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Identifying Homeless Veterans Who Access Health Care Outside of the VA

Research on homeless Veterans has typically focused on those in a VA setting, but a new study published in the American Journal of Public Health sought to better identify those homeless Veterans who seek health care services outside of the VA. In 2011, researchers conducted a survey of 224 Health Care for the Homeless (HCH) clinics, with 110 clinics participating across 10 geographical regions. While 98% of clinics reported having a process for identifying those with Veteran status, their methods varied: 63% of clinics reported that staff asked about Veteran status during an intake, 25% reported that patients self-identified as a Veteran, and another 8.7% reported that identification procedures varied by staff member. Overall, consumer responses were affected by discharge status and confusion over definition of the term "Veteran." However, most Veterans were able to access needed services. Nearly 60% of Veteran consumers were connected to Veteran-specific services in the community, 45.7% were referred to VA Medical Centers, and 25.5% received assistance with VA benefit applications. More work remains to identify methods of recognizing homeless Veterans.

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Did You Know?

- A traumatic brain injury (TBI) is caused by a blow to the head from falls, motor vehicle crashes, sports injuries, or blast exposure, particularly in war zones.
- TBI can incur memory loss, impair concentration, affect emotional and impulse control, and contribute to behavioral problems such as depression and anxiety.
- At least 5.3 million Americans currently live with disabilities resulting from a TBI.
- The annual rate of TBI among active duty personnel increased significantly from 2000 to 2011. Most of these increases occurred from 2006-2008.
- The actual rate of TBI is believed to be underestimated, particularly for mild cases. Based on self-reported data, at least 15% of active duty troops in Afghanistan and Iraq have suffered a TBI.
- TBI has been called the "signature injury" of Operation Enduring Freedom/ Operation Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF).
- 33% of military personnel admitted to Walter Reed Army Medical Center have been diagnosed with TBI; 60% of those admitted to Walter Reed who have sustained blast-related injuries also have TBI.
- The full burden of TBI is difficult to estimate; implications for those with TBI can mean costly medical bills, rehabilitation costs, and lowered productivity and/or income. In 2000, these direct and indirect costs were estimated at \$60 billion per year.



Sources: (www.maketheconnection.net, www.cdc.gov, and www.va.gov) ◆

VA to Expand Benefits for Veterans With Traumatic Brain Injuries

This month, the VA plans to expand benefits for some Veterans with TBI and any of five other ailments. Those Veterans with TBI who also suffer from any of the following will be eligible for additional disability pay: Parkinson's disease, certain types of dementia, depression, unprovoked seizures, or other diseases of the hypothalamus and pituitary gland. The new regulations, which take effect mid-January, state that if a Veteran has a service-connected TBI, then the second illness will also be considered service-connected in relation to the TBI. A report from the National Academy of Sciences—Institute of Medicine found "sufficient evidence" to link moderate to severe TBI injuries with the five illnesses listed above. Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki stated, "We decide Veterans' disability claims based on the best science available. As scientific knowledge advances, VA will expand its programs to ensure Veterans receive the care and benefits they've earned and deserve." **Sources:** (www.va.gov) ◆

