walking around the yard in a confused state; his head and facial hair had been burnt by the fire. Suelayne asked the man if anyone else was inside the house and he replied, “She is still in there!” Suelayne told her nephew to get the man to safety by taking him to the post office parking lot across the street.

She observed a pair of feet and knees in a doorway inside the home. Suelayne and another good Samaritan helped the elderly woman on her feet and removed her from the burning home. Suelayne remained on the scene until the first fire company and ambulance arrived. Both individuals were transported to the local hospital for treatment.

If not for the heroic actions by Suelayne and another unnamed passerby, the woman inside would have very likely perished in the fire.



**Kurt Quemore**

*Corporal Michael J. Crescenz VA Medical Center*

Kurt has been a social worker at the CLC for 10 years. He is continuously recognized by team members for his ability to connect with residents and develop a trusting relationship.

A few years ago, a Veteran resident brought to Kurt’s attention his distress that Veterans who passed away at the CLC were taken out of the building through the back with limited acknowledgement by staff and other CLC residents. Kurt empowered this Veteran to develop a strategy for honoring the life of deceased CLC residents. A resident Honor Guard was established through these efforts that continues to move CLC residents, staff, and Veteran family members to date.

Recently one of the CLC residents required hospitalization in the ICU. This Veteran was a member of the Honor Guard and very well respected and appreciated by CLC residents and staff. He had a complicated medical history and after coming down with the flu, his health was failing. Receiving an Honor Guard at the CLC would be an important way for this Veteran’s comrades and staff to say goodbye.

In anticipation of this Veteran’s return to the CLC, Kurt held a meeting with the Honor Guard, sensing they would be eager to see their friend, but also anxious to say goodbye.



Coordinating with the ICU, the Veteran arrived in the hospice unit surrounded by family members. He took his bi-pap mask off and did not want any other interventions. Shortly before this Veteran died, Kurt informed him that the Honor Guard would pick up right where he left off. The Veteran, nearly 5 minutes shy of death, heard Kurt, acknowledged his kind words, and was able to die with dignity and in peace.

**September is  
Suicide Prevention  
Month**

**#SPM19**

**#BeThere**  
for service members and Veterans.





Learn more at [www.myhealth.va.gov](http://www.myhealth.va.gov)

# My HealthVet

## Secure Messaging – Convenient Online Communication

Secure Messaging is an easy-to-use online messaging feature available through My HealthVet. Similar to email, Secure Messaging allows you to send and receive messages, save drafts, review your sent messages and maintain a record of your conversations with VA care teams up to one year from the original date.

### How Can Secure Messaging Benefit You?

Here are examples of ways VA Patients are already using the Secure Messaging feature.



#### Pharmacy

Use Secure Messaging to ask questions about your prescribed medications and to request renewals.



#### Non-Urgent Matters

Use Secure Messaging to communicate about non-urgent, non-emergency health related questions with your VA health care team and other VA staff (e.g., services your facility may offer through Secure Messaging such as administration, billing, pharmacy).



#### Appointments

Use Secure Messaging to request, reschedule or cancel your VA appointments.



#### Health Records

Use Secure Messaging to communicate with your health care team or ask your doctor to explain your latest test results downloaded via the VA Blue Button feature. Secure Messages saved to your VA medical record can be viewed in VA Notes through VA Blue Button.



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

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VA Healthcare-VISN 4

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#### Vision for Excellence - Issue 27

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#### We'd Like to Hear from You

Vision for Excellence is published for the employees, volunteers, patients and friends of VA Healthcare-VISN 4. For more information about this publication, contact David Cowgill at 412-822-3318 or [david.cowgill@va.gov](mailto:david.cowgill@va.gov).