Upcoming Events
November 2016

Native American Heritage Month
Military Family Month
National Family Caregivers Month

National Veterans Day Ceremony
November 11; Arlington National Cemetery

Transgender Day of Remembrance
November 20

National Family Week
November 22–28

Thanksgiving
November 24

Message from the DAS
As several holidays approach, I’d once again like to remind all VA employees of the Department’s Policy Guidance on Religious Exercise and Expression in VA Facilities and Property Under the Charge and Control of VA. If you have any questions about this guidance, please contact ODI.

We are now accepting nominations for the Secretary’s Sixth Annual Diversity and Inclusion Excellence Awards! These awards are intended to recognize exemplary contributions by VA managers/supervisors, employees, and teams who work to create a diverse VA workforce and cultivate an inclusive VA workplace. The criteria for these awards align with the goals in the VA Diversity and Inclusion Strategic Plan: a diverse workforce, an inclusive workplace, and outstanding public service. There are four nomination categories: Nonsupervisory Employee, Manager/Supervisor, Equal Employment Opportunity/Diversity and Inclusion Practitioner (Manager or Specialist), and Team. Nominations are due December 1, 2016. Please consider making a nomination! Visit the Web site above for more information.

In last month’s issue, we highlighted the successes of ODI’s World Café initiative. We continue to receive overwhelming positive evaluation comments from the facilities where these events have taken place. This is without a doubt an employee engagement experience you may consider attending. For more information, contact ODI.

Finally, please join VA and the Nation in commemorating Native American Heritage Month this November, Veterans Day on November 11, and Transgender Day of Remembrance on November 20. Read more in the Commemorate article below.

– Georgia Coffey

Commemorate
National Native American Heritage Month

VA proudly commemorates National Native American Heritage Month this November. This year’s theme is “Serving Our Nations.” VA managers and supervisors are encouraged to support events and activities that recognize contributions of American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/AN). VA Central Office will observe Native American Heritage Month on Thursday, November 17, 2016, in the G.V. “Sonny” Montgomery Veterans Conference Center, room 230, at noon. For more information, contact Ms. Aurelia Waters, VA’s National AI/AN Employment Program Manager. (Continued on the next page.)
Commemorate
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The month of November is an opportunity to learn about the diverse AI/AN cultures and traditions during the month of November. It is also a time to reflect on the important contributions they have made throughout our Nation’s history. Some of these contributions can be found in medicine, literature, language, music, agriculture, and the arts. AI/ANs serve in the United States Armed Forces with great honor and distinction, defending and sacrificing their lives for the security of our Nation. VA commends these courageous servicemen, women, and Veterans, including employees Department-wide, for their continued commitment and dedication in service to our Nation’s Veterans, their families, and survivors.

From the 2015 Presidential Proclamation: American Indians and Alaska Natives enrich every aspect of our country. As the first to live on this land, Native Americans and their traditions and values inspired -- and continue to inspire -- the ideals of self-governance and determination that are the framework of our Nation. This month, we recognize the contributions made by Native Americans since long before our founding, and we resolve to continue the work of strengthening government-to-government ties with tribal nations and expanding possibility for all.

Native Americans have helped make America what it is today. As we reflect on our history, we must acknowledge the unfortunate chapters of violence, discrimination, and deprivation that went on for far too long, as well as the effects of injustices that continue to be felt. While we cannot undo the pain and tragedy of the past, we can set out together to forge a brighter future of progress and hope across Indian Country and the entire American landscape....This month, let us reaffirm our responsibility to ensure each generation is defined by a greater sense of opportunity than the last, and let us pledge to maintain our strong relationship with tribal nations across America. By keeping this commitment, and by endeavoring to shape a future in which every citizen has the chance to build a life worthy of their hopes and dreams, we can ensure that ours is a country that is true to our spirit and to our enduring promise as a land where all things are possible for all people.

For more information, visit VA’s AI/AN Employment Program Web page.

Commemorate
Veterans Day

VA joins the Nation in proudly saluting those who have served our Nation on Veterans Day, November 11. From the 2015 Presidential Proclamation: The United States military is the strongest, most capable fighting force the world has ever known. The brave men and women of our Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard demonstrate a resolute spirit and unmatched selflessness, and their service reminds us there are few things more American than giving of ourselves to make a difference in the lives of others. On Veterans Day, we reflect on the immeasurable burdens borne by so few in the name of so many, and we re dedicate ourselves to supporting those who have worn America's uniform and the families who stand alongside them...Our veterans left everything they knew and loved and served with exemplary dedication and courage so we could all know a safer America and a more just world. They have been tested in ways the rest of us may never fully understand, and it is our duty to fulfill our sacred obligation to our veterans and their families. On Veterans Day, and every day, let us show them the extraordinary gratitude they so rightly deserve, and let us recommit to pledging our full support for them in all they do.

For more information about Veterans Day and the National Veterans Day Ceremony, visit the VA Office of Public Affairs Web page.
SOAR Update
ODI Participated in Local GovWeek Event

On Wednesday, August 24, 2016, ODI Outreach and Retention Team staff participated in the University of Maryland University College (UMUC) “Government Week” event. The event provided exclusive interactive sessions dedicated to educating UMUC students and alumni about the wide range of employment opportunities available with the Federal Government and government contractors. Additionally, discussions were designed to help the participants better understand the hiring process, craft a resume for a Federal position, and apply for internships and entry-level opportunities.

The event began with a three-member panel comprising a government contractor; an Office of Personnel Management representative; and Angela James, Diversity and Inclusion Specialist, ODI. Panel members shared their experiences working as a Federal employee and/or contractor and provided tips to the participants on how to be successful in, or working with, the Federal Government. Following panel member statements, participants asked various questions pertaining to hiring processes, resume building tips, and contracting with the Federal Government.

At the conclusion of the question and answer session, panel members and other Federal employees participated in a series of ten-minute roundtable discussions with UMUC students and alumni. During these roundtable discussions, participants received more in-depth information on how to become Federal Government employees and contractors, participating in internships, building résumés, and much more. Nanese Loza, Diversity and Inclusion Team Lead, ODI; Malissa Green, Management Analyst, Human Capital Management, Office of Information and Technology (OI&T); and Rodney Goodwine, Supervisory Management and Programs Analyst, Human Capital Management, OI&T; as well as Ms. James, all greatly contributed to the roundtable discussions.

VA and UMUC are currently in the process of establishing a Memorandum of Understanding to establish a robust collaborative working partnership and to coordinate and implement outreach to a diverse student population for employment and educational opportunities with VA. UMUC is a public state university offering convenient online education along with on-site locations across the United States. Additionally UMUC has divisions in Asia and Europe and a presence on military installations in more than 20 countries and territories. UMUC offers more than 90 degrees and certificate programs; educates more than 80,000 students; and is also a leading provider of education services to the U.S. military. For more than 65 years, UMUC has provided educational opportunities to students around the world, earning the university a global reputation for excellence.

Participation in this event aligned under the VA ODI Student Outreach and Recruitment (SOAR) Program. This initiative focuses on providing to students and recent graduates information on Federal employment, VA careers, VA internships, and mentoring. The goal of the program is to establish a pipeline to careers in VA and to provide real-time job, internship, and career information to SOAR participants. It is also designed to market the Pathways Program, the National Diversity Intern Program (NDIP), the Workforce Recruitment Program (WRP), USAJOBS.gov (the Federal Government’s official source for job listings, applications, and employment opportunity information), and other intern and employment programs available through SOAR to increase the pool of qualified applicants for VA employment opportunities. For more information about the SOAR Program, contact Ms. Nanese Loza.
Employee Engagement Service
How to Develop a Survey Action Plan to Build a Better VA

“Planning is bringing the future into the present so that you can do something about it now.”  – Alan Lakein

Organizations around the world develop plans for a variety of reasons. A plan provides a concrete foundation and roadmap to help aid the creation of new products, outline strategic developments, foster change efforts and facilitate other important initiatives. Plans are often a response to an organization acquiring new data about the market or their organization and help inform the execution of a particular objective or goal.

VA understands the importance of planning to foster meaningful change throughout the Department. Following the release of the 2016 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) results, VA leadership engages in action planning to support change efforts and respond to feedback from employees. Feedback was gathered on a number of topics like engagement, satisfaction, intrinsic work value, employee experience and other important issues. This feedback provided VA leaders with ample information to build plans to improve their respective office environments.

But what does the process of creating an action plan based on employee feedback really look like? VA’s approach to action planning can be described as a three-part process – share, develop and act. This article explores the “develop” portion of the action planning process and outline the steps that VA uses to develop an action plan.

Action Plan Development

Create a team. We’ve all heard the old saying that two heads are better than one. This holds true in the planning process as well. The first step in developing a usable plan is to build a team that comprises people in your immediate organization who have unique perspectives and skill sets. This team will support action planning meetings, help brainstorm organizational issues, and ultimately oversee the success of the plan formation and execution.

Extract key themes. Data and feedback are wonderful things, but until they are thoroughly analyzed and grouped, they are just words and numbers. The real power of data comes into play when people examine it to find important themes. For example, the action planning team could receive a number of responses around seemingly different topics. One person says that he needs updates on new projects that the office is managing. Another person mentions that she feels disengaged because she often works remotely. A third person says that he would really like to do something nice for his co-workers on birthdays but is unsure of when the birthdays are. With this feedback, the action planning team can develop a theme around internal communication and create solutions to improve it throughout their office.

Discuss the results. One of the most challenging and rewarding questions an action planning team can ask is “why?” In the midst of receiving feedback and trying to fix perceived problems, it’s very easy to develop solutions that treat a symptom while not addressing the underlying problem. Discussing assumptions about the root causes of issues is one of the most important steps in action planning and this step yields the best version of an action plan possible. Interactive exercises designed to illuminate the “why” throughout this process could be – town halls, focus groups, in depth interviews, suggestion boxes, staff meetings and other open communication forums. Participants should be allowed to speak freely in these exercises, and the information they provide should be kept confidential, where appropriate. Their inclusion ensures that real answers are provided and real solutions can be formed.

Decide on solutions. Once feedback and data are grouped into themes and the results are discussed openly, an action planning team can begin to think through solutions in an informed way. These solutions should connect to the deeper “why” and seek to address the heart of any issues in the organization. Solutions can be as simple as weekly all-hands meetings or a virtual teleconference for employees who telework. (Continued on the next page.)
Employee Engagement Service
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Make action plans SMART. Action plans should be built around SMART objectives—Specific (what exactly do we want to accomplish, who is the audience we want to impact, and how do we want to impact them?), Measurable (what data or indicators will demonstrate we achieved our objectives?), Attainable (is this something we feel we have the capacity to accomplish?), Realistic (do we have the resources to achieve the objective?), and Timely (when do we want to achieve the objectives by?). SMART plans are organic and may change when new feedback is provided. Progress should be tracked and measured periodically throughout execution of the action plan; the team should routinely report progress and celebrate achievements throughout the implementation rather than just at the end.

For questions related to action plans, contact the Employee Engagement Service.

National Veteran Health Equity Report
New Report Published by the Office of Health Equity

The Office of Health Equity (OHE) is proud to announce the release of the first ever Veterans Health Administration (VHA) National Veteran Health Equity Report to cast an equity lens on our Nation’s military Veterans. The report embodies a comprehensive review of existing evidence of disparities among Veterans including relevant literature, VHA fiscal year 2013 administrative data, and descriptive analyses by subject-matter experts. This report, available online, contains input from a wide range of experts as chapter authors, and illustrates partnership and collaboration across the VA at its best.

The National Veteran Health Equity Report aligns with the MyVA initiatives, the VHA effort to improve access to care for all Veterans, the VHA Health Equity Action Plan, the recent VA Commission on Care Report, and momentum across the country, by adding to the body of knowledge about vulnerable Veteran populations.

Readers are encouraged to review and share the National Veteran Health Equity Report widely with Veterans, VA staff, health practitioners, educators, trainees, policymakers, and others concerned about improving the care of all Veterans especially the most vulnerable.

For more information about the report, OHE, or Veterans’ health equity, visit the OHE Web site.

Policy Alert
VA Handbook 5011, Hours of Duty and Leave

VA Handbook 5011, Part II, Chapters 2, 3 & 4, and Part III, Chapters 2 & 3 have been revised and will be incorporated into the electronic version of the handbook. The policy change provides clarification and revision of the following:

a. Clarifies the procedures for requesting alternative work schedules and supervisory responsibilities of reminding employees of available workplace flexibilities;
b. Clarifies the appropriate category for approved authorized absences; provides clarification on disciplinary/adverse actions and the use of administrative leave;
c. Clarifies the procedures for requesting a telework agreement;
d. Revises the 72/80 Alternate Work Schedule to allow a tour of duty that begins on the last day of one pay period and ends on the first day of the next pay period to be credited in the previous pay period; and
e. Revises the in-lieu of holiday guidance for employees on compressed work schedules.

For more information, contact Worklife and Benefits Service.
Compliance Corner
Disability and Discipline

Often managers are stymied when considering disciplinary action against an employee with a disability. For example, an employee may assert that his disability is the cause of a conduct problem and request reasonable accommodation as an affirmative defense to the proposed discipline. Or the employee may allege that he was discriminated against, based on his disability, when he was disciplined.

The Rehabilitation Act is clear on this issue—employers are not required to excuse behavior that violates conduct standards that are job-related and consistent with business necessity even if the employee’s disability caused violation of the conduct rule (see Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) Policy Guidance, The Americans with Disabilities Act: Applying Performance and Conduct Standards to Employees with Disabilities, Question 9). For example, requiring an employee to follow his supervisor’s instructions to attend a staff meeting is job-related and consistent with business necessity.

In Bryant F. v. Department of Interior, EEOC Appeal No. 0120121828 (Dec. 11, 2015), the complainant, a biologist for the Fish and Wildlife Service, alleged that he was subjected to discrimination based on his mental health disabilities when his agency proposed his suspension. Agency officials explained that the complainant slept at work and falsified his time and attendance records. The complainant argued that his medications caused him to fall asleep late in the workday and to drift off to sleep during the day.

In finding for the agency, EEOC affirmed that reasonable accommodation is intended to assist the individual with a disability in meeting the performance and conduct standards of the agency, rather than requiring the employer to forgive violations of those standards. They further determined “an agency does not have a duty to excuse an employee’s misconduct as a form of reasonable accommodation...where such misconduct would result in discipline or discharge if committed by another employee.”

Likewise, the Rehabilitation Act does not require employers to excuse violations of conduct standards that are job-related and consistent with business necessity AS A REASONABLE ACCOMMODATION. In Stallworth v. Department of Veterans Affairs, EEOC Appeal No. 01893705 (Jan. 29, 1990), the complainant verbally abused and then punched his supervisor several times in the head and face. Based on this conduct, the complainant was terminated during his probationary period.

The complainant filed an EEO complaint alleging that his PTSD caused his outburst and that VA should have reasonably accommodated him. The accommodation he sought was that his supervisor not harass him about his leave. The complainant testified that if his supervisor had not harassed him about his absences, which were directly related to his PTSD, he would not have become angry and hit him. An EEOC Administrative Judge found in favor of the complainant on the reasonable accommodation issue, writing “[T]he Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, makes no distinction as to the affirmative duty of all federal agencies providing reasonable accommodation, that must be adhered to, regardless of the distasteful nature of the particular circumstances resulting in the initial termination, absent proof of undue hardship.”

On appeal, the Commission overruled the judge’s finding of discrimination. They found that the complainant was not a qualified individual with a disability entitled to accommodation because, by assaulting his supervisor, he had engaged in conduct for which VA customarily terminated employees. They further held that VA was not required to accommodate complainant by excusing his violent conduct. – Maxanne R. Witkin, Director, Office of Employment Discrimination Complaint Adjudication