CVNR NEWSLETTER

CENTER for VISUAL and NEUROCOGNITIVE REHABILITATION

March 2026

Welcome to the latest edition of the Atlanta VA Center for Visual and Neurocognitive Rehabilitation Newsletter! Our newsletters aim to keep you informed on current insights and advancements from CVNR research. Stay tuned for exciting content that helps you stay ahead of the curve when it comes to eye and brain health!

Highlights & Reflections:
CVNR 40th Anniversary Event

For the 40th anniversary, the CVNR hosted a special event celebrating the accomplishments of its research community. The program featured engaging presentations from CVNR investigators highlighting key research focus areas.
Dr. Machelle Pardue shared updates on vision research, showing how new discoveries in diabetic eye disease detection and treatment are entering clinical practice. Dr. Sheila Rauch presented her work in post-traumatic stress disorder, focusing on how mental health care is being applied in primary care and peer-based settings.

The event also featured a live Gerofit exercise demonstration, reflecting the center's continued commitment to Veteran health and wellness. The event concluded with an awards ceremony that offered special recognition to several Veteran Research participants.

Administrative Officer, Lisa Calas, was also honored for her outstanding leadership and excellence at the CVNR. Hospital Leadership joined the event to celebrate the Center's legacy and the vision for continued progress in Veteran-centered research.

L to R: Dr. Joe Nocera, Kai Mentzer, Lisa Calas, Dr. Robert Norvel, Angela Morris, and Dr. Connie Hampton

A Message from the CVNR Executive Director

Dr. Joe Nocera

The Center for Visual and Neurocognitive Rehabilitation (CVNR) has had a profound and lasting impact on Veterans by advancing research that directly improves their health, independence, and quality of life. At its core, the CVNR is dedicated to understanding and treating the visual, cognitive, and motor impairments that often follow neurological injury or disease—conditions that unfortunately disproportionately affect Veterans. Through innovative, multidisciplinary research, the Center has developed and tested new rehabilitation interventions that translate scientific discovery into meaningful clinical outcomes. These efforts have helped countless Veterans regain functional abilities, enhance mobility, and reengage with their communities. Beyond its scientific achievements, the CVNR's work exemplifies the VA's mission to serve those who have served our country. Each research initiative is grounded in the real-world needs of Veterans, informed by their experiences and priorities. Whether developing exercise-based interventions for Parkinson's disease, novel therapies for traumatic brain injury, or technologies that restore vision and cognition, the CVNR consistently ensures that Veterans remain at the heart of its mission. This Veteran-centered approach has built trust and strengthened the relationship between Veterans and the VA research enterprise, making them active partners in discovery rather than passive participants.

Looking ahead, the CVNR remains committed to expanding its impact by fostering innovation, collaboration, and compassionate care for Veterans. Its long ongoing work continues to shape the future of neurorehabilitation within the VA, ensuring that breakthroughs in research translate into tangible improvements in Veterans' daily lives. With its unwavering dedication to service, scientific excellence, and Veteran-centered rehabilitation, the CVNR stands as a vital resource within the VA and a powerful force for restoring health, independence, and hope for those who have sacrificed so much.

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Participant Profile

CVNR 40th Anniversary Veteran Awardees

As part of the CVNR 40th anniversary celebration, four extraordinary research participants were recognized for their dedication, perseverance, and partnership in advancing Veteran-centered research.

The **CVNR Participant of the Year Award** honors a research participant whose dedication and contributions have meaningfully advanced VA research. This year's recipient, **Mr. Charles Parrott**, a U.S. Marine Corps Veteran, has made an impact far beyond that of a typical study volunteer. Through his commitment and insight, Mr. Parrott has helped shape the future of research that benefits all Veterans.

The **CVNR Commitment to Research Award** recognizes a research participant whose dedication to participate in research sets a standard of excellence. **Mr. Lynn Austin**, a Vietnam Veteran, dedicated nearly a year to a research study—showing up to every session and giving his full effort. Mr. Austin's steadfast participation exemplifies the values of service and determination that define the Veteran community.

The **CVNR Medical Progress Advocate Award** recognizes individuals whose dedication to healthcare drives meaningful progress in advancing a cause that touches lives. **Mr. Jerry Feldman**, a proud U.S. Army Veteran of the 25th Infantry Division, continues to serve on a new front line—the fight against Parkinson's disease. Reflecting on the honor, Mr. Feldman shared, "I was not expecting to be recognized… I am thrilled to be associated with such a fine group of researchers and medical professionals who truly make a difference improving our health."

***L to R**: Dr. Jeanie Park, Dr. Joe Nocera, Jerry Feldman, Lynn Austin, Charles Parrott, Angela Morris, and Dr. Robert Norvel*

The **CVNR Heart of the Study Award** celebrates a research participant whose kindness, reliability, and enthusiasm truly uplifts the entire study team. This award was presented to **Mr. Wesley Wiggins**, a U.S. Army Veteran who served three tours in Vietnam. Mr. Wiggins had a smile for everyone, and his positivity is an inspiration. Reflecting on the award, he said, "Please accept my deepest appreciation for the invaluable role you play in the lives of Veterans... I am profoundly grateful for the positive impact you have made on my journey."

***L to R:** Dr. Joe Nocera, Dr. Amy Rodriguez, Wesley Wiggins, Anna Ree, and Alexandra Mayes*

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Together, these honorees embody the spirit of partnership, perseverance, and purpose that define CVNR's four decades of innovation. Their stories remind us that behind every breakthrough are the Veterans whose courage and generosity continue to move science forward.

Thank You!

"We thank the Veterans. Nothing we do is possible without their continued service. By volunteering their time, sharing their experiences, and participating in our studies, they make it possible to advance the science that drives better interventions. Their trust, commitment, and willingness to contribute are the foundation of all CVNR achievement, and for that, we are deeply grateful."

- Dr. Joe Nocera

CVNR Staff Feature

Aral Ahmadi, Pain Research Coordinator

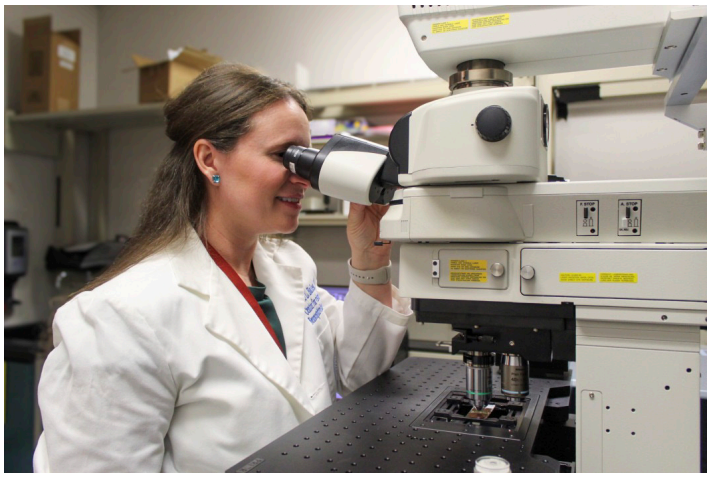
Aral Ahmadi is a Health Science Specialist working as a research coordinator for Dr. Anna Woodbury's PAIN Lab. Aral helps with coordinating and conducting pain management research appointments for Veterans with fibromyalgia.

Born and raised in Arak, Iran, Aral came to the United States in 2010 for an internship at Emory University as part of her Masters studies. She later graduated from René Descartes University in Paris with an MSc degree in Neurobiology and officially moved to the U.S. in 2012. After spending two years in Connecticut, she moved to Georgia in 2014 and worked at Georgia State University as a lab manager. She then joined the Emory Winship Cancer Institute as a research coordinator before transitioning to her role at the Atlanta VA.

Aral is dedicated and diligent in her work, always striving to provide the best care to the Veterans she serves. Outside of her work, she creates visual art in various mediums and enjoys movies, theater, writing, and music.

CVNR Researcher Update

Dr. Katie Bales explores BDNF in eye disease interventions



Q: What was the inspiration for your pilot study?

A: "I was inspired to investigate the role of brain derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), a protein that is increased with exercise that helps support cells that make up the retina, which are responsible for vision. We have previously shown that the BDNF signaling increased by exercise protects vision in age-related diseases. My lab's research focus is on how exercise modifies these retinal cells to preserve vision in Veterans. "

Q: What were the major findings from your study?

A: "Our findings revealed that BDNF signaling induced by exercise is important for specific cell-types that help improve blood flow in the eye. With the loss of BDNF signaling, we found reduced blood flow and breakdown of structures important for blood flow. Our data suggests that exercise promotes signaling of BDNF in several cell-types in the retina and that it is important for supporting vision in age-related diseases."

Q: What is the next step (or future questions) you will be addressing in the line of research?

A: "Our future studies will investigate additional cell types, such as pericytes, that express BDNF and control blood flow in the retina."

Q: Ultimately, how will your research impact Veterans' health?

A: "We know that exercise is important for many organs and maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Our work highlights the importance of exercise as a method to protect vision that can help shape and inform clinical application of exercise methods to halt or slow vision loss."

Dr. Bales' research is one of several pilot studies sponsored by the CVNR in 2025. Her pilot research has led to continued research funding. The CVNR is pleased to sponsor two new pilot projects to be completed in 2026! Watch this space for updates!

New Funding

Vaughan team receives continued funding to further explore urinary symptoms in Parkinson Disease patients

Camille Vaughan, MD, MS has received VA Merit Review funding for a new multi-site clinical trial, titled "Sequential Multiple Assignment Randomized Trial to Treat Urinary Symptoms in Parkinson Disease." While Parkinson Disease (PD) is well known for motor symptoms such as tremor, non-motor urinary symptoms are also common. The urinary symptoms of overactive bladder are associated with falls as patients may rush to get to the bathroom due to the urgency they experience. Falls are a cause of increased mortality in PD.

Dr. Vaughan's team, which includes personnel at sites in Atlanta, Birmingham, Salt Lake City, and Philadelphia, will be studying the effectiveness of behavioral and drug treatments on these urinary symptoms. The team will examine whether patients with PD who have not responded well to either behavioral or drug treatments, respond better when the two treatments are combined. They will also work to determine patient factors that influence how well the combined treatment works for each patient.

***L to R**: Dr. Camille Vaughan, Taressa Sergent, and Lisa Muirhead*

This new study builds on evidence from Dr. Vaughan's previous VA-funded trial published this past summer in JAMA Neurology showing behavioral therapy worked just as well as medication to improve overactive bladder symptoms in patients with Parkinson's disease. Congratulations to the whole team!

A brief look at the results from Dr. Vaughan's previous VA-funded PD trial!

Dr. Vaughan's previous trial found that pelvic floor muscle exercises and urge-control strategies worked as effectively as the studied medication, solifenacin, for treating overactive bladder symptoms in PD. The study included 77 PD participants from four Veterans Affairs medical centers. The behavioral treatment group and the medication treatment group showed meaningful improvement over 12 weeks, but the behavioral treatment group achieved the benefits without the medication-related side effects found in PD patients. The medication treatment group experienced more problems, such as dry mouth and falls, that can significantly impact quality of life in Parkinson's. Overall, Dr. Vaughan's study suggests that the pelvic floor muscle exercise and urge-control strategies should be considered as a treatment option for urinary symptoms in PD.

What Does "Impact" Mean to You?

In research, we talk about impact all the time. We believe impact is personal, contextual, and evolving - and we want to hear your perspective. Whether you're a researcher, practitioner, or community partner, your insight helps shape how we communicate, measure, and support meaningful outcomes for Veterans. Let's redefine impact - together.

Send us your thoughts- a sentence, a paragraph, or a quick story to cvnr@va.gov

We want to understand what creates real change in the everyday health and lives of Veterans. Impact looks different depending on your experience, and that's exactly why we want to hear from you.

Did you learn a new skill that helps you daily? Is there a practice you do that has improved your understanding of yourself? Do you have an increased interest in certain topics that have affected your attitude or behavior?

Listening across roles and experiences can help gain a fuller understanding of what meaningful change looks like. We can use this feedback to strengthen our research approach and better support our Veterans and communities. By considering diverse perspectives, The CVNR can continuously improve how our research center defines success and delivers meaningful outcomes.

CVNR
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Atlanta VA Health Care System
1670 Clairmont Road
Decatur GA 30033

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Thank you for your continued commitment to advancing Veteran healthcare!

To learn more about participating in research please contact us!

(404) 728-5064
CVNR.Registry@va.gov

Visit our website

CVNR Participant Registry
Enrollment as of April 2025

274 Active Participants
13 New Participants

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