Commemorate
National Disability Employment Awareness Month

VA joins the Nation in observing National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM) this October. This year’s theme is “America’s Workforce: Empowering All.” VA leaders are encouraged to support events and activities that recognize the contributions of workers with disabilities and educates about the value of a workforce inclusive of their skills and talents. Employment of individuals with disabilities is essential in accomplishing the noble VA mission, which—in the great words of President Abraham Lincoln—is “to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow, and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.” (Continued on page 3.)
Training

Out & Equal Workplace Summit
Out & Equal Workplace Advocates will host its annual Workplace Summit on October 1-4, 2018, at the Washington State Convention Center in Seattle, Washington. The educational commitment and focus of this conference this year centers around Peer-to-Peer Education, Commitment to Diversity, and Focus on LGBTQ Workplace Equality. Employees who wish to attend the Workplace Summit must preregister. Employees are responsible for securing authorization to attend from their respective supervisors before registering on the Out & Equal Website. For more information, contact Mr. Sterling Akins, VA’s National LGBT Program Manager, ORM.

HACU Conference
The Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) will host its 32nd Annual Conference October 6-7, 2018, at the Atlanta Marriott Marquis in Atlanta, GA. It will provide a unique forum to share information and ideas for the most promising practices in the education of Hispanics. Employees are responsible for securing authorization to attend from their respective supervisors before registering on the HACU website. For more information, contact Ms. Edith Perry, VA’s National Hispanic Employment Program Manager, ODI.

Policy Updates

Annual EEO, D&I, No FEAR, and Whistleblower Rights and Protection Policy Statement
Secretary Wilkie is firmly committed to a VA that is a workplace free from unlawful discrimination, harassment, and retaliation. The Secretary recently issued VA’s updated Annual Equal Employment Opportunity, Diversity and Inclusion, No FEAR, and Whistleblower Rights and Protection Policy Statement. This Policy Statement summarizes VA’s workplace rules of behavior and employee protections. Please be sure you have read the updated policy, dated August 27, 2018.

Policy Guidance on Religious Exercise and Expression
During this holiday season, all VA employees are expected to be mindful of the Department’s Policy Guidance on Religious Exercise and Expression in VA Facilities and Property Under the Charge and Control of VA. At all times, the government must ensure that it does not act in a manner that would lead a reasonable observer to conclude that it is sponsoring, endorsing or inhibiting religion generally or favoring or disfavoring a particular religion. The government must also ensure that it does not require or pressure its employees or others to participate in religious activities or to refrain from participation in such activities. Please read the associated FAQs at the link above for more information. We all have a responsibility to be respectful and to ensure that our workplaces are harassment-free zones.

Services for People with Disabilities: Personal Assistance Services (PAS)
Federal Agencies’ Obligation to Provide Personal Assistance Services (PAS) under Section 501 of the Rehabilitation Act

On January 3, 2017, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) amended the regulations implementing Section 501 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 501), the law that prohibits the federal government from discriminating in employment on the basis of disability and requires it to engage in affirmative action for people with disabilities.

As part of the agencies’ obligation to engage in affirmative action, federal agencies are required by the new regulations to provide Personal Assistance Services (PAS) to individuals who need them because of certain disabilities. See 29 C.F.R. § 1614.203(d)(5). PAS are services that help individuals who, because of targeted disabilities, require assistance to perform basic activities of daily living, like eating and using the restroom. In VA, PAS requests are handled the same as Reasonable Accommodation (RA) requests. For more information regarding PAS and RA check out the RA Community of Practice on VA Pulse.
In order to provide the highest level of care and benefits to those impacted by the lasting effects of their unwavering service to this great Nation, there needs to be an understanding of the various limitations and disabilities faced by those who have sacrificed unselfishly to defend and protect our people. Therefore, it is imperative to ensure VA’s workforce includes individuals who have disabilities so the Department can accurately capture the challenges faced by Veterans and their families as it relates to individual disabilities. It is a great benefit to employ individuals with disabilities because not only is there rich talent, by the very nature of the hardships many of these individuals face, it creates a strength and resilience in the face of adversity and contributes toward finding resolutions to some of the Department’s most challenging and pressing issues.

As of August 2018, individuals with disabilities represented 13.85 percent of the VA workforce, including 2.53 percent with targeted disabilities. In addition, Veterans with disabilities represented 13.31 percent of the VA workforce for this same time period. Although there was a previous onboard goal of 2 percent and hiring goal for of 3 percent for individuals with targeted disabilities, these goals are no longer applicable as they changed in fiscal year 2018 due to updates to regulation. In 2018, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission updated the goals set forth for employment of individuals with disabilities and targeted disabilities in Federal Agencies through updates to 29 Code of Federal Regulations 1614, section 203, implemented through Management Directive 715 (MD-715). VA is meeting three of the four new onboard goals set forth in the MD-715 to include having 12 percent of the onboard VA workforce in the grade cluster of general schedule (GS) 1 to 10 and equivalent individuals with disabilities, 2 percent of the onboard VA workforce in the grade cluster of GS 1 to 10 and equivalent individuals with targeted disabilities, and 12 percent of the onboard VA workforce in the grade cluster of GS 11 to Senior Executive Service (SES) and equivalent individuals with disabilities. The Department is still challenged to meet the goal of 2 percent of the onboard VA workforce in the grade cluster of GS 11 to SES and equivalent individuals with targeted disabilities.

These new changes make it ever so important to ensure employees can easily self-report whether they have a disability and what the disability is. When a new employee is hired, he/she is asked to complete Standard Form (SF) 256, “Self-Identification of Disability”, which helps VA capture numeric information about the representation of individuals with disabilities and targeted disabilities in the workforce. Information captured on the SF-256 form assists VA in identifying resources needed to manage the National Disability Program, to include funding and other resources to ensure full accessibility to services, activities, reasonable accommodations, and benefits for employees, applicants for employment, interns, trainees, and of course our customers: Veterans and their families. It is a common misconception that this information is used to let others know that a specific employee is an individual with a disability or targeted disability and therefore treat those who identified having a disability differently. In accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, as amended, which is implemented in the Federal workforce through the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, it is illegal to treat people differently or take what might be considered a discriminatory action against an individual based solely on the fact that this is a person with a disability. Anyone who believes that a discrimination has occurred because he/she is a person with a disability is highly encouraged to contact the Office of Resolution Management (ORM) at 1-888-566-3982 or TDD 1-888-626-9008 or visit ORM’s online Resolution Support Center.

While it is strongly encouraged to resurvey the workforce for accuracy of the data, even at the facility level, since the Department recently moved to a new human resources system of record, HR Smart, efforts are underway to allow electronic accessibility to submit this form online for any employee, whether he/she is a new hire or has been onboard with VA for an extended time. This option is expected to be available at some point during fiscal year 2019.

Additionally, VA strives to not only ensure it is meeting the above MD-715 goals, not just because it is a Federal mandate, because it is the right thing to do and couldn’t be more important for VA than any other Department. It is not enough to ensure VA is employing these individuals. Including, engaging, and retaining this rich talent pool helps us achieve greatness in caring for Veterans and their families. This is why VA is creating a number of ways for employees to get involved, namely, establishing an employee resource group (ERG) for individuals with disabilities, creating a new retention initiative called Stay@VA, and holding online monthly lunch and learn sessions on disability-related topics. Through the efforts of the Disability ERG, the Diversity and Inclusion in VA Council’s Disability Committee, online Disability lunch and learn sessions, and this new Stay@VA initiative, along with partnerships with other Federal agencies, VA aims to become the Federal employer of choice for Individuals with Disabilities and Targeted Disabilities.

For more information on VA’s Disability Program, visit the Individuals with Disabilities Program page or contact Ms. Nanese Loza, VA’s National Disability Program Manager, ODI.
Blacks in Government (BIG) VA Headquarters Chapter Presents

REAL TALK

(ECQ: Building Coalitions)
Focused on career progression, mentoring and the essentials needed to succeed

October 4, 2018

12:00pm (noon) – 1:00pm
Conference Center, Room 530
(810 Vermont Ave., NW, Washington, DC)

** Space is limited **

Unable to attend in person: Call in: 1-800-767-1750 / Access Code 55734
Apply for Leadership VA (LVA) Class of 2019!!!

The LVA program will be accepting applications through 08:00AM – 5:00PM ET October 01 – 31, 2018 for eligible applicants in the grades of GS 13 (minimum 52 weeks) through GS 15 and Title 38 equivalents. Eligible applicants must occupy a full-time position with VA, meet the minimum grade requirements and have maintained a performance rating of “Excellent or above” during their most recent evaluation period. Eligible applicants will also be required to obtain 1st and 2nd level endorsements from their rating supervisor and reviewing executive as part of the application process.

Leadership VA (LVA) is the Department of Veterans Affairs’ primary enterprise-wide leadership development program for high-performing, results-oriented leaders in the grades of GS 13, GS 14, GS 15 and Title 38 equivalents. LVA Alumni collaborate across VA to build operational partnerships, alliances and communities of practices designed to solve some of the Department’s toughest problems. LVA Alumni also facilitate modernization and are catalysts for achieving VA strategic objectives. Graduates exit the program supremely confident and prepared to assume increased levels of responsibility, lead operational and strategic programs and take on critical supervisory/leadership roles using an enterprise-wide perspective to meet the needs of a diverse population of Veterans, family members, survivors, employees and stakeholders.

Each year LVA Fellows make up a cohort chosen based on a rigorous national review panel and merit-selection process. Eligible applicants are required to complete an electronic application and compete their total scores against peers within their home Administration or VACO Staff Office, to form the annual cohort. For example: VHA applicants’ total application scores will be compared only with other VHA applicants’ total scores. The top applicant scores for VHA would then proceed to become the Best Qualified (BQ) primary and alternate candidates and represent their Administration for the cohort. This same scoring process would take place for applicants for VBA, NCA and the VACO Staff Offices, until we have the 80 fellows that will make up the 2019 LVA Cohort. The 3-person national review panels are made up primarily of senior GS 14 and above, LVA Alumni, and 2019 fellows. All LVA reviewers are required to receive annual training on the scoring process to ensure consistency and fairness to each applicant.

Each LVA Cohort will receive over 360 hours of leadership development training from VA senior leaders and subject matter experts over an eight to ten month period, which usually begins in the Spring of the calendar year. The cohort's training includes four one-week residential sessions that focus on leadership modules, interactive workshops and assignment to an InnoVAtion project team responsible for developing actionable deliverables with the potential for the Department to implement. Each project team will brief their results to VA senior leaders at the LVA InnoVAtion Symposium during the final residency week. The cohort's self-paced leadership training during intersessions consists of webinars, academic readings, blogging and conducting research, and meeting with their project teams and executive sponsors. Below are the current residency weeks locations and dates.

- Session I – Philadelphia, PA or Washington, DC - - March 11 – 15 (VACO Week)
- Session II – St. Louis, MO, St. Paul, MN or Baltimore, MD - - May 06 – 10 (VBA Week)
- Session III – Louisville, KY - - July 08 – 12 (VHA Week)
- Session IV – Washington, DC - - September 9 – 13 (NCA Week)

For more information about this prestigious leadership development program, please contact HLTLVAApplications@va.gov.
VA Commemorates Historically Black Colleges and Universities Week

By Harvey Johnson, Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Offices of Resolution Management and Diversity and Inclusion

As a graduate of Morgan State University, a part of the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), I am excited to share that VA joined the Nation in observing HBCU Week September 16-22. For decades, HBCUs were the only higher education option for African Americans. Today, HBCUs remain important doors to opportunities otherwise closed to many people; a quarter of HBCUs across our Nation have at least a 20 percent non-Black student body. While HBCUs represent only 3 percent of colleges in the United States, they produce 20 percent of African-American graduates. In particular, HBCUs are responsible for producing 17 percent of all health profession degrees earned by African-American graduates.

But the future of HBCUs is uncertain: 63 percent of HBCUs may face closure by 2035. A confluence of economic, academic and policy changes are jeopardizing the future sustainability of many HBCUs. HBCUs are particularly impacted by these changes because they depend more on public funding. In addition to reduced state and federal funding, many HBCUs now face other increasingly significant challenges such as declining enrollment and inadequate financial support from alumni.

On February 27, 2017, President Trump signed executive order 13779 creating an interagency working group focusing on HBCUs and ordering any government agency regularly interacting with HBCUs to develop annual plans to strengthen the capacity of HBCUs. VA believes in the mission and impact of HBCUs and is building greater support for this important network of higher education institutions.

VA has used its experience with healthcare and resources as a large government agency to provide a wide range of services for HBCUs to try to address the challenges they face. For example, 151 VA medical centers have affiliation agreements with 70 HBCUs and Predominately Black Institutions sponsoring training in more than 40 disciplines and specialties. Through the VA Acquisition Academy, VA partners with HBCUs to develop acquisition-based curriculum to prepare graduates for federal acquisition careers. The VA Office of Academic Affiliation piloted a geographic mapping program to connect 75 percent of VA medical facilities to local HBCUs and is also aiming to expand it to connect 100 percent of VA medical facilities to HBCUs.

VA is committed to continually supporting HBCUs. I believe HBCUs are important for our country and are important sources of diverse talent for VA. During HBCU Week and throughout the year, I call on all employees to assist VA in improving data tracking of key metrics at HBCUs, identifying possible areas for future engagement, extending Graduate Medical Education programs in rural and underserved areas, providing internship opportunities to HBCU students, and applying advanced data analytics to identify the most at-risk HBCUs and allocating additional resources to those locations.

On September 16-19, VA participated in the 2018 National HBCU Week Conference for federal agencies, private sector companies and philanthropic organizations, planned under the leadership of the White House Initiative on HBCUs with input from the President’s Board of Advisors on HBCUs and its conference sponsors. The annual conference provides a forum to exchange information and share innovations among and between institutions while aiming to promote HBCU excellence, innovation and sustainability. To get more involved or for more information, visit VA’s National African American Employment Program webpage at https://www.diversity.va.gov/programs/aa.aspx. For more information on the White House Initiative on HBCUs and a list of HBCUs, visit https://sites.ed.gov/whhbcu.

Affinity Conferences

External Affinity Conferences Approved for VA-wide Participation

Affinity conferences are national meetings convened by external private or public nonprofit organizations representing diverse segments of the population for the primary purpose of promoting equal employment opportunity and providing career development, education, and employment outreach services. VA strongly supports leveraging external partnerships with affinity conferences for professional development and recruitment outreach purposes. The list of Fiscal Year 2019 External Affinity Conferences Approved for VA-wide Participation is now available online.