

Elizabeth “Lisa” Freeman, Veterans Affairs Palo Alto director oversees health system’s massive growth spurt

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Elizabeth “Lisa” Freeman has been director of the Palo Alto VA health system for the past 10 years and is leading the system during its \$1.6 billion construction overhaul.

In the decade since Elizabeth “Lisa” Freeman took over as director of the Veterans Affairs Palo Alto Health Care System, she has seen monumental changes in the services needed by veterans.



The nature of the nation’s most recent wars — Afghanistan, which began in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 — have introduced health providers in the United States Department of Veterans Affairs health care system to the phenomenon of traumatic brain injury, or TBI. Today’s vets seeking medical care are also younger and more likely to be female, compared to those from the Vietnam, Korean or World War II eras.

“We offer the most comprehensive medical care of any of the 150 (VA hospitals) in the country,” Freeman said. “All types of medical care are available here. The only exception is on-site transplant surgery, which is handled at Stanford Hospital & Clinics. But we do prepare patients for those surgeries here.”

To adapt to the changing needs of 21st-century veterans, \$1.6 billion in upgrades and new construction is changing the face of the sprawling 93-acre facility off Foothill Expressway and its other offices in nearby towns. It will thrust VA Palo Alto Health Care System into the forefront of the nationwide VA health care system. Some of the work is designed to replace aging, seismically unsafe structures dating back to the center’s opening in 1960.

It will also help Palo Alto offer new treatments and technology. It has been designated one of only five polytrauma, or multiple trauma, centers **among VA** hospitals throughout the United States and is one of [only 11](#) centers dealing with [blindness resulting from TBI](#).

Freeman has worked for the VA since 1983, starting as a resident engineer at the VA Medical Center in Oklahoma City. She went on to work in a variety of positions at VA facilities in Shreveport, La., and Palo Alto. She earned a bachelor’s degree in civil engineering from the University of Notre Dame in Indiana and master’s degree in business administration from Louisiana Tech University.

The interview below with Freeman has been edited for content and clarity.

Q: Describe the VA Palo Alto Health Care System.

A: We provide everything a veteran needs in health care services and beyond. It ranges from our spinal cord injury and polytrauma centers to treatment and services in dozens of other specialty areas, such as dental, mental health and smoking cessation. **It's a unique** institution. There are 90,000 veterans eligible to receive our services in our area, which extends from San Bruno on the north to San Luis Obispo on the south and Sonoma on the east. We serve 65,000 of those veterans every year. Our workforce is comprised of 3,300 full-time equivalent employees.

Q: What is your annual budget?

A: \$850 million, appropriated by Congress.

Q: Are you able to form partnerships with local companies providing medical equipment or services?

A: We are only able to contract for goods and services that total less than \$25,000. Anything larger is handled regionally by administrators in the VA's Sierra Pacific region, which includes Northern California, Northern Nevada, Hawaii and Guam.

Q: What is your relationship with the city of Palo Alto?

A: We are a federal enclave. The Department of Veteran Affairs has very specific specifications for growth of our facilities. But we also strive to be a good neighbor. We share information about our growth plan with (Palo Alto) city officials and the city council. But they can't take **action to stop or change** our plans. We also reach out to the surrounding Barron Park neighborhood, distributing flyers to residents describing our projects.

Q: Can you provide services to non-veterans?

A: We have limited authority to include relatives, such as spouses, in care plans we offer to veterans suffering with post-traumatic stress disorder, for example. Otherwise, our services are exclusively available to veterans.

Q: Are you experiencing growth in your patient numbers?

A: We have seen consistent annual growth of 3 percent to 5 percent annually here in Palo Alto in recent years. As a system, we service between 25 percent to 30 percent of veterans. We're looking to increase that number.

Q: How will federal health care reform affect VA health care facilities?

A: Out of thousands of pages in the federal health care reform legislation, there is only a single line devoted to us. It only says we will continue to offer health care services to veterans. However, in 2014, veterans, along with everyone else, will have a choice to go anywhere for health care. We want to be the provider of choice among them. We're working very hard to make sure veterans understand this is a unique institution that can best meet their specific needs.

Q: How do you accomplish that?

A: We can't advertise like other health care organizations. But we have started to use new outreach methods. We established a Facebook page in January 2010 and now have the highest number of "fans" of any of the 150 VA facilities nationwide, with more than 7,300.

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