

2005

This year, NOVA took a new approach to educating members of Congress regarding VA issues by holding a legislative briefing for members of the House and Senate Veterans Committees' staff. Legislative staff members were invited to a briefing held Thursday, January 13, 2005, in the Cannon Office Building to meet members of the NOVA Board of Directors, other Congressional colleagues, and learn more about nursing in the VA. Members of NOVA's Legislative Committee provided information on NOVA and veteran's issues. NOVA President Dianne Nelson began the briefing with an introduction to NOVA. Legislative Committee Co-Chair Ron Hopper presented information on NOVA's history, including information on News From NOVA, the annual meeting, lobbying power and previous legislative accomplishments, including passage of S2484 during the 108th Congress. Legislative Committee Chair Cecilia McVey presented an overview of VA nursing and emphasized that NOVA's greatest concern this year is with the budget. Other issues concern locality pay and hiring nursing assistants. She reviewed statistics related to nursing, the nursing shortage, and its impact on providing care to our nation's veterans.

Legislative Committee member Mary Raymer presented information on the National Commission on VA Nursing recommendations, the nurse qualifications standards, and recruitment and retention issues. VA nurses are more highly educated than those in the private sector, with 58% compared to 44% holding a baccalaureate degree or higher. The VA employs more associate degree nurses now than before changes were made to the qualifications standards, 22%. VA employs more male nurses than the private sector, 11% to 4%. Information on scholarship programs and other innovative programs was also shared. In addition, each legislative assistant received a folder with the following documents: Attaining and Retaining a Quality VHA Nursing Workforce, winter issue of News from NOVA, brief NOVA history, and Nurse Qualifications Standards Update.

NOVA held its twelfth Annual Legislative Roundtable on January 14, 2005 at the DAV National Headquarters in Washington, DC. This forum provided an opportunity for key stakeholders in veterans' issues to gather and share information. NOVA Legislative Chair Cecilia McVey opened the roundtable by presenting information on VA nursing issues and concerns, specifically the VA budget. She discussed passage of Senate Bill 2484 this past year which resulted in changes in physician pay, nurse executive pay, and flexibility for nurse scheduling.

Major recommendations from the National Commission on VA Nursing Report were also highlighted including the nurse executive's role and relationship in the medical facility, with line authority for nursing care and how it is delivered; the work environment, including respect and collaboration among all members of the interdisciplinary team; workplace safety; and recruitment and retention of nurses.

Other topics and issues presented included:

*Concern for VA healthcare budget in light of proposed cuts, including a plan for changing eligibility--limiting VA care to service-connected and indigent patients only which has been proposed by House Veterans Affairs Committee Chair Steven Buyer

*Critical importance of getting the message out regarding the impact of the proposed budget cuts on VA's missions of patient care, education, and research

*Support for mandatory funding proposal for VA healthcare

- *Need for creative alternatives for VA budget
- *National Office of Nursing Services Nursing Strategic Plan developed and presented last May to nursing staff in all facilities
- *“Best Care Anywhere”—article in the January issue of the Washington Monthly describing VA healthcare
- *VA response to the National Nursing Commission Report with support for all initiatives, including support in principle for nurse executive responsibility for practice and nursing personnel
- *Needed legislation for addressing LPN and other pay caps and direct hire of nursing assistants
- *Use of contract care options within the VA
- *Reality of the nursing shortage in the VA healthcare system and efforts at recruitment and retention
- *Clinical Nurse Leader proposal and concerns of Advanced Practice Nurses
- *Work environment issues including safe patient handling and the impact on recruitment and retention
- *Impact of Magnet criteria on nurse recruitment and retention
- *New look of both the Senate and House Veterans Affairs Committees due to new leadership and members
- *Future look of the VA healthcare system in the 21st century

Participants included: NOVA Board of Directors President Dianne Nelson, Past President Vincent Elliott, Vice President Cecilia McVey, Treasurer Mary Raymer, Membership Secretary Nancy Claflin, Secretary Larry Lemos, Directors Linda-Dell Archuleta, Ron Hopper, Beverly Ross, Cindy Wilkinson, Director of Administration Maggie Sullivan, and Executive Director Deborah Beck; NOVA Foundation Chair Jayma Hall and Vice Chair Margaret Kruckemeyer; Department of Veterans Affairs Chief Nursing Officer Cathy Rick, RN, CHE, CNAA and Program Director Karen Ott, RN MSN; Association of VA Nurse Anesthetists President Carol Craig CRNA, President-Elect Maureen Reilly CRNA, PhD, and Executive Director Laura Cohen, CRNA; Friends of Medical Care and Health Research Executive Committee Member Barbara West; American Association of Colleges of Nursing Director of Government Relations Debbie Campbell RN, MSN, and Associate Director Francesca Fierro O’Reilly; American Nurses Association Director Government Affairs Rose Gonzalez MPS, BSN, RN, and Associate Director Michelle Artz; Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs Professional Staff/Majority Bill Cahill, and Professional Staff/Minority Kim Lipsky; American Legion Assistant Director of Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation Division Don Mooney; Disabled American Veterans Assistant Director for Legislative Affairs Joy Ilem; and Veterans of Foreign Wars Assistant Director of Health Policy Michael O’Rourke

On January 19, the day before the Inauguration of President Bush, NOVA Executive Director Deborah Beck attended Secretary Principi’s Farewell Reception. A wonderful video celebrating his commitment to our Nation’s veterans and his many accomplishments during his tenure as Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) showcased this reception. During these challenging economic times, Secretary Principi’s enthusiasm energized all VA employees and motivated them to focus on the VA’s mission and to be devoted and committed to the women and men who have served

our country with dignity, compassion and respect. He was always committed to duty, honor and service. Under Secretary Principi's leadership, the VA

- *Increased the number of patients served

- *Decreased processing times

- *Oversaw the greatest cemetery growth since the Civil War

- *Increased quality in both decision making as well as in health care

Secretary Principi's sons, Tony and Ryan, joined him for this special event. His final remarks as the VA Secretary were very moving and poignant. NOVA members will deeply miss Secretary Principi.

Also in January, 2005, Jim Nicholson was sworn in as the new Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs. During his confirmation hearing, Senate VA Committee Chairman Larry Craig praised his background and noted, "You will succeed a man who will be a tough act to follow." Chairman Craig said the fiscal environment he is inheriting will be considerably less friendly than the past four years.

On February 9, 2005, the Chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, Jerry Lewis from California, announced a major change in the organization of the House Appropriations Committee. The greatest impact of these changes falls on the VA-HUD and Defense Subcommittees. The functions of the District of Columbia, Legislative, and Veterans, Housing, and Independent Agencies were merged into other subcommittees. The House Appropriations Committee reorganized into ten subcommittees. The Military Quality of Life and Veterans Affairs Subcommittee is now responsible for the following from the current VA-HUD Subcommittee: Veterans Affairs; American Battle Monuments Commission; Cemeterial Expenses, Army (Arlington Cemetery), and Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims. It is also responsible for the following from the Defense Subcommittee: Basic Allowance for Housing; Facilities Sustainment, Repair and Modernization; Defense Health Programs; and Environmental Programs.

On April 20, 2005, the NOVA Foundation held its 25th Silver Anniversary Gala and fundraiser.

The kick off to the annual conference began with a star studded evening to remember and a special guest appearance by Naomi Judd at the Gala. This year, NOVA celebrated its 25th Silver Anniversary as an organization. The fund raising event and Silver Anniversary Gala entitled "A Galaxy of Future Stars" was held at the Hyatt in Crystal City. Highlights of the program included a private reception with Naomi Judd and Secretary Principi followed by the awards banquet and keynote address by Naomi Judd. Naomi, who is also a registered nurse, retired from her music career due to a life-threatening diagnosis of Hepatitis C in 1990. Since her recovery, Naomi has been on the lecture circuit sharing her life experiences and inspiring people with her story. Naomi Judd shared her life experiences dealing with Hepatitis C. Naomi also autographed her book, entitled "Naomi's Breakthrough Guide – Twenty Choices to Transform your Life" attendees enjoyed dancing the night away to the sounds of a music ensemble and vocalist provided by Sydney Banda and Friends. The NOVA Foundation has been instrumental in raising funds for nursing scholarships and research. The proceeds from Naomi's book signing and the silent auction enhanced the fund raising efforts throughout the evening. It was a wonderful opportunity to meet old and new NOVA Foundation friends on the evening before the Annual NOVA meeting celebrating 25 years of caring for America's Veterans. The gala was attended by many to applaud the Honorable Anthony J. Principi

as he accepted the G. V. “Sonny” Montgomery Award from the NOVA Foundation for his commitment to and support of VA nursing. In addition to current veterans who attended the gala were active duty military men and women. Those future veterans will depend on quality healthcare from VA nurses.

The NOVA Foundation developed a strategic plan to increase their support of nursing scholarships and research grants, including strengthening their board. Recognizing that Veterans Service Organizations know the impact that VA nurses have on quality veteran care, in addition to representation from Joy Ilem, DAV, they appointed Velma Hart, AMVETS, Peter Gayton, American Legion, and Michael O’Rourke, Veterans of Foreign Wars. They also appointed Daniel Persut, PH.D, RN, APRN, BC, FAAN, President, Sigma Theta Tau International to the Honorary Board. The Foundation is also raising funds through the sale of VA Nurses caring for America’s Heroes bumper stickers.

The 2005 Annual Educational Program in Washington, DC was outstanding. Audrey Drake, RN, MSN, CNA, Program Director/Nursing Services, opened the program on Wednesday afternoon with a pre-conference seminar on professional practice. Her discussion of the nurse professional standards board process and nurse qualifications standards was greatly appreciated by the audience. She was followed by Jim de la Torre from Gallagher Benefit Services who discussed retirement options, providing NOVA members with valuable information for both FERS and CSRS options. Wednesday evening, over 135 members and guests took part in the NOVA Foundation Gala at the Crystal City Hyatt.

On Thursday morning, participants were informed and entertained by a presentation by Kathleen Lambert, on “Nursing and Political Activism.” Her presentation was followed by the Veterans Service Organization Panel featuring Joy Ilem from the DAV, Peter Gayton from the American Legion, and Rich Jones from AMVETS who discussed concerns with the VA budget. The next panel represented the Senate and House Veterans Affairs Committee staff, including Susan Edgerton, from the House Minority staff, Bill Cahill, from the Senate Majority staff, and Alex Sardena, from the Senate Minority staff. The panel gave participants a glimpse of Congressional thoughts for veterans’ services. Attendees were sorry to say farewell to Susan Edgerton, who is leaving her position to become a full time mother.

NOVA’s 25th Annual Meeting in Washington, DC was a tremendous success. Over 100 nurses descended on Capitol Hill to make their voices heard and share stories about the crisis in the VA. Budget shortfalls impact veterans and the staff who care for and support them. Legislators need to hear these stories. Prior to the Annual Meeting, the National Office staff had divided the participants into 14 state delegations: Arizona; California; Colorado; Florida; Georgia; Kansas; Maryland; Massachusetts; New Jersey; New York; North Carolina; Ohio; Texas; and Virginia. Appointments were made for each delegation to meet with their two Senators. Four buses transported everyone to Capitol Hill en masse and dropped everyone in front of the Dirksen Senate Office Building.

They were off to tell their stories, and tell their stories they did. Everyone was empowered and realized how important and powerful they are. Senator Daniel Akaka (D-Hawaii), Ranking Minority Member of the Senate VA Committee, reiterated this with these words, “NOVA is a tremendous organization – not just for what the organization

does – but because of who you are: nurses caring for veterans. Legislators heard these voices loud and clear.

- *VA hospitals and clinics are suffering under severe funding shortages, which means overtime hours and overburdened nurses.

- *The FY 2005 Emergency Supplemental provides more than \$80 billion for the ongoing war, yet not one dime has been included for VA care.

- *Over 20 percent of returning service members are now seeking care at the VA.

- *Care needs to be provided to those who are returning without displacing those veterans currently using the system.

- *Because of budget shortfalls, some clinics and hospitals have stopped seeing even the poorest of patients – sending them hundreds of miles away to other facilities.

- *Old medical equipment cannot be updated, and nursing home beds are being closed.

- *It is nearly impossible to care for the current veteran population, but it will be impossible to care for returning veterans in the midst of this kind of situation.

Senate visits were followed by a Congressional briefing for legislative aids for veterans issues. Senator Akaka opened the briefing with poignant remarks about his and Senator Patty Murray's (D-WA) efforts to get an amendment attached to the Iraq Supplemental for nearly two billion dollars for VA health care. They made the case that emergency funds are necessary this year to improve care at VA hospitals. Only one Senator from the other side of the aisle, Senator Arlen Specter, former Chairman of the VA Committee, voted for the amendment. Senator Akaka concluded by saying, "I tell you this not to discourage you but to energize you. I know that your voices are strong. And you – better than most – can tell the story about what kind of resources are needed for VA health care. Members are eager to hear from you."

Friday morning participants heard from Deputy Under Secretary for Health Gordon Mansfield on the issues facing the VA. His presentation was followed by a town hall meeting and panel discussion with Cathy Rick, RN, CNAA, FACHE, Chief Nursing Officer, Department of Veterans Affairs and her staff, including Audrey Drake, Deputy Director, responsible for professional practice and the qualifications standards; Rose Paradis, responsible for workforce development, recruitment and retention; Oyweda Moorer, responsible for technology and system design; Anna Alt-White, responsible for research and advanced practice; Karen Ott, responsible for academic and legislative initiatives; Michael Grove, responsible for education and training initiatives for qualifications standards and facilitating other work groups; and Becky Kellen, responsible for clinical and data management. Sandra Janzen, RN MS CNAA, Nurse Executive from the VA's first magnet facility, Tampa, ended the morning with a presentation on magnet status. After the awards luncheon, participants attended the annual business meeting, followed by committee meetings.

Saturday morning, Anne Lafond and Brenda Faas, social workers from the Washington, DC VAMC, gave an eye-opening presentation on "Serving Our Newest Veterans." The new veterans are younger, with a higher level of athletic functioning and an amazing recovery rate, more female, have more polytraumatic injuries, are more knowledgeable about health care options, and expect immediate gratification. This was followed by an emotionally charged panel presentation of four generations of veterans, moderated by Joycelyn King. June Springer represented World War II; Tom Porter

represented the Korean War; Carroll Williams represented the Vietnam War, and Juanita Wilson and Wasim Khan represented the Iraq War,

Christa Hojlo, RN DNSc, Chief VA Nursing Home Program, gave a presentation on the “Cultural Transformation of the VA Nursing Home.” The conference ended on an uplifting note with a presentation by Mary Seaman on “Nursing: Reach for the Stars.” Larry Lemos, Conference Chair, closed the program and invited participants to the 26th Annual Meeting in Miami, FL, next spring

NOVA honored nurses at an Awards luncheon during the conference. The Professional Nurse Award for Clinical Excellence recognized the work of Jeanette McCain, Nurse Practitioner at the James A. Haley VA Medical Center in Tampa, FL (JAHVAMC). She was the first master’s prepared nurse practitioner hired by the institution and has continued her work for the past 17 years. Her leadership and excellent clinical skills have led to the expansion of over 70 nurse practitioners in many different areas. Ms. McCain is the JAHVAMC’s Heart Transplant Coordinator and Primary Care Provider where she is responsible for coordinating needs with community transplant centers and VA Transplant Centers throughout the country. She is innovative, knowledgeable, and a mentor and role model for other nurses.

The Distinguished Service Award was given to Bill Cahill, Legislative Assistant for Senator Larry Craig, Chairman of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee. He has supported adequate funding for VA health care, has been a strong voice for VA nurses, supported an environment in VA health care which makes VA the employer of choice, and supported legislation to make the VA the leader in quality health care. Mr. Cahill has been active in the annual NOVA Legislative Roundtable sessions. He is committed to VA nurses and VA health care. He not only talks the talk, but also walks the walk as is demonstrated by the magnitude of his actions.

The Barbara Chambers Award was given to Vince Elliott. He has been a nurse in the VA since 1982 and is currently a Clinical Nurse Specialist at the Mental Health Clinic in San Jose, a part of the Palo Alto Health Care System. He has been involved on the NOVA Board since 1993 as Director, Treasurer, Vice-President, President, and Immediate Past President. Under his leadership since 1986, the Palo Alto Chapter has consistently had the largest active membership in NOVA with 229 current members. He was the first editor of Hot News, led the development of the NOVA Newsletter, led legislative interventions, and has been involved in every annual conference since 1990.

The Silver Star Chapter Award is a new award this year and was awarded to the Palo Alto Chapter. The Palo Alto Chapter currently has 229 active members, more than any other chapter. This chapter has quarterly board meetings where they plan quarterly membership educational programs that include an all-day Annual Meeting every January. There have had many members on the National NOVA Board of Directors including past Presidents. The Palo Alto Chapter continues to support the NOVA Foundation in the pursuit of supporting nursing education and research. This chapter also has the distinction of having initiated a resolution at a NOVA Annual Meeting regarding crediting sick leave for FERS employees. NOVA’s support of this concept contributed to legislation, including the recently passed bill that gave employees enrolled in FERS the benefit of crediting sick leave for retirement, similar to the benefit enjoyed by employees enrolled in CSRS.

Highlights from the 2005 Annual Meeting included the announcement of the

NOVA dental program, administered by Gallagher Benefit Services, available to all VA employees. The accounting firm retained to conduct a review of NOVA's finances for the fiscal year reported assets of \$58,775 and liabilities of \$28,395, leaving NOVA with assets of \$30,380 as of June 30, 2004. Dianne Nelson created panels for the NOVA Gala showing 25 years of NOVA and U. S. History, which will become part of NOVA's history. The NOVA Foundation Board applied for the CFC designation. NOVA increased the number of chapter contacts from 49 to 91. The Chapter Starter Kit, which was begun by Dianne Nelson, was updated and sent to all chapters. For the first time, each member was mailed a copy of the Annual Report and Membership Listing. Results of the NOVA membership survey were shared. Over 11% of the membership responded. Outgoing board member Beverly Ross was recognized with a plaque for her service to the NOVA board of directors. Teller Catherine Bailey submitted the election results as follows: President Elect: Cecilia McVey; Vice President: Mary Raymer; Treasurer: Ron Hopper; Secretary: Larry Lemos; Board members: Linda Archuleta, Magalene James, and Cheryl Knowles. Committee assignments for 2005-2006 are: Legislative: Cecelia McVey, assisted by Ron Hopper; Membership: Nancy Claflin; Annual Meeting 2006: Joan Clifford; Awards: Linda-Dell Archuleta assisted by Dianne Nelson; Nominations: Vince Elliott; Publications: Nancy Claflin. Hot News; Joan Clifford.

The NOVA board approved a plan to allow individual Local NOVA Chapters to have a presence on the Web at a very minimal cost. Geo-Net Marketing & Design, who designed and maintains the NOVA National Website – www.vanurse.org – put together a plan making a webpage affordable for every local chapter.

Dr. Jonathan B. Perlin was sworn in as the Under Secretary for Health in the Department of Veterans Affairs. VA's health care system includes 196,500 health care professionals, 125,000 volunteers, 80,000 health profession trainees and 25,000 affiliated medical faculty. Dr. Perlin, who was sworn in by Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs Gordon H. Mansfield, serves as the chief executive officer of the nation's largest integrated health care system, which treats more than 5 million people annually with a budget of nearly \$30 billion. "Dr. Perlin is a man of great skill and boundless compassion," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs R. James Nicholson. "America's veterans are lucky to have him lead VA's health care system." A native of Maryland, Dr. Perlin earned an M.D. and a Ph.D. in pharmacology from Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) in Richmond, VA. He later served on the staff at the Medical College of Virginia Hospitals at VCU and continues to hold an adjunct faculty appointment there. "I'm honored by the trust shown by Secretary Nicholson, President Bush and the Senate," Dr. Perlin said. "And I'm grateful for the opportunity to serve our nation's veterans." Dr. Perlin, a Fellow of the American College of Physicians, has held several appointments at Richmond VA Medical Center, and moved to the Department's Washington headquarters in 1999, serving as chief quality and performance officer, deputy under secretary for health, acting chief of research and development, and acting under secretary for health.

On July 21, 2005, the House Veterans Affairs Committee held a hearing to discuss with VA officials HR 3130, the Veterans' Healthcare Supplemental Appropriations Act. This bill was passed on June 30, 2005 and appropriated an additional \$965 billion in supplemental funds for the 2005 fiscal year. The Board of Directors was in Washington, DC for a meeting the following day and was able to attend this hearing. It was the first time many Board members had attended a Congressional

hearing.

Upon the passing of HR 3130, a Department of Veterans Affairs press release stated, "Secretary Nicholson said the administration will reassess the fiscal year 2005 budget and in the near future submit an amended veterans' budget for fiscal year 2006." The purpose of the hearing was to investigate the miscalculation of funds for the 2005 and 2006 fiscal years. Under Secretary for Health Jonathan B. Perlin, MD, PhD, MSHA, FACP was the lead witness for the Department of Veterans Affairs. The House Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman Steve Buyer (R-IN) sought answers from the VA regarding its request for an additional \$1.9 billion for FY 06 to fund higher-than-expected veteran's health care needs. The proposed FY 2006 budget amendment included: \$300 million to replenish carry-over funds to be expended in FY 2005 to cover the increase in average cost per patient; \$677 million to cover an estimated additional 2 percent increase in the number of patients expected to seek care in FY 2006; \$400 million increase in recognition of the expected cost of providing more costly treatment; and \$600 million to correct for the estimated cost of long term care.

This was a very informative and educational process for board members that had never attended a Congressional hearing. The NOVA board members all wanted to give support to Dr. Perlin in his quest to obtain additional funding for our veterans. The NOVA and NOVA Foundation Board members in attendance had a picture taken with Chairman Buyer and thanked him for his oversight of this committee and its continued support to ensure that our veterans have the access to healthcare that they deserve.

Earlier that day there was a ceremony at DAR Constitution Hall commemorating the Department of Veterans Affairs 75 years of service attended by the NOVA Board members. The ceremony included remarks by Vice President Dick Cheney introduced by Michael Debakey. Adrian Kronauer, on whom the movie "Good Morning Vietnam" was based, served as master of ceremonies. The Marine Corps band provided entertainment as veterans from different eras were honored, including a World War I veteran. Each members in attendance received a commemorative pin. Chairman Buyer also stated, "On the 75h anniversary of the VA, let us move forward, with a firm resolve to ensure that our veterans and their families know that the VA has every dime it needs to provide the best heath care and services possible. To do any less is unacceptable".

A budget that includes additional FY 2005 and 2006 funding for the Department of Veterans' Affairs was passed by both the House of Representatives and the Senate. The Senate authorized adding \$1.5 billion to the Interior Appropriations bill on a 99-1 vote and the House approved the spending by a 410-10 vote. VA officials in June told Congress that its healthcare system will end FY 2005 with a \$1 billion deficit. The VA had said it could make up the deficit by using surpluses and other operational funds, but next year's budget would again include a \$1 billion deficit. "I am cautiously optimistic that VA and the Office of Management and Budget have gotten it right this time. Working with Congress, they submitted an FY 2005 and 2006 budget amendment that identified the needs for an additional \$2.952 billion. This bill provides a \$1.5 billion down payment that goes towards meeting that identified need," said Chairman of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs Larry Craig, R-Idaho, in a press statement. The additional \$1.5 billion raised VA's FY 2005 healthcare budget to more than \$28 billion. Under the legislation, any of the funding not spent in FY 2005 will carry over into FY 2006. In mid-July, President Bush asked Congress to add a \$1.977 billion to the FY 2006

budget and \$975 million for FY 2005.

One of our NOVA Baltimore Chapter 218 nurses, Diane Bailey, was featured in an article by the Washington Post in Washington, DC. The Washington Post, August 22, 2005, article entitled, "Revamped Veterans' Health Care Now a Model", Staff Writer Gilbert M. Gaul reported," For years, the Department of Veterans Affairs' sprawling health care system was criticized by veterans groups and government investigators as a dangerous backwater of medicine. But in the past decade, largely unnoticed by the public, the system has undergone a dramatic transformation and is now considered by some to be a model. Researchers laud the VA for its use of electronic medical records, its focus on preventive care and its outstanding results. The system outperforms Medicare and most private health plans on many quality measures, including diabetes care, managing high blood pressure and caring for heart attack patients. Demand at veterans clinics and hospitals is soaring – so much so that Congress last month appropriated \$1.5 billion in emergency funds to cover a budget shortfall that the department did not anticipate.

Some experts point to the VA makeover as a lesson in how the nation's troubled health system might be able to heal itself. Since 1995, the VA says, the number of patients it is treating has doubled, to about 5.2 million. At the same time, the department reports that it has trimmed its staff by about 12,000 people, opened hundreds of outpatient clinics and shifted its focus to primary care, while cutting costs per patient by about half. "If we've proved anything...in the last 10 years, it is that quality is less expensive", said Jonathan B. Perlin, acting undersecretary for health. The VA's new medicine is on display at the bedside. One recent morning in Room 148 on the third floor of the Baltimore VA Medical Center, nurse Diane Bailey prepared to give Francis Xavier Lee, 79, a World War II veteran, medication for asthma. A large part of that shift is the result of the investment in computers. Perlin estimated that it costs the VA about \$78 per patient per year to operate the electronic health record. "Roughly the equivalent of not repeating one blood test," he said. Later this year, the VA plans to allow patients to access their electronic medical records over the Internet through its My HealthVet program. "the patient is often the forgotten partner in health care," Perlin said. Sharing the records "recognized a person has interests in how his care is managed." The target for the rollout: Veterans Day in November.' This article truly gave the VA a positive image for a change.

On August 22, 2005, Laura Miller began a long-term detail in the Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information in the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). She had served four years as Deputy Under Secretary for Health for Operations and Management. In her new job, she will help to implement President Bush's vision for widespread adoption of interoperable electronic health records within the next ten years. Dennis M. (Max) Lewis was designated Acting Deputy Under Secretary for Health for Operations and Management. Mr. Lewis is a 35-year VA employee and a Presidential Rank Award recipient. He has had fifteen permanent assignments at VA facilities during his career. Mr. Lewis is the Assistant Deputy Under Secretary for Health for Operations and Management, and is also serving as the Acting Director of VISN 20 in the Pacific Northwest.

Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans on August 31. VA nurses watched in horror the effects of Hurricane Katrina as she washed ashore in New Orleans, Gulfport and

Biloxi. The flooding was devastating, as well as the physical damage to homes and other structures. Katrina continued to leave a wake of destruction as she headed north, finally losing force and subsiding, but not before inflicting other damage on structures and lives. Our thoughts and prayers were with our fellow citizens along the Gulf Coast who suffered so much from Hurricane Katrina. The same goes for our colleagues who worked diligently to fulfill their mission at VA facilities throughout the disaster area. This was a trying time for everyone, particularly VA employees with family and loved ones in the region. The most critical patients were successfully evacuated on Tuesday from the New Orleans VA Medical Center following extensive flooding and power outages. They began evacuating the remaining patients Thursday morning, moving them to other VA medical centers in Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas, and the evacuation of employees and family members from the flooded medical center was completed on Friday. The Gulfport, MS, VA Medical Center took the brunt of Katrina, but it was evacuated before the storm hit, with all patients moved safely to other VA medical centers. Crews cleared roads at the VA Gulf Coast Veterans Health Care System in Biloxi, and that facility was one of two hospitals still operating in that community. More than 750 VA employees volunteered for relief duty in the stricken areas and evacuation sites. Many donated funds to assist VA employees in the disaster area. A VA employee relief fund was created.. A month later, Hurricane Rita caused major flooding in Texas and Louisiana. VA employees responded to assist with disaster relief. Relief shelters were staffed by VA nurses in Marlin and Waco, Texas.

The total discretionary spending for the fiscal year 2006 Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Appropriations bill approved by House and Senate Conference committees was \$44.14 billion. Overall, the conference agreement by the House and Senate recommends over \$70 billion for the Department of Veterans Affairs. Of this amount, \$36.995 billion was for mandatory programs (benefits and compensation) and \$31.818 billion was for discretionary programs. There is an additional \$1.225 billion in contingent emergency funding for medical services to fill a budget shortfall disclosed in June, which requires President Bush to declare the funding an emergency before he can use it. The emergency designation allows appropriators to remain below budget caps. The bill provided an 8.5 percent funding increase over fiscal 2005 as well as an increase of 0.8 percent over the president's budget request. The priorities reflected in the conference agreement show an increase for mental health for veterans, treatment of post traumatic stress disorder, and additional funding into Gulf War Illness research.

In a new program by the NOVA Foundation to donate to the NOVA foundation in honor of a colleague, the following were the first recipients honored. The colleagues of Jean Revak, RN donated \$250 to the NOVA Foundation to honor her nearly 40 years of service at the Erie, Pennsylvania VAMC. Jean retired from the VA on September 30, 2005. The majority of her nursing career was dedicated to caring for our veterans. She served in many roles during her tenure at the medical center. For many years, Jean was head nurse of the surgical unit where she mentored all levels of nursing. She worked closely with and earned the respect of physicians and other allied health care professionals. Jean also worked in nursing education, utilization review and was instrumental in implementing a wound clinic. Jean was sought out by her peers for her expertise in all aspects of nursing. She always put her patients and staff first. We have

been honored to call Jean a colleague and friend, and the veterans have been fortunate to call her nurse.

NOVA President Dianne Nelson's husband's company, GLHN Architects & Engineers, was established in 1963. It is an employee-owned, multidiscipline firm of more than 40 full-time employees. GLHN works for major universities through the West and Midwest, large governmental agencies such as the Department of Veterans Affairs and Bureau of Land Management, local municipalities, and clients in private industry like Qwest/AT&T and Grubb & Ellis. GLHN sponsored two \$1,500 NOVA Foundation scholarships for the 2005/06 academic year. GLHN Architects & Engineers honored President Dianne Nelson with a scholarship in her name. She has been on the NOVA Board of Directors since 1997 and has worked tirelessly to enhance health care in the Department of Veterans Affairs. Dianne graduated from the University of Arizona with a Bachelor of Science in Nursing in 1973 and immediately began her nursing career at the Southern Arizona VA Health Care System in Tucson. Dianne is a staff nurse in the Telehealth Program. Dianne has been an active NOVA Member since 1992, serving as Tucson Chapter President, and then joining the National Board of Directors in 1997. She has been NOVA's Membership Secretary and the Editor of the NOVA publications, NEWS FROM NOVA, Legislatively Speaking and the Membership Directory. She has served as Vice President, President-Elect, and President. Additionally, she serves on the Veterans Health Administration Registered Nurse Qualification Standards Implementation Steering Committee. In all of her NOVA roles, Dianne strives to provide services that will keep NOVA members interested, energized and engaged.

Thomas F. Fiala's family made a \$50 contribution to the NOVA Foundation in honor of his passing on April 5, 2005. He was born in 1925 and worked at the Hines VA from 1960 to 1985. Tom was one of the founders of NOVA and wrote the first draft of the NOVA Articles of Incorporation and bylaws in the spring of 1980. He served two terms as the First Vice President and was on the Board since its inception. He served on the Historical Committee, the "Adopt a Chapter" Committee and many others. He received the 1985 Barbara Chambers Award as part of the NOVA Founder's Group. He declined to serve as an officer in 1984 because of his pending retirement from the VA in January 1986. As an anecdote for NOVA's 1st Annual Meeting in 1981 at the Bismarck Hotel in Chicago, he had to write a personal check to cover the hotel deposit. He was later reimbursed, but it demonstrates his commitment to NOVA. His daughter, Marsha Rasmussen, says, "I am very proud of my Dad and his accomplishments in the VA service and with NOVA.

By a vote of 408-0, the U.S. House of Representatives passed H.R. 4061, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Information Technology (IT) Management Improvement Act of 2005. After years of cost overruns, mismanagement and lack of accountability at the Department of Veterans Affairs, this legislation will make the VA Chief Information Officer (CIO) accountable for the VA's entire IT infrastructure, with authority over its budget, as well as control over IT policies, procedures, personnel and assets. The VA has historically funded IT efforts in the general administration accounts of the Veterans Health Administration, the Veterans Benefits Administration and the National Cemetery Administration, essentially spending billions of dollars on three separate IT infrastructures within the Department.

Gartner Consulting, VA's IT consultant, recently completed its review of VA

IT infrastructure and reaffirmed many of General Accounting Office (GAO) past criticisms of VA. Specifically, VA's IT budgets lack accountability regarding how and when funds are spent. The GAO has testified since 1998 that VA has encountered numerous and consistent problems managing its IT programs. Gartner Consulting concluded that savings could exceed \$1.7 billion over the course of five years if the VA carries out the option to centralize the management of IT budgeting. "In the wake of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, we saw how the lack of a nationwide IT infrastructure placed veterans at a disadvantage for receiving the healthcare they needed. In the coming years, it is my hope that veterans will not have to carry medical documents and x-rays from Medical Center to Medical Center. In this day and age, there is no excuse for this. Technology continues to move at lightning pace and the VA healthcare delivery system should take advantage of this for the sake of our veterans," Buyer added.

The VA has spent about \$1 billion per year over the last decade to upgrade its IT infrastructure. The VA's FY 2005 budget request for IT is \$1.6 billion. In 2004, the VA received \$1.4 billion for its IT program, and over the past decade has received close to a billion dollars each year for IT initiatives. Craig B. Luigart, a former naval aviator and Virginia resident, was recently selected to be the chief information officer (CIO) for the health care system of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Luigart will also serve as the Department's deputy chief information officer for health, reporting to the Department's CIO and Assistant Secretary for Information Technology, Robert McFarland. Along with Luigart's appointment, Dr. Robert M. Kolodner has been appointed as the chief health informatics officer (CHIO), a position which he held in an acting capacity. As CHIO, reporting to Luigart, he is responsible for defining VA's health informatics strategy.

Bridget C. Maybury, MSN, RN, ANP, from the Bronx VAMC, recently won an award from Nursing Spectrum/Nurse Week. Bridget, who is the Patient Safety Specialist, won the Nursing Spectrum/Nurse Week 2005 national award in the Advancing Nursing Practice category. Her picture appeared on the cover of the magazines for the November 7, 2005 issue.

The officers for 2005-2006 were:

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