U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Veterans Health Administration
Office of Rural Health
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ORH PROJECT OVERVIEW

Engaging Out-of-Care Distressed Veterans and their Partners in Outreach and an ACT-Based Intervention

Background

The stresses of military life, including deployment and reintegration cycles, regular relocation, and the mental and physical health consequences of trauma can lead to significant disruptions in marriages.[1] Indeed, most Veterans referred for behavioral health assessments endorse significant relationship concerns.[2] Relationship distress leads to increases in physical and mental health problems, disruptions in work and social functioning,[3] and is a common predictor of suicidal ideation and suicidal behaviors among Veterans.[4,5] Unfortunately, there are many barriers to accessing couples therapy within VA, including couple-level barriers such as logistical challenges of coordinating schedules, childcare, and stigma.[6] System-level barriers, particularly in rural areas, include limited numbers and locations of trained couples' therapists.[7] Implementing a couples-focused intervention requires specialized training.[8] Unfortunately, although most VA medical centers have couples' therapists, they are limited in number and geographic location.[9] Training providers who work with rural Veterans and their partners, in couples therapy, is critical to increasing access to effective couples' therapy.

BRAVE is a manualized 1-day (6 hour) couples' group therapy intervention. It integrates principles from Integrative Behavioral Couple Therapy (IBCT), the evidence-based protocol for couple therapy currently used in the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Veterans Health Administration (VHA); and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), an evidence-based protocol for a range of mental and physical health problems. BRAVE is offered as a "workshop", is available in digital and in-person formats, and combines didactics with experiential exercises. A provider training manual, patient workbooks, and dissemination toolkit have been developed.

Goals and Objectives

The overall purpose of VHA Office of Rural Health (ORH) Veterans Rural Health Resource Center-Iowa city project, *Engaging Out-of-Care Distressed Veterans and their Partners in Outreach and an ACT-Based Intervention*, is to strengthen the mental health and romantic relationships of distressed rural Veterans. To do so, we will disseminate BRAVE nationwide by increasing the number and location of providers who can provide a couples' intervention to rural Veterans and their partners.

The main objective is to train providers (Chaplains, Whole Health Coaches, and counselors) nationwide in the BRAVE intervention. In turn, trained providers will offer BRAVE to Veteran couples at their respective locations.

Methodology

BRAVE (Building Relationships with Vitality and Engagement) is a manualized, evidence-informed, one-day (6-hour) couples' workshop designed specifically for rural Veterans and their romantic partners. The workshop aims to strengthen relationship health and resilience through structured, skill-based activities. BRAVE is available in both digital and in-person formats to maximize accessibility for rural populations.

Public Recognition and Expansion: Following the publication of an article on BRAVE by the Department of Veterans Affairs in 2024 (https://news.va.gov/127950/couples-workshop-helps-Veterans-relationships/), there was a significant increase in interest among VA providers. In response, a national provider training initiative was launched in 2024 to support the dissemination of BRAVE.

- Training and Dissemination Efforts (Fiscal year (FY) 2025): In FY 2025, BRAVE provider training has been actively delivered across the nation. The training program targets key VA personnel including Chaplains, Whole Health Coaches, and Counselors.

- Training Format: Each provider training is facilitated by two psychologists involved in the original development of BRAVE. Trainings include: Pre-workshop readings and preparation; Two full-day, instructor-led group training sessions; Cohorts of 5–6 providers to ensure interactive, small-group learning.

- Training and Dissemination Materials: BRAVE Provider Training Manual; Participant Workbooks; Dissemination Toolkit to guide implementation and outreach efforts; These resources support fidelity to the BRAVE model and equip providers to effectively deliver the workshop within their local VA or community settings.

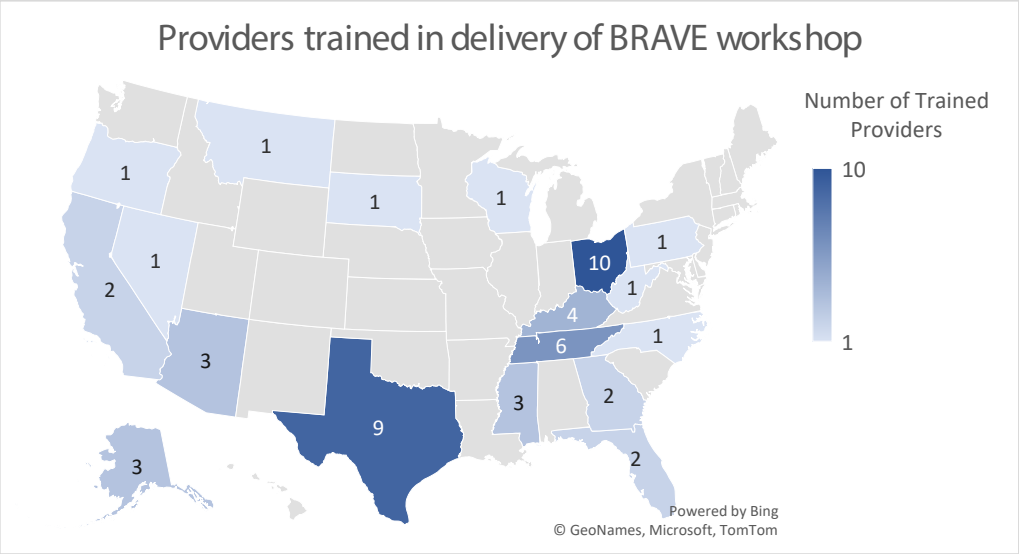
Assessment procedures. Chaplains, Whole Health Coaches, and counselors trained in BRAVE provide qualitative feedback on the training. They also report on the number of BRAVE workshops conducted and the number of Veteran couples treated following the training. To make tracking easier, trained providers receive a brief online survey every quarter to update us on the BRAVE workshops they've conducted and the number of rural Veterans they've served.

Impact on Rural Veteran Health

- To date, 52 VA providers nationwide have completed our 2-day training of BRAVE.
- To date, 3 BRAVE Workshops have been implemented by trained providers:

Key Takeaways

- Expanding access to relationship-focused care requires new approaches. Training providers in a brief, evidence-based intervention, delivered in-person or virtually, can reach Veteran couples who wouldn't otherwise engage in traditional therapy especially in rural locations.
- Delivering the program through community-based organization (CBO) partnerships also reaches couples who may not seek care through VA Medical Centers.



- Chaplains, Whole Health coaches, and family service providers at VAMCs nationwide work with Veterans and their families. In many rural communities, Veterans are more likely to seek support from chaplains than from traditional mental health professionals, due to established relationships, cultural trust, and accessibility.
- Training chaplains and other alternative providers in couples-based interventions is a practical way to build capacity and trust within the VA system.
- To date, 52 VA providers nationwide have completed our 2-day training of BRAVE. These providers are currently offering the workshop to Veteran couples in their location.
- By training providers nationwide in the BRAVE couples workshop, we are expanding access to couples care for rural Veterans and their romantic partners.

Type of Providers Trained	Number
Chaplain	25
Social Worker	13
Clinical Psychologist	8
Marriage and Family Therapist	4
Readjustment Counselor	1
RN Treatment Coordinator in Domiciliary	1
Total trained as of 6/25/2025	**52**

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