Commemorate Black History Month

VA Central Office (VACO) will commemorate Black History Month on Thursday, February 16, 2017, in the G.V. “Sonny” Montgomery Veterans Conference Center, room 230, at noon (ET). This year’s theme is “Crisis in Black Education.” Monique L. Dixon, Deputy Policy Director and Senior Counsel, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, will serve as this year’s featured keynote speaker. Tonia Bock, Executive Director, Office of the Secretary will serve as this year’s senior host. The VACO Library will provide an array of African American literature resources and information. This event is coordinated by the VACO Black History Month committee and is sponsored by the Office of Diversity and Inclusion.

(Continued on the next page.)

Message from the DAS

Please join the Nation in commemorating Black History Month this February. Booker T. Washington, who was born a slave and became one of the most celebrated educators and orators in American history, said, “You measure the size of the accomplishment by the obstacles you have to overcome to reach your goals.” We have many successes to celebrate in civil rights and in the diversity and inclusion arena, but are still faced with obstacles. There is much more to be accomplished and we invite your perspective, as always, as we continue in this journey.

VA employees across the country have been developing creative, innovative, and effective ways to increase employee engagement, but there has been no central repository to share these best practices throughout the Department—until now. ODI’s Employee Engagement Service (EES) is excited to announce the launch of the new and improved Leading Practices Exchange. The Exchange is a site that all VA employees can join to share and discuss best practices on employee engagement. The site is not just a repository but is meant to be a collaborative space and community for employees to openly hold dialogue on what is working at their facility to increase engagement. Employees can post new practices as well as view, search, like, or comment on submissions from others throughout VA. Log into the Leading Practices Exchange today and start sharing your best practices and ideas. Please contact the EES Team with questions on developing action plans.

Finally, we observe Washington’s Birthday on February 20. On this day we recognize the lives and achievements of all of America’s chief executives and their efforts to advance this great Nation.

– Georgia Coffey

ORM
Steps Toward Resolution
Alternative Dispute Resolution
(202-461-0280) can help with resolving conflict. 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.

Upcoming Events
February 2017
Black History Month

National Wear Red Day
February 3

Rosa Parks Day
February 4

VACO Black History Month Program
February 16, room 230, noon–1 pm

Washington’s Birthday
February 20

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The 2017 Black History Month theme is “Crisis in Black Education” and focuses on the crucial role of education in the history of African Americans.

From the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH):

ASALH’s founder Carter G. Woodson once wrote that “if you teach the Negro that he has accomplished as much good as any other race he will aspire to equality and justice without regard to race.” Woodson understood well the implications associated with the denial of access to knowledge, and he called attention to the crisis that resulted from persistently imposed racial barriers to equal education. The crisis in Black education first began in the days of slavery when it was unlawful for slaves to learn to read and write. In pre-Civil War northern cities, free Blacks were forced as children to walk long distances past White schools on their way to the one school relegated solely to them. Whether by laws, policies, or practices, racially separated schools remained the norm in America from the late 19th century well into our own time.

Throughout the last quarter of the 20th century and continuing today, the crisis in Black education has grown significantly in urban neighborhoods where public schools lack resources, endure overcrowding, exhibit a racial achievement gap, and confront policies that fail to deliver substantive opportunities. The touted benefits of education remain elusive to many Blacks of all ages. Tragically, some poorly performing schools serve as pipelines to prison for youths.

Yet, African American history is rich in centuries-old efforts of resistance to this crisis: the slaves’ surreptitious endeavors to learn; the rise of Black colleges and universities after the Civil War; unrelenting battles in the courts; the Black History movement; the freedom schools of the 1960s; and local community-based academic and mentorship programs that inspire a love of learning and thirst for achievement. Addressing the crisis in Black education should be considered one of the most important goals in America’s past, present, and future.

For more information on VA’s African American Employment Program or the VACO observance, contact Ms. Tynnetta Lee, VA’s National African American Employment Program Manager and the VACO Special Emphasis Observance Coordinator.

Policy Alerts
Affirmative Action for Individuals With Disabilities in Federal Employment

EEOC published its final regulations explaining what federal agencies must do to comply with their legal obligation to engage in affirmative action in employment and otherwise serve as "model employers" for individuals with disabilities. EEOC also published a question-and-answer document on the regulations.

OPM Telework Webinars and Dependent Care Guidance Issued

The Telework and Performance Management training webinars are now available to watch on the Telework.gov website. The purpose of these webinars is to share information about necessary tools to successfully manage employees in a virtual environment. The first part of the series focuses on key steps for developing a successful telework strategy to ensure program success. The second part demonstrates how effective performance management can lead to organizational success in a virtual environment. The Chief Human Capital Officer Council memorandum on Telework and Dependent Care was issued by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) on December 9, 2016. The memorandum introduces the Telework and Dependent Care Policy Guidance, which is an addendum to existing guidance contained in the OPM “Guide to Telework in the Federal Government.” The intent of this guidance is to provide Federal agencies with the appropriate tools to meet the needs of employees while being responsive to agency mission requirements. The focus is on the use of telework as a workplace flexibility to support employees with caregiving responsibilities of minor children and/or adult dependents for whom an employee provides services essential to their health, well-being, and/or activities of daily living. For questions regarding this notice, contact VA Central Office Work Life.
Religious affiliation in the United States is rapidly changing. According to Pew Research, the majority of American adults no longer identify themselves as Protestants (51% in 2006 to 46% in 2014). Even more striking is the percentage of Americans who claim no religious affiliation at all (16% in 2007 to 23% in 2014). Finally, Pew Research projects that by 2050 Islam will be the largest non-Christian religion in the United States.

Recognizing the increased religious diversity of VA’s workforce, the Office of Employment Discrimination Complaint Adjudication (OEDCA), in concert with the Office of Resolution Management (ORM) and the Office of Diversity and Inclusion (ODI), recently sponsored a lecture on religious discrimination in the workplace. Speaker Kelly Goode, Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) Officer at the United States Drug Enforcement Administration and former Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) Administrative Judge, provided attendees with an excellent overview of how religious discrimination can occur in the workplace. For example:

- VA cannot discriminate against a person because of his religion or lack of religious beliefs;
- VA must promptly investigate allegations of religious harassment;
- VA must accommodate an employee’s religious beliefs and practices unless there is an undue hardship on Agency operations;
- VA cannot require an employee to participate, or not to participate in, religious activities as a condition of employment; and
- VA cannot retaliate against an employee because of her religious beliefs or lack of religious beliefs.

So, how does religious discrimination happen? There are four common scenarios. First, an employee may request accommodation for his religious beliefs, for example, asking for religious compensatory time to celebrate Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year). The request is then denied because the facility never provides its employees with religious compensatory time. Second, a conflict arises between one employee’s right to religious expression and another employee’s right to a harassment-free work environment. Third, co-workers and supervisors may have stereotypes about non-mainstream religions; for example, employees who practice Wicca can cast spells. Finally, unconscious bias may exist toward a particular religious faith.

Scenarios two and four were the focus of a recent finding against VA. An EEOC administrative judge found that a Jewish maintenance worker was subjected to harassment because of his religion. Between 2008 and 2012, his Christian co-worker made numerous derogatory comments about the complainant’s religion. He also told the complainant that he was going to try and convert him and the complainant responded that “it was not going to happen.” In 2008, the coworker attempted to baptize the complainant by sprinkling water on his back and telling him, “Now you are one of us.” During a staff meeting in 2009, the coworker referred to the complainant as the “devil” and “Satan’s serpent.” He also told the complainant that if he didn’t change he was going to go to hell. Although the complainant and his work leader both told the coworker to stop making these remarks, the remarks continued. Between 2009 and 2012, the coworker sent the complainant and his family Christmas cards. When he handed the cards to the complainant, he usually told him that “his family needed to be saved” or that the complainant was “condemning his children.” One year, the coworker stated, “This is for you and your family and I will pray for them. Once the coworker told the complainant that anyone who did not raise his children to believe that Jesus Christ was Lord and Savior was condemning his family. In 2012, the complainant told the coworker that he did not want his Christmas card, at which point the coworker threw the card on the complainant’s desk. Other comments made by the coworker to the complainant included, “You will always be thirsty if you don’t have Jesus Christ in your heart” and “A man who knows everything will never get to know Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior.” The coworker also placed fish symbols on many items in the workplace including mechanic’s tools, tool bags, and drills. These items were used by all staff members, including the complainant. The complainant repeatedly complained to his first level supervisor about the coworker’s conduct. While the supervisor took some action to address the harassment in 2010 and 2011, it continued through 2012. In 2012, the complainant’s supervisor told him not to make any more complaints about the coworker after the complainant refused to participate in weekly meetings with the supervisor and coworker which were designed to resolve their differences.

An EEOC administrative judge found VA liable for the coworker’s conduct because the Agency did not take immediate and appropriate corrective action to address and end the coworker’s harassment. The judge wrote, “Appropriate corrective action by the Agency consists of a response that is reasonably calculated to stop the harassment. Upon becoming aware of alleged harassment, the Agency has the duty to investigate promptly and thoroughly. The appropriateness of the Agency’s action depends upon ‘the particular facts of the case, the severity and persistence of the harassment, and the effectiveness of any initial remedial step.’” – Maxanne R. Witkin, Director, Office of Employment Discrimination Complaint Adjudication
Employee Engagement
Staying Engaged During Change or Tough Times

“A problem is a chance for you to do your best.” – Duke Ellington

Leadership changes, new policies, and office reorganization: These are just a few of the ways the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) may undergo tough changes. While these changes might be necessary, they can sometimes lead to anxiety and stress. During these times, it is important for employees to remain engaged, know their hard work does not go unnoticed, and recognize VA values their commitment to serving Veterans.

During times of change it is vital for employees to remember organizational values, or the ideals that guide an organization and its collective actions. By focusing on the VA Core Values of Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect, and Excellence (I CARE), employees can stay focused on our mission “to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan” by serving and honoring the men and women who are America’s Veterans.

Psychological safety, or the extent to which a team member feels comfortable asking questions or sharing concerns, is one engagement driver that is fundamental to maintaining engagement during times of change. Employees should feel safe approaching leaders with their questions or concerns, and leaders should seek feedback from employees when possible. Because new leadership or policies can cause concern amongst employees, it is important that employees feel comfortable talking to leaders about changes to better understand how it impacts their work.

Work-life flexibility is another engagement driver that is crucial for employees to feel engaged and happy at work. During difficult times when individuals feel stressed or overwhelmed at work, employees and leaders can alleviate some of that stress by coming to a mutually beneficial agreement regarding work schedules or work load. Employees are encouraged to follow Department protocol and talk with leaders about their options.

Times of change can impact leaders and employees alike and cause stress or burnout. VA knows that our employees are the foundation of our organization, and it’s important for us to feel safe and happy with our work life, so that we can continue to provide the best possible care to our nation’s Veterans.

For any questions related to employee engagement, contact the Employee Engagement Service. – Ms. Clarise Cannings

Workforce Recruitment Program
Fiscal Year 2017 Program Update

VA is strongly committed to the recruitment and hiring of individuals with disabilities, including Veterans, and individuals with targeted disabilities. The fiscal year 2017 Workforce Recruitment Program (WRP) kicked-off on December 20, 2016. WRP is a recruitment and referral program that connects Federal sector employers with highly motivated college students and recent graduates with disabilities who are interested in temporary or permanent Federal jobs. Through the WRP Web site, WRP maintains the largest database of Schedule A candidates for hiring into the Government. In addition, WRP is recognized by the U.S. Office of Personnel Management as a model strategy regarding the recruitment and hiring of individuals with disabilities. As an update, VA’s Office of Human Resources Management (HRM) released a bulletin (HRM Letter No. 05-17-02) on January 26, 2017, to provide initial guidance regarding the recent hiring freeze. In this letter HRM informs us that they anticipate several issuances of VA human resources guidance regarding the matter. Appropriate guidance regarding the impact to the WRP will be provided as it becomes available. We appreciate your support of the program, and we stand ready to answer any immediate questions you may have concerning the program. For more information, contact Aurelia Waters, VA’s WRP Manager.