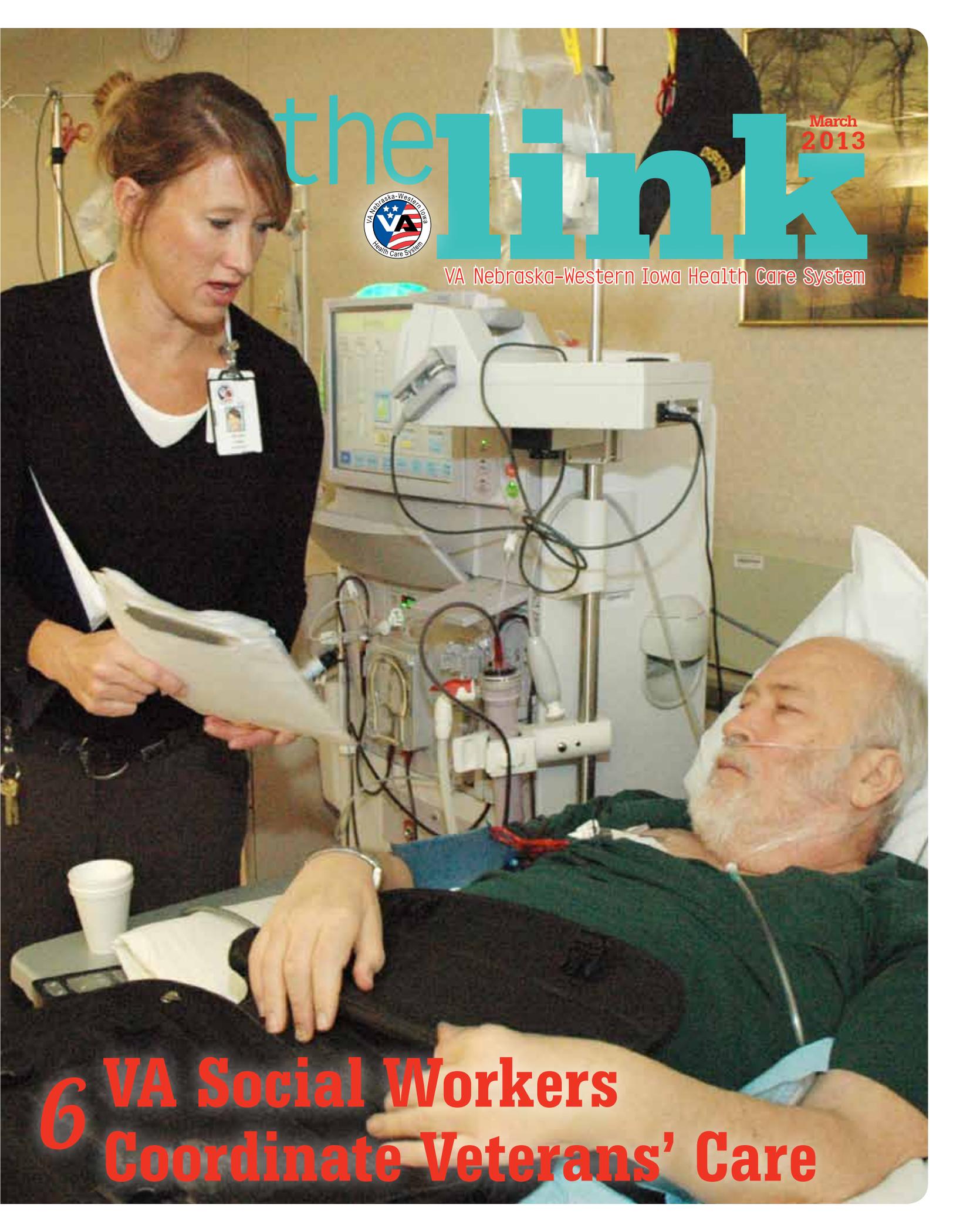


# the link

March  
2013



VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System



**6 VA Social Workers  
Coordinate Veterans' Care**



**Ten years ago this month, U.S. troops were asked to put themselves in harm's way when the United States and other coalition troops invaded Iraq.**

According to the Department of Defense, since the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom and into Operation New Dawn, almost 5,000 troops have given their lives in support of U.S. efforts in Iraq. More than 30,000 have been wounded.

Many of the troops who served in Iraq have seen numerous tours of duty in Iraq and in Afghanistan. Some of them also served in the Gulf War and Vietnam. These are the Veterans who walk into our clinics each day. These are the Veterans we care for in our inpatient units.

As a psychologist, I was privileged to provide services for some of these Veterans as they returned home, and I recognize they face unique challenges. Along with transitioning back to civilian life, many have struggles with family adjustments, job adjustments, post traumatic stress disorder and substance abuse issues. Our mutual goal is to ensure these Veterans, and all of our Veterans, are getting the exceptional care they deserve.

They met their duty to serve their country; and we will meet ours. It is now our duty to serve them at VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System. When employees interact with Veterans of any era, I ask them to remember the sacrifices those men and women have made on our behalf. Thank them for their service and remember our mission to honor them by providing exceptional health care that improves their health and well-being.

*Marci Mylan*

**DIRECTOR AND PUBLISHER**

Marci Mylan, Ph.D., MHA

**PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICER**

Will Ackerman

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**Editor** | Anna Morelock

**Photographer** | Bruce Thiel

**Designer** | Becky Brown

**Writer** | Kate O'Dell

FACT: EATING 100 EXTRA CALORIES A DAY CAN PUT ON ABOUT 10 POUNDS A YEAR. THE GOOD NEWS IS LOSING 10 POUNDS CAN BE AS EASY AS EATING 100 CALORIES LESS EACH DAY FOR A YEAR. (SOURCE: LANCASTER COUNTY, NEB., COOPERATIVE EXTENSION)

Cover: Ellen Grow, LCSW, reviews health information with U.S. Marine Veteran Albert Cooper during his dialysis treatment at VA NWHCS, Omaha. (Photo by Will Ackerman)

“I enjoy being able to help Veterans navigate a difficult system and get the services they need. My dad and my husband are both combat Veterans, so it makes me feel good to be able to help them. I want all Veterans treated like I would want them to be treated. I was glad to get an opportunity to work for VA.”

Terasa Cuypers  
Medical Support Assistant | Holdrege CBOC



# the link

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This magazine is an authorized publication for VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System (VA NWHCS). 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 NWHCS Public Affairs Office.

### CONTACT US

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

### VISIT US ONLINE

Scan with your smart phone to view more issues of The Link online.



# meet

## renee sullivan

Geriatric Nurse Practitioner  
North Platte CBOC



**Q: How long have you been a VA employee?**

A: "Since March of 2005"

**Q: What does your job entail?**

A: "Regular appointments, walk-ins, managing chronic disease processes, seeing the new

(Operations Iraqi and Enduring Freedom) Veterans who are coming back. On an average day I see 10 to 11 patients."

**Q: What is your favorite thing about your job?**

A: "Meeting the people and getting to know them. Some of my patients have been on my panel since I started, so I have known them for eight years."

**Q: When not at work, where can you be found?**

A: "I have a menagerie of animals. I have geese, ducks, a chicken, a turkey, ferrets, four dogs and five cats. I take care of them. When I'm not doing that I like to do community theater. I used to work as a wench at a medieval dinner theater in Chicago to put myself through nursing school." 📍

### Visit Our Social Media Sites



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Follow @VANWIHCS

Get news, information for patients and upcoming events

## THE *heart* OF VETERAN CARE

### WEAR RED DAY

Employees at VA NWIHCS, Lincoln show their support for women's heart health during February's Wear Red Day.



Photo by Bruce Thiel



Photo by Anna Morelock

Donna Higgins, VA NWIHCS Women Veterans Program manager, explains the red dress board to Jackie Bieker, VA NWIHCS assistant chief of Human Resources. The dress-shaped graphic was covered with pink and red hearts bearing the names of those who have battled heart disease employees and Veterans wanted to remember.

### NATIONAL SALUTE TO VETERAN PATIENTS WEEK

Hope Wilkinson (right), assistant chief of Voluntary Services, hands cookies to a Veteran during February's National Salute to Veteran Patients Week.



Photo by Kate O'Dell



Photo by Anna Morelock

Angela Williams (left), VA NWIHCS, Grand Island site manager, and Dr. Marci Mylan (right), VA NWIHCS director, hand out cookies, brownies, coffee and tea to Veterans at the Grand Island facility. The treats were a part of National Salute to Veteran Patients Week.

## New Associate Director

# Remembers her Roots

Anna Morelock | Public Affairs

**Denise Harrison planned to work her two-year commitment as a participant in a Department of Veterans Affairs scholarship program and then move on to a nursing position in the private sector.**

"I didn't think it was a very glamorous job, and I didn't have any desire to stay," Harrison said about her 1984 job as a registered nurse at the then, Lincoln VA Medical Center. "I said many times, 'two years, one day, and I'm out of there.' I didn't really connect with the mission."

During that two years, however, Harrison said she had an experience that connected her with the fact she was taking care of American heroes. A patient, who was near death, was hanging on until his son got to the hospital. When he arrived, he stood at the foot of the bed in his own military uniform and saluted his father. His father mustered the strength to salute back.

**"I still remember that. It was the very first time that I really connected what I was doing to the (VA) mission."**

Denise Harrison, FACHE  
VA NWIHCS Associate Director for Operations

More recently, Harrison's dedication to the VA mission was reaffirmed when she learned her uncle was not only a Veteran, but also a former prisoner of war.

"I didn't even know he was a Veteran," she said of her uncle who now resides in Seattle. ▶

▶ At age 80, Harrison's uncle finally decided to share his story with her of being shot down over Germany during World War II. Armed with copies of his diary and notes, Harrison is helping him write his memoirs from her home in Lincoln.

Harrison brings these experiences, and 28 years with VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System, to her new position of associate director for operations at VA NWIHCS, where she said she hopes to help make a difference. As the associate director for operations, Harrison will provide leadership and oversight to service lines such as Logistics, Engineering and the Business Office.

In her years at VA NWIHCS, Harrison has held positions as head nurse, integration coordinator, site manager for the Lincoln VA facility, and as the senior management analyst for the data analytics unit. Her data-driven efforts established a nationally recognized data analytics program within the Veterans Health Administration. She also has provided data analytics consultation for VHA across the country. ①



Photo by Bruce Thiel

**IntegratedEthics**  
Improving Ethics Quality in Health Care

**I'm just not sure... What is the right thing to do? Should I ask for an ethics consultation?**

In health care, patients and families often face the difficult question of "What should be done?" The right choice for one patient may be the wrong choice for another. If you're unsure, or if you can't agree with your health care team or your loved ones about what is best, you can ask for an *ethics consultation*.

If you wish to seek help from the Ethics Consultation Service, leave a confidential message:

**1-855-ETHICS8** (1-855-384-4278)



## VA SOCIAL WORKERS:

# Coordinating Veterans' Care

Will Ackerman | Public Affairs

**I**n December 2012, U.S. Air Force Veteran Donald Spicer learned he had a lung tumor. For Spicer, his situation presented challenges, since his closest family support – his sisters Susan Eaton and Marylyn Witting – lived hundreds of miles away in Chicago.

Although his sisters returned to Chicago after nearly two months by Spicer's side, he still had support. Lori Jensen, a licensed clinical social worker at the VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System medical center in Omaha, Neb., assisted Spicer with his medical needs and was only a phone call away.

In working with Spicer, Jensen said, she coordinates his appointments with the infusion clinic where he receives services, arranges for home health care or just answers his or his family's questions.

For Spicer's sisters, they said knowing they have an advocate and support system for their brother in Omaha while he is going through treatment for his tumor is very comforting.

**“It's good to have Lori here.”**

Susan Eaton | Veteran's Sister

VA NWIHCS has about 50 social workers assigned in areas including mental health, extended care and rehabilitation, inpatient and outpatient care, and the returning Veterans' program, said Bob Phaiyah, VA NWIHCS social work manager. ▶

Donald Spicer, U.S. Air Force Veteran, discusses his care with his sister Susan Eaton while Lori Jensen, LCSW (pink sweater), talks to his sister Marylyn Witting in the VA NWIHCS, Omaha Infusion Clinic.

**“My job is to try and tie it all together for them. I connect people to the resources. Veterans don't always understand their eligibility or specific resources available through the VA.”**

Lori Jensen, LCSW | Omaha VA Medical Center

▶ Social workers are not experts about everything within the health care system or what is available within the community. However, they are tasked with figuring this out, regardless of the service where they work.

“Social workers look at the whole of the patient's needs, engage the Veteran and develop a comprehensive care plan,” Phaiyah said.

One of the common terms associated with social workers is case management, which means they provide needed assistance to coordinate a variety of services Veterans may need. This can include counseling, support services or just helping Veterans determine their needs and how to get them.

Ellen Grow is a licensed clinical social worker who works part time in geriatrics and inpatient care, but her primary role in assisting ▶



Photo by Will Ackerman

► dialysis patients. With both geriatrics and dialysis, her patients require long-term assistance with many different challenges.

One of Grow's dialysis clients, U.S. Army Veteran Michael Hollingsworth, is on the waiting list for a kidney transplant. Typically, he must have dialysis treatment several times a week where a machine filters his blood of toxins his kidneys cannot process. Treatment requires him to come to the VA NWIHCS Dialysis Clinic for several hours at a time. In addition to coordinating Hollingsworth's treatment schedule at VA, Grow arranges with a contract ambulance service to transport him to and from his treatments.

"These types of patients are a vulnerable population," Grow said. "It can be detrimental to their health if the patient misses an appointment."

However, it's not just Hollingsworth's care at the VA in Omaha that Grow coordinates. He loves to travel, but still requires regular dialysis treatment regardless of the location.

"Ellen calls ahead for me to a VA clinic near where I'm going and sets up for me to have my dialysis treatment," Hollingsworth said. "It allows me to continue to travel a lot and do what I want to do."

Although social workers work through logistical challenges to help their clients, they also provide psychotherapy for Veterans to help them recognize their emotional, behavioral and mental health needs.

Donna Higgins, a licensed clinical social worker, is the VA NWIHCS Women Veterans Program manager. Although she has been in her job for about a year, Higgins worked for several years at VA NWIHCS with returning Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans.

Many returning war Veterans may realize they have mental health needs, Higgins said. The challenge, she said, is many Veterans know they need help; however, they are not always ready to own it.



Photo by Will Ackerman

U.S. Army Veteran Michael Hollingsworth discusses his care needs with Ellen Grow, LCSW, during his dialysis treatment at the VA NWIHCS, Omaha medical center building 8.

► "Through psychosocial therapy we try to guide them, ask them questions and then start where the Veterans' needs are at that time," Higgins said. "It's only a problem if the Veteran acknowledges it."

Once the Veterans own their specific problems or needs, the social workers then also become educators.

**"Our role is to educate the Veterans how to help themselves."**

Donna Higgins, LCSW | VA NWIHCS Women Veterans Program Manager

Social workers educate Veterans and their families about specific health care conditions, programs and services available through VA to manage the stress or illness, and then connect them with resources.

"We educate not just our clients, but other VA staff," Higgins said. "I constantly reach out to other departments within the VA to help staff understand the unique needs of women Veterans."

Two examples Higgins has worked on are increasing privacy for women by having clinical patient exam tables turned away from the entry doors, and having locks put on the women's showers in the Psychosocial Residential Rehabilitation Treatment Program to provide enhanced safety. 📞

For more information on VA social work visit [www.socialwork.va.gov](http://www.socialwork.va.gov).



# DIETITIANS ARE ESSENTIAL TO **Health & Wellness**

Kate O'Dell | Public Affairs

**S**ince nutrition plays such an important role in health, dietitians are involved in many different areas of health care.

They contribute to diabetes education, home-based primary care, patient-aligned care teams, the MOVE! weight management program, oncology, intensive care and other medicine units, and renal programs to name a few areas.

When a dietitian is a part of a care team, he or she is able to offer guidance and intervention for a patient who will benefit from his or her expertise. An appointment starts with a full assessment of a patient that is used to compose a nutrition diagnosis. The diagnosis is used to plan a nutritional intervention, which can include meal planning, education, portion control and recommendations for exercise plans.

A dietitian then monitors the patient's progress and can recommend a change in plans when necessary or offer support to continue healthy habits.

Heather Siemers, LMNT, RD, has worked at VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care

## TIPS TO MAKE HEALTHIER CHOICES:

**Healthy Eating on the Run:** Split your order at restaurants. Share an extra large sandwich or main course with a friend, or take half home for another meal.

**Vary your Veggies:** Eat more orange and dark green vegetables, such as carrots, sweet potatoes, broccoli and dark leafy greens.

**Look out for Salt:** Compare sodium in foods like soup, bread and frozen meals – and choose the foods with lower numbers.

**Think your Drink:** Drink water instead of sugary drinks. A 12-ounce can of soda has about 10 packets of sugar.

**March is National Nutrition Month, and the 2013 theme is "Eat Right, Your Way, Every Day."**

This theme encourages personalized healthy eating styles and recognizes food preferences, lifestyle, cultural/ethnic traditions, and health concerns all impact our food choices.



Photo by Kate O'Dell

U.S. Marine Corps Veteran Robert O'Brien meets with dietitian, Natalie VanKat, MS, RD, LMNT, once a month as part of the MOVE! weight management program. Since starting MOVE! in 2010, O'Brien has lost more than 30 pounds.

System, Grand Island for five and a half years. She recently was recognized by the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics as the Young Dietitian of the Year for the Central Nebraska District.

“There is so much information on the Internet, on TV, and that you read as far as health and nutrition goes. Dietitians are trained as the nutrition experts. We are here to decipher all of that information.”

Heather Siemers, LMNT, RD | VA NWIHCS, Grand Island

U.S. Army Veteran Glenda Allen sees a dietitian as a part of her involvement with the MOVE! weight-loss program. “I pay attention to what I eat now. I never really had a set calorie intake, and now I do,” she said. “I developed it when I got in the program, and I have been following it since.”

*(continued on page 10)* ▶

# VA ASSOCIATE CHIEF OF STAFF FOR RESEARCH:

## *A woman of science and medicine*

Kate O'Dell | Public Affairs

**W**omen have made huge strides in their roles in society. Women's History Month is a time to recognize these accomplishments and to celebrate the successes of women throughout history.

This year, the theme of Women's History Month is "Inspiring Innovation through Imagination: Celebrating Women in Science, Technology and Mathematics." The trails blazed for working women years ago have been traveled by many women who now thrive in their careers as scientists, doctors, mathematicians, educators and researchers.

Dr. Debra Romberger is the associate chief for staff of research for VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System. Romberger grew up on a farm in Kansas. Raising plants and livestock piqued her curiosity about why things behave the way they do and ultimately fueled her interest in science. That interest in living things eventually motivated her to pursue an education in medicine.

**"I enjoyed science, but I also enjoyed working with people. I thought that medicine was a nice combination of those things."**

Dr. Debra Romberger | VA NWIHCS Associate Chief of Staff for Research

Without any family members practicing medicine, Romberger had to begin her journey in the medical field with little knowledge of what to expect. She grew up with three brothers, and as the only girl, her parents were supportive of her decisions. Her mother just wanted her to consider how demanding the career would be, Romberger said.

After she finished her degree in life sciences at Kansas State University in 1977, she began medical school at The University of Kansas. It was during her fellowship there in pulmonary and critical care that she discovered her love of research. ▶



▶ "I was really drawn to the academic medical setting," Romberger said.

In 1988, she began a second fellowship in research at the University of Nebraska Medical Center.

**"It was very challenging, different stuff than what I had learned in medical school. The challenge of that was very appealing and that launched me into doing research."**

Dr. Debra Romberger

During that fellowship, Romberger began a part-time position at VA NWIHCS, Omaha and became a staff physician two years later. She found her place in research in 2006 when she was appointed the associate chief of staff for research. Romberger has been recognized for her research with the UNMC Department of Internal Medicine with the Research Career Award in 2011, and last May, she received the 2012 UNMC Distinguished Scientific Award.

Romberger said she feels privileged to work with Veterans and their families. Her daily work consists of patient care, research and the administrative duties that comes with them. She is currently working under a funded grant from the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health to examine mechanisms of airway inflammation in agricultural workers. (continued on page 10) ▶

## Register now for a Patient-Centered Care Employee Retreat

Retreats are being offered to provide VA NWIHCS employees with information about VA's patient-centered care journey. Learn what is going on at the national and local levels and how you can make a difference at VA NWIHCS.

The all-day retreats are being offered through May 2013.

View the full schedule and register today on TMS, [www.tms.va.gov](http://www.tms.va.gov).

**For more information:**  
Contact Michele O'Connor  
at Omaha ext. 5809 or  
[michele.oconnor@va.gov](mailto:michele.oconnor@va.gov).

## HELLO

Dec. 30, 2012 to Feb. 9, 2013

**Jamie Baldwin**, Pharmacy

**Bradley Billington**, Environmental Management Service

**Jason Carey**, Surgery

**Jack Edmondson**, Engineering

**Lorin Ferguson**, Surgery

**Ketchewmi Fowler**, Veterans Canteen Service

**Jennifer Godek**, Surgery

**Jennifer Holland**, Primary Care and Specialty Medicine

**John Markus**, Mental Health

**Heather Marunda**, Contract

**Matthew Morris**, Environmental Management Service

**Heather Pilakowski**, Sterile Processing Service

**Mark Stockstell**, Logistics

**Angela Vogel**, Surgery

**Shantel Webster**, Primary Care and Specialty Medicine

## GOODBYE

Dec. 30, 2012 to Feb. 9, 2013

**Mary Baker**, Human Resources

**Patricia Books**, Business Office

**Diana Bullington**, Primary Care and Specialty Medicine

**Kristen Diaz**, Office of Information and Technology

**Michael Farris**, Engineering

**Sharon Galliard**, Community Living Center

**Melinda Haag**, Veterans Canteen Service

**Steven Kriesen**, Business Office

**James Meyer**, Mental Health

**Barbara Pope**, Veterans Canteen Service

**Abdul Razak**, Surgery

**Karl Riley**, Police Service

**Gregory Shearer**, Surgery

**Donald Sterling**, DSS

**Teresa Wiese**, Veterans Canteen Service

**Delphine Williams**, Business Office

## RETIRING

Dec. 30, 2012 to Feb. 9, 2013

**Diane Hoegren**, Business Office

► *Dietitians continued from page 8*

David Lujan, a U.S. Marine Corps Veteran, made an appointment with a dietitian about a year ago. He was overweight and knew he needed help approaching weight loss, he said. "We talk about what my experiences are and what I'm going through."

“She listens and then explains to me what I’m doing and what we should try to change. I wouldn’t try to approach weight loss without a dietitian.”

David Lujan | U.S. Marine Corps Veteran

Since regularly seeing a dietitian, he has noticed weight loss, an increase in energy and has learned to pay attention to portions.

A healthy and steady diet impacts more than weight. It can impact mood, energy levels and overall wellness. "A lot of different diseases are strongly impacted by diet. Just a few extra calories everyday over what your body needs can lead to weight gain and can contribute to a greater problem in the long term," said Linda Swenson, LMNT and chief of Clinical Nutrition for VA NWIHCS.

"It's complex, but it is so simple," Swenson said. "Eat your fruits and vegetables, and don't eat too many calories." 🗣️

► *A Woman of Science and Medicine continued from page 9*

Romberger said she believes in the importance of pursuing an inspiring career and to remember that with each opportunity, more opportunities will become available. Although she knew she wanted to go to medical school out of college, she didn't know where it would lead her. "When I started medical school I had every intention of returning back to a small town and being a primary care provider," she said. "I think it is important that people take advantage of opportunities that can lead to multiple things." 🗣️

# WHO DO YOU THINK WAS AN *influential woman* IN HISTORY



Eleanor Roosevelt. In many ways she leveraged her position as first lady for meaningful change. She tried to look for peace and alternatives for war.

**Dr. Cathy Eberle**  
Chief of Extended Care and Rehab | Omaha VA Medical Center

Clara Barton. She founded the American Red Cross. They do so much to help and support our Veterans.

**Jamie Bentzinger**  
Certified Nursing Assistant | Omaha VA Medical Center



Mother Theresa, because her goals to help the needy transcended cultures. It had nothing to do with her; she was selfless.

**Pam Schneider**  
Dental Assistant | Lincoln CBOC

Eleanor Roosevelt, because she showed resiliency in supporting her husband as president and what it's like to be a servant leader.

**Gina Woods**  
Quality Analyst | Grand Island CBOC



Susan B. Anthony because she accomplished a lot for women's rights. She wouldn't take no for an answer. She brought a lot of change.

**Dennis Selvage**  
Medical Support Assistant | Lincoln CBOC

## EVENTS what's going on?

- March 1** New Volunteer Orientation, Omaha
- March 3-9** Patient Safety Awareness Week
- March 4** VA Food Pantry, Lincoln
- March 5** Patient-Centered Care Employee Retreat, Grand Island  
Employee Forum, Shenandoah
- March 6** VA Food Pantry, Omaha
- March 7** Patient-Centered Care Employee Retreat, Grand Island and Omaha
- March 8** Free Tax Preparation, Lincoln  
Coffee House Informational Meeting, Lincoln
- March 10** Daylight Saving Time Begins
- March 13** Employee Forum, Holdrege  
Registered Dietitian Day
- March 14** Patient-Centered Care Employee Retreat, Omaha  
Employee Forum, North Platte
- March 15** New Volunteer Orientation, Omaha
- March 17** National Poison Prevention Week
- March 18** Public Forum, Grand Island
- March 19** Women Veterans' Forum, Omaha
- March 20** Spring Begins  
VA Food Pantry, Omaha
- March 22-23** Veterans of Armed Forces Outreach, Neola, Iowa
- March 25** National Medal of Honor Day
- March 26** Diabetes Alert Day
- March 27** VA and Community Book Club, Lincoln
- March 28** Patient-Centered Care Employee Retreat, Grand Island and Omaha
- March 30** National Doctors' Day
- March 30-April 6** National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic, Snowmass, Colo.

For more information about VA NWHCS events, visit [www.nebraska.va.gov](http://www.nebraska.va.gov).



  
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Refill VA Prescriptions  
Register Today!

# Women Veterans Forum

*We want to hear from you about your care*

**Tuesday, March 19; 5 to 7 p.m.**

**Guest Speaker: Marci Mylan, Ph.D.**  
*VA NWIHCS Director (6 p.m.)*

**VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System  
Education Conference Room**  
4101 Woolworth Avenue  
Omaha, NE 68105

*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

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