



VHA Innovators Network

VHA Innovators Network

**2022**

**ANNUAL REPORT**



VHA Innovation Ecosystem

# welcome

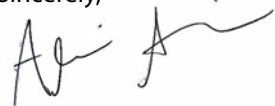
Greetings,

It is hard to believe another year has ended. I'm not sure what was more exciting, Innovation Specialist "Summer Camp" in-person training and a return to in-person Spark-Seed-Spread Accelerator Bootcamp, or the progress made to find a path forward for employee-designed products to be manufactured and used throughout VA?

We also had six new sites join the VHA Innovators Network (iNET) this year! VA Illiana, VA New Jersey, Bedford, West Palm Beach, Alexandria, and Charleston joined iNET in 2022, as well as Innovation Specialists from those sites and many more from other sites. Of course, we sadly had to say goodbye to the 2020 Innovation Specialist of the Year, Julie Whitney, who retired in November 2022.

iNET has every intention of making 2023 a breakthrough year for employee innovators. We are so close to making the VA Intrapreneur Product Marketplace a reality and adding nationally accredited programming for storytelling and lean start-up methodology to our repertoire. On behalf of the entire iNET team, thank you to all those who made 2022 a great year for employee innovation and we look forward to so much more in 2023.

Sincerely,



Allison Amrhein, MPH  
Director, VHA Innovators Network



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# 2022 AT-A- GLANCE

## February

Tiger teams form to update iNET human-centered design and innovation strategy programming content.

## April

New Innovation Specialists met in Chicago and Albuquerque for a 2-day human-centered design workshop, as they prepare to lead programming at their local sites.

## August

Six new VA healthcare systems/medical centers were selected to join iNET in FY23! Bedford, VA Illiana, Charleston, VA New Jersey, Alexandria, and West Palm Beach.

## November

Spark-Seed-Spread Innovation Accelerator Bootcamp was back face-to-face in Washington, DC!

## March

The Ignite Series begins! Over 1,200 frontline employees attended this four-session series meant to spark their innovative fire.

## June

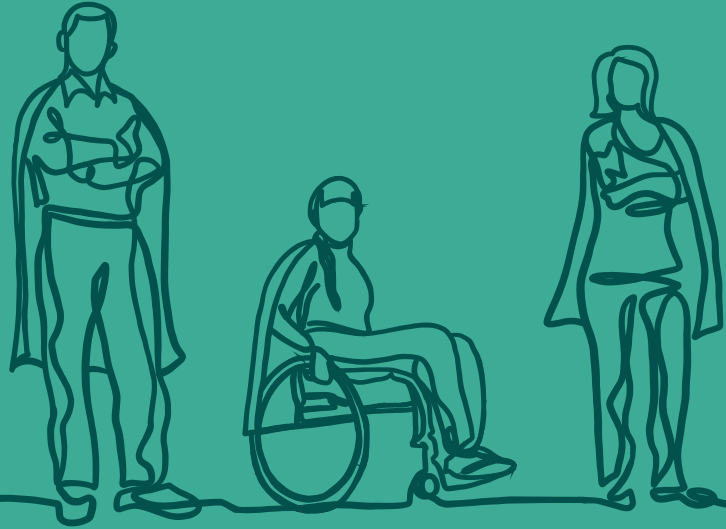
Innovation Specialists work hard and play hard at Summer Camp in Milwaukee.

## October

The first-ever VA Intrapreneurial Product Marketplace Day occurs during the 2022 VHA Innovation Experience.







# ANNUAL iNET AWARDS

*Each year, Innovators Network (iNET) celebrates and recognizes the accomplishments of three individuals who excelled in the work that is foundational to iNET.*



## INNOVATION SPECIALIST OF THE YEAR

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.

The 2022 Innovation Specialist of the Year is Orlando VA's Innovation Specialist, Kim Bielicki. As many would agree, Kim is the heart of VA Orlando. She is not only a leader of her local innovation community, but a trusted leader within the iNET community. Her creative and positive approach have not only helped Orlando's program but she continues to support and foster innovation throughout VISN 8 so it can continue to thrive. She is a tremendous asset for Greenhouse Initiative projects, bringing people together from Orlando, VISN 8 and SimLEARN. Her willingness to lead and build bridges has been enormously valuable this year. No one has more energy or is more passionate about what they do.



## INVESTEES OF THE YEAR

The 2022 Investee of the Year is Kevin Johnson from the Cincinnati VAMC. This is a most deserving recognition for an outstanding advocate and innovator for Veterans. Kevin has persevered through more barriers than any one investee should have to encounter. He has continued to grow, learn and follow through despite a continuous upward battle. Kevin is receptive to constructive feedback and makes the necessary changes to iterate his solution. He appreciates the process of innovation and the work it takes to make something right. He is also extremely passionate and dedicated to his work. Kevin regularly meets with key stakeholders during off hours before or after his normal tour of duty and does so with no reservations. He has truly demonstrated what passion for innovation looks like. Kevin's device, the Kyphotic Wedge, is one of 13 innovations to be featured at the first-ever VA Intrapreneurial Product Marketplace Day. His innovation is an inflatable device that uses air to push a kyphotic patient comfortably into proper positioning during an MRI, and widespread use of his device across VA is just on the horizon.



## THE "TANKED" AWARD

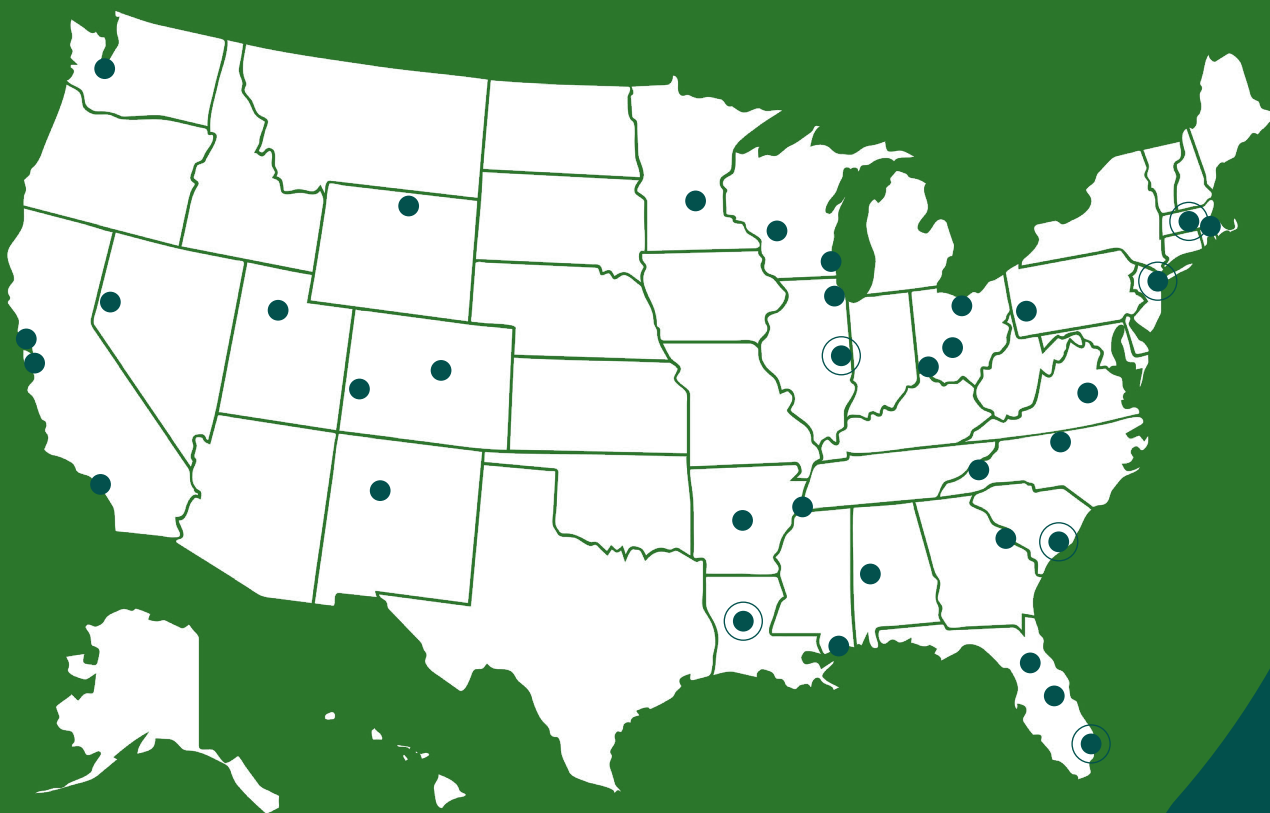
The "Tanked" Award celebrates the idea of agile innovation, ability to pivot for a viable solution, or the incredible dedication to solving a problem no matter what obstacles arise. This year's 2022 Tanked Award recipient is Stacie Garcia.

Stacie Garcia, and her partner, Alice Allen, embrace the spirit of innovation and iteration like no other. They were met with the challenge of coming into the program with a mandate from the Outpatient Mental Health Shared Governance Committee to push a pre-ordained solution. Stacie and Alice actively participated in their Spark-Seed-Spread Accelerator investment year for their Help Is Only a Phone Call Away innovation. They did all the homework, albeit with many struggles as they had to carve out their own path. They talked to Veterans—a lot of Veterans—and their reward was learning that the solution they were tasked to build simply wasn't going to solve the problem. Undeterred, they continued to innovate and adapt. After several pivots and low-fidelity prototypes, they finally landed on a solution that was able to demonstrate efficacy.

The Tanked Award does not signify a failure, but the ability to pivot and the flexibility and perseverance of an investee. Stacie went through the process of innovation, which sometimes means the solution isn't what was expected. However, Stacie found the right solution for Veterans. She embodies the notion 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. Stacie's ability to do this, shows her strength of character and determination to succeed.

***Congratulations to these innovation heroes!***

# WELCOME NEW iNET SITES!



● **VISN 1: VA New England Healthcare System**  
Bedford VAMC

● **VISN 2: New York/New Jersey VA Health Care Network**  
VA New Jersey Healthcare System

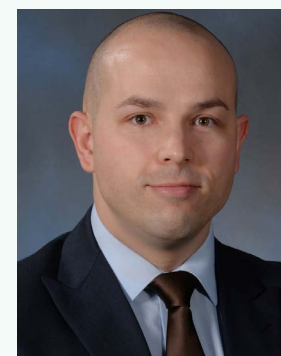
● **VISN 7: VA Southeast Network**  
Ralph H. Johnson VA Health Care System

● **VISN 8: VA Sunshine Healthcare Network**  
West Palm Beach VAMC

● **VISN 12: VA Great Lakes Healthcare System**  
VA Illiana Healthcare System

● **VISN 16: South Central VA Healthcare System**  
VA Alexandria Healthcare System

## Building a Broader VHA Community with iNET



Within iNET, we know that people are the driving force behind the innovation that ensures VA remains on the cutting edge of healthcare now and in the future. Our community of front-line

innovators and the Innovation Specialists who support them, are critical to VHA's innovation efforts.

iNET also appreciates the importance of engaging Veterans in the development and testing of innovations, as the end users and beneficiaries of these new solutions. The phrase "nothing about me, without me" illustrates the ethos that the relevance, effectiveness, and usability of our solutions are largely determined by how well we engage end users in the design and development process. The Voice of the Veteran is critical to ensuring that we are focusing on the right challenges, and that we are tackling those challenges in a way that will best meet Veterans' needs.

To continue enhancing our impact and reach, this year the VHA Innovation Ecosystem (VHA IE) began engaging with Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs) at the national level to increase awareness of our work and explore opportunities for collaboration. VSOs such as Veterans of Foreign Wars, Blue Star Families, the Wounded Warrior Project and The Mission Continues are excited to share VHA innovation news with their local chapters and welcome the opportunity for their members and staff at the local level to get involved with their local VAMC's innovation programs.

It's the next evolution in our efforts to integrate the Voice of the Veteran into VHA's innovation.

To best prepare and support Innovation Specialists to engage with local VSOs, VHA IE's new Community Builder, Matt Rowley, has begun discovery interviews to learn about the challenges Specialists face in forging and maintaining these relationships, and what sorts of tools would be most useful. Using insights gathered from Innovation Specialists, Matt and the Community Engagement support team will develop materials and receive draft feedback from additional Innovation Specialists prior to delivering them to the iNET community. We're excited for our Innovation Specialists to use these co-designed tools to develop relationships with their local VSOs, sharing information regarding new innovations while creating a safe space for these valued partners to give feedback on projects and priorities. This closer relationship will further ensure that we identify, improve upon and scale innovations at VA that matter most to Veterans.

Excited to learn more about VSOs and some of the tactics you can employ to effectively engage with them? Check out [OHIL's Engaging Veteran Service Organizations Playbook!](#)

-**Matthew Rowley**, VHA IE Community Builder



# SPOTLIGHT ON PROGRAMMING

## WHAT IS A PROGRAMMING CURATOR



## Hi there!

**I'm Matt Knight, the new  
Programming Curator for iNET.**

You may find yourself wondering what the heck is a Programming Curator? Great question! Allow me to share with you some of my responsibilities and give some insight into my day-to-day life.

Several times a year iNET offers nationally accredited classes for VA staff. You may have attended an Incubator class, an Ignite class, or one of our Human-Centered Design (HCD) 101 classes. As Programming Curator one of my tasks is to create, update, and manage the content of these classes. I coordinate the accreditations, help get classes posted in VA's Talent Management System, plan panelist discussions, and even have the opportunity to teach some of this content myself. To be honest the teaching opportunities are my favorite part of my job!

In addition to national classes I work closely with our Innovation Specialist team. Since starting my role I have brought more structure to our mentoring program for new specialists. I also prepare and deliver trainings to help our team thrive at their respective facilities. Everything I do is in support of our amazing team of Innovation Specialists. I am always looking for new opportunities to create relevant content for them.

For 2023 we have completely revamped two of iNET's core classes; introduction to human-centered design and building your innovation strategy. These new classes increase interaction and class participation and provide more relevant healthcare related examples to help educate VA staff on these core concepts and equip them with the tools to be problem seekers and solvers in their work environments.

Looking ahead, my goals for this upcoming year include developing new content to teach lean start-up methodologies to our innovation specialist team and VA staff, and to fully overhaul our two-day HCD programming. One thing that won't change; the fun and enjoyment iNET brings to every interaction we have with our Veterans and VA staff. We look forward to making VA a fun place to work and I fully believe that engaging and creative content which is both fun and educational can play an important role in making VA the most innovative healthcare system in the country.



# FY22 SPARK-SEED-SPREAD

## portfolio

The goal of the Spark-Seed-Spread Innovation Investment and Accelerator Program (Spark-Seed-Spread (SSS) is to identify and accelerate innovations created by VA employees that improve health care experiences for Veterans, families, caregivers, and VA employees. The class of 2021-2022 Spark-Seed-Spread investees continued to excel in developing employee-driven innovative solution design and personal growth. Here are just a few of iNET's SSS investees and their solutions from this year's program.

### eHealth: Education & Emergence of eHealth Designated Technology Manager (eHEEDTM)

*Melodie Anderson,  
Hunter Holmes McGuire VA Medical Center*

eHealth and telehealth use computer and telephone-based technologies for health informatics, specialty care and case management. The COVID-19 pandemic and lock downs that followed triggered a dramatic uptick of telehealth and virtual care modalities. The use of eHealth during this time made patient management of spinal cord injury and disorder (SCI/D)-related care easier to manage. Novel virtual care approaches assisted in maintaining and enhancing continuity of care to persons with SCI/D using VA-issued tablets, apps, and wearables to bridge the Digital Divide. This period sparked Melodie to submit a proposal to develop individualized eHealth education tier programs encompassing eHealth fundamentals (compare/ contrast technology types, internet navigation, credentialing online resources, etc.) needed for self-care management. This innovation introduced the concept of an eHealth-designated technology manager (eHEEDTM) who will be an eHealth navigator throughout training and assist Veterans in using eHealth applications to manage their healthcare.

### VICK - Veteran Integrated Chair Kiosk

*Kristin Mate,  
Gulf Coast Veterans Healthcare System*



VICK (Veteran Integrated Chair Kiosk) is a kiosk that catalogues, tracks, and disinfects wheelchairs for use while in a VA facility. VICK provides an accurate inventory of wheelchairs at facilities using the VICK kiosk. VICK is tackling a common issue throughout VHA of locating clean and operational wheelchairs when a

Veteran, caregiver, or employee needs one. Currently, there is no standard process in place to ensure anyone who needs a wheelchair has access to one that is clean and in working order. This year Kristin and her team completed their first iteration prototype and are looking forward to improving the design for a second iteration to utilize during a pilot.

### Help! My Home Telehealth Machine Blood Pressure Reading Is Wrong!

*Femi Faminu,  
VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System*

Accurate blood pressure is critical to a patient's overall healthcare picture. While discussing problems obtaining blood pressure data from patients, Femi and a group of Home Telehealth nurses decided to collaborate to explore the issue further. With guidance from their Innovation Specialist and iNET's Spark-Seed-Spread Innovation and Accelerator program, the nurses investigated the various barriers to data transmission and possible solutions to improve both the frequency with which patients transmitted blood pressure data and the quality of the data. Ultimately it was determined that, within the current constraints of the Home Telehealth program, the best intervention to improve outcomes was further development of the relationship between the nurse and the patient, rather than a change of equipment.

### Building Confidence Builds Psychological Safety

*Barry Peterson,  
VA Sierra Nevada Healthcare System*

While Barry intended to learn about how virtual reality can help build psychological safety in the workplace, he found himself swept up in contracting, privacy, and security issues which are the reality of implementing virtual reality within VHA. This led Barry and his team to develop confidence and psychological safety amongst themselves. In psychologically safe workplaces, employees feel comfortable taking interpersonal risks and speaking up to correct errors or provide feedback. Previous research suggests that a psychologically safe climate optimizes organizational outcomes. As Barry and the team researched more, they learned to pivot and learn, and by the end of the fiscal year, their contract was awarded. Thanks to iNET's patience and Strategic Acquisition Center-Frederick's persistent expertise, Barry started FY22 with a prototype and a plan to pilot it.

### Linking Veterans Who Inject Drugs into Harm Reduction Services

*Minh Ho,  
Orlando VA Healthcare System*



Orlando VA has been a leader within VHA system at efficiently curing Hepatitis C (hep C/HCV) and achieving undetectable viral loads in our Veterans with HIV. However, as new viral infections continue to be diagnosed, there's a need for the focus on prevention.

In 2019, the CDC announced the Ending HIV Epidemic in the U.S.

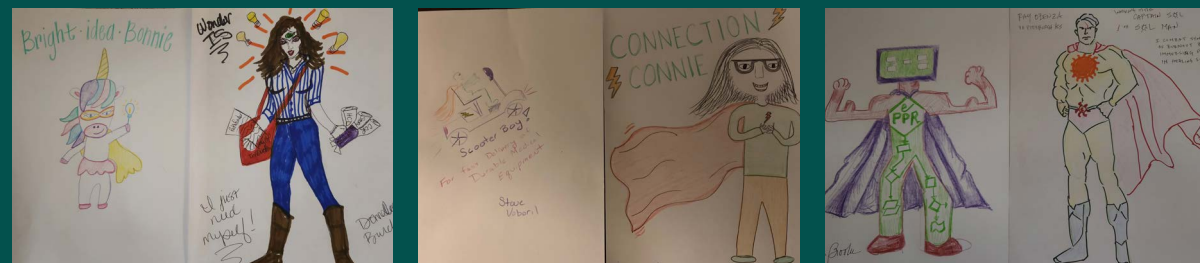
campaign which underscored the importance of sterile syringe programs (SSPs), amongst other measures, in the ongoing fight to reduce new HIV infections. At the Orlando VA, Minh began laying the groundwork to create a sterile syringe program shortly after the state of Florida gave authorization for these programs making the Orlando VA the second VA in the nation to start an SSP. In September 2020, the Orlando VA dispensed clean syringes and supplies to its first SSP patient. Since then the programs has grown to serve almost 10 times as many patients in the years following – thanks, in part, to the profound support from iNET. The Orlando VA SSP has provided thousands of syringes, hundreds of fentanyl tests, and an innumerable amount of other supplies in addition to providing comprehensive harm reduction services via infectious disease screening, immunizations, naloxone, HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis, education on safe injection use, and linkage to other care services including SUD, social work and mental health services. Through fostering trustworthy, compassionate, and non-judgmental healthcare relationships with Veterans in our program, we are making progress to reach the goals of decreasing HCV infections and ending the HIV epidemic among Veterans.

# bootcamp REWIND

iNET's Spark-Seed-Spread Accelerator Bootcamp was back in person, in Washington, DC for the new cohort of FY23 investees. Over 100 frontline employees traveled to Bootcamp the week of November 14th, for a 3-day superhero-themed event. Kicking off with a special recorded message from Dr. Shereef Elnahal, the Under Secretary for Health. Investees then created their "coat of arms" as an initial icebreaker in breakouts and spent the rest of the day with Aspen Labs participating in a design dash.



Day two started with remarks from the Deputy Under Secretary for Health for the Office of Discovery, Education and Affiliate Networks (DEAN), Dr. Carolyn Clancy, live on location, then led to an icebreaker in which investees were asked to draw their "innovation superhero", followed-by an introduction to the problem framing workshop. This time was meant to help participants further refine the problem their innovation aims to solve or the "Spark", as iNET focuses on solving problems with the goal of developing a functional prototype. Prepared with a focused problem, investees participated in an hour of "problem speed dating". With their problem written on a piece of paper, they went around the room to find others with the same problem, collecting their emails so they could collaborate later. Once the speed dating session was complete, investees broke out by problem for more in-depth discussion, brainstorming and connection.



The event wrapped on day three with a workshoping "how to" on how to conduct discovery interviews and user experience testing or "Seed" which will lead to the "Spread" of their innovative solution in the Spark-Seed-Spread program. Lastly, Bootcamp ended with a celebratory scavenger hunt! Investees were randomly broken out and tasked with finding as many objects and completing as many tasks as possible on their scavenger hunt list in the shortest amount of time. The teams did not disappoint! But Bootcamp investees left with the most important thing after three days together: the support of a community of fellow innovators to lean on as they embark on their own Spark-Seed-Spread journey from idea to testing to a validated prototype that will eventually go live at chosen VA sites.

"The best way to describe my Bootcamp experience is... my mission in life is not merely to survive, but to thrive; and to do so with some passion, some compassion, some humor, and some style." Maya Angelou"  
- Investee, Jennifer Malivert-Cotman

"I am amazed by my colleagues' creativity and drive! I'm excited to learn design methodology and apply it to my project."  
- Investee, Emily Keram

"The excitement, camaraderie and supportive learning environment, especially in group exercises led by Aspen Labs was thoroughly enjoyable and led to deeper exploration of our individual topics."  
- Investee, Sandra Park

"I found Bootcamp to be energizing, inspiring, and very informative. It was a wonderful experience!"  
- Investee, Daniella Estes







### ***Hello Readers,***

I'm Kelsey Shull, the Innovation Specialist for the VA Augusta Health Care System, and the Human-Centered Design Lead for iNET. I am what you would call a "VA-lifer". I started my career at VA as an intern. It has been an honor to bring my knowledge of hospital operations, skills as a Mental Health Recreational Therapist, and experience as the daughter of a Veteran to benefit the dedicated employees of the VA Augusta Health Care System. Having served in multiple roles caring for Veterans, caregivers, and employees of the greater Augusta area, my work within the VHA Innovators Network is one of the most exhilarating adventures of my career!

### **A Logical Fit**

Our facility hit the ground running when we joined iNET in FY21. While most people know Augusta for its golf prestige, many don't realize that another nickname for our town is "the Silicon Valley of the Southeast." In addition to hosting the annual Masters Tournament, Augusta is home to the U.S. Army's Cyber Center for Excellence at Fort Gordon, the Georgia Cyber Center, and the Medical College of Georgia at Augusta University. With these players in the community, Augusta is ripe for healthcare innovation. Adding the VA Augusta Health Care System to the mix has been a logical fit.

At VA Augusta, we firmly believe that the real gem in the Innovation program is the employee, and their innovative solution is our secondary gain. If we can inspire and empower our staff to act on problems with the empathetic, iterative process of Human-Centered Design, we know that will result in more than one solution.

For that reason, we know the need for fostering creative, out-of-the-box problem solving doesn't just happen in July when the Spark-Seed-Spread application window opens. We created our local innovation investment program mirroring the set-up of iNET's Spark-Seed-Spread. Our local investment opportunity allows us to capture the concern and enthusiasm of our staff to pursue innovative solutions to problems at our facility. Through our local lens, we can solve problems outside the national innovation funding cycle to target innovative solutions to problems, even if not selected for a Spark-Seed-Spread investment. Currently, we have eight team projects in various phases of the Human-Centered Design process. I'm inspired by the amount of learning taking place locally.

To recognize the employees who are doing the hard work of innovation and culture change at VA Augusta, we created a monthly award called The Fire Starter Award that goes to an employee or work group who exhibits outstanding performance and/or dedication to innovative imagination, ideation, and iteration for the benefit of the VA Augusta Health Care System. The award is presented monthly to spotlight the work being done within the organization and to encourage a culture of innovation.

I could not be prouder of Augusta's FY23 Spark-Seed-Spread investees. In the FY23 cohort, there are five employees who are tackling problems such as falls, isolation/loneliness, and access to contraceptive care. What I am most proud of in each of these investees, is their dedication and passion for solving problems, whatever the end solution may be. Their heart and desire for talking to their end users to ensure their innovation solves the right problem to the desires and needs of the patients is exactly what is needed to transform our healthcare system.

Our program is still in its infancy, and we have only scratched the surface of potential within our workforce. We believe our positive impact will ripple far beyond the reach of the VA Augusta Health Care System. With the infrastructure of iNET and spirit of innovation on our side, I think the classic rock band Bachman Turner Overdrive said it best – "you ain't seen nothing yet!"

# iNET at iEX

## The VA Intrapreneurial Product Marketplace Day

The inaugural VA Intrapreneurial Product Marketplace Day (VAIPMD) was held on October 25, 2022, as part of the annual VHA Innovation Experience (iEX) conference. This event highlighted 14 frontline VA employee innovators from across the country. Here they were able showcase the innovative products they developed with the support of iNET, all of which are ready for manufacturing or commercialization. This event not only turned a well-deserved spotlight towards VA frontline innovators but also heralded the beginning of a new era of VA innovation by harnessing the innovations of employees who are directly responsible for the care of our Nation's Veterans.

The VAIPMD began with an introduction by iNET Director, Allison Amrhein and included remarks by VA Principal Executive Director for the Office of Acquisition, Logistics, and Construction, Michael Parrish. These were followed by the heart of the event itself: a brief pitch by each employee innovator followed by a marketplace showcasing prototypes or the actual innovative products that were spotlighted during the event.



### *The innovators highlighted at this event were:*

- Angel Avila (pitch provided by Ben Salatin): Medication Drop Box
- Larry Hillson: Floor Sweeper Cart Attachment
- Kevin Johnson: Kyphotic Wedge
- Robert Smith and Kimberly Jones: Blood Pressure Support Frame
- Stephanie Bailey: Self-Leveling Walker
- Billie Slater (pitch provided by Soleil Bernstein): Prosthetic Sock Management Tool
- Jessica Alva: Neuropsychological Assessment Clinic Kit
- Debra (DJ) Cole: Atlas Knee Supporter
- Ashley Crooks: Reverse Patient Boom Lift
- Brian Higgins (pitch provided by Ben Salatin and Megan Rumzie): Smart White Cane
- Punit Vaidya: Portable Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation Device
- Suzanne Zwerin: Air Pillow on a Roll
- Terri Ohlinger: Drop Ease



## iEX TALK

### *PEOPLE are the Solution*

The TED-style talks at iEX this year focused on storytelling to highlight the ingenuity and power of innovation in creating real value and impact for VHA employees, academia, industry partners, and the Veteran community. VA employees shared their experiences during their presentations to challenge beliefs, stir imaginations, tell a great story, and most importantly, demonstrate how their innovations are forging a healthier future for all Veterans. iNET Director, Allison Amrhein, provided one of the 10 iEX Talks highlighted at the event. Her Talk was grounded on the concept that PEOPLE are at the heart of everything, which lies at the core of everything iNET does. That it's PEOPLE who solve problems, not widgets or gadgets, and that only by empowering PEOPLE can VA continue to be a leader in innovation.

Titled "PEOPLE are the Solution", Allison's talk focused on one particular VA employee innovator: Debra (DJ) Cole, a radiologic technologist at VA Richmond Healthcare System. A 42-year VA employee, DJ still possesses the drive to make the Veteran experience better. Through her work in the pain clinic, she learned that the normal standard of care or "best practice" of care is not always the best option. DJ noticed that Veterans had a hard time remaining immobile during pain treatment, that their leg would fall off the table resulting in longer procedure times, and the general increased discomfort and stress levels for Veterans as a result of this "best practice". Realizing that

she could do something to fix this, DJ applied to iNET's Spark-Seed-Spread Innovation Investment and Accelerator Program in 2019 with the desire to make Veterans painful knee procedures more comfortable and less stressful. Through Human Centered Design (HCD), trial and error, and an innovation journey filled with failures and successes she designed the Atlas Knee Supporter to help keep Veterans comfortable during an incredibly painful process. iNET taught DJ how to innovate with empathy and supported her journey to becoming an employee innovator with a viable solution to a problem.

While DJ is a remarkable person, her journey is not out of the ordinary. At its heart it's the story of someone who saw a problem and had a passion to solve it. iNET doesn't seek solutions for the sake of finding solutions.

*"It's hard to get a voice. iNET gave us a voice."*

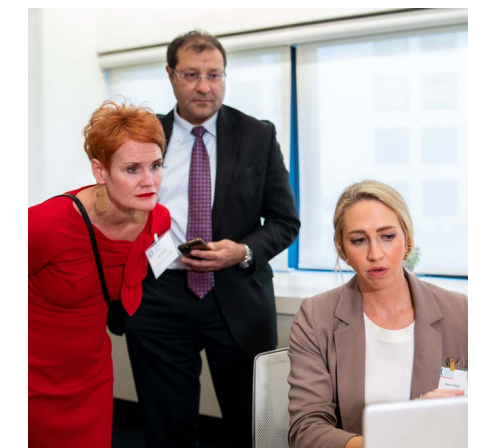
iNET empowers those who see firsthand what the problem is and provides them with the tools needed to tackle those problems. It is the human experience that drives the solution and as Allison said in her Talk, PEOPLE are the solution. VA is the largest healthcare system in the USA and when we flip the notion of who an innovator can be and put that power back into its people, meaningfully designed products and programs that change and save Veteran lives and improve their experience in VA are fostered and created.

This is VA. These are the people iNET wants to tackle the biggest challenges across the enterprise. Over the past six years iNET has had over 700 employees, like DJ, who have participated in the Spark-Seed-Spread program. Without iNET, there would be no Atlas Knee Supporter and Veterans would still

be uncomfortable in the pain clinic. iNET finds success by giving everyone a voice, because individuals have so much more to offer than what's listed in their job description. They aren't just a nurse, or housekeeper, or medical support assistant, if you give them the chance – they are the solution and champions of change. PEOPLE are our greatest resource, we are the solution to our challenges, and anyone can be an innovator. iNET's Spark-Seed-Spread Innovation Investment and Accelerator Program not only sparks innovation but also collaboration and creates a tight knit community among its innovators where they support each other. The goal and message of iNET is this: we can all be innovators and PEOPLE are the solution.

## iEX STORIES

iEX's Innovation Stories featured multiple sessions for frontline innovators to share their experiences from the past year. Innovation Stories allowed innovators to highlight their innovation journeys - including the triumphs and hurdles. Each presenter made the jump from employee to innovator, and these sessions focused on how iNET's Spark-Seed-Spread Innovation Investment and Accelerator Program helped to facilitate those journeys. Those who participated in last year's Breaking Boundaries Collaboration Challenge and their Innovation Specialist counterparts also provided demonstrations on the progress of their collaborative innovations.





# SHANNA JENKINS

VHA Inventory Exchange Program, Gulf Coast Veterans Healthcare System

Every year throughout VHA, thousands of medical and surgical supplies are discarded due to expiration dates. Limited expiration dating, which is regulated by the FDA, can increase costs and creates waste for hospitals and medical centers. This year, the team developed a mock prototype that will allow facilities to post-surgical items that are not expected to be used before the item's expiration date. The platform follows the same model as the well-known online retailer eBay, but VHA Inventory Exchange Program requires no payment. The surgical implant inventory exchange program will list items on a centralized National SharePoint site where participating VAs can request the items they need, which will drive costs down and reduce surgical waste. The use of this platform can save VHA millions of dollars on wasted supplies. The team pitched the prototype to various program offices throughout the investment cycle and have received buy-in from OIT to assist with further testing of the prototype in VISN 16.

# ALICIA HURST

Quiet Conversations, VA Palo Alto Healthcare System

Alicia Hurst was sitting in her office, trying to ignore the sounds of her co-workers bleeding through her office walls, when the spark of an idea came to her. As more people began returning to the office, how would she be able to hear Veterans if they visit her in the office? How can they make sure focus stays on what is being said and not on the noise around them?

With the support of iNET and Cal-Poly, Alicia dove into the problem and found it to be much broader than she originally imagined, with many of her VA colleagues running into similar issues. After spending a year digging into the problem, framing the issues and talking with those who face this problem on a daily basis, Alicia developed a prototype (Quiet Conversations, an innovation of headphones.)

This year she'll be testing that prototype that will enable people to block out the noise around them and speak clearly to each other, keeping the focus on the Veteran and the reason they came into the building in the first place. Alicia noted that she's excited to see what will develop from this prototype and that its potential to help so many people really helps motivate her to keep going even through the natural ups and downs of the innovation process.

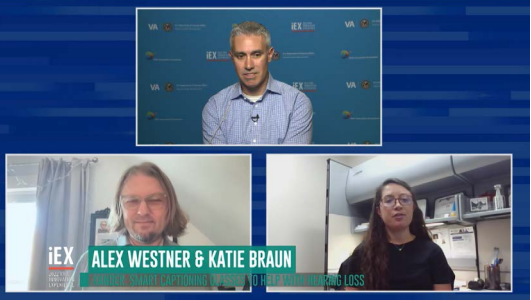


# XANDER

Xander™ began their innovation journey with VHA back in 2021 to develop a unique product to help Veterans with hearing loss. XanderGlasses™ are augmented reality smart glasses that display real-time captions of what other people are saying — right in the wearer's field of view. After learning that hearing loss and tinnitus are top health concerns among Veterans, Xander applied to the iNET Greenhouse Initiative program and was thrilled to be accepted. In the first phase of this collaboration, VHA audiologists and Veterans from four iNET sites provided critical feedback that spurred design upgrades to Xander's product. The next phase of the collaboration will begin in early 2023, where clinics will test revised prototypes with Veterans and report on their findings to see if XanderGlasses can move to the next phase of implementation within VA.

# WAREOLOGIE

**From sketch to product in two years.** In 2020, a novel portable parallel bar device was designed as part of the Challenge America COVID-19 Maker Challenge. The outcome was the creation of the Portable Parallel Bars, an ongoing co-design collaboration between iNET, VHA clinicians, the Central Virginia VA Health Care System in Richmond, VA and Wareologie™. This collaboration was one of the first iNET Greenhouse Initiative funded projects which allows companies outside the VA to collaborate directly with iNET sites. Portable Parallel Bars aim to make access to rehabilitation therapy easier as a foldable device on wheels designed for therapy anywhere, including hospitals, rehabilitation centers, and in the home. This allows Veterans on isolation precautions or with limited ability to access the therapy gym to receive rehabilitation directly at the bedside in the privacy and safety of their room. Expedited manufacturing of Portable Parallel Bars is ongoing to allow Veterans access to this rehabilitation technology. Portable Parallel Bars are FDA Class 1 registered and will soon be available for purchase.





# 2022 network by the NUMBERS



6

New iNET Sites



66

Greenhouse  
Initiative  
Applications

5

Greenhouse  
Collaborations



3

Alumni Events

1,500+

Alumni Engaged



900+

Incubator Attendees

1,200+

Ignite Attendees



142

FY22 Spark-Seed-Spread  
Investments

160

FY23 Spark-Seed-Spread  
Reviewers

114

FY23 Spark-Seed-Spread  
Investments

46

FY23 Spark Investees

58

FY23 Speed Investees

10

FY23 Spread Investees

6

FY23 Go-Fish! Investments

37

FY23 Returning Investees

13

VAIPMD Presenters



## LOOK AHEAD TO 2023

From the Director's Chair



### MY HEROES DON'T WEAR CAPES

It is hard to believe another year has passed, but when life is so full of joy, it can't help but feel like a whirlwind! As I hit a milestone birthday this year, I found myself experiencing a lot of personal and professional clarity about what the next chapter of my life will bring. Participating in VHA's Health Care Leadership Development Program (HCLDP) and

my frequent travels onsite to meet with frontline employees and Veterans confirmed one thing for me, my heart is in the field with Veterans and my colleagues. I truly believe that VA employees are heroes. In all my encounters on site this year, I have witnessed so many people going above and beyond to make the Veteran and VA employee experience better. I have met so many current and future VHA leaders who display fervent determination to ensure VA continues to be a place Veterans want to receive care and employees want to work. I absolutely adore serving great heroes and working alongside them. I am grateful.

To ensure iNET continues to serve heroes and provide opportunities to them, we will continue our hard work in 2023. Over the last 6 years, we have had over 700 employees participate in Spark-Seed-Spread. Yes, Spark-Seed-Spread is absolutely meant to influence the employee perspective and ability to solve problems and impact our workforce culture; it also provides the opportunity to facilitate the development of innovative solutions, some of which will rise to the top and should be implemented and adopted into our system nationally. I know we are meeting the first target. We are changing the employee psyche. We have also had some success with the latter target; the VHA 3D Printing Network, Intermediate Care Technician hiring program, mobile prosthetics, VEText, virtual reality for pain and/or distraction, rideshare, and so many more programs initially supported by iNET are now widely supported across the enterprise with the support of the Diffusion of Excellence, program offices, or via a National Center for Innovation 2 Impact. Still, these are programs or initiatives; we have had limited success with employee-designed products but next year, we will have more focus on advancing employee-designed products.

Throughout 2022, we made headway towards our long-term goal of creating an Amazon-like market for frontline employees to shop VA employee-designed (and Greenhouse Initiative collaboration) products. We dove into market research about manufacturing, intellectual property, tech transfer, contracting avenues, FDA regulations, purchasing, and more. We invited parties from each of these areas to the first-ever VA Intrapreneurial Product Marketplace Day to showcase 13 employee-designed products. I met with contracting officers, web designers, and so many more all

working together to make this happen.

The most exciting step however is our pilot, which kicked off in December, with Harbor Designs and Manufacturing (HDM) in Baltimore. During this collaboration, three iNET alumni presented their prototypes, the known competitive and prior art landscape for their prototypes, proposed value proposition, and the potential quantity and other production requirements. In the new year HDM's support team will educate us on the design for manufacturing process, make suggestions for potential design optimizations, and propose the pros and cons of potential manufacturing processes for parts and assemblies.

Based on this discovery and understanding of immediate and long-term goals, HDM will generate a proposed roadmap to satisfy the immediate goals and/ or full roadmap to FDA compliance and commercialization. This roadmap will include an initial rough order of magnitude estimate or cost target per unit which would include the anticipated cost of both the number of units to be produced and the time and materials necessary to prototype and then produce them.

This is it. The next step towards the reality of a VA Intrapreneur Product Marketplace. We will navigate forward with our mantra in mind, "Think big. Start small, fail small." It will take time, patience, and persistence. Luckily, I have the latter for days 🙄. I can't slow down time and I'm working on the patience part!

Stay tuned for 2023. Our employee innovation heroes deserve this and so much more. They work hard for our Veterans undeterred by obstacles and do so without the need of accolades or heroes' capes. I am so proud to work within the VA healthcare system which is the largest in the country serving our Nation's heroes. On behalf of my entire iNET family, employee innovation heroes assemble! We've got work to do.





