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“Serving the people who have worn the cloth of our nation”

My name is Dr. Gerry Cox. I’m the recently appointed Assistant Deputy Under Secretary for Health in VHA, in charge of the Office of Integrity. So that office was established within the larger Office of Organizational Excellence under the leadership of Carolyn Clancy.

Integrity has everything to do with my job and with those of my colleagues in that office. As a Navy Veteran, I lived by a set of core values for decades. The Navy’s core values are Honor, Courage and Commitment. So one of those three, Commitment, happens to overlap with VA’s five I CARE values: Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect and Excellence. So that’s a constant reminder of the importance of maintaining integrity and fostering an ethical and just culture in everything that we do in caring for Veterans.

The role of our office is to both foster that ethical and just culture and also to integrate information that we collect from various internal and external oversight activities to make sure that the system is performing as expected. To make sure that Veterans are getting the quality of care that they deserve.

I think integrity can be defined really simply. It means doing the right thing. And again you hear Secretary Bob McDonald talking frequently about doing the harder right rather than sometimes the easier wrong. It may be in a particular situation where you have a decision to make – you may not even think of it as an ethical dilemma, but it has an ethical component.

Veterans want to receive the benefits that they’ve earned. Particularly with regard to health care benefits, they want that care to be of the highest possible quality. They want to feel confident that VA physicians, nurses and other health care professionals are well-trained, that they’re going to provide the best possible care to him or to her.

I think just having an office, a major division, that has “integrity” in its name should serve as a reminder, and as encouragement to all of us that work here that it is in fact one of VA’s core values. I think it’s probably already in people’s minds that they want to serve this population of Veterans, they want to serve the people that have sacrificed for our country. As you know, a good one third or so of VA employees are themselves Veterans. And so they probably don’t need that reminder from me. I think like almost everybody that I work with, I come to the job every day with the attitude that I want to serve my fellow Veterans, work hard and do the best job I can. This is not about me personally, this is about serving the people who have worn the cloth of our nation.

So it’s a noble mission. And I want to make sure that integrity becomes, or I should say remains, one of the watchwords of VHA.