Walk with a Doc Program
AN ERA OF CHANGE

B. DON BURMAN Director, VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System

We’re living in an era of change. A new president. A new secretary of Veterans Affairs. With new leaders come new visions and strategies. Some people fear change, while others welcome it as an opportunity to adopt a spirit of entrepreneurship to stimulate progress and continuous improvement.

In the book “Good to Great,” author Jim Collins said, “Good is the enemy of great.” Organizations that adopt the philosophy of performing “good enough” frequently become stagnant or fail to realize continuous improvement.

The Department of Veterans Affairs under former Secretary Bob McDonald experienced significant change with programs such as MyVA and the Blueprint for Excellence, which focused on areas including process improvement, improving the Veteran experience and community partnerships.

During a speech at a Disabled American Veterans conference Feb. 26, Secretary David Shulkin, identified a few of his priorities: overhauling the Veterans Choice Program, which he referred to as “Choice 2.0,” by removing restrictions that require Veterans to live 40 or more miles from a VA facility or wait more than 30 days for an appointment; and employee accountability, having the right people onboard.

VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System’s strategic vision has always focused on continuous improvement to improve processes and deliver a great Veteran experience, provided by the right, committed employees. I encourage you to welcome change. With your commitment to moving NWIHCS from “Good to Great,” we’ll continue to be a model for other organizations to emulate and provide a great Veteran experience every day.

THE PROFESSIONALISM EXHIBITED BY ALL IS (A) REFLECTION OF THE PRIORITIES FROM THE TOP MANAGEMENT TEAM. THEY ARE VERY RESPECTFUL TO PATIENTS AND ARE A CREDIT TO THE VA.

“THE DAY OF SURGERY EVERY ONE POSSESSED KNOWLEDGE & COMPASSION FOR MY WIFE AND I MAKING EVERYTHING EASY AND POSSIBLE.”

WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU
Veterans receive several surveys after inpatient and outpatient visits. If you receive one, please fill it out and return. Feedback is shared with staff and helps improve services across the health care system.

NURSES
By Veteran Bruce A. Aughe

A nurse is one who really cares. Their feelings and caring they always share

A nurse is one with a caring heart. They are always there doing their part.

You have seen the rest. When you are a nurse, you really are the best

A nurse is one who will never let you down. Their kindness and caring is always around

A nurse is one who will go an extra mile to put on your face a happy smile.

WHAT OUR PATIENTS ARE SAYING

"The professionalism exhibited by all is (a) reflection of the priorities from the top management team. They are very respectful to patients and are a credit to the VA.”

“"The day of surgery EVERY ONE possessed knowledge & compassion for my wife and I making everything easy and possible.”

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“The day of surgery EVERY ONE possessed knowledge & compassion for my wife and I making everything easy and possible.”
My father is a retired Air Force Veteran and Veteran of both the Korean and Vietnam wars. My oldest brother is a retired member of the Navy. Their service to our country led me to look at how I can give back to this great nation. To serve our Veterans, men and women who have kept my family safe and secure, is a great honor and fulfillment of my calling.

Dr. Larry L. Brown
Chief, Primary Care

FACT: LESS THAN HALF OF THE APPROXIMATELY 116,000 VETERANS ELIGIBLE FOR CARE AT VA NEBRASKA-WESTERN IOWA HEALTH CARE SYSTEM ARE ACTIVELY RECEIVING THE HEALTH CARE THEY HAVE EARNED. DO YOU KNOW A VETERAN WHO NEEDS TO ENROLL? TELL THEM TO STOP INTO ANY VA NWIHCS FACILITY OR VISIT WWW.VETS.GOV.

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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
Have a story idea? Call the VA NWIHCS Public Affairs Office at 402-995-5547 or email vhanwipublicaffairs@va.gov.

THE LINK STAFF
B. DON BURMAN, MHA | Publisher
WILL ACKERMAN | Director of Communications and Voluntary Service
ANNA MORELOCK | Editor
BECKY BROWN | Design
BRUCE THIEL | Photography

COVER: Dr. Amy Arouni, chief of Cardiology; Echohawk Lefthand, Health Promotion Disease Prevention coordinator; and Denee Killion, Rachel McCrae and Tracy Masek, all registered nurses in Cardiology, kicked off Walk with a Doc in February at the Omaha VAMC. Photo by Anna Morelock.
A message from
VA SECRETARY
Dr. David Shulkin

Dr. David J. Shulkin was confirmed as the Secretary of Veterans Affairs on Feb. 13, and sworn into office on Feb. 14.

I am grateful to President Trump and to members of Congress for entrusting me with the privilege of serving Veterans and the dedicated employees of the Department of Veterans Affairs as your secretary.

Dr. David Shulkin
Secretary of Veterans Affairs

It is my highest professional honor. Together, we’ll ensure our nation’s obligation to provide care and benefits to those “who shall have borne the battle” and fulfill our institutional I CARE Values: integrity, commitment, advocacy, respect and excellence.

That obligation and those values are sacred to me, first, as an American – a beneficiary of the service and sacrifices of Veterans and their families who defend our uniquely American freedoms and opportunities. They’re also sacred to me because my father served the nation as an Army psychiatrist, and both my grandfathers were Army Veterans. My paternal grandfather served as chief pharmacist at the VA hospital in Madison, Wisconsin, and as a young doctor, I trained in VA hospitals. So, serving the nation and serving Veterans is a family tradition.

Kalan Root, LICSW & Heather Eller-Gilman, LICSW
Transition Care Management Social Workers | Lincoln VA Clinic

HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN AT VA:
KALAN (left) – 3 years, 3 months
HEATHER (right) – 3 years, 8 months

WHAT DOES YOUR JOB ENTAIL?
“We case manage Veterans who are in the Transition Care Management program. So any Veterans who had a deployment status post September 2001, when they come to the VA they’re enrolled in the Transition Care Management clinic. When they come in we assess them for their needs, we tell them about resources, and then we follow them to get them connected to help with their transition out of the military into civilian life. And we also provide therapy to address any number of issues from depression to anxiety. We also offer evidence-based PTSD therapies.”

WHAT DO YOU LIKE BEST ABOUT WHAT YOU DO?

KALAN – “I like our population. I like the teamwork that we have within our team; the support that we have from our bosses. I love watching Veterans get better. I love watching them come in kind of lost and then walk out of here with purpose and meaning and confidence.”

HEATHER – “I like the long-term relationship that we form with the Veterans we work with. We see Veterans over years through ups and downs in their life and really develop a strong bond with them; a trusting relationship. I also really like the different things we get to do in our job. We can go from helping somebody with housing to helping somebody with a bill, and then turn around and do therapy. So the variety in our job is wide.”

WHEN NOT AT WORK, WHAT CAN YOU BE FOUND DOING?

KALAN – “Spending time with my two children and husband. In the summer, being at the lake or by the pool.”

HEATHER – “Traveling, camping, spending time with my three kids and four grandchildren.”
Rickert comes from a family deeply rooted in military service, including her parents, husband, son, uncles and grandfather. “I firmly believe every Veteran deserves no less after giving of themselves for their country,” she said.

She finds the mission at the VA unique with an advanced emergency management program, state-of-the-art clinical practices, a long and storied research mission and an educational program that trains medical students and residents.

Growing up with nine siblings on a 325-acre farm kept her active, which carries over to her off-duty activities today that include landscaping, gardening, cycling and hiking. Rickert also enjoys reading and volunteering.

Dr. David Williams, a neurosurgeon, was appointed chief of staff at VA NWIHCs in September 2016. During his 24-year U.S. Air Force medical service career, Williams said he’s seen significant health care advancements.

“As a young physician, I had no effective drugs for multiple sclerosis, a devastating disorder that affects young people,” Williams said. Now, more than a dozen treatments are available. Many patients live with a disease that was previously truly devastating,” he said.

Becoming a physician seemed “genetic” for Williams; his father and grandfather were doctors, too.

As chief of staff, Williams leads NWIHCs’ medical staff to provide safe, high-quality care to Veterans. One of his goals is to make NWIHCs “the health care provider of choice” for Veterans.

Williams was impressed with the VA team when the Bellevue VA Clinic originally opened at Offutt Air Force Base’s medical facility in 2009 where he was the 55th Medical Group deputy commander.
Bridging the Gap Between Military and VA Services

Combat experience can cause common reactions including post-traumatic stress, depression, combat stress, anger, and drug and alcohol abuse. VA created a dedicated program to support the nation’s newest generation of combat Veterans as they navigate these issues and transition from the military to civilian life.

Formerly known as the OEF/OIF/OND Program for Operations Iraqi Freedom, Enduring Freedom and New Dawn, it is now known as the Post-9/11 Transition and Care Management Program.

Post 9/11 TCM case managers and transitional patient advocates work with Veterans to help them obtain access to VA services and benefits, or to community services – often before they even leave the service. Veterans and active-duty service members who have served in combat since Nov. 11, 1998, are eligible.

“This is very different than other wars because the average number of times servicemembers have deployed is three times; some as many as five times.”

Heather Bojanski, LICSW, Post 9/11 TCM program manager

The program developed out of a need to provide a seamless transition from the military to VA for those coming back from combat, said Lori Wardlow, LMSW, Post 9/11 TCM Administrative Officer. “The Department of Defense and VA systems were very different. We had to create a way to provide a clinical warm hand off from one entity to another.”

An important feature of the Post 9/11 TCM program is the co-location of social workers, primary care and mental health providers and nurses in one setting. The goal is to “treat the patient as a whole and in one clinic, when possible,” Bojanski said.

The program has grown each year since it began nationally in 2007. At VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System, more than 8,000 Veterans are enrolled, almost half of which are National Guard and Reserve Veterans.

Although the name of the program recently changed, Wardlow said, the mission to serve members of the military during transition in times of war and peace has not.

For more information on the Post 9/11 TCM program at VA NWIHCS, call Wardlow at 402-480-1801 or Bojanski at 402-995-4149.
Foster homes provide long-term care for Veterans in a home setting

The Medical Foster Home program is recruiting caregivers in the Grand Island and Omaha areas to provide long-term care in their homes for Veterans. Medical foster homes must be within 30-miles of the Omaha VA Medical Center, or 60 miles of the Grand Island VA Medical Center.

The Medical Foster Home program allows caregivers to be their own bosses and allows them to give back to those who have served our country, said Lori Jones, the Medical Foster Home coordinator for VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System.

Jones related the story of one Veteran who was suicidal and living in an assisted living facility.

“He’ll tell you it saved his life,” Jones said of the 74-year-old Veteran’s placement in a Medical Foster Home. “Now he’s got a girlfriend and his health is great. He just truly turned around.”

Veterans placed in foster homes can be of any age. Jones recently visited a 96-year-old Veteran who is in an assisted living facility but now needs one-on-one supervision, which the facility can’t provide. A Medical Foster Home would be perfect for him, Jones said.

Medical Foster Homes must be accessible for Veterans with walkers and wheelchairs, and caregivers need to ensure Veterans have 24-hour a day care whether that be from a family member or a paid, relief caregiver.

The program seeks caregivers who have personal or professional care experience. Once approved, Jones acts as a liaison to connect Veterans with caregivers. The Veteran pays between $1,500 and $3,000 a month for care in a Medical Foster Home, which can house up to three Veterans. In return, caregivers provide personal care and supervision, and assist Veterans with appointments and medication.

“The Veterans really become like extended family.”

Lori Jones, VA NWIHCS Medical Foster Home Coordinator

Those interested in learning more about the Medical Foster Home program should contact Jones at 402-995-4796 or lori.jones@va.gov. Online, visit https://www.va.gov/geriatrics/guide/longtermcare/Medical_Foster_Homes.asp.
NEW HOUSING SUPPORTS RURAL TRAINEES

BY ANNA MORELOCK
Public Affairs

One of the seven remodeled bedrooms in the trainee housing awaits its first guest. The house also includes a kitchen area, living room, computer area (left), and meeting room.

DESTINY MOSTEK COMPLETED HER DIETETIC INTERNSHIP AT THE GRAND ISLAND VA ABOUT TWO YEARS AGO AND JUST RETURNED IN 2017 AS A CLINICAL DIETITIAN. THIS IS EXACTLY WHAT THE RURAL TRAINING INITIATIVE IS DESIGNED TO DO – INTRODUCE STUDENTS TO RURAL HEALTH CARE AND MAKE THEM WANT TO RETURN. MOSTEK WORKED IN THE COMMUNITY LIVING CENTER TO FULFILL THE LONG-TERM CARE ROTATION FOR HER INTERNSHIP. SHE ALSO WORKED WITH THE DIETITIANS IN THE OUTPATIENT CLINICS AND ENJOYED THE EXPERIENCE.

“When I heard that a dietitian was retiring and that a position would be available, I just hopped right on board in applying for it,” Mostek said. “I had (worked in that area) before and I really enjoyed it.”

The new trainee housing is a place for interns such as Mostek. While living on campus, medical students and residents from around the world learn about the unique challenges and opportunities with rural health care delivery. While their rotations vary in length, trainees at the Grand Island VA include pharmacy, dental and physician assistant students and residents.

To learn more about rural health initiatives at VA, visit www.ruralhealth.va.gov.

VA Secretary Dr. David Shulkin continued from page 4

It was a privilege to serve as VA’s Under Secretary for Health over the past year and a half. Now, I look forward to continuing our collective efforts across the department and our country to deliver the care and services our Veterans need and deserve. Among many critical efforts already underway, we will continue building on significant progress increasing access for Veterans, preventing suicide, addressing unique needs of women Veterans, supporting Veterans’ families and caregivers, continuing to drive down the disability backlog and Veteran homelessness, and pursuing necessary legislation to reform the outdated appeals process and for other critical legislative priorities.

With the support of the president, Congress, Veterans, their service organizations, and the American people, we – the dedicated employees of VA – will continue to fulfill President Lincoln’s promise.

There is no nobler mission. There is no higher calling for any American. I am humbled and proud to serve with you.
Denée Killion, a registered nurse in Cardiology at the Omaha VA Medical Center, sees the effects of bad habits on Veterans’ health. Smoking, bad eating habits and inactivity all take their toll.

FAST OR SLOW, WALKING IMPROVES HEALTH.

For that reason, Killion got VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System signed on with Walk with a Doc, a national program designed to engage patients in their health care and promote activity.

“We want to increase the visibility of our physicians to our patients and make ourselves more available to them in a fun, informal setting while encouraging something that’s really terrific for their health,” said Dr. Amy Arouni, NWIHCS’ Chief of Cardiology.

The second Saturday of each month at 10 a.m., Veterans are invited to meet in the main lobby at the Omaha VAMC and walk with Arouni or more than a dozen other VA health care providers from various disciplines who have volunteered.

“I’m excited to put my money where my mouth is,” Killion said. “I tell people every day to exercise more, and now we can help them do it.”

Walking groups will be based on the pace of the walkers and stick to a timeframe versus walking a set distance. Before each walk kicks off, one of the providers will provide a mini-talk on a health topic. During the walk, Arouni encourages Veterans to bring up any concerns they may have. Water and healthy snacks will also be provided.

“Exercise benefits not only your heart, which is our main concern in Cardiology,” Arouni said, “but it also benefits every bodily system, as well as your mental health. The more people that walk with us the better and the better for their health.”

To learn more about Walk with a Doc, call Killion at 402-995-6718, or visit walkwithadoc.org/our-locations/omaha-nebraska/.

Dr. Amy Arouni, chief of Cardiology; Echohawk Lefthand, Health Promotion Disease Prevention coordinator; and Denée Killion, Rachel McCrae and Tracy Masek, all registered nurses in Cardiology, kicked off Walk with a Doc in February at the Omaha VAMC.
When Lance Eggen checked into rehab he thought he would get ahead of a judge in a legal matter, go through the “horse and pony show,” and call it good. He wasn’t a drug addict. Yes, he used drugs, but he wasn’t an addict.

A little more than a year later, Eggen celebrated his sobriety and graduation from the Transition Residence, also known as the TR House, at the Grand Island VA Medical Center.

“I was just trying to get it over and done with,” Eggen said of rehab, “but stuff just started sticking.”

When he left the 30-day Substance Abuse Treatment and Recovery Program, Eggen decided he wasn’t going to go back to his previous lifestyle. He moved into the TR House with seven other Veterans he now considers his brothers, just as he did his shipmates in the Navy.

The nine-bed TR House, Building 5, sits just off of Wheeler Avenue on the east side of campus. Its purpose is to provide a structured living environment for Veterans like Eggen and others who need to learn how to make constructive instead of destructive decisions.

The camaraderie Eggen had with his brothers was key, he said. After a bad day at work he could come home where everyone would good-naturedly give each other a hard time, but also support.

“The stress would go away pretty quick,” Eggen said. “I knew everybody here had the same problem I had. It just makes life a little easier.”

Every day is still a trial.

“I’m just looking at staying sober for 24,” Eggen said, but he plans to continue attending meetings, keeping in touch with those at the TR House and lending his support to those just beginning their journey to recovery. And, he’ll be nearby to do so.

With help from Kelly Arends, the TR House Readjustment Counselor, or “big sister,” according to Eggen, he found a rental house in a neighborhood near the VA. At graduation he was presented with a crockpot, coffeemaker, cleaning supplies, pots and pans, and other household goods donated to each TR House graduate by the Hastings Elks Lodge. Arends said she still sees Eggen several times a week and that he is doing well in his new house.

“When they transition and they stay connected with the house, that is a good sign they’ll stay in recovery,” Arends said.

For more information about the TR House and eligibility requirements, contact Arends at 308-382-3660, ext. 3261.
Radio Talking Book is now available to inpatients at the Omaha VA Medical Center on channel 75. Programming includes the reading of state-wide newspapers, ads, books, magazines and other items of interest. Radio Talking Book is a reading service for the blind and visually impaired. Each week volunteers read hundreds of articles and entertainment pieces.

VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health System is also working with Radio Talking Book service to implement the programming for patients at Grand Island’s Community Living Center. Radio Talking Book is a closed-circuit system and only available on radios provided by the service, or on systems such as the one implemented with VA, or other inpatient facilities.

Blind and visually impaired Veterans can contact Jean Butler, NWIHC's Visual Impairment Services Team coordinator, at 402-995-3188 for assistance in applying for a radio or for more information about services for blind and visually-impaired Veterans through VA.

Besides volunteering as a greeter at the Omaha VAMC and heading up the Omaha VAMC Veterans Advisory Group, U.S. Air Force Veteran Dick Harrington spends time each week in the Radio Talking Book studio reading weekly newspapers for the service.
New Regulation Decreases Cost of Outpatient Medication Copay for Most Veterans

VA News Release

Washington – The Department of Veterans Affairs amended its regulation on copayments for Veterans’ outpatient medications for non-service connected conditions. VA had charged non-exempt Veterans either $8 or $9 for each 30-day or less supply of outpatient medication, and under those regulations, a calculation based on the medication of the Medical Consumer Price Index (CPI-P) would be used to determine the copayment amount for future years.

“Switching to a tiered system continues to keep outpatient medication costs low for Veterans,” said then-VA Under Secretary for Health Dr. David J. Shulkin. “Reducing their out-of-pocket costs encourages greater adherence to prescribed outpatient medications and reduces the risk of fragmented care that results when multiple pharmacies are used; another way that VA is providing better service to Veterans.”

This new regulation, which became effective Feb. 27, eliminated the formula used to calculate future rate increases and established three classes of outpatient medications identified as Tier 1, Preferred Generics; Tier 2, Non-Preferred Generics including over-the-counter medications; and Tier 3, Brand Name. Copayment amounts for each tier are fixed and vary depending upon the class of outpatient medication in the tier.

COPayment Amounts

• $5 for a 30-day or less supply - Tier 1 outpatient medication
• $8 for a 30-day or less supply - Tier 2 outpatient medication
• $11 for a 30-day or less supply - Tier 3 outpatient medication

These changes apply to Veterans without a service-connected condition, or Veterans with a disability rated less than 50 percent who are receiving outpatient treatment for a non-service connected condition, and whose annual income exceeds the limit set by law. Medication copayments do not apply to former Prisoners of War, catastrophically disabled Veterans, or those covered by other exceptions as set by law.

Copayments stop each calendar year for Veterans in Priority Groups 2-8 once a $700 cap is reached.
A love of books brought Peggy Dovel and Jane Bieber together at the Lincoln VA Clinic where they both volunteer. Since 2012, the pair has spent hours receiving, hauling, cataloging, organizing hundreds and selling thousands of books donated to VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System for an annual book sale at the Lincoln VA.

“We were getting donations upon donations of books and putting them out in the facility,” said Dovel, herself an Army Veteran. “They were just getting overwhelming.” So, the pair asked, “Why don’t we have a book sale?”

For the past two years, the pair actively searched for donations for the sale, which netted them several thousand books to sell. However, the time and effort to collect and organize everything is getting to be too much. In 2016, Bieber estimated they sold approximately 4,000 books for 25 cents to $1 each, with a few special items going for more.

The 2016, three-day book sale in Lincoln’s Auditorium was their last, but Dovel and Bieber are still connecting Veterans with books and raising a little money in the process. They are promoting a lending library located in Room 011, with several smaller collections in the chapel, lab and mental health areas. Veterans are encouraged to pick up a few titles and to drop some off when they’re done reading them for others to enjoy.

Dovel and Bieber have also been setting aside other “special” books they suspect are worth a bit more. One prize they’ve come across over the years was a leather-bound set of Louis L’Amour westerns they sold for $200. They will look to sell their other vintage finds to book sellers they’ve gotten to know. The proceeds will go back into the Voluntary Service coffers. Some of their stash they’ve set aside to send to Veterans in the Nebraska Correctional system.

With proceeds from previous sales, Bieber and Doval have purchased speakers and microphones for the Lincoln auditorium, three new Christmas trees, storage bags and ornaments, and more than 300 pounds of coffee along with cases of sweetener. And, they still have money leftover they would like to see go toward events for women Veterans.

“We’re stopping the sale, but we’re not stopping our services,” said Bieber, who has volunteered more than 1,800 hours at the Lincoln VA since April 2011.

Doval, who is also a volunteer in the lab, has been giving her time to the Lincoln VA since July 2011 and has also given 1,800 hours. “We talk about giving it up, and we just can’t do it,” she said.

VETERAN LENDING LIBRARY
Lincoln VA Clinic, Room 011
Detasseling corn; cross-pollinating corn; roguing corn – I did a lot of things with corn!”

Kelli Redinger, RN
Community Health Nurse
Grand Island VAMC

“I was a sacker at Hinky Dinky.”

Joann Hawthorne
EKG Tech, Cardiology
Omaha VAMC

“I worked in greenery and as a cashier at Shopko.”

Ann Wadsworth
Physical Therapy Assistant
Grand Island VAMC

“What was your first job?

“Babysitting when I was 13.”

Jeff Warner
Med Technician, Lab
Lincoln VA

“I cut grass as a boy. But I worked as a busboy for my first hired position.”

Jeff McGregor
Supervisory Medical Support Assistant
Lincoln VA

“I worked in greenery and as a cashier at Shopko.”

Joann Hawthorne
EKG Tech, Cardiology
Omaha VAMC
“I jumped at the opportunity to join the (NWIHCS) team last fall and continue to serve service members through the VA,” Williams said.

Williams’ father and wife are Veterans, too, which is “strong motivation” for him to provide great care. “I see the VA filling a critical niche in caring for those ‘who shall have borne the battle.’”

Outside of work, Williams enjoys spending time with his children, chauffeuring them to many events. “I think I’ve been to every soccer field in a five-state area.”

He’s also a self-professed “car nut,” always looking for his next vehicle. “I’m always game for swapping car stories.”
EAT WISELY... a healthy eating pattern includes:

- Focus on Whole Fruit
- Vary your Veggies
- Move to Low-fat or Fat-free Milk, Yogurt & Cheese
- Make ½ your Grains Whole
- Vary your Protein Routine
- Drink and eat less sodium, less saturated fat, and less added sugars
- Use Unsaturated Fats

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Healthy Living Matters. Prevention Works.

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Classic Cars & Cycles

Tuesday, May 9, 5 to 8 p.m.
Lincoln VA Clinic, 600 S. 70th St.
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For information contact Ron Lechner at 402-560-3342 or ronlechner1@gmail.com or Lynsan Garrison at 402-730-1347 or Lynsan.Garrison@va.gov

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