

THE northern

The Official Voice of VA Northern California Health Care System

2018: A Year of Progress and Emergency Response for
VA Northern California Health Care System
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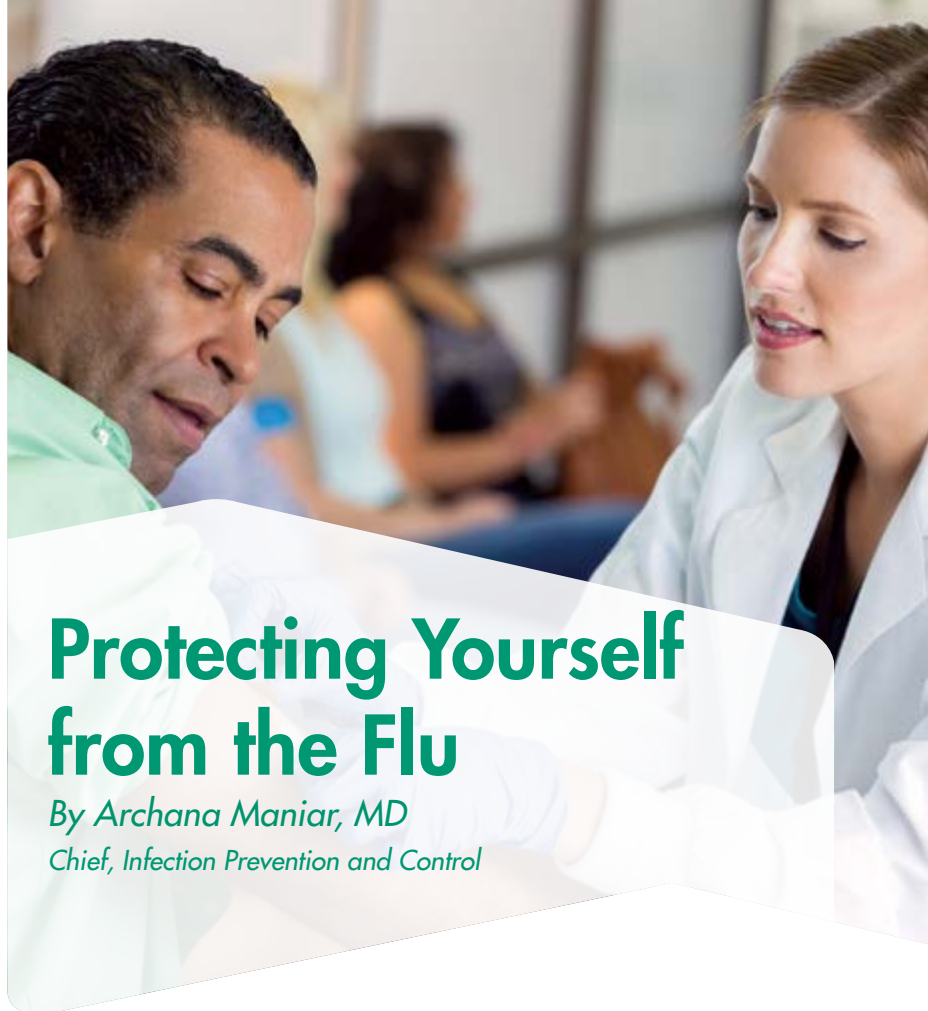
VA Northern California
HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

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William Martin Chief Public Affairs Officer
Jon-Nolan Paresa Publisher/Photographer
Darren Ebbing Webmaster/Graphic Design
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Protecting Yourself from the Flu

By Archana Maniar, MD

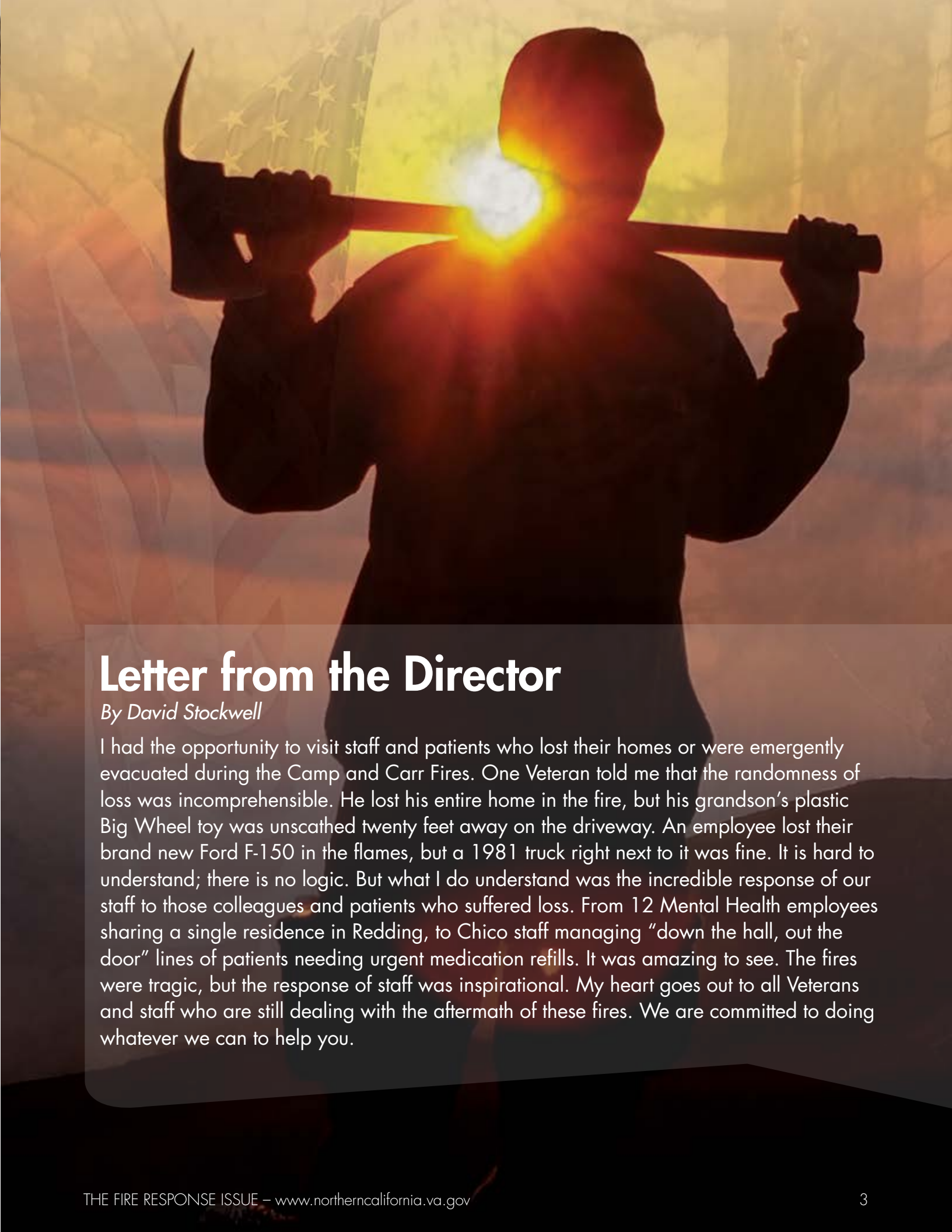
Chief, Infection Prevention and Control

In California, flu season begins ramping up in December. Throughout this season, it is important to be aware of the symptoms of influenza and to take measures to protect yourself and your loved ones.

Symptoms of flu include fever, sore throat, cough, headaches, muscle aches, and fatigue. The illness usually lasts five to seven days. Flu typically does not cause runny nose, nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea. Some symptoms, such as cough, can mimic those caused by smoke from the recent fires in Northern California. However, people with the flu usually have one or more of the other symptoms listed above.

The best way to protect yourself from the flu is to get your flu vaccine. Wash your hands frequently or use hand sanitizer to kill germs. Cover your cough with a tissue or use a mask to avoid spreading germs. If you have flu symptoms, please see your doctor.





Letter from the Director

By David Stockwell

I had the opportunity to visit staff and patients who lost their homes or were emergently evacuated during the Camp and Carr Fires. One Veteran told me that the randomness of loss was incomprehensible. He lost his entire home in the fire, but his grandson's plastic Big Wheel toy was unscathed twenty feet away on the driveway. An employee lost their brand new Ford F-150 in the flames, but a 1981 truck right next to it was fine. It is hard to understand; there is no logic. But what I do understand was the incredible response of our staff to those colleagues and patients who suffered loss. From 12 Mental Health employees sharing a single residence in Redding, to Chico staff managing "down the hall, out the door" lines of patients needing urgent medication refills. It was amazing to see. The fires were tragic, but the response of staff was inspirational. My heart goes out to all Veterans and staff who are still dealing with the aftermath of these fires. We are committed to doing whatever we can to help you.

2018: A Year of Progress and Emergency Response for VA Northern California Health Care System

By William Martin and Nastassia Sitze

VA Northern California Health Care System Public Affairs

VA Northern California Health Care System (VA NorCal) clinics and employees responded to two massive wildfires in 2018 and achieved strong marks in several health care quality measurements, marking it as a year of significant progress and rapid emergency response for VA NorCal.

WILDFIRES

Comprising nearly 4,000 employees across more than 44,000 square miles, VA NorCal serves more than 110,000 Veterans enrolled across its 11 facilities. In 2018, two of those VA NorCal facilities were directly impacted by massive wildfires.

The Carr Fire burned 229,651 acres across Shasta and Trinity Counties throughout July and August, displacing hundreds of Veterans and VA NorCal employees belonging to the Redding VA Outpatient Clinic (OPC).

The Redding OPC staff took several steps to better serve the approximately 11,000 Veterans who use the clinic each year, including partnering with the Redding community to deploy a Mobile Vet Center to the Local Assistance Center at Shasta High School. Staffed with three social workers, a registered nurse, and a program support assistant, the Mobile Vet Center provided services to 23 Veterans in the first hour alone. In addition, VA NorCal established regular shuttle services

between local evacuation sites and the Redding OPC to serve those Veterans lacking transportation.

“The VA NorCal staff in Redding set a standard in their commitment to local Veterans,” said VA NorCal Director David Stockwell. “Despite personal loss in many cases, they managed to not only keep open the Outpatient Clinic’s doors, but travel deep into the community to ensure that displaced Veterans received the care they needed and deserved.”

Only a few months later—heading into Veterans Day weekend—the Camp Fire, the deadliest and most destructive fire in California history, destroyed the town of Paradise and much of the Butte County region. Within hours of learning of the fire, VA NorCal deployed Mobile Vet Centers, nursing and social work evacuation teams, pharmacy representatives, and Dual-Use Vehicles to its clinics and evacuation shelters to provide health care and emergency support to Veterans.



Photos courtesy of the California National Guard



“The health care needs of our Veterans don’t stop during an emergency, so having VA clinics embedded in nearby communities was critical to our response,” said Dr. Regina Godbout, VA NorCal Deputy Chief of Staff. “We deployed resources from VA clinics across Northern California to our clinics in Chico and Yuba City, as well as nearby evacuation centers, to ensure that our Veterans have access to life-saving medications and other emergency assistance.”

To ensure air quality inside its clinics, VA NorCal placed HEPA filters throughout its facilities in Chico, Yuba City, and the East Bay. HEPA air purifiers force interior air through a fine mesh, preventing Veterans and staff from breathing in harmful particles. Because smoke from the Camp Fire traveled across Northern California—impacting communities as far away as the East Bay and Sacramento—VA NorCal also delivered air filtration masks to its clinics for distribution to Veterans and staff.

Critical to both wildfire response efforts was the role of VA NorCal social workers. Using strengths-based and solution-focused approaches, VA social workers were integral in directing and connecting Veterans to basic resources such as food, shelter, clothing, and medical care.

Veterans also benefited from having their story heard so that they could better process an emergency incident like the Camp or Carr Fires. By providing initial crisis mental health support, VA social workers helped Veterans improve coping and resilience skills that will contribute to their recovery in the wake of the fires, and for the future as well. These skills include improving sleep, self-care skills, healthy ways to cope with stress, and problem solving.

“Both these fires tested the skill and resolve of our employees, not only in Chico and Redding, but across the VA NorCal Health Care System,” said Godbout. “More than 40 percent of VA NorCal employees are Veterans, and that was apparent in the speed and focus of our response. We reached out to each of our Veterans in the impacted areas and deployed personnel

and resources to community shelters across Northern California. The response was a shining example of local, state, and federal agencies coming together to support Veterans when they needed us most.”

HIGH MARKS

VA NorCal and the wider VA experienced a series of positive evaluations regarding the quality of health care it provided to Veterans in 2018.

An independent Dartmouth College study published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* in December 2018 concluded that VA hospitals outperform private hospitals in health care markets across the nation. Dartmouth researchers assessed 121 regional health care markets with at least one VA facility and one non-VA hospital together with data from Hospital Compare, a public database that ranks hospitals on quality measures like mortality rates and patient safety indicators.

According to the findings, VA hospitals provided the best care in most regions and rarely provided inadequate care. One of the study’s most notable findings indicated that VA hospitals were the best or above average for treating heart attacks, heart failure, and pneumonia. In addition, VA ranked best in local markets at least half of the time for measures including death rates among patients with serious complications after surgery, collapsed lung due to medical treatment, broken hip from a fall after surgery, and bloodstream infections after surgery.

“This is proof that the hard work and dedication of our VA employees is making a real difference in the lives of our nation’s Veterans,” said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. “[We’re] giving our heroes the very best quality of care that they have earned through their faithful service to our country.”

Also in 2018, a VA customer experience survey revealed an average 2.4 percent increase in Veteran trust of VA hospitals during Fiscal Year (FY) 2018. When asked if they trust the VA, 86.4 percent of Veterans responded with “agree” or “strongly agree.” Locally,

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Deputy Chief of Staff Regina Godbout, MD, assisting a Veteran during the Camp Fire in Paradise, California.



Medications and Disasters: What to Do?

By Steven W. Samuels, PharmD

PGY1 Pharmacy Resident

Natural disasters like fires, floods, and earthquakes can cause anxiety and worry for Veterans and their families. Veterans can prepare early to prevent medications from becoming another stressor during natural disasters.

Veterans who need medication refills should call the VA Northern California Health Care System Pharmacy Service line at **1-866-600-8279**, or stop by any VA outpatient pharmacy. Trained pharmacy staff can ensure that prescriptions get to temporary addresses, provide temporary supply of medicines, and share advice.

If a natural disaster occurs, usually the president, governor, or secretary of Health and Human Services will declare an emergency or disaster. In this case, Veterans unable to access mail or nearby VA outpatient pharmacies can potentially receive emergency medicine supplies from local pharmacies under California law. Several state and federal agencies provide additional information, including: the Federal Emergency Management Agency at [FEMA.gov](https://www.fema.gov) or **1-800-621-3362 (TTY 1-800-462-7585)**, state websites like [CA.gov](https://www.ca.gov), and Public Health Emergency resources at [PHE.gov](https://www.phe.gov). The Poison Control hotline **1-800-222-1222** is another expert resource.

Sources:

1. Getting Medical Care & Prescription Drugs in a Disaster or Emergency Area. <https://www.medicare.gov/Pubs/pdf/11377-Care-Drugs-Disaster-Emergency.pdf>
2. Safe Drug Use After a Natural Disaster. <https://www.fda.gov/Drugs/EmergencyPreparedness/ucm085200.htm>
3. Emergency Preparedness – Keeping Medications Safe (Feb 2016). <https://www.fda.gov/Drugs/ResourcesForYou/HealthProfessionals/ucm486286.htm>
4. California Poison Control System. <https://calpoison.org/>
5. California State Board of Pharmacy Lawbook. https://www.pharmacy.ca.gov/laws_regs/lawbook.pdf

Taking medications can be confusing or difficult during disasters. In most cases, if a dose of a medicine is missed, **do not** take extra to make up for the missed dose (known as “doubling up” on a dose). Ask a pharmacist or other health care provider what to do. This is especially important for medications like insulin or blood thinners, which could be harmful if taken incorrectly.

Inspect medications and consider replacing if they were exposed to heat from a fire or unsafe water. Keep an up-to-date list of medications, including dose and indicated use. Have ice available for refrigerated medications like insulin during electricity loss or travel. Lastly, have bottled water to use for powdered medicines that require mixing.

The VA, government agencies, pharmacists, and other health care providers are excellent resources to help you know what to do with medications in any disaster.



It Starts with Preparedness

By Anne Di Candido Griffin, MS

In the wake of the devastating Camp Fire, many of us are asking ourselves, “Is it possible to prepare for an event of the size and scope of the Camp Fire?”

Absolutely! FEMA, through its www.ready.gov website and free preparedness publications, recommends a three-step process: **Build a kit; Make a plan; Be informed.**

Individuals and families can build disaster preparedness kits for their homes, vehicles, and offices. A basic emergency supply kit usually contains enough non-perishable food and water to last 72 hours, first aid items, extra prescription medications, spare eyeglasses, diapers, protective gear, and anything else that an individual or family might need, if a natural or human-caused disaster requires you to evacuate your home. It is a good idea to have smaller versions of each kit for your vehicle or office. Remember that not all of the survivors of the Camp Fire were at home when the fire forced them to evacuate Paradise, California. The [ready.gov](http://www.ready.gov) website and FEMA’s pre-printed materials contain helpful checklists for building emergency supply kits. A number of private companies also sell pre-assembled kits.

Your kit should also contain a copy of your individual or family emergency plan. A typical plan highlights evacuation routes out of the community where you live or work and addresses your preferred method for receiving emergency alerts and notifications. Your plan should also indicate a family meeting place post-evacuation. It is important to establish a few alternate meeting places far outside your community in case your primary meeting place becomes inaccessible as a result of a disaster. Another critical communication component of the plan is establishing family/household points of contact inside your community, outside your community and even out of state, if possible. Should you become separated from your loved ones following a disaster,

you will appreciate having pre-arranged to call someone far outside the affected area to communicate your whereabouts and condition. Here again, the [ready.gov](http://www.ready.gov) website and FEMA publications contain useful templates for developing all aspects of your plan.

Knowledge is power. Being informed means learning about the disasters and hazards that might affect your area and the emergency alert systems available in your community. Your local Office of Emergency Management, [ready.gov](http://www.ready.gov), and the FEMA materials are great resources as you begin your learning journey. If you do not have internet access, all of the FEMA publications mentioned in this article are available by calling **1-(800) BE-READY (1-800-237-3239)**, or by writing to FEMA Distribution Center, 4440 Buckeystown Pike, Frederick, MD 21704. Materials are free, but please allow four to six weeks for shipping.

If your community experiences a natural or human-caused disaster, you will be thankful that you built a kit, made a plan, and became informed. You also need to know that it is imperative to register with FEMA at www.DisasterAssistance.gov or by calling **1-(800) 321-FEMA (1-800-621-3362)**. Don’t assume you won’t be eligible for FEMA assistance. Many who have suffered property damage, loss of employment, or other adverse effects are pleasantly surprised to find that they qualify for some type of disaster relief assistance.

Disasters are survivable, but preparation is key. **Please prepare.**

FEEL FREE TO TAKE THIS MAGAZINE HOME!

2018: A Year of Progress and Emergency Response for VA Northern California Health Care System (cont.)

VA NorCal Veterans exceeded the national average with an 88 percent trust score in FY 2018.

Furthermore, the VA ranked sixth out of 17 federal government agencies in the Partnership for Public Service's annual "Best Places to Work" report. The No. 6 ranking marks a dramatic improvement over 2017, when the VA ranked 17th out of 18 organizations listed that year in the independent review.

"These indicators are confirmation of what those of us serving Veterans every day across Northern California already know: VA NorCal is headed in the right direction," said Director Stockwell. "While our focus isn't on honors or recognition, we are encouraged that the data shows we're realizing our goal of providing high-quality, compassionate health care to Veterans each day."

LOOKING AHEAD

Bigger and better VA facilities will be a prominent theme in the coming year, as a new VA clinic will open in Chico, and VA NorCal will break ground for a new clinic in Redding in 2019. The new Chico VA Outpatient Clinic will serve more than 9,000 Veterans when it opens in April 2019. At approximately 42,000 square feet on seven acres of property, it will be roughly twice the size of the current Chico clinic. The new Redding VA Outpatient Clinic will be a 77,000-square-foot facility, and will replace the current 48,000-square-foot clinic. This clinic will open to Shasta and Trinity County Veterans in mid-2021.

Other VA NorCal priorities for the coming year include expanding telehealth capabilities so that any Veteran who has access to a computer, tablet, or smartphone can conduct a virtual appointment with their VA NorCal provider, thus increasing the number of Veterans who use VA NorCal Mental Health services; implementing a lifesaving lung cancer screening program; and reducing wait times for consults and other medical engagements to ensure more timely access to health care services for Northern California's Veterans.



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

To register, please call Kristi Scott, My HealthVet Coordinator, at 916-843-7119 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