

# THE northern

The Official Voice of VA Northern California Health Care System

SUMMER 2014

They Went,  
They Survived,  
They Are Here  
to Help

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**IN THIS  
EDITION...**

ACCESS UPDATE  
AGENT ORANGE

  
VA Northern California  
HEALTH CARE SYSTEM  
[www.northerncalifornia.va.gov](http://www.northerncalifornia.va.gov)

VA



U.S. Department  
of Veterans Affairs

# Letter from the Director



The VA has been in the news most of the summer with concerns about accessing timely appointments, the integrity of the system and whether we are accurately recording patient wait times for appointments. At VA Northern California Health Care System, we remain committed to giving patients the best possible care and experience, and we have spent a great deal of time this summer calling and talking to our patients about appointment times, desired dates and getting seen sooner. To improve timeliness, we have decided to buy care in the community for patients needing care in three specific areas: eye care, podiatry and GI procedures. We have increased the numbers of appointment slots in primary care, physical therapy, dermatology and sleep studies. In addition, we are attempting to eliminate “blind scheduling” across our entire system. This means that we negotiate every appointment with the patient and never just book an appointment and mail our patients the appointment information. It honors the patient to discuss each appointment with them, and it reduces no-shows for appointments. Moreover, this personal interaction actually reduces the demand for specialty care by ensuring that patients are committed to their appointment prior to booking it.

Since the start of summer, we have lowered our overall electronic wait list numbers from 2,414 to 267. We have eliminated our new enrollee request for primary care appointment list, and our current numbers are based on the requests that we receive daily. We have lowered our average wait time for new patients in all clinics by five days. Finally, we are working hard to provide timely care to our patients; between May 20, 2014, and July 29, 2014, we have added 1,341 patients to our system.

We are encouraged by these results and will continue to find ways to improve access to care for our Veterans—after all, you are the reason we are here.

David Stockwell  
*Director, VA Northern California Health Care System*

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### About the Publication

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## Upcoming Events

**Aug. 21–23 (all day)**  
Annual Yuba/Marysville Stand-Down  
Riverfront Park, Marysville  
yubasutterveteransstanddown.org  
530-749-1036

**Aug. 27, 8:30–10 a.m.**  
New Dental Clinic Open House  
McClellan Dental Clinic

**Sept. 6–7 (all day)**  
California Capital Air Show  
Mather Air Field

**Sept. 10 (all day)**  
Mental Health Summit  
Lions Gate Conference Room,  
McClellan

**Sept. 10, 5:30-8 p.m.**  
Veterans Town Hall  
Sacramento Medical Center,  
Auditorium in 650  
For more info, call Kevin Kasnick at  
916-843-7241

**Sept. 11–14**  
East Bay Stand Down  
Alameda County Fairgrounds  
Pre-registration required.  
eastbaystanddown.org

**Sept. 12–14**  
Sacramento Stand Down  
Mather Field  
standdownsacramento.org  
916-389-8917

**Sept. 20, 11 a.m.–3 p.m.**  
Annual Welcome Home Event  
Sacramento VA Medical Center  
*Community organizations, Vet Center  
and VA program information.  
Free BBQ lunch for the family  
and fun activities.*

**Oct. 14–16 (all day)**  
North Bay Stand Down  
Dixon Fairgrounds, Dixon  
nbstanddown.org

**Nov. 11**  
Veterans Day Ceremony  
Sacramento VA Medical Center  
*More information to follow*

# Access Update



*VA is posting regular data updates to employees and the public that show progress in our efforts to accelerate access to quality health care for Veterans who have been waiting for appointments.*

## Access Report for VA Northern California Health Care System

Average prospective wait times:

- **Primary Care:** 39 days for a new patient and 3 days for an established patient.
- **Specialty Care:** 42 days for a new patient and 7 days for an established patient.
- **Mental Health:** 34 days for a new patient and 2 days for an established patient.

Why does it take longer for new patients to get an appointment than it does for established patients?

- Physicians allocate more appointment time to review new patient health history.

## Progress in Veterans' Access to Care

- Last year, our ten community-based outpatient clinics (CBOC) treated more than 89,600 unique Veterans and provided more than 1,179,400 outpatient visits.
- As of July 15, 2014, we have 63,399 appointments scheduled in our health system.
- When VA Northern California Health Care System started the accelerated access initiative in May, we had 2,414 Veterans waiting to be scheduled for an appointment; as of July 21, 2014, we have 267 people waiting to be scheduled. As of July, we have reduced our electronic wait list (EWL) by 85 percent.
- In June, the NEAR List was at 1,594; in late July, there were only 14 patients on the list. This list is worked on daily.



**New Enrollee Appointment Request (NEAR) List:** The total number of newly enrolled Veterans who have asked for an appointment during the enrollment process.

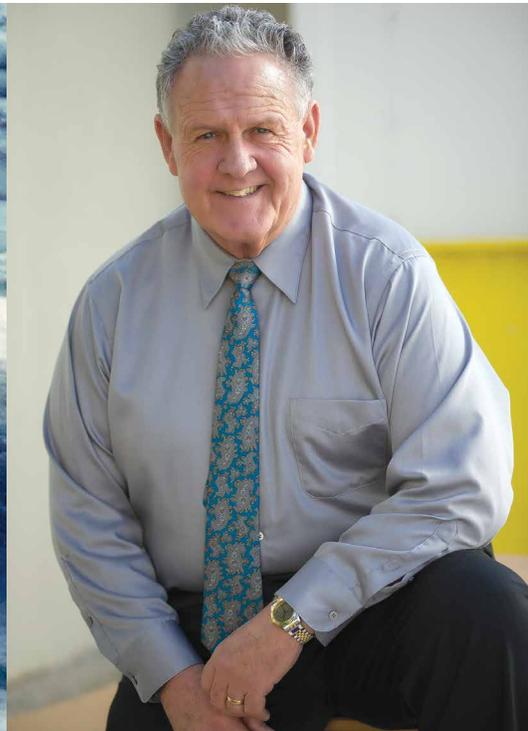
**Electronic Wait List (EWL) Count:** The total number of all new patients (those who have not been seen in the specific clinic in the previous 24 months) for whom appointments cannot be scheduled in 90 days or less.

**Total Appointments Scheduled:** Every appointment scheduled at the facility except surgery and medical procedures.

## How Are We Reducing This Wait List?

- Before May, our health care system scheduled our patients only 30 days out for their appointments in order to reduce the no-show rates. We have adjusted that model and now are scheduling 90 days out for non-urgent issues.
- We have extended night and weekend hours at our clinics. We are increasing clinic time for part-time and fee-based providers, overbooking patients, sending patients for non-VA care and using non-traditional approaches, such as group clinics and telehealth.

# They Went, They Survived They Are



**T**he effects of the war in Vietnam, along with the treatment that soldiers endured when they returned home, have been long-lasting and difficult to overcome for many. But those who face these challenges often end up being the best advocates for other Veterans.

American forces were directly involved in the Vietnam War between 1965 and 1973. In January 1968, the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong launched the massive Tet Offensive. During this time, America's negative public opinion peaked and turned against the war efforts and troop morale also hit an all-time low. In 1973, a cease-fire was signed, but by that time 58,000 soldiers had been killed, 153,000 had been wounded and 1,948 were missing in action. Additionally, 5 million acres of mangrove and upland forest had been defoliated with 12 million gallons of Agent Orange.

Two of our Vietnam Veterans, Richard Grace and Chris Lambert, sat down with us to talk about their experiences at war—and why they decided to help others here at the VA.

*Historical photos in this edition are courtesy of Richard Grace and Chris Lambert.*

# ved, Here to Help

*Q&A with Vietnam Veterans  
Richard Grace and  
Chris Lambert*

## **Remembering Vietnam**

Grace had completed Pathfinder training and was stationed at Bien Hoa Army/Air Base as part of the First Cavalry Division, 229th Assault Helicopter Battalion, Headquarters, Headquarters Company. He and his teammates were responsible for air traffic control and communications. Because his duty was on base, he sometimes had to use his weapon to protect the perimeter, but he never knew what he hit because of the dense tree line surrounding the base.

"For all I know, I never hit anything when I shot my weapon," said Grace. But one night there was one arc light strike that hit seven miles away that was so intense it shook him out of bed. Grace and some other heavily armed men were sent to the area to clean up. "The whole place was torn up—it was deathly quiet and surreal," he recalls. "The level of destruction was mind-boggling. We were out looking for bodies but we could not count how many we found because they weren't all intact. It disturbed me so much that I got sick, which made the Sergeant mad. I can't forget it. Three hours later, I was back in my unit eating lunch in the chow hall and just shaking. I'd never seen or smelled anything like that before or since."

Lambert joined the U.S. Marine Corps and trained in San Diego and was then sent to Infantry Training Regiment. By January 31, 1968, he was in country—just as the Tet Offensive in Hue City was launched. On a bridge just south of Phu Bai, he and about 50 men were overrun. During that fight, he was wounded twice. "That second wound almost killed me," he says. "I was in the hospital in Danang for a while because they had to wait for my eardrum to heal before sending me in again. Four months later I got wounded again in an ambush—so I was sent home."

## **Leaving Vietnam**

Grace remembers that everyone had a countdown calendar and they would color in each day until it was filled. "The first and last weeks were the hardest on your nerves, but the rest of the time you were just numb."

Lambert recalls that when he was getting ready to leave a part of him was really happy. "But there was this other part that just felt like I was leaving my buddies behind," he says. "In the picture (bottom of page 5) all the other guys are getting ready to go back and fight, but I was getting ready to leave for home...it was a tough day. When I landed in Japan, I had this realization that I no longer had to worry about mortars landing on me because I was safe; but even knowing that, I never could sleep peacefully again."

## **The Battle Inside**

"We weren't treated very well back home," Grace says. "People knew you were military because of the buzz cut and sometimes you would use military jargon without realizing it. I learned not to go to parties because once someone identified you as a Vietnam Veteran, there would be a fight. People really had the idea that the soldiers were the criminals in that war, and they did not want you around. I was very careful not to mention the war. My hair was growing out so it was harder to tell that I was in the military, and that was a good thing. But I could not hide the fact that I was upset."

Although there were negative comments and disrespect, Grace, his Army buddy and a small group of Vietnam Vets would march in the San Jose Veterans Day Parade every year. He says that from the time the war was over until about 1985, Vietnam Veterans were something to scorn, they were not wanted—they were like lepers, to



*Continued on next page*

which he adds, "It really sucked." Things slowly got better, but then, in 2003, something really changed.

"I don't know exactly why," says Grace, "but people started cheering when Vietnam Vets marched down the parade route." And that same year, at the dedication ceremony for building 700 at Sacramento VA Medical Center, when Grace and his group marched into the event, the crowd went wild for them. Since then he has felt a lot better.

Lambert learned not to mention the war as well. He says, "I didn't tell anybody that I went to Vietnam, because it wasn't the right thing to say—it was just better not to say

anything. The people who knew would ask how many people I killed or what it felt like. When I got home, any kind of conflict I had with anyone would enrage me. It didn't matter how minor something was because I could not be reasonable about it and I kept that anger with me for years. For 12 years I self-medicated with alcohol and drugs, until I woke up and realized I did not want my kids to see me as a drunk. They needed me to be a father and their caregiver—so I started the process to heal."

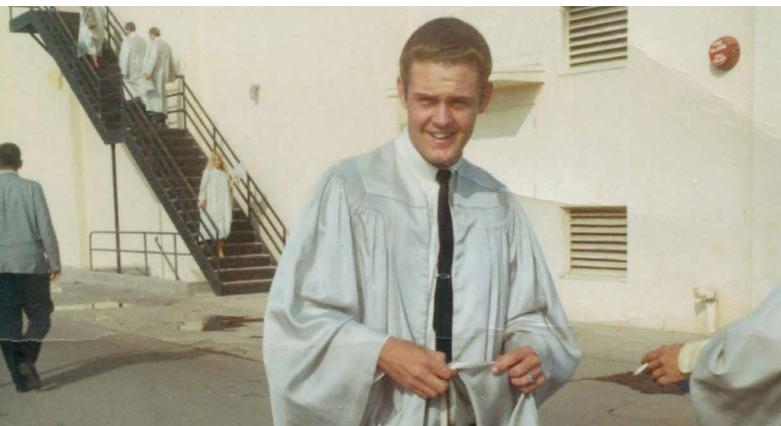
"Once our soul is wounded, it is hard to see the world as a safe place again. It has taken me years to trust people enough so that I can just have a conversation with someone. It took me until I was about 50 years old to acquire the social skills that an average person has at 25. I used to battle the war every day but I have learned to use that experience to find happiness in what I have. I know that I will eat a great meal today and I know that I can sleep in a bed instead of a rice paddy."

"But it took a long time to see things that way. When you look at the war as a victim, you really go downhill. When I fought the war, I was a patriot. Now that I survived the war and I can really appreciate what I have, I am a better patriot—I can help others. My motivation in life is made up of Vietnam and my family. They both keep me doing good things."

### **Helping Today's Veterans**

Grace is now Technical Director of Pulmonary Services at Mather. He says, "I've been here working with our Veterans for 28 years now and I couldn't have had a better life. There is nothing that I would have wanted to do more than to support the Veterans—all of them—because every time I see that sign that says 'All gave some, some gave all' it almost brings a tear to my eye."

Lambert is a volunteer with the Chaplain's Office at Sacramento VA Medical Center. He says, "I made a statement at the Purple Heart Monument about how we spend six months to a year training people to kill, and I would like to create a 30-day period after battle in which the soldiers stay together and start the healing process. I always say there are no victims, only volunteers. I know that the process has to start Veteran-to-Veteran because we don't trust anybody else. My dad died of PTSD because he was never able to deal with his war. If you leave combat untreated, it grows. So, I am here to do what I can for any Vet who needs help and is ready to start the process to recovery."



# Veterans' Conditions Associated with Agent Orange



**D**uring the Vietnam War, U.S. soldiers were exposed to millions of gallons of Agent Orange (AO) and other herbicides sprayed on vegetation in war zones. Several decades later, concerns about the health effects from these chemicals continue.

Veterans who served in Vietnam between 1962 and 1975, or in parts of Korea or Thailand around the same time, may be eligible for the AO exam. There are other potential sources of exposure, which you should discuss when requesting an exam. If you believe that you were exposed and you want to know more, call the number on the right or tell your primary care doctor that you want an AO exam. You will get a packet to fill out; please bring it to the exam with you. If you were exposed to chemical agents and have one of the conditions listed on the right, please go directly to the Compensation and Pension Program—no exam needed.

If you were exposed, were not dishonorably discharged and have one or more of the long-term health issues listed below, you, your children and your spouse may be eligible for different types of compensation.

Fourteen diseases associated with AO exposure:

- AL Amyloidosis
- Chronic B-cell Leukemias
- Chloracne and other similar acneform disease
- Diabetes Mellitus Type 2
- Hodgkin's Disease
- Ischemic Heart Disease
- Multiple Myeloma
- Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma
- Parkinson's Disease
- Peripheral Neuropathy (Early Onset)
- Porphyria Cutanea Tarda
- Prostate Cancer
- Respiratory Cancers (Including Lung Cancer)
- Soft Tissue Sarcomas

Additionally, VA presumes that certain birth defects in the children of Vietnam and Korea Veterans are associated with qualifying military service.

If you believe you were exposed, please call 925-372-2000 and request an exam, or visit [www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/agentorange](http://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/agentorange)

For the Compensation and Pension Program, please call 707-562-8260.

To subscribe to web updates on the issue, visit [www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/agentorange](http://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/agentorange)

If you would like more information about current research, please visit [www.warrelatedillness.va.gov](http://www.warrelatedillness.va.gov)

# Healthy Recipes!

## Black Bean Salsa

Yield: 12 servings

### Ingredients

- 2 (15 oz.) cans black beans, rinsed and drained
- 2 (15 oz.) cans whole kernel corn, rinsed and drained
- 2 large tomatoes, seeded and diced
- 1 small onion, diced
- ¼ cup chopped fresh cilantro leaves
- 2 Tbsp lime juice
- 1 Tbsp red wine vinegar
- Dash of pepper
- Optional: Add avocado or any color bell pepper for an extra twist!

### Preparation

1. Mix all ingredients thoroughly in a large bowl.
2. Cover and chill overnight.
3. Taste and add pepper or more lime juice as needed.
4. Serve with tortilla chips or grilled chicken as a meal!



Nutrition information (per serving):  
Calories: 62 kcals; Protein: 3g; Carbohydrate: 16g;  
Fat: 1g; Fiber: 2g; Sodium: 44mg  
Courtesy of the VA Yummy Benefits Cookbook



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

My Health, My Care: 24/7 <sup>Online</sup> Access to VA

### Connect with VA Northern California Health Care System

Valley Division—Sacramento VA Medical Center  
Includes Redding, Yreka, Yuba City, Chico and McClellan  
Outpatient Clinics

10535 Hospital Way  
Mather, CA 95655  
916-843-7000 | 800-382-8387

East Bay Division—Martinez Outpatient Clinic  
Includes Fairfield, Oakland and Mare Island Clinics

150 Muir Road  
Martinez, CA 94553  
925-372-2000 | 800-382-8387

### VETSCONnect

800-382-8387 Mon–Fri 7 a.m.–6 p.m.

Appointment scheduling and answers to your questions about health, eligibility and benefits are just a phone call away through VETSCONnect, our friendly, convenient and easy-to-use telephone care program.

Call to make, change or cancel an appointment.

### Prescription Refills

We offer several fast, easy and convenient ways for patients to refill their prescriptions.

Automated Telephone Refill System: 1-866-600-VARX (1-866-600-8279) Toll-Free

Order refills or check on the status of your prescriptions by calling our automated telephone refill system.

- Have your full nine-digit Social Security Number (SSN) ready
- Have the prescription number(s) from your most recent prescription bottle or package
- Be sure we have your correct address and phone number
- Have a pen and paper ready to write down information

Available 7:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., Monday through Friday, excluding federal holidays.