

# VA **anguard**

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

May/June 2011



*After the Storm*  
*Military Cultural Awareness Training*  
*Amputee Softball Team*  
*VA and Its Academic Partners*



*The military experience can seem like an entirely new world to people who have not personally served.*

# To Know Them is to Serve Them Better

USMC

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

It is said that the best way to understand someone is to walk a mile in their shoes, or in the case of 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," says Geralyn Mushinski, assistant Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment officer at the VA Regional Office and Insurance Center 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 opportunities for today's VA employee, in both large and small ways," adds Karen Malebranche, acting chief officer for the Legislative, Regulatory and Intergovernmental Affairs Office in the Veterans Health Administration. "The key is not only to understand that these changes will keep coming, but also that 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 believes that understanding what a veteran has endured can help VA employees improve the services they provide.

The benefit of this kind of deep-seated understanding of veterans is what brought about development of the VA Military Cultural Awareness Training. The interactive 90-minute e-learning course was launched last November by the VA Learning University under the Office of Hu-

man Resources and Administration's ADVANCE initiative.

"I sought out Karen and others like her across the Department after Mike Walcott (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, Army 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 says. 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 VA Health Resource Center in Topeka, Kan., 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."

Malebranche speaks from personal experience. Before coming to VA 10 years ago, she served 31 years in the 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 spend-



*"Just saying, 'thank you for your service,' or calling a veteran by his or her rank can make all the difference," says Karen Malebranche, veteran and VA employee.*

ROBERT TURTEL

## 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).
- 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 work with veterans and service members.

ing 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, Lisa Mattingly, a cemetery representative at Lebanon National Cemetery in Kentucky, says she was profoundly affected by the training. "I feel an even deeper sense of respect and appreciation for our veterans," she says. "When I heard the vets talk about their experiences in the video, what they've sacrificed for our freedoms, it made everything very real for me. They deserve our thanks and our utmost respect ... now I feel like I un-

derstand personally why that is."

After serving veterans and their families for 9-and-a-half years, a job Mattingly finds very 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. 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 veteran's body and mind is essential to everyone at VA as they work to improve care.

"The simple fact is," Mattingly says, "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, 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](http://vaww.va.gov/valu/mca.asp). To learn more about this and other training opportunities offered by VALU, visit <http://www.valu.va.gov>. **VA**



GERRY SONNENBERG

## VA Military Cultural Awareness Training Wins Prestigious Gold Award

The MCA course was recently honored with the 2011 Best Practices in Distance Learning Programming, Gold, from the United States Distance Learning Association. USDLA, the premier distance learning association since 1987, honors organizations annually with its 21st Century Best Practices Awards. These prestigious awards are presented to organizations and individuals engaged in the development and delivery of distance learning programs.

*Left: Alice Muellerweiss, dean, VALU, accepts the award from USDLA President Dr. Denzil Edge.*