



## EDITORIAL

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# Finally, Some Good News!

**A**ugust 2016 provided 2 impressive news stories. These stories have far more salience and granularity than I can begin to entertain in this brief editorial, but they show that the VA with all its systemic problems has unrivaled potential to promote what Aristotle called human flourishing.

A past director of mine greeted any small success or positive accomplishment of the facility and its employees with the folksy aphorism “You have to celebrate when you can in this outfit.” He was wise, for he knew that taking a respite to recognize a job well done is crucial to the emotional wellness of the workforce. And after that moment of satisfaction, everyone gets back to work at least a little bit recharged. So in this editorial, I will praise a few recent, unique VA achievements that underscore the importance of keeping the organization not only upright, but also doing right.

On August 1, President Obama announced that since 2010 veteran homelessness had been reduced by almost half. VA Secretary Robert A. McDonald also applauded a 56% decrease in unsheltered homeless veterans. Yet just as quickly, he refocused the collaborating agencies on the goal of ending veteran homelessness, which seemed a long shot when initially announced but now seems to have a realistic chance of success. “Although this achievement is noteworthy, we will not rest until every veteran in need is permanently housed,” McDonald said.

Three large government agencies and extensive partnerships cooper-

ated to keep 360,000 veterans and their families from being homeless. But each veteran also had the outreach and support of a HUD-VASH (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and VA Supportive Housing) worker and counterparts in the community. It is hard to see how any other health care organization could leverage this large an effort or would choose to dedicate its federal, state, and city resources to meet a need so basic that without it few persons can move up Maslow’s hierarchy of human actualization.

The same week the VA Research and Development program gave all of us in federal service a reason to hold up our collective heads a little higher announcing that the Million Veteran Program (MVP) had enrolled its 500,000th participant, making it the largest genomic database in the world. Once again, it is difficult to imagine any other health care organization, except another federal agency like the National Institutes of Health, mounting such an ambitious research initiative.

The MVP offers a databank—the likes of which has never been assembled—to study some of the most common and debilitating conditions, such as mental illness, substance use, and kidney and heart disease among many others. The combination of environmental genetics and clinical and psychosocial data will open doors of discoveries for thousands of people, veteran and nonveteran alike. Secretary McDonald applauded the most important ethical aspect of the project, the incomparable altruism of veterans,

“Many of our veterans have saved lives on the battlefield and because of their participation in MVP, their participation has the potential to save countless lives—now and for generations to come.”

These 2 amazing initiatives have more in common than may seem apparent at first glance. Besides their intrinsic worth in humanist service and scientific creativity, respectively, putting veterans in homes and constructing a repository of scientific knowledge show that the VA—once accused of being a dinosaur ignoring the plummeting temperatures of its own ice age—has demonstrated remarkable instantiation of the I CARE Core Characteristics of agility and innovation (available at <http://www.va.gov/icare>) in the campaign to end homelessness and the MVP initiative.

These good-news stories celebrate the immense power of the VA to change the world for the better. This is reason enough to keep the faith that VA will emerge from the hearings and the headlines as a workforce proud of their privilege to care for veterans and contribute to the common good. ●

### *Author disclosures*

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