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Partnering with Community Groups to Address the Mental Health Needs of Rural Veterans

Many Veterans who face mental illness and live in rural areas do not obtain the mental health care they need. To address those needs it is imperative to reach out to community stakeholders who may have more interaction with Veterans than the formal health care system. A recent Journal of Rural Health article describes a program, partially funded by the VHA Office of Rural Health (ORH), that was designed to improve engagement in and access to VA mental health services for rural OEF/OIF Veterans by partnering with three different community stakeholder groups: 1) rural clergy, 2) post secondary educators, and 3) criminal justice personnel. This pilot program, conducted in rural Arkansas, involved developing and delivering training for community stakeholders on the physical, psychosocial and spiritual health issues of OEF/OIF Veterans; establishing a student Veteran outreach initiative on 4 rural college campuses; and establishing a Veterans Treatment Court (VTC) to support Veterans involved with the criminal justice system. So far, 90 stakeholders have attended formal training workshops developed by this program: 32 student Veterans have been referred for various student services such as counseling; and 16 Veterans have been referred for eligibility assessments to gain entry into the VTC program. [Article Citation: Kirchner JE, Farmer MS, Shue VM, et al. Partnering With Communities to Address the Mental Health Needs of Rural Veterans. *The Journal of Rural Health*, 27(4), 416-424. [CLICK HERE TO VIEW ONLINE ABSTRACT](#)]

Did You Know?

- The prevalence of mental illness is similar in rural and urban areas, but mental health treatment specialists tend to be located disproportionately in urban areas. Thus, a shortage of mental health providers, along with the stigma often associated with mental illness are significant barriers to mental health treatment for rural Veterans.
- Over the last decade, VHA has worked diligently to bring mental health treatment to rural VA facilities either by staffing them with mental health providers or by delivering evidence based mental health services via telemedicine.
- Research indicates that about 1 in every 4 or 5 Veterans will return from war with some serious mental illness; most commonly depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and/or traumatic brain injury. Untreated mental illness can result in substance abuse, relationship difficulties, and job performance issues.



Families at Ease

During focus groups composed of OEF/OIF Veterans and their spouses living within 60 miles of Raleigh, North Carolina, researchers at the VISN 6 Mental Illness Research, Education, and Clinical Center (MIRECC) noted persistent family concerns about irritability, sleep problems, social withdrawal, rapid changes in family roles and responsibilities, and lack of communication among Veterans after deployment. Each of these factors contributes independently and collectively to family stress and threatens family breakup. Veterans and spouses most desired VA services related to anger management, marital and family counseling, stress management, benefits counseling, and career and school counseling. They identified the stigma associated with reporting mental health problems, their own pride and fear of portraying any sign of "weakness," the potential negative impact of seeking help on the chances for promotion, and "red tape" as key barriers to seeking assistance. In recognition of the impact that deployment-related stress can have on families, the VISN 6 MIRECC has piloted the Families at Ease program in North Carolina and is in the process of rolling out a national Families at Ease program, in collaboration with VISN 3 and the VA Office of Mental Health Services. This program helps family members cope with their Veteran's post deployment difficulties and supports the family's efforts to find help for the Veteran. It provides referrals for Veterans and their family members and coaches family members in motivating their Veteran to seek help. Contact Families at Ease at 1-888-823-7458, or by e-mail at Families.Ease.NC@va.gov.

