Whether you love it or hate it, most everyone agrees that strategic planning is essential for an organization to grow and thrive. Most of us have been involved along the way with developing a strategic plan, but what purpose does it really serve? A strategic plan is an organization’s process of defining its direction for the future. For a plan to work, it must be both affordable and feasible. Important components of a plan involve goal setting, putting actions on paper to achieve the goals, and making sure that resources (time, money, and people) are available to get the work done.

So much has happened since COA’s strategic plan for 2014-2019 expired, namely staff transitions, an ongoing pandemic resulting in multiple deployments of those on the Strategic Planning Committee, and an inability to meet in person to do this important work. Fast forward to August of 2021. The pandemic was under control well

by Jacqueline Rychnovsky, PhD, CAE, Executive Director of COA

The 68th National Veterans Day Observance, which featured a wreath laying at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier by President Biden to mark the 100th anniversary of the tomb, took place on November 11, 2021, at Arlington National Cemetery. Representing the Commissioned Officers Association of the USPHS (COA) was Commander Kelly Valente, Chair of COA’s Board of Directors. Joining CDR Valente were six active duty officers from the District of Columbia (DC), Baltimore, and Atlanta COA Local Branches, LCDR Jen Eng, LCDR James Pitt, CDR Vandna Kishore, CAPT Margo Riggs, CDR Kelly Fath, and LCDR Vera Jones.

To commemorate the 100th year of the Tomb of the Unknown Solider, the ceremony began with an Armed Forces Joint Service Procession that replicated a historic procession from 1921. Following the procession a breathtaking east to west aircraft flyover by Navy, Army, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard aircraft was experienced by all attendees. In addition to The Honorable Joseph
COA Member Benefits

Capitol Hill Representation
Efforts on Capitol Hill continually support all Commissioned Corps officers – active, former, reserve, and retired

Local Representation
COA Local Branches provide venues for meeting fellow officers and a forum for the discussion of issues within the Commissioned Corps

Newsletter
Newsletter reports on monthly activities and items of interest about the Corps and COA

Ribbon
Authorized to be worn on the PHS uniform by members in good standing when attending COA functions

Insurance Programs
Low-cost insurance programs that may continue as long as your membership in COA remains current

USF Online Programs
Discounted degree and certificate programs like PhD, DrPH, MPH, MSPH, MHA

NYMC Online MPH
50 percent discount for the online MPH and certificate programs

Scholarship Programs
College scholarships for children and spouses of COA members and high school students

The Ohio State University
In-state tuition for graduate nursing and certification programs

Legislative Update
But what have you done for me lately?

by CAPT Alan Echt, USPHS (ret.)

A few months ago, we happily reported that Commissioned Corps officers who retired or separated after 1 October 2021 would be issued a DD 214, a long-standing goal of your Legislative Affairs Committee. We thought we would take a few minutes to bring you up to date on what else we’re working on for you.

Park Passes
The Alexander Lofgren Veterans in Parks Act will codify in law a National Park Service pass program that grants free passes to members of the Armed Forces, the National Guard and Reserves, Veterans, and Gold Star Families; everyone but the USPHS and NOAA Commissioned Corps. The bill, sponsored by Rep. Miller-Meeks, passed the House and the Senate version was sponsored by Sen. Sinema. The bill’s language was rolled into the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). COA had meetings with Sen. Sinema’s and Rep. Miller-Meeks’ offices, and the relevant committee staff to amend the language to change “Armed Forces” to “Uniformed Services” which would permit the USPHS and NOAA Commissioned Corps to also be granted free park access. While Rep. Miller-Meeks and Senator Sinema agreed to amend the Lofgren Act to include the USPHS and NOAA Corps, the amendment was blocked by the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, which has jurisdiction over the National Park Service. The Committee, chaired by Sen. Manchin, blocked all amendments to the NDAA that was under his committee’s jurisdiction. You need to know that we tried hard to fix this. COA will work to amend the Lofgren Act in another piece of legislation next year.

Letter of Congratulations and Meeting with ADM Levine
Jacque sent a letter to ADM Levine congratulating her on her appointment as an admiral in the Commissioned Corps. Along with COF Chair RADM (Ret) Solomon, Jacque had a productive meeting with the DSG and ADM Levine on 1 December at HHS headquarters, where they discussed the challenges faced by USPHS officers, and agreed to work together to overcome them.

The Military Coalition
Along with other members of The Military Coalition, COA signed letters of support for the Veterans’ Prostate Cancer Treatment and Research Act and the Effective Suicide Screening and Assessment in the Emergency Department Act.

Smithsonian Lawsuit
COA’s work continues on the lawsuit over USPHS and NOAA Corps exclusion from the Smithsonian’s National Native American Veterans Memorial. COA reached out to NOAA Corps HQ and
Heart of America COA Offers Mentoring Workshop

by CAPT Lisa Gilliam, RN, BSN, CAS GH/GHE

A small branch of COA, Heart of America (HOA) covers a territory across Kansas, Missouri, and Iowa. Committed to fostering supportive relationships in the heartland, HOA has a long-standing history of offering a yearly mentoring workshop for officers seeking assistance with developing their COER, CV, OS, ROS, and supporting documents in preparation for promotion boards.

HOA mentoring events have proved beneficial to both the mentees and mentors. Being a mentor provides a way to give back and is an important development and learning experience. By mentoring, the senior officer can hone leadership skills, learn to communicate effectively, and become a recognized advisor for junior officers. The mentee gains problem-solving skills, networking opportunities, and a greater chance to advance their career opportunities.

HOA was able to carry on the tradition last year with a virtual mentoring event. This year, HOA put together an in-person and virtual mentoring workshop on October 27, 2021. Four senior officers (CAPT Kelly Battese, CAPT Dana Hall, CAPT Lisa Gilliam, and CDR Kimberly Davids) volunteered as mentors and CAPT Gilliam hosted the event. Four stations were set up so the five mentees (LCDR Jeremie Gregory, LCDR Joe Rorabaugh-Irwin, LT Lloyd Luapula, LT Catherine Olguin, and LT Alyesya Van Meter) were able to meet one-on-one with a mentor. Two of the five attended virtually.

The stations were set up in such a way to allow each pairing a quiet space to discuss issues/concerns and offer feedback without interruption. The mentees sent their documents for review prior to the event. This allowed time for the mentors to prepare comments. Each mentee was able to speak with two mentors, allowing for a wider range of perspectives and feedback from experienced officers.

All the officers who participated expressed how beneficial the experience was and look forward to next year’s event. Each mentee felt the sessions were helpful. They gained ideas for how to show more impact in their promotion packets.

JUNIOR OFFICER SPOTLIGHT

LT Kip Christensen, PT, DPT

Physical Therapist with the Indian Health Service, Crownpoint, NM

LT Kip Christensen has held the Incident Command (IC) role for the Crownpoint service unit from March 2020 to June 2021. Throughout that time, LT Christensen continued supervisory duties for the Physical Therapy department maintaining PT services and prioritizing outpatient services, as well as inpatient services to COVID-19 patients. LT Christensen has advocated for PT involvement in the COVID-19 recovery clinic, assigning PT staff to multidisciplinary teams.

LT Christensen working in the Incident Command Center in Crownpoint, NM.
The last two years of a pandemic, natural disasters, and humanitarian responses have pushed to the limit the capacity of the entire public health system, which has been historically underfunded and understaffed. Throughout this onslaught, the officers of the USPHS Commissioned Corps have been on the frontlines, responding to our nation’s most critical public health needs. In doing so, they have worked side by side with millions of healthcare and public health professionals across the United States.

To fulfill the mission of protecting and preserving the health of everyone in the U.S, we need a more robust and well-funded public health workforce, of which a larger and better supported Commissioned Corps will continue to be a particularly crucial part. The Commissioned Officers Foundation advocates on behalf of our officers and the entire public health workforce to ensure that current and future professionals and leaders have the numbers, training, skills, knowledge, and experience that will enable their success in that mission. We also advocate for a concerted effort to build public health and science knowledge throughout the U.S. population, the deficiencies of which have added to the tragic toll of the pandemic. We are directing our philanthropy toward these same goals.

The U.S. needs to support not only a larger Corps, but a Corps that provides ongoing educational and training opportunities for active-duty officers, as is routine in the other uniformed services. To help build and strengthen the Corps, COF advocates for a program to offer student loan forgiveness and repayment plans for officers who join either the regular or reserve Corps. Such programs existed in the past and helped create the National Health Service Corps as well as bringing into the Commissioned Corps an entire generation of nationally recognized public health leaders.

To address our Nation’s most pressing needs, we need to increase representation in the public health workforce and its leadership of people from underserved and vulnerable communities. We believe that the Commissioned Corps can serve as a model of representation, participation, and advancement, but this can only be accomplished with highly proactive outreach and recruitment along with significant financial support for students and trainees in all the Corps’ eleven categories.

COF fully supports the Surgeon General’s advisory on Confronting Health Misinformation through a national effort on science education from primary school through college to provide a basic knowledge of the principles of science and public health. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated with alarming clarity how difficult it is for people to navigate the torrent of misinformation and disinformation to which they are constantly subjected.

As a result, confusion persists, vital public health recommendations are ignored, and the public health system’s energies are diverted to the task of countering falsehoods and fantasies. A more scientifically literate population might critically examine and more likely reject deceptive information, making better informed choices about their health. During this pandemic, ignorance has been deadly.

Along with advocacy, COF will increase its philanthropic support for training and education of active-duty officers, and we will also increase the number and size of our scholarship programs for high-school and college students focused on careers in public health.

Earlier this year COF adopted the phrase “Forging Leadership for Generations” as a motto and as a guiding principle. It is with this in mind that we are focusing on the development and advancement of today’s Corps officers as well as on identifying, educating, and recruiting the next generation of officers to lead the only uniformed public health service in the world.

Your financial contribution to the Foundation will support these efforts. With your help, we can demonstrate that the Commissioned Corps and our USPHS officers are the model of the best trained, best educated, most experienced and most effective public health workforce in the world.
The Essence of Teamwork

by LT Samora Casimir, OTR/L, OTD, and LT Mirabelle Adamu, PharmD, MPH

Teamwork is a positive attribute one must uphold and value. It’s especially true for junior officers who deploy to support new colleagues.

On October 20, we had less than three hours to ensure our deployment bags were ready to go and to report to a new duty station for the next couple of days. We were called to serve with the behavioral health team in support of Operation Allies Welcome. We were excited and nervous. Once we arrived, there was no time for delay.

LT Casimir served as the Safety Officer and LT Adamu served as the Pharmacist overseeing COVID-19 vaccinations among other pertinent immunizations stored for the Afghan families. Our duties were very different, but the mission was all the same. We were to provide safe yet effective preparation for transport of over 500 Afghan refugees to their next destination. LT Casimir and LT Adamu collaborated with over 150 Federal civilians, numerous Army and Marine Corps service members, Department of State personnel, and hotel staff. We attended daily command briefings, assisted with the organization of departure plans, and distributed

see ESSENCE continued on page 12
A year like no other...

by Kelly Valente, PharmD, MS, BCACP

As the gavel for the position of COA Chair was passed to me on July 1, 2021, I knew this was “my year”. However, little did I know what “my year” would be.

This has been a year of memorable opportunities. July 1 started out with the promotion results like no other. Like the majority of the officers who were not selected, I grieved and processed through my emotions similar to many of my fellow officers.

In August, I spearheaded the planning for the COA five-year Strategic Plan and Annual Board Workshop. At this meeting, the Board of Directors decided, that we as an association, had to peel back the layers and promote our true calling. COA is for the well being of its members, whether, active duty, retired, separated, spouse, or friend. We are here to ensure your welfare. As we launch our new five-year Strategic Plan, we are committed to empowering our members to grow, engage, serve, and advocate. (See our plan at coausphs.org/page/StrategicPlan).

Throughout this plan, I aim for our members to be best kept secrets no more. COA in the end of September succeeded in preserving your leave that was expiring and was delighted to hear that Commissioned Corps Headquarters was able to afford retiring officers a DD214.

We have all done unprecedented work and in September I was honored as Rhode Island Pharmacist of the Year. I was complete surprised and humbled to receive such an award. While this was an individual award, I truly felt it was a group award and thanked the multitude of PHS officers who assisted with the award worthy work.

Throughout the pandemic, members of COA have done unprecedented work. In September, I was honored as Rhode Island Pharmacist of the Year. I was complete surprised and humbled to receive such an award. While this was an individual award, I truly felt it was a group award and thanked the multitude of PHS officers who assisted with the award worthy work.

As Board Chair, one of the responsibilities is representing COA for the Veterans Day Committee festivities at Arlington National Cemetery. This year, President Biden invited each chair within the Veterans Day Committee to the White House a meet-and-greet. While I spoke with President Biden, I could not help but think of my grandfathers who served before me and the opportunity I had to representing each of you.

This past year has brought multiple deployments. I have deployed three times, totaling 100 days. It has been tough. Being away from my family and my steady state work has been a challenge in more ways than one. However, deployments have brought growth and new experiences.

PHS officers have such unique experiences compared to those who serve in the private sector. As we are in our “PHS bubble”, I too forget how special we are and the amazing and memorable opportunities we are privileged to. As we go into 2022, relish on your experiences as an officer. For as I had a year like no other, we have careers like no other and experiences like no other as well.
The Community Outreach Committee of the Greater Texas COA mobilized area officers for two service projects.

The first project included five USPHS officers who participated in “Virtual Story Time” at Children’s Hospital in collaboration with the North Texas District of the Texas Physical Therapy Association. Children in the hospital miss fun activities at home and can experience isolation, especially in the age of COVID-19. Story time provides an escape from reality.

The second project involved two USPHS officers who supported The Texas Ramp project with constructing an ADA-compliant ramp for a client. The ramps assist patients with physical disabilities to safely exit their homes to access community services and medical appointments. According to 2017 census estimates, over 3 million (10.9 percent) of the State of Texas’s 27.4 million people are 65 years old or older. Of these, over 25 percent have some ambulatory disability, and 811,000 people ages 5 to 64 have a similar disability.

The Texas Ramp project is free of charge for the elderly, disabled and economically disadvantaged. Ramps are custom built to the recipient’s house. The total time from referral to completion of a ramp is three to four months.
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Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, PHS officers rose to the challenge in immeasurable ways. Many officers also found time to focus on their health and personal goals. Many had to find new and innovative ways to maintain fitness standards. The USPHS Exercise Challenge recognized these efforts and aimed to introduce fun and creative ways to maintain physical fitness.

One of the Surgeon General Teams OSG chartered activities, the USPHS Exercise Challenge supports the Surgeon General’s initiatives and the Health and Human Services 2018 Physical Activities Guidelines for Americans.¹ Running from January 4 to March 28, the 2021 USPHS Exercise Challenge required participants to exercise at least 150 minutes weekly at a moderate intensity for a minimum of 10 out of 12 weeks. It included opportunities for peer engagement through “extra credit” activities. Examples were the Zoom Plank Challenge, a USPHS Exercise Challenge Playlist, and the PHS Athletics 5K Virtual Run/Walk Event.

The goal was to engage Commissioned Corps officers in consistent, physical activity, and to facilitate a community of support. The response was overwhelming. As organizers for this challenge, we could not anticipate such high levels of motivation and we were inspired by the work ethic and resilience of the Corps. The timing of this year’s challenge was in the heart of the winter, after long months of lockdown, social isolation, and multiple deployments.

The Exercise Challenge included 1,174 participants from all professional categories. 755 out of the 1,174 Officers (64%) completed the event and logged over 2.4 million exercise minutes. Additionally, 686 officers (58%) reported achieving a personal record and the Surgeon General Exercise Team received 307 unsolicited messages from officers expressing their satisfaction and how thankful they were for this challenge!

To all the participants, thank you for your involvement. Thank you for motivating one another to be physically active and build morale when we all need it.

Without the leadership of the CDR Clara Stevens and CDR Michael Rinaldi, the 2021 Exercise Challenge would not have been possible. The Exercise Challenge team worked hard on creating a positive experience for each officer and we are planning even more exciting activities for next year.

References:

Enroll for the 2022 Exercise Challenge

January 3 – March 11, 2022

Join the listserv for updates and logging exercise minutes:
https://list.nih.gov/cgi-bin/wa.exe?A0=USPHS-EXERCISE-CHALLENGE
Are You Eligible?

Former and retired officers may be eligible for newly enacted service-connected benefits. Over the course of the last six months, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has begun processing service-connected disability claims for six new presumptive conditions related to environmental exposures during your service. In May 2021, VA started implementing provisions of the William M. Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021, adding bladder cancer, hypothyroidism, and Parkinsonism to the list of medical conditions presumptively associated with exposure to Agent Orange. A few months later, the VA added asthma, rhinitis, and sinusitis (to include rhinosinusitis) on a presumptive basis based on particulate matter exposures during military service in Southwest Asia and certain other areas. Any Veteran who was previously denied service-connection for any of these six conditions but had symptoms manifest within 10 years of military service will need to file a supplemental claim using VA Form 20-0995, Decision Review Request: Supplemental Claim. The claim form should include the name of the condition and specify that the condition is being claimed due to in-service exposure to environmental hazards.

The Commissioned Officers Association (COA) strongly encourages all veterans to use a Veteran Service Organization/Officer (VSO) to assist in filing and revising claims. You can visit www.va.gov for the most recent developments around environmental exposures during your service, as the VA is constantly conducting research and surveillance as well as reviewing scientific literature for conditions that may be related to exposure. For more information about VA benefits and eligibility, or how to file a claim, Veterans and survivors can visit VA’s website at www.va.gov or call toll-free at 1-800-827-1000.

Looking for the Next Generation of Health Science Leaders

Do you know a high school senior looking for a little extra help with college expenses?

The Commissioned Officers Foundation for the Advancement of Public Health (COF) is pleased to announce the 2022 cycle of the Mishoe Diversity “Believe” Scholarship. The application window will open in January and close in March. One award recipient will be announced in May. The scholarship is open to graduating high school seniors from underrepresented communities who are pursuing a career in a science or a health-related field. This award is given to someone who has shown resiliency in overcoming challenges and who will work to make our world a better place.

The scholarship program was established in 2020 by Helena O. Mishoe, PhD, MPH, retired Rear Admiral of the Commissioned Corps of the US Public Health Service. Her extraordinary public service and scientist career spanned over three decades at the National Institutes of Health and included 27 years of active duty in the USPHS.

Submissions will be accepted electronically at https://www.phscof.org/scholarships/mishoe-believe-scholarship/. Potential applicants should check the website beginning January 10 to access the application.

We would like to thank those who have donated to the Mishoe Scholarship fund. Anyone interested in supporting this program can do so online at https://www.phscof.org/donate/ with a notation that the money be used for the Mishoe Scholarship.
Alaska Officers Promote Flu Vaccines

by LCDR Theresa Castellanos, PharmD, CLC

Every October during American Pharmacists Month, many officers from the Aurora Borealis branch of the COA volunteer their time and services at the Southcentral Foundation/Alaska Native Medical Center Flu clinic. The clinic is led by LCDR Theresa Castellanos, pharmacy officer at Southcentral Foundation and Community Outreach chair of the branch. The clinic began in 2013 and has become an annual event that many people look forward to due to the convenience of not needing an appointment.

Last year it was converted to a drive-thru model to meet demands during the COVID-19 pandemic. Patients are grateful for the safe and efficient way to get their annual flu vaccine and it has become the new norm. This year the drive-thru clinic successfully vaccinated 495 people in four days. LCDR Castellanos is always amazed by the number of officers across campus and disciplines who volunteer to help keep the community healthy. The rain, snow, wind, and cold temperatures don’t stop these officers in Anchorage!

OBITUARY

Captain John Collins

Captain John Thomas Collins, a Life Member of the Commissioned Officers Association, passed away peacefully on May 10, 2021, at the age of 74. John was born and raised in Western New York and served in the U.S. Army before his commissioning in the U.S. Public Health Service. As a Civil Engineer with the State of Alaska, he served over twenty years attached to the National Park Service Rocky Mountain Division. John was a fiercely loyal NY Mets fan, avid woodworker, and winemaker. He volunteered with Habitat for Humanity and delivered for Meals on Wheels; he was a true servant to all.

John is survived by his wife Kathryn Skeahan-Collins, sons Brian (Cheryl) Collins and Jason (Annette) Collins, bonus children Danielle (Ron) Sollenberger, Marcella (David) Hille and John (Wendy) Chapman, and nine grandchildren. He will be remembered for the way he loved and cared for his family, his friends, and his community.
food, warm clothing, hygiene products, and children’s books to ease the families’ travel.

Once the families safely left, the teamwork continued. We inventoried all medical supplies to include PPE and office supplies. We provided input to help with smooth transitions, assisted others with tasks once our assignment for the day was complete and kept a smile on our faces without complaining.

It takes a group effort to make things happen successfully. We collaborated with many people. We saw senior leaders give instructions and then rapidly changing them, giving us a new perspective on being flexible and working well with others. We worked efficiently, effectively, and changed our approach if things did not work the way we had planned. It was a great learning experience, and we look forward to our next deployment.

From left, LT Mirabelle Adamu and LT Samora Casimir.

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R. Biden, Jr., President of the United States and First Lady Jill Biden, other attendees included the Honorable Denis McDonough, Secretary of Veterans Affairs; Ms. Karen Durham-Aguilera, Executive Director, Army National Military Cemeteries and Arlington National Cemetery; and Brigadier General Harry Bandholtz, Commander, Military District of Washington.

Before the ceremony CDR Valente attended an event at the White house where she had a personal conversation with President Biden before receiving a Presidential Coin. President Biden’s proclamation for Veterans Day 2021 acknowledged the need to care for Veterans of all services, saying “Our Nation has only one truly sacred obligation: to properly prepare and equip our service members when we send them into harm’s way and to care for them and their families when they return home. For our 19 million veterans, that means ensuring that they have access to the support and resources for a future of security, opportunity, and dignity. This is even more important as we continue to recover from the global COVID-19 pandemic.”

Culminating the ceremony was a somber, individual wreath laying event by each member of the Veterans Day National Committee (VDNC). CDR Valente and LCDR Pitt laid a wreath from the Commissioned Officers Association, with CDR Valente remarking, “It was an honor and a privilege to represent the Commissioned Officers Association at this event. I thought of our veterans in PHS and my veteran grandfathers. This moment invigorated my passion to work harder for the well-being of our members.”

This year, due to ongoing COVID-19 restrictions, the amphitheater and tomb ceremonies were an invitation only event open to members of the VDNC, other VIPs, and their guests. As a full member of the VDNC, COA was provided seven box and four bench seat tickets to the amphitheater which provided our attendees with a bird’s eye view of all events. In total, only 800 guests were allowed, although general events at the cemetery were open to the public. For two days prior, members of the public were also allowed to lay flowers at the tomb to honor the soldier during a pre-100th anniversary event. At the conclusion of the ceremony, CDR Valente and her husband attended a luncheon reception at the Military Women’s Memorial at Arlington National Cemetery, hosted by the Jewish War Veterans. As a member of the VDNC, COA is scheduled to host the Veterans Day ceremony and reception in the year 2039.

Currently, Arlington National Cemetery is open to the public, although the Memorial Amphitheater remains off limits due to COVID-19 restrictions.
COA Receiving Award Nominations

The COA Awards Subcommittee welcomes nominations for the following awards:

Health Leader of the Year
Recognizes civilians, retired active duty, or active duty service members who have made notable contributions to the health of the Nation.

Local Branch of the Year
Recognizes the exceptional accomplishments of COA Local Branches. Each year, a Large Local Branch (60 members or more) and a Small Local Branch (fewer than 60 members) are recognized for their well-deserved efforts.

Civilian Outstanding Support of the USPHS
Presented to those civilian (individuals and/or groups) who have distinguished themselves in service to the Commissioned Corps.

Retiree of the Year
Recognizes excellence in continued service and contributions beyond active duty or government civilian service to the Association, PHS Commissioned Officers Foundation, and to the members of COA Local Branches.

New Awards
Local Branch Member of Year Award (active local branch COA member) and Local Branch Leader of the Year Award (COA Local Branch Executive Committee member). These awards will enable COA Local Branches to further recognize the great work being done by their members and leaders throughout the year.

Apply Online
Details are on the COA website at: https://coausphs.org/page/awards. The deadline to submit nominations is Monday, March 1, 2022 at 5 PM Eastern.
The Meaning of Light

Why does it make me so happy to climb on my roof and put up my Christmas lights? It takes a whole day…and sometimes trips to the store…and figuring out the extension cords, but then I can stand in the front yard and view my masterpiece. Ahhh! This is the time of year when we see lights going up all over the place, but have you ever wondered what the lights stand for? They have tons of meaning for many different belief systems!

The image on the right is of a menorah. It is used in the Jewish faith to celebrate Chanukah, the festival of lights. Rabbi Shimon Apisdorf states that, “Light is the overarching, central, definitive metaphor for Jewish understanding of all of reality.” In fact, there are so many Hebrew words for “light,” that it is a part of their worship all year long.

There are other belief systems that celebrate by using light this time of year. Buddhism teaches that light is knowledge and followers celebrate Bodhi Day by decorating fig trees with lights. In years past, Pagan followers celebrated the winter solstice by decorating trees with hanging candles. This symbolized the sun, moon, and stars, and celebrated any loved ones that had passed away. Christianity teaches that God is light, and that Jesus Christ is the light of the world. I learned that blue Christmas lights (which are my favorite) symbolize support for fallen police officers, firefighters, and armed service members, or for troops who are abroad during the holidays.

What do lights mean to you? Life, hope, inspiration, celebration, or God’s presence? All of the meanings of light are positive ones. It’s no wonder that everyone wants to decorate before Thanksgiving! We are drawn to these positive and warm feelings because they enrich us, they heal us, and they make us joyful for life. This is a spiritually healthy way to refill our tanks. So, make it look like broad daylight in your yard this year with all your lights. We could use a refill.

May we all make our light to shine for all to see and be joyful.

Education: Our Lady of Guadalupe Feast Day

December 12 was the Feast Day of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Considered the patron saint of Mexico, she is a symbol of devotion, identity, and patriotism. The feast is a circular gathering held outside of the church and marked by prayers, singing, and a recounting of the appearance of Mary to Juan Diego.

Spiritual Exercises

1. Learn more about the many words for light in Judaism at https://www.jwi.org/articles/get-a-glow-on.
2. Make a list of the times when you use lights in your spiritual practices. How do they make you feel?
3. Light a candle, sit comfortably, focus on the flame, breathe deeply, and think about your inner light.

Questions or comments? Contact me at khredman@hotmail.com.
identified a Native American NOAA Corps officer who served in a Title 10 status to join the suit along with a Native American COA member with Title 10 status to insure that COA has standing to sue the Smithsonian

Dept of Education’s Public Service Loan Forgiveness program

Jaque wrote a letter to the Secretary of Education and followed up in conversations with Department of Education staff regarding Commissioned Corps officers’ eligibility for the Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) program. COA has confirmed that the employer “United States Public Health Service Commissioned Corps” EIN 53-0196950, is in the Public Student Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) database as an eligible employer. Please note that you must meet all other eligibility criteria before PSLF eligibility can be confirmed, finalized, and granted. We recommend you check your W-2 tax statement to determine your employer. Retired or former USPHS officers who had eligible employment after October 1, 2007, may also be eligible. For more information, please visit the StudentAid website. When in doubt, we encourage you to apply.

Mental Healthcare

Jaque initiated a discussion of mental health services for Corps officers by sending a copy of the May 2021 RAND report, Behavioral Health Care in the Military Health System - Access and Quality for Remote Service Members to ADM Levine. She received responses from both ADM Levine and SG Murthy. SG Murthy wrote, “…We are aware of the challenges posed by the pace of deployments during the COVID era and are working on strategies to enhance support to our officers while also reworking the distribution of deployment demands. RADM Hinton and RADM Childs will also be focused on this priority in their new roles as DSG and Interim Director of CCHQ.” COA will stay on top of this issue. RADM Kis Robertson Hale addressed the issue of mental health and personal well being at the COA Gathering on December 7. If you missed it we strongly encourage you to view the recording of this great presentation.

State Veteran Status Survey

COA worked with National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs to identify contacts in all 56 state and territorial veterans’ departments. Jacque sent them each a letter asking if USPHS officers are veterans in their jurisdiction. Responses are coming in. NASDVA has agreed to follow up with non-responders. They invited Jacque to speak at their next national meeting.

VA Memorial Medallion Form Revision

Jaque sat in on a meeting of the VA Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials and submitted a comment that referenced Jim Currie’s efforts to get the VA form 40-1330M revised so that those who served in these organizations are eligible to receive a memorial medallion that indicates USPHS or NOAA as their branch of service. She had a call with Glenn R. Powers, VA Deputy Under Secretary for Field Programs and Cemetery Operations, National Cemetery Administration, who assured her that the form is being revised.

Corporation for National and Community Service Public Awareness Campaign

COA requested that when the conferees meet to discuss language for the Corporation for National and Community Service that the following be included: “The conferees support the Corporation’s efforts to launch a national public awareness campaign to inform the public about various military, and national public service opportunities. The conferees direct the Corporation to also collaborate with the US Public Health Service Commissioned Corps when developing strategies for the campaign.”

Reimbursement for Spouse License Fee Due to PCS

Jaque reached out to CCHQ to ask if a program has been established through CCHQ to reimburse spouses of Commissioned Corps officers who incur relicensing fees when the active-duty member PCSs to another state. The program parameters in the FY20 NDAA (Section 577) were expanded from “Armed Forces” to “Uniformed Services.” COA is awaiting a response.

Service Member Parental Leave Equity

COA staff met with Rep. Speier’s office about this issue. Rep. Speier was the sponsor of the House bill, and the language was included as part of the NDAA. The NDAA conference agreement includes compromise language which amends Title 10 and authorizes 12 weeks of paid parental leave for members of the “Uniformed Services” after the birth, adoption, or permanent foster placement of a minor child with the member. Title 10 leave doesn’t include the USPHS. Rep. Speier’s staff advised that COA should advocate for parity for the USPHS with the OSG and ASH. The COA will work to amend the parental leave provision to include members of the “uniformed services” in another piece of legislation next year.

Those are just a few of the issues we’ve been advocating on your behalf. We appreciate your continued support through your COA membership.

Dues Increase in July 2022

COA strives to provide the best value for your member dollars. The last few years have made for interesting times and pushed us to virtual settings, along with increased operational costs due to limited availability of products and subscription services. With that, COA has proposed the first dues increase in five years that will become effective on 7/1/2022. We appreciate your support.

Other: $65 (Really Retired, Ready Reserve, Former Officer, Spouse) ($10 annual increase)
O3 and below: $120 ($15 annual increase)
O4 and above: $200 ($30 annual increase)
Our current Surgeon General, VADM Vivek Murthy posted online on November 22, 2021 that from April 2020 – April 2021, our country lost more than 100,000 people to drug overdoses. He stated we need to accelerate our efforts to destigmatize addiction while investing in prevention. He stated in the USPHS Commissioned Corps Town Hall on July 16, 2021 that one of his priorities was the opioid epidemic, continuing the initiative led by our former Surgeon General VADM Jerome Adams. I was delighted to hear this, as this is a subject I am interested in, and has affected me personally. Key landmark legislation has been adopted in the past 20 years to fight against opioid addiction. The first was the Drug Addiction Treatment Act of 2000: DATA 2000 which established the permission for office-based outpatient treatment. However, prescribing buprenorphine was limited to physicians. As a nurse practitioner student in 2011, one of my assignments was to review current legislation and write a paper lobbying for change. I chose the topic of substance use disorder and the limitations at the time it had on addressing the opioid epidemic by not allowing nurse practitioners the option to treat this patient population.

Fortunately, I was not the only one to argue this point, as the Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act of 2016 raised patient limits and piloted expanded prescribing to nurse practitioners and physician assistants for 5 years. In 2019, the SUPPORT for Patients and Communities Act (HR6) allowed NPs and PAs to be able to prescribe permanently in an outpatient setting and expanded prescriptive authority to additional advance practice nurses who are nurse anesthetists, nurse midwives, and clinical nurse specialists in states where they have prescriptive authority after completing X waiver requirements.

The opioid epidemic was declared a public health emergency in 2017, and continues to be a current issue as 2020 recorded a record number of opioid overdose deaths. Drug overdose deaths in 2020 rose nearly 30%, from a previous record set in 2019, and opioids are the leading type of drug. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in increased drug use, isolation, stress, and also limited access to treatment supply. A positive note is that the three largest pharmaceutical distributors and Johnson & Johnson are on the verge of a $26 billion agreement with states that would settle numerous lawsuits and pay for addiction and prevention services throughout the United States, supporting the battle against this epidemic.

This year, additional support has been given to combat the opioid epidemic. In April 2021, the X waiver was lifted, allowing advance practice providers to prescribe buprenorphine without patient limits. Most recently, the Biden-Harris Administration announced this August that it is providing nearly $90 million in part to help rural communities combat opioid use disorders (OUD) and other forms of substance use disorders (SUD). This funding is being distributed through the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA).

Free educational opportunities are available for COA members. ASAM, the American Society of Addiction Medicine, offers a two-part e-learning course which provides up to 24 hours of continuing education at no cost for advance practice nurses. The Providers Clinical Support System offers additional free CME and is geared towards primary care providers who want to treat OUD. In addition, all PHS Commissioned Corps officers have been able to take a free course offered through CDC funded Project ECHO and receive up to 3.75 continuing education credits, and Project ECHO offered an Overdose Prevention Project ECHO Course where one can receive up to an additional 16 continuing education credits at no cost to officers. I participated in Project ECHO’s courses in 2020 & 2021, and it was a great opportunity to network with subject matter experts in this field across the country in a virtual setting.

I share these opportunities as I believe education of this chronic, relapsing disease can assist officers who either provide direct patient care in either their day to day jobs or on deployment provide care to a person, family member, or friend who is affected by the opioid epidemic. These courses dispel some of the myths and can help destigmatize the issue within our uniformed service. If you are interested in any of these opportunities, check out www.asam.org, www.pcssnow.org, or for the Project ECHO programs please contact CDR Patrick Neubert: Patrick.Neubert@oig.hhs.gov.
enough at that time for the COA's Board of Directors to meet in person. With everyone in attendance being fully vaccinated, we were able to refresh our plan for 2022-2026 which we believe will ensure that COA remains a vibrant, healthy, and active membership organization dedicated to protecting the interests of the USPHS Commissioned Corps and its officers.

With that, I am pleased to share COA's priorities for the next five years, which are to GROW membership, ENGAGE members, SERVE members, and ADVOCATE for Commissioned Corps officers. To view the full plan, please visit https://tinyurl.com/coastrategicplan

COA Strategic Plan, 2022-2026

1. GROW: COA will grow its membership by 2026 by:
   - Revising COA's mission and vision to emphasize what is most important to members, concisely, clearly, and inspirationally
   - Reconsidering membership categories and dues pricing as well as analyzing membership benefits (tangible and intangible) and offerings to nonmembers to enhance the member value proposition
   - Setting goals and timeline for membership retention and growth by category, mindful of the total universe of possible members
   - Surveying members regularly about membership value and interests
   - Rebranding COA
   - Personalizing messaging to different member groups including those at different career stages
   - Experimenting with diverse marketing approaches
   - Tracking response to outreach
   - Reshaping outreach based on analysis (tweak, continue or sunset)
   - Helping members be COA ambassadors

2. ENGAGE: COA will further membership engagement, collegiality, networking, and participation in COA activities to promote unity, support members' well-being and success, share resources, and collaborate to achieve COA goals by:
   - Publicizing COA's new mission, goals, and vision to emphasize COA's commitment to supporting, empowering, and advocating for its membership
   - Enhancing media experience by discussing and highlighting COA values and membership experiences
   - Surveying members regularly about Local Branch experiences and wishes
   - Encouraging and supporting Local Branch structure, initiations, maintenance, and membership
   - Providing more Local Branch assistance to encourage consistency, viability, value, and connection to COA
   - Reconsidering/reshaping networking opportunities
   - Enhancing media presence by highlighting COA values and member experiences
   - Tracking opportunities available to members for participation in COA activities and numbers of members who volunteer to participate, and developing new opportunities if needed
   - Growing virtual networking events, e.g., lunches, happy hours, etc., recognizing time differences and what members value most
   - Encouraging mentorship efforts
   - Enlisting COA members in COA's advocacy efforts at local and federal levels
   - Offering one-on-one support as needed
   - Expanding leadership development programs in conjunction with the Foundation
   - Surveying membership about the Newsletter and revising if indicated
   - Offering Q&A sessions live and recorded, mindful of time differences

3. SERVE: COA will expand/reshape its programs to strengthen its value proposition for COA active duty and retired officers and ready reserve officers by:
   - Surveying members regularly regarding interests, needs, and hopes, as well as preferred venues for information/assistance
   - Reimagining the structure of Local Branches to better serve COA members
   - Offering members and partners regular virtual and written resources addressing vital/popular topics such as career development, handling multiple deployments, disability, retirement, second careers, etc.
   - Expanding leadership development programs in conjunction with the Foundation
   - Surveying membership about the Newsletter and revising if indicated
   - Offering Q&A sessions live and recorded, mindful of time differences

4. ADVOCATE: COA will strengthen and amplify its voice advocating for Public Health Service Commissioned Corps officers by:
   - Expanding resources for training members in advocacy (e.g., letter-writing, Capitol Hill, or local representative visits)
   - Simplifying lobbying/educating local and national representatives through provision of tools
   - Increasing outreach to members to encourage participation in advocacy
   - Highlighting inspiring case histories of activities, goals, and outcomes
   - Increasing involvement in The Military Coalition
PHS Commissioned Officers Foundation
Donations Received, November 1, 2021 to November 30, 2021

President’s Society ($5,000)
CAPT Susanne Caviness* in memory of her husband Edward Lee Bruns

Gold ($500)
CAPT Carol Baxter
CAPT Laurencia Liebmann
CAPT Hugh Mainzer
CAPT James Minor ^
RADM Sven Rodenbeck
RADM Richard Rubendall

Silver ($250)
CAPT Sammie Beam ^
CAPT Linda Brown

Bronze ($100)
CAPT William Beck
CAPT Gary Blache
Dr. Susan Blank
Mr. John DiMaggio
CAPT Janet Dumont
CDR Roger Hargrove
CDR Craig Kluger
CAPT Stephen Lieberman
CAPT Robert Lloyd
RADM William Maas ^
CAPT Carl Merrill
CAPT Diann Shaffer

Friends (Under $100)
CAPT Raymond Clark
CAPT Thomas DeCaro
CAPT Gary Lounsberry
CAPT Leo Stander
CAPT Elizabeth Whelan

All other donations were made to the COF General Fund

We Welcome New Members of COA, November 1-30, 2021

LT John Acido
LTJG Andrea Bankston
LT Olubukola Banmeke
LTJG Devon Barbieri
LT Grafton Burley
LT Rachel Cardi
LT Charles Cole
LCDR Raquel Coleman
LCDR Ronell Copeland
Mr. David Dahl
LT Kyle Fisher
LT Tessa Fletcher
LT Oluwaseun Foluke
LTJG Jonathan Harris
LTJG Naemah Jones
LT Maria Kennedy
LT Colby Kern
CAPT Martha Marquesen
LCDR Michelle Matthey
LTJG Birook Mekonnen
LT Paula Morgan
CDR Michelle Noonan
LCDR Jesse O’Shea
Mr. Marshall Peters
LT Jazmin Reed
LT Robert Rick
LT Michelle Scott
CDR La’Toya Spencer
LT Kiara Stoner
LT Tuan Tran
LT Gifty Tufour
CDR Sayeedha Uddin
LTJG Somtochukwu Ume-Ugwa
LCDR Martha Vera
Ms. Katelin Warner
LCDR Angelina Williams
LCDR Katie Wilson
LT Nasser Yazdani
LTJG Emily Ziniel

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- Measuring and reporting on activities and outcomes monthly through updates and social media, including hashtagging ongoing efforts
- Increasing media presence regarding advocacy efforts through outreach to media

I hope something on this list resonates with you and calls you to be involved in your membership organization. There are so many ways to be involved! Whether you have a little bit or a lot of time, there are opportunities for COA to meet you where you’re at. Consider a small, microvolunteering activity such as being a scholarship or grant reviewer, to something that might take a bit more time such as serving in a leadership role at your Local Branch or at the National level. There are so many things to do that can be done anytime, anywhere, and on your own terms. Be on the lookout in the next few months as we post openings and needs for the year 2022 and beyond. As always, thank you for your COA membership, and for all you do to protect the health of our nation.

My warmest thoughts and best wishes for the upcoming holidays, and for health and happiness to each of you in 2022.