VA expands transparency, accountability efforts

Becomes first agency to post information on adverse employee actions

WASHINGTON — Earlier this month, U.S. Secretary of Veterans Affairs David J. Shulkin announced that the Department of Veterans Affairs is taking a further step on transparency and accountability as a follow-on to the VA Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act signed by the president in June.

Beginning July 7, the department is making public a list of adverse employee actions taken since Jan. 20. This information is posted at http://www.va.gov/accountability, and will be updated weekly.

Secretary Shulkin pointed to the move as another step in long-sought transparency and accountability actions at VA, and noted that VA is the first federal agency to make such data public. “Under this administration, VA is committed to becoming the most transparent organization in government,” Shulkin said. “Together with the Accountability bill the president signed into law recently, this additional step will continue to shine a light on the actions we’re taking to reform the culture at VA.

“Veterans and taxpayers have a right to know what we’re doing to hold our employees accountable and make our personnel actions transparent,” he continued. “Posting this information online for all to see, and updating it weekly, will do just that.”

For privacy reasons, the adverse action list will not include employee names, but will give information on the position, VA region or administration and type of adverse or disciplinary action taken.

The list includes terminations, demotions and suspensions over 14 days since the new administration came into office Jan. 20. Additional categories of accountability actions will be included in upcoming releases.

In addition to posting the adverse action information, Secretary Shulkin announced that he is requiring approval by a senior official of any monetary settlement with an employee over the amount of $5,000. Any settlement above this amount will require the personal approval of the Under Secretary, Assistant Secretary or equivalent senior-level official within the organization in which the dispute occurs.

“Taxpayers need to know that we will engage in good faith settlement negotiations, where required by third parties, but will look to settle with employees only when they clearly have been wronged or when settlement is otherwise in Veterans’ and taxpayers’ best interests, and not as a matter of ordinary business,” Shulkin said. “We’re changing to a culture of accountability at VA, and this is an important step in that direction.”

Jeffrey Soots selected as Dorn VAMC’s associate director

Jeffrey A. Soots was appointed as Medical Center Associate Director of the William Jennings Bryan Dorn Veterans Affairs Medical Center effective July 9, 2017.

Soorts came to the VA after a 25-year career in the U.S Air Force. He is an innovative and visionary health care leader with more than 30 years of logistics and administrative experience in all levels health care. He is a native of Lenoir, North Carolina, and graduated from Hawaii Pacific University. He retired from the Air Force in 2009.

In his current role as Medical Center Associate Director, Soorts will have direct oversight of the eight administrative areas within the complex health care organization to include Business Office, Engineering, Fiscal, Human Resources, Logistics, Privacy / Freedom of Information, Prosthetics, Safety/Emergency Management, and Strategic Planning.

During his military career, Soorts served overseas for 15 years with assignments in Japan, Alaska and Hawaii. His positions include the Director of Consolidate Storage Kaneohe Marine Corps base Hawaii, Pacific Air Force Propulsion Superintendent for 3,500 personnel at nine dif-
NEW YORK — Late last month, Secretary of Veterans Affairs David J. Shulkin, M.D. unveiled the world’s most advanced commercial prosthetic — the Life Under Kinetic Evolution (LUKE) arm — during a visit to the VA New York Harbor Health Care System’s Manhattan campus.

The event also included a demonstration of the technology by the first Veteran amputees to receive the device.

A collaboration between VA, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) and industry, the LUKE Arm is the product of nearly eight years of testing and research, and holds the potential to significantly benefit Veterans and others with upper-extremity amputations.

Unlike less-advanced prosthetics, the entire LUKE arm can move as one unit, reducing the labor-intensive process of controlling one joint at a time. The LUKE arm also features the first commercially available powered shoulder, with up to 10 powered degrees of freedom.

Simply stated, the LUKE arm will help restore Veterans’ ability to perform a variety of one and two-handed activities.

With accompanying rehabilitation, recipients can use the LUKE arm to perform tasks, such as drinking from a glass, picking up small pieces of food to eat, cooking or gift-wrapping presents.

Fred Downs and Artie McAuley are the first Veterans to receive the LUKE arm, the world’s most advanced commercial prosthetic.

“The LUKE arm is a shining example of why VA exists,” Shulkin said. “There is no commercial market for this type of technology. The patient population is simply too small to motivate private companies to pursue these types of advancements on their own.

“This is why VA and its research efforts – efforts that could not be replicated in the private sector – are so important.”

Fred Downs added, “The technology has definitely been an improvement in my ability to perform daily activities, most notably in grasping. It’s useful when an opposing hand is needed, in the workshop or while cooking.”

In fiscal year 2016, VA provided care for nearly 90,000 Veterans with amputations, more than 20,000 of whom had upper-limb involvement.

The device is the first computer-driven prosthetic arm capable of multiple, simultaneous movements.
On the front lines: defending against the tiniest of enemies

by Jennifer Scales
Dorn VA Medical Center
Public Affairs

Shhhhh…..there is an unseen force that exists on every shift, for the protection of many at the William Jennings Bryan Dorn VA Medical Center in Columbia, S.C.

Members of this force, like many heroes we envision, wear protective clothing from the top of their hair to the soles of their feet, covering as much of their body with deliberate and true dedication in providing defense from even the smallest microbe of an enemy that would dare think about invading and obstructing the health care of patients.

The Sterile Process Service, led by Thaddeus Jennings, chief of the service, and Jwan Jackson, reusable medical equipment coordinator, both give credit to each other and a team of employees who remain steadfast in their commitment to ensuring that all critical and non-critical equipment meets the Veteran Affairs, the manufacturers, and the national needs for sterilization. SPS is the only area that processes sterilization for the whole facility.

Jackson goes into explaining some of the items that are involved in sterilization. “Most people are familiar with the gastro-intestinal aspect of a medical procedure, which would may consist of an endoscopy or a colonoscopy.”

With an endoscopy procedure, a doctor puts a tube-like instrument into the body to examine a person’s digestive tract; the colonoscopy allows a doctor to look at the inner lining of large intestine or colon, using a thin, flexible tube.

“Both procedures require equipment to be sterilized after each use. We also have sets, like the total knee set used to replace a knee; hip sets which are used for hip replacements; cataract sets which are used to remove cataracts and replace with lenses; hemostats which are clamps used in surgery to stop bleeding, so many other medical equipment items,” Jackson said.

Jennings, who manages the whole department, assures that every product provided is sterile. “We monitor biological requirements by ensuring that one is run with every load that needs to be sterilized, compared to other medical facilities that may run them less often,” Jennings said.

Patient safety and infection controls are at the top of the list for SPS and all the section does for the entire medical center. Their standards comply with not only the local Dorn VA Medical Center standards, but also those of the Veteran Affairs agency, the Association of periOperative Registered Nurses, and the Association for the Advancement of Medical Instruments, to name a few.

The Greenville Community-Based Outpatient Clinic is the only other facility which falls under Dorn that uses critical and semi-critical equipment for sterilization.

Non-critical sterilization items which use other methods for cleaning include wheelchairs, blood pressure cuffs, and scales.

Then there are those which fall in the disposable category such as different types of forceps, scissors, nail clippers, to name a few.

The SPS staff of 30-plus, which includes lead technicians for quality assurance and medical supply technicians, is always on the cusp of learning new methodologies of sterilization because with every instrument comes an instruction for use (IFU) from the manufacturer.

“We may have between 500-600 IFU’s on hand in our section,” Jennings said. “Even with new medical
The gift of music, songwriting presented to Dorn Veterans from Conner Foundation

Story by Jennifer Scales
Dorn Public Affairs Office

Yamaha and Ibanez acoustic guitars, Congo and Bongo drums, along with a full-size keyboard and stand were just a few of the instruments presented to the Veterans of the Wm. Jennings Bryan Dorn VA Medical Center, June 20 by the Christopher Conner Foundation of Lexington, S.C.

Chris, a local professional musician, singer songwriter, succumbed to lung cancer in 2007. He is known for being a part of Sourwood Honey, The Conner Brothers Band, and The South Band.

His sister, Kelly Rodgers, who was on hand to deliver the instruments, said that her brother was one of the nicest persons who ever lived. “The foundation was originally started to help with his medical bills, but after his death, this became a way for us to hold him near and dear to our hearts, and as therapy for the family.”

The foundation has extended its boundaries of help in the state by continuing to provide healing through music at various organizations such as children’s hospitals and for adults in need.

Karly Warren, a psychologist at Dorn VA Medical Center, was influential in getting the organization to take notice here.

“Reaching out to help the Veterans at Dorn VA Medical Center is a first-time for the foundation,” Rogers added.

In addition to the instruments, Brian Conner, brother of Chris and also an established professional musician, will be giving beginners music lessons on the instruments to the Veterans for the next seven weeks at the medical center.

“Music has a healing power,” Conner said. “I want to share with these Veterans that experience.”

A songwriting class will also add to the donation that is coming from the foundation, taught by Conner.

“Through songwriting, you get a chance to express yourself in a positive manner and express your feelings, which is something these Veterans may want to do,” Conner added.

Robert Davis and Latwister Wright just happened to be present during the delivery of the instruments and eagerly awaited their chance to experience the chance of learning to play one of them.

“I’m always trying to branch out to learn something new,” Davis said. “This is a great form of help for me and I am ready to learn.”

Wright stated, “This is definitely good therapy for me. I want to learn how to play the piano and I can’t wait for the next class. This gives me something to look forward to each week.”

The foundation was founded in honor of the late Chris Conner, a well-loved and highly-respected musician from Columbia. At age 36, at the height of his career, Chris was diagnosed with Stage IV lung cancer. Chris’ courageous 10-month battle with the deadly disease set an example of courage, faith and love for thousands.

Veterans Stuart Benjamin and Andrew E. Whitener, JR pound out a beat on the Congo drums donated by the Christopher Conner Foundation, June 20. Brian Conner, brother of the late Chris Conner, who will be offering weeks of instructions to the Veterans at the Dorn VAMC, looks on.

Air Force Veteran Robert Davis is serious about learning the instrument donated by the Christopher Conner Foundation. Davis is just one of many Veterans who will benefit from instruction given by Brian Conner, brother of the late Chris Conner.
Video games helps improve balance, get moving

by Bill Outlaw
Communications Manager
Office of Patient Care Services

When 69-year-old Vietnam Veteran Robert Brown was looking for ways to increase his balance and physical activity, he joined VA’s Wii Fit™ pilot research study at Little Rock, Ark. Motivated to lose weight, he overcame his concerns about falling and started walking and exercising again on a regular basis.

Brown and other Veterans took part in the VA-funded study led by Dr. Kalpana Padala at VA’s Geriatrics Research, Education and Clinical Center (GRECC) at the Central Arkansas Veterans Healthcare System in Little Rock.

Dr. Padala and Brown are pictured above along with research coordinator Christopher Parkes.

The study involved a randomly assigned group of 30 participants. Researchers used the Wii™ program, comparing results with a control group that completed computer-based mental exercises.

The Nintendo® Wii Fit™ Plus program includes a Wii console, Wii balance board, and Wii remote. It consists of balance games, yoga, strength training, aerobics and training plus (more advanced activities). Balance exercises involved posture control (e.g. Half Moon, Torso Twist), weight shifting (e.g. Ski Slalom), multidirectional balance (e.g. Table Tilt), and multidirectional balance while doing a mental activity (e.g. Perfect 10).

Combining activity with technology is the focus

The results showed 12 times greater improvement in balance among the older Veterans using the Wii Fit™ program compared to the control group. Results were published in the Journal of Aging Research. Dr. Padala said the study’s results show promise to help understand and improve mobility in older adults. “Combining physical activity with readily available technology is the focus of our research,” said Dr. Padala. “These exercise programs are most effective if they are readily available and easy to do.”

Army Veteran William Boehmer took part in the program and also had a positive experience. He suffered a serious spinal cord injury while serving in the first Gulf War and was nearly paralyzed at one point. His back had increasingly become worse after a series of operations and physical therapy.

Boehmer said the Wii Fit™ video games and exercise program have helped him the most. He used to have problems in doing simple things, like walking to the mailbox. But now he is skiing—albeit indoors — through use of the video and balance board. Boehmer said the balance board and video games require the participant to move and twist and turn while watching a video as if you are skiing on a course. The weight shifts and turns help in ways they don’t originally focus on for their balance.

“I could tell I was more balanced; my gait was better,” Boehmer said.

Thousands die from falls every year

Studies show that 22 percent of older adults living in the community fall each year. An estimated 2.8 million older adults get treated annually for falls, of which about 800,000 are hospitalized, and 27,000 die as a result of falls.

Dr. Padala said the long-term goal is to increase physical activity level in older adults and lower their risk of falls. “These results are very encouraging because balance and gait problems are very common in older adults and are important risk factors for falls. Falls in turn are associated with increased morbidity and mortality in the older adults,” Dr. Padala said.

Dr. Padala plans to apply for grant money to offer the program to a larger group of Veterans and to bring the program to peoples’ homes so it is readily available for the Veterans to use it.

“Expanding this program based on the research makes tremendous sense for us in VA because more than 50 percent of Veterans enrolled in VA’s health care system are over the age of 65,” said Dr. Richard Allman, Chief Consultant for VA’s Geriatrics and Extended Care (GEC) program.
Local Veteran group helps homeless Vet find homes

by Craig Currey
Transitions CEO

Recently, a HomeFront for homeless veterans was hosted in the Transitions Day Center in the downtown Columbia area. There were a total of thirteen homeless Veterans who were actual Transitions residents and three Veterans who were using Transitions available resources for that day.

Small packets of health care items were handed out to the homeless Veterans in attendance and a good lunch was enjoyed by all following the event.

Fourteen vendors were in attendance representing the Wm. Jennings Bryan Dorn VA Medical Center, the Southeast VA Regional office, the VA Health Care for the Homeless, the Women Veterans Program, HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing, One80 Place Supportive Services for Veteran Families, the National Guard, the South Carolina Department of Employment and Workforce (SCDEW), Telemon, Fast Forward, Goodwill Community Services Employment Program, SC Thrive, Hidden Wounds, and Project Josiah.

Two homeless Veterans were interviewed for a follow-up job through SCDEW.

A breakout session was hosted by the Midlands Veterans Engagement Council for those homeless Veterans who needed to voice their frustrations and discouragements.

The MVEC panel that consisted of Dan Hennigan, US Army retired; Colonel Ronald Taylor, chief of staff for the SCNG; Sherry Martell, with Dorn VA’s Homeless Services; Dr. Peter Warren, Dorn VA’s Suicide Prevention; and Craig Currey, Transitions CEO and US Army retired, listened to the Veterans.

All Sixteen homeless veterans chose to participate in the panel discussion, a first-ever panel for MVEC and Homefront. Seven Veterans voiced their concerns at that time. Out of the seven, four have been housed, one is awaiting housing placement, and one is now being seen by the Blue Team at the Dorn VAMC and awaiting benefits.

The clients responded well to the MVEC and VA leaders on the panel. They felt their concerns were being addressed as the above results show. The event was part of a sustained VA and local provider partnership to address homeless Veteran issues.

Transitions continues to be a strong meeting place for the homeless and will be the location for the larger Stand Down event for homeless veterans in November.

Instruments we receive, we hold it for 72 hour before it is used for the first time. The staff is educated on its sterilization procedures, and of course make sure it is safe for patient use.”

Jennings credits Jackson with spearheading the collaboration with other service lines in the medical facility who are in direct support with SPS. “We have relationships with Dental, Operation Room, Ear/Nose/Throat, Podiatry, Urology, and Dermatology,” Jackson said. “There are Champions and stakeholders in those departments which are instrumental in our policies and procedures.”

SPS is a field where a person is behind the scenes, but you make a huge impact, according to Jennings.

Having been an operating room nurse for her entire career, Jackson sees and still takes pride in what she does now. “We are able to speak confidently to the Veteran because we go beyond the standards. We also visit other for inspections and even share our best practices with them,” Jackson said.

“We are the frontline to defending and protecting our Veterans, from behind the scenes,” Jennings said. “We believe in best practices and we bring them to our customers.”

Soots’ VHA career begin as the Chief Logistics Officer in 2012 overseeing $110-million worth of equipment, $50-million worth of contracts, $30-million budget for all disposable medical supplies, 2.5-million reproductions, 1.5-million pieces of mail, 120,000 packages and distribution of 6,000 burial flags throughout the state of South Carolina. He has a varied background that includes consultative and administrative, educational and leadership roles.

“Soots establishes solid and viable partnerships to effectively and efficiently align with and support key strategic and business initiatives. He also builds and retains high performance teams by hiring, developing and motivating skilled professionals who are goal oriented, mission focused, results driven and value based.”

SPS from Page 3

So different bases in the Pacific theater, providing cradle-to-grave logistics management and lean initiatives as regional manager in production processes for over 750 aerospace propulsion engines valued at $3-billion dollars.

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  Anderson, SC 29621
  Tele (864) 224-5450

- **Greenville OPC**
  41 Park Creek Drive
  Greenville, SC 29605
  Tele (864) 299-1600

- **Spartanburg CBOC**
  279 North Grove Medical Plaza
  Spartanburg, SC 29303
  Tele (864) 582-7025

- **Florence CBOC**
  1822 Sally Hill Farms Blvd
  Florence, SC 29501
  Tele (843) 292-8383

- **Sumter CBOC**
  407 N. Salem Ave
  Sumter, SC 29150
  Tele (803) 938-9901

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  1767 Village Park Drive
  Orangeburg, SC 29118
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