



# Rocky Mountain Connections

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## Message from the Network Director

In the last issue of Rocky Mountain Connections, we shared a story with you on the Grand Junction VAMC's suicide prevention program. The prevention of suicide is a high VA priority across the country. We recognize that suicide prevention requires a comprehensive plan that involves planned strategies, coordinated efforts, and a steadfast commitment to implementation and evaluation. We are also aware that we are dealing with individual's lives and that each life is invaluable.

I would like to reinforce that the VA in partnership with the Department of Health and Human Services has established a National Suicide Prevention Hotline. This toll free number is available to anyone to call if they are in a mental health crisis or are having feelings of hurting themselves. The number is 1-800-273-TALK (8255) and operates seven days a week, 24 hours a day. Every veteran or family member of a veteran who calls this number will

... speak to a highly qualified mental health professional who will provide assistance. There are posters, pamphlets and pocket cards with the 800 number and lists of warning signs available at every VA.

In VISN 19, we have suicide prevention coordinators in each medical center. Their job is to promote suicide prevention among staff and veterans. Each coordinator provides education to front line staff and others on the subtle signs of a person in danger. The coordinators also visit with veterans who come to the medical centers and follow up with those who have called the Suicide Prevention Hot Line. These individuals are key to our efforts to provide the best care to veterans. In some cases this may include visiting with family and helping them understand the signs and needs of a veteran feeling desperate enough to consider suicide.



GLEN GRIPPEN

Prevention is the only way to combat suicide. Please share the National Suicide Prevention Hotline number with others. If you have more questions, I encourage you to contact your local medical center and ask to speak to the suicide prevention coordinator.

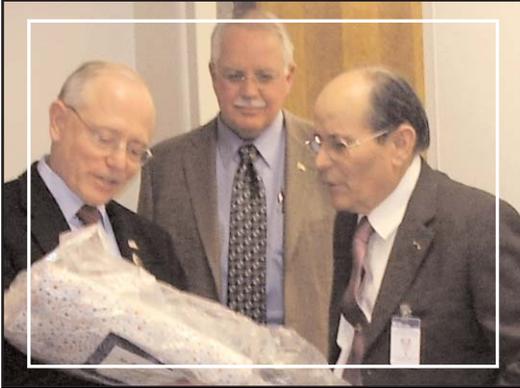
We are pleased to present a snapshot of other events in VISN 19 including a visit to Montana by Secretary Peake. Please enjoy this issue of Rocky Mountain Connections.

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## New VA Secretary Visits Montana

Montana Healthcare System



Secretary Peake with Faust Alvarez,  
VA MHCS Chief of Staff.

New Secretary Peake along with members of the Montana Congressional Delegation toured VA healthcare facilities in February. This was the Secretary's first visit to Montana and the Rocky Mountain Region as head of the VA. During his visit Secretary Peake, received a quilt similar to the quilts given to veterans receiving care in the VA Montana Healthcare System. The quilts are given to men and women coming home from Iraq and

Afghanistan as a thank you for their service. Secretary Peak was duly impressed with the care and "twenty-first" century technology being used in such a rural setting. After his tours, the Secretary also held Town Hall meetings with veterans to hear their concerns and visions for rural and frontier medicine and the future of the VA in Montana. VA Montana Healthcare System staff are following up on veteran and community comments and concerns.

## VA Clinicians Take Their Skills Abroad

Cheyenne VA Medical Center

Several Cheyenne VA clinicians recently returned from vacation. Vacation, so where's the news in this? Sure, everyone needs a vacation. But the "vacation" that these clinicians took wasn't an average vacation; these doctors and nurse had volunteered their skills to offer clinical services abroad.

Drs. Tyler Marshall (podiatry) and Ryan Prall (ophthalmology) traveled to India during the month of January, 2008 and were able to help deliver both podiatry and ophthalmology services to those

individuals living in India. Dr. Patricia Stepp and Brenda Hart, RN, also traveled in January, 2008 to Mante, Mexico. Their work helped restore eyesight to those indigenous Mexicans whose vision has been impacted by cataracts.

All of the VA clinicians interviewed for this story feel that the humanitarian work they can get involved in overseas helps them provide even better care for the veterans and patients they see here. They all relay that it's helpful to experience and treat some of the more

advanced states of various diseases, since in the VA hospital, diseases advanced to the degree found in Mexico and India are rare. Treating advanced cases helps surgeons be better prepared for when an extreme health condition is presented. Another one of the benefits from working abroad is that VA providers are able to share their skills and help restore a higher quality of life to those in other parts of the world.

*"Treating advanced cases helps surgeons be better prepared for when an extreme health condition is presented."*

## Cheyenne VA Medical Center (cont.)

The VA providers note that they also enjoy the illustration of how a preventative approach to health care is better than the approach that focuses on treatment. The VA health care system uses a preventative approach; this generally provides for early identification and reduction of risks and reduces the severity of the health conditions. This occurs through the screening that VA providers complete in the exam

room. The screening feeds “formulas” that generate risk factors that should be addressed to optimize nutrition, exercise and lifestyle choices.

Foot and eye care are some of the most important preventative types of care that can be given to people at risk with diabetes. Risk factors increase for diabetes with low activity levels, poor diet and high blood pressure. These elements also impact obesity and cardiovascular disease, which are other prevent-

able diseases. Other factors that can influence diabetes include family history, ethnic heritage, age and excess weight.

Drs. Marshall and Prall traveled to India through the Seva Foundation; Dr. Stepp and Brenda Hart, RN, traveled to Mexico with a group from the Boulder (CO) Community Hospital. Both groups maintain the goal of serving people by translating values such as compassion and concern into useful service.

*“The VA health care system uses a preventative approach; this generally provides for early identification and reduction of risks and reduces the severity of the health conditions.”*

## A Long Career Serving Veterans

### Sheridan VA Medical Center

Each year the Wyoming legislature in Cheyenne recognizes veterans and thanks them for their service. On February 12, 2008, both the House and the Senate took time from the budget session to honor all Wyoming veterans and honor those men and women who have given their career in service to veterans.

One of those honored was the Associate Director of the Sheridan Veterans Affairs Medical Center, Gary V. Morton. Mr. Morton began his career with the VA 35 years ago as a nursing assistant. “I started out in the morgue as a way to help me

pay for college,” Morton says as he packs up his office. The VA did more for Morton than just pay for college; it set him up in a life long career serving America’s heroes. “My experience is not unlike many in the VA. I started working at the VA, not sure what I was going to do with my life, then had all these great opportunities. More importantly, my job let me say ‘Thank you’ everyday to veterans,” says Morton to a group of new employees just starting their career with the VA. “I like to encourage young people who are not sure what they want to do



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*“It’s been an amazing career.”*

## Sheridan VA Medical Center (cont.)

with their lives to consider a career in service. The satisfaction you get everyday knowing that you are helping people live better lives is amazing, but more importantly, I’ve been able to help veterans who

sacrificed so much so that I could even have the American Dream. It’s been an amazing career.”

Associate Director Morton left the VA after 35 years of service and 14 years at the Sheridan VA Medical Center. “Being asked to represent the VA at the Wyoming legislature is an honor. The VA has

been my home for 35 years. It was a nice way to wrap up my service.”

## Customer Service Drama Team

### Eastern Colorado Healthcare System

Customer service is an important part of any organization. Finding ways to remind employees

made up of a variety of employees who all share the same goal of wanting to improve customer service for the veteran. The Drama Team is hard at work developing skits which reflect real life experiences and encounters for our veterans and employees. First, an example of poor customer service is reenacted. Following the first example, a facilitator leads the audience through a discussion of what they saw and what changes could be made. Then the scenario is repeated utilizing good customer service techniques followed by another discussion.

The Drama Team is working with services throughout the ECHCS to develop scenarios

specific to their needs. Several of the topics include how to handle a difficult customer, how poor communication with co-workers affects the veteran, how to handle interruptions appropriately, and elevator etiquette. While the scenarios cover serious topics, there is generally a humorous element to each skit. This unconventional learning technique allows employees to readily identify with the themes presented and enjoy the discussions. ECHCS believes the Customer Service Drama Team is improving patient care by providing customer service education in a unique and fun learning environment.



of the importance of customer service can be a challenge. Eastern Colorado Healthcare System (ECHCS) has implemented a creative way to improve customer service within the organization. The Customer Service Drama Team is

## Using *MOVE!* (Managing Overweight and Obesity in Veterans Everywhere) to Get the Most Out of Life

VA Salt Lake City Health Care System

Since 1980 the number of Americans who are overweight or obese has more than doubled. Two-thirds of Americans and 71 percent of patients in the VA Salt Lake City Health Care System are overweight or obese. Excess weight increases the risk for and severity of many health problems including high blood pressure, diabetes, high blood cholesterol and lipids, sleep apnea, degenerative joint disease, various cancers and other health problems. Extra weight increases the risk of dying early.

### Managing Your Weight

A good starting goal is to lose 10 percent of your weight. For example, someone weighing 250 pounds would want to lose 25 pounds. This is enough to improve your health. Try to lose one to two pounds per week.

#### To cut back on calories and still get a healthy diet and enough to eat:

1. Don't skip meals. People who skip meals, especially breakfast, have a higher risk of being overweight. Eat smaller portions at least three times a day.
2. Cut back on fatty foods and sweets. Fried foods have twice as many calories as nonfried. Include smaller amounts of heart healthy fats like olive oil in your diet and cut back on sweets.

3. Skip regular soda and sugared beverages. A 12-ounce can of regular soda, punch, or unsweetened fruit juice daily adds up to 15 pounds of body weight per year.
4. Decrease portions. Use a smaller plate and eat slowly. You will feel satisfied with less food.
5. Eat more fruits and vegetables. Have a double portion of vegetables at lunch and supper and have several whole fruits a day.

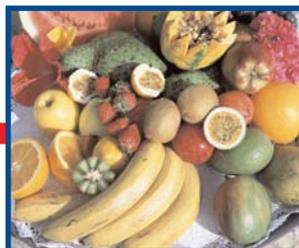
### Increase Your Physical Activity

Besides helping you lose weight, exercise by itself will help improve most obesity related diseases and conditions. A good goal is 30 minutes of physical activity per day above your normal activities, 60 minutes is even better.

### Get Involved in the *MOVE!* Program

The *MOVE!* Program has been set up to help veterans manage their weight and improve their health. Ask your provider for a referral to the *MOVE!* Program. If you go to a Community Based Outpatient Clinic, ask if they are doing the *MOVE!* program and how you can participate.

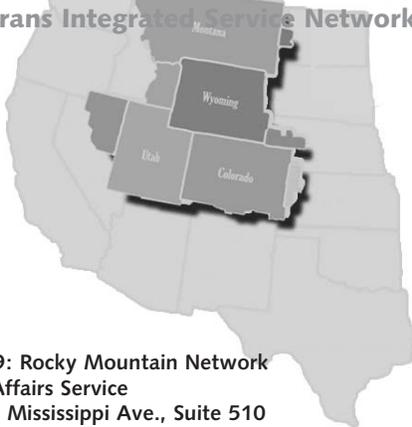
*“A good goal is 30 minutes of physical activity per day above your normal activities, 60 minutes is even better.”*



# The VA Rocky Mountain Network

*"To care for him who shall have borne the battle"*

## VA Rocky Mountain Health Care Network Veterans Integrated Service Network 19



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Glendale, CO 80246



We're on the web!  
<http://www.va.gov/visn19>

## Games With Heart ~ A Mile High Minute

Denver will host one of the world's most strenuous and spirited athletic competitions in July 2010, when more than 500 wheelchair athletes from across the United States, Puerto Rico and Great Britain will arrive to compete in the 30th National Veterans Wheelchair Games, Games with Heart a Mile High.

The Games, presented each year by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA), are open to all U.S. military veterans who use wheelchairs for sports competition because of spinal cord injuries, amputations, certain neurological conditions or other mobility impairments. The 2010 event will be hosted by the VA Eastern Colorado Health Care



System (VA ECHCS) and the Mountain States Chapter of Paralyzed Veterans of America (MS PVA) Competitive events take place July 4-9, 2010.

In December, representatives from VA ECHCS and MS PVA traveled to Omaha, Neb., 2008's host city, to attend a site visit. These trips allow local VA and PVA staff to learn more about the planning process and many steps required to prepare for the Games, with a goal to put on the best event possible.

2008 will bring exciting events for both the Chapter as well as VA ECHCS. Focus groups will be facilitated by VA ECHCS staff and allow MS PVA membership to provide valuable insight as to what they wish to see at the 2010 Games in Denver. Additionally, a kick-off event is planned for March for both organizations and will serve as a means to generate enthusiasm and awareness. Numerous fundraising events are in the planning stages – look for more information on these activities in future columns.

For additional information about sponsorship or volunteer opportunities for the 30th National Veterans Wheelchair Games, please contact Amanda Eckman at (720) 201-0455, or via email at [amanda.eckman@va.gov](mailto:amanda.eckman@va.gov).