

## **Introduction**

The staff of US Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center (VAMC) at San Francisco has a very challenging mission. They provide the most cost effective acquisitions of supplies and services as well as the most updated inventory management methods to the Medical Center personnel in a timely manner. They will ensure availability of required medical supplies and services to the Medical Center during local and national emergencies. They will provide continuing education to Acquisition and Material Management Service staff to optimize competition and the best value for procedures in procurements and inventory management. They help initiate and maintain remote supply points throughout the Medical Center and outlying veterans service facilities.

## **The Professional and the Work**

Leslie Buchman wears two hats. She is the chief of voluntary services and she is the acting associate director of the facility. That would be the equivalent of a Chief Operating Officer. My interview with her was in the capacity of associate director of the medical facility. Her responsibilities as associate director include overseeing a \$257 million dollar budget and 1657 employees. She is responsible for the administrative services of the VAMC that includes: the fiscal services, the business office, acquisition and material management, environmental management service, engineering services, voluntary services, canteen, human resources, an armed federal police force, information technology and all of the support services that make a medical center run.

With all these different departments, I asked her how do you keep current and know what is happening throughout the medical center. She responded, “We have a weekly meeting of all the admin service chiefs.” In this meeting they go over what has happened in the last week in their respective departments and relate any problems or changes that have taken place because what happens in one department could have impacts on other departments. This hospital also has the largest research program of any VAMC in the United States, so people from research attend the meeting. It is a forum where people present their concerns and issues and they are worked out in this meeting. “Communication is really, really, high on our list” of functions. There is also a meeting once a month with all of the admin and clinical chiefs, which the director attends. There is also email that everyone sends back and forth in between meetings.

I asked about the knowledge, skills, and abilities that are needed to perform this position. Leslie told me that her degree was in psychology. Is this the degree needed to best perform this work? No. To perform this work she has to have knowledge of: management principles, working with budgets, construction principles, human resources, etc. she has to have knowledge of a little bit of everything so that she can converse with different people in different functions. If she doesn't have this knowledge then she would have a difficult time determining if the service chiefs are living up to expectations.

I wanted to know how she came to this position because it seemed to me a big leap from chief of voluntary services to associate director of a medical center. Leslie's response was that this is the second time she has acted as associate director. The first time she held the position for eighteen months then there was a five-year gap followed by the transfer of the associate director and now she has held the position for the past two

years. She has served in this capacity for a total of three and a half years of the past eight and a half years. The second time the director asked her if she would assume the responsibilities again. The medical center has advertised for the position of associate director a number of times, but to date “they have not found a candidate with the right qualifications.”

The next question that jumped immediately to mind is “if you have been doing this job for the past two years, why don’t you apply or take it permanent?” She answered the question honestly; that her grade is not high enough to qualify. In the federal government there is a requirement of “time in grade” and you cannot jump grade levels. For example, I could not be a GS 13 and make the jump to GS 15 without occupying the grade of GS 14 for a period of time. Leslie does not meet this criterion even though she has assumed all the responsibilities and duties of the higher graded position. She is also at the top of her grade for her present permanent position which does not allow her to meet the next higher grade requirement.

The second half of the answer to taking the position permanently is that she is not sure that she would want it. She learns new things everyday. She is challenged, inspired, it is fun, it keeps her on her toes, but it there is some drawbacks. It cuts into her family time, she works twelve hour days (by choice), she doesn’t feel comfortable going home until her work is done, she is on call 24/7 if there is an emergency, but her son is in college and her husband suggests she do what makes her happy, so for the time being she will continue to do the job. She feels her director is a good mentor and she is the smartest person she knows. She also has “a great administrative staff. To a person she feels that

the staff is excellent. They know their job, they know what they are doing and they know how to make their services run smoothly and efficiently.”

To do this job Leslie says, “you need a sense of humor. You need to be very patient.” You cannot get angry easily because things happen every single day where you might say to yourself “why did this person do that?” Their patients are their number one priority and you have to be diligent to say on top of things. She cannot let certain things go a day without being addressed (i.e. patient care item, safety item). The medical center has a lot of acreage and many stories on the building, so Leslie figures she is out of her office walking about half her day to make contact or understand a problem that may arise. She really looks at the medical center through different eyes than when she was a service chief.

Leslie says that each VA medical center is an entity unto its own. They all have to follow that C.F.R.’s and the Title’s that govern the entire federal government operations, but there is a lot of flexibility within each medical center. She likes operating under federal rules and regulations because it keeps things on track and there is huge help when you have a central office in Washington D.C. that can track the big stuff and make rulings that effect all the medical facilities rather than each facility making or tracking their own. An example of this is she will receive instant recall notification on any medical equipment from Washington, whereas if they took care of that function within the facility they would have to wait to be notified by the manufacturer. Within the facility itself there are MCM’s (Medical Center Memorandum) and those govern on top of the federal regulations. An example of this would be what can and cannot be done with personal vehicle use and the mileage that might be charged.

Leslie has nothing but praise for both administrative and clinical staff. The physicians all have UCSF appointments; they not only do clinical work they teach. And those that want to can do research. For example they have a research biochemist that was the first female payload specialist on a space shuttle and is currently doing work on bone density. She is correlating her space research with osteoporosis here and still sends experiments up into space. The administrative staff is of the same high quality and there is respect between the two groups because they all know that their peers are just as good as they are at what they do. There is mutual respect for each other.

### **Conclusion**

What did I learn about public administration from this research? I learned that there are many different ways to serve the public. Leslie did not take a class that brought her to her position of associate director of a major medical center. Taking challenges and being able to work with people led to her growth into the position. And with taking those challenges you gain experience and there is no substitute for experience. You learn many lessons over a lifetime and sometimes those are not pleasant, but we should always learn from everything we do. If George Santayana's quote, "Those who fail to learn the lessons of history are doomed to repeat them," then I would say Leslie graduated with honors.