

Give Green a Chance

VA employees receive recognition for making conservation a habit.

With new initiatives, executive orders and environmental awareness at the forefront of today's "greening" advances in the federal government, employees are crucial to the success of the programs designed to reduce VA's environmental footprint.

Although some changes are mandated by federal law, others have sprung forth from surprising sources. Several creative grassroots efforts, spearheaded by employees determined to make their workplaces better, have started locally and are slowly spreading to the rest of their facility or in this case, the rest of VA.

The first annual Green Routine Awards, presented at VA Central Office in Washington, D.C., last summer, recognized these efforts. The Green Routine Initiative, launched in the fall of 2009, encouraged VA employees to "adopt, implement and promote conservation and sustainability." The awards honor VA employees and facilities that have developed, initiated or significantly contributed to green, sustainable practices at their workplace.

"Reducing our operational costs through sustainable practices means increasing our ability to serve veterans," said Jim Sullivan, director of VA's Office of Asset Enterprise Management. "In a larger sense, all of the nominees for the Green Routine Awards are winners, because they are helping us achieve that goal."

Four winners were chosen from more than 50 submissions, each highlighting the special contributions that made a difference in their facility. With categories such as Waste Reduc-

tion, Recycling, and Resource Conservation, winners received a locally-made award of 100 percent recycled glass, along with a ceremonial coin.

To be considered, efforts had to be started through an individual's own will, not because it was part of their job description. In addition, these grassroots efforts had to be undertaken outside of staff's daily duties. Many efforts were started by team members within an office; others were due to the hard work of a single employee. In all cases, small changes led to big developments.

Among the winners was a team from the St. Cloud VA Medical Center in Minnesota for their Food Waste Study. The team began the study in 2009, focusing on all aspects of food waste, such as "plate waste" (food served but not consumed by patients) and "food production waste" (prepared food that is not served).

Discovering that the facility wasted a staggering 3,313 pounds a week, clinical dietitians created procedures to reduce the amount of food waste on residents' trays. Led by Brian Vetter, clinical dietitian, the team made portion sizes smaller and reduced the amount of large batch preparations. After several months, a second study showed that food production waste decreased by an astounding 1,265 pounds every three weeks.

To keep improving, the facility's "Nutrition Green Team" continually monitors food waste and operations, passing along the direct cost savings to the medical facility. With a 35 percent tri-weekly reduction in processed food waste, Vetter and his team in turn also reduce the amount of food

packaging going to landfills.

Another winner, from the Milwaukee VA Regional Office, focused on biking, an environmentally-friendly way to reduce petroleum fuel use and pollution, with their Bike to Work Program. The program, which operates only during warm weather months, uses a point system to reward employees who commute to work by bike.

Employees can use reward points for a reserved parking space during the winter months or on alternative trinkets such as a backpack or messenger bag. In addition to temporarily easing the demand on parking facilities, this innovative effort can easily be duplicated at other VA facilities, providing a low-cost way to encourage employees to go green.

The project was the idea of Steve Fraenzl, the Milwaukee VARO's public contact outreach specialist. Accustomed to driving his car along the picturesque Menomonee River Parkway every morning, he knew his commute would be much better on a bike. He did some research, bought a bike, and began riding when the weather was good, enjoying the exercise while taking in the landscape.

Last summer, in conjunction with the Milwaukee VARO's Health & Wellness Initiative, Fraenzl, assisted by employee Thomas Braun, created the Bike to Work Program. Fraenzl admits his reasoning was twofold.

"I wanted to help with the parking issue here at the regional office," Fraenzl said, "but it was also an attempt to promote wellness." And his efforts have paid off. To date, almost a dozen people have participated in

more than 200 rides. “It’s a much nicer way to start your day,” Fraenzl said. “I wish I could do it all the time.”

Going paperless has been one of the major greening goals of VA, considering the average U.S. office worker uses 10,000 sheets of paper in a year, according to Environmental Protection Agency stats. In 2009, the Manchester (N.H.) VA Medical Center’s radiology department started an initiative aimed at eliminating paper orders each time an exam was requested.

Led by Radiology Manager Lisa Duda, PACS Administrator Holly Conroy, and Lead Technologist Doreen Mitchell, the department was able to successfully move to an all-electronic system. Working with their Information Technology department, the Radiology team rolled out changes, one at a time, to transition users slowly.

Along with training sessions and e-mail alerts about the changes, the Radiology team also changed the exam process: now when consults are ordered, an electronic alert is sent to the technologist to schedule the exam, eliminating the risk of a patient’s personally identifiable information being left unattended. By reducing the waste generated by the paper orders, the new paperless system also reduces energy consumption from the department’s printers. The cost-saving project was promoted throughout the



Top: Steve Fraenzl was honored for the Bike to Work Program he started at the Milwaukee VARO; above: VA Chief of Staff John Gingrich speaks at the awards ceremony in headquarters.

Manchester facility, which later received several inquiries from other internal departments looking to achieve the same results.

On hand for the award ceremony from New York, the Buffalo VA Medical Center’s cardiac catheterization department was honored for their recycling of the platinum contained in cardiac catheter tips. Platinum, an important component in laboratory equipment because of its resistance to corrosion and oxidation, is one of the rarest noble metals in the periodic table, making it highly valuable when recycled. Prior to implementing this process, platinum was simply discarded as regulated medical waste.

The first step the Buffalo team

took was identifying companies that could recycle the entire catheter, along with which catheters could be recycled, since not all of them are suitable for recycling. The team, consisting of employees Angela L. Oliveri, Stephanie Miller, Susan Pahl, Sandra Cottis and Kathryn Healy, then oversee the collection, cleaning and disinfecting of the platinum tips before they are sent to the recycling facility.

All of the money earned from the platinum recycling is then placed into a fund that supports other recycling-related initiatives at the facility. The Buffalo VAMC, part of the VA Western New York Healthcare System, is hoping their success with the program will inspire other VA medical centers to start catheter-recycling programs.

During the ceremony in VACO, VA Chief of Staff John R. Gingrich, on hand to present the winners with their awards, emphasized the importance of VA’s progress in becoming more environmentally-friendly.

“We were one of the first federal agencies to place environmental and energy managers at our facilities—today they number in the hundreds,” he said. “In just seven years, we’ve reduced energy consumption in our buildings by 11 percent.

“This ceremony highlights the fact that we all can do our part to bring green, sustainable practices into the workplace. Our honorees are on the front lines of our environmental advance toward a more eco-friendly VA. As I see it, our 10 awardees are nothing less than ‘earth warriors’—warriors serving warriors with the best in green initiatives.” VA

By Amanda Hester

Nominations Open for 2011

The 2011 Green Routine Awards, which opened to nominations in January, welcomes all new conservation and cost-effectiveness ideas. To apply, visit www.green.va.gov/awards.