

# Women's History Month: Recognizing front-line workers

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This March, the Electronic Health Record Modernization Integration Office (EHRM IO) joins VA in celebrating Women's History Month by recognizing the women who have helped VA improve its delivery of care to Veterans through the implementation of the department's new electronic health record (EHR).

Women at EHRM IO provide vital technical knowledge to VA and its community care partners nationwide, directly contributing to the success of the EHRM program. They serve as leaders in their communities and manage large-scale projects such as the deployment of health data exchanges, system integrations, change management, training and more.

Several women across EHRM IO shared their thoughts about what it's like to be part of the program.



## Tasha Blocker

Chief Financial Officer

### **What has your experience been like working as the chief financial officer for EHRM?**

My experience and expertise are in the budget and financial field. I've always worked in a male-dominated area in the federal government, and I have noticed an increase of women in leadership positions. According to the Office of Personnel Management, 44 percent of the federal workforce are women, and 23 percent are African American. I feel optimistic and empowered to know that there are more opportunities for women now than there were a decade ago and that the gap in pay between men and women in the federal workforce has been steadily closing, especially at the executive level. It's wonderful that women are experiencing success in multiple employment spaces and are experiencing positive work experiences.

### **Who has inspired you to be where you are today?**

My mother inspired me the most. She was my protector, mentor and teacher, who taught me to persevere through life's challenges. She laid the foundation and roadmap for me to be successful in any career field that I chose. She stressed the importance of receiving a college education. My mother's family background included a strong lineage of educators, such as my great grandparents, who were principals in a small school in Mississippi; my grandmother, who received her degree from Alcorn State University; and my mother, who received her bachelor's degree from Southern University. All of the things that my mother provided me have led the way for where I am today.



## Renae Facundus

Deputy Director, Interoperability and Population Health Management, for the Office of the Deputy Chief Information Officer (ODCIO)

## **What is it like to be a woman in the health informatics field?**

I think this is an exciting time to be a woman in the health informatics field. The dynamic and tremendous changes in the world have created a situation that allows women the opportunity to lead, drive change and make a difference in the health care field. I was recently on a project during the COVID-19 pandemic where we noted that, on a leadership call, there were six women planning the strategy, approach and implementation to meet critical project needs. We collectively brought together our passion, expertise and just pure grit to achieve goals supporting VA's COVID-19 efforts. That was the most recent example where women were leading powerfully, but it wasn't the first time, nor will it be the last.

## **What do you think is still an obstacle for women in the workplace?**

From the time I spent in the Army to my role here at VA serving our Veterans, the biggest barrier I have come against is being taken seriously. The intersection of my gender and race have made this extremely difficult at times. In the past, I have had someone tell me that they are impressed with my technical skills — because who knew a mom of four could be technical. I have also been congratulated on being “a great speaker in spite of my race.” Both comments reveal the depth of people's preconceived notions of what women can do, but instead of looking at it as a barrier, I take it on as a challenge to constantly prove them wrong.



## **Dr. Meredith Josephs**

Chief Medical Informatics Officer for the Federal Electronic Health Record Modernization (FEHRM) office

## **What do you think can be done to challenge the “glass ceiling” in the workplace?**

Women face many barriers to female leadership. Structural barriers, including historical sexism, gender bias and stereotyping, and limited access to the established networks needed for career advancement, are particularly significant. There are ways to tackle these challenges, such as joining female leadership programs, reaching out to mentorship and sponsorship programs, learning how to communicate effectively about career advancement goals and strategically promoting equity in the workplace that supports universal paid family leave, subsidized child care and family leave policies that do not create financial penalties.

## **What woman inspires you the most and why?**

Women health care providers taking care of active-duty service members, Veterans and other beneficiaries inspire me. I am in the field of clinical informatics to deliver technical solutions that will make it easier for them to do the critical work of caring for those who serve or served our country.



## **Shilpa Patel-Teague**

Director, Chief Medical Informatics for the Office of the Functional Champion (OFC)

## **Do you have any advice for young women trying to advance in the engineering and technology fields?**

My primary advice is to seek out a mentor that has the experience that you are looking to attain, and get their advice on the successes and pitfalls they achieved throughout their journey. I recently sought the opportunity to volunteer with an American Medical Informatics Association diversity, equity and inclusion workgroup to come up with strategies for encouraging staff like myself to network with folks with similar backgrounds as myself for career alignment and to provide foresight on how to best expand future professional networking opportunities.

## **What woman inspires you the most and why?**

My mom inspires me the most. Born in Nairobi, Kenya, and moving to India in her teens, she had to adapt to a new country and social network and establish her roots as a young woman. Then, having an arranged marriage in her twenties, she had to move again to the United States, where she had no family or friends, to join my dad where he was working. She encountered many personal and financial hardships in her early years in the United States but made these sacrifices so her children could have freedoms she did not have.



## **Laura Prietula**

Acting Deputy Chief Information Officer (ODCIO)

## **What is it like to be a woman in the health information technology field?**

It's fun! I am a geek and a nerd and love every minute of it. But it has not been easy. Most people used to assume an engineering degree was primarily for men. Therefore, the types of roles that were typically offered to me, as a woman, were less technical, so I used to have to fight for the job I wanted. Women in the information technology industry are asked to demonstrate our competence in every decision and action we take. This is seldom the case for men. It is great to be in the health sector because it is more open than other sectors to diversity, equity and inclusion.

## **What advice would you give to women trying to advance in the engineering and technology fields?**

So many come to mind. A few would be:

- Embrace your femininity, never give up and work with passion.
- Ensure you surround yourself with people who will help each other succeed.
- Remember to have perspective and to embrace diversity, not only of gender, race or ethnicity, but also of thoughts and beliefs.
- Clean your lens before you expect others to clean theirs and check your biases continuously.
- Where you are today will change based on your ability to adapt and to change (yourself and others).
- Don't be afraid to explore and live life to its fullest.



# **Elexa Sin-Sanders**

EHRM National Pharmacy Council Inpatient Lead

## **What advice would you give to women trying to advance in the engineering and technology fields?**

Technology is rapidly transforming and becoming increasingly accessible to more and more people with different needs. My advice to women trying to advance in the field is to be courageous. It's important to highlight personal strengths and to be representative of them when opportunity presents. While being junior in the field, it's easy to feel intimidated; however, diverse voices are imperative to understand where traditional systems are failing to meet the needs of the different populations and cultures. Women's input, perspectives and skills are invaluable in creating well-rounded and collective solutions.

## **What do you think is the most significant barrier to female leadership?**

The pandemic has undoubtedly changed and challenged norms worldwide, and I believe it's lasting impacts will shape the barriers ahead for female leadership. COVID-19 has made remote conferencing much more accepted and practiced. Interestingly, I believe social distancing has strongly brought women closer to "the [decision making] table." With teleconferencing, there's no longer the seat at the back of the room, which opens opportunity for each member to have an equitable voice. On the flip side, as we become a highly driven society built around virtual meetings, a barrier for female leadership is the ease of overlooking personal interactions that are valuable for making lasting connections and diverse networks.