I want you to know that the state of VA Psychology is strong. Over the course of the past year Psychologists in collaboration with allied health professionals across the VA system have continued to provide the highest quality psychological services to Veterans and their families in a timely and thorough manner. VA staff and providers can be proud of the strides we have made over the past two years—a truly challenging period. Yet the narrative in the community, the narrative favored by many politicians and the media is: VA is broken and is failing Veterans. Nothing could be further from the truth.

This past year, under the energetic, focused and devoted guidance of Dr. Russell Lemle who has worked closely with the Association of VA Psychologist Leaders (AVAPL) Executive Committee and AVAPL Advisory Group, we initiated an extensive advocacy campaign that is beginning to catch the eye of journalists and some politicians. What has been key to the success of this advocacy campaign has been building coalitions, coalitions of healthcare professionals. AVAPL, in an unprecedented way, has systematically sought to build a working dialogue with our social worker colleagues, our nurse colleagues, our physician assistant colleagues, physician and psychiatrist colleagues, and our VA labor partners including the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE). AVAPL has worked to enhance our relations with Veterans service organizations benefitting immensely from mutually supportive interactions and guidance from the Disabled American Veterans (DAV).

As a result of these collaborations AVAPL was able to present testimony highlighting the overwhelming effectiveness of VHA behavioral healthcare for Veterans to the Commission on Care in January of this year. Two months later in March, AVAPL provided the Commission on Care with an in depth review of empirical studies demonstrating the superior quality of VA healthcare when compared with the care provided by other US healthcare organizations. That review was providential insofar as it helped to undercut an attempt by a small group of Commission on Care members to manipulate and commandeer the commission into a fast moving process toward privatization of Veteran healthcare. Most recently, AVAPL was joined by nine other healthcare professions and labor partners in the development of a joint Policy Brief in response to the Commission on Care Final Report (http://advocacy.avapl.org/pubs/Health%20Care%20Professionals%20&%20Federal%20Unions%20Policy%20Brief%20July%202016%20Response%20to%20Commission%20on%20Care.pdf).
Additionally, AVAPL has benefitted from sustained collaboration with the American Psychological Association (APA). APA has consistently supported our efforts to alter the negative media and political narrative about VA healthcare. AVAPL under the masterful guidance of Dr. Heather Obeirne-Kelly has carried the true story of VA healthcare into the halls of power in our nation’s capital. APA leadership and influence has been and will continue to be essential for the success of VA psychologists seeking to provide the best care for Veterans. APA Division 18 continues to support and promote psychologists’ research to improve healthcare for Veterans. APA works closely with the VA Office of Academic Affairs in assuring that VA continues to train high quality psychologists for the care of Veterans into the future.

As you know from the studies we have mounted on the AVAPL Advocacy page over the past year, study after study indicates that VA provides the best overall comprehensive and integrated healthcare in our country. But none of our efforts or those of our fellow healthcare staff and professionals will succeed if Veterans are delayed in getting the care they desire and need.

We psychologists are on the frontlines working with our fellow VA employees to ensure that Secretary McDonald’s Breakthrough Priorities are implemented.

Dr. Wendy Tenhula and Dr. Lisa Kearney recently wrote about the MyVA Access Initiative—an initiative that belongs to all VA employees. The MyVA Access Initiative is nothing new for psychologists since our vocation or calling is rooted in providing prompt, personal, professional care to persons requesting our help and particularly those who are most vulnerable. What will require our attention are systems and process issues that interfere with Veterans getting immediate personal care from the moment they enter our system. This means that VA psychologists, trained as we are in systems and processes, can be instrumental in helping all VHA staff and providers learn how to implement plans that will assure Veterans get the right care at the right time. Please review the article “Hot Topics” The MyVA Access Initiative in the July 2016 AVAPL Newsletter [http://avapl.org/pub/Newsletters/AVAPL%20Newsletter%20Volume%204,%20Issue%202.pdf](http://avapl.org/pub/Newsletters/AVAPL%20Newsletter%20Volume%204,%20Issue%202.pdf) for specific resources that will enable you as change agents to improve how we serve our Veterans. Our efforts can lead to greater Veteran and VHA staff and provider satisfaction.

All our efforts at advocating for VA will be for naught if Veterans cannot be seen in a timely manner. It is our task along with our colleagues to assure that Veterans the world class VA care in a timely manner. Anything less enables the forces favoring privatization.

I come from a family of Veterans stretching back to my great great uncle, Christian Magley who served in the 89th Indiana Volunteers, United States Army during the Civil war. He died at Memphis on July 18, 1863. Our VA mission, to care for the men and women “who shall have borne the battle” as President Lincoln said it, is noble and it is compelling.

Our country has been at war for 15 years. There is no end in sight to the war on terrorism. The sacrifices and suffering of our military men and women and their families has been and will continue to be more than we can imagine. The work of caring for our Veterans is a sacred calling, a sacred mission. The
mission is larger than individual and group self-interest. It is essential that we continue our research into improving healthcare for Veterans and their families and that we continue training and preparing the men and women who will follow us in caring for Veterans.

Recently, I was talking with a minister friend about my AVAPL presidential year coming to a close. She shared some words from the Talmud with me.

“Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief.

Love mercy now.

Do justly now.

Walk humbly now.

You are not obligated to complete the work, but

Neither are you free to abandon it.”