Announcer: Welcome to the HSR&D Veteran Voices podcast series. In this episode, QUERI dissemination coordinator Diane Hanks speaks with career Air Force veteran Becca Keller about her experiences volunteering in VA research.

Becca Keller: I’m an Air Force veteran. I’ve spent 26 years in the Air Force, so I did retire. I was in from 1988 to 2014. I’ve had probably nine, a little over nine years of overseas time.

Diane Hanks: When you retired or when you left the service, how did you find out about VA? Because I’ve been hearing that it’s difficult for some veterans to even be aware that there are VA healthcare options out there, especially for women I think.

Becca Keller: Certainly I’ve heard the same thing and perhaps it depends on your service, perhaps it depends on the area that you’re retiring or separating out of. But from my perspective, my last duty assignment was Fort Meade, Maryland. They had an extremely robust transition program.

Diane Hanks: That’s great.

Becca Keller: They had at least half of a day devoted specifically to veteran benefits from the VA, with VA speakers. I was well aware of what needed to be done. That doesn’t make the process any less cumbersome or maybe smoother to get through. You still have to do all of the paperwork \_\_\_\_\_ [00:01:31] and file and everything. But at least I was certainly aware of what was there for me.

Then I can’t say enough about the Minneapolis VA women’s clinic. They reached out and asked if I wanted to be a member of the women’s clinic there. They’ve been super supportive and very responsive to all of my medical needs.

Diane Hanks: So you felt welcomed immediately on the VA campus?

Becca Keller: I did, absolutely.

Diane Hanks: And how did you get involved in VA research?

Becca Keller: I happened to be up at the VAA in Minneapolis for an appointment and saw a flyer on their research board asking for volunteers to support a research project that was just being started. I thought that would be kind of interesting. It said three to four interviews or attendance projects a year for just a couple hours each time. I thought well, that would be very interesting. I called them up and volunteered. They had a vetting process. Just because I volunteered didn’t mean I was going to be accepted, but ultimately I was. I found it a very rewarding experience.

Diane Hanks: Great. Have you participated after that? Or are you still participating in that study?

Becca Keller: Still participating.

Diane Hanks: So it’s a longitudinal study?

Becca Keller: It’s a five-year project as I understand it. Three to five years. It’s still going on. We’re maybe a year, year-and-a-half into it.

Diane Hanks: Wow. Is it an HSR&D study?

Becca Keller: It is. The primary researcher is Dianna Burgess. It’s called LAMP, Learning to Apply Mindfulness to Pain. It’s been just a wonderful experience to be able to participate in that.

Diane Hanks: I’m just curious because I’ve written about the LAMP study. I believe it’s part of our QUERI program. Have you found that mindfulness has been helpful to you in particular to deal with chronic pain? I’m assuming that you’re not part of … I don't know if there’s a control cohort and an intervention cohort and I’m not sure which one you’re part of.

Becca Keller: So interestingly there are control and intervention but as the advisors, we’re not part of the group.

Diane Hanks: Oh.

Becca Keller: We’re purely advising the researchers. Now that isn’t to say we don’t have chronic pain. It’s been interesting to be able to use all of the tools as they’re in development at the same time that we’re kind of advising the researchers on this really isn’t hitting the point home for veterans or your language here isn’t as crisp or as strong as it should be or this method or methodology doesn’t resonate with a veteran in allowing them to make those changes that would hopefully pull in and

Diane Hanks: Retain.

Becca Keller: prove more impact, yeah. More of the veterans \_\_\_\_\_ [00:04:29].

Diane Hanks: How many people are on this advisory panel? How many veterans are on it? Do you know?

Becca Keller: I think there’s less than a dozen.

Diane Hanks: Less than a dozen.

Becca Keller: A couple of them are not from the Minnesota area so they’ll dial in. Then the rest of us are more local. I’m probably the farthest away. I’ve got about an hour and 15-minute drive to get to the VA. But most people are kind of central right there in the Twin Cities area.

Diane Hanks: Wow. Do you think you would do this again after this project?

Becca Keller: Absolutely. Yeah, absolutely. I just think it’s so rewarding. Not only to understand all of this research that’s going on behind the scenes to support us as veterans to be able to have an opportunity to help guide that as well. To make it more meaningful for my fellow veterans.

Diane Hanks: And more successful.

Becca Keller: And more successful. Absolutely.

Diane Hanks: That’s great.

Becca Keller: It’s been a wonderful experience.

Diane Hanks: Have you been able to or is there a chance for you to recruit other veterans to become advocates for research?

Becca Keller: That hasn’t come up. I’ve really been singly focused on the one LAMP study. I haven’t really had insight into the other stuff that’s going on either in Minneapolis or nationally until I came here.

Diane Hanks: Right. But you’re so enthusiastic. I think you’d be a great person to go out there and kind of help recruit …

Becca Keller: I’d be happy to do it if somebody needs the assistance, certainly.

Diane Hanks: I wish there was a … or I hope some time it the future there’s an opportunity for people like you to speak to congress and let them know about how you feel about the research that’s taking place and how beneficial it is and

Becca Keller: How important it is.

Diane Hanks: especially when you see results of the study that you’re in now and once you see the intervention and what the findings are and how it’s helping people. And how you, as a veteran, and people like you helped to get to that point.

Becca Keller: Absolutely.

Diane Hanks: I think that would be so important for people who fund the VA to understand that. How important veterans are to research and how important research is.

Becca Keller: You don’t really realize it when you’re at such a microlevel. I didn’t truly understand the impact that I was having or could have in my individual LAMP study. Certainly I answered the questions and went to the meetings and provided my feedback and input, but it’s being able to see that much broader picture where I fully internalized the value of what I was providing.

Diane Hanks: Right, right. And it is. I mean every study that’s done, even if it only affects one person, is worth all the time and effort because you’re changing a life.

Becca Keller: Absolutely.

Diane Hanks: You're making a life easier and you’re giving back to people who put everything on the line for us.

Becca Keller: Increasing participation and function and the ability to …

Diane Hanks: To live your life.

Becca Keller: What’s nice is Minnesota doesn’t have any true, large, active-duty bases. This is an opportunity for me to be able to rub elbows with my fellow veterans and be able to continue giving back without being in an environment that is deeply steeped in the military culture because Minnesota is without that active-duty base or even retirement base.

Diane Hanks: That’s a good point.

Becca Keller: So this is a way for me to stay involved.

Diane Hanks: And that would be a way for a lot of people I think to stay involved.

Becca Keller: Absolutely.

Diane Hanks: And stay connected.

Becca Keller: You bet.

Diane Hanks: Hopefully this podcast maybe reaches some veterans who will think about what you’re doing, and it does give a lot of meaning and purpose I think to your life.

Becca Keller: Absolutely.

Diane Hanks: Thank you very much for taking the time.

Becca Keller: Well thank you very much for the opportunity.

Announcer: The views and opinions expressed in the preceding podcast are concerned with the scope of recently concluded or ongoing VA HSR&D funded research and do not necessarily reflect current or to be implemented VA policy. To learn more about this research, visit the VA HSR&D website at www.hsrd.research.va.gov.