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## "Out in the Open Boss"

A few years back, VHA put a name to the quality of service we expect our staff and service providers to deliver: Spectacular Care. It was a bold call to action then and now. I know how hard community work is, having started my career as a social worker, but today I spend most of my time behind a desk or in meetings.

So over the last few months, I shadowed many staff and service providers on their client visits. Instead of being a TV “undercover boss” though, I thought it was more important to be “out in the open,” so that I could share experiences with VHA’s workers with the hope that I would get a better understanding and appreciation for the work. It was also a chance to meet more of the amazing people we serve. I got this and much more.



What I learned:

**Public transit, unpredictable traffic and sometimes hard-to-find residences can cause anxiety**—mostly in me—about arriving at an appointment on time.

**Our staff and service providers cover so much ground**, calmly handling every literal and figurative speedbump with ease and grace.

**An appreciation for our clients and the diversity of circumstances that bring them to VHA.** They represent every age and walk of life; some have many supports, others have none.

**VHA workers are amazingly flexible and open:** they confidently and seamlessly become part of our clients and their caregivers’ lives. Many times I was told that the “worker is like family to us” and I could clearly see what a special relationship of caring had developed.

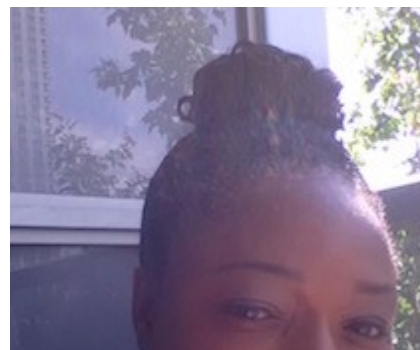
**Our staff and service providers are truly client-centred and in the moment.** Each and every one of them put aside their own full life to bond with our clients. They never rushed anyone, even though there were more clients to get to. The workers made the client feel that they were the only people in the world. To me, that is spectacular care.

These shadowing experiences have reminded me how vital the work of VHA is for the people who rely on us and how it instils an enormous sense of pride in the dedicated women and men who deliver the care. Through everyone’s skilled, compassionate and caring day-to-day actions, we are truly living our mission to create more independence for our clients and they are ever so grateful for it.

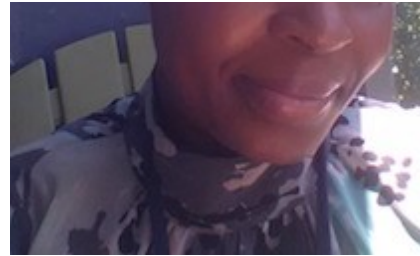
## Honouring Every Minute of Life

The words “palliative care” often evoke sadness and fear in people, but not in Sandy Jacobs. To her, caring for people in their last days is a privilege. “The care we are giving is palliative... but the focus is wholly on their (the clients’) current state and that is a living state. They are still here.”

Sandy is a supervisor for VHA’s palliative care services in the Durham and Scarborough regions. She coordinates VHA care teams of nurses and Personal Support Workers (PSWs)



to ensure there are no gaps in care. VHA is one of three organizations providing this coordinated care approach on behalf of the Central East CCAC.



Sandy is well qualified for this role. She began her career as a PSW two decades ago while studying nursing. After graduating, she worked in the oncology palliative unit of the hospital that served her neighbourhood. “I often saw people that I knew—neighbours or spouses of childhood friends,” she says. “People asked how I could do the work but I thought, ‘Who better than me to show compassion, empathy and sympathy for people that I know?’”

She moved into community nursing and then case management with the CCAC. When Sandy saw the new opportunity with VHA, “it just spoke to me and I needed to apply because this is where my heart and passion lies.”

The CCAC’s palliative care approach provides the client with a combined care team. Clients are able to express what they want their palliative care to look like, then the CCAC care coordinator, the health provider, the nurse, PSW and oncologist or family doctor work together to make sure the needs are being met.

Sandy acknowledges that it takes a very special kind of person to work in palliative care. “It’s by no means easy. Clients can range from happy-go-lucky to angry. You have to empathize with what is going on with them and even though you haven’t personally experienced it,” she observes.

Palliative care also involves serving client families. “Clients are often already in a place of acceptance. For the family, they are just not ready yet. So more than anything, we as caregivers need to have compassion and not just sympathize but to empathize with what these patients and their families are going through.”

Working in palliative care has opened Sandy’s eyes to the range of palliative states. “We have palliative patients who are very much functioning – still driving and taking themselves to the hairdresser. That word ‘palliative’ really only identifies the type of treatment and services, not the physical condition of patients,” she says.

Overall, doing this work is incredibly rewarding. “I remember being called in to be with a patient and his huge family to pray together as he was dying. They said the care I provided meant so much to him and them,” she says, fighting back tears. “Even though some of my patients pass, just the ability to provide the type of care that I’d want for myself or my family, is more important than anything I can imagine. That’s why I do it: to have an impact.”

## **A WINNING SEASON!!**

### **Hats off to Carol Annett!**



VHA’s CEO, Carol Annett, has been named a finalist for the Aird & Berlis Award for Canadian HR CEO Champion. The award—one of four Canadian HR Awards that recognizes an individual—is given to an outstanding CEO with a track record of putting people first and championing innovative HR values. Carol is eminently worthy of this honour, having conceived of such innovative initiatives as VHA Spark and VHA’s Emergency Fund, as well as championing VHA’s Head Start



Scholarship program and staff recognition programs.

The winners of the Canadian HR Awards will be announced on September 15. Congratulations, Carol and we hope to see you at the podium accepting this honour!

## Bravo to the Palliative Care Team!

VHA Home HealthCare is part of the team that won the Ontario Association of Community Care Access Centres (OACCAC) Systems Partnership Award at the OACCAC's annual conference in June. VHA, St. Elizabeth Healthcare and Paramed share this honour as the team that delivers the winning initiative, Central East CCAC's Combined Palliative Care Model.



The OACCAC's Systems Partnership Award recognizes a one-time or extended project whose nature and scope create the opportunity to make systemic improvements. The winning project must have significance to the community served and to the practices of the CCAC, and generate a positive impact on patients, caregivers and the health care system.

## Congratulations, Phoebe Boachie!



VHA Personal Support Worker Phoebe Boachie was recognized with Toronto Central CCAC's 2016 Heroes in the Home Award. This award recognizes caregivers who show exceptional kindness and dedication to a client or loved one to ensure that the limitations of age, illness or disability do not deter them from living fulfilling lives.

"I was so surprised when I got a call from the CCAC inviting me to attend the ceremony," says Phoebe, who has been a PSW with VHA

for 15 years. "I did attend, and I was very happy to be recognized for hard work and dedication to service to my clients."

## Kudos, Manouchehr Esmaeili!

Congratulations to VHA Nurse Manouchehr Esmaeili, who was nominated for the 2016 Toronto Star Nightingale Award. The Nightingale Award is presented each year to an Ontario nurse nominated by one of their patients or peers. "Manu is a very client-centred individual whose calm demeanor puts clients and family at ease in the toughest of situations," says Nursing Supervisor Richard Rementilla.

## Speaking Your Mind



VHA Home HealthCare is dedicated to



supporting research and innovation that advances human welfare, new knowledge, understanding and best practices in the home and community. Our research team regularly partners with academics and the community to create meaningful, systematic and innovative solutions that deliver the highest quality of care for our clients and their families. VHA is currently part of an exciting research partnership that is testing a new tool for assessing the progression of dementia.

This pilot project—a collaboration with the University of Toronto, Toronto Rehabilitation Institute, and AGEWELL—will field test a technology platform that analyzes a person’s natural speech and enables health professionals to monitor changes in it.

Speech is a strong indicator of cognitive health. The technology—developed by the start-up company Winterlight Labs—extracts more than 400 variables in a person’s speech. With this tool, caregivers simply show the patient a picture on a tablet and ask him or her to describe it. The technology records the description and analyzes the speech pattern, allowing caregivers to track any changes over time.

The software assesses such features as pitch, tone, rate of speech, speaking rhythm, word choice and pauses—all of which alter as dementia progresses. Metrics are completed in as little as five minutes when a network connection is available. In the laboratory setting, the software was able to reliably identify Alzheimer’s disease, aphasia and Parkinson’s disease with 85 to 100 percent accuracy.

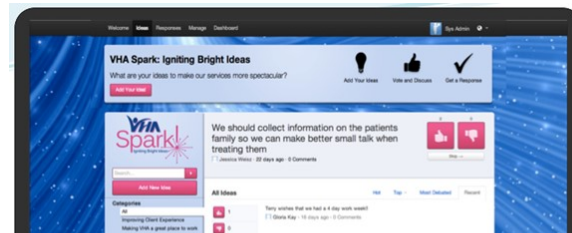
Research into cognitive impairment is a priority area for VHA. Memory and behavioural changes experienced by people with cognitive impairment often have significant health consequences for those involved. We are committed to partnering with our clients, families and research partners to better understand these conditions.

This technology offers exciting potential in the world of healthcare innovation. Winterlight’s software creators were among 10 Canadian teams showcasing technological solutions to address dementia at an international pitch competition hosted by AGEWELL in July. The team took home the first prize at the competition, and also at a Toronto competition put on by Aging2.0, an organization that is searching the world for the best aging-focused start-ups.

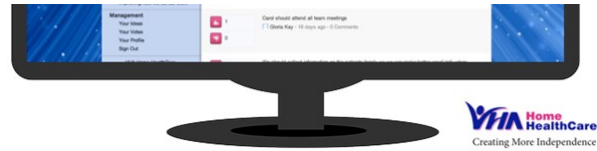
Depending on the results of our field tests of the technology, Winterlight’s simple tablet-based tool may eventually replace more complex and time-consuming paper-based assessments that can intimidate or agitate patients. This quick, detailed and repeatable assessment can improve monitoring of cognitive health and may be valuable when planning care needs and strategies for support.

## Igniting New Ideas

Connectivity has long been a central challenge in home care. Where an office offers a physical space for ideas to flow between workers who see each other daily, it is harder for ideas to converge in the community when workers do not. VHA has



leveraged technology to solve this problem through VHA Spark. The solution gives our staff and service providers an easy way to share their knowledge and explore new ideas online.



Launched at the end of 2014, VHA Spark is an innovative online platform developed by SoapBox that allows VHA to crowdsource ideas from staff and service providers and then organize, manage, and respond to them. “The idea to develop VHA Spark came from feedback we received in our 2014 Work Life Employee survey and our commitment to invest in technology to foster innovation. ‘Having your voice heard’ was an area that staff and service providers felt we could improve upon,” says Gloria Kay, Quality Improvement Associate at VHA.

“Staff and service providers can log on to VHA Spark, propose an idea that fits with our strategic directions, and then others are able to vote on it with a thumbs up or thumbs down,” says Gloria. “They can also make comments, such as suggestions for improvements on the idea. If an idea gets 20 thumbs-up votes, it is assigned to a manager for consideration and an official response as to whether it will be accepted or not, and if not, why.”

In addition to staff-generated ideas, managers can create challenges in VHA Spark for a select group, such as nurses, or the whole organization. Challenges focus on a priority area that already has resources to implement changes. Staff and service providers are invited to suggest ideas to solve a specific problem or improve VHA performance in a particular area.

More than 600 ideas have been submitted to Spark, with 31 per cent receiving the required support to merit an official response. Some of these ideas have been flagged as future opportunities or are in consideration, while others have been implemented or are in progress.

As of June 2016, 45 new ideas proposed on VHA Spark were actioned and completed. These included offering staff discount monthly passes for Toronto public transit through a bulk VHA purchase; making disposable plastic aprons available for personal support workers to wear when bathing clients; creating a glossary of terms used at VHA; creating bookmarks with inspirational quotes on them for workers to give to clients when they want; and installing a bike rack at the head office.

Staff and service providers continue to join VHA Spark and new ideas are posted regularly. VHA Spark! has also had a positive impact on work life, with a number of relevant areas assessed by the Work Life Employee survey showing improvement in this year’s results. Most notably, there was a positive 10% shift in staff perceptions about senior managers acting on staff feedback.

“You need to have a happy workforce to give the best service to clients,” says Gloria. “VHA Spark gives us information on how to improve our service and how to improve work life at VHA. It’s an amazing way to make our workers’ voices more audible and connected.”

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