

# Heart H(app)y

**Lois Freeman, MS '02, BSN '01**

BY KOREN  
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**Lois Freeman, DNP, MS '02, BSN '01**, always wanted to be a nurse, but it was her volunteer work in the intensive care unit as an undergraduate that led to Freeman's specialty in cardiology.

Complex, critical-care patient cases "struck her fancy," she says, and her mom's death from heart failure in 1987 made the work personal.

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LOIS FREEMAN

Although we know more about heart failure today, hospitalizations due to the condition have tripled, and it still claims the lives of more than 300,000 people a year. A key tactic in reducing these numbers is patient education. "We as health care providers have failed at teaching patients about what heart failure is and what they can do to manage it," says Freeman, a telehealth and primary care nurse practitioner and heart failure educator for the Veterans Administration (VA) Maryland Health Care System in Baltimore. "Once patients know what they can do, most are willing to try."

Freeman's idea for a smartphone app aims to put that knowledge and power in patients' hands. Her project, the Heart Failure Mobile App, was one of 15 that won development funding from approximately 4,000 entries in the VA's 2016 Employee Innovation Contest, which awards up to \$1 million to develop and pilot programs to improve health care



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or business practices. The app will educate patients about heart failure – including what symptoms merit a call to a provider – and enable them to track their weight, blood pressure, activity, and sodium intake. It will even remind them when to take their medications. The app will also integrate with MyHealtheVet, an online portal that allows VA patients to send secure messages to their provider.

"They can send messages about any changes in their experience," Freeman says. "Their doctor, then, may adjust their medication or take other action that can keep these patients from having unnecessary emergency room visits or admissions."

Expected to be ready within two years, the app will be piloted first in the VA's Maryland facilities and at rural sites in West Virginia. After that, it will be rolled out nationwide.

The project is one of several ways Freeman is doing her part to educate and empower patients and

practitioners. Her 17-year career has included serving as a heart failure educator, a provider with the VA's Home Telehealth program, and a sub-investigator for clinical trials of cardiac devices and drugs – including a study that led to better hypertension medications for African-American patients.

Freeman also serves as chair of the VA Maryland Advanced Practice Council, where she leads a group of 76 advanced practice nurses, and presents at national conferences such as the Nurses Organization of Veterans Affairs annual meeting.

She encourages colleagues and future nursing professionals to persist when presenting their ideas. Freeman entered the annual innovation contest three times – with three different ideas – before receiving an award. "Nurses have made some significant contributions to health care," she says. "If you have an idea, step out and follow it through." ♦