

5 Questions: New director of VA hospital finds much to like about 13



Patrick Kelly is a Navy man who's lived 12 places in 28 years.

Sioux Falls is number 13.

Kelly, 54, became director this month at the Veterans Administration Hospital. The main campus is on 22nd Street west of Spellerberg Park, a high spot with a tower visible from all over town.

He oversees 1,000 health care workers. They, in turn, see 27,000 veterans who make 270,000 visits a year. Most are at the Sioux Falls center. The rest are at satellite facilities at Aberdeen, Wagner and Watertown in South Dakota and at Sioux City and Spirit Lake in Iowa.

Kelly is a captain in the Navy. That changes in October when he will retire from the military and continue at the VA in a senior civilian position.

The Navy took him from Rhode Island to the Philippines, Florida, Tennessee, Japan, San Diego and more points between. He was top officer at a unit in Okinawa for 200 marines and 400 sailors. He was a policy analyst in Washington.

Most recently, he oversaw 12 Pacific area hospitals.

He's brushed with brass, but a particularly satisfying celebrity moment was all baseball, when he met former Minnesota Twins slugger Harmon Killebrew. He had played against Killebrew's son, Cam, as a teen, and saw Harmon watching that day in the bleachers.

Now, he was showing him around a military hospital.

All the travel for Kelly begs the question of how long he'll stay here.

"I get asked that a lot," he said. "Our intention is to stay here a long time."

Sioux Falls is near his Minnesota roots, and he's found a lot to like here, including a bike route near his home along Southeastern Avenue. He's the lean fellow on the trail, 6-1 and 175 pounds, who runs four miles a day.

Question: How is the VA different from other hospitals?

Answer: Avera and Sanford are the community health care providers. We by law are responsible for veterans. ... There's a very clear difference. Our population is veterans, those who served their nation.

What is your biggest challenge?

We are challenged by the geography of South Dakota. We can't be everywhere that veterans are. ... We can't concentrate all our resources like we can on military bases. We're all over.

Your father was in the Army during the Korean War, but you had something other than a military career in mind?

I attended seminary two years at St. Mary's College in Winona, Minn. I thought I wanted to be a priest but realized having a family was something I valued more than joining the priesthood. I did go to Guatemala for one year of missionary work with the Catholic Church, to teach Spanish and English and coach in a junior high school. I loved that, but I knew I needed to get on with things. A friend recommended the University of North Carolina, so I went there and got my master's in public health and joined the Navy in 1983.

What's one thing everyone should know about veterans?

Today's veterans all served voluntarily. They fought for their nation. We owe them the highest quality of care because of what they did for their country.

You read a lot of Bob Woodward books. But do you watch "Mash"?

Absolutely. But I also watch "Seinfeld."

Reach reporter Jon Walker at 331-2206 or 800-530-6397.