

THE northern

EARLY SUMMER 2016

The Official Voice of
VA Northern California Health Care System

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Service Animal
Policy
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In This Edition...

NO VETERAN DIES ALONE

ASPIRATION INTO ACTION


VA Northern California
HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

www.northerncalifornia.va.gov

VA



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

Every Picture Tells a Story

About This Picture:

Art Ford with Vietnam War Veteran pin

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Produced by Forte Information Resources

The Northern • Early Summer 2016

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For some, it may seem like "just a pin," but for others, it represents and evokes a lifetime of memories. For Air Force Veteran Art Ford, his Vietnam War Veteran pin brings tears to his eyes when he recalls the challenges,

rich opportunities, long-term friendships, and painful sorrows he experienced during 37 years of service to his beloved country.

Art, or AJ to his friends, comes from a rich line of military men. His grandfather served in the Army Air Corps, and his father had a career in the Army Air Corps and the Air Force. Early on, Art learned about airplanes and fell in love with flying. This led him to seek a career with the Air Force that began in 1961, after graduating from high school in Sacramento.

Art excelled in aircraft maintenance and became the youngest flight engineer in the Air Force at that time. He later joined special operations, which took him to many countries around the world. He served throughout the Cuban Missile Crisis, Vietnam, and Desert Storm, and received many awards and decorations along the way until retiring in 1998.

When asked what his years of military service gave him, Art's quick response is "discipline, travel, friendships, and purpose." Since his retirement, Art has enjoyed duck hunting, fishing, and spending time with friends. He and Carole, his wife of 50 years, are active at their local church where Art is a passionate advocate for both Veterans and his country.

At Your Service!

By Jeff Fortner and Charlene Wetmore, Public Affairs Specialists

When Veterans arrive at the Sacramento VA Medical Center campus, there is no doubt they will cross paths with someone from Concierge Services—a team of volunteers committed to assisting Veterans during their time with us.



Each member of Concierge Services is prepared to assist Veterans by answering questions, giving directions, securing a wheelchair assist, or helping with transportation arrangements, including light rail or VA transport services.

Welcome Ambassadors like Cynthia (photo 1) are available to greet Veterans, while volunteers like Bob, Katy, Rudolph, or Letecia (not shown) assist Veterans while they are inside buildings 650 and 700. Friendly Parking Ambassadors like John (photo 2) are ready to help Veterans in the parking garage, while others provide shuttle rides throughout the campus. Other teams of volunteers bring the comfort cart to patients receiving inpatient care (photo 3). The comfort cart is filled with scratchers, books, personal hygiene supplies, as well as beautiful handmade items such as quilts and blankets. During March 2015, volunteers like Lou, Tooran, and Ron (photos 4, 5, and 6) logged more than 1,000 hours of wheelchair assists for our Veterans.



Overseeing this vital network of volunteers is Ed Morelli (photo 7), a 26-year Air Force Veteran. Ed leads the Concierge Services team with a commitment to assist Veterans and make a positive contribution to their experience while on campus. Ed says his team of 85 volunteers, who range from high school students to 75-year-olds, makes his job easy because they are a happy group of people who want to come to work. Their presence is felt throughout the entire campus, where these volunteers log roughly 350 interactions with Veterans every single day!



Story Photo Credit: U.S. Air Force

Updated Service Animal Policy

By Jeff Fortner, Public Affairs Specialist

We know how important service and support animals are to our Veterans, and how much of a positive impact these companions have on our patients' quality of life. That is why VA Northern California Health Care System has made recent changes to the service animal policy.

What is a service animal? Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), a service animal is defined as a dog or miniature horse trained to perform beneficial tasks directly related to an individual's disability. Due to the numerous tasks dogs can be trained to perform, there is no specific language defining what a task is. Our service animal policy was revised at the prompting of service animal owners' comments at our quarterly Town Halls.

The new policy was written with input from service animal owners and handlers in an effort to make our Veterans with service animals feel respected and accommodated. The revisions to the policy include ADA policy language and were approved and signed into effect on March 2016. The new policy is explicitly welcoming and supportive of Veterans with a service animal and provides clear guidance on the rights and responsibilities of animals' handlers while they are at the VA.

There are a variety of reasons for a Veteran patient to use a service animal. Historically, service animals have been used to help patients with blindness or mobility impairments. In recent years, Veterans with less observable problems, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression, have started using support animals. Service animals are different from support, therapy, or comfort animals in that support animals do not have to be trained to perform specialized tasks, but instead are there for comfort and cheer.

Support animals have been reported to provide relief from symptoms associated with anxiety, PTSD, and depression. Karri Kennedy, an occupational therapist at the VA's Martinez Outpatient Clinic, recommends support animals to her patients. "I know how valuable they are," she says of the dogs. "Having a support animal gives Veterans purpose and makes them get up and go out of the house."

"Otto has helped my life tremendously," says Robert, a Marine Corps Veteran, of his support animal. "He is there for me, and grounds me in a way that nothing else can."

Here are some guidelines and useful information to make your visit with a service animal more enjoyable:

- 🐾 Do not bring your service animal if he or she is exhibiting signs of illness, infection, open wounds, insect infestation, or if you think the animal will urinate or defecate inside a building.
- 🐾 If your service animal exhibits inappropriate behavior (e.g., barking, growling, biting), please keep in mind that the VA Northern California staff may have to discontinue treatment.
- 🐾 When on campus, owners and handlers are responsible for their service animal.
- 🐾 VA employees are not allowed to supervise, care for, or assume liability for a service animal. The owner/handler maintains responsibility at all times.
- 🐾 There is a specially designed kennel maintained in the emergency department if a patient has an emergency, but no one to stay with his or her service animal.

If you are a Veteran seeking service animal benefits under 38 CFR §17.148, the following organizations can help with animals requiring certification:

- 🐾 Assistance Dogs International
- 🐾 International Guide Dog Federation

Or if you are a Veteran, or know a Veteran who could benefit from a support animal, the Animal Rescue Foundation (ARF) is here to help. VA Northern California Health Care System has partnered with ARF to assist Veterans whose emotional health could benefit from having a support animal. ARF has programs that benefit our Veterans, including waived adoption fees and training. If a Veteran qualifies for the Pets for Vets Program, his or her dog receives free food! For more information, contact ARF at: Pets for Vets c/o ARF, 2890 Mitchell Drive, Walnut Creek, California 94598 | (925) 256-1273 | petsforvets@arflife.org | www.arfpetsforvets.org | www.arflife.org.



No Veteran Dies Alone

By Charlene Wetmore, Public Affairs Specialist

“The No Veteran Dies Alone program was started to give our Veterans dignity and respect upon passing. The last thing that they know is that the VA was there for them and that we care.”

Michael Hughes,
No Veteran Dies Alone coordinator,
Chaplain Service



Michael Hughes, a retired Air Force Veteran and volunteer at Sacramento VA Medical Center, has one of the hardest yet most rewarding jobs in the hospital. He sits with Veterans who are in their last stage of life.

In Spring 2013, Michael brought the No Veteran Dies Alone program to VA Northern California Health Care System to provide presence, companionship, and reassurance at the bedside when family and friends are unable to be with a Veteran at the end of life.

A program that began with 15 volunteers has grown to 62 individuals who are on-call when a Veteran needs them most. All it takes to start the process is a phone call. For example, when a palliative care nurse requests a volunteer at the bedside of a Veteran, that is when Michael starts making phone calls to his on-call volunteers. “I am so proud of our volunteers,” he says. “Whenever I get a call, it only takes a few minutes and I have volunteers scheduled for a full day.

Starting this program and seeing all the people who want to volunteer has touched my heart. Personally, it gives me comfort knowing that we make a difference in the Veterans' lives as they pass, by being able to sit with them and hold their hand, talk and listen to them, and just let them know we care and they are not alone.”

The No Veteran Dies Alone program would not be possible without its dedicated volunteers. If you are interested in joining the team, please call 916-366-5372.



“Wherever the Vet is, any time, any place.” —Tom Smith

Aspiration into Action

By David Stockwell, Director

When reading the core principles of the VA Access Declaration, we hope you will see we are working hard to provide the best access for our Veterans, be innovative in our solutions, and find new and creative ways to provide quality care to our patients.



Change is never easy, especially on a large scale, but I am encouraged by how far we have come and how we have a greater understanding of what it means to be a patient-centered health care system. When reading our declaration (below), it is important to recognize that the first line says, "We aspire to ..." This is the foundation of the principles we are moving toward, the goals we have, and our aspirations for the future. Each principle has brief talking points to help explain complex ideas that will benefit from a more thorough explanation.

*my*VAaccess Declaration

WE ASPIRE TO PROVIDE ACCESS TO CARE BASED ON THE FOLLOWING CORE PRINCIPLES:

Provide timely care, including same-day services in Primary Care, as needed.

Our goal is to be able to offer our patients same-day triage options, urgent care, and walk-in appointments at all Primary Care clinics.

Provide timely mental health care, including same-day services, as needed.

Our goal is to triage any patient who needs same-day mental health care services.

Provide Veterans medically necessary care from another VA medical center while away from their primary facility.

As our Veterans travel, we want to ensure they see our health care system as a seamless option for their medical needs.

Respond to routine clinical inquires within two business days.

Our goal is to respond to our Veteran's phone calls and secure messages within two business days.

Offer appointments and other follow-up options upon leaving the clinic.

We are moving toward a system of patient-centered scheduling, which means patients will be given the option of scheduling their follow-up appointment before they leave the clinic (even if their next appointment is far in the future). In the coming months, we will be rolling out a formalized check-out procedure for every clinic, to help empower patients with their health care.

Integrate community providers as appropriate to enhance access within 90 days.

Continue to work with Veterans and TriWest to improve Community Care.

Actively engage Veterans for timely follow-up if an appointment is canceled due to unforeseen circumstances.

Our Veterans should be notified in a timely manner if their appointment is canceled, and they should be able to negotiate their rescheduled appointment. Our goal is to offer them an expedited appointment or other alternative options if they need to be seen that day. If Veterans are driving from far distances to see us and their appointment is canceled in the process, we should do everything in our power to see that Veteran—this embodies the idea of patient-centered health care.

Offer Veterans extended clinic hours and/or virtual care options, such as telehealth, when appropriate.

Work to provide extended clinic hours and telehealth that meet the needs of our patients.

Transparently report access-to-care data to Veterans and the public.

Healthy Recipe!

Summer Squash "Pasta" with Garlic and Basil

Yield: Serves 4
Prep time: 12 minutes
Cook time: 5 minutes
Total time: 17 minutes

Ingredients

- 3 to 4 small to medium yellow summer squash
- 2 teaspoons olive oil
- 4 tablespoons chopped basil
- 2 medium cloves garlic, pressed
- ¼ cup grated fresh Parmesan cheese
- 1 lb Italian sausage

Directions

1. Draw the julienne peeler down over the squash, making spaghetti-like strands or thin, broader noodle-like slices.
2. In a large skillet, heat olive oil over medium heat. Cook and drain Italian sausage, then add to large skillet with heated olive oil. Add the squash



strands and cook for a few minutes, or just until softened. Add the garlic and basil and continue cooking for about 30 seconds to 1 minute longer. Add salt and pepper to taste.

3. Toss with the Parmesan cheese and serve immediately.



My Health, My Care: 24/7 ^{Online} Access to VA

To register, please call Kristi Scott, MyhealthVet Coordinator, at 916-843-7108 or email her at Kristi.Scott@va.gov

Connect with VA Northern California Health Care System

Valley Division—Sacramento VA Medical Center
10535 Hospital Way
Mather, CA 95655
916-843-7000 | 800-382-8387

East Bay Division—Martinez Outpatient Clinic
150 Muir Road
Martinez, CA 94553
925-372-2000 | 800-382-8387

Call Center

800-382-8387 Mon–Fri 7 a.m.–6 p.m.

Prescription Refills

Automated Telephone Refill System: 1-866-600-VARX (1-866-600-8279) Toll-Free
Available 7:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., Monday through Friday, excluding federal holidays.