



VHA Innovators Network

VHA Innovators Network

# 2023

# ANNUAL REPORT

DRIVING INNOVATION FORWARD



VA



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Veterans Health Administration  
Office of Healthcare Innovation and Learning



VHA Innovation Ecosystem

# WELCOME

Greetings,

Wow, what a banner year for iNET! Not only did we see the Network grow again in number of sites (42 now) and Spark-Seed-Spread applications and investees, but we saw engagement across the country in unprecedented records. It is the engagement and enthusiasm that really hits the target in our mission, changing the culture of the workforce. We use innovation as just a tool for something much bigger.

In this year's Annual Report, you will learn about the VA Intrapreneurial Product Marketplace, our efforts to engage Veteran Service Organizations, updated innovation fundamentals content, and more. Don't forget to check out a recap of our first-ever Graduation Day event in Washington, DC this August! We've been busy.

Thank you to the VA medical center leadership who continues to believe in this program, my Office of Healthcare Innovation & Learning and VHA Innovation Ecosystem leadership, Innovation Specialists, and iNET front office staff for making all this possible. I am as always astounded by the passion of VA frontline employees, and it is an honor to serve them and our Veterans.

Sincerely,



Allison Amrhein, MPH  
Director, VHA Innovators Network

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# 2023 at a Glance



Ignite burns bright! Nearly 4,000 VA employees joined the 4-week series this year.

The VA Intrapreneurial Product Marketplace launched internally! The soft launch allowed iNET to make improvements on the site and communications.

Nineteen VA sites applied to join iNET in FY24, while the FY23 Spark-Seed-Spread cohort celebrated the first-ever F2F Graduation Day ceremony in Washington, DC.

VHA Innovation Experience was back in person in Washington, DC.



The FY24 cohort of Spark-Seed-Spread met in Falls Church, VA for Bootcamp.

JANUARY

MARCH

JUNE

JULY

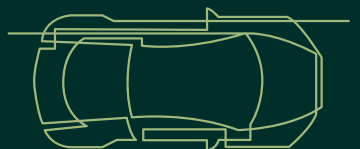
AUGUST

SEPTEMBER

OCTOBER

NOVEMBER

DECEMBER



iNET Director, Allison Amrhein, visited all three Florida iNET sites (North Florida/South Georgia, West Palm Beach and Orlando) on a whirlwind trip to meet frontline staff, teach innovation programming, and meet with leadership.

Innovation Specialists headed to Salt Lake City for Summer Camp, their only F2F training for the year.

Spark-Seed-Spread applications were reviewed and a record number of applicants selected as investees (167).

Nearly 20 new Innovation Specialists headed to Nashville for a F2F New Innovation Specialist Training week.







# Annual iNET Awards

Each year, VHA Innovators Network (iNET) celebrates and recognizes the accomplishments of three individuals between the 42 VA Medical Center across the country who excelled in the work that is foundational to iNET.

## INNOVATION SPECIALIST OF THE YEAR

**Kelsey Shull,**  
Augusta Healthcare System  
Innovation Specialist

The Innovation Specialist of the Year award is given out each year to recognize one of the highly trained Innovation Specialists at each iNET site. Innovation Specialists are expertly trained leaders of their facilities' local innovation programs. As VA medical center (VAMC) employees backed with iNET teaching and resources, Innovation Specialists are well equipped to understand the complex challenges of serving our Nation's Veterans. They meet these challenges with innovative approaches to aid frontline employees in developing creative solutions for problems that are identified at VA.

Innovation Specialist of the Year finalists are chosen by iNET Leadership, but the final selection was made by fellow Innovation Specialists. The 2023 Innovation Specialist of the year is Augusta Healthcare System Innovation Specialist, Kelsey Shull.

Kelsey is not only a leader at her local site, but a leader throughout our Network. During this last year, she elevated her local program in Augusta and also served as iNET's HCD Lead. She went far above and beyond to support her fellow specialists in understanding and practicing human-centered design and serving as an HCD leader and representative of the entire VHA Innovation Ecosystem. To me a good leader is a confident decision maker, empathetic listener, creative spirit, and eager learner. Kelsey isn't a good leader within iNET, she's a great leader. The difference is that not only is she those things, but she is trusted and admired by her peers. That is what makes a great leader.

## THE "TANKED" AWARD

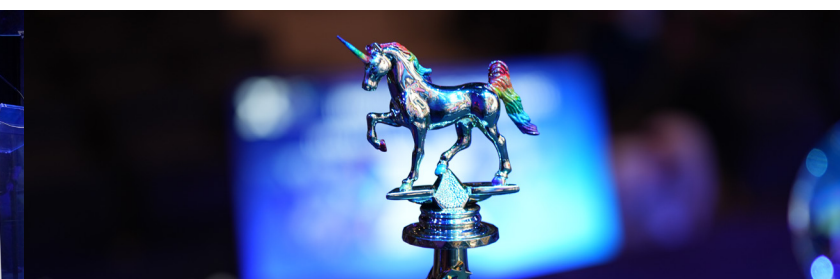
**Elizabeth Townsend,**  
Vestibular Audiologist, Charlie  
Norwood VA in Augusta, GA

The "Tanked" Award celebrates the idea of agile innovation, ability to pivot a solution, or the incredible dedication to solving a problem no matter what obstacles arise. The 2023 Tanked awardee is Elizabeth Townsend, vestibular audiologist at the Charlie Norwood VA in Augusta, GA, whose unwavering commitment to Veterans led her away from her original idea toward a more collaborative one.

Elizabeth is a vestibular audiologist who was pulled onto a HCD Design Team looking at falls in the VA Augusta Psych Unit. Traditional fall prevention methods aren't available for the population, but she knew there had to be a better way. Through HCD, she and a team came up with a concept based on what they learned from interviews for a wearable device to monitor gait with a mobile call button based on what they learned from interviews. Initial market research was conducted and

it looked like a wide-open opportunity! Elizabeth was accepted as a Spark in FY22, learned more about the needs of the patients, explored additional populations, and made an initial disclosure to Tech Transfer. In FY23, Elizabeth worked as a Seed with various VA resources to develop a functional prototype. In meeting with some VA engineers, Elizabeth learned of another company already available whose product is designed to do almost exactly to what she was trying to create, with some slight differences. Even though the Seed project came to a halt, Elizabeth and her Innovation Specialist contacted the company to explore the possibility of a collaboration through iNET's Greenhouse Initiative to best meet the needs of our Veterans.

The Tanked Award does not signify a failure, but the ability to pivot and the flexibility of an investee. Elizabeth went through the process of innovation; which sometimes means the solution isn't what you thought it would be. However, Elizabeth found the right solution for Veterans. She embodies the fact that sometimes it isn't about the solution or result you want, but putting in the work to find the solution that your audience needs. Elizabeth's ability to do this, shows her strength of character.



## iNET INVESTEE OF THE YEAR

**Suzanne Zerwin**  
Nurse, VA Cincinnati Healthcare System

The iNET Investee of the Year is awarded to a VA employee who has received an investment through iNET's Spark-Seed-Spread program and gone above and beyond on their journey to innovator. The 2023 awardee, Suzanne Zerwin, has been providing bedside nursing care to patients for over 31 years, most recently in the post-anesthesia care unit. Her Air Pillow on a Roll is featured on the VA Intrapreneurial Product Marketplace. The Investee of the Year is nominated by their Innovation Specialist and selected by iNET leadership. This is the second year in a row that the Investee of the Year came from the Cincinnati VAMC.

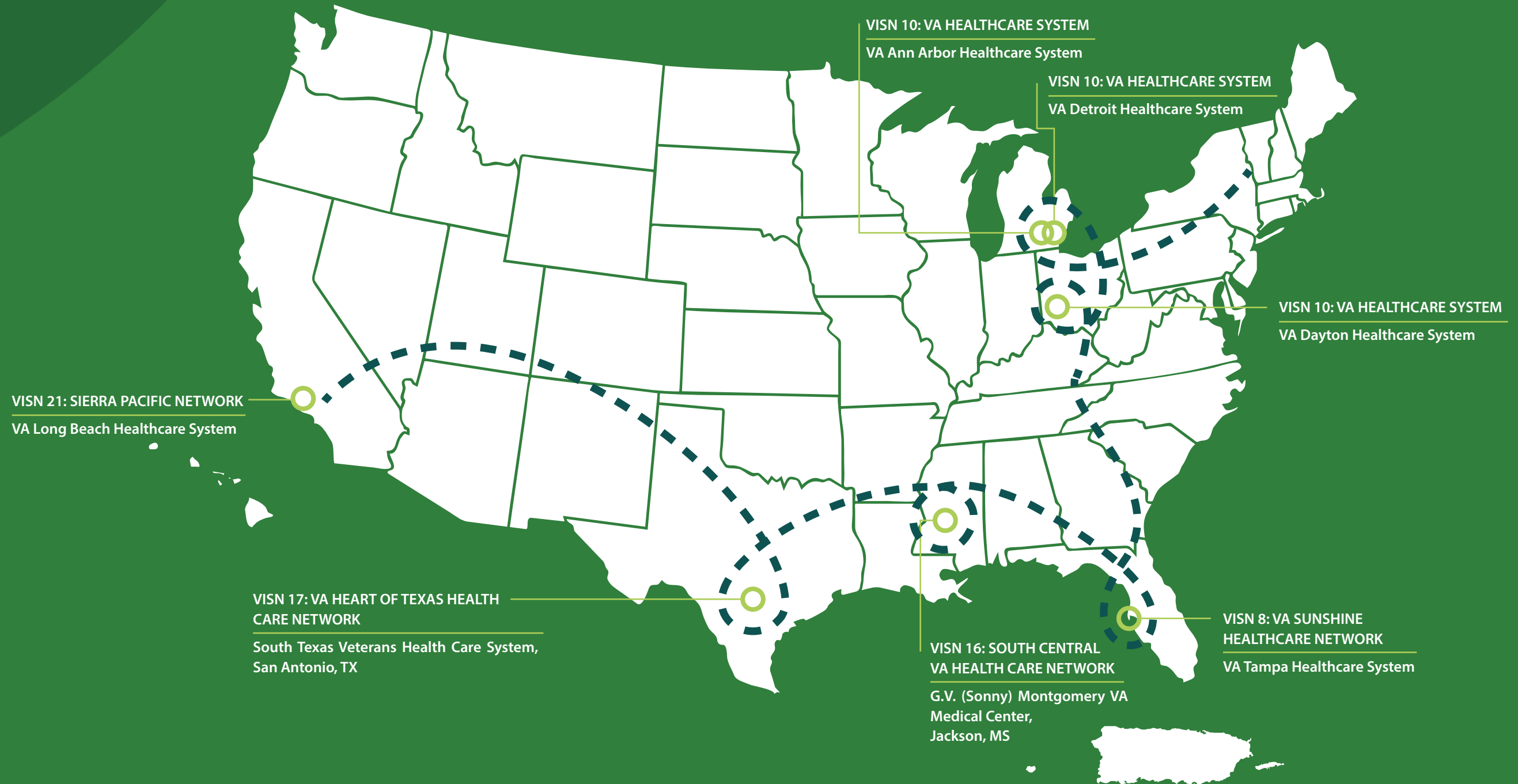
Suzanne had been providing bedside nursing care to patients for over 31 years, most recent 8 years at the VA in the PACU (post-anesthesia care unit). Selected, supported, and mentored by iNet to incorporate everyday challenges into frontline solutions. Spread level inventor of APOAR (Air Pillow on a Roll).

Suzanne has persevered through many iterations of her innovation, pivoting with ease. Despite many innovation obstacles, she has continued her discovery towards creating an end product that truly meets Veterans' needs. She is relentless in her energy and desire to make her innovation great while educating those around her along the way.

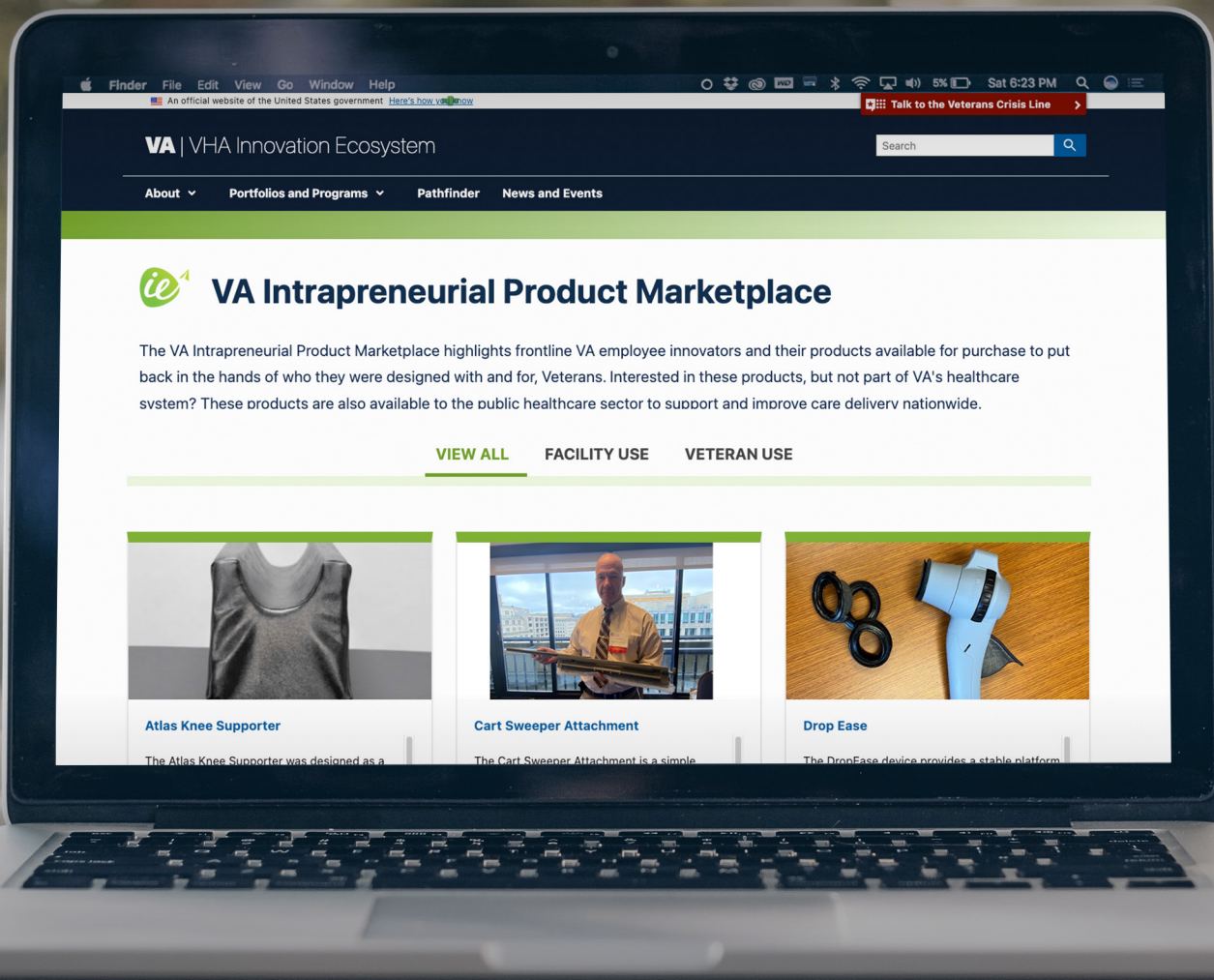
Suzanne's device is coming soon on the VA Intrapreneurial Product Marketplace that launched this past year. I have near certain expectations that Suzanne's device will be widely used throughout the VA in the upcoming years and hopefully beyond VA.



# Welcome New iNET Sites!



# VA Intrapreneurial Product Marketplace (VAIPM)



This year saw the launch of the VA Intrapreneurial Product Marketplace (VAIPM), a new platform to put employee-developed innovative products straight into the hands of Veterans. The marketplace is the next step in connecting these new innovations directly with the people they were designed with and for. Through VAIPM, individuals can browse the latest inventive healthcare products, read about the employee innovators (or “intrapreneurs”), learn about the intended product audience, and locate purchasing information.

All products featured in VAIPM were either designed and developed by VA frontline employees via the VHA Innovators Network Spark-Seed-Spread Innovation Investment and

Accelerator Program or co-designed by frontline employees and external collaborators via iNET’s Greenhouse Initiative. From home-use tools such as the Prosthetic Sock Management Tool (PSMT) to facility-use equipment like the Atlas Knee Supporter, VAIPM products put the focus on making a tangible difference in the everyday lives of Veterans.

“These innovations not only turn a well-deserved spotlight towards the creativity and passion of VA frontline innovators, but they also herald the beginning of a new era of VA innovation,” said Allison Amrhein, VA Innovators Network director. “Every health care system throughout the country can purchase these products.”



**WAREOLOGIE PORTABLE PARALLEL BARS**  
Peter DiSalvo PT, DPT  
*PolyTrauma and Traumatic Brain Injury Rehabilitation*  
Central Virginia VA Health Care System

The Wareologie Portable Parallel Bars provide a steady hand to patients anywhere. The compact bars fold in minutes, transport on wheels, and have a sturdy, 600 lb. weight capacity which helps bring physical therapy treatments to a wide range of patients everywhere.

**THE BELONGINGS BUDDY**  
Rebecca Gallo, RN and Cindie Rice, MSN  
*Quality Management*  
Central Virginia VA Health Care System

The Belongings Buddy is here to make sure patients never lose anything in the hospital again. With a Velcro strap to attach to a bed rail or chair and brightly colored pockets, this product can hold any personal items one might have on them at the hospital, from glasses and cellphones to dentures and hearing aids.

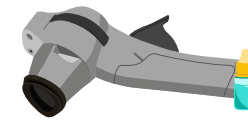
**PROSTHETIC SOCK MANAGEMENT TOOL (PSMT)**  
Billie Savvas Slater  
*Research Health Science Specialist and Innovation Specialist*  
Minneapolis VA Medical Center

The PSMT assists clinicians in educating Veterans on prosthetic sock use. This two-part organizational system enhances understanding of health management for their residual limbs.



**XANDERGLASSES**  
Maureen Wargo and Lisa Rodgers, Au.D.  
*Audiologist and Audiology Supervisor*  
VA Augusta Health Care System and Pittsburgh VA Medical Center

XanderGlasses translate speech-to-text to provide real time captions for individuals affected by hearing loss and auditory processing disorders. These glasses open new levels of dialogue as the wearer can still look at speakers and absorb visual cues while referring to captions as needed. The glasses can be turned on and off and can be used with or without cloud connection.



**DROP EASE**  
Terri Ohlinger, RN  
*Eye Clinic Case Manager*  
Cincinnati VA Medical Center

The Drop Ease provides a stable platform for self-administering eyedrops. With an easy to squeeze handle and an adjustable metered dosage setting, the Drop Ease makes a sometimes irritating and difficult task accessible and routine for everyone.

**RAPID ON-DEMAND CONNECTION INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY (ROCIT)**  
Steven M. Handler MD, PhD, CMD  
*Associate Chief of Staff: Geriatrics and Extended Care (GEC)*  
VA Pittsburgh Health Care

Lightweight and powerful, ROCIT is a portable VPN internet hotspot with all the network speed required for your Veteran’s Digital Divide connectivity needs. This product is great for home-based primary care, field staff, extended reality programs, TeleX programs, simulation centers, rural clinics, community-based outpatient centers, and emergency departments.

**CART SWEEPER ATTACHMENT**  
Larry Hillson  
*Chief, Environmental Management Service*  
VA Sierra Nevada Healthcare System

The Cart Sweeper Attachment latches onto the bottom of a housekeeping/janitorial cart to sweep the floors effortlessly and on the go. This tool keeps hospital floors consistently clean of dirt, dust, and debris while the cart makes its usual route around the hospital.

**ATLAS KNEE SUPPORTER**  
Debra (DJ) Cole  
*Radiologic Technologist*  
VA Richmond Healthcare System

The Atlas Knee Supporter provides comfort and support to immobilize and secure the knee during difficult pain management procedures, as well as any procedure in which the knee must be stabilized. Offered in two different sizes, this product supplies comfort for Veterans from the hip to the ankle.





# Spotlight on Programming

Hello and welcome back. It's been quite a year. Over the last 12 months we have worked hard to enhance iNET's core offerings to provide a more engaging in-class experience. The result? Our "Introduction to Human-Centered Design" and "Building Your Innovation Strategy" classes have never been better. But that's not all. We are excited to announce the expansion of our course catalog with three brand new opportunities:

First on the list is the "Storytelling for Change" class. This one-hour session will help employees develop their storytelling skills and empower them to connect with their audience on a personal level.

Next up is our "Playing with Prototypes" class, a two-hour journey into the world of creativity. Here, staff members will practice bringing their innovative ideas to life in a low risk, imaginative, and fun environment.

And finally, our largest new offering, a two-day immersive Human-Centered Design (HCD) class. In this comprehensive experience, participants will walk through the entire HCD process from identifying

problems to testing prototypes. By the end of class they will have developed a deep understanding of what it takes to bring an innovative idea to life.

Each of these new classes align with iNET's goal of equipping employees with the skills and mindset necessary to contribute to and sustain a thriving community of innovation within VA.

As we look ahead to the upcoming year, we're committed to incorporating the principles of diversity and inclusion into our design work. And, of course, we will continue to look for new opportunities for staff to learn and apply design thinking methodologies so they can effectively ideate, prototype, and test innovative solutions within VA.

One thing that won't change: our culture. We will continue to bring fun and enjoyment to every interaction we have with our Veterans and VA staff. We truly believe that engaging and creative content, which is both exciting and educational, is a key component in making VA our nation's most innovative healthcare system.



# Engaging VSOs in Innovation

FORGES BONDS AND STRENGTHENS THE MISSION

Veteran feedback is critical to the success of VA's innovation efforts. For Veteran perspective, VA relies on Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs). They are the eyes and ears in every community, where Veterans live, work, and thrive. VSOs understanding of Veterans outside of healthcare settings, combined with their role in advocating for their members, makes VSOs ideal partners for better understanding what Veterans want in their interactions with VA. By involving VSOs in the process of healthcare innovation, VA can foster a symbiotic relationship, ensuring that they are focused on addressing the most important and relevant issues impacting Veterans now and in the future.

To support this community building initiative, VHA Innovation Ecosystem Innovation Specialists attended a two-day training where they learned ways they to weave VSOs into the fabric of their local innovation efforts. The training was met with overwhelmingly positive feedback and has already begun to make an impact.

During the initial rollout, Innovation Specialist Jamie Key from the Tuscaloosa VA Medical Center met with her local Disabled American Veterans (DAV) chapter commander about the innovative Monarch Program for holistic and individualized oncology care. Following this

engagement, the commander encouraged one of their chapter members who would benefit from the program to look at enrolling in VA care. Tuscaloosa VA was able to get the Veteran enrolled and into care at their facility, which he reports has been "wonderful." Ongoing training and support to iNET is currently underway to facilitate local VSO engagement, getting community members excited about VA innovation, and involving local Veterans in the process.

Local-level engagement of VSOs is something that iNET recognizes as critical to the success of VA innovation. "VA doesn't just want VSO collaboration on innovation; it needs VSOs as partners to ensure VA can continue to deliver on its mission of delivering for Veterans," said Matt Rowley, Iraq veteran and Community Builder with the VHA Innovation Ecosystem. With the rollout of the VSO engagement toolkit, Innovation Specialists are looking to build upon their efforts to involve VSOs in their local area in the coming year.

If you would like to learn more about this initiative or find a local facility to partner with in support of Veteran healthcare innovation, please reach out to [VHAIECommunityEngagement@va.gov](mailto:VHAIECommunityEngagement@va.gov).



# FY23 Spark-Seed-Spread Portfolio



## POCUS GUIDE

Kevin Murray, Physician  
*Louis Stokes Cleveland VA Medical Center*

The POCUS Guide was created to help providers more effectively perform Point-of-care Ultrasound (POCUS). This technology allows for quick and intuitive communication of probe movements both between providers who are performing diagnostic and/or procedural ultrasounds and between providers and their patients. As POCUS training courses transition from in-person to remote, this technology increases the effectiveness of teaching remotely and allows for better visualization and communication of probe movements between instructors and learners. This technology is so simple to use, patients can be guided to perform ultrasound on themselves when directed using the POCUS guide from their provider, opening up endless possibilities for remote-ultrasound applications in underserved and rural locations.

## LINKING POPPIES AND VOLUNTEERS: A PATH TO TRANSFORMED DEMENTIA CARE IN HOSPITALS

Christy Knight, Social Worker  
*Durham VA Health Care System*

The Poppy Flower is a tool to engage and connect with hospitalized Veterans living with dementia on a personal level. This Veteran-focused approach helps staff get to know a Veteran more quickly, and fosters rapport, trust, and cooperation with care. Posted in the Veteran's room, the Poppy Flower depicts key information from the Veteran's life story, including likes, dislikes, and challenges in a manner that is easy for staff to understand. When entering a Veteran's room, staff are encouraged to review the Poppy Flower and engage the Veteran in two or three topics of conversation before performing a task. This year Christy and her team worked to bring dementia awareness and enhanced education for acute care staff. Large scale Poppy Flower boards are now displayed in five acute care rooms. This innovation introduces dementia and age friendly care, reduces compassion fatigue, and brings new sources of support for Veterans living with dementia and staff that provide their care. The Poppy Flower is also a foundation to develop a Volunteers for Veterans with Dementia program.



## UTILIZING ROOM SENSORS TO MAXIMIZE CLINICAL SPACE UTILIZATION

Sandra Park, Health Systems Specialist  
*Tibor Rubin Medical Center, VA Long Beach Healthcare System*

With the expansion of programs, and a finite amount of clinical space at the facility, Sandra saw the potential for incorporating a simple technology into the clinical areas to measure and optimize space utilization within Services, and on a larger, facility-wide scale, she saw an opportunity to reach across the siloed aspects of space. By incorporating room sensors in exam rooms, procedure, and treatment rooms, and starting first in primary care, specialty clinics, and surgery, it became possible for Services to see their room usage in real time. The data also revealed patterns of usage through the customizable dashboard that reflected the ways each service organized and operated their services – for example, through teamlets or by morning versus afternoon appointments. Real time data additionally captured no shows and appointments that finished early or late. The goal is that with this data, the Services can find ways to optimize the space they have been allocated, increasing access to care and decreasing wait times for Veterans. It is hoped that on a larger scale, Services can also share adjacent clinical spaces and work collaboratively on joint clinical initiatives with tracking and better understanding of their shared spaces.

## INTELLI-CUSHION: VETERAN SEATING MONITOR SYSTEM

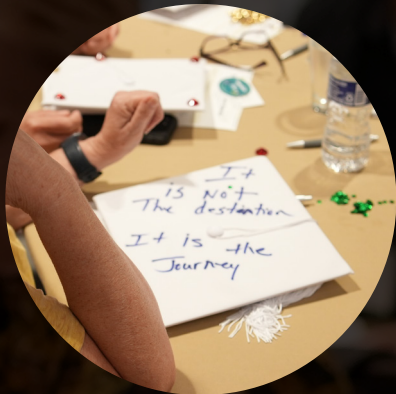
Kate Kapus, Occupational Therapist  
*VA Richmond Healthcare System*

With the goal to eliminate pressure injuries obtained from sitting in a wheelchair, the Intelli-Cushion System is designed to provide Veteran autonomy by monitoring their seating system through the use of a custom cushion cover with pressure mapping technology and a connected app interface. Our team has worked with the Innovators Network for two years to develop and explore our prototype system, and we look forward to spreading it throughout the VA system in the coming year for ongoing refinement and feedback. Notably, our project is patent pending with the goals to have a working prototype by the end of this coming fiscal year to trial with Veterans and clinicians.





# Graduation Day



A new iNET tradition was launched in 2023: Spark-Seed-Spread Graduation Day. The iNET Graduation Day is a ceremony for Spark-Seed-Spread investees that took place in Washington, D.C. on August 22-23. Nearly 175 frontline employees were welcomed by the iNET team, before insightful panelists discussed praiseworthy failures and investees shared stories of their innovation journeys. The two-day event also included an overview of VA's innovation programs, an investee poster showcasing what their peers accomplished over the last year, time for connection and reflection, and, of course, the graduation ceremony itself with the obligatory hat-toss. Fostering cultural change in an environment isn't always about technology, big data, or huge budgets; it's about supporting people's ideas, exploration, and personal journeys, all of which was reinforced and celebrated throughout Graduation Day. While we celebrate the success of these frontline employees, we continue to drive forward with the FY24 cohort of the Spark-Seed-Spread Innovation Program.



# 2024 Spark-Seed-Spread Innovation Accelerator and Investment Program

83%

Increase in Applications Received

46%

Increase in Investments Selected

29%

Increase in Number of Spark-Challenge Investees

120%

Increase in Number of Spark-Idea Investees

10%

Increase in Number of Seed Investees

110%

Increase in Number of Spread Investees

## Number of Associated Ideas to USH Priorities

48

Support Veterans' whole health, their caregivers, and survivors

50

Accelerate VA's journey to a High Reliability Organization

11

Prevent Veteran suicide

58

Connect Veterans to the soonest and best care

98

Spark-Seed-Spread investments are products

40

Spark-Seed-Spread investments are programs





# iNET Bootcamp Accelerates VA Innovation

The VHA Innovator's Network (iNET) fiscal year (FY) 2024 Spark-Seed-Spread Innovation Accelerator Bootcamp was filled with collaboration, creativity, and design-thinking activities. Over 250 individuals, including VHA Innovation Specialists, FY24 Spark-Seed-Spread investees, and VA leaders throughout the country, came together to be inspired by innovation thought leadership, learn skills needed to practice human centered design (HCD), and network with like-minded, passionate VA frontline employees. This annual three-day event kicked off with a race car prototype challenge where attendees broke into teams to interview each other, utilizing HCD discovery principles. Equipped with new knowledge about their fellow "pit crew members" and a focus on inclusive teamwork and collaboration, each team then built prototype cars from available materials (e.g., cardboard, paper plates, paint, putty, and more).

## Empowering Innovation

Also on day one, a panel of representatives from VHA's Office of Healthcare Innovation and Learning (OHIL) discussed "The Current Innovation Landscape and VA."

Joseph Beedle, Executive Director for VHA's Office of Advanced Manufacturing, encouraged attendees to connect and reach out to people throughout VA: "We are all part of the same very large family. Because of the way we exist in VA, we are a part of the same family. If you have a particular idea, bring it forward through your innovation groups."

Before attendees headed into VISN breakout sessions, they also heard from VA's Assistant Under Secretary for Health for Discovery, Education and Affiliate Networks, Dr. Carolyn Clancy. She spoke about VA's history of innovation and highlighted the current innovation projects that are continuing to drive VA's success in health care.

"This room of change agents is proof that when we work together, we can do great things," said Dr. Carolyn Clancy. "I'm thrilled about your work and encourage each of you to continue imagining better ways to serve our Veterans and strengthen our health care system."

## Navigating the Innovation Journey

On day two of Bootcamp, attendees began by designing race car helmets to illustrate the barriers, hazards, and speed bumps they might encounter on their race to bring their innovative idea to reality.

Attendees also participated in activities that facilitated connections, with dedicated time to get to know mentors in the innovation space and separate time to identify peers who they could collaborate with on solutions.

After lunch, Brent Aguilar, HCD Lead for iNET, led attendees in a workshop to accelerate their innovation journey by avoiding assumptions and asking the right discovery interview questions. Attendees ended day two creating solutions in breakout sessions with fellow employees at the same stage of maturity, based on the "Spark-Seed-Spread" investment level they are in.

On day three of Bootcamp, attendees gained insight on how to break down barriers when innovating, as well as a session highlighting the importance of designing with equity in mind. In the afternoon, they participated in a selection of innovation-inspired activities and puzzles, including a final networking activity where they rotated between three rooms, each focusing on a key fundamental takeaway of the entire event.

"Driving Innovation Forward" was the theme of this year's Bootcamp, inspiring attendees to build with the tools of Human-Centered Design and collaborate with newfound "pit crews" to find momentum on their innovation journeys. "This is just the beginning," said Allison Amrhein, Director of VHA Innovators Network. "Investees will return to their facilities with the connections, lessons, and tools to advance both their individual projects and the culture of innovation at VA."





# iNET Site Spotlight

## INNOVATION IS ABUZZ IN THE BEEHIVE STATE

Last June, in the shadow of the Rocky Mountains, Innovation Specialists donning Kelly green tie-dye shirts spread across the Salt Lake VA Campus spreading the Good News of Innovation, like bees spreading pollen from flower to flower. It was a serendipitous pairing of iNet's annual Innovation Specialists Face-2-Face training (hosted this year by the Salt Lake VA) and the SLC VA's All Employee Summer Cookout. Employees traveling to/from lunch were taught about Innovation by the "Specialists" they encountered enroute. That day the George E. Whalen VA was literally abuzz with Innovation, a hum that continues to crescendo in Salt Lake as well.

In this report, we share a sampling of the busy bees at work inside SLC's Innovation HIVE (Health Innovation for Veterans and Employees), led by incoming Innovation Specialist Liz Charles, MBA, RN, BSN and outgoing Innovation Specialist Aaron Angelovic, RN, BSN.

### Spark-Seed-Spread Projects

**Spark Challenge** – "I could start a 7-day bonfire with the amount of paperwork you send with my prescriptions," one Veteran complained. Lidian de Oliveira and Derek Vigil, Pharmacy Technicians, are determined to eliminate this Veteran's concern as they explore ways to reduce paper use in the pharmacy.

**Spark Idea** – Nurses rushing to a code call often grab the crash cart and start running, forgetting to unplug the cart. Tired of fixing frayed plugs and busted wall sockets, Bret Dunyon and Trevor Teeple, Electricians, are creating a wireless docking system for crash carts. While Jessica Florez, a MSA, is seeking to expand SLC's alternative health offerings by bringing Sound Healing to VA.

**Seed** – Francesca Zeringue, a health coach, is creating an extended reality equine therapy program. Currently

Francesca is working with Professor Edoardo Battaglia, director of the Human-Centered Haptics and Robotics Lab at the University of Utah, to create a pair of haptic gloves capable of an interactive virtual equine encounter. These gloves will be integrated into the VRChat world Horse Mountain (created by Steve Stefanovich), where Veterans will be able to touch and feel the horses taking them on a trail ride.

**Spread** – Rodney Wayne, RN, is a serial innovator. His Just-In Time code cards instruct employees on best practices during an emergency (e.g., cardiac arrest, sepsis) and include the calculation of weight-based medication doses via a slide rule. In September these cards were approved by the VA's Acute Care Committee for dissemination across VA. Rodney was also a 2023 Shark Tank semi-finalist with his Master Preceptor Philosophy for nursing education.

### Go Fish!

A Veteran refused cancer care at their site because of the inconvenience of getting from their car to the clinic. Nurses Mara Kellner and Jennifer Andrade, our Go Fish adoptees from the South Texas VHCS, are going to improve this Veteran's journey. They are creating a tool that will signal transport needs and provide directional assistance to Veterans navigating their campus.

### MIT Catalyst

Dr. Jason Ramirez, Anesthesiologist, and his team of compadres (Dr. Taylor Whalig University of Nebraska, Dr. Alison Quinn, Memphis VAMC, and Mark Drinkwater, MA, APRN Boston VAMC) are MIT Catalyst participants. Over the past three years they have been developing an opioid deactivation pill bottle under the tutelage of a multidisciplinary team of MIT Professors and VA Mentors. Their device received patent approval this past summer. Prototypes created by the VHA Office of Advanced Manufacturing in Richmond, VA, will be deployed for user-testing in 2024.

### Greenhouse Initiatives

Kirk Rose, Orthotist and Prosthetist, assisted start-up VESSL Prosthetics in the early scoping and design of its automatically adjusting prosthetic socket for below-the-knee amputees.

Providing his expert opinion, Dr. Peter Chalmers, Orthopedic Surgeon, helped VA Ventures better understand the current and future state of implantable (3D printed) devices.

### VISN 19 Collaborations

Salt Lake showcased its SSS investees and promoted Human Centered Design at the first annual VISN 19 Innovation Summit in Sheridan, WY (June) and at the VISN 19 Improvement (Systems Redesign, HRO and Innovation) Forum in Denver, CO (November).

### Virtual Reality

As part of a pilot test, SLC employees, donning VR headsets, assumed the avatar of an ethnic, female, Veteran who encounters several incidents of harassment while collecting a prescription from a VA pharmacy. Employees were testing the Virtual Reality Prevention of Sexual Harassment educational curriculum being developed by Leila Jackson's Assault Harassment Prevention Office, VA Immersive, and CVP Corp. SLC employees provided personal and professional reflections to further shape the ongoing creation of this novel course.

"Very helpful during this stressful procedure," comments one Veteran following participation in SLC's MRI Phobias Virtual Reality Pilot (VA Immersive, Deloitte). Using VR headsets, Veterans can "swim with dolphins" to reduce anxiety prior to/during certain procedures. The results from this pilot have been overwhelmingly positive. "I feel like I could totally relax and get a lot of stress out. Thanks!"

### Looking Forward

With the support of SLC VHA Director Dr. Angela Williams, who champions Innovation across the SLC Campus, SLC plans in 2024 to extend the scope of Innovation by further embedding it in the culture and accessing overlooked Veterans and employees.

One means to that end is the establishment of a physical footprint for Innovation on the SLC campus. The HIVE Innovation Lab will welcome employees, Veterans, and innovators who want to engage in problem solving. These collaborations will ensure Innovation remains abuzz in the Beehive State.

"The men of experiment are like the ant; they only collect and use. But the bee gathers its materials from the flowers of the garden and of the field, but transforms and digests it by a power of its own."  
Leonardo Da Vinci





# iNET at iEX

The 2023 Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Innovation Experience (iEX) is an exciting opportunity to be at the forefront of change alongside your fellow innovators, VA employees, Veterans, industry leaders, and researchers. This year the Innovators Network was scattered across all aspects of iEX. Not only did iNET leadership participate in panel discussions and line the hallways with posters displaying Spark-Seed-Spread projects but iNET was active parts of three out of the four main breakout tracks: What is VHA Innovation, Training & Education, & Connection Café.





# 2023 Network by the Numbers



7

New iNET Sites

750

Incubator Attendees



3,767

Ignite Attendees

8

New Innovators  
Featured on VAIPM



51

FY24 Go Fish! Applicants  
Matched with an iNET Site

16

FY24 Go Fish!  
Investees

93

FY24 Go Fish!  
Applications



344

FY24 Spark-Seed-Spread  
Applications

167

FY24 Spark-Seed-Spread  
Investments

6,200

Alumni Engaged

51

FY24 Returning Investees



82

FY24 Spark Investees



64

FY24 Seed Investees



21

FY24 Spread  
Investees

114

FY23 Spark-Seed-Spread  
Investments



31

Greenhouse Initiative  
Applications

7

Greenhouse  
Collaborations

4

Alumni Events





# Look Ahead to 2024

From the Director's Chair:  
*Driving Innovation Forward with Heart*

Here we are again! Without a doubt 2023 was a game-changing year in iNET. Four years ago, I would never have dreamt that iNET would be what it is today. We are 42 sites deep, 50+ Innovation Specialists on the roster, winning awards like Service to the Citizen and CX Innovation, collaborating with VSOs, popping-up with our own employee product shopping site (the VA Intrapreneurial Product Marketplace—VAIPM), and attracting thousands (3000+) of employees to our national programming offerings.

What I am most proud of, however, is the sense of community the Network brings to those who play in our sandbox. To me, everything begins with making people feel comfortable being themselves, being heard, supported, and encouraged to do better.

This year, I have personally felt very frustrated and challenged with change. Particularly with the launch of the VAIPM and difficulties we face putting these solutions back into the hands of Veterans. Something I believe shouldn't be nearly as hard as it has frequently made me stop, pause, and say "Why am I doing this?!" This is exactly what happens with all our frontline employee innovators too. This is what drives them towards their solutions. It is also what drives Innovation Specialists to break down barriers and fight for the little guy.

So, without a doubt, within a day or two of throwing myself a pity party, I am deafeningly reminded of the strength within this community to lift each other up. That is the beauty of community, it isn't one-sided. We all lift each other up. Innovation cannot happen without the heart of a powerful community.

Heart is what drives innovation forward, heart and determination. In 2024, we are working towards national contracts to enable to easier procurement of VAIPM items for users. We are also driving onward with an Innovation Specialist internship pilot program next year. In addition to that collaboration with academia, we will continue to collaborate with VSOs in 2024, to include more Veterans in the discovery and user experience testing we do through Spark-Seed-Spread and the Greenhouse.

Let this be a love note of sorts to my iNET community. As I am always the biggest cheerleader of your pit crew, thank you for being mine. Remember that driving innovation forward alone isn't nearly as fun as sharing wins with a team. I am grateful to be on your team.

—Allison Amrhein  
iNET Director







VHA Innovators Network

VA



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Veterans Health Administration

Office of Healthcare Innovation and Learning



VHA Innovation Ecosystem