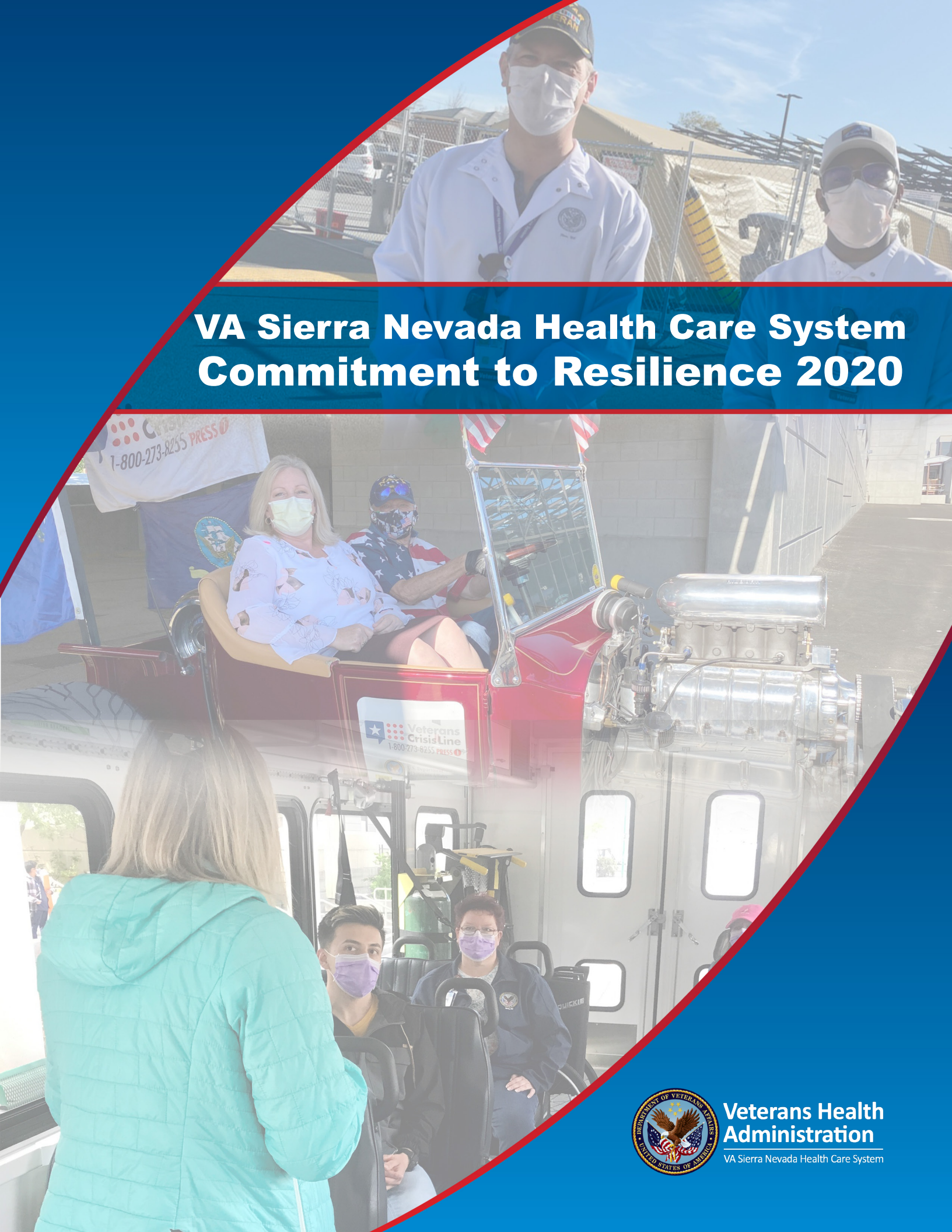
VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System
Commitment to Resilience 2020



Veterans Health Administration
VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System

Letter from the Director

Lisa Howard, Director

Commitment to Resilience

A short year ago, we at VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System (VASNHCS) could not have imagined how the year 2020 would challenge each of us. Our staff has learned what we are made of, what we can manage, and how resilient we are, individually and as a team. Health care throughout our nation has been tested in a historic manner. Pandemics seem so foreign to our modern way of life. Yet, here we are, moving through each day while fearlessly continuing VA's mission to serve and care for those who have "borne the battle."

Living and working through a global health crisis has helped us identify what is most important in our lives. Our family, our work family, and of course, our straightforward commitment to healing Veterans does not always translate to easy, though, and that is where VASNHCS' resilience shined as the best in health care. I could not be more proud of my staff and our Veterans in northern Nevada and northeastern California. Committing to resilience has allowed us to face the stress of the unknown future, move forward daily and keep our Veterans safe from the coronavirus.

VASNHCS has shown flexibility in how we deliver health care, and Veterans of all ages have adjusted from face-to-face appointments to virtual appointments with overarching and amazing ease. While we have offered telehealth options for many years, it has been the 2020 pandemic that has presented the opportunity to expand virtual appointments in ways that, a year ago, we could not have imagined. For care that must be delivered face-to-face, VASNHCS implemented robust infection control procedures, such as clinical screening, physical distancing and in-house COVID-19 testing to sustain high quality care.

VASNHCS staff in every department have been critical to our resilience and flexibility. From our Facilities Management Service staff who, in a few short weeks, converted a new and nearly completed Intensive Care Unit to the only negative-pressure COVID-19 Isolation Unit of its kind in northern Nevada, to our Environmental Management Service and housekeeping staff who exceeded cleaning requirements to assure no infectious disease or virus could survive, and our clinical staff supporting entrance screening, in-house COVID-19 testing and isolation areas, our staff demonstrated VA's core values on a daily basis.

Our stakeholders and community have demonstrated resilience, as well. Words of support and gratitude from Veteran groups and members of our community to VA staff have been overwhelming and my gratitude to each of them leaves me at a loss for adequate words.

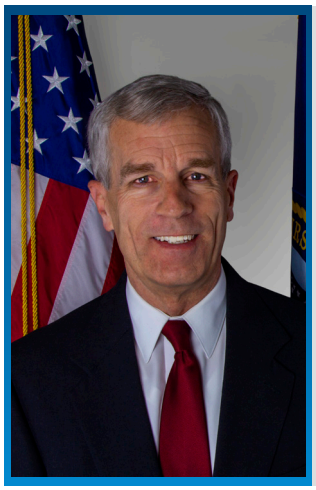
What have we learned from 2020? VASNHCS learned VA staff, our community stakeholders and especially our Veterans are champions. As we continue administering a COVID-19 vaccine that will allow us to return to a life free from pandemic, our resilience would never have been made apparent had our measure not been tested. I am grateful to all VASNHCS staff for their dedication and commitment for without them, our achievements would not have been possible. To our Veterans, because of the changes in delivery of their health care this year, VASNHCS remains humbled by their military sacrifices and their ability to flex. ***Safe Care*** is our mission.

Lisa Howard

Executive Leadership Team

Lisa Hamilton, Deputy Director

Sensitivity to Operations reflects continuous improvement in systems and processes ensuring patient care is never compromised. We accomplish this through maintaining high standards, having trust and respect for each other, and staying attentive to frontline operations. Patient safety is our primary focus.



Jack Smith, Associate Director

One of the ways that we implement the High Reliability Organization principles is through the use of the Just Culture decision tool. Rather than jumping to a conclusion or immediately assigning individual blame when a mistake or accident happens, we follow a structured investigative process. This process helps determine whether there were systemic issues (e.g. training, process, culture, etc.) that significantly contributed to the incident or if it was a human error or deliberate action.

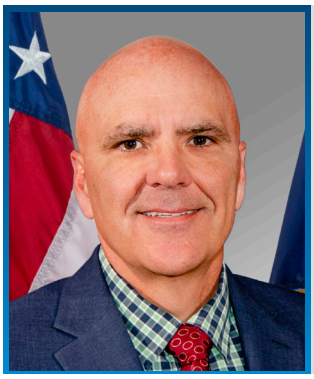
Amy Sanguinetti, MD, PhD, Chief of Staff

Reluctance to Simplify challenges the team to look for the root cause. By finding the root cause we protect ourselves from finding simple answers that may blame individuals and fail to correct the process. By slowing down and digging deeper we can identify the process that went wrong or a process that needs to be developed. By looking at processes we build psychological safety amongst staff and promote the culture of safety.

Executive Leadership Team

Maisha Moore, DNP, RN, CNL, NEA-BC, VHA-CM Nurse Executive

We exemplify Preoccupation with Failure by constantly seeking the answers to what unintended consequences may result from our decisions and proactively searching for our blind spots. We incorporate debriefs to problem solve critical incidents and, we start each morning with safety stories to highlight our opportunities to prevent harm.



Robert Kimmel, M.D. Deputy Chief of Staff

Deference to Expertise means that decisions and processes should be implemented after input and advice from those with expertise in that area. An "expert" might be someone with specialized training and skills. Or it might be a person without special training, but whose day to day job gives them detailed knowledge of the current state.

Beverly Johnson, MHA, BSN, RN Deputy Associate Director

By focusing on system failures, not the individual, we are better positioned to bounce back from mistakes and demonstrate Commitment to Resilience while ensuring the psychological safety of our workforce. We continually reinforce to staff members their duty to speak up when they have safety concerns, and we are resolved to be transparent about risks.

High Reliability Organization (HRO) Principles

Commitment to Resilience

We bounce back from mistakes, get back on track, and prevent those mistakes from happening again. It is a principle that enables us to constantly improve.

Preoccupation with Failure

We have a laser-sharp focus on catching errors before they happen. Rather than reacting to problems, HRO's focus on predicting and eliminating risks before they cause harm.

Reluctance to Simplify

We get to the root causes of a problem, rather than settling for simple explanations. HROs are committed to practicing, thinking and learning from all errors, whether they lead to a safety event or not.

VHA'S JOURNEY TO HIGH RELIABILITY

Your Care is Our Mission.

Sensitivy to Operations

We maintain consistent focus on front line staff and care processes. Leaders and staff members across all levels are mindful of all people, processes and systems that impact patient care.

Deference to Expertise

We empower and value expertise and diversity of perspectives and insights HROs rely on those with the most knowledge of a situation, regardless of rank, hierarchy, position.

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Organizational Direction

Who We Are

The Sierra Nevada Market provides primary and secondary care to 20 counties in northern Nevada and northeastern California with the largest population center around Reno, NV. The market is home to the Ioannis A. Lougaris VA Medical Center in Reno, five Community Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOC), with an additional six Other Outpatient Services (OOS) sites. Over 47,000 enrolled Veterans reside in the market, with 83% living within a 60-minute drive from the Reno VAMC.

Mission

Provide World Class Care and Service to America's Heroes

Strategic Goal

Provide Veterans Personalized, Proactive and Patient-Driven Health Care

Vision

We Are Next Level

Core Values

Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect and Excellence (ICARE)

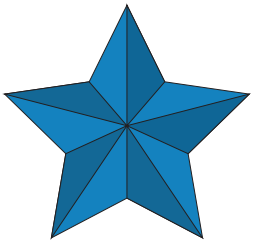
Organizational Direction

VA Strategic Priorities

Customer Service

The number one priority at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is customer service. VA will reaffirm its commitment to excellent customer service for all Veterans, Service members, their families, caregivers and survivors in the delivery of care and services. Interactions with stakeholders will result in a consistently positive experience in terms of ease, effectiveness and emotional resonance. Together, VA staff and volunteers will OWN THE MOMENT and make each encounter an opportunity to be supportive to those who have served and their families, caregivers and survivors.

MISSION Act Implementation



The VA Maintaining Internal Systems and Strengthening Integrated Outside Network (MISSION) Act of 2018 is the foundation that will fundamentally transform elements of VA's health care system while fulfilling the President's commitment to helping Veterans live healthy and fulfilling lives. The MISSION Act supports the creation of a health care system that will:

- Ensure easy and reliable access to the care Veterans need when they need it.
- Provide exceptional care to Veterans anytime, anywhere.
- Serve as a trusted, caring partner, helping Veterans and their families be healthy and well.

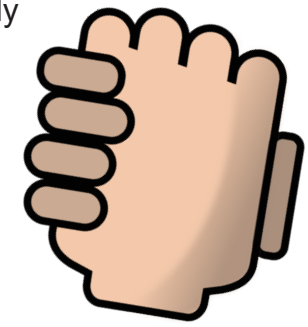
Their Voice

I am a retired surgeon who knows good medical care when I see it. I saw it at the Reno VA.

Business Transformation

VA is modernizing human resource management, finance and acquisition, as well as supply chain. Former VA Secretary Robert Wilkie gave medical centers more leeway to manage budgets and recruit, retain and relocate staff needed to serve Veterans. VA will also forge more robust partnerships with state and local communities to address challenges such as Veteran homelessness and suicide prevention.

VA/DoD Collaboration



VA will work collaboratively with the Department of Defense (DoD) to provide quality care for the Nation's Service members and Veterans. VA will adopt the same electronic health record as the DoD, creating a seamless transfer of medical information for Veterans leaving the Service.

Zero Harm: The Path Towards High Reliability

VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System (VASNHCS) has made tremendous strides on the journey towards high reliability health care, so much so that it operationalized the High Reliability Organization (HRO) Service in FY20. The service is supported by two registered nurses, two pharmacists, an innovation specialist and an administrative assistant. The team coordinates regular debrief sessions with staff after events such as intubations, code responses and COVID-19 patient admissions to identify opportunities to improve. HRO team members also round during service-level huddles to discuss ways to support HRO principles and the Just Culture framework through encouraging active and open dialogue.

In collaboration with Quality Management Service, the HRO team was trained to review patient safety reports, as well as participate in root cause analyses and deep dive safety event reviews culminating in the development and execution of robust action plans. Evidencing success of the health care system's focus on reporting safety concerns without fear of reprisal, the total number of Joint Patient Safety Reporting (JPSR) events jumped over 100% between FY19 Q1-Q3 and FY20 Q1-Q3 (from 1,135 to 2,273). To sustain this positive trend, HRO training was incorporated into our New Employee Welcome and New Supervisor Academy. Reinforcing a Culture of Safety, VASNHCS issued 15 Great Catch awards during the FY for spotting near misses.

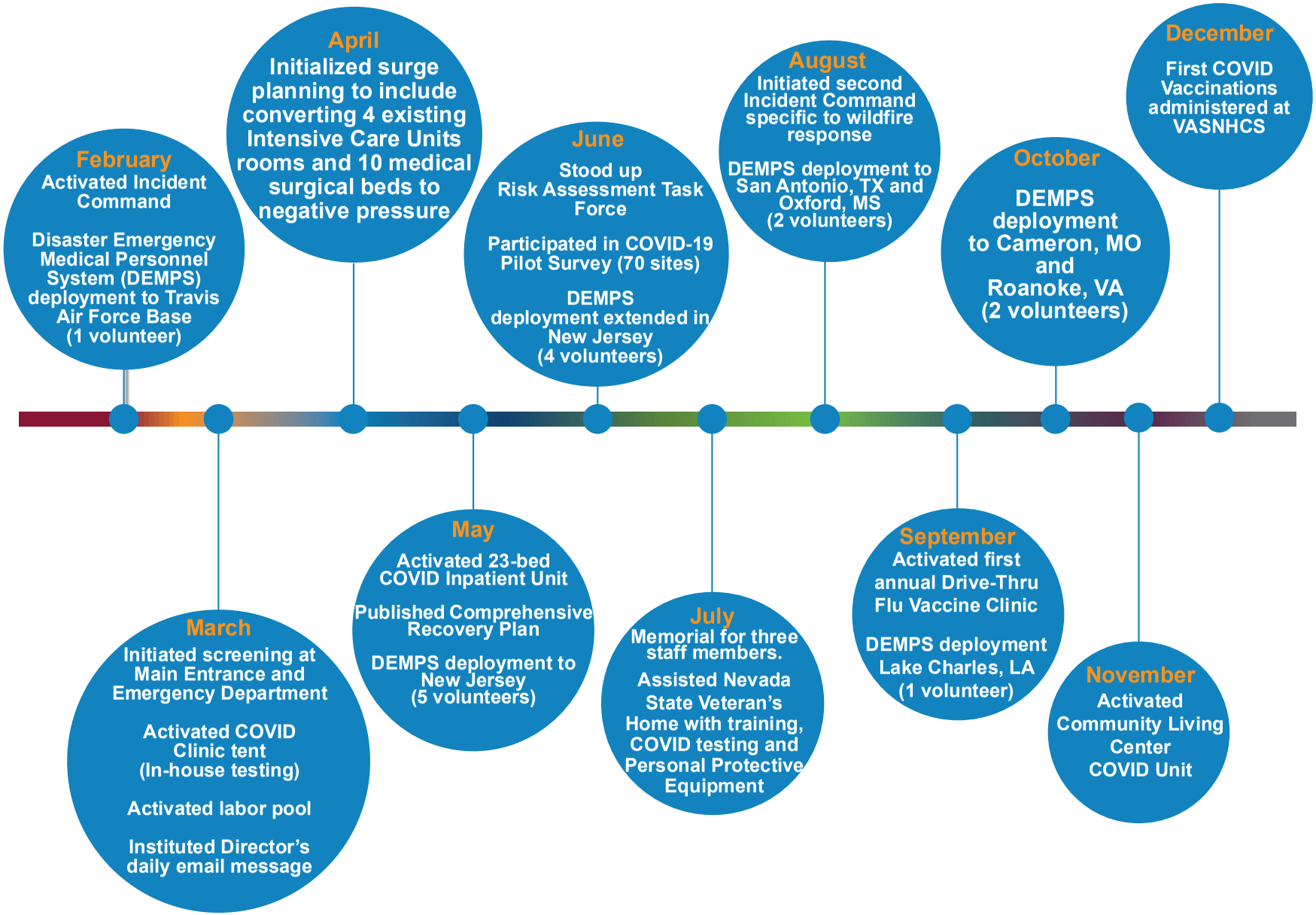
An exceptionally strong practice developed by the HRO Service during COVID-19 response, which personifies Preoccupation with Failure, centers around the locally developed Patient Room Monitor (PRM) program. PRMs are clinical staff members who lead, protect and guide others through the process of safely and correctly donning and doffing personal protective equipment (PPE) and observing the environment to ensure there are no breaches in infection control standards. Through August 2020, the PRMs observed 10,896 events of donning and doffing PPE during which time the medical center experienced zero cases of staff testing positive for COVID-19 due to taking care of a COVID-19 patient or patients possibly infected.

The biggest lesson we learned when opening up the COVID unit was you can't think of everything. We tried to envision every scenario, but when we opened, there were of course items we forgot. Simple day-to-day tasks that we do every day were overlooked at first.

- Kenneth Kavanaugh, MSN, RN, CCRN
Chief, Acute Care Nursing Service

Although FY20 was rife with setbacks, the COVID-19 pandemic served as a catalyst to propel VASNHCS many miles further along on the HRO Journey. Commitment to resiliency is defined by an organization's ability to bounce back from mistakes. The public health crisis afforded the organization many opportunities to learn and improve. At Incident Command meetings, service chiefs reflected on their COVID-19 experiences and shared poignant lessons learned. HRO Service collated the lessons learned, transformed each lesson into an actionable opportunity for improvement and aligned the actions with HRO principles. The COVID-19 HRO Lessons Learned Library was then shared with all VASNHCS staff, as well as nationally across the Veterans Health Administration.

2020 Timeline



Protective Gear Protects Lives

Alexis Starks, CLC RN (front), Garrett Trigero, ICU RN (left), Jennifer Woodman, Cath Lab RN (top) Amy Curry, MSU RN (right)

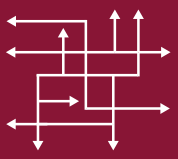
The COVID-19 pandemic has served as a stark reminder that the proper use of personal protective equipment (PPE) is vital to the safety of frontline health care workers. VASNHCS expanded PPE training during the pandemic to include advanced safety and isolation precautions. Due to national shortages of Powered Air Purifying Respirators (PAPRs) the medical center procured an alternative brand of PAPR not previously used. The PAPR is a type of respirator used to safeguard health care workers from airborne contaminants. Staff soon expressed concern about the PAPR shortly after it was put into operation, noting the new units were alarming - indicating a low airflow condition that potentially placed staff and Veterans at risk of COVID-19 exposure.

Employing the HRO principles of Preoccupation with Failure, Sensitivity to Operations and Reluctance to Simplify, staff from the High Reliability Service (HRS) worked alongside Infection Control, Biomed, Safety, and frontline staff to troubleshoot the failure. When the internal team was unable to resolve the issues, VASNHCS reached out to the manufacturer for guidance. The manufacturer tested the PAPRs and was unable to recreate the failure and declared the PAPRs safe to use. The HRS team continued to work with frontline staff who tested the PAPRs before putting them back in service. The PAPRs continued to alarm, indicating low airflow. The team did not give up and continued to push the manufacturer to either take the PAPRs back or identify and fix the problem. After several rounds of investigation, video conferences and returning the equipment to the manufacturer, the problem was identified: The faulty PAPRs had been calibrated to operate at sea level which did not consider the high altitude (close to 5,000 ft elevation) of Reno. The team's resilient efforts helped the manufacturer isolate the failure. By refusing to settle, the problem was corrected and new PAPRs were issued to staff. Utilizing HRO Principles, VASNHCS was able to ensure health care workers had an adequate supply of PAPRs and they could be confident the protective equipment they use is safe.

Demonstrated Values:

Preoccupation with Failure

Sensitivity to Operations



Reluctance to Simplify

Events in 2020

Flag Day - June 14:

Members of the Battle Born Patriots Chapter of the Sons of the American Revolution treated our Community Living Center Veterans with a parade of cars filled with family, friends and well-wishers. This was the first event after the COVID-19 pandemic began and provided the CLC residents a much needed chance to interact and exchange greetings with friends, family and community members. Veterans, staff and volunteers were thrilled to celebrate Flag Day and the 245th US Army birthday with this community-driven celebration.

Baby Shower - July 17:

With COVID-19 guidelines negating the ability to hold an annual in-person Veteran Baby Shower, cars full of expecting Veterans slowly made their way through a parking lot at VASNHCS as volunteers handed out diapers, blankets and other essential items during the first-ever Drive-Thru Veteran Baby Shower.

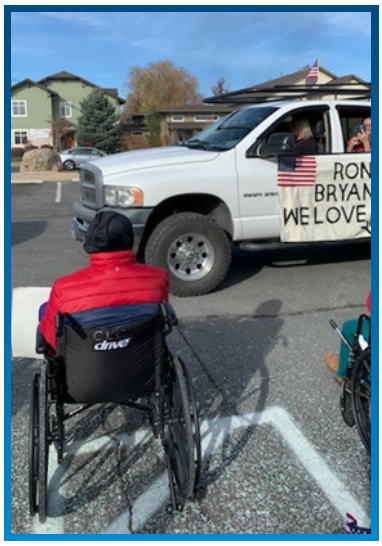
Though this year's event had no games or prizes, it offered many mothers and fathers a touching reminder that they are not alone. "They appreciated the thoughtfulness of the VA and the community donors to create a safe celebration for them," said VASNHCS Women Veteran Coordinator Frances Mahoney. "One mom-to-be, who does not have family nearby, felt that the hand-made baby blankets were especially heartfelt. She was in awe that someone had gone to the effort to make them, like family would do," added Frances.

Spartan Pledge Day - September 25:

"I will not take my own life by my own hand, until I talk to my Battle Buddy first. My mission is to find a mission to help my Warfighter family." Those are the words that fulfill the oath that is the Spartan Pledge, created by Army Veteran and author, Boone Cutler. Depression is the leading cause of Veteran suicide, and lack of community only increases that feeling. That's why Boone, rapper/entertainer Soldier Hard, and many others established the "Warfighter Community," a team of battle buddies that can always reach out to each other in times of need, guided by a shared oath.

Because of the coronavirus pandemic, this year's Spartan Pledge event at VASNHCS was held for the first time digitally, with less than 20 people in a room, including Boone, Soldier Hard, and Director Lisa Howard. The event streamed online for viewing by Veterans and staff from VA facilities across the country, including three other VA facilities in Ohio, Mississippi, and California who are adopting the Spartan Pledge.

Changes in the Community Living Center



The Community Living Center (CLC) is a Veteran's home and VASNHCS strives to create a healthy, homelike environment that focuses on the needs and preferences of the Veteran. Staff used creative strategies designed to keep residents connected and engaged while COVID-19 infection control requirements limited available space for interaction, leisure and recreation. Utilizing novel approaches, including CLC window visitation and creating a woodwork pen-spinning program, as well as facilitating virtual recreation activities such as integrated virtual reality, yoga, guitar lessons and the youth pen pal program, all helped improve quality of life for residents during pandemic response and recovery. As part of the VHA's smoke-free initiative, VASNHCS partnered with a local nursery and converted the CLC smoking shelter into a vibrant disability-accessible greenhouse and added gardening to the growing list of available resident activities.

To enhance patient safety and make the CLC more aesthetically pleasing, 63 new patient lifts were installed and all patient rooms received wood grain luxury vinyl flooring, new color schemes with fresh paint and upgraded furnishings to create a welcoming and relaxing environment. Additional renovations underway include removing institutional nursing stations, creating intimate resident dining areas, establishing a concierge desk at the new centralized CLC entrance and converting the recreation room into a functional multi-purpose space featuring a movie theater, den/computer area and dedicated activities zone. The bath area is also undergoing renovation to transform it into a spa-like setting. Each of these enhancements is congruent with the spirit of the VA small house model and reinforces person-centered care.

Notably, the CLC sustained a 5-Star rating from FY19 Q4 through FY20 Q4, earning 5-stars across-the-board in FY20 Q4, to include Unannounced Survey, Staffing and Quality. VASNHCS is proud to provide a home where residents can have the highest possible quality of life and receive the best quality care in a safe and comfortable environment.

Sites of Care

Ioannis A. Lougaris VA Medical Center

(main campus)
975 Kirman Avenue
Reno, NV, 89502
775-786-7200

The VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System serves tens of thousands of Veterans annually. Our dedicated staff are a testament to why our Veterans feel that this facility is the best VA they have ever experienced.

East Campus VA Clinic

1202 Corporate Blvd., Suite 100
Reno, NV, 89502
775-786-7200

- Nutrition
- Telehealth (Various Services)
- Mental Health
- Social Work
- Pharmacy (consultation)
- Womens Health
- Blood Draw
- Primary Care

Carson Valley VA Clinic

1330 Waterloo Lane, Suite 100
Gardnerville, NV, 89410
775-782-5265

- Nutrition
- Telehealth (Various Services)
- Mental Health
- Social Work
- Pharmacy (consultation)
- Womens Health
- Blood Draw
- Primary Care

Diamond View VA Clinic

110 Bella Way
Susanville, CA, 96130
530-251-4550

- Nutrition
- Telehealth (Various Services)
- Mental Health
- Social Work
- Pharmacy (consultation)
- Womens Health
- Blood Draw
- Primary Care

Lahontan Valley VA Clinic

1020 New River Parkway, Suite 304
Fallon, NV, 89406
775-428-5265

- Nutrition
- Telehealth (Various Services)
- Mental Health
- Social Work
- Pharmacy (consultation)
- Womens Health
- Blood Draw
- Primary Care

Current State

Winnemucca Rural
Outreach Clinic
3298 Traders Way
Winnemucca, NV, 89445
775-623-9575

- Nutrition
- Telehealth (Various Services)
- Mental Health
- Pharmacy (consultation)
- Womens Health
- Social Work

North Campus VA Clinic
1140 & 1170 Selmi Drive
Reno, NV, 89512
775-786-7200

- Nutrition
- Telehealth (Various Services)
- Mental Health
- Pharmacy (consultation)
- Womens Health
- Social Work

Capitol Hill
VA Homeless Clinic
350 Capitol Hill Ave, Reno, NV 89502
775-786-7200

The Capitol Hill Clinic in collaboration with federal and community partners, provides Veterans with housing solutions, employment opportunities, health care, justice- and reentry-related services and more.

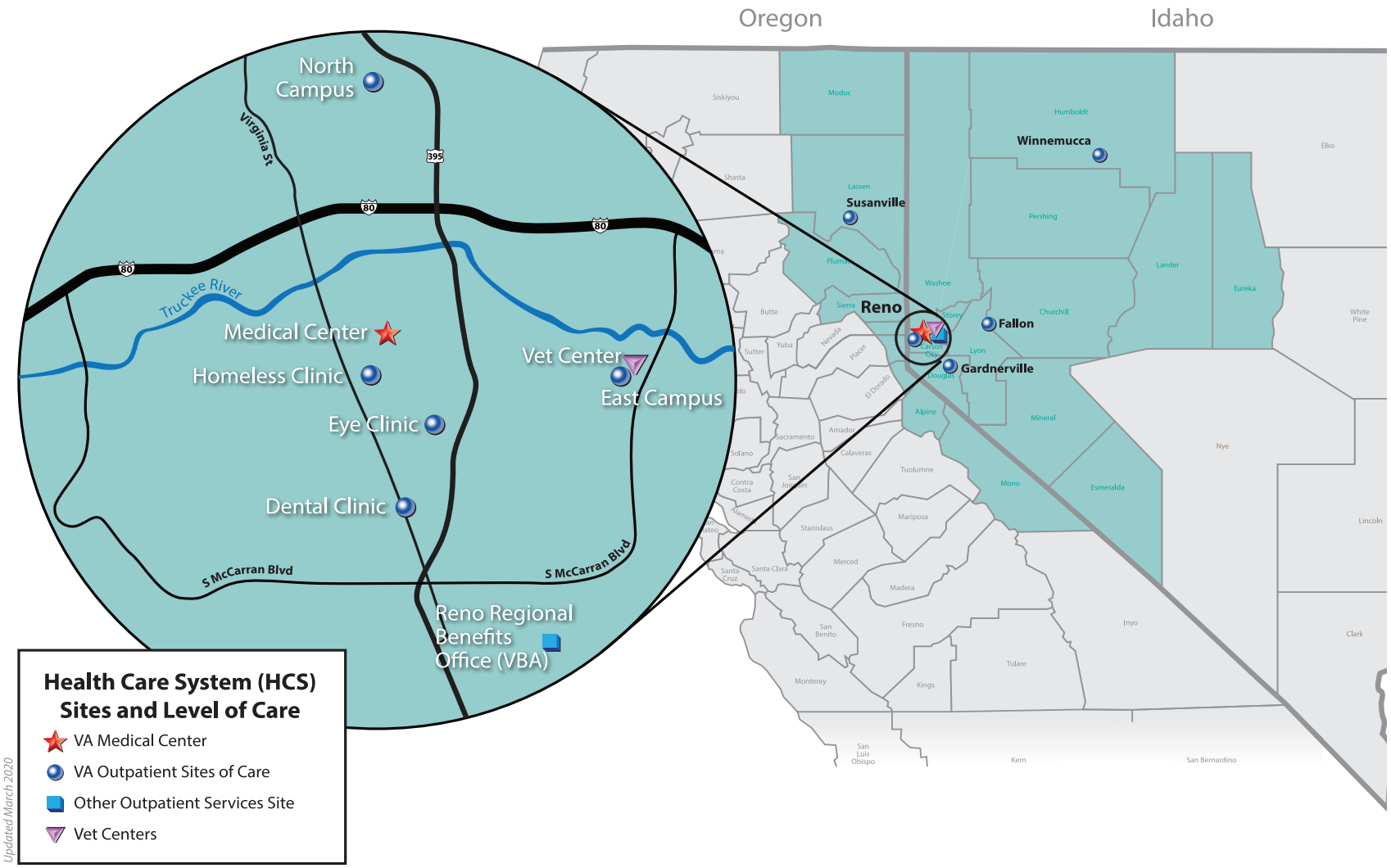
VA Eye Clinic
2295 Kietzke Lane
Reno, NV, 89502
775-786-7200

The VA Eye Clinic offers complete optometric and ophthalmic care, including medical retinal care (laser treatment and diabetic retinopathy and retinal tears, and intravitreal injections), cataract surgery and minor in-office oculoplastic and glaucoma laser procedures.

VA Dental Clinic
3674 South Virginia Street, Unit E4
Reno, NV, 89502
775-786-7200

The VA Dental Clinic provides comprehensive preventive care, oral surgery and oral implantology. Inpatient dental procedures are performed at the main campus, including operating room oral surgery services.

VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System Catchment Area Map



Surge Planning

The facility developed a robust facility surge plan to allow for the potential activation of 51 additional medical/surgical beds. The facility converted the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) into a 23-bed COVID-19 isolation unit. The unit was activated with the first COVID-19 patient in May and later supported 15 patients concurrently during the peak surge. In addition to the isolation unit, VASNHCS converted four existing ICU rooms to negative pressure, prepped 10 additional negative pressure Acute Care beds for potential COVID-19 patients and segregated space within the CLC to create a separate isolation unit for residents. The facility also explored opportunities to convert 10 beds in the Emergency Department annex to create a negative pressure unit for suspected COVID-19 patients.

COVID-19 Unit Creation

In January 2020, following initial reports coming out of China of a new and seemingly deadly coronavirus, Dr. Faisal Siddiqui, a pulmonologist at VASNHCS, vividly remembers hoping the coronavirus would not arrive on the shores of the U.S. Not long after, he watched news reports that Italy was experiencing large numbers of seriously ill patients and health care professionals were quickly isolating entire units of infected patients. It was at that point Dr. Siddiqui realized that this, too, would become a crisis in our nation. He and Dr. Sarah Ashraf, Chief of Medicine at VASNHCS, began to discuss ways they could create an area in the hospital that could be an isolated unit where Veterans suffering from COVID-19 could be safely treated.

Dr. Siddiqui shared his thoughts and concerns with VASNHCS Director Lisa Howard. She told him to let her know what he needed to make his and Dr. Ashraf's idea a reality and she'd ensure they have all the resources they needed to pursue their goal. As he set about creating an isolation unit at VASNHCS, the support he received from both the Director and Chief of Staff was paramount and immediately evident, resulting in an isolation ward being created mere weeks after his initial request. Drawing from his experiences working with clinical teams at seven other area hospitals, Dr. Siddiqui is proud of what he and the rest of the VASNHCS team were able to accomplish, "VASNHCS is the best. It is the best prepared COVID-19 negative-pressure isolation unit in the entire geographical area. The infection control measures in this hospital are literally the best in northern Nevada."

Dr. Siddiqui is quick to acknowledge the joint efforts and expertise by so many staff were critical to the unit's success. "The ability of our Facilities Management Team to create a sealed, negative-pressure unit to prevent spread of the virus was unmeasured," explained Dr. Saddiqui.

Their Voice

Even with the COVID-19 lock down, I have been able to get the treatment I need.

Once the unit was in full operation, transitioning from the normal face-to-face, in-person contact with patients to learning how to communicate and care for them in an isolated, sealed environment was difficult for staff and medical students alike. But Dr. Siddiqui noted how they all rose to the challenges presented, inspired to deliver the care Veterans earned through their service to our nation.

COVID-19 Vaccine Clinic

VASNHCS received its first delivery of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine on December 22, 2020 and immediately began vaccinating Veterans in our long-term care Community Living Center along with frontline health care workers following Center for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines. Extensive planning prior to the arrival of the vaccine enabled VASNHCS to have a fully functioning, dedicated COVID-19 clinic that was able to quickly administer all of the allocated supply to those who wanted to be vaccinated. VASNHCS Director Lisa Howard said receipt of the vaccine "is like having hope delivered. As vaccine supplies increase, our goal is to offer COVID-19 vaccination to all Veterans and employees who want to be vaccinated."

The arrival of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine garnered a lot of interest from our Veterans. Through a coordinated messaging campaign which leveraged the strength of social media, local traditional media, our Veteran Engagement Team and call center staff, along with Veterans Service Organizations, we were able to successfully administer all our allocated vaccines with zero waste. In addition, as supplies of the vaccine stabilized, VASNHCS began offering weekend vaccine clinics, with one Saturday clinic administering more than 750 vaccines to our Veterans. Over the past few months, VASNHCS averaged more than 300 doses delivered daily to Veterans and staff. Plans are in the work to transition to a drive-thru clinic, which is expected to improve the overall vaccination process and make it easier for our Veterans to receive their vaccine.

Their Voice

"On Monday morning last week, I called the VA appointment scheduler at 10:45 and was given an appointment time for 11:15. I live about a mile away. I got in line about 11:10 and was out of the building with my first shot before noon. Congratulations on the excellent organization. Very helpful and friendly staff. Thanks for looking out for us so well!"

Customer Service

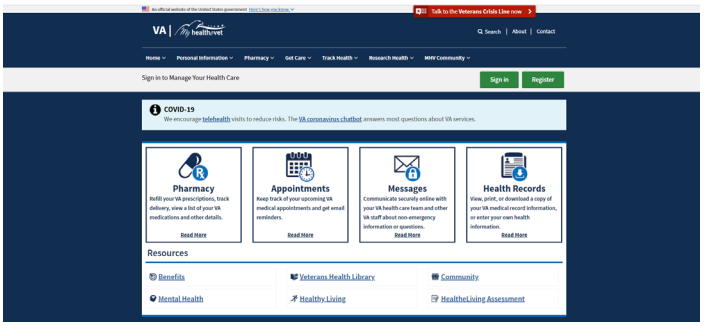
With a focus on maintaining open lines of communication with Veterans and family members, VASNHCS disseminated current information related to COVID-19 processes through telephone calls, multiple status update letters, email, secure messages, text messages and social media posts. COVID-19 informational brochures were made available at entrance screening stations. Clinical medical support assistants contacted Veterans prior to in-person visits to remind patients of adjusted procedures. VASNHCS posted frequent social media alerts announcing major process changes, including screening, testing and appointments, in addition to other COVID-19-related news. The director recorded a special video highlighting the facility's new North Campus clinic, new parking garage, ramping up of outpatient/elective appointments and reassuring Veterans that safety is our top priority.

VASNHCS took swift and appropriate action to address Veteran concerns throughout FY20. VASNHCS successfully transitioned to the Patient Advocate Tracking System-Replacing (PATS-R) and resolved cases within an average of 3.72 business days in July 2020 and an average of 2.66 business days in August 2020. Each week, the chief of Veteran Engagement Service distributes the list of V-Signal comments to clinical services for review. This allows services to celebrate staff who provided paramount customer services, reach out to Veterans when service recovery is needed and to identify trends and overall opportunities for improvement. VASNHCS consistently outperformed the national average for the overall trust score, averaging over 95% week-over-week (compared to ~90% nationally). For FY20 Q3, 100% of PATS-R requests were closed within seven business days.

My HealtheVet

When the coronavirus pandemic hit the nation, VASNHCS swiftly reacted to ensure the safety of our Veterans and staff. With physical distancing and other restrictions in place, a focus on providing our nation's heroes with information and maintaining open lines of communication was paramount.

VASNHCS relied heavily on MyHealtheVet to ensure Veterans had continued access to their health care team. Veterans could send secure messages, view their health records, review their prescription refills and verify appointment changes.



Access to these services became particularly vital as Telehealth appointments increased 2,400% over a six-month period. Both patients and staff quickly adapted to the change, thanks in large part to Jeff Holmes, MyHealtheVet Coordinator at VASNHCS.

Jeff kept busy educating Veterans how MyHealtheVet could help them through the changes brought about by COVID-19. Jeff said his lessons extended to the greater digital VA domain, "We're not a resource just for MyHealtheVet, we're here for general knowledge of the VA. We're a great resource on how to navigate the VA through electronic means."

The first step to sign up for MyHealtheVet is to start up your computer system and get online, a step some Veterans have not done for years,

if ever. Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, Jeff has helped Veterans, usually by phone call, navigate to MyHealth*e*Vet and then complete the necessary steps to sign-up and use the service. For many Veterans, this is a new and challenging experience; the digital world is cumbersome and intimidating.

Once a Veteran feels comfortable with the MyHealth*e*Vet platform, they are in a position to take control of their health care. Jeff notes that this and other digital tools have become exceptionally important to Veterans during a period when face-to-face visits with their health care providers are limited. The vast information provided by MyHealth*e*Vet empowers Veterans to take control of their health; Secure Messaging gives them a direct way to communicate with their health care team.

MISSION Act Implementation

Telehealth

With the implementation of the MISSION Act, Veterans are afforded more options for how and where they receive care, including virtual modalities. FY20 represented a pivotal shift in the VA's adoption of telehealth. The coronavirus pandemic served as a catalyst to utilize available technology to sustain care and services, while limiting the number of staff, patients and visitors physically at VA medical centers or offsite clinics.

Not only did VASNHCS Veterans embrace telephonic and virtual video visits during COVID-19 response and recovery, but the organization also experienced an overall increase in patient satisfaction scores. Many Veterans reported they prefer virtual visits because of reduced travel costs for the Veteran and family member/caregiver.

Notably, 88.6% of primary care appointments and 72.5% of mental health appointments cancelled due to COVID were successfully accomplished later via telehealth.

100% of mental health providers, 83% of primary care providers and 43% of specialty providers have completed a Veteran Video Connect (VVC) encounter. VVC allows Veterans to quickly and easily meet with health care system providers through live video on any computer, tablet or mobile device with an internet connection. VVC utilization exploded, growing by 1,462% between August 2019 and August 2020.

Market Assessment

VA initiated an enterprise-wide effort to assess each of the 96 established health care markets, providing analysis and insights that will inform national health care design. In accordance with the MISSION Act, Market Assessments will assist VA's ongoing effort to ensure high-performing networks of care that will improve access and quality of care for Veterans across the country. These networks include care delivered not only by VA, but also supplemental care providers from the Department of Defense, Federally Qualified Health Centers, other federal partners, teaching hospitals and community providers across the country. VA will remain the integrator and coordinator of all Veteran care. The primary goals of the Market Assessment are:

1. **Increase access to and quality of care.**
2. **Improve Veteran satisfaction and experience.**
3. **Balance supply and demand.**
4. **Implement world-class facilities to best serve Veterans.**

The results will be considered in the design of a high-performing network, which will have a positive impact on Veteran's access to care across the country. The impact of COVID-19 on the health care markets, as well as VHA's emergency preparedness and fourth mission (i.e., humanitarian) requirements, are being considered in conducting market assessments.

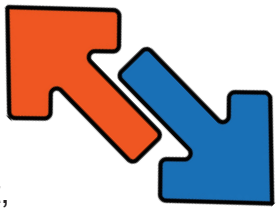
As of the publication of this report, VASNHCS has successfully completed comprehensive data validation and analysis for the Sierra Nevada market, hosted a virtual site visit including interviews with medical center leaders and managers, identified key takeaways and findings and submitted a series of recommendations for consideration by the network director.

Mental Health Unit Bed Increase

Over the past several years, the medical center's Mental Health Unit (MHU) has been consistently at full capacity. This results in patient transfers to other community facilities, excessive wait times in the Emergency Department and increased patient diversions. In FY19, the medical center was on divert for MHU bed saturation for a total of 2,226 hours and diverted 51 patients due to lack of an available bed on the unit. Occupancy rates for MHU were between 92% and 95% each quarter of FY19.

The MHU historically operated as a 14-bed unit; VASNHCS recently obtained final approval through VHA to place five additional MHU beds into operation, bringing the MHU bed count to 19. This change went into effect October 1, 2020. MHU clinical and support staff was expanded to support the increase in patient beds, and the MHU recreation area was significantly enhanced, to include the installation of multiple exercise stations, new paint and finishes, and other modifications to enhance the well-being of MHU patients.

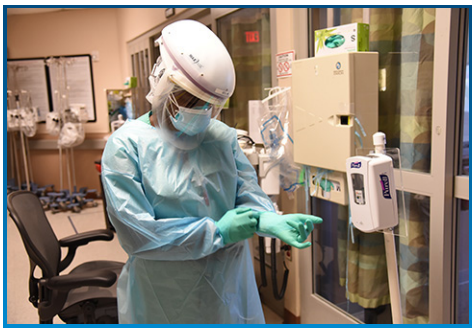
Business Transformation



VA is empowering employees to provide world-class customer service to Veterans by reforming systems responsible for human resource management, finance, acquisition and supply chains. In alignment with this strategic priority, VASNHCS has taken pronounced steps to enhance local processes, and the health care system's pandemic response and recovery activities helped accelerate the transformation of numerous clinical and business practices.

Beginning in March 2020, VASNHCS adapted dozens of operational processes utilizing up-to-date guidance from VHA and other federal authorities. Over 40 Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) documents were published to ensure all staff followed the same processes. Implementing rigorous review and re-certification practices, the SOPs were continually updated and refined through incorporating lessons learned and evolving guidance from local and national public health institutions.

Procedure Planning Matrix/PPE Projection Model



VASNHCS folded multiple locally produced best practices into COVID-19 response planning, all of which were shared across the network for diffusion. As an example, a procedure planning matrix served as a robust clinic monitoring system to continually assess current and projected workload (virtual versus face-to-face) and forecasting staffing needs, bed capacity, surge demands, space, infrastructure and needed personal protective equipment (PPE) requirements, along with other necessary resources needed to ensure safe and sustainable operations while ramping up services.

The efforts were supplemented by a robust PPE projection model that incorporated existing inventory, pending shipments, delivery patterns, burn rates and other components to accurately project PPE supply and demand for dozens of types of PPE, such as gloves, gowns, goggles and respirators, for 60 and 90 days into the future. This concerted approach helped ensure staff always had the appropriate PPE to safely provide patient care and support.

SAIL

Leading VASNHCS through sustained emergency operations required significant energy and resources, yet the results achieved in FY20 demonstrated the system's commitment to continual performance improvement and untiring pursuit of excellence. Strategic Analytics for Improvement and Learning Value Model (SAIL) is a system for summarizing hospital system performance within Veterans Health Administration (VHA). In FY21, VASNHCS is focused on reducing hospital wide readmission rates and increasing its ORYX score. ORYX is an initiative introduced by The Joint Commission in 1997 that integrates patient outcomes of inpatient care and other performance measure data into the accreditation process.

Drive-thru Flu Clinic

Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has indicated that influenza vaccination is especially important during the COVID-19 pandemic, as vaccination can help reduce the overall impact of respiratory illness and reduce the resulting strain on the health care system in these challenging times. With physical distancing, virtual care appointments and Veterans concerned with potential exposure to COVID-19, offering an alternative method to receive flu vaccination during the pandemic was critical. An immunization drive-thru clinic concept was pursued, as it would increase access to influenza vaccination while maintaining physical distancing and minimizing the need for Veterans to enter the medical center solely for a flu shot.

There was extensive collaboration in planning for the drive-thru and a great deal of enthusiasm, problem solving and initiative with 14 departments participating in weekly virtual planning meetings for the drive-thru immunization clinic. As traditional methods for advertising (flyers, posters) were not feasible during the pandemic, the Public Affairs team arranged for several local news channels

to highlight the event and leveraged multiple electronic resources including social media, email and text messages to ensure Veterans were aware of the drive-thru clinic.

A total of 2,266 influenza immunizations were administered to Veterans. The process ran efficiently and feedback from Veterans was extremely positive.

VA/DoD Collaboration

VA works collaboratively with the Department of Defense (DoD) to provide quality care for the Nation's Service members and Veterans. Perhaps the most significant and ambitious undertaking is adopting the same electronic health record (EHR) as the DoD, creating a seamless transfer of medical information for Veterans leaving the Service. To complete its portion of the EHR initiative, VASNHCS is in the process of upgrading our data system infrastructure, which requires installation of all the cabling, closets and utility systems to support the EHR installation. VASNHCS has seen this project delayed due to restrictions put in place because of the COVID-19 pandemic, so the EHR installation will not begin until 2022.

VA's 4th Mission

Disaster Emergency Medical Personnel System (DEMPS) is the Veterans Health Administration's primary deployment program. In support of VA's Fourth Mission to assist the nation in times of emergencies and disasters, VASNHCS expanded its pool of DEMPS volunteers as the number of support requests increased.

Through the end of 2020, VASNHCS staff proudly supported 14 two-week deployments. Our support provided staff to various geographically diverse parts of the nation where emergencies and disaster had struck.

DEMPS can be used to support both internal VA missions and disasters declared by the President of the United States.

This declaration allows federal assistance to states through resources to protect life and property in response and recovery after hurricanes, earthquakes, floods and other catastrophic events. The coronavirus pandemic certainly qualifies as a catastrophic event.

Budget

VASNHCS received $23M in supplemental funding from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act). The funding was strategically allocated to purchase equipment, ensure adequate PPE stock and support multiple required functions by trained staff, as well as activate the COVID-19 Unit. VASNHCS also leveraged CARES Act funding to purchase furniture, partitions and shields to support physical distancing and meet Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines. The facility hired 49 additional staff using CARES Act funding. The facility also secured $175,000 in COVID-19 Project Funds to create a contamination prevention area (anteroom) and add HEPA filtration exhaust to the Pulmonary Procedure Room. Similarly, an OR suite was renovated to also add an anteroom which prevents contamination from one room to the next. This process allows doctors to safely perform surgeries on COVID-19 patients.

Workforce Development

VASNHCS continued to support trainees and overall workforce development throughout pandemic response and recovery. Employing innovative approaches, such as tele-rounding using iPads and Bluetooth stethoscopes, the medical center was able to utilize medical residents during this pivotal time in health care without compromising safety and while preserving critically needed PPE.

The health care system expanded the number of approved medical residents from 42 to 53 between 2019 and 2020 and hosted more than 400 total trainees this year with plans to double the number of trainees over the next five years. VASNHCS is currently applying for accreditation to establish an independent dietetic internship program and continues to serve as a practicum site for dietetic interns. VASNHCS is also applying to establish a nurse practitioner training program and seeks to expand and improve training opportunities across disciplines. The health care system processed over 400 staff education requests in FY20 and sustained multiple leadership development programs virtually, to include School at Work, Apprenticeship and Emerging Leaders.

Nursing Development

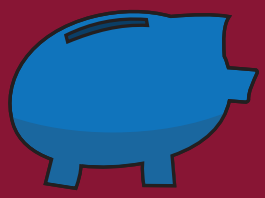
VASNHCS nurse educators provide annual professional development days for nurses and health technicians. The educational content is developed through needs assessments whereby nursing staff on the inpatient and outpatient units suggest topics and skills they would find most valuable. The curriculum incorporates updated evidence-based topics and current practices, such as a psychomotor component for maintaining proficiency. Morning sessions consist of lecture topics from guest speakers, and the afternoon sessions feature skills stations breakouts. In 2019 a total of 270 staff participated in professional development days. Due to COVID-19, VASNHCS created online nursing development modules in 2020 allowing staff to continue enhancing skills and retaining competencies across the organization. The in-person skills stations were sustained and completed on individual units precepted by a clinical nurse leader.

Cross-training was critical to maintaining needed staffing coverage during COVID-19 surges. To meet the need, VASHNCS hosted eight COVID-19 training classes between March and April 2020 for nurses. This strategy prepared nurses assigned to various areas throughout the health care system to provide coverage on the acute care Medical/Surgical Unit, the Emergency Department and the COVID-19 Unit.

Workforce

1,670 onboard employees as of December 2020.

27% of health care system staff members are Veterans.



20.9% of workforce is retirement-eligible.

56.8% of all service/section chiefs are women.

COVID-19 Specific Workforce Development

Cross-Training

In order to respond to a potential surge in COVID-19 cases, the VASNHCS nurse educators provided training to 82 registered nurses (RN) through eight-hour cross-training sessions and 29 licensed practical nurses (LPN) through four-hour cross-training sessions between March and April. The training prepared RNs/LPNs to float to Medical Surgical Unit, Emergency Department and the COVID-19 Unit in the event the facility experienced a surge. Upon completion, the nurses received orientations to each unit.

Labor Pool

COVID-19 presented challenges that required staff be reassigned to areas of great need, creating a labor pool. Employees were trained how to properly perform tasks that aided in the overall safety of all who visit the facility. The labor pool served as screeners and aided logistics to name a few examples. VASNHCS utilized labor pool staffing to ensure critical COVID-19 functions were supported, while balancing the ongoing needs of all services.

Recruitment

VASNHCS implemented waivers for pre-employment processes and collaborated with Human Resources to ensure all requirements were completed in a timely fashion. VASNHCS marketed and hosted Medical Support Assistant and Nursing Job Fairs in fall 2020 and conducted on-site and telephonic interviews. Representatives of VASNHCS shared job recruitment opportunities, upcoming job fairs and general updates and overview of the health care system through interviews on local radio stations.

Employee of the Year

The 2020 VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System Employee of the Year is Dawn Dollarhide, a Registered Nurse (RN) and Patient Aligned Care Team manager who takes a leading role every day she's on the job in Ambulatory Care Service.

Her supervisor and service chief praise her work ethic and commitment to duty, noting Dawn rarely takes time off, is never late, and never calls-in sick. Dawn always raises her hand to take on a project or to help her co-workers. Dawn's willingness to provide excellent care, be an outstanding team member and always do the right thing for her patients has earned her several Daisy Awards and Daisy nominations as well as nominations for Northern Nevada Nurse of Achievement.

Dawn learned to perform telederm to meet the dermatology needs of Veterans that telehealth was struggling to meet because of increased demands brought about by the coronavirus pandemic. She managed the Veteran Reassignment Clinical Review process, which is extremely complicated and includes all the community based outpatient clinics, assisting Veterans in resolving issues with their current care teams or a change of provider.

Dawn identifies areas in need of improvement and always steps up to assist with the task or take part in a process improvement. Additionally, Dawn is extremely efficient. She is a master trainer for Ambulatory Care Service's new RNs. Dawn understands all systems and processes and has the ability to take on extremely heavy amounts of work and keep it all organized.

Dawn proved pivotal in helping to organize, train and manage a cadre of facility entrance screeners assembled early on in the coronavirus pandemic. The screeners questioned all staff and visitors entering a VASNHCS facility about COVID-19 symptoms and ensured masking compliance, helping to ensure the safety of staff and Veterans alike.

Dawn has earned the distinction of being the 2020 VASNHCS Employee of the Year. Well done!

Community Affairs

One group that has consistently helped us navigate through the challenges of our mission are our volunteers, particularly those still volunteering during this pandemic, such as our drivers. Over 75 Volunteer Transportation Network Drivers served more than 2000 hours during the pandemic months of April – September 2020 providing access to care for 862 Veterans. This is an invaluable service to Veterans who do not have any other means of transportation to their VA appointments – many are economically challenged and have no transportation options and many cannot even afford to use public transportation. Our volunteers recognize this need and are acutely aware of the challenges that Veterans of all eras and conflicts face every day. Were it not for the volunteers commitment to their work, many of these men and women would miss or skip medical appointments that could easily be considered crucial to their health care.

Community Support

Volunteer Support

Volunteers:	**326**
Hours:	**25,227.75**
Monetary Donations:	**$32,699.91**
Non-Monetary:	**$255,617.28**
Total:	**$288,317.19**

Community Support during COVID-19

Masks:	**$23,579.30**
Hand Sanitizer:	**$1,015.00**
Meals:	**$40,132.77**
Mobile Vaccine Refrigerator:	**$9,932.30**
Televideo Equipment for Isolated Veterans:	**$450.00**
Total :	**$75,109.37**

I am so ready to help. Consider me crouched at the starting line with my track shoes on.

- Roger
(Ambassador Volunteer)

A Little Help From Our Friends

Our community is truly incredible, and we are so grateful for their consistent and continued support. The people and businesses listed have all donated delicious meals and scarce supplies to our staff. Their contributions have fed and brought smiles to hundreds of employees.

While accepting donations of food for employees would not typically be allowable, these were not typical times. Our community recognized the need to raise morale and motivate health care workers on the frontline, showing gratitude and providing fuel for our health care workers.

Our community stepped up to donate much needed personal protective equipment (PPE) when supplies were scarce. We would like to extend our gratitude to the following organizations for their generous donations of PPE, meals and other needed supplies.

Community of Support

American Bistro & Catering Company

Assistance League of Reno-Sparks

DharmaRelief

Disabled American Veterans

DISH Cafe & Catering Company

Empower Nevada Teachers

Fat Cat Bar & Grill

Ford Motor Company

Gary Sinise Foundation

Great Full Gardens

Griffon Company

Harbour Freight

Infinity Hospice Care

Jack Stanko, owner of Champion Chevrolet

Jennifer Reis and Forrest Aragon @ Get Involved Nevada

Little Caesars Pizza

Mari Chuy's Mexican Kitchen

Military Orders of the Cootie – Pup Tent #69

Mothers of Macro's

Nevada Attorney General's Office

Nothing to It Culinary Center

Pinocchio's Bar and Grill

Record Street Brewing

Red Hawk

Reno Pizza, Inc.

Reno's Pi Zeta Lambda Chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity

Rounds Bakery with their nonprofit Feed Our Heroes

Saint Mary's Hospice

Squeeze In

Teriyaki Madness

The Cheese Board

The Home Depot

Projections

Outpatient Demand and Projections

Across the VA, outpatient programs are projected to have significant growth in demand, which is reflected in the outpatient projections for the Sierra Nevada market. The majority of outpatient encounters within the market occur at VASNHCS, and demand for these programs is projected to increase 35-64% over the next 10 years. All outpatient specialties are projected for 10-year growth, with the largest growths projected for rehab therapies (53.4%), mental health programs (69.7%) and dental (63.9%).

Inpatient Demand and Projections

The VASNHCS main campus is the only inpatient facility for enrolled Veterans within northern Nevada and northeastern California. VASNHCS is authorized 130 total beds (124 operating) and a total FY19 Average Daily Census of 107. These beds are spread between medical, surgical, mental health and Community Living Center (CLC) beds, with the highest number of beds being for CLC (60) and medicine (50).

Northern Nevada Growing Stats for 2020

- **Population, jobs and homes to increase by 8.6%, 12.7% and 8.8%, respectively, over next five years (Washoe, Douglas, Storey, Carson and Lyon counties).**
- **Job growth increase of 51,585; population growth of 54,470 (2019-2023).**
- **11,272 jobs added in 15 months (Dec 2018 to March 2020)**
- **14.4% increase in Washoe County population 2010 to 2020 (421,958 to 482,539).**
- **Significant growth projected for all VA outpatient services.**
- **10-year inpatient demand in the Reno area is projected to increase for Medicine, Surgery and Mental Health (2019 to 2029).**
- **Significant growth projected for long-term support and services: Home Based Primary Care, Adult Day Health Care, Homemaker/ Home Health Aide and Home Respite Care.**
- **Anticipated demand for post-acute rehabilitation beds due to COVID-19.**
- **Veteran population continues to age; Sierra Nevada ranked 9th of 96 markets for enrollee age, averaging 62 years old; majority of enrollees are 65+.**
- **Significant Women Veteran enrollee growth projected (144% increase in Women Veterans age 65-84).**
- **Sierra Nevada market covers nearly 70k square miles; approximately 40% of enrollees are rural (all counties outside Washoe County).**

Preparing for the Future

Facility Improvements

Feasibility Study

In October 2019, VA Central Office authorized a feasibility study to compare the currently planned projects for VASNHCS to correct existing site deficiencies against other possible options. The feasibility study will be used to determine viable paths forward to resolve seismic, infrastructure, space, parking, physical security and safety deficiencies that exist at the health care facility. This will allow the health care system to meet burgeoning Veteran demand in the rapidly expanding northern Nevada region for many decades into the future.

Plans for Future Projects

VASNHCS submitted for future planning a Project Book for the following major projects:

- Correct Seismic and Utility System Deficiencies at the Boiler Plant (Building 8), estimated project cost $85M.
- Correct Seismic Deficiencies, Upgrade Utility Systems, Expand the OR and correct other infrastructure deficiencies in Building 1D, estimated project cost $264M.
- Correct Seismic and Utility System Deficiencies in Building 10, estimated project cost $85M.
- Correct Seismic Deficiencies in Building 12, estimated project cost $28M.

East Campus Expansion

To respond to the exponential growth anticipated for primary care services over the next ten years, VASNHCS is currently pursuing a 2,500 square foot expansion with minor renovations of East Campus. The expansion will provide space for two additional Patient Aligned Care Teams (PACT), a larger waiting area, a negative pressure exam room, two large team rooms, police room, vending machines and six additional exam rooms.

North Campus Activation

The long-awaited North Campus clinic was activated in May and is the health care system's largest offsite clinic at 19,500 square feet. The new site of care improves access offering audiology, primary care, general x-ray and blood draw services and is closer to home for many Veterans. North Campus occupies two buildings, both located in a commercial complex near the intersection of Sutro Drive and North McCarran Boulevard. Veterans may enroll as a new patient and often be seen on the same day by a provider.

Parking Garage

After two years of construction, the new four-level parking garage opened in July providing 326 stalls helping to close a longstanding parking gap and reducing the number of cars parked on the streets surrounding the hospital. Having enclosed parking on campus increases safety and preserves much-needed street parking for neighborhood residents. The garage is located on the southeast corner of the campus, adjacent to the existing parking garage.

Never Forgotten

On a warm yet somber Friday morning, July 10, 2020, hundreds of staff members of VASNHCS gathered in front of the hospital to memorialize and dedicate a monument to three fallen colleagues. The three passed away early on in the coronavirus pandemic while in service to fellow Veterans.

Joining the staff were family members of those lost and representatives of the Nevada State Troopers and the Washoe County Sheriff's office, to include the sheriff himself. The ceremony had been postponed for months due to COVID-19 restrictions. Once conditions allowed for it to take place, those gathered practiced physical distancing and wore masks to ensure the safety of all attendees.

Following the posting of colors by a state trooper honor guard, State Trooper Josh Thompson sang the National Anthem. For Trooper Thompson, the ceremony was deeply personal, for his mother, Viana Thompson, was one of the three staff members being memorialized that day.

Vianna was a nurse whose heart had not just touched those at the Reno VA but at other surrounding hospitals as well. She was a voice for all nurses, her impact on her community was felt and seen by everyone near and far. Her husband, Bob Thompson, met Vianna in 1991 while both were stationed at Osan Air Base in South Korea. "God is getting one hell of a nurse up there," he told the crowd.

Bruce McAllister was a model citizen and family man, often volunteering in the community. When he wasn't volunteering, he was finding adventures for his family, or taking his son to see the San Francisco 49ers play. His wife, Lana McAllister, remembers their last day together as one of the hardest days of her life, "The virus stole him from me. It stole a dad from Bryce. It stole a son from his mom. It stole a brother from his sister. It stole family from all of us."

Alexander Gousev's kindness was remembered by many. One co-worker recalled briefly mentioning his need for a new grill. A few days later Alexander called; he had a grill ready for his colleague to take. Alexander had many talents, but it was his talent to listen and care for those around him that will be missed most. In 2000, Alexander found the Holy New Martyrs of Russia Orthodox Church, where he served as deacon. A Russian immigrant, his actions served for many as an example of how to be a kinder version of themselves.

The three stone memorials erected in dedication to Vianna, Bruce and Alexander were placed in front of the hospital's main entrance, standing as a reminder to all who pass of the sacrifices made by these three in service to America's heroes. They may be gone, but their memories and selfless acts will live on, captured in stone.

Honors Escort

To pay tribute to Veterans who pass, in a manner reflecting the nobility of their service, VASNHCS sustained the Honors Escort program. Recognized as a VA Best Practice, this program touches the hearts of Veteran families and VA staff due to its military bearing and protocol. Staff provide a dignified transfer of the recently deceased Veteran from his or her hospital room to the facility morgue.

Upon receiving notice that a Veteran's passing is imminent or has occurred, escorts prepare a gurney with an American flag. Using the hospital's intercom system, staff are alerted an Honor Escort is about to occur. Staff line the hallways and pay final respects to the Veteran as the procession passes. After the procession, the Veteran's family is given the opportunity to assist with folding the flag. To help expand this acclaimed program across VA, the health care system developed a training program so other VA medical centers can implement their own Honors Escort programs.

Farewell Letter

This last year has brought so many unexpected events. We faced difficult decisions and stressful times, along with some moments of joy, and we certainly found new ways to serve our Veterans and to care for one another. I am profoundly grateful to have these shared moments and memories with my work family. While venturing forth into the unknown is daunting, the whirlwind that was 2020 provided us with myriad opportunities to become more resilient and adaptable when managing uncertainty. In the spirit of embracing the unexpected, I am sharing important news with you, news which I could not have anticipated or predicted. I have been appointed to serve as the director of the VA Palo Alto Health Care System.

Life has a way of creating pathways for us that we are often unable to see for ourselves. I encourage new leaders and staff to be open to change and seize opportunity, embracing the unknown, even if it is not what we envisioned. I am practicing that embrace now. I was planning to finish my career at VASNHCS and settle into retirement in northern Nevada. I spent the past two decades serving Veterans at this health care system, and I reflect fondly on the cohesive culture we developed, the strong teams we built across the organization and our amazing ability to elevate every aspect of our care and services to the Next Level.

While it is difficult to leave a certain level of comfort, I am excited to bring my leadership philosophies to VA Palo Alto and continue to develop as a health care administrator at one of the nation's largest and most complex VA health care systems. I am equally excited to see VASNHCS open a new chapter under a new Director, who can refresh the health care system with new ideas, fresh eyes and a compelling vision for the future. I cherish my time here and I will carry into my new position the lessons learned, the relationships built and the many crucibles that helped forge me into who I am. Above all, I cherish the love and the family that I felt here. It is rare to have such close-knit executive and management teams, as well as such strong support from staff at all levels. Whenever I've called upon you, you were there to answer the call, time after time. You have faithfully served our mission, you have earned my sincere appreciation and admiration and I know you will continue to carry the flag and persevere long after I leave.

While I may not be physically in Reno, I will remain part of the VASNHCS family. I am but an email or call away, and I would love to hear from you and stay apprised of your journeys. I have high expectations for each of you to care for our Veterans, to care for each other and to care for yourselves. I am so very proud to have served among you. The fact that this decision was so hard to make underscores how fortunate I am to have been a part of this wonderful organization. I feel truly blessed beyond measure. In the words of Winnie-the-Pooh, "How lucky I am to have something that makes saying goodbye so hard."

Lisa Howard

Veterans Health Administration

VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System