COA Thanks Members of Congress

by CAPT Jacqueline Rychnovsky, USN (ret.)

On a gorgeous day in early November, COA's Executive Director, retired Captain Jacqueline Rychnovsky, traveled to Capitol Hill to thank the original sponsors of the legislation that led to the authorization and funding of the PHS Ready Reserve Corps. Without the support of four key policymakers this initiative would likely still be a pipedream. Presentation of these awards, first announced in June, was delayed due to the ongoing pandemic.

For background, Senator Mike Rounds (R-SD) and Senator Doug Jones (D-AL), in October of 2019, introduced S. 2629 “The United States Public Health Service Modernization Act of 2019” which proposed creation of the Ready Reserve Corps for the Commissioned Corps.

Several weeks later, a companion bill, H.R. 4870, was introduced by Rep. Michael Burgess (R-TX-26) and Rep. Anna Eshoo (D-CA-18). Six months later, on March 27, 2020, after many phone calls and in-person meetings by COA staff, this legislation was written into the CARES Act (H.R. 748) and became law.

COA selected these four elected officials to receive COA’s 2019 Congressional Public Health Leadership Award, usually bestowed upon one key elected official, for his commitment to improving public health by introduction of this legislation. COA offers a sharp salute to these four policymakers and thanks and congratulates everyone who worked tirelessly to see this legislation come to pass.

Local Branches Stay Connected

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from the Executive Director

Jacqueline Rychnovsky, PhD, RN, CPNP, FAANP
Captain (ret.), Nurse Corps, US Navy

Priorities for Transition Team

Every four or eight years, when a new President of the United States is elected, non-profit organizations have an opportunity to provide policy recommendations to the new administration’s transition team. This gives the non-profit an opportunity to introduce the organization, its mission, and to explain how they can assist the administration to be more successful in their quest to achieve the President-Elect’s priorities. It’s a narrow window of opportunity, and not everyone is successful in scheduling a meeting. I assure you that the Commissioned Officers Association (COA) has reached out to the transition team, and we will be relentless in our quest to have an audience with the new administration.

I want to take the opportunity to share snippets from the transition document COA constructed. We worked with many members to ensure it represents the needs and wants of our membership. These are the opinions of COA and do not reflect the opinion or recommendations of COA’s Executive Director. Please access these recommendations at www.coausphs.org.
COA Member Benefits

Capitol Hill Representation
Efforts on Capitol Hill continually support all Commissioned Corps officers – active duty 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 & COA

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 Program
College scholarships for children and spouses of COA members

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

Legislative Update
Two Huge Victories and a Smaller Win in 2020

by Judith Rensberger, MS, MPH

As COA prepares the legislative agenda for 2021, we also look back at legislative victories in 2020.

Strengthening the PHS Ready Reserve
The U.S. Congress approved language that would permit the USPHS Ready Reserve to function as intended; that is, to enable the Commissioned Corps to deploy in response to public health emergencies both domestic and foreign. The USPHS Ready Reserve had existed, at least on paper, since 2010. But the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services lacked the specific authority it said it needed to support the Corps with pay and benefits. Getting the language clarified, known as a technical fix, would seem to be a simple matter. But it never is. In this case, explaining the issue and winning support of congressional offices one by one took many months. It was possible thanks to the efforts of many, including the unwavering support of the Assistant Secretary for Health Admiral Brett Giroir and the dogged efforts over many months by John McElligott, COA’s then-Deputy Executive Director.

Saving PHS Officers’ Leave
While the Ready Reserve issue did not come as a surprise (COA had brought it up), the issue of expiring leave for PHS officers certainly did. Out of nowhere came the very bad news that USPHS officers, alone among uniformed personnel deployed to fight the coronavirus, stood to lose some of their earned leave. While the other uniformed services had been able to figure out how to get around whatever verbiage seemed to stand in the way, the PHS had not. That was because PHS expiring leave policy had been written into law, whereas the others had not. Time was short; fixing this was essential.

For assistance, COA partnered with two former appropriations staffers. In the world of lobbying, individuals with appropriations experience are highly prized. Bettilou Taylor, who spent 23 years working for the U.S. Senate, had served as staff director of the behemoth Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services. Judy Sherman, a former House appropriations staffer, now runs a coalition advocating on behalf of the Indian Health Service.

COA Executive Director Jacqueline Rychnovsky prepared a two-page issue brief and shared it widely on Capitol Hill. “All 6,100 PHS officers are on 100 percent deployment readiness status, which means their ability to take leave is extremely limited,” she wrote. “PHS officers will continue to deploy for as long as the COVID-19 pandemic continues. “But unless Title 42, Section 210-1 is changed or amended, PHS officers will lose much, if not most, of their accumulated leave.” Capitol Hill staffers and their bosses were interested and supportive. So much so that one legislative aide called Ms. Taylor at 11 p.m. on a Saturday night, asking for more information. After many meetings

see LEGISLATIVE continued on page 8
VA Update: Health Care Practice Across State Lines

by John McElligott, MPH, CPH

COA continues to provide you with content relevant to all veterans.

In accordance with the scope and requirements of their employment, health care professionals in the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) may practice across state lines. That is what the VA announced through an interim final rule.

Such a policy allows VA to shift personnel as needed and hire qualified candidates from any state. This regulation is particularly helpful to move staff during the coronavirus pandemic and shore up staffing at VA medical centers. Since the pandemic started, VA has deployed over 3,000 health care professionals to serve at civilian health facilities, Indian Health Service, state veterans homes, and other VA facilities in 47 states and DC.

VA Secretary Robert Wilkie said, “As the nation’s largest integrated health care system, it is critical VA health care professionals are able to deliver services in regions other than where they may be licensed, registered, certified or limited by a state requirement.”

You have a voice. The public may comment on the interim final rule before January 11, 2021. Visit www.regulations.gov and search for RIN 2900-AQ94.

AWARDS from page 1

The Ready Reserve Corps will offer a unique opportunity for officers to serve their local communities as well as their country in times of public health emergencies or in underserved areas. They will become part of the elite group of “America’s Health Responders” who protect, promote, and advance the health and safety of our Nation. Commissioned Corps Headquarters began receiving applications for the Ready Reserve Corps in October and will commission its first officers in 2021.
On May 25, 1961, President John F. Kennedy told a joint session of Congress that his administration was committed to “landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the Earth.” During that speech, Kennedy said that “…we possess all the resources and talents necessary […] but] we have never made the national decisions or marshaled the national resources required for such leadership.” Of course, that commitment was fulfilled eight years and two months later, on July 20, 1969. We remember that achievement as one of the high points of American history in the 20th Century and as a stirring example of this nation’s ingenuity, determination, and unity of purpose. Less well remembered is the early opposition to that goal, both in Congress, from members of both parties, and from most of the American public. Opponents objected to the cost of the project, at a time when there were other pressing concerns, and they feared that too much attention paid to the “moon shot” would distract from other priorities. To rally support for the space program, Kennedy gave another speech in September 1962 in which he linked the proposed moon landing to other feats of daring and courage, like Lindbergh’s solo crossing of the Atlantic and the conquest of Mt. Everest. He said, “[w]e choose to go to the moon…and do the[se] other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard…because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win.”

In 2021, America will face another challenge that we must accept, that we must be “unwilling to postpone,” that will require us as to “[make] the national decisions [and marshal] the national resources” necessary to achieve it, and that may well take the better part of the rest of the decade. We must completely restructure, rebuild, and reenergize the public health system in the United States, not just to prevent the catastrophic consequences of a future pandemic but to deal with the ongoing, chronic public health problems that have been laid bare by COVID-19.

It would be both reassuring and convenient to blame political interference for the deficiencies in the U.S. response to the pandemic. While that certainly added to the burdens of public health agencies and public health workers and hampered their work, we know from over 40 years of reports, investigations, reviews, and studies that the public health system in the United States has been suffering from underinvestment and lack of support for decades. Too often dismissed and ignored for years have been:

• the need for a larger public health workforce with support for ongoing training,
• the need to finally address health inequity and unequal access to services in a meaningful way with targeted performance measures,
• the need to reexamine legal authorities for public health action at the local, state, and Federal levels,
• the need for enhanced capacity for public health communication that is equal to the marketing expertise of Fortune 500 companies, and,
• the need for integration of public health information systems and response capacity, that, while allowing for the necessary adaptation to local needs in the implementation of public health strategies, ensures that people, wherever they may live in the United States, have available to them the resources and support they need to live a healthy life.

Our leaders should recognize and accept their responsibility to create a public health system that serves every person living in this country at the highest level of effectiveness, and which is driven by science. We can only hope that President-elect Biden will commit his administration to that goal, not because it is easy, but because it is hard, and because there is no higher priority for the United States.
There is a wealth of information available on the internet from and about the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). But what does FDA offer for health care practitioners, and how can healthcare practitioners stay current on all the FDA's many activities? Keep reading to learn how to tap into valuable resources.

Email Alerts. The first thing to do is sign up to get email alerts from FDA at this link: https://public.govdelivery.com/accounts/USFDA/subscriber/new?preferences=true#tab1. Your subscription service can be tailored to your interests. FDA disseminates information on food, drugs, biologics, cosmetics, dietary supplements, and tobacco. Other interesting specific topics healthcare practitioners may be interested include compounding, drug shortages, drug trial snapshots, drug information, drug safety labeling changes, clinical pharmacology, and recalls, as well as disease-specific information on diseases such as HIV/AIDS, diabetes, and hepatitis.

Social Media. FDA is on Twitter (@US_FDA), Instagram (@FDA), Facebook (www.facebook.com/FDA), and several other digital platforms. FDA has multiple Twitter accounts in addition to the main FDA account that allow different audiences to follow specific interests. For example, @FDADrug_Info specializes in the latest drug information. This account is well worth following. Other accounts of interest include the following:

- @FDAOncology - the Twitter account for FDA's Oncology Center of Excellence
- @FDAJobs - where you can learn about jobs at FDA

Other Twitter accounts with FDA-related content include:

- @SteveFDA – Twitter account of Dr. Stephen Hahn, the Commissioner of FDA
- @DrWoodcockFDA – Twitter account of long-time Center for Drugs director
- @DrAbernethyFDA – Twitter account of the Principal Deputy Commissioner and Acting CIO
- @FDAEnEspañol – FDA information in Spanish
- @FDACBER – information from the Center for Biologics Evaluation and Research
- @FDArecalls – notifications on FDA's recalls

Industry Blogs. Those who comment and report on FDA also have a web presence. Two blogs that are notable for their perspective on FDA matters are the Hyman, Phelps & McNamara PC's FDA Law Blog (http://www.fdalawblog.net/) and Lachman Consultants' The Lachman Blog (https://www.lachmanconsultants.com/blog). Both have a Twitter account, but I suggest you subscribe to their blogs to get the latest information.

Division of Drug Information. The Center for Drug Evaluation and Research's (CDER) Office of Communication has a division called the Division of Drug Information (DDI), which responds to public inquiries and provides timely, accurate, and useful information on human drug products (see their Twitter handle above and the following link: https://www.fda.gov/about-fda/division-of-drug-information). Of special interest to healthcare practitioners may be their continuing education offerings. DDI has many educational webinars on a wide variety of topics that offer FREE CE credits (https://www.fda.gov/about-fda/center-for-drug-evaluation-and-research-cder/division-drug-information-webinars). Topics include Labeling on Drugs@FDA vs. Daily Med, FDA's Postmarketing Drug Safety Surveillance Systems, Biosimilars, Drug Shortages, and many others. FDA's DDI can be reached via email (druginfo@fda.hhs.gov), or phone (855-543-3784).

Drugs@FDA. Another invaluable resource, as mentioned above, is an online service called Drugs@FDA (https://www.accessdata.fda.gov/scripts/cder/daf/). Drugs@FDA provides information about drugs and biologic products approved for human use in the United States that are regulated by CDER. Drugs@FDA does not include FDA-approved products regulated by the Center for Biologics Evaluation and Research (CBER), such as vaccines, allergenic extracts, and blood products. What is usually provided at Drugs@FDA is the most recently approved labeling and the approval letter that accompanies the labeling. What I find useful is that Drugs@FDA posts the approval package when the drug is first approved, although not all drugs have the approval package posted. Sometimes, FDA will post reviews of updated labeling after approval, but this
by RADM Brandon L. Taylor, PharmD, BCPS

We are in the throes of the most wonderful time of the year. Thanksgiving has come and gone as has Black Friday and Daylight Saving Time. Deciduous trees have lost their leaves in all their splendor, temperatures around the country have finally dropped, and many are busily online shopping for loved ones. Scanning social media, it doesn’t take long to find one of many tree ornament advertisements featuring 2020, the year of the COVID-19 pandemic and all its sequelae. From a rosy-cheeked, mask-donned Santa Claus to a burning dumpster fire displaying “2020.” Perhaps these various depictions of the year point to the diverse views of the pandemic and its impact our lives and society. It’s certainly brought global health and public health into the light.

Certainly 2020 has not been what we initially thought it would be. Many of us started the year with big plans, like weddings, promotion and retirement ceremonies, birthday celebrations, family reunions, vacations, graduations, and just simply going to dinner with friends or colleagues. Most, if not all, of these plans were derailed or converted to a virtual event. Worse yet, many of us have lost loved ones due to the virus.

Has anything good come from the pandemic? Have we taken this opportunity to grow at all? I offer an invitation: During this season of rejoicing, giving, and virtual caroling and Zoom parties, please take a moment to reflect on your year focusing on what went well, what you learned about yourself, and how have you grown (not around the midsection).

As a public health expert, are you impressed with the science behind the identification of a novel virus, its genetic sequencing, development of diagnostic testing and each evolution, and development of a vaccine within 12 months? Are you grateful for the outpouring of praise, support, and concern from citizens from all walks of life for the heroes on the frontlines working around the clock treating patients with minimal time away? Perhaps you’re one of those healthcare heroes and are grateful for employment when so many individuals have lost their jobs. Have you been able to spend a little more time with family because you are working from home? Perhaps you gained a greater insight into race relations and worked on diminishing your own prejudices? Perhaps you took the opportunity to exercise more and focus on your health with the additional time. Perhaps you developed a new skill or learned a new hobby. Maybe you reconnected with friends or colleagues via video chats or social media. Perhaps you benefited from telehealth to maintain readiness or work through any health concerns. Did you finally catch up on that favorite streaming television series? And perhaps you enjoyed sleeping in a little longer because your commute is 20 steps from the bedroom to your office.

Despite the challenges, strains, setbacks, disappointments and losses of the year, there is much for which to be grateful and received blessings to consider that might not have come any other way. I invite you to identify them. They are there.

On behalf of the COA Board of Directors, I wish each of you a very merry holiday season filled with health, joy, reflection, and gratitude.

Fair winds.
Local Branches Stay Connected and Engaged

by CAPT Karen Munoz, RN, BSN, MS

Local branches are an important mechanism through which COA members find camaraderie, engage in community service events, and find important social and networking connections. They have become like the glue that binds officers from different professional categories, and officers who may not work at the same duty station but reside in a common geographical area. COA has branches throughout the United States, overseas, and in the Caribbean. Here are examples of how COA local branches are finding creative ways to stay connected and engaged, making a difference in members’ lives. We know there are many more events than we have listed here, and we salute all the local branches for their efforts to stay active and involved throughout this challenging time.

New England COA Hosts Virtual Army 10-Miler

New England COA is filled with officers who are committed to the Commissioned Corps and to fitness. In the beginning of 2020, several officers completed a winter fitness challenge, with plans to have monthly fitness events. Despite officers being deployed multiple times for COVID-19 responses and home lives turned upside down, COA members continued to find creative ways to stay fit and come together as a socially distanced team. They overcame sore and blistered feet from the virtual 26.2 Tough Ruck march in September and trained for a virtual Army 10-miler. On October 17, many officers and civilians came together at different locations in variable weather conditions. Some officers were seasoned runners, others had never run more than a 5K. There were no cheering crowds, no aid stations with water, and no bright balloons and loud music at the finish line. But they did have each other. Officers shared their struggles and post-run triumphs via text and pictures of times and courses. They encouraged one another and made sure no one was left behind. In the end, everyone who signed up completed the 10-mile run. As New England COA welcomes another northeast winter, we look forward to staying fit throughout the pandemic.

Heart of America COA Initiates A Book Club

To foster connection among members, LCDR Gretchen Trendel started a book club. LCDR Michelle Barbosa, LT Alesya Van Meter, LT Torrey Ward, CAPT Lisa Gilliam, LT Catherine Olguin and LCDR Jennifer Carver meet via Zoom every two weeks, alternating discussion leaders to encourage interaction and participation. The book club is currently reading *The Happiness Advantage* by Shawn Achor. It reviews the concepts of positive psychology and how to apply them at home and work for a more fulfilling and successful career and life.

Here are some tips from *The Happiness Advantage*:

- Happiness is the precursor to success, not merely the result.
- Happiness and optimism fuel performance and achievement.

- Our interpretation of reality changes our experience of that reality.

Heart of America COA presents Military Etiquette and Courtesies

At the October meeting of the Heart of America COA Branch, LT Joseph Hill educated 14 officers from throughout different agencies and disciplines on military etiquette and courtesies. LT Hill has a wealth of knowledge of the U.S. uniformed services. His father served 21 years enlisted in the Army and LT Hill served 14 years in the Navy, followed by 3 years in the Navy Reserve, and 7 years to date in the USPHS.

Heart of America COA Receives Resilience Training

With a lot of stressors in our local communities, the Heart of America COA reached out to a Federal resource in our region to provide resiliency training. On September 29, “Resiliency & Self Care” was presented by Kimberly Nelson, LAC, MPA, Region 7 Regional Administrator for Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA). The fundamentals for adequate social relations are challenged with distancing mandates. Ms. see CONNECTED on page 8
Suicide Prevention at their annual “Out of the Darkness Drive Through Event.” The event was coordinated by CDR Crystal Andrews, who needed to deploy and was unable to attend. Special thanks to LCDR Steven Herrera and the staff at STIPC that donated $550 through Operation Sausage Wrap!

LCDR Herrera also coordinated a volunteer day for the Frio County Food Bank in Pearsall on September 24. South Texas COA members, working alongside local soldiers of the US Army, assisted with food distribution at a drive-up location. Attendees included LT Steven Trevino, CDR Suzie Garza, LT Patrick Kelly, CAPT Misty Rios, LCDR Steven Herrera, LCDR Sylenia Jones, and LCDR Danhe Cui.

Golden Gate COA

Golden Gate COA in the San Francisco area has held several virtual happy hours, athletic events, and two seminars to keep members engaged. One seminar focused on deployment and readiness, and another was a financial seminar. Golden Gate COA members volunteered twice at local food banks, including a $500 donation, and volunteered three times at a local medical supply NGO. Members have also been busy sharing the Surgeon Generals 3 W's campaign!

Evergreen COA, Seattle, WA

The Evergreen branch led a virtual PHS Athletics event on National Public Lands Day (September 25). Members have been hosting monthly virtual happy hour events, with topics ranging from deployment experiences to Veterans Day shopping deals. Winter plans include hosting a virtual sport event on skiing, snowboarding, and snowshoeing activities.

District of Columbia COA

DCCOA has held numerous virtual events to keep their members connected and engaged. In October, DCCOA hosted a “Writing for Impact” workshop to assist officers with improving their COER submissions for promotion. From a fall foliage hike to a scavenger hunt, they have created opportunities for leadership and active participation among the members of this large branch. During the scavenger hunt, families were asked to take a morning hike or walk, and find things such as a red leaf, green leaf, and orange leaf, pine needles, a pine cone, a smooth rock, and other items one would find in nature. Then, in the afternoon they met via Zoom to share their findings and win prizes. DCCOA will host the “Jingle All the Way: 5K, 10K, 1K, Your Way”, where participants can walk or run wherever they choose in a 24-hour time frame.

Nelson favors the term “physical distancing” in lieu of social distancing. This simple swap has encouraged awareness to maintain safe social connections with family and friends through digital means or mailing a handwritten letter. Maintaining social connectivity with regular patterns of communication has direct impacts on community morale, mental health, job satisfaction and overall wellbeing. Ms. Nelson reminds us there are several creative pathways for sustaining self-care activities, providing the ability to care for others. Heart of America COA will leverage this training to shape quality relationships and build resiliency during hardships.

Greater Texas COA

The Greater Texas COA held a North Texas Turkey Trot on Saturday, November 21, 2020. USPHS officers, their families, and friends from the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex took a moment to reflect on the challenges of the year and acknowledge that which they are thankful for as we enter into the holiday season. Hosted as a virtual 1 mile or 5k run/walk, the event also welcomed participants from other areas such as Annapolis, MD; Red Meza, AZ; San Antonio, TX; and Shiprock, NM. Channeling gratefulness through fellowship, fun, & fitness was a humbling experience while enjoying the beauty of nature. The event was organized by LT Candice Johnson and LTJG Stephanie Severns.

Greater Los Angeles COA

The Greater LA COA is collaborating with PACE to promote the OASH “I Am Ready” Campaign in English and Spanish during December, the month of World AID’s Day. Branch President and PACE Representative, LCDR Jose Ortiz will be presenting “Ending the HIV Epidemic” town halls in both languages and has been invited to take part in a Latinx commercial to promote HIV prevention. He was also been invited to a Latinx show with Las Promotoras de Salud, titled “Hablando entre nos” to talk about HIV prevention and ending the HIV epidemic initiative in support of the Latinx population.

Chicago COA

Chicago COA gathered virtually for a Veterans Day 5K fitness event. Officers from across the state of Illinois joined to celebrate all of those who have served our country, to promote fitness, and to support each other from afar. They were joined by friends, family, and neighbors.

South Texas COA

In November, CDR Kimberly Spady-Grove and LT Patrick Kelly supported San Antonio’s Chapter of the American Foundation for organizations in The Military Coalition. It failed, but the Trump Administration relaxed the restrictions a bit by expanding J-1 exemptions for COVID-19 health care workers, researchers, and special needs children. To what extent that helped PHS families is unclear.

Looking Ahead to 2021

COA is reducing our Legislative Affairs Committee to 20 members and working diligently to create the 2021 legislative agenda. If you have ideas, then please send them to Judy Ransberger, available at jrensberger@coausphs.org. All suggestions will go to retired Captain Lisa Tonrey, a pharmacist and COA Board member.
Our transition document begins by letting the transition team know that COA looks forward to working with them to inform vital changes to protect and enhance the public health and safety of the United States. The document provides background on the Commissioned Corps of the U.S. Public Health Service and the Commissioned Officers Association and provides COA’s policy recommendations to the incoming administration on how we feel Commissioned Corps officers can help achieve the President-Elect’s priorities. The document informs the team that COA is well positioned to assist in advancing President-elect Biden’s priorities but we know this cannot be accomplished without several things; funding, additional training, and restructuring is needed to be maximally successful.

By prioritizing efforts focused on 1) emergency preparedness and response; 2) health services for underserved populations to achieve health equity; and 3) support for national and state public health infrastructure, we say that the Corps will be at the ready to address the administration’s priorities related to COVID-19, economic recovery, racial equity, and climate change. Throughout the document we stress that funding and structural changes are essential to meet these goals.

Funding

The document informs the incoming administration on how the Commissioned Corps Headquarters (CCHQ) is funded through the “Service and Supply Fund,” an internal HHS fee paid by each HHS OpDiv/Staff Div and outside agencies that utilize Corps officers. We explain that since this funding “follows” the number of officers, this amount is insufficient to maintain the readiness of the Commissioned Corps for public health emergencies and to stand up the Ready Reserve. We stress that additional funding will be necessary for support personnel at CCHQ to maintain personnel readiness, medical affairs, accession and retirement, assignments, transfers, promotions, and separations to be maximally successful. We recommend that HHS request a dedicated budget line to replace the Service and Supply Fund. We inform that COA also opposes any budget proposal to shift Commissioned Corps retirement pay and survivors’ benefits costs from the current mandatory indefinite structure to a discretionary structure or one that charges agencies their share of these costs.

Training and Advancement

Due to insufficient funding, we inform the team that many Corps officers have not had any regular, formal training outside of their Officer
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Open Mic Night Lifts Moods

by CAPT Karen Munoz, RN, BSN, MS and LT Rachel Forche

On the evening of October 15, a group of Regular Corps and retired officers from around the country gathered online for an Open Mic night via Zoom. Organized by CAPT Karen Munoz and LT Monica Geiger, the theme was “Pandemic Poetry and Prose.”

Fourteen officers volunteered to be performers, and a few dozen spectators joined the meeting as a virtual “audience.” The goal of the event was to help bring officers together for a fun evening in order to de-compress and to lift the spirits of so many of us who have been physically separated for so many months. There was a selection of music, poetry, readings, and even comedy.

CDR Michael Ahmadi kicked off the night with an exciting rendition of the National Anthem on the Electric Guitar, in the style of Jimmy Hendrix. CAPT Andy Hunt performed the classic ballad, “Will the Circle be Unbroken.” CDR Alfredo Sancho recited two original poems, one titled, Bloodless Death - a dark poem inspired by this challenging year. CDR Kyle Sheffer, a multitalented musician and vocalist, sang an original revision of the Beatle’s tune, “Yesterday.” His parody was spot on - referencing the wearing of masks, Zoom calls, forthcoming vaccines, and how we all long for yesterday. A verse in his song reflects the way we probably all feel: “Yesterday. . . Back when friends just came around to play; Now it’s getting old I’d have to say, Oh I believe in yesterday.”

CDR Patricia Corbin shared an original poem about wearing masks, complete with signs that her daughter held up as she performed. CDR Matthew Newland pre-recorded a performance of “Wish You Were Here” by Pink Floyd. CDR Todd Johnson performed “It’s So Hard to Say Goodbye to Yesterday” by Boyz II Men in the great acoustics of his bathroom. He was followed by PHS retiree, LCDR Phil Lafleur, who reflected upon the good things that have occurred during the pandemic. CAPT Karen Munoz then shared a poem she wrote while on deployment, illustrating the challenges of working with COVID patients after not having done floor nursing for many years. LT Monica Geiger performed a comedy skit about the “Impotence (sp) of Proofreading!” Although spectators were muted, you could see everyone laughing and smiling on the screen. It was truly hilarious!

LCDR David Shih, a talented tenor, performed “Oh What a Beautiful Morning” from the musical Oklahoma! CDR Ed Zechmann performed “Idaho”, as he sang and played the piano, followed by CDR Qiona Coffee performing an original poem called “Water to My Fire,” describing a woman’s passion to move forward through life’s circumstances and frustrations. CAPT Andy Hunt then performed an encore of John Lennon’s “Imagine”, and CDR Kyle Sheffer performed a swing standard on his saxophone. The Zoom line remained open with officers chatting for quite a while, providing much needed fellowship during this time of physical distancing. CDR Cynthia Chennault, LT Monica Geiger, and LT Rachel Forche served as emcees, together with CAPT Karen Munoz.

Officers and their families nationwide loved taking part in this unique opportunity to come together for a morale-boosting, stress-free evening of music and theatrical performances. The performers additionally enjoyed utilizing this innovative platform through which they could share their creative talents with their colleagues and friends. This event truly embodied the phrase “esprit-de-corps,” and for a couple hours. Officers felt as though they were in the same room as their colleagues, despite being thousands of miles apart. The evening was such a success that there have been multiple requests to have another Open Mic Night again in the near future. Look out for “Open Mic Night – Holiday Edition” – coming to your computers soon!
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Application deadline: March 2
Learn more: go.osu.edu/usphs_hcli
Lawrence Interdenominational Nutrition Kitchen (LINK) is an organization in Lawrence, Kansas aiming to share nutritious, home-cooked meals free of charge to those in need. The Heart of America (HOA) COA joined forces with the local organization to host a meal for the community. Coordination of the event involved managing monetary donations received from USPHS officers and Haskell Indian Health Center employees in support of the event, designing a food menu, purchasing supplies, and preparing the meals. The team drafted a menu consisting of three different meal choices, including one vegetarian option. Twelve volunteers came together during two separate meal preparation sessions and an assembly-line set-up was utilized to streamline putting the meals together. When all was said and done, the HOA COA prepared over 100 nutritious meals to be donated to the LINK organization. Normally, the volunteer groups take part in serving and distributing the meals, and even get to visit with patrons while enjoying their meal together. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19 restrictions, the COA volunteers were only allowed to drop the meals off for distribution by the LINK staff. The Heart of America COA volunteers were grateful for the opportunity to help the community.
is not always the case. That said, it can be interesting to peruse the approval package and read the various reviews (medical, pharmacology, chemistry, etc.) that supported the approval decision.

FDA Advisory Committees. If you are interested in FDA’s thinking prior to a certain regulatory decision, you may be able to get information from an Advisory Committee meeting. FDA usually convenes an Advisory Committee meeting to discuss novel or high-profile issues. An Advisory Committee allows FDA to obtain input from outside experts. Sometimes, healthcare providers may hear from drug companies which applied to FDA for review; however, you won’t generally hear directly from FDA about its current thinking on the application prior to a regulatory decision. However, if FDA holds an Advisory Committee meeting on an application, you will hear FDA’s perspective on the drug application prior to a regulatory decision (whether approval or non-approval). To find out more, go to the Advisory Committee website: https://www.fda.gov/advisory-committees. During the pandemic, the public Advisory Committee meetings can be viewed online in real time so you can watch the deliberations on a drug prior to FDA’s regulatory decision. Further, if you are interested in a particular topic and you want to share your expertise with the Agency, you can sign up to speak at an upcoming public meeting.

Orange Book. I would be remiss if I did not mention FDA’s Orange Book (short for Approved Drug Products with Therapeutic Equivalence Evaluations). In this publication, FDA identifies products that were approved for safety and effectiveness and provides patent and exclusivity information as well. The Orange Book can be found online (https://www.fda.gov/drugs/drug-approved-drug-products-therapeutic-equivalence-evaluations-orange-book), is a searchable database (https://www.accessdata.fda.gov/scripts/cder/ob/index.cfm), and is available as an app in Apple’s App Store or in Google Play. You can search the Orange Book and find out if a therapeutic equivalent has been approved. Note that just because there is an approved therapeutic equivalent does not mean it is being marketed. The Orange Book provides good information on products that are being actively marketed versus those that are discontinued but the market shifts rapidly. Also, the Orange Book is not a repository of all drugs ever approved by FDA.

Contact Me: There are many other resources available on FDA’s website and digital platforms as well as information about FDA from sources outside of FDA. If you have questions, I can be reached at mdjonesrx@gmail.com or find me on LinkedIn (https://www.linkedin.com/in/mdjones-13/). From time to time, I post FDA-related content there.
COA at National Veterans Day Observance

by CAPT Jacqueline Rychnovsky, USN (ret.)

The 67th National Veterans Day Observance, which featured a wreath laying at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier by President Donald J. Trump, took place on November 11, 2020 at Arlington National Cemetery. Representing the Commissioned Officers Association, and all USPHS Commissioned Corps officers, was RADM Brandon Taylor, COA’s Chairman of the Board of Directors. Also attending the event were Vice President Mike Pence, Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Robert Wilkie, and HHS Secretary Alex Azar, II.

Before the ceremony, President Trump issued a proclamation for Veterans Day 2020, saying “Our veterans represent the best of America, and they deserve the best America can provide them…. Our precious liberty has survived and thrived because of generations of brave Americans — from every background and walk of life — who have answered the call to support and defend the United States. The gravity of their contribution is immeasurable and so is our debt to every single one of our Nation’s veterans.”

After the event, RADM Taylor remarked, “It was a beautiful yet somber ceremony which gave the attendees time to reflect on those who have served this country in uniform.” He went on to say that he heard no complaints about the weather, “The rain felt fitting for the solemn nature of the event. I am deeply honored to have represented the Commissioned Corps of the USPHS at this observance.”

The ceremony was a closed, invitation only event. As one of 25 members of the Veterans Day Planning Committee (VDPC), COA was invited to send a representative of the Commissioned Corps. Additionally, COA’s Executive Director CAPT (ret.) Jacqueline Rychnovsky, served on a VDPC subcommittee to update the Veterans Teachers Guide. She ensured language was modified to teach students about Veterans in all eight uniformed services. The Teachers Resource Guide can be viewed at https://www.va.gov/opa/vetsday/docs/2020-Veterans-Day-Teachers-Guide.pdf.

Currently, Arlington Cemetery is open to the public, though the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and the Memorial Amphitheater remain off limits due to COVID-19 restrictions.
Veterans Clean the Anacostia River

by LCDR Jen Eng, RDH, BSDH, and LCDR Cynthia Chennault, RDH, BSDH, MPH

On October 17, three USPHS officers volunteered with The Mission Continues in Washington, DC, to assist Anacostia Riverkeeper in their annual waste removal. Anacostia Riverkeeper is a nonprofit organization that works to protect and restore the Anacostia River and create opportunities for the community to connect to the river. The Mission Continues is a national nonprofit organization that connects military veterans with new missions in under-resourced communities.

A total of 31 volunteers picked up over 800lbs of trash in the community. The debris was segregated into different categories for disposition, including paper, plastic waste, food wrap/restaurant take out containers, glass bottles, and personal protective equipment. Even a DC city scooter and bicycle were recovered! The goal is to beautify, improve recreation and community spaces for all to enjoy safely. This simple task will make Anacostia cleaner and safer for those who live in the area.

Sound Off on Lost Leave

Several members agreed to sharing their statements about COA efforts to include the USPHS Commissioned Corps in congressional language which protects their unused leave officers could not expend due to COVID-19 activity. Here are two examples.

Good morning CAPT (Dr.) Rychnovsky,

I would like to personally thank you, your team, and the BOD for your leadership to decrease the angst regarding lost leave (an earned benefit) for fellow officers. This is one of the many reasons I’m a Life Member of COA. I understand the importance of being a paid member of COA, and the benefits.

James LaVelle Dickens, DNP, APRN, FNP-BC, FAANP, FAAN
Captain, USPHS

Jacque,

I want to extend my deep gratitude to you and your incredible COA staff for the work you did on behalf of all the officers to restore our leave!!! You are amazing. I don’t even know if the President signed the bill, but you made it really far and I can see that since you took the reins you are fighting like mad to support our officers. Thank you for all you are doing to support us and fight for us while we continue to battle this pandemic. We are extremely fortunate to have you at the helm!

Sara B. Newman, DrPH, MCP
Captain, USPHS
Retired CAPT Bruce R. Chelikowsky, USPHS
1941-2020

Retired CAPT Bruce R. Chelikowsky passed away on November 10th in Rockville, Maryland. He served over three decades in the U.S. Public Health Service, mainly with the Indian Health Service (IHS).

Born in New York and raised in Ohio, CAPT Chelikowsky went to St. Charles Preparatory School in Columbus, Ohio, received his bachelor’s degree from Xavier University, and earned his Master of Public Health degree from Tulane University’s School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine.

After serving as Peace Corps Volunteer in Sarawak, Malaysia, he joined the U.S. Agency for International Development in Thailand before going back to Malaysia to train three Peace Corps health groups. Returning to the U.S., CAPT Chelikowsky was commissioned in the U.S. Public Health Service and his career with the IHS stretched from Crown Point, New Mexico to Portland and to the Headquarters in Maryland. In 1978, he was detailed to the University of Hawaii and assigned to the Ministry of Health in Indonesia.

Upon completion of the Indonesian project, CAPT Chelikowsky reported to the IHS Headquarters in Maryland. From 1980 to his retirement in 2007, he held these positions:

Emergency Preparedness Coordinator; Chief, Environmental Management Branch; Deputy Director and Acting Director, Office of Environmental Health and Engineering. From 1989 to 1994, he was appointed by U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop as Chief Professional Officer for the Sanitarian Category. In 1998, he was detailed half time to the Office of the Surgeon General. He also represented the IHS in Self Governance, Healthy People, and International Health.

CAPT Chelikowsky served many years on the Sanitarian Professional Advisory Committee, the Commissioned Officers Association’s (COA) Board of Directors, the Commissioned Officers Foundation’s (COF) Board of Trustees; the National Environmental Health Association’s (NEHA), Board of Directors and Regional Vice-President; the NSF National Council of Public Health Consultants; and the American Academy of Sanitarians (AAS).

During his retirement, CAPT Chelikowsky became a public health consultant and worked with the IHS Office of Environmental Health and Engineering. He was also a COF co-principal investigator of a health project in China.

CAPT Chelikowsky received numerous awards including the Surgeon General’s Exemplary Service Medal; NEHA’s Walter S. Mangold Award; and AAS’s Davis Calvin Wagner Award.

CAPT Chelikowsky is survived by his spouse, Ti; his son and daughter-in-law, Adam and Alexandra; grandchildren, Isabela and Nicolas; his six siblings and their spouses.

A celebration of his life will be held at a later date when gathering is safe.

In lieu of flowers, please consider donating to the COF Annual Fund – In memory of Bruce Chelikowsky. You can do so online at https://phscof.org/donate.html or by mail: PHS/COF, P.O. Box 189, Cheltenham, MD 20623-0189.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR from page 9
Basic Course for many years. The document recommends prioritizing funding to develop and institute leadership training opportunities for officers at the junior, mid-grade and senior level.

Structure and Services
The document points out that the law is not being followed and hasn’t been for several decades. We stress our hope that the administration will follow 42 U.S. Code 205 and resume the practice of appointing the U.S. Surgeon General from the ranks of the USPHS Commissioned Corps. We recommend that to elevate the Corps to a Secretary-level national biodefense asset, the Surgeon General should be a direct report to the Secretary of DHHS; that the active duty Corps be increased to 10,000 to meet the public health needs of HHS; that a USPHS physician be named to head the White House medical team; and USPHS nurses and nurse practitioners be considered for White House service.

We further ask that the Surgeon General (or a PHS officer designated by the Surgeon General) be added to a role in the next iteration of the Directorate of Global Health Security and Biodefense at the National Security Council. Lastly, we request that Corps officers be provided with a legal defense for Equal Opportunity and disability issues like what is available within the Department of Defense.

In closing, we let them know that COA stands ready to collaborate with the administration, the Surgeon General, and the Assistant Secretary for Health to amplify the administration’s priorities and support the Commissioned Corps. COA looks forward to being of service to them, and most importantly to you, our members. I will keep you apprised. There are other priorities not listed in this column. Please drop me a line at jrychnovsky@coausphs.org and let me know what’s important to you.
Recent Retirees: Stay Involved

COA congratulates the following USPHS Commissioned Corps officers who retired between July 1-September 1, 2020. We wish you success and happiness in this next stage of your life! Your leadership, mentorship and involvement in COA is now more important than ever. If you are a COA member, don’t forget to update your profile to indicate your personal email and home address. If you’re not a member and want to stay connected to the PHS Commissioned Corps to mentor junior officers, advocate for the Corps, join a committee or serve on the Board of Directors, please consider joining now.

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*current COA member
**current at retirement but now lapsed (need updated personal email address)
Mishoe Believe Scholarship - PHSCOF

The RADM Helena O. Mishoe Diversity “Believe” Scholarship for high school seniors was established to encourage and help to support the career dreams of high school seniors from populations burdened by health disparities and that have been shown to be underrepresented in the health sciences and research, or health-related disciplines.

Only online submissions will be considered. The deadline will be February 28 at 11:59 p.m. Eastern. No late submissions will be accepted. A review committee composed of donors and COA members will select the top three applicants. The first-place winner will receive $500. The second and third place winners will receive a certificate. We anticipate announcing the winner by the end of April. For more information or if you would like to volunteer to review applicants, please use the following link:

https://www.phscof.org/mishoe-believe-scholarship.html
Why We Should Have Joy

by LCDR Katrina Redman, MT(ASCP), SPOC(AACC), Chaplain (BGCT)

I realize that some of us may not feel very joyful this year. It is both understandable and okay to have mixed feelings about the holidays. Things will be different for all of us, and for so many around the world it will be a time of great sorrow as they miss the presence of their loved ones. You may not want to read an article about joy, but I would like to share why this is the perfect word for us right now.

I have done some research into the many celebrations that occur in December. Please forgive me if I miss a group. Followers of Santería celebrate the Feast of Changó on December 4. It is one of the most important days of the year with offerings, drumming, and dancing. December 8 is recognized by Buddhists as the day the Buddha achieved enlightenment under the Bodhi (fig) tree. Many Buddhist celebrate Christmas by decorating trees with multi-colored lights representing the different paths to enlightenment, and recognize Jesus as a bodhisattva, a blessing to the earth. The Jewish holiday of Hanukkah begins on the evening of December 10 this year and runs through December 18. Hanukkah celebrates the rededication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, and it is often called the festival of lights because of the lighting of the menorah (a candelabra that holds 9 candles). It is a time of remembrance of a great victory and a miraculous event of the lighting of the menorah, special prayers, giving gifts, and fried foods. December 21 is the winter solstice, and marks the beginning of Yule, a time of dancing, feast, and family ending on December 31. There are two holidays on December 25. One is Christmas, the Christian holiday celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ who represents God’s presence on earth with mankind and the coming restoration of God’s relationship to man. It is celebrated with evergreen trees, lights, the exchange of gifts, and goodwill to others. The other holiday on this day is the Fast of Tevet. This is a Jewish holiday commemorating the destruction of the Temple in 425 BC. December 26 marks the beginning of Kwanzaa which extends for seven days to January 1. Kwanzaa is a time of gathering, praising, and rejoicing in the African American and Pan-African communities to commemorate the past, recommit to cultural ideals, and celebrate the good.

It is evident that December is a time of celebration for many of us. It is true that many times the commercial emphasis takes over, and we lose sight of the true meaning of our celebration. This is the point of the popular movie “The Grinch Who Stole Christmas.” Remember in the end when the Grinch realized that Christmas was more than just the holiday symbols? He discovered that joy was present even without all the bells and whistles. The same is true for us this year. You see, there is a difference between happiness and joy. Happiness is an emotion ranging from feelings of contentment and satisfaction to bliss and intense pleasure. Joy, however, is a much stronger feeling. Joy occurs when we achieve selflessness to the point of personal sacrifice. In the book Spiritual Leadership Today, Mel Lawrenz affirms that joy does not mean enjoyment. Joy comes from a deep inner conviction that doing the thing you do is right in God’s eyes, is the right fit for your abilities, and is worthwhile even if it takes a long time to accumulate accomplishments. Joy, he writes, means being “able to meet trials head-on because it gives hope in the face of the trials.”

Have we had trials this year? Yes. Do we believe that we as PHS officers are doing what is right, fit for our abilities, and worthwhile even though we may not immediately see the benefit of what we are doing? Absolutely! Have we met these trials head-on because we have hope that we are making a difference? We most definitely have. Joy is here, no matter what our circumstances are.

In the Bible, the angel announced the birth of Christ by saying, “Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people” (Luke 2:10, KJV). My prayer for you all is that you will have great joy during this season.
This is part two of a two-part series. Part one was published in the November issue of Frontline.

On October 22, 2020, RADM (retired) Steven Solomon, President of the PHS Commissioned Officers Foundation for the Advancement of Public Health, and I sat down for a video interview with Captain (retired) Harvey Alter, 2020 winner of the Nobel Prize for Medicine or Physiology for his contributions to the discovery of the hepatitis C virus.

Jacqueline Rychnovsky: Dr. Alter, you’ve mentioned that you had some aspirations and spent some time in clinical practice, but ultimately have ended up being a scientist. Historically, Americans trust the scientific community. In Pew’s 2018 General Social Survey, public confidence in the scientific community stands out as one of the most stable as any institution from the mid-seventies. Is that what you would have guessed, starting out as an early scientist, and then seeing where science has evolved and currently is viewed within the public right now?

Harvey Alter: I think so. In my growing up days, physicians were highly respected, I think, not so much anymore, or not as much, anyway, I think scientists have, until recent time, been able to stay apolitical. I see around here, everybody is just interested in what they’re doing. They work hard, very collegial. It’s high level, I haven’t found it to be competitive. And so, I think trust in science is well founded. There are people who cheat the system, and that happens occasionally, but really, review of your protocols beforehand with all the protections for patients nowadays, with the peer review of journals, science is to be trusted. And it’s a shame that it’s being denigrated now for political reasons.

Steve Solomon: Dr. Alter, I saw in your biography that you’re a native New Yorker. I grew up in the South Bronx. Where in New York did you hail from?

Harvey Alter: Yeah, I was in Ridgewood, Queens, just across the street from Brooklyn, near Bushwick.

Steve Solomon: Right. Right.

Harvey Alter: And I was an avid Brooklyn Dodgers fan and grew up in the streets playing ball everywhere. And yeah, there was no aspirations to be a scientist or a Nobelist. I wanted to be a baseball player. That was my biggest dream.

Steve Solomon: We all did, in those days. Growing up there, my upbringing was a little bit insular, I think. It was only until once I got to medical school and got out into residency that I saw a bit of the wider world. And you went to Rochester, you went to Seattle, you went to Washington ... a city that, as I recall, John Kennedy once typified as a town with Southern efficiency and Northern charm. But did you find it an adjustment leaving New York and going to so many different places for your training and experience?

Harvey Alter: No. No, I didn’t. Actually, compared to most people in medicine, I think I’ve been to fairly few places. But once I left for undergrad school in Rochester, that pretty much ended my days in New York City except to come home to visit parents. I spent nine years in Rochester and loved it there, except the winters were very difficult. And then I came to Washington. I’ve been there ever since. I had the one year in Seattle too, which was a great year. So, I’ve always been kind of happy wherever I was.

I would have trouble going back to the cold weather now, so Washington’s a nice combo of sophistication, sort of, and good weather.

Jacqueline Rychnovsky: Well, the million-dollar question is, “So what’s next? This is a life achievement and one that so few have ever experienced, so what’s next for you, Dr. Alter?”

Harvey Alter: I think I’ll be responding to emails for the rest of my life (laughs). This is a secondary burden of winning a prize. I still have about 1100 that I’m behind, but I’m trying to answer them. Actually, coincident with the award was my first day back to NIH. I’ve been emeritus status for the last several years. I had been coming in twice a week until COVID. I started to come back even with COVID, but now I’m officially back on a one-year appointment.

We’re continuing to work with hepatitis C, with the blood bank, where I’m trying to develop multi-pathogen chip technology, looking at a relationship between hepatitis C and B-cell lymphomas. There seems to be a link there. Doing operational work with COVID, but I’m not
Not all heroes wear capes.

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very involved with COVID. So that’s all, and I have so many things to write up that I keep putting off, so I hope to get some of that written this year. But after that, I think I’m just going to be retired, really retired.

Jacqueline Rychnovsky: It’s been an honor to speak with you. I have to say, if you have truly that many unanswered emails, you are always very quick to respond, and incredibly gracious. And just knowing that you sat for this interview with us, to inspire ... especially the junior officers in the Corps right now ... it really means a lot. It means a lot to me, and I know it’s going to mean a lot to our members. So, thank you so much.

Steve Solomon: Just very, very grateful to you, Dr. Alter, for your work, for what you’ve contributed to science, for helping the world, sir. And the recognition obviously is very deserved, and it just makes us, again, as busy as you are, so grateful to you for spending this time with us and helping us get the message out that every one of our young officers has an opportunity to make a contribution. It’s going to keep them going in what’s going to be, perhaps, some tough times over the next couple of years.

Harvey Alter: Well, thank you. And I say I owe a lot to the Commissioned Corps: it gave me my start and supported my research, and I’m very, very grateful for that.

I would encourage people to do clinical or basic research, to stay. It’s a very, very rewarding career. It’s rewarding without prizes. It really is rewarding, and I wish you success.

On behalf of each of the attorneys and staff of the Law Offices of David P. Sheldon, PLLC

Celebrating the holidays means something different to each of us and we wish to recognize the sacrifices of you and yours during the holiday season. Thank you to each and every member of the United States Public Health Service.

Your commitment to keeping all Americans safe has never meant more.

We are blessed to have such wonderful, dedicated officers who have one goal and that is to serve this great Nation honorably—and you have done that each and every day.

We are truly grateful for your dedication to your duties.

Attorneys Shannon James & David P. Sheldon & the Law Offices of David P. Sheldon, PLLC
Washington, DC
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