

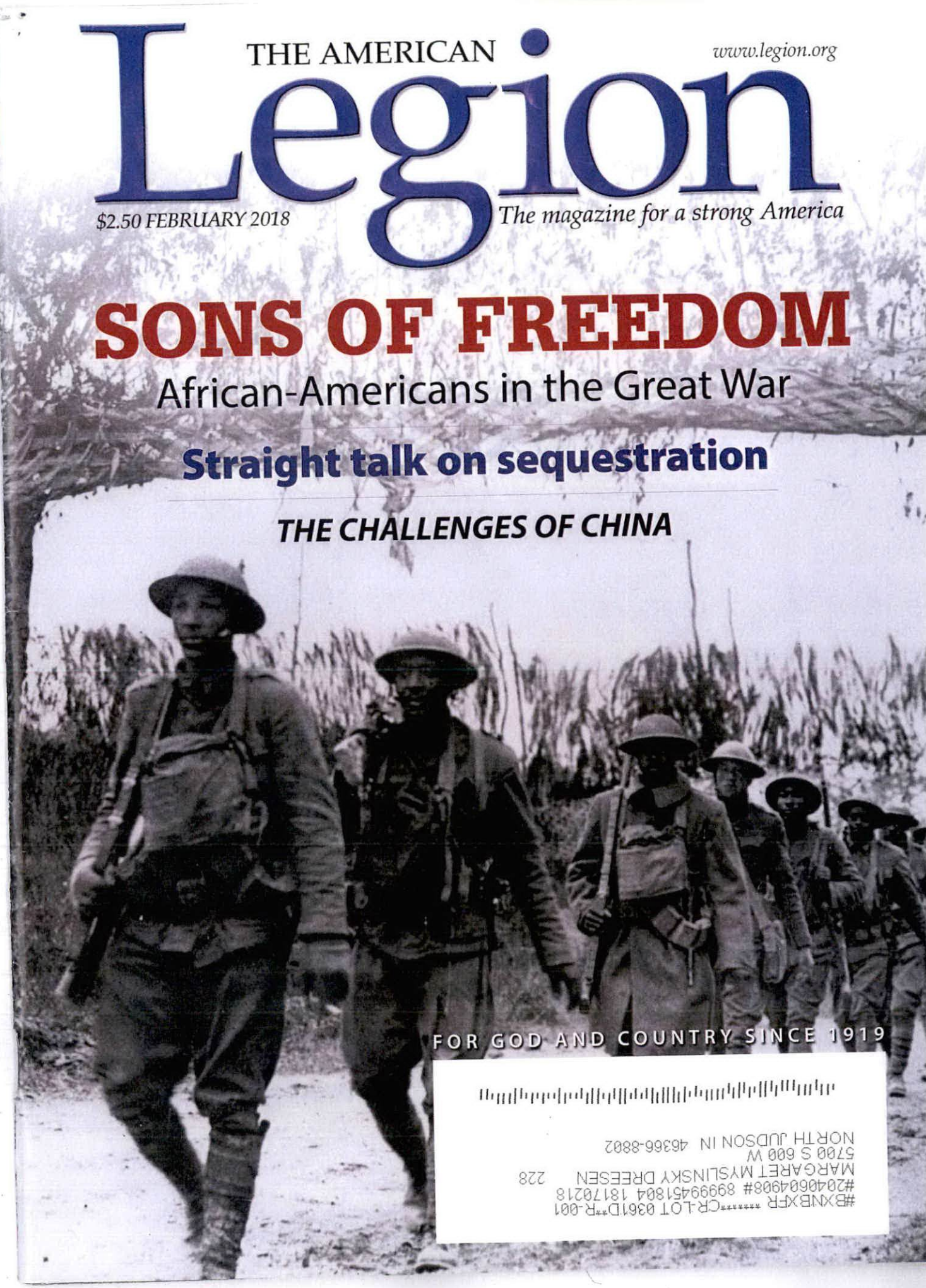
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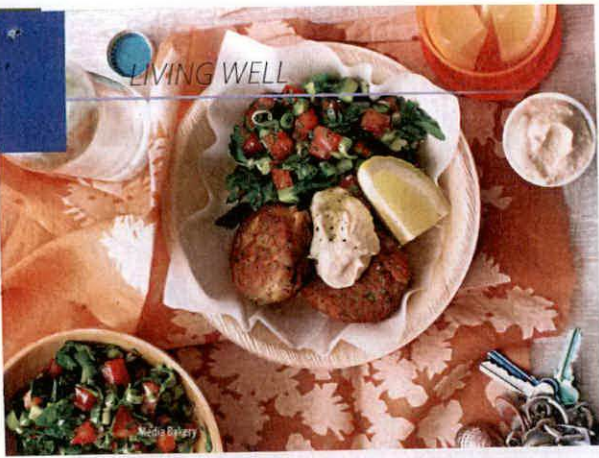
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MARGARET MYSLINSKY DREESEN 228
5700 S 600 W
NORTH JUDSON IN 46366-8802



Improving health, one meal at a time

Across the country, veterans like Fran Kondorf of Chicago are learning a skill that helps them live healthier lives every day. Kondorf is an active participant in VA's Healthy Teaching Kitchen (HTK) program, which educates veterans and their families on the basics of eating well.

Through in-person cooking lessons at the Jesse Brown VA Medical Center in Chicago, Kondorf has benefited from the expertise of registered dietician Allison Chikos. Like other nutrition educators throughout the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), Chikos wants to help participants make healthy, economical food choices while teaching easy ways to prepare fresh foods. "You learn different things that you can do that are healthy – simple tips. I enjoy them," Kondorf says.

The Chicago-based HTK is just one of 125 programs led by Nutrition and Food Services (NFS) departments at VHA facilities throughout the country. Chikos finds cooking classes to be an especially effective way to educate patients.

"I serve as a liaison between veterans and their doctors, demonstrating easy ways that they can lower blood pressure by limiting their salt intake, or manage diabetes by decreasing the amount of sugar in meals," she says. "They get to experience firsthand how simple and delicious healthy cooking can be."

She adds, "My No. 1 priority is that the food tastes good. It doesn't matter how nutritious it is if no one is going to eat it."

If you're interested in participating in the HTK program or other nutrition education services, contact your local VHA's NFS department. You can also go to www.nutrition.va.gov/healthy_teaching_kitchen.asp to download Yummy Benefits cookbooks, or to access healthy cooking videos through VA's YouTube channel. In addition, Chikos' cooking classes are streamed online and posted on the Chicago VA's Facebook page.

– Michelle Gibeault Traub

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and older, Carter found that visits related primarily to misuse of drugs increased by 78 percent between 2006 and 2012.

"A significant portion of those visits – 11 percent – was for opioids," she says.

Nationally, hospitalizations for opioid overuse in adults 65 and older increased by 9 percent a year between 1993 and 2012, nearly twice the increase seen in younger adults.

Simply being older contributes to the problem. Opioids are more potent in older people and their effects last longer, largely because the liver and kidneys metabolize and excrete drugs less efficiently. In addition, sedation and confusion are common opioid side effects. Seniors who take several prescription medications may confuse their pills or forget they have already taken their scheduled doses. Consuming alcohol or taking other drugs that depress the central nervous system, such as anti-anxiety medications and some sleep aids, further increases the risk for an opioid overdose.

Another problem is multiple prescriptions. After a hospital stay, it's not uncommon for someone to go from the hospital to a rehabilitation facility to home, receiving more than one opioid prescription along the way.

"We don't have a good way to track drugs from pharmacy to pharmacy to make sure old prescriptions are discontinued," Carter says. "Whether intentionally or by mistake, someone might be taking more than initially prescribed, the new dose plus the old dose."

Establishing a "family care team" is one way to ensure an older person's safety, says Jane Wolf Frances, a Los Angeles social worker and psychotherapist who specializes in family-care issues. For example, children can accompany parents to doctor visits, record what's being said and ask the doctor questions the parent might not think to ask. They can keep an eye on the medicine cabinet to check for duplicate or outdated prescriptions. Exploring non-drug alternatives for managing pain, such as physical therapy and exercise, and looking at the person's entire situation make an enormous difference, Frances says.

"Older people may not only be in a lot of physical pain, but have psychological pain from the loss of a loved one or the loss of their independence," she adds. "Get them involved in activities that they love with family and friends. Help them create a plan and purpose in life."

Health professionals aren't the only ones concerned about opioid misuse.

"Older adults themselves worry about addiction and may undertreat their pain at home, but that can cause their pain to spike," Carter says. "We really need to completely rethink how we can help older adults who are struggling with pain, multiple health conditions and other issues."

Judith Hurley is a freelance journalist who specializes in science and medicine.