Upcoming Events

December 2015

Universal Human Rights Month

Rosa Parks Day
World AIDS Day
December 1

International Day of Persons with Disabilities
December 3

Hanukkah
December 6–14

National Pearl Harbor Remembrance Day
December 7

Human Rights Day
December 10

Human Rights Week
December 10–17

Bill of Rights Day
December 15

Christmas
December 25

Kwanzaa
December 26–January 1

New Year’s Eve
December 31

Message from the DAS

Georgia Coffey

Season’s greetings to all of our VA employees! I wish you all a joyous and peaceful holiday season. As several holidays approach, I am asking all of us to demonstrate respect and sensitivity to all of the diverse religious observances and celebrations that are honored at this time of year. Our Nation was founded on the principle of religious freedom and tolerance. As we’ve seen in recent events in our Nation and around the world, it is important that we protect and respect every individual’s right to his or her religious beliefs, including those who do not observe. On that note, I am reminding VA employees that the Guidance on Religious Exercise and Expression in VA Facilities and Property Under the Charge and Control of VA is available online. All employees should be aware of their rights and responsibilities.

Congratulations to the recently-named winners of the Secretary’s Fifth Annual Diversity and Inclusion Excellence Awards! In the Nonsupervisory Employee category, the winner this year is Veterans Health Administration (VHA) employee Maria Heliana Ramirez, LISW, LGBT Staff and Allies Special Emphasis Program Manager at the VA Palo Alto Health Care System, Menlo Park Division, California. In the Manager/Supervisor category, the winner is Audrey Oatis-Newsome, Director of the VHA Equal Employment Opportunity/Affirmative Employment Office, VA Central Office, Washington, DC. In the Team category, the winner is the Southern Arizona VA Health Care System Gathering of Healers Program Planning Team, in Tucson. Team members include (in alphabetical order): Mark Besich, George Campbell, Sharon Hammond, Karen Hebda, Bruce Kafer, Curtis Kekahbah, Rex Kinsey, Katherine Kretscher, Cindy Mapelli, and Phyllis Spears.

Congratulations also to the VA Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Workgroup! Continued on page 5.

Commemorate

International Day of Persons with Disabilities

VA joins the Nation in commemorating International Day of Persons with Disabilities on December 3. From the 2014 Presidential Proclamation: Each year, the United States joins with the international community to celebrate the inherent dignity and worth of every person. In America and in countries around the world, individuals with disabilities support families, strengthen their communities, and contribute to the global economy. On International Day of Persons with Disabilities, we reaffirm the fundamental principle that those with disabilities are entitled to the same rights and freedoms as everyone else: to belong and fully participate in society, to live with respect and free from discrimination, and to make of their lives what they will. (Continued on page 3.)
The training sessions will be held in the Washington, DC metro area.

The AAGEN SES DP is a tuition-free program that offers executive development courses, coaching in mock interviews, individual mentoring, and career counseling for candidates to gain the skills to effectively compete for SES positions. Each candidate will be assigned an SES or a Flag officer mentor who will provide guidance throughout the program. Other benefits include:

- SES Application Preparation
- Public Speaking Tutorials
- Leadership Training
- Mentorship
- Networking Opportunities

Qualified competitive applicants must have the explicit approval and support of their current agencies for the duration of the program to be selected into the program.

The SES DP inaugural class was launched in March 2012 in response to the continuing need to boost the number of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) in the Federal Government’s top echelon—the SES. According to a study of SES diversity published by the Center for American Progress, “The projected ethnic, racial and gender makeup of the Senior Executive Service will not reflect that of the American workforce in 2030 and beyond.” With this forecasted shortage, potential AAPI candidates must rise to meet the needs of our government and Nation.

With participation from the White House Initiative on Asian American and Pacific Islanders, the Office of Personnel Management, and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, AAGEN will again administer the next class of SES DP.

More information about AAGEN’s SES DP is available online.

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**Asian American Government Executives Network (AAGEN)'s Senior Executive Service Development Program (SES DP)**, a career enhancing opportunity, is available to aspiring SES candidates at the GS-15 equivalent level or higher with at least one year of experience as a manager or supervisor. Applications for AAGEN’s 5th SES DP are being accepted now through December 31, 2015. A limited number of openings are available. The class will commence in April 2016 and will continue through March 2017.

**ORM**

**Steps Toward Resolution**

Alternative Dispute Resolution can help with resolving disputes. To file a discrimination or harassment complaint, you must contact the Office of Resolution Management at (toll free) 888-737-3361 within 45 calendar days of the date of the alleged discriminatory incident.
Commemorate
Continued from Page 1

Nearly a quarter century ago, the Congress came together to pass the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), a landmark civil rights bill and a historic milestone in our journey toward a more perfect Union. The first Nation on earth to comprehensively declare equality for its citizens with disabilities, we enshrined into law the promise of equal access, equal opportunity, and equal respect for every American. The ADA was a formal acknowledgement that individuals with disabilities deserve to live full and independent lives the way they choose, and today, my Administration continues to fight to give every person a fair shot at realizing their greatest potential. We are working to rigorously enforce the protections against disability-based discrimination and expand workforce training and employment opportunities for people with disabilities, including our wounded warriors and those with serious disabilities. Today's theme, "Sustainable Development: The promise of technology," reminds us that as we strive to increase accessibility in our communities, we cannot allow the benefits of groundbreaking innovation to be out of reach for those who seek to participate fully in our democracy and economy.

Disability rights are not only civil rights to be enforced here at home; they are universal rights to be recognized and promoted around the globe. That is why I am proud that during my time in Office, the United States signed the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and why I continue to call on the Senate to provide its advice and consent to the ratification of what is the first new human rights convention of the 21st century. Around the world, more than 1 billion people experience a disability. These women, men, and children seek a fair chance to complete an education, succeed in a career, and support a family -- and the United States stands with them wherever they live.

America continues to be the world leader on disability rights. Today, we celebrate the courage and commitment of all who have agitated and sacrificed to bring us to this point, and all who continue to press ahead toward greater access, opportunity, and inclusion. With advocates from around the world and all those whose lives have been touched by a disability, we can build on our progress. Let us recommit to fostering a society free of barriers and full of a deeper understanding of the value each person adds to our global community.

Human Rights Day and Human Rights Week

VA joins the Nation in commemorating Human Rights Day on December 10 and Human Rights Week December 10–17. From the 2014 Presidential Proclamation: On December 10, 1948, nations from six continents came together to adopt the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This extraordinary document affirmed that every individual is born equal with inalienable rights, and it is the responsibility of governments to uphold these rights. In more than 430 translations, the Declaration recognizes the inherent dignity and worth of all people and supports their right to chart their own destinies. On the anniversary of this human rights milestone, we join with all those who are willing to strive for a brighter future, and together, we continue our work to build the world our children deserve.

The desires for freedom and opportunity are universal, and around the world, yearnings for the rule of law and self-determination burn within the hearts of all women and men. When people can raise their voices and hold their leaders accountable, governments are more responsive and more effective. Children who are able to lead healthy lives and pursue an education without fear are free to spark progress and contribute to thriving communities. And when citizens are empowered to pursue their full measure of happiness without restraint, they help ensure that economies grow, stability and prosperity spread, and nations flourish. Protecting human rights around the globe extends the promise of democracy and bolsters the values that serve as a basis for peace in our world.

It is our obligation as free peoples to stand with courageous individuals who raise their voices to demand universal rights. Under extremely difficult circumstances—and often at grave personal risk—brave human rights defenders and civil society activists throughout the world are working to actualize the rights and freedoms that are the birthright of all humankind. The United States will continue to support all those who champion these fundamental principles, and we will never stop speaking out for the human rights of all individuals at home and abroad. It is part of who we are as a people and what we stand for as a Nation. Continued on Page 6.
3 Steps to Working with Your Supervisor on Your IDP

Autumn is the time for employees at VA to work on their Individual Development Plans (IDPs) for the following year. When you start creating your IDP, it’s important to remember that your supervisor can be a valuable ally and resource. Whether you’re thinking about goals to set or training to take, your supervisor can help you brainstorm and can guide you through the process of writing a great IDP.

Think you’re ready to approach your supervisor for your initial IDP conversation? Here are three steps to take—before and during your discussion—so that you can create an IDP that will really help you achieve your goals.

1. Do your research
Before you even start talking to your supervisor about your IDP, it’s important to lay the foundation for an effective conversation. Make sure you’ve done your research so that you can discuss the SMART goals that you’d like to set for yourself.

You wouldn’t show up to an interview without doing background research about the organization. Consider approaching your IDP discussion in a similar way. Use your supervisor’s—and your own—meeting time wisely, and come prepared with ideas for your IDP. Then, your supervisor can confirm or add on to the ideas you bring. If you’re not sure where to start, you can try:
- Completing a self-assessment of your strengths, accomplishments, and goals
- Talking to a mentor about developmental areas that you can target
- Setting up an informational interview to learn more about specific skill areas in a job you may be interested in

Once you have an idea of the skills you want to develop, put together an initial plan that you can share with your supervisor during your conversation.

2. Consider your supervisor’s perspective
As you think about developmental activities to include in your IDP, look at the options from your supervisor’s point-of-view. When you’re weighing your choices, it’s important to think about the costs associated with each. Activities with little to no cost—such as on-the-job learning experiences—are more likely to get a favorable reaction from your supervisor. For example, are you looking for more leadership experience? Ask your supervisor if you can lead an upcoming project for your team.

Developmental opportunities with a higher cost need good reasoning and approval from more senior people. These options may be difficult to achieve since training budgets can vary from year to year. When you want to pursue these types of options, put yourself in your supervisor’s shoes and think about what he or she needs to know to make a stronger case on your behalf. Consider factors like the number of employees your supervisor oversees and how much funding your department will have to budget for training.

It may also help your supervisor make his or her case if your personal development could benefit others. Will a spreadsheet training you’re hoping to take streamline your team’s monthly expense reporting? Can you share the skills and tips you learn at a writing workshop with others in your department? Figure out how you can frame developmental activities as beneficial to your larger office.

Even if your supervisor makes a strong argument, it may not be possible for your office to include a costly opportunity in its budget. If that’s the case, try working with your supervisor to come up with a way that you can achieve your goal at a lower cost.

3. Keep communication open
Your communication with your supervisor about your IDP shouldn’t stop with your initial conversation. Continued on the next page.
Remember to check in and let him or her know what challenges you've encountered and how you're progressing toward your goals.

It’s important to share your successes and setbacks throughout the IDP process. Make sure that you tell your supervisor when you make significant progress toward a goal and ask for support when you need it. If your supervisor helps you get training you wanted, write a thank you note after the experience. Include details about what you learned and how you think the opportunity benefited you and your team. By frequently checking in with your supervisor, you can continue to find new ways to work toward your goals and advocate for your personal development.

Can’t decide which developmental experiences you want to include in your IDP? Check out these ideas for learning opportunities that can help you achieve your goals. And if you haven’t already, stay up-to-date with career advice and articles like this one by signing up for the MyCareer@VA Monthly Update.

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Policy Alert

Administration of Veterans’ Same-Sex Spousal Benefits

The Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) is processing same-sex spousal benefit claims that were held or submitted following the June 26, 2015, Supreme Court decision in Obergefell v. Hodges. VBA Letter 20-15-16 rescinds VBA Letter 20-14-08 and provides instructions and procedures for processing compensation, pension, dependency and indemnity compensation (DIC), and vocational rehabilitation and employment (VR&E) claims involving same-sex marriage in light of the Obergefell decision. For more information, contact the following:

- Compensation: VAVBAWAS/CO/212A
- Pension: VAVBAWAS/CO/PMC
- Insurance: VAVBAPHI/IC/29/29A
- Loan Guaranty: LGYLEGAL.VBAVACO@va.gov
- Education: VAVBAWAS/CO/225C
- VR&E: Your area VR&E field liaison by telephone at (202) 461-9600.

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Message from the DAS

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I recently helped to recognize their hard work with an ODI Shared Leadership Award. Members include Bruce Gipe, Deborah McCallum, Dot Hostetter, Jeff Pellegrini, Heliana Ramirez, Carlos Rodriguez, Victor Urrego-Vallowe, Jeremy Sims, Zander Keig, and Kenneth Jones, PhD. The Workgroup was established under the VA Diversity Council (VADC) to develop strategies to identify and address any VA global, systemic LGBT employee concerns and needs, and to ensure VA has an inclusive work environment that is free from sexual-orientation or gender-identity discrimination. Although I presented the award to Mr. Gipe at the last quarterly VADC meeting, I want to personally thank each and every member of this committee for their dedication and achievements.

Finally, please join VA and the Nation in observing International Day of Persons with Disabilities on December 3. VA is committed to increasing the representation of qualified individuals with disabilities in all levels of its workforce. Read more beginning on page 1.
**Commemorate**

Continued from Page 3

My Administration supports free and fair elections, and we will always oppose efforts by foreign governments to restrict the freedoms of peaceful assembly, association, and expression. We will continue to defend the rights of ethnic and religious minorities, call for the release of all who are unjustly detained, and insist that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons be treated equally under the law. We will press forward in our efforts to end the scourge of human trafficking, our fight to ensure the protection of refugees and other displaced persons, and our tireless work to empower women and girls worldwide.

The United States will always lift up those who seek to work for the world as it should be. This is part of American leadership. On Human Rights Day and during Human Rights Week, let us continue our urgent task of rejecting hatred in whatever form it takes and recommit to fostering a global community where every person can achieve their dreams and contribute to humankind.

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**Bill of Rights Day**

VA joins the Nation in commemorating the Bill of Rights Day on December 15. From the 2014 Presidential Proclamation:

For more than two centuries, our Nation has been shaped by courageous women and men who have dared to raise their voices and work to safeguard the blessings of liberty and justice. In the face of tyranny, early patriots stood up against an empire and proclaimed the independence of a new Nation, declaring that we are all created equal, endowed by our Creator with unalienable rights. To secure these rights, they fought a war and enshrined these truths into our Constitution. The product of a fierce debate and great compromise, our founding charter was a remarkable yet imperfect document. It provided the foundation for a society built on freedom and democracy, but essential questions—including those of race and gender—were left unresolved. Yet before it was fully ratified, our Founding Fathers began working to refine its text, an early milestone in our unending journey to form a more perfect Union.

Ratified on December 15, 1791, the Bill of Rights secured our most fundamental freedoms. These first 10 Constitutional Amendments protect our rights to protest, practice our faiths, and hold our Government accountable. They guarantee justice under the law, allow for the dissemination of new ideas, and create the opportunity for those left out of our charter to fight to expand its promise. In times of war and peace, and through waves of depression and prosperity, these tenets have not only endured, but they have strengthened our Nation and served as an example to all who seek freedom, fairness, equality, and dignity around the world.

On the anniversary of the Bill of Rights, we reflect on the blessings of freedom we enjoy today, and we are reminded that our work to foster a more free, more fair, and more just society is never truly done. Guided by these sacred principles, we continue striving to make our country a place where our daughters’ voices are valued just as much as our sons'; where due process of law is afforded to all people, regardless of skin color; and where the individual liberties that we cherish empower every American to pursue their dreams and achieve their own full measure of happiness.

Our fidelity to these timeless ideals binds us together as a Nation. As we celebrate Bill of Rights Day, let us recommit to the values that define us as a people and continue our work to broaden democracy’s reach by strengthening the freedoms with which we have been endowed.