



Military Cultural Awareness eLearning VAanguard Article

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Approved for use

(NOTE: Screen captures from the training as well as care/combat photos will be provided to support this article)

Headline

**To Know Them
Is To Better Serve Them**

Subhead

From following proper protocol, to treating complex injuries, understanding military culture has never been more important to achieving our mission.

Text

It is said that the best way to understand someone is to walk a mile in their shoes, or in the case of our Veterans, a mile in boots while wearing 50 pounds of body armor, a Kevlar helmet, ammunition and weapons.

“Understanding what Veterans have experienced directly relates to my ability to build a trusting relationship,” shares Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA)’s Geralyn Mushinski, Assistant Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VRE) officer in Philadelphia. “If I can make that connection, demonstrate that I get it, that’s a big step in being able to help.”

“The very nature of war and its changing effect on Service members and their families presents ongoing challenges and opportunity for today’s VA employee, in both large and small ways,” adds Ms. Karen Malebranche, Acting Chief Officer for the Legislative, Regulatory and Intergovernmental Affairs Office for the Office of the Under Secretary for Veterans Health Administration (VHA). “The key is not only to understand that these changes will keep coming, but also in the midst of change, VA people work hard to appreciate the little things.”

“Just saying ‘thank you for your service’ or calling a Veteran by his or her rank can make all the difference,” Malebranche, also a retired Army Colonel, suggests. “To have their personal sacrifices, and the sacrifices of their families demonstrably appreciated cannot be understated.” Just as her own field experience helped her improve care in an Army clinical environment, Malebranche feels that understanding what a Veteran has endured can help VA employees improve the services they provide.

The benefit of this kind of deep-seeded understanding of our Veterans is what brought about development of the VA Military Cultural Awareness (MCA) Training. The interactive 90-minute e-learning course was launched this past November by VA Learning University (VALU) under the Office of Human Resources and Administration’s ADVANCE initiative.

“I sought out Karen and others like her across the Department after Mike Walcoff (Acting Under Secretary for Benefits) asked for rich customer service training to improve employee

understanding of the Armed Forces and Service members,” recalls Alice Muellerweiss, Veteran and Dean, VALU. The concept was universally embraced, and prompted swift development of the innovative program.

“Already, 1,458 people have completed the training, and the feedback we’ve received about its content, impact on providing better service, and the format itself, is excellent,” she said. More than 4,600 people have the course on their learning plans to date. Because of this success, Muellerweiss and her team are busy developing follow-on training for release this summer. Using stories that resonate with participants, the award winning (see sidebar) MCA training provides real-world context for the facts presented, making it an especially effective and engaging approach to training. It provides foundational knowledge of common military culture, customs and courtesies, explains differences between the branches of the Armed Forces, defines roles and ranks within the military, and overviews some of the conflicts in which Veterans have served.

“I was nearly brought to tears – it just brought so much about our Veterans to life for me,” says Arminda Guerrero, a training technician at the Topeka VA Health Resource Center in Topeka who completed the course. Guerrero recommends this training for every employee at VA, whether or not they are directly interfacing with Veterans or processing benefits. “The training opened my perspective on our mission at VA, as well as the needs of the Veterans on the other end of the lines at our call center.”

“The fact is, we have changed America in these recent wars,” Malebranche adds. “The impact on families due to longer and more frequent deployments is very different from past generations,” she says.

Malebranche speaks from personal experience. Before coming to VA 10 years ago, she served 31 years in the U.S. Army as an active duty Soldier, nurse, senior health systems analyst and program manager. She recalls a critical part of her own training that gave her added compassion and insight into her role as nurse. “Simply by suiting up in full gear, and spending a day walking and working side-by-side with a combat soldier, I gained a sharper understanding of the kind of toll such duty places on a person’s body,” Malebranche explains.

Another MCA participant, VA employee Lisa Mattingly, Cemetery Representative, Lebanon National Cemetery, says she was profoundly affected by the training. “I feel an even deeper sense of respect and appreciation for our Veterans,” she shares. “When I heard the Vets talk about their experiences in the video, what they’ve experienced and sacrificed for our freedoms, it made everything very real for me. They deserve our thanks and our utmost respect...now I feel like I understand personally why that is.”

After serving Veterans and their families for 9-1/2 years, a job Mattingly finds extremely rewarding, she says she now feels even *more* honored to do so. “They don’t need a shoulder to cry on, they want respect and recognition – that’s what I can do for them.” She knows she has provided the most professional service possible when a Veteran or family member turns to her and says, “You understand me.” The MCA training has helped her feel that much closer to the people she works with every day.

“Working at VA is a labor of love,” Malebranche agrees. “We may all come from different backgrounds, but everyone has their devotion to our mission in common,” she says. “Most people you talk to have a family member or friend who served, so they have some personal reason for coming, even if it’s not direct military experience. Maybe that’s part of the passion – the personal connection.”

The military experience can seem like an entirely new world to people who have not personally served. And even among those who have, awareness beyond their own branch of service or personal experiences can seem like a different world. Clearly, being better able to understand the implications of that kind of wear and tear on a Vet’s body and mind is essential to all of us at VA as we work every day to improve our care.

“The simple fact is,” Mattingly concluded, “all VA employees should understand the need of every Veteran. The more we are connected to their hearts, emotions and experiences, the deeper our respect for them will be.”

To register and view the MCA course, go to VA’s Talent Management System (TMS), course #1341520, or go to <http://bit.ly/mcacourse>. For information about the topics included in the course, a list of resources is available at vaww.va.gov/valu/mca.asp. To learn more about this and other training opportunities offered by VALU, please visit <http://www.valu.va.gov>.

SIDEBAR #1

Department of Veterans Affairs Military Cultural Awareness (MCA) Training Wins Prestigious Gold Award The MCA was recently honored with the 2011 Best Practices in Distance Learning Programming, Gold, from the United States Distance Learning Association (USDLA). USDLA the premier distance learning association since 1987, honors organizations annually with its 21st Century Best Practices Awards. These prestigious International Awards are presented annually to organizations and individuals engaged in the development and delivery of distance learning programs.

SIDEBAR #2**What You'll Learn From Military Cultural Awareness Training:**

- The differences between the various branches of the military and their core values
- The common uniforms, uniform markings, and some basics on military ranks and titles

The experiences a Service member goes through,

- Why they serve, what motivates them, and the kind of training they receive
- The major military conflicts, from World War I through the Global War on Terror (Operation Enduring Freedom /Operation Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF))
- The role the military plays in times of national disaster
- The customs and courtesies common throughout the branches of the military, and the potential implications for VA employees who works with Veterans and Service members

SIDEBAR #3

"I was truly moved by the MCA Training – the video and interactivity made it enjoyable and compelling. It brought the Veteran experience to life for me, made it very real. I feel I have a better, more personal perspective of our mission at VA now, and what our Veterans need from me every day. I think every employee should take it."

Arminda Guerrero

Training Technician

VA Health Resource Center

Topeka, KA

SIDEBAR #4

"Everyone at VA should complete the MCA Training. The training is *real*. The stories are *true*. Our Veterans deserve this kind of deep understanding of what they've endured, the challenges they've faced in life, and how every Vet and situation is different. I gained insights into what is expected of me as a VA NCA employee, and personally feel an even greater sense of connection with our Veterans."

Lisa Mattingly

Cemetery Representative

Lebanon National Cemetery

Lebanon, KY

SIDEBAR #5

“Understanding a Veteran directly relates to building trust – they need this to feel they have nothing to fear, that we’re truly here for them. If I can make a connection, that’s a big step toward being able to help.”

Geralyn Mushinski

Assistant VRE Officer (Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment)

Philadelphia

SIDEBAR #6

Karen T. Malebranche

Acting Chief Legislative, Regulatory, and Intergovernmental Officer, Veterans Health Administration

Col. (Ret) Karen Malebranche, RN, MSN, CNS, is the Acting Chief Officer for the Legislative, Regulatory and Intergovernmental Affairs Office for the Office of the Under Secretary for Health in the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). She was formerly the Executive Director for the Operation Enduring Freedom/ Operation Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF) from September 2007 to January 2009. Prior to this, she was the Program Coordinator for Clinical and Case Management in the Office of Seamless Transition, and the Chief of the State Home Per Diem Grant Program in the Office of Geriatrics and Extended Care. Malebranche served 31 Years in the U.S. Army as an active duty soldier, nurse, senior health systems analyst and program manager in various clinical and administrative roles. She came to VA after her last active duty assignment in the Office of the Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs, where she was the Director of the Programs and Benefits Directorate at the TRICARE Management Activity. Previous assignments include Chief, Coordinated Care/TRICARE Division, U.S. Army Medical Command; Ft. Sam Houston/Office of the Surgeon General, Chief Nurse, Joint Task Force (JTF) Bravo, Honduras; Ft. Campbell; Ft. Rucker; Ft. Ord; Ft. Gordon; Hawaii and Korea.

SIDEBAR #7

Michael Walcoff

Acting Under Secretary for Benefits

As Acting Under Secretary for Benefits, Michael Walcoff leads the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) in the delivery of a wide range of integrated programs of non-medical benefits and services authorized by law to veterans and their dependents and survivors. He directs the administration of VA’s disability compensation, pension, education, home loan guaranty, vocational rehabilitation and employment, and life insurance programs. Prior to his appointment as Acting Under Secretary, Mr. Walcoff served as VA’s Deputy Under Secretary for Benefits since January 2008. Previously, Mr. Walcoff served as the VA’s Associate Deputy Under Secretary for Field Operations, supervising VBA’s 57 regional offices with over 13,000 employees. Mr. Walcoff began his career as a veterans claims examiner at the Philadelphia

Regional Office and Insurance Center in 1974. During his career, he has served as Director of the VBA regional offices in Seattle, Wash., and Huntington, W.Va., as well as Deputy Area Director of VBA's Western Area. Mr. Walcoff received his Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science from American University in Washington, D.C., and his Juris Doctor degree from Temple University School of Law in Philadelphia, Pa. He received the Senior Executive Service Presidential Rank Award of Meritorious Executive in 2001 and the Distinguished Executive Award in 2005.

SIDEBAR #8

Alice Muellerweiss

Dean, VA Learning University

Alice Muellerweiss was appointed Dean of the VA Learning University (VALU) in the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Human Resources and Administration at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in January 2010. Muellerweiss leads VA's new corporate university to help build a talented and diverse VA workforce and enterprise-wide leaders to better serve Veterans and their families. She began her executive career as VA's Associate Deputy Assistant Secretary of IT Human Resources Career Development within the Office of Information and Technology from June 2008 to December 2009, leading corporate human capital management transformation to build and sustain a high-performing workforce. Muellerweiss' Federal career began in the U.S. Army military police over three decades ago. She held a variety positions, including Drill Sergeant at Fort McClellan, Alabama, Platoon Sergeant at Operation Restore Hope in Mogadishu, Somalia; and ended her Army active duty career as an Operations Sergeant in Kitzingen, Germany in 1996. She continued her work as a civilian employee in Army operations, training and leadership development in Germany and the United States. From 2004 to 2007, Muellerweiss served as Chief, Civilian Leader Development Division in the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff, Army Training Directorate. During her tenure, she was selected as the Secretary of the Army's Task Force Chief of Staff for the Review of Education, Training, and Assignments for Leaders. In this role, she advanced the Army's leader development program by creating and implementing the Army's first deliberate and systematic process to develop civilian leaders of the highest caliber. Muellerweiss earned her Masters degree in Strategic Studies from the U.S. Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, in June 2008. She holds a Masters degree in Human Relations from the University of Oklahoma and a Bachelor's of Science in Management from the University of Maryland, University College.