



*A monthly newsletter dedicated to informing and strengthening the VA Research Community - January 2022*

## Message from the CRADO

As we begin the new year, I offer my heartfelt thanks to all of you, my VA Research colleagues, for your hard work and resilience. Your commitment is a testament to the strength and dedication of our organization.



These have not been easy years. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacted both physical and mental tolls. In a recent [study](#) by VA Puget Sound researchers led by Dr. Rebecca C. Hendrickson, one in five nurses surveyed said they were unlikely to stick with their careers because of the stress caused by the pandemic. Frontline health care workers are not the only ones feeling the strain. Research staff also have been impacted, at work and at home.

We in ORD recently released a memo to the field outlining how research-related activities may continue to be affected by the pandemic, especially in light of the recent surges caused by the omicron variant. As an organization, VHA is in a very different place than we were back in March 2020, when we put an administrative hold on most human subjects research. Since that time, VAMC leadership and staff have had time to develop effective procedures and communication channels to address issues arising from the pandemic. Thus, we do not plan to issue any new administrative holds on research activities. Questions for ORD staff about how research is being affected by COVID-19 can continue to be sent to [ORDCOVID19@va.gov](mailto:ORDCOVID19@va.gov). While living through the pandemic, VA researchers also are providing much-needed knowledge about the impacts of the pandemic on Veterans' mental health. One hopeful finding, from a VA [study](#) published in *JAMA Psychiatry* in August 2021, found that the COVID-19 pandemic has not been linked to an increase in suicidal behavior among Veterans. The authors attributed their finding partly to the strength and resiliency of our Veterans.

Again, thank you for your continued diligence and perseverance as we navigate through these uncertain times. I am truly inspired by how our community continues to conduct high-quality



[Policy/Admin Updates](#)



[Resources and Opportunities](#)



[Noteworthy Publications](#)



[Media Buzz](#)



[Upcoming Events](#)



[Achievements and Milestones](#)

research amid difficult circumstances and contribute in substantial, meaningful ways to the national response to the pandemic. With that said, in VA Research, we value our teammates not just as contributors to an incredible biomedical enterprise, but also as individuals. As we face the highest number of new cases by far seen throughout the pandemic, please take good care of yourselves.

With gratitude,

Rachel

**Rachel Ramoni, DMD, ScD**  
**Chief Research and Development Officer (14RD)**  
**Department of Veterans Affairs**



## Policy/Admin Updates

**VAIRRS update: Project Cover Sheet campaign 2022**—The Project Cover Sheet (PCS) campaign continues into 2022 as a key part of the VA Research enterprise rollout. The PCS Wizard is an informational document that consolidates basic descriptive data points for each active research study and provides a mechanism for principal investigators and study teams to document the defining attributes. This allows them to collect funding information, project personnel, and project characteristics.

As of Jan. 3, 2022, there has been a 20% increase in PCS submissions, with an overall completion rate of 51.3%. The VAIRRS Program will be reaching out to the research offices to verify active project counts before contacting the researcher community again. The goal is to reach a 100% completion rate as the campaign continues in the new year.

**COVID-19 VHA travel restrictions**—In response to increased COVID-19 infection numbers, VHA has implemented travel restrictions until the end of February 2022. Only mission-critical VHA travel will be approved. All other VHA travel is cancelled as a proactive action in response to the current COVID-19 surge. “Mission critical” will be determined by local leadership on a case-by-case basis and includes travel to provide clinical coverage in VHA or under approved “Fourth Mission” assignments. Until the end of February, no research-related travel will be approved by ORD leadership. Therefore, any ORD employees who have VA travel scheduled between now and the end of February should cancel travel plans.



## Resources and Opportunities

**Research Supplements to Promote Diversity**—A new [funding opportunity](#) for early-stage investigators from underrepresented backgrounds is now accepting applications. The supplement award will provide a mentored research experience for early career scientists from underrepresented populations, such as individuals from racial and ethnic groups underrepresented

in health-related sciences on a national basis, individuals with disabilities, U.S. Veterans, and LGBTQ+ persons. It will provide salary and project funds for up to two years.

Individuals mentored under the supplement must be within three years of their doctoral degree or their last clinical training if the mentee is a licensed clinician. The primary mentor must be an appropriately qualified VA investigator with an active Merit Award. All VA medical centers with an active research program are eligible. Only one supplement request per medical center will be accepted per year. It is anticipated that up to 10 awards will be funded. Applications are due through [grants.gov](https://grants.gov) by **Feb. 1, 2022**.

**Summer Research Program to support diversity**—ORD is piloting a Summer Research Program to enhance the diversity of the research workforce by providing research experience and related opportunities to enrich the pool of individuals from diverse backgrounds, including nationally underrepresented groups, Veterans, and disabled individuals. The pilot will support creative mentored research experience for community college and undergraduate students or medical, dental, nursing, and other health professional students.

Initial appointments will be for one to three months between May and August of 2022. This will be a three-year pilot with opportunity for renewal. For more information, contact Drs. Cendrine Robinson ([cendrine.robinson@va.gov](mailto:cendrine.robinson@va.gov)) and Mark Roltsch ([mark.roltsch@va.gov](mailto:mark.roltsch@va.gov)). Full proposals are due by **Jan. 31, 2022**.

**NAVREF clinical trial opportunities**—In their December newsletter, the National Association of Veterans' Research & Education Foundations ([NAVREF](https://navref.org)) published a list of clinical trial opportunities identified by the Partnered Research Program open for research site participation. To receive this list and request more information on clinical trial opportunities, contact Robin Rusconi at NAVREF ([rrusconi@navref.org](mailto:rrusconi@navref.org)).

**New ORD newsletter portal**—A new [ORD newsletter portal](#) has been added to the VA Research website. This page provides links to the archives of multiple newsletters offered by ORD services, including this *ORD Field Update*. Each newsletter also has a subscribe button. The new portal includes newsletters intended for Veterans and the public, MVP enrollees, and the VA research community. It will serve as a convenient, one-stop location to direct people who may be interested in subscribing to news about various VA Research areas.

**Research in Action call for submissions**—All VA research is intended to ultimately contribute to the health and well-being of Veterans. VA [Research in Action](#) highlights examples of how VA research has been translated into everyday health care within VHA or in medical care generally.

We are looking for VA projects to highlight that have had substantial, lasting impact on health care across the country and globe. If you know of a VA accomplishment that you think would be a good candidate for this feature, please contact [Tristan.horrom@va.gov](mailto:Tristan.horrom@va.gov) with details.



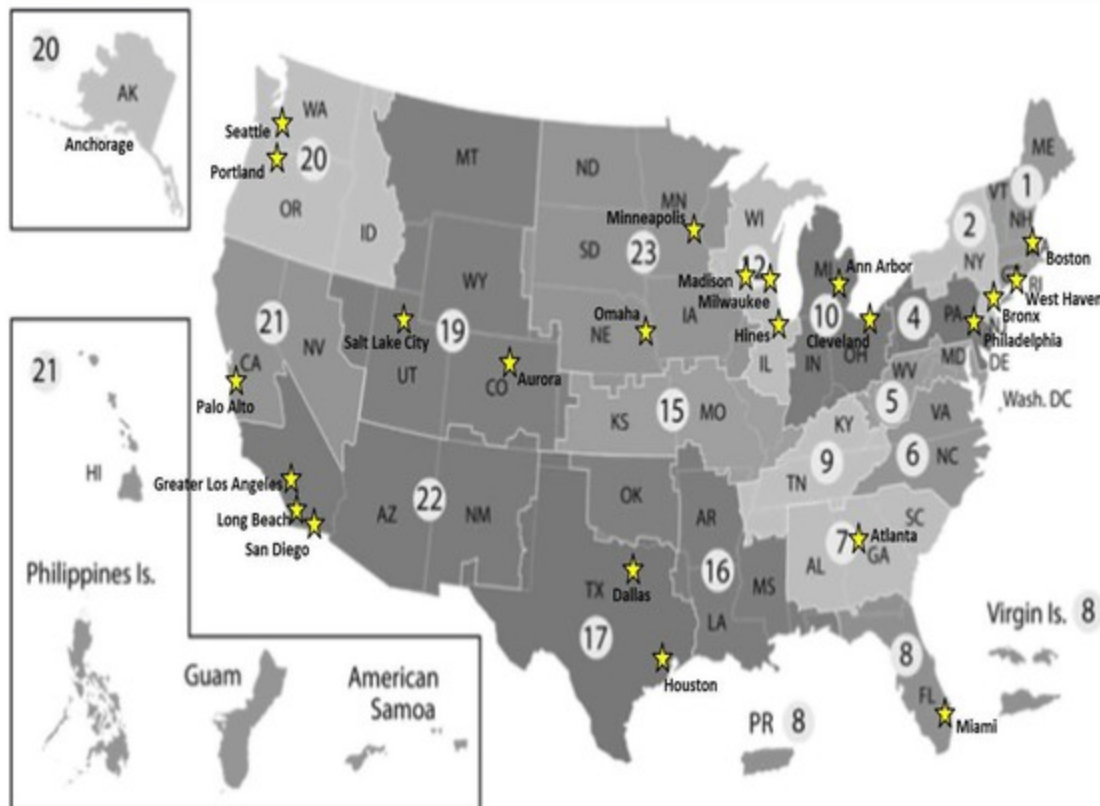
**Barnwell Award application deadline**—The John B. Barnwell Award is CSR&D's highest honor for outstanding achievement in clinical science research. Nomination packages are due by close of business on **Feb. 1, 2022**.

The Barnwell Award is given for outstanding scientific achievements in clinical research that advance the diagnosis, prevention, and/or treatment of diseases and disorders in the Veteran population.

Nominations may come from VA medical centers, or CSR&D can invite researchers to submit an application. All applicants must apply through their local R&D office. To be eligible for the Barnwell Award, nominees must meet specific qualifications. Please review the program guide and instructions posted on the [CSR&D website](#) for further details or contact Dr. Mark Roltsch ([mark.roltsch@va.gov](mailto:mark.roltsch@va.gov)) with questions.

**CSP NODES expansion**—The VA Cooperative Studies Program (CSP) is pleased to announce the selection of 13 VA medical centers (VAMCs) to join its Network of Dedicated Enrollment Sites (NODES) program, bringing the total number of participating facilities to 23. These facilities all demonstrated the necessary leadership qualities, clinical research environment, support for a collaborative environment, and dedication to NODES goals and were all highlighted as being of the highest caliber among the proposals that were received. This program expansion is intended to strengthen the existing NODES consortium and increase Veteran access to CSP (and other ORD) sponsored research, and is consistent with CSP's demonstrated success in the adoption of a centralized approach to address site-level challenges to enroll patients more efficiently into multi-site clinical research. See the map below for all NODES sites.

## Network of Dedicated Enrollment Sites (NODES)



**Researchers Who Served call for submissions**—We are looking for VA researchers who served in the military to feature in a series called [VA Researchers Who Served](#). The profiles explain the critical work that VA researchers do for the Veteran community and at the same time highlight and recognize their military service.

If you know a VA researcher who would be a good candidate for this series, please contact Mike Richman ([Michael.richman1@va.gov](mailto:Michael.richman1@va.gov)).

### Employment

- (01/06/22) [Biostatistician](#)- Durham, NC
- (01/04/22) [Research Assistant](#)- Brockton, MA
- (01/03/22) [Supervisory Program Specialist](#)- Long Beach, CA
- (01/03/22) [Research Assistant Part-Time](#)- Boston, MA
- (01/03/22) [Clinical Research Program Manager/Clinical Research Supervisor](#)- Long Beach, CA

More VA Research opportunities can be seen on the [ORD website](#). Members of the VA Research community who are interested in advertising their available positions here can submit requests to [ORD.Web@va.gov](mailto:ORD.Web@va.gov).



## Noteworthy Publications

Below is a small sampling of noteworthy studies published by VA researchers within the past month. This list is intended to reflect the broad spectrum of VA research, but is in no way inclusive of all VA researcher topics or projects. Visit the [VACO Library](#) website to sign up for alerts on published VA studies on many different topics.

[Comparative effectiveness of BNT162b2 and mRNA-1273 vaccines in U.S. Veterans](#). Dickerman BA, Gerlovin H, Madenci AL, Kurgansky KE, Ferolito BR, Figueroa Muñiz, Gagnon DR et al. The Moderna mRNA vaccine was shown to offer slightly better COVID-19 protection than the Pfizer vaccine, but both vaccines were highly effective at preventing infection, hospitalization, and death. *New England Journal of Medicine*. 2021 Dec 1. Online ahead of print.

[Cardiovascular events with finerenone in kidney disease and type 2 diabetes](#). Pitt B, Filippatos G, Agarwal R, Anker SD, Bakris GL, Rossing P, Joseph A et al. Among patients with type 2 diabetes and stage 2 to 4 chronic kidney disease with moderately elevated albuminuria or stage 1 or 2 CKD with severely elevated albuminuria, finerenone therapy improved cardiovascular outcomes as compared with placebo. *New England Journal of Medicine*. 2021 Dec 9;385(24):2252-2263.

[Effect of long-term supplementation within marine omega-3 fatty acids vs placebo on risk of depression or clinically relevant depressive symptoms and on change in mood scores: A randomized clinical trial](#). Okereke OI, Vyas CM, Mischoulon D, Chang G, Cook NR, Weinberg A, Bubes V et al. Treatment with omega-3 supplements yielded mixed results. The findings do not support the use of omega-3 supplements in adults to prevent depression. *JAMA*. 2021 Dec 21;326(23):2385-2394.

[Association of rivaroxaban vs apixaban with major ischemic or hemorrhagic events in patients with atrial fibrillation](#). Ray WA, Chung CP, Stein CM, Smalley W, Zimmerman E, Dupont W, Hung AM et al. Among Medicare beneficiaries 65 years and older with atrial fibrillation, treatment with rivaroxaban compared with apixaban was associated with a significantly increased risk of major ischemic or hemorrhagic events. *JAMA*. 2021 Dec 21;326(23):2395-2404.

[Association between preserved ratio impaired spirometry and clinical outcomes in US adults](#). Wan ES, Balte P, Schwartz JE, Bhatt SP, Cassano PA, Couper D, Daviglius ML et al. Baseline PRISm, compared with normal spirometry, was associated with a small but statistically significant increased risk for mortality and adverse cardiovascular and respiratory outcomes. *JAMA*. 2021 Dec 14;26(22):2287-2298.



## Media Buzz

Social Media Highlights

On Dec. 9, the main VA Twitter account tweeted to its over 600,000 followers a story about MAPS, a VA-created smartphone app that aims to help prevent Veteran suicide.



**#VAResearchNewsBrief:** Researchers from the **@VAProvidence** developed a smartphone app to help prevent suicide. The Mobile Application for the Prevention of Suicide (MAPS) uses assessment in the moment to identify risk and deliver real-time strategies. [bit.ly/3rR4AFu](https://bit.ly/3rR4AFu)



8:30 AM · Dec 9, 2021 · Salesforce - Social Studio

57 Retweets 10 Quote Tweets 27 Likes

If you would like to submit a post to go on the VA Research Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram pages, please do so via email at [ORDMedia@va.gov](mailto:ORDMedia@va.gov).

Please include the following information:

- Desired platform: Facebook, Twitter (240 character max), or Instagram
- Post content
- Image

- [Link](#)

After the above are submitted, the request will be forwarded to the ORD Communications team for approval and scheduling. Posts may also be added to a library of potential stories to be picked up by other VA social media accounts, such as the main VA pages.

### VA Research in the News

Multiple news outlets reported that researchers with the Concussion Legacy Foundation diagnosed former NFL receiver Vincent Jackson with stage 2 chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE). Jackson, who retired in 2018, was found dead in February at the age of 38. CTE is a progressive degenerative brain disease caused by repetitive head trauma. It is linked to aggression, impulsivity, depression, anxiety, paranoia, substance abuse, suicidal ideation, and cognitive problems. Dr. Ann McKee, chief of neuropathology at the VA Boston Healthcare System, described how Jackson's life changed as he was affected with these symptoms. McKee is also director of the Boston University CTE Center and VA-BU-CLF Brain Bank. "That his brain showed stage 2 CTE should no longer surprise us; these results have become commonplace. What is surprising is that so many football players have died with CTE and so little is being done to make football, at all levels, safer by limiting the number of repetitive subconcussive hits," said McKee. The researchers hope that the findings of Jackson's case will raise awareness of CTE and the risks of the disease.

This story was reported by *U.S. News & World Report*, *CNN*, *NBC News*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *CBS News*, among other outlets.

### Research Photo of the Month



(From left) Drs. Lauren Kennedy-Metz and Marco Zenati and chief perfusionist Rithy Srey stand near a heart-lung machine in an operating room at the West Roxbury VA in Massachusetts. The team is



studying how artificial intelligence can help perfusionists optimize use of the machines during cardiac surgery. (Photo by Deirdre Salvas)



## Upcoming Events

- The Office of Research Protections, Policy, and Education (ORPP&E) will hold a webinar on the submission process to the Central IRB through IRBNet on **Jan. 13, 2022**, at 2:00 pm EST. Registration is through [WebEx](#).
- Louis Dell'Italia will be presented CSR&D's highest honor for clinical research contributions, the John B. Barnwell Award, in a ceremony planned locally at the Birmingham VA Medical Center on **Jan. 27, 2022**.



## Achievements and Milestones

**VHA 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemorative eBook**—As part of its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration, VHA released a commemorative [eBook](#) that highlights VHA's past, present, and future. Pages 54–61 feature an enlightening, informative, and highly readable account of the VA research program, past and present.

### Career Milestones

**Welcome to Matthew Verna**—ORD recently welcomed Mr. Matthew Verna as the new director of finance. Mr. Verna has a financial background exceeding 25 years. Prior to coming to ORD, he served as the chief financial officer for the VA Maryland Health Care System for the past two years. He was previously assigned to ORD as a budget analyst in the finance department, supporting the Cooperative Studies Program for 10 years. In addition to working for VA, Mr. Verna served in the United States Marine Corps and worked for several private sector companies, such as PriceWaterhouseCoopers, Northrop Grumman, and AECOM. Mr. Verna holds a bachelor's degree in accounting from Strayer University, and is currently pursuing a Master of Business Administration degree.

### History Corner



**Diabetes drug from Gila monster venom**—In 1990, endocrinologist Dr. John Eng at the Bronx VA Medical Center and Dr. Jean-Pierre Raufman, now with the Baltimore VA Medical Center, discovered a peptide in the venom of a Southwest desert lizard that would become the basis for the diabetes drug exenatide, sold as Byetta. Seeking new hormones, they were intrigued by research showing that venom from some snakes and lizards, including the Gila monster, enlarged the pancreas, where insulin is made. The Gila monster is able to maintain steady blood sugar levels even after long periods of not eating. Their research showed that the newly discovered peptide triggers the synthesis and release of insulin from beta cells in the pancreas, thus laying the groundwork for exenatide’s development.

Anyone interested in receiving general news updates about VA research is invited to [sign up](#) for our VA Research Currents and VA Research Spotlight monthly emails.



You have received this message because you are subscribed to Veterans Health. Access your [Subscriber Preferences](#) to make changes to your subscription or [Unsubscribe](#). Get this as a forward? [Sign Up](#) to receive updates from Veterans Health. Having questions or problems? Please visit [Help](#) for assistance.

