

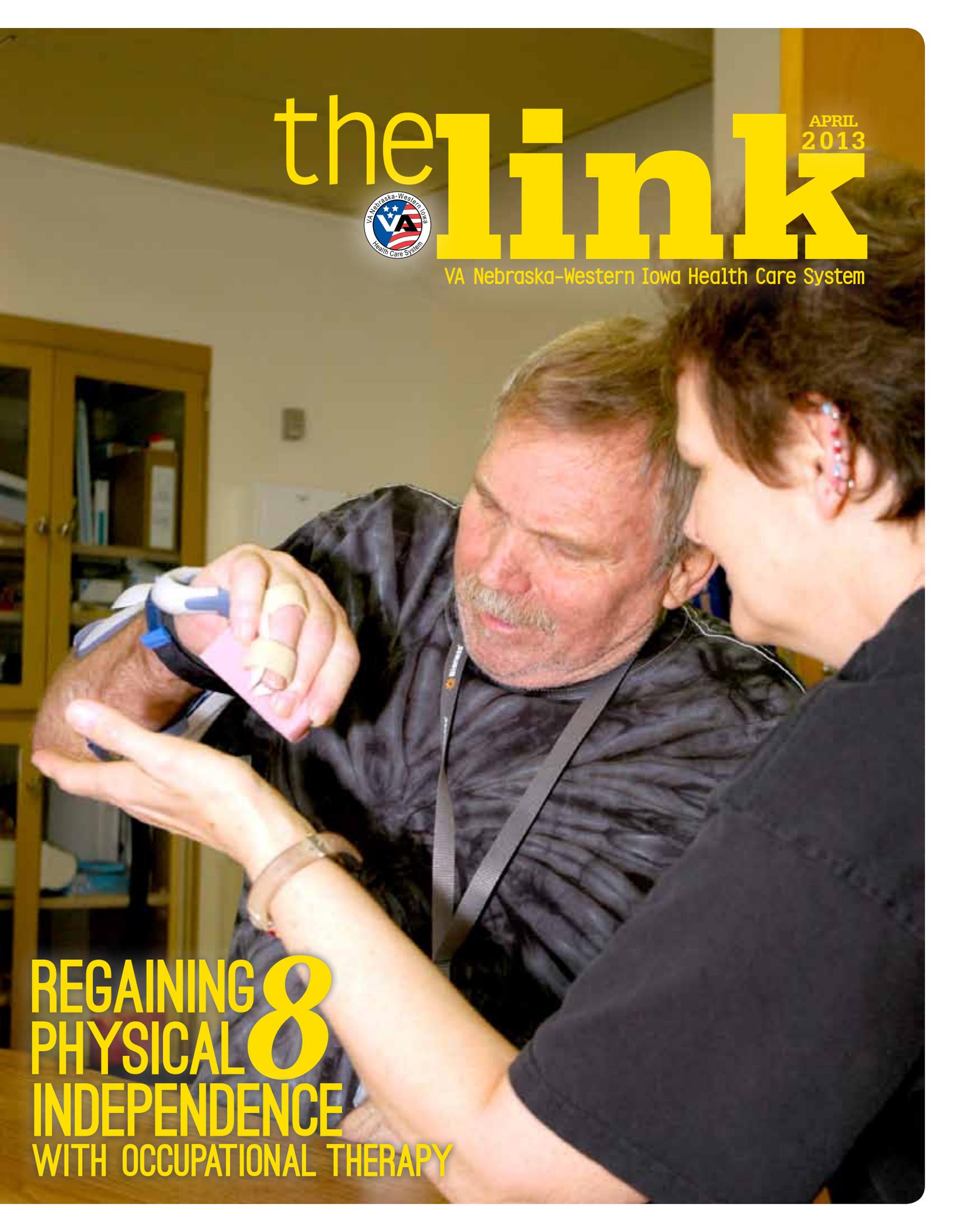
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APRIL
2013



VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System

REGAINING
PHYSICAL
INDEPENDENCE
WITH OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY





This year, VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System is in its window of opportunity to receive a visit from a Joint Commission survey team. In fact, by the time this prints, they may have come and gone.

The Joint Commission checks to ensure patients are receiving the quality care they deserve. Safety and quality are of the utmost importance. To prepare for the visit, Quality Management staff performed what we call "tracers." During a tracer, a Quality Management employee follows the circle of care for a patient. They check to ensure employees know processes, and they examine products to make sure they are stocked correctly. This example is simplified, but the point is, they check from top to bottom that a patient's experience is what it should be. Tracers provide in-the-moment expertise to help us improve our work.

Tracers will be a regular practice at NWIHCS going forward. Routine tracers are a part of a culture of continuous readiness. While we have quality and safety processes in place, tracers provide a good look at what our patients experience. We won't be conducting tracers every day, but it is important we consider our patients' experiences every day.

How are patients greeted? How do we follow up with them? Do we go out of our way to provide the safe, quality care they deserve? Do we correct safety issues when we see them? Do you as an employee tackle process gaps when you encounter them? I encourage employees to go through the day and ask themselves how their actions impact Veterans. For those who don't work directly with patients, how do actions in your area impact Veteran care down the line?

Tracers are just one more way we can ensure Veterans receive the best care available. By ensuring we're providing the best care, we will be their provider of choice.

Marci Mylan

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Designer | Becky Brown
Writer | Kate O'Dell

FACT: LAST YEAR, VA NEBRASKA-WESTERN IOWA HEALTH CARE SYSTEM'S 850 VOLUNTEERS DONATED APPROXIMATELY 95,000 HOURS OF THEIR TIME TO HELP VETERANS.

Cover: U.S. Army Veteran Chuck Wredt works his shoulder muscles by lifting a foam block and handing it to his wife, Leslie, during an occupational therapy treatment session March 22 at VA NWIHCS, Omaha. (Photo by Anna Morelock).



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“I really like working at VA and have for 26 years. The thing that makes me love it is the Veterans. They are so unique, and they see this as ‘their place.’”

Clare Miller
Nurse Practitioner | Norfolk CBOC



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Continual Readiness: Tracers Prepare Staff for Survey Team



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Mediators Help Solve Workplace Conflict



Occupational Therapists Assist Veterans to Regain Their Physical Independence



VA Views



This magazine is an authorized publication for VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System (VA NWIHCS). Contents of The Link are not necessarily the official views of, or endorsed by, the U.S. government, or the Department of Veterans Affairs. The editorial content of this publication is the responsibility of the VA NWIHCS Public Affairs Office.

CONTACT US

Have a story idea? Call the VA NWIHCS Public Affairs Office; Will Ackerman at 402-995-4719, Anna Morelock at 402-995-5547, or email vhanwipublicaffairs@va.gov.

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The Link online.



meet

jim cicarelli



Army Veteran | Volunteer
Omaha VA Medical Center

Q: How long have you been a volunteer?

A: "For about two years."

Q: What do you do as a volunteer?

A: "I work in the surgery/ICU (Intensive Care Unit) waiting room. I'm kind of an

intermediary between nurses, physicians and the patient. I relay information and take the calls for family waiting for patients in surgery, try to alleviate whatever fears they have, give them directions for places they can go and things they can do."

Q: Why did you become a volunteer at VA?

A: "I was with Union Pacific railroad for 32 years, and I am retired. It is a nice way to try to give back. I am a Veteran myself. It simply makes you feel good to do something for somebody. I enjoy the people, and they seem to appreciate my efforts."

Q: What's your favorite thing to do as a volunteer?

A: "Interacting with the family of the patient who is having surgery. I really enjoy the contact with the family. It is important. I have had family in surgery before. I know sometimes you are sitting there, and your mind is wandering. I can let them know what they can expect."

Q: When you're not volunteering, where can you be found?

A: "I'm an avid hunter. That's my passion, bow hunting. I hunt deer in Nebraska, and I hunt elk and antelope in Wyoming. I have two sons and a daughter who live in Wyoming, so I go and spend time with them. My daughter has an organic wheat farm; I go and help with harvest." 📍

VA RESEARCH

INSPIRING INNOVATION

Although there are more than 155 research projects ongoing, many people are not aware of the Research Service at VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System's medical center in Omaha.

VA Research Week provides people an opportunity to learn the role it plays in Veterans' health care. This year, VA Research Week is May 13 to 17. The theme is VA Research Inspires. The focus is to call attention to the achievements of VA researchers in providing high-quality care for Veterans and advancing medical science.

"VA Research is unique because it is focused on Veterans. Research week is an opportunity to highlight that service."

Dr. Debra Romberger
Associate Chief of Staff for Research | VANWIHCS

Historically, VA research contributions include development of a new shingles vaccine, the nicotine patch, implantable defibrillators, CT scan technology and functional electrical stimulation systems to move paralyzed limbs.

VA funds four major areas of research: basic laboratory research, clinical studies, rehabilitation and health services.

Research at VA NWIHCs, Omaha is being performed in areas including mental health, liver studies, rheumatoid arthritis, lung disease, obesity, dental prosthetics and reproductive endocrinology.

In fiscal year 2012, which ended Oct. 1, 2012, research grants for the VA NWIHCs, Omaha program exceeded \$10 million from sources including the Department of Veterans Affairs, National Institute of Health, other federal agencies, academic institutions and other donations. 📍

RESEARCH WEEK EVENTS AT THE OMAHA VAMC:

MAY 13-17: Research Activities Display, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., Main Lobby

MAY 14: Poster Display, 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., Library, Third Floor

MAY 17: Research Seminar by Dr. Kristin Nichol and Friends of VA Research Award Presentation, 8:30 to 10 a.m., Education Conference Room

For more information visit www.research.va.gov/researchweek.



Continual Readiness

TRACERS PREPARE STAFF FOR SURVEY TEAM

Kate O'Dell | Public Affairs

Every three years, The Joint Commission visits VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System to ensure VA NWHCS staff

continue to provide the best care for Veterans. To do this, a team will conduct an in-depth survey to determine whether or not VA NWHCS will maintain its accreditation.

Dr. Marci Mylan, director of VA NWHCS, said she believes in the importance of the process.

"The survey is one of many regulatory tools that are used to help us assure a certain level of quality and process management," she said. "They really assure that we are performing at a certain level or standard."

The Joint Commission will come unannounced and spend time throughout the system in clinics, inpatient units, the emergency department, radiology and dietetics. The surveyors observe procedures, interview employees and use their findings to make recommendations for improvement.

"Improving the work is our work. Our processes are really the foundation on which all of our innovation and all our processes are built, so consistency is critical."

Dr. Marci Mylan | VA NWHCS Director

To continually monitor the processes within VA NWHCS, Quality Management conducts "tracers" periodically throughout the system including visits to community-based



Photo by Kate O'Dell

Emily Hawkins, Quality Management program analyst, goes over potential survey questions with Sherry Whitney, RN, BSN, at VA NWHCS, Lincoln. Whitney has never been through a Joint Commission Survey and used this opportunity to ask questions to prepare.

▶ outpatient clinics, home health care and the Omaha medical center. The purpose of these tracers is to prepare employees for the visit from surveyors and identify areas where there may be room for improvement before The Joint Commission arrives.

Emily Hawkins, a program analyst in Quality Management, specializes in environmental care and life safety. She has worked with The Joint Commission before and understands what to expect. She visits with employees and hopes to create relationships with VA NWHCS employees so they know who to contact if they have any questions about the survey.

"My goal is to help staff to become comfortable with the process."

Emily Hawkins | Program Analyst | Omaha VAMC

Linda Muell, also a program analyst in Quality Management, plans to ensure high standards of care are consistently monitored and maintained through regularly scheduled tracers. *(continued on page 10)* ▶

Overcoming Challenges

WITH HELP AND GUIDANCE FROM POLYTRAUMA SUPPORT CLINIC STAFF

Kate O'Dell | Public Affairs

Veterans who suffer from traumatic injuries can face many challenges that include physical obstacles to emotional struggles. Because of the complexity of these cases, treatment needs to be approached from multiple disciplines.

The team at the Polytrauma Support Clinic at VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System, Omaha is comprised of a psychiatrist, a neuropsychologist, a speech language pathologist, a physical therapist, a registered nurse and a program support assistant.

The clinic opened in August 2010 at the Center Mall, across the street from the medical center. Veterans referred to the clinic receive comprehensive traumatic brain injury and polytrauma evaluation and then rehabilitation therapies, as appropriate. Therapies offered include: physical therapy, speech language pathology, polytrauma neuropsychology for evaluation and individual therapy, case management, telehealth and occupational therapy. ▶

▶ Melanie Linnaus, a physical therapist, has worked at the clinic since it opened. She treats Veterans who have balance issues, joint pain, muscle strains and other injuries. Linnaus said she enjoys working with VA because of the freedom of forming a treatment plan without restrictions from insurance policies that exist in the private sector.

“At the VA we can determine what is appropriate for the patient and form our own plan of care without having to worry about (insurance limitations).”

Melanie Linnaus, Physical Therapist

Most of the team has worked at the clinic since it opened; they have refined their processes as a team. The clinic team meets weekly and works together to create treatment plans. This not only allows each provider to better understand his or her patients, but it keeps the care consistent for Veterans.

“We know each other well enough and work together well. When one of us says something, we are confident that someone else in the office is going to say the same thing,” said Dr. Jill Champley, the clinic’s speech pathologist.

U.S. Army Veteran, Darryl Summers was referred to the clinic in 2011 for treatment of post-traumatic stress (continued on page 11) ▶

Melanie Linnaus, physical therapist in the Polytrauma Support Clinic, treats U.S. Army Veteran Darryl Summers once a week to help him recover from multiple knee surgeries.



Photo by Kate O'Dell

Solve Workplace Conflict

Anna Morelock | Public Affairs

A group of employees at VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System are specially trained to help solve problems. They don't provide the answers, but through mediation, they help guide parties to their own solutions.

Mediation is an alternative dispute resolution process used to resolve problems between individuals or groups. Whether it is a dispute between an employee and a supervisor, two employees or a group, mediation can help resolve issues privately and quickly. The process provides a non-biased third party to facilitate discussion and help the parties work toward an outcome to their issues.

VA NWHCS' mediators are volunteers who have taken on mediation as an extra duty. Colleen Nielsen, a registered nurse in Lincoln, is one of the newest mediators in the group. One of the reasons she participates as a mediator is to help create a better working environment.

"We are at work 40 plus hours a week," Nielsen said. "To have such an unpleasant situation, whether you're the person involved, or you're in the department where there's that conflict, if I can do something to help people understand or get along, that's an important thing." ▶

▶ Issues brought to mediation have to do with miscommunication, personality conflicts, job duties and perceptions of fairness, to name a few.

"If there's a resolution between the two parties and they part company better than when they first came into the room, as a mediator, that is kind of rewarding to be a part of that."

Barbara Lewis, Mediator | Grand Island CBOC

More volunteer mediators are being sought at VA NWHCS. Mediators are provided with extensive training to prepare them for their duties. Two attributes mediator Jack Nelson said are helpful for mediators to possess are the abilities to listen well and be unbiased.

"You can't come in with any preconceived notions or criticisms," Nelson said. "A lot of times you may want to put yourself in that person's situation because you have been through that before, but you have to try and cut that out because what works for you may not work for them."

Flexibility and being comfortable with conflict were other attributes mentioned by NWHCS' current mediators as being helpful to performing the duties. ⓘ

Mediation involves five stages: preparation, introduction, an overview of the issues, problem solving and agreement. To participate in alternative dispute resolution, the parties should be in agreement they want to resolve the issue. They should then contact Equal Employment Opportunity manager, Laura Neal, at 402-995-3109 or laura.neal@va.gov.

VA NWHCS MEDIATORS

Not pictured: Denise Waschick, Judith Hughes and Gloria Kortum



NICOLE COCKERILL
Mediator since 2003



JACK J. NELSON
Mediator since 2011



COLLEEN NIELSEN
Mediator since 2011



JANELLE BROCK
Mediator since 2002



LINDA FLOYD
Mediator since 2003



BARBARA LEWIS
Mediator since 2009

OCCUPATIONAL Therapists Assist Veterans

TO REGAIN THEIR PHYSICAL INDEPENDENCE

U.S. Army Veteran Chuck Wredt suffered a massive stroke in July 2012 in the middle of an annual seven-day bike ride across Iowa. After riding 110 of the 468-mile ride, he woke in the middle of the night while experiencing the stroke.

Occupational therapists at the VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System, Omaha medical center are helping Wredt regain his independence.

He was an active person who lived life to the fullest, said his wife, Leslie. He lost his ability to speak and was paralyzed on the left side of his body.

Although both physical and occupational therapy help patients regain movement and function in their daily lives, occupational therapists focus more on assisting people to accomplish daily life activities and to optimize their independence. This includes getting dressed, using the toilet, getting in and out of bed or maneuvering safely around home.

“We focus on helping people with the occupations of their day, their life skills.”

Amy Cogswell,
Occupational Therapist | Omaha VAMC

“When we first started working with (Wredt), he didn’t have any movement of his arm,” said Tessa Wamsley, an occupational therapist at the VA medical center.

Wredt’s right arm now has more functionality after months of therapy with Wamsley. He uses a wireless hand rehabilitation device, which slides over his wrist and forearm. The device delivers low-level electrical stimulation to the nerves in his brain that control the muscles in his right arm and hand. ▶

Will Ackerman | Public Affairs



Tessa Wamsley, an occupational therapist at VA NWIHCS, Omaha, works with U.S. Army Veteran Chuck Wredt to improve his shoulder movement March 22 during a treatment session.

▶ Wredt also works with rehabilitation tools to increase his movement and strength. To improve his shoulder movement, Wredt maneuvers a set of plastic balls over a metal tube that is similar in appearance to a mini-rollercoaster. He then uses his right hand to lift several small foam blocks and hands them to his wife.

“We use exercises, stretching and different activities to increase the function and movement of his arm,” Wamsley said.

In addition to therapy, occupational therapists work with families to complete comprehensive home and job-site evaluations to determine if they need adaptive equipment.

Cogswell, who is assigned to Home-Based Primary Care at VA NWIHCS, visits Veterans in their homes to evaluate the “occupation of their days.” For example, she evaluates if the patients’ physical limitations require adaptive equipment for their beds, toilets, baths or kitchens.

Since Cogswell is the only occupational therapist on the HBPC team, they also contract with community agencies to perform in-home assessments. ▶

(continued on page 10) ▶

WHAT ARE HEALTHY WAYS YOU RELIEVE **st r e s s**?

I read, listen to music. I walk about two or three miles a day, and I practice diaphragmatic breathing. I attend sleep and pain classes; talk to friends and spend time with my family.



Denise Cottingham
Mental Health Case Manager
Grand Island CBOC

I like to spend time with my family and my grandkids. I like to travel, go on cruises. I've been to the Bahamas and lots of different places. This October, I am going on another cruise headed to the Caribbean.



Charles Johnson
Inventory Manager | Omaha VAMC



Two to three times a week I do water aerobics. It's a great stress reliever.

Carrie Christenson
Medical Support Assistant
North Platte CBOC



I work out and play sports. I play volleyball and basketball. I also read. I like to read mysteries and health care books.

Alyssa Steele
Radiology Student | Lincoln CBOC



I go to the gym five or six times a week. I don't use elevators; I use the stairs.

William Hammett
Dental Office Supervisor | Lincoln CBOC

Women Veterans Forum

We want to hear from you about your care

Tuesday, April 16; 5 to 7 p.m.

Guest Speaker: Duncan Fallon
Grand Island acting site manager

Holdrege Community-Based Outpatient Clinic
1118 Burlington Street
Holdrege, Nebraska

*Learn about all the services available to women Veterans.
Gather with fellow women Veterans to discuss and express any concerns to VA staff.*

Light Refreshments Provided

For More Information Contact:
Donna L. Higgins, MSW, LCSW | Women Veterans Program Manager
402-995-4906 or 1-800-451-5796 ext. 94906



HELLO

Feb. 10 to March 9

Rodney Basler, Contractor**Stacy Bundy**, Surgery**Sean Collins**,
Primary Care and Specialty Medicine**Essie Gross**, Nursing**Debora Hart**,
Environmental Management Service**Frederick Hefner**,
Environmental Management Service**Stanley Jones**,
Environmental Management Service**Paul Kimble**, Prosthetics**Amber King**, Mental Health**Michael McCary**, Police Service**Shonda Torres**, Contractor**Camille Kantai**, Contractor

GOODBYE

Feb. 10 to March 9

Kathryn Bronson,
Primary Care and Specialty Medicine**Tami Harders**, Human Resources**Theresa Hatcher**, Physician**Jessica Heath**, Mental Health**Marietta Hofferber**,
Primary Care and Specialty Medicine**Tiffany Jarosik**,
Primary Care and Specialty Medicine**Terry Kotschwar**,
Environmental Management Service**Kurt McGhee**, Surgery**Rachael Meinder**, Pharmacy**Brian Moon**, Business Office**Josa Novoa**, Physician**Matt Parsons**, Human Resources**Heather Pilakowski**, Sterile Processing Service**Suzanne Rainforth**,
Primary Care and Specialty Medicine**Kathrine Smuskiewicz**, Surgery**Carita Spears**, Sterile Processing Service**Cay Tiernan**,
Primary Care and Specialty Medicine**Elizabeth Yearwood**, Quality Management**Victor Zimmerman**, Engineering▶ *Joint Commission Survey continued from page 5*

The idea is not only to be prepared for a survey, but to support continuous readiness. Muell said the standards should be “just the way we do business.”

The Joint Commission survey will evaluate VA NWIHCS’ four accredited programs including hospital, home care, behavioral health and long-term care. Each survey addresses key components that include thousands of performance elements.

The best way to do well during a survey is to remember the basics. “Wear your name tag, wash your hands and always remember patient safety. Things that are so simple make a lot of difference,” Muell said. Also, it is important to keep in mind that the accreditation is voluntary. “They are invited into our building because we care about the Veterans,” Muell said. ⓘ

For more information about The Joint Commission, visit www.jointcommission.org.

▶ *Occupational Therapy continued from page 8*

“We also look at their diagnosis to determine if they are able to return home safely,” said Jodi Gustin, one of Omaha’s occupational therapists. “We might recommend the Veteran go into an assisted living facility if we see a significant decline in life skills.”

The therapists also perform cognitive assessments. One of the tools they use is a cognitive-level screening. One tool has the patient use three leather lacing stitches to determine his or her ability to process new information.

“This is often used in the beginning stages of dementia to determine comprehension,” Gustin said. This presents “objective data.”

The testing paired with patient and family interviews presents a picture of cognitive functioning and ability.

“Many of our patients do not want to lose their independence, especially our Veterans,” Gustin said.

Although not all patients will recover to exactly how they were before their accidents or medical ailments, occupational therapists’ goals are to help patients regain as much independence as possible.

Although the recovery road is long, Wredt’s wife said her goal for Chuck is to work with the occupational therapists to regain as much of his physical ability as possible.

“He may not come back 100 percent, and that’s ok. But, I would like at least 99 percent,” she said. “Chuck wouldn’t be where he is today without the VA hospital staff.” ⓘ

► *Polytrauma Support Clinic continued from page 6*

disorder and traumatic brain injury. Summers served three tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. He had three knee surgeries in two years before beginning treatment at the clinic. "My knees were just killing me; it got to a point where I had to do something," he said.

Since beginning physical therapy, he has seen improvement in his flexibility, strength and overall wellness. In eight months, he lost 15 pounds and is closer to his goal of running again. He looks forward to being able to go for runs with his dog, King. "I'm a runner at heart," he said.

Along with physical therapy and PTSD counseling, Summers receives acupuncture at the clinic. He was skeptical about the process at first, but now he believes in the effects of the treatment. "After you get used to the needles, it doesn't hurt. When you come out of there, you feel like a different person."

Summers said he has a good relationship with his therapists in the clinic.

"They show care and concern, and you can't beat that," he said. "It's not just business as usual; that's what is so cool about coming here." ①



Photo by Kate O'Dell

Physical therapist, Melanie Linnaus, completes resistance therapy with Veteran Darryl Summers to strengthen muscles. The resistance band allows Linnaus to control the exercise.


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EVENTS

what's going on?

- April 1** VA Food Pantry, Lincoln
- April 1-7** Medication Safety Week
National Public Health Week
Testicular Cancer Awareness Week
- April 3** Patient-Centered Care Retreat, Omaha
VA Food Pantry, Omaha
- April 5** New Volunteer Orientation, Omaha
- April 5-6** Veterans of Armed Forces Outreach, South Sioux City
- April 7** Holocaust Remembrance Day
- April 9** Former POW Recognition Day
- April 10** Free Tax Assistance, Grand Island
Patient-Centered Care Retreat, Omaha
- April 12** Free Tax Assistance, Lincoln
- April 15** Tax Day
- April 16** National Health Care Decisions Day
National Stress Awareness Day
- April 17** VA Food Pantry, Omaha
- April 19** New Volunteer Orientation, Omaha
- April 21-27** Administrative Professionals Week
National Volunteer Week
- April 22** Patient-Centered Care Retreat, Omaha
VA All-Employee Survey Begins Online
Earth Day
- April 22-26** Information Security and Privacy Awareness Week
Medical Laboratory Professional Week
- April 24** VA and Community Book Club, Lincoln
- April 28-May 4** National Compliance and Ethics Week

For more information about VA NWHCS events, visit www.nebraska.va.gov.



Become a Volunteer

Volunteer opportunities are found in the medical center, and our community-based outpatient clinics. Our goal is to meet the needs of our Veterans while meeting your interests, skills, and talents as a volunteer.



Call Voluntary Service to See What You Can Offer:

Omaha: 402-995-3283 or 3284 | Lincoln: 402-489-7938 | Grand Island: 308-382-3660, ext. 2146



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