The VHA Office of Rural Health has selected Richmond VAMC as one of 5 hubs sites to develop and grow TeleRehabilitation to enhance access to specialized rehabilitation services for rural Veterans under Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation. As a hub site, Richmond VAMC will be working to further develop and enhance TeleRehabilitation for specialized areas throughout PM&R, including those areas within assistive technology.

There has been tremendous growth with TeleRehabilitation within the Richmond assistive technology department over the last 2 years. Assistive technology members, including rehab engineers, speech pathologists, occupational therapists and adaptive sports team members have provided to Veterans in their homes and at other VA Medical Centers. Through these efforts, assistive technology has extended their specialized services to Veterans who may not have access to specialty care in their local communities.

Rehab Engineer, Brian Burkhardt, has utilized telehealth directly to patients’ homes and from facility to facility; including Hampton VA, New York NY and Durham NC. Brian has used telehealth to evaluate and treat patients for electronic aids to daily living, including home and cell phone access. He recently evaluated a Veteran with a high level spinal cord injury who was unable to access his cell phone by hand. Both Brian and the Veteran agreed a Bluetooth switch interface attached to his wheelchair would allow him access his phone with head movement. Brian saved the Veteran over a 2 hour drive to the Richmond VA by connecting via telehealth to complete this evaluation.

Erin Brandon, physical therapist, recently evaluated a patient for adaptations to his personal golf clubs via telehealth. She stated, “telehealth has given us the opportunity to reach Veterans who may not have been able to come in person.”

Telehealth has not only increased Veteran’s access to care, it has also proven to enhance the level of therapy we provide. Seeing the patients within their home environment allows for the provider to adjust the treatment plan and recommendations as needed. It also opens opportunities for education to family members and caregivers that may not have been present during a clinic appointment.

As the Richmond PM&R TeleRehabilitation Program Director and a member of the assistive technology team, I look forward to continuing to support and develop TeleRehabilitation efforts within the assistive technology department. If you would like further information regarding telehealth please contact Jessica Barton at Jessica.barton@va.gov.
Meet McGuire’s AT Team... SCI OTs

Kathryn Becker
Kathryn was a student on Spinal Cord Injury in 2010 and knew this is where she wanted to work. She started as a full time employee in January 2011 and has been here ever since!

How long have you been at the VA? Almost 7 years!

What do you like about working at the VA? I love the patient population, the team approach, the close working relationship with our docs, and the opportunity to learn something new everyday!

What areas of AT are you interested in and like working with? And Why? I'm most interested in custom modifications and adapted equipment; the smallest modification to a standard piece of equipment can often allow for a significantly greater level of independence.

Why are you passionate about AT? I'm passionate about AT because of the out of the box, collaborative approach. I feel like the best ideas come when therapists, engineers and patients work together.

Tell us about other interests outside of the VA. Chasing my 1 year old son & trying the newest restaurants in town!

Kate Kapus
Kate graduated from Penn State University with a B.S. in Kinesiology-movement science and MS in Occupational Therapy from Virginia Commonwealth University. After graduation from VCU, she worked as an OT in a skilled nursing facility before accepting a OT position with the Richmond VAMC’s Spinal Cord Injury team in 2012. Since starting with the VA, she has obtained her clinical specialist in SCI&D and have worked closely with the assistive technology program with many of her patients, including in the ALS/MS rehab clinic she took over in 2016.

How long have you been at the VA? 5+ years

What do you like about working at the VA? I really like the collaboration of team members at the RIC VAMC and the positive environment present on the SCI&D team. I appreciate the flexibility I have with patient care at the VA to manage my time with treatments to best meet patient’s individual needs. I also appreciate the freedom to try new and innovative ideas, create and modify supplies, demonstrate and trial a wide variety of equipment, and the vast array of services available for our patients.

What areas of AT are you interested in and like working with? And Why? Increasing someone’s independence in whatever creative way possible is a big interest of mine. Working on the SCI&D service and with the ALS/MS clinic, many people initially lose independence or access with their daily tasks or their environment. It is very exciting for me to be able to collaborate with AT to come up with a solution to allow someone access to their environment, provide independence with their power w/c or with their self-care tasks, return access with their phone or computer, etc. I also like being able to collaborate with AT to make an idea come to reality.

Why are you passionate about AT? I'm passionate about AT because of the out of the box, collaborative approach. It allows me to challenge patients to do more than they ever thought possible despite their injury/illness.

Tell us about other interests outside of the VA. I love kayaking the local flat waters or lakes, spending quality time with friends and family, and traveling when not at work.

Heather Kloepping
Heather received her undergraduate degree from UNC-Chapel Hill and her Master’s degree in occupational therapy from VCU. Immediately after school, she started at the Richmond VAMC, specializing in Spinal Cord Injury.

How long have you been at the VA? 9 years

What do you like about working at the VA? I absolutely love my team! All of my co-workers are very supportive and encouraging. I also love the veteran population. I love listening to their live stories and am thankful for the opportunity to serve those who have served for our freedom.

What areas of AT are you interested in and like working with? And Why? EADLs/environmental access from power w/c level, adaptive sports, manual w/c fittings/skills training.

Why are you passionate about AT? AT and all the continued advancements help to allow individuals to continue to participate in the activities that they need/lone. I enjoy the creative think outside the box side of AT and love collaborating with the AT engineers to allow our patients to do more than they ever thought possible despite their injury/illness.

Tell us about other interests outside of the VA. I first and foremost love being the mother of a 2 year old boy. He keeps me moving. Some people say I am a little bit addicted to Crossfit! Also, I enjoy being active outside hiking, biking, running etc. I love all Boston sports teams, especially the Patriots!!

Ricky Price
Ricky graduated from Virginia Tech in 2011 with a Bachelor’s of Science degree in Psychology and then graduated from VCU Occupational Therapy program in 2013 with a Master’s degree in Occupational Therapy. He spent his two fieldworks at the Richmond VAMC SCI unit and at the VCU Hand Center. He returned to the VA after graduation where he spent his first year in acute care and transferred down to SCI at the beginning of 2017.

How long have you been at the VA? 1 year and 8+ months.

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Veterans’ Stories…Perry Lahmon Jr. and John Pollock

Driving a motorized scooter to get around can be cumbersome when you have to stash a walking cane. The cane holder provided by scooter companies can be ineffective for patients with poor hand coordination, and it’s mounted on the rear of the chair where it is less accessible. So it went with Mr. John Pollock and Mr. Perry Lahmon, two veterans who rely on scooters for transportation and who helped AT staff develop the simple yet effective cane clip. Mr. Pollock provided the initial impetus and inspiration for the clip, which attaches to the front handle of a scooter for easy access, while Mr. Lahmon, drawing from years of mechanical experience, was instrumental in giving feedback and ideas for improving the design.

What challenges were you having that precipitated your referral to the AT program?

Mr. Pollock: “I had no way to carry my cane in my [scooter], I knew I needed a cane holder, and all the veterans I saw with cane holders constructed them themselves, and they were kind of jerry-rigged.”

Mr. Lahmon: “I did not like the other cane-holding device, for the simple reason that it’s floppy and it doesn’t hold up good.”

What qualities of the AT innovation - the cane clip - do you appreciate?

Mr. Lahmon: “I like it because you can take [the cane] and pop it right out, you don’t have to reach around the back and try to get the cane out, it’s stable, it’s pretty easy to work with.”

Mr. Pollock: “I like the cane clip because you can remove it easily, and it goes back on easily.”

Would you recommend this AT innovation to other patients with the same need?

Mr. Lahmon: “I definitely would recommend the cane clip. It makes it easy to get along with, it’s out your way, and you can reach it without turning all the way around in the chair.”

Mr. Pollock: “All veterans with canes would benefit, and even civilians would also benefit from this clip… it’s almost indestructible. I’ve used it over and over, and I can’t break it.”

Meet McGuire’s AT Team...SCI OTs, cont.

What do you like about working at the VA? It’s a great feeling to know that we don’t have additional extraneous barriers (like insurance or Medicare policies) keeping us from being able to recommend certain services/equipment and be unable to get them. That additional freedom allows us as therapists much more flexibility to do whatever it takes to help our Vets meet their goals.

What areas of AT are you interested in and like working with? And Why? I really have enjoyed seeing how much technology with respect to wheelchairs has evolved since I was a student in the summer of 2015. I feel it will continue to grow and adapt to the growing needs of our populations we serve and it’s exciting to be at the forefront of trying out these technologies and see how they improve our Vets’ lives.

Why are you passionate about AT? Understanding and implementing AT in treatment programs can be a game changer for some of our patients with SCI&D. Without these resources, many individuals with more complex needs would be unable to function, participate, and otherwise have a higher quality of life.

Tell us about other interests outside of the VA. I enjoy many sports, weightlifting, being outdoors, reading, and doing personal finance.

Dawn Pound
Dawn graduated with a Masters in Occupational Therapy from VCU and immediately began working as an OT on the Spinal Cord Injury service at the Richmond VAMC. She has remained on the SCI service ever since. She received my Assistive Technology Professional certification this year through RESNA.

How long have you been at the VA? 9 years

What do you like about working at the VA? I like working at the VA because of the strong rehab department and SCI team.

What areas of AT are you interested in and like working with? And Why? Being on the SCI unit, I work regularly on wheelchair seating and positioning and training veterans on utilizing wheelchairs in their daily lives to improve independence and their quality of life. I really enjoy getting creative and thinking outside the box when it comes to wheelchair needs to individualize each wheelchair for the end user. I love the creativity and I never get bored.

Why are you passionate about AT? I am passionate about AT because I strongly believe assistive technology can change the lives of the end user and caregivers.

Tell us about other interests outside of the VA. When I am not at work I enjoy spending time with my family and my dog, yoga, camping, travel, snowboarding, and stand up paddle boarding.
The other solution is high-tech. Braze Mobility offers a specialized sensor system designed to mount onto wheelchairs and alert the user when the wheelchair is approaching an obstacle or wall. The alert can be in the form of a beeping sound, a light display that indicate which side and how close an obstacle is, and/or a vibration module that buzzes. Additional mini-sensors can be added to a specific area for common collision culprits like a headrest or an elbow block. The sensors are programmable and can alert the user to very specific distances, much like a backup camera in a car might give a driver a green, yellow, and red zone.

Whatever the solution may be, it’s important to equip wheelchair users for avoiding collisions so that they can drive more responsibly and effectively.


Sensor system, Braze Mobility, https://brazemobility.com/