Audiology Improves Quality of Life
Every day at VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System, our dedicated employees work to meet our mission: Honoring Veterans, Empowering Health.

During National Salute to Veteran Patients Week in February each year, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs encourages the community to join us to show appreciation to our Veterans.

I invite individuals, community organizations, schools, and businesses to join us in the National Salute Feb. 10 to 16. A long-standing tradition that you can participate in is Valentines for Veterans. You or your organization can create Valentines cards and write a personal message to “any Veteran.” We will then distribute these to Veterans who we serve within our health care clinics.

This special week is also an opportunity where you can stop in and learn how to show your appreciation throughout the year by becoming a part of our Volunteer Services community. Our volunteers donate thousands of hours each year, or a few if that is all you have to spare, to help in many areas within our facilities.

I encourage you or your organization to contact our Voluntary Services offices to learn more about these opportunities to participate in Valentines for Veterans, arrange a personal or small-group visit, or become a volunteer. Read the story on page 4 for more information.

On behalf of the VA, thank you for honoring our American Veterans.

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FACT: LAST YEAR ALONE (FISCAL YEAR 2013) THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS WAS ABLE TO HELP MORE THAN 42,000 HOMELESS VETERANS FIND PERMANENT HOUSING.

Cover: Michele Gortemaker, Au. D, VA NWIHCS
Audiology and Speech Pathology Services chief, talks to Veteran Wiley Wentling through a tele-audiology system while Jennifer Trompke, LPN, helps adjust a hearing aid. Gortemaker was at the Omaha VA Medical Center; Wentling and Trompke were at the Holdrege community-based outpatient clinic.
Photo by Will Ackerman

“Working in a small CBOC, I am not just serving Veterans, I am serving friends and neighbors. As a VA employee, I have gained a greater understanding and appreciation of how our patients have served our country, the sacrifices they have made and how it has affected their lives. I consider working for them a small repayment for what they have done.”

Linda Mattson, RN | Nurse Supervisor | Holdrege Clinic

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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
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meet
michelle warner

Medical Support Assistant
Norfolk CBOC

Q: How long have you worked at the VA?
A: I have been at the VA for 5 years.

Q: What does your job entail?
A: I work at the front desk and check patient’s in, make appointments, take care of faxes, get schedule ready for the next day, order supplies, and anything else that needs to be done.

Q: What do you like best about your job?
A: I like that I get to work with so many different patients.

Q: When you are not at work, where can you be found?
A: When I am not working I am spending time with friends and family.

SALUTING VETERANS
During VA’s National Salute to Veteran Patients Week

You can join VA’s National Salute to Veteran Patients Week by joining in the “Valentines for Veterans” program. You can personally create a Valentine addressed to “any Veteran” or have your organization create Valentines to thank Veterans for their service. Valentines can be mailed or dropped off at one of the VA NWIHCS facilities’ Voluntary Services offices, who will distribute these to Veterans. Every citizen’s personal thanks can make a positive difference in the life of a Veteran patient.

However, the love doesn’t have to end on Valentine’s Day. Many Veterans are coming to the Department of Veterans Affairs with special needs and challenges that require the hearts and hands of a new generation of VA volunteers. VA NWIHCS invites citizens, young and old, to join in honoring VA’s Veterans year-round by learning more about VA’s volunteer program.

Call Voluntary Services to schedule a personal or small group visit and learn how to join the VA’s National Salute to Veteran Patients. For the Omaha VA Medical Center, call 800-451-5796 ext. 3283. For the Lincoln VA clinic, 866-851-6052 ext. 7938. For the Grand Island VA clinic and Community Living Center, call 866-580-1810 ext. 2146.

NWIHCS’ NATIONAL SALUTE TO VETERANS EVENTS:

OMAHA
Feb. 10, 10 a.m. to Noon, Keyboard artist Bob Arsenault, fireplace by Blue Clinic
Feb 12, 10 a.m. to Noon, Bob Arsenault, by Blue Clinic
Feb. 13, 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., FREE Cookies, Lobby area near coffee shop

GRAND ISLAND
Feb. 12, 2 p.m., Ice Cream Social, second floor recreation room
Feb. 13, Valentine banquet for Community Living Center residents
Feb. 14, 10 a.m., Visit by American Legion and Auxiliary, balloons and free refreshments

LINCOLN
Feb. 13, 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., FREE Cookies, outpatient clinic area

Visit Our Social Media Sites

Like Us on Facebook
www.facebook.com/NebraskalowVA
Follow @VANWIHCS
Get news, information for patients and upcoming events
The newest members of the VA NWIHCS infectious disease prevention team in Grand Island are MIA and SAL.

However, MIA and SAL are not employees. They're portable room disinfecting systems that use ultraviolet (UV) light to disinfect rooms in the Grand Island Community Living Center and residential substance abuse treatment unit.

The systems, which look similar to robots, use pulse UV light to reach surfaces and destroy bacteria and bacterial spores without using chemicals.

“They don’t replace our housekeepers. The light can reach crevices and surfaces where rags cannot.”

Dennis Hawkes, Supervisor
Environmental Management Services | Grand Island VA

On average, the system can kill 95 percent of bacteria or bacteria spores in a room within five minutes, according to its manufacturer.

Grand Island began using the two systems in November 2013. Four of the UV systems are scheduled to be implemented within the Omaha VA Medical Center this month, according to Bill Gaynor, chief, EMS. They will be initially deployed to the Emergency Department, Surgery Services and the Intensive Care Unit.

VA's goal is to achieve zero hospital-acquired infections, according to Peggy Ondracek, APRN, Grand Island infectious disease prevention. The systems have proven to be effective against bacteria that include deadly microorganisms that cause infections such as Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus Aureus, Clostridium difficile and Norovirus.

Since the only risk from UV light exposure is skin and eye irritation if directly exposed, the system has sensors that detect motion to prevent accidental exposure. The UV light cannot penetrate glass, doors or plastic.

The use of the new systems has produced an additional benefit; it's increased discussion about disease prevention amongst Grand Island employees and patients.

“People are intrigued by the new systems, and there’s a lot more talk about infections and prevention.”

Peggy Ondracek, APRN | Infectious Disease Prevention | Grand Island VA

Although VA has a stringent cleaning and disinfecting process EMS performs, and patients with infectious diseases are placed in isolation rooms to prevent the spread of infections, the UV system adds another layer in the fight against disease spread.
Loss of hearing is a common military service-connected condition. Many Veterans were exposed to loud noises around aircraft, machinery or weapon or mortar blasts.

Veterans also experience hearing loss because of exposure to other loud noises that include lawn mowers, power tools or loud music.

Fortunately, the VA offers an array of audiology and speech pathology services for Veterans eligible for health care services.

NWIHCS offers hearing tests at its Omaha VA medical center and Lincoln community-based outpatient clinic (CBOC). Hearing tests at the Grand Island CBOC are provided through a contract provider while renovations are completed. Grand Island’s CBOC will resume in-house services once a new audiologist is hired, which is expected in the next few months.

“If a Veteran requires a hearing aid, an impression is taken of the patient’s ears and devices are ordered from commercial manufacturers.

Veterans can then go to their local VA clinic for their initial hearing aid fitting and follow-up adjustments through the use of tele-audiology. Clinics are located in Holdrege, North Platte, Norfolk, and Bellevue, Neb., and Shenandoah, Iowa.

Gortemaker said tele-health clinical technicians in the CBOCs receive training in basic audiology skills to assist on the patient side.

“They are our hands during these appointments,” Gortemaker said.

Gerald Crawford, an 81-year-old Veteran who lives near Holdrege, recently had his new hearing aids fitted and adjusted at the CBOC there. Jennifer Trompke, LPN, was with Crawford while Gortemaker communicated with them via a tele-audio system, which includes a video camera at both sites, large-screen monitors, microphones and a computer.

With the hearing aid in Crawford’s ear in Holdrege, Gortemaker adjusted the audio levels through a computer system from Omaha.

“We perform the initial hearing exam at Omaha, Lincoln or Grand Island to establish a baseline, because this is where we have testing booths with controlled environments.”

Michele Gortemaker, Au. D | Chief NWIHCS, Audiology and Speech Pathology Services

Jennifer Trompke, LPN, holds up an audio device at the Holdrege Community-Based Outpatient Clinic for Michele Gortemaker, Au.D., VA NWIHCS Audiology and Speech Pathology Services chief, to inspect during a hearing aid fitting appointment for Veteran Gerald Crawford (right in monitor). Crawford was having his hearing aids fitted from Holdrege through a tele-audiology system.
Crawford, who served eight years in the U.S. Navy, was exposed to loud noises from shelling and explosive charges.

He said although tele-audiology “is a little intimidating at first with the video screen, once you get relaxed, it’s like a standard appointment.”

“It also saves a lot of driving time,” he said.

To be eligible for audiology services, Veterans must be referred by a VA medical provider or be evaluated for a service-
There are increasing number of female Veterans receiving VA health care services. At NWIHCS, seven percent of patients are women.

Dr. Stephanie Hartman, VA NWIHCS Women Veteran Medical Director, is charged with enhancing services for women Veterans. She assumed the position in September 2013; however, Hartman is no stranger to serving Veterans. She’s been at the Omaha VA medical center for eight years in various roles including as a medical student, an internal medicine resident and a primary care provider.

When she was a senior resident at Creighton University School of Medicine, Hartman helped create curriculum for residents about specific female health areas that included pap smears, breast tissue masses and pelvic pain.

“It was not a subject specifically addressed in the curriculum at that time,” Hartman said.

Partnering with Hartman at VA is Donna Higgins, LCSW, Women Veteran Program Manager. Hartman educates providers about women Veteran-specific needs and issues. Higgins provides a social worker perspective. She also conducts outreach and Veteran education.

Specific areas they focus on include cervical cancer screens (Pap smears), breast cancer screens (mammograms), birth control, preconception counseling, Human Papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine and menopausal support (hormone replacement therapy).

Some areas of specific focus include military sexual trauma and intimate partner violence. Some research suggests intimate partner violence amongst women Veterans is higher than in the general population, Hartman said.

“Whether providers have predominantly treated male Veterans, it’s important to have regular opportunities to refresh their knowledge regarding gender-specific health care needs.”

Dr. Stephanie Hartman
VA NWIHCS Women Veteran Medical Director

Although VA does not provide direct maternity care, women Veterans enrolled and eligible for VA care receive maternity benefits. The care is offered by a provider at a facility of the Veteran’s choice and is paid for by the VA. Mammograms are also paid by the VA for eligible Veterans to receive at a non-VA provider.

“Our long term goal is to provide comprehensive health care for women Veterans throughout NWIHCS by expanding on the service we currently provide,” Hartman said.
Who is your most-memorable U.S. PRESIDENT?

Richard Nixon. He was almost impeached but resigned. This had never occurred in the history of the U.S. And, I voted for him.

Mary Kay Jordan, RN
Program Analyst, Quality Management | Omaha VAMC

Barrack Obama. During his election, he focused hard on education issues that were important to college students like me (I was in college at the time).

Colleen O’Brien, Program Support Assistant
Quality Management and Patient Safety | Omaha VAMC

John F. Kennedy. I was a little girl when we was president. He was like royalty to the U.S. I was fascinated with his family and movie star popularity.

Peggy Ondracek, APRN
Infectious Disease Prevention
Grand Island VA

George W. Bush. He led the country during the War on Terrorism, and I was sent to Afghanistan. His decisions about the military directly impacted me.

Greg Loyd, P.A., U.S. Army National Guard Veteran
Associate Chief of Medicine | Omaha VAMC

Jimmy Carter. He’s from Georgia like me. I understand rural areas as did he with a hard work ethic. He carried that work ethic and integrity to the White House.

Trickera Sims, NP
Grand Island Community Living Center

Heart disease is the No. 1 killer of women – killing more women than all forms of cancer combined. Most women don’t notice the symptoms of heart disease until it’s too late, which is why heart disease has been called the silent killer.

Donna Higgins, LCSW, VA NWIHCS Women Veterans Program Manager, and Employee Wellness, encourage employees and Veterans to join in special events to raise awareness about heart disease in women Veterans at three “VA Goes Read” events.

“VA is proud to team with the American Heart Association’s (AHA) Go Red For Women movement to raise awareness of heart disease in women Veterans and VA staff,” said Higgins. “This event not only highlights our commitment to care for women Veterans, but it’s also a great opportunity to share information about cardiovascular disease and prevention.”

Go Red For Women Events

Come and Go Comedy Luncheon, 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., Feb. 4, Omaha VA Medical Center Conference Room. Features Abbot and Costello, door prizes, and information about cardiac health. Bring your own lunch.

Come and Go Heart Healthy bingo and lunch, 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., Feb. 7, Lincoln VA auditorium. Information about cardiac health. Bring your own lunch or pre-order a heart-healthy meal for $5.25 by Feb. 5. For more information or to pre-order, email quin.kelly@va.gov.

Heart Health Info, 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., Feb 4, Grand Island VA, South Lobby Area. Learn about cardiac care and get a red apple and bottle of water.

For more information, visit www.womenshealth.va.gov and www.goredforwomen.org.
Ending Veteran homelessness by 2015 is a top priority for VA’s Secretary Eric Shinseki. Nationally, there’s been a 24-percent reduction since the initiative started.

In the Omaha area, VA’s homeless population has decreased nearly 40 percent, said Linda Twomey, Mental Health Specialty Programs director.

One of the important components to determine success is a process called a Point in Time Count, which is required by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. VA NWIHC’s Community Resource and Referral Center at 825 Dorcas Street, Omaha, Neb., served as the city’s launching point for the count.

Forty-five staff and volunteers from Omaha’s HUD office, VA NWIHC, the Metro Area Continuum of Care for the Homeless (MACHH), Community Alliance and other service providers scoured the streets Jan. 22 in sub-freezing temperatures to find Veterans and other homeless people across the city.

“...The goal is to capture a snapshot of the need within our community.”

Ann Smolsky, MACCH Program Coordinator
(continued on page 11)
“We teach people how to manage their reactions to the ringing and introduce other sounds into their environment,” Gortemaker said. “Psychology teaches participants relaxation techniques along with other aspects of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy.

“Although most people are able to ignore the Tinnitus, this group is for people who need additional help to learn to manage it,” Gortemaker said.

Within audiology, speech pathologists evaluate and treat Veterans who have communication or swallowing disorders. They evaluate and treat physiological or anatomical impairments that can be caused by head injury, hearing loss or learning disabilities. Speech and language difficulties could also result from medical conditions that include a stroke, Alzheimer’s disease, cancer or mental health issues. With speech pathologists only based in Omaha and Grand Island, they, too work with Veterans through tele-audiology, too.

“Speech therapy helps to improve Veterans’ quality of life, whether it is helping them to improve their ability to communicate or overcoming effects of swallowing disorders.”

Jill Champley, PhD, Speech Therapist

“This (speech therapy) can include communicating their needs or expressing their thoughts clearly through talking or assistive devices,” said Champley.

People conducting the count went to locations homeless people are known to be located, which includes under bridges, parks, the riverside and the downtown public library. Local shelter staff also counted the number of homeless staying in shelters.

“HUD uses the info to see if we are making a difference to ending Veteran homelessness,” said Earl Redrick, Omaha HUD Field Office director.

He said the count is very important because it determines how much funding HUD receives locally to support programs to provide affordable housing in the community to reduce all homelessness.

In addition to counting homeless people, volunteers made connections that will result in further outreach. One team found two Veterans staying in a building with no utilities.

“Tomorrow, we will send VA staff to perform outreach to these Veterans,” said Twomey.
There are thousands of health information websites...

But only one designed for you.

www.veteranshealthlibrary.org