



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT QUARTERLY • • •

The **Quarterly Newsletter** of the Office of Community Engagement & Center for Compassionate Care Innovation

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ABOUT US

Office of Community Engagement

The mission of the Office of Community Engagement (OCE) is to serve as a trusted resource and a catalyst for the growth of effective partnerships at the national, state, and community level and as a facilitator/ access point for public and private entities interested in partnering with VHA to benefit Veterans, their families, caregivers, and Survivors.

Center for Compassionate Care Innovation

The mission of the Center for Compassionate Care Innovation (CCI) is to explore emerging therapies that are safe and ethical to enhance Veteran physical and mental well-being when other treatments have not been successful. CCI primarily focuses on treatments that address the following health concerns: traumatic brain injury (TBI), posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), chronic pain, and suicidality.

OCE FEATURE STORY

2018 VHA Community Partnership Challenge Winners Celebrate "Return on Partnership"

VHA holds an annual contest to recognize successful partnerships between VA medical facilities and nongovernmental organizations. This year the theme was Return on Partnership. VA medical facilities were encouraged to submit entries that demonstrate how their partnerships are paying off for Veterans and advancing VA's mission, best practices and strategic goals: to provide greater Choice to Veterans, prevent suicide, increase timeliness, focus resources and modernize VA systems.

The three winning facilities are the Central Texas Veterans Health Care System, Phoenix VA Health Care System, and VA San Diego Healthcare System. Their partnerships were among more than 100 entries from across the country.

"This approach to partnering with local community partners is not just a smart thing to do, it's the right thing to do for our Veterans. If you want to travel fast, travel by yourself. If you want to travel far, you go with others" said Dr. Carolyn Clancy, Executive in Charge of VHA, during the virtual awards ceremony.

GET OUR NEWS UPDATES

Visit <https://www.va.gov/healthpartnerships> and enter your email address in the "Connect with VHA" box on the right.

JOINING HANDS, FEEDING VETERANS



A Veteran receiving food from one of the mobile food pantries.

This mobile foodbank partnership between the Central Texas Veterans Health Care System and the Central Texas Foodbank is supporting hundreds of Veteran households with fresh fruit, produce and other healthy food options. The expansion of the Central Texas Food Bank's mobile pantry service for Veterans is part of the Veterans Pantry Pilot (VPP) program from Feeding America, the nation's largest hunger relief organization. Together, they serve their local area Veterans by ensuring that they have sufficient food and access to nutrition. Since August of 2017, the mobile pantries have distributed nearly 87,000 pounds of food, which equates to more than 72,000 meals for Veterans and their families.

BE CONNECTED



Team AMVETS™ volunteers

Since 2009 the Phoenix VA Health Care System and the Arizona Coalition for Military Families have worked together on *Be Connected*, a program to create an ecosystem of support for Veterans and their families throughout the state of Arizona. *Be Connected* brings together important stakeholders from the public and private sectors to address the elevated suicide risk of Arizona Veterans. Since its launch, *Be Connected* has helped more than 1,400 individuals through its support line and over 1,000 resources have been mapped on the online platform.

TEAM AMVETS™ WELCOME HOME

More than 5,000 Veterans have been served since the inception of the partnership between the VA San Diego Health Care System and Team AMVETS™. The Welcome Home program helps Veterans through donations of home furnishings, including furniture, household items, cooking utensils

and appliances. The program specifically targets Veterans who are exiting homelessness and moving into new housing that is likely unfurnished. Team AMVETS™ has donated over \$500,000 in San Diego County, and close to \$2 million in Southern California. Some Veterans have been so grateful for the assistance that they now volunteer at the Team AMVETS™ warehouse, joining nearly 5,000 other Welcome Home partnership volunteers across the region.



CONGRATULATIONS to the winners! These and other partnerships will be highlighted in a special edition newsletter coming July 2018.

VA Medical-Legal Partnerships (MLP): VA Clinicians and Legal Providers Making the Connection for Veterans

Making legal services accessible to Veterans is critical in addressing the social determinants of health. Unfortunately, VA does not have statutory authority to directly provide or contract for legal services for Veterans. As a result, many low-income Veterans rely on legal aid organizations, which are often understaffed and do not have expertise with Veterans' issues. The [2016 CHALENG survey on Veterans homelessness](#) found that affordable legal assistance consistently ranks high on the list of unmet needs — sometimes even higher than housing.

MLPs support care collaboration between medical and legal professionals to address the outstanding medical and legal needs of Veterans. The MLP initiative is spearheaded by

the MLP Taskforce at VA Central Office. It is comprised of a multi-disciplinary team from the VA offices of General Counsel, Community Engagement, Social Work Services and the Veterans Justice Outreach program. The Office of General Council has challenged the VA MLP Taskforce to increase VA participation in MLPs and legal clinics to 100 percent.

In order to increase legal partner participation, in November 2017, VA signed a memorandum of agreement (MOA) with the American Bar Association, The Veterans Consortium and National Law School Veterans Clinic Consortium to improve Veterans' access to free legal services.

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The MLP program at the Bay Pines Healthcare System in southwestern Florida, launched in February 2017, shows how the partnership encourages service delivery collaboration between medical and legal practitioners. The Bay Pines MLP is a collaboration between the C. W. Bill Young Medical Center, Stetson University Veterans Law Institute, Bay Area Legal Services and Gulfcoast Legal Services.

Through MLP partnerships, volunteer attorneys train VA health care teams to screen Veterans for unmet legal needs. Then the medical team refers Veterans to on-site legal clinics where pro-bono and privately funded attorneys provide legal services for non-criminal issues at no-cost for those who qualify for assistance. Services available to Veterans through the new program range from Veterans benefits and Social Security Disability to family law, guardianship, landlord-tenant disputes and elder law.

“[The program] is a terrific collaboration with our community in service to America’s heroes, and it makes a big difference for them and for us in helping them support their health outcomes and reach their goals,” said Suzanne M. Klinker, Director, Bay Pines VAHCS.

As of January 2018, the Bay Pines MLP had assisted 344 clients with legal issues ranging from bankruptcy to

housing, estate/probate and family law to social security and Veterans benefits. The majority of cases (54%) dealt specifically with Veterans benefits. In addition to the clients that the Bay Pines MLP assisted, dozens of other inquiries were received or referred for other services. The on-site legal clinic serves clients two days per week for both walk-in and scheduled appointments.

Currently VA has 25 MLPs and numerous legal clinics at VA facilities.

 **MORE INFORMATION**

VA employees interested in setting up MLPs can email the MLP Taskforce at VAMLPTaskforce@va.gov.

Read the VA news release announcing the MOA at <https://www.va.gov/opa/pressrel/pressrelease.cfm?id=3974> and get a list of VA-based legal clinics by visiting <https://www.va.gov/ogc/docs/LegalServices.pdf>.

The Veterans Hub: Calling all Community Organizations! Kicking Off the Veterans Hub Recruitment Campaign

The Office of Community Engagement will launch a nationwide campaign in support of the Veterans Hub to bring together policy-makers, health care experts and nonprofit organizations in an unprecedented collaboration to improve the health and well-being of our Veterans.

Part of the global public health initiative 100 Million Healthier Lives and spearheaded by the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI), the Veterans Hub aims to enrich the lives of Veterans in the communities in which they live by improving their health and well-being. This is accomplished by addressing social determinants of health which include access to safe housing, food security, reliable transportation, spiritual support and comprehensive health care services. The Veterans Hub aims to build bridges between organizations, communities and social support systems to create local networks of organizations and individuals supporting the Hub’s mission and theme, “Working together to help Veterans thrive.”

Members of the Veterans Hub can access a virtual network of individuals and organizations working to improve the lives of Veterans. Through its social media platform, <http://connect.100mlives.org/>, members can collaborate, network and post information about the work that they are engaged in to help raise awareness about their efforts. The Veterans Hub is one seven topical hubs that make up the 100 Million Healthier Lives movement.

In the coming weeks, OCE will release a new member toolkit that has information and resources for participating in the Veterans Hub, including social media graphics and ideas on how to engage with other Veterans Hub members.

A Pain Management Procedure for PTSD?

At the VA Long Beach Healthcare System, Dr. Michael Alkire and Dr. Chris Reist are using a nerve block to treat posttraumatic stress disorder.

When Dr. Michael Alkire, Chief of Anesthesiology at the VA Long Beach Health Care System, first started hearing the anecdotes he was skeptical. Stellate ganglion block (SGB), a well-established treatment for upper-body pain disorders, was rumored to lessen symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), particularly hyperarousal.

“We decided we had better try one,” Dr. Alkire said, referring to the treatment. He first performed SGB for PTSD in a small research study conducted at VA Long Beach. Within the last year, however, the team has been able to treat 22 more Veterans through a clinical demonstration project facilitated by the Center for Compassionate Care Innovation (CCI). The initiative offers SGB to a subset of the Veteran population with PTSD who have not found relief through evidence-based treatments.

Dr. Chris Reist, psychiatrist on the SGB treatment team, notes that there is a need for innovation. “Despite the development of evidence-based medication and psychotherapy treatments, many Veterans have minimal or insufficient responses. Consequently, there continues to be significant suffering and disability,” he said.

During the SGB procedure, an anesthesiologist uses ultrasound or x-ray imaging to guide a needle to a bundle of nerve tissue called the stellate ganglion at the base of the neck. The provider then [administers](#) a numbing medication to anesthetize the tissue.

SGB is considered an innovative approach to managing PTSD symptoms. While controlled trials are currently being conducted, there is widespread anecdotal evidence of SGB’s positive effects on PTSD symptoms. Because the procedure has been used for decades for pain management, safety

and risk data are well understood. For these reasons, CCI facilitated the offering of the treatment for Veterans who have failed to improve with standard treatment.

“We see about one third of patients get a profound response. In fact, the last patient we treated even called it a miracle,” Dr. Alkire said. Another third of patients seem to improve over the next week as measured on clinical tests and reported by their families.

This site’s clinical demonstration will run through Fall 2018. The goal is expansion to further sites within VHA to provide Veterans with difficult-to-treat PTSD and their care teams more options to consider for their treatment.



Check out a video of Stellate Ganglion Block (SGB) treatment in action at https://players.brightcove.net/2851863979001/default_default/index.html?videoid=5713669618001

Healing Under Pressure?

VA now referring Veterans for Hyperbaric Oxygen Therapy for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) at two medical centers.

Veterans can now receive hyperbaric oxygen therapy (HBOT) through referral from the VA Northern California Health Care System or Eastern Oklahoma VA Health Care System. This therapy is available for Veterans with difficult-to-treat posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) who meet certain ethical criteria.

A new clinical demonstration, facilitated by the Center for Compassionate Care Innovation (CCI), has made HBOT available to a subset of the Veteran population, diagnosed with PTSD, who have previously tried evidence-based treatments but not



Patients receiving HBOT treatment in multi place chamber.

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found relief. HBOT has been used since the 1930s to treat decompression sickness, a condition associated with scuba diving, and wounds that are not healing well. The therapy is considered an innovative treatment for PTSD and is being evaluated by CCI for its potential as a more widely-offered therapy within the Veterans Health Administration.

During HBOT, Veterans receive pure, medical-grade oxygen under increased atmospheric pressure while they sit or lie in a specialized hyperbaric chamber. This makes more oxygen available to the tissues of the body, which may promote healing. Treatments take place up to five days a week for up to nine weeks.

 **MORE INFORMATION**

Email VHACCI@va.gov for more information.

Veterans with difficult-to-treat PTSD who meet certain criteria can now receive HBOT through referral from the VA Northern California Health Care System or the Eastern Oklahoma VA Health Care System.

STORIES FROM THE FIELD

A recurring spotlight of VA clinicians working to offer more care options to Veterans with difficult-to-treat conditions through CCI-led clinical demonstrations. These projects expand treatment choices for Veterans while research continues elsewhere.



Dr. Jeffrey Knight,
Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) Champion

Current position:

Principal Investigator, National Center for PTSD-Behavioral Science Division, VA Boston Healthcare System.

Areas of Specialization:

PTSD; Neuropsychology

Years with VA:

29

How long have you been involved in studying TBI?

I originally began in 1984 with psychiatric and neurology patients who had co-occurring head injuries. Interest in TBI particularly surged because Veterans were returning from duty in Iraq and Afghanistan with medical, neurological and psychiatric injuries.

NEW CCI RESOURCES

New Resources from the Center for Compassionate Care Innovation: Check out our website (www.va.gov/healthpartnerships) to find new sources of information, including:

- **CCI Fact Sheet:** https://www.va.gov/HEALTHPARTNERSHIPS/docs/CCIFactsheet_30Mar2018.pdf
- **Mental Health Mobility Service Dog Tool Kit and Fact Sheet:** <https://www.va.gov/HEALTHPARTNERSHIPS/docs/CCIServiceDogFactSheet.pdf>
- **Stellate Ganglion Block (SGB) Fact Sheet:** <https://www.va.gov/HEALTHPARTNERSHIPS/docs/CCISGBFactSheet.pdf>
- **SGB Video:** https://players.brightcove.net/2851863979001/default_default/index.html?videoId=5713669618001

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What is your motivation for working with TBI patients?

As a neuropsychologist, I see a variety of brain injuries and how they impact the lives of patients. TBI can involve gray or white matter in the brain and produce localized damage or be spread across many areas of the brain. There are frequently occurring TBI symptoms, but there is also a lot of variability between people. This makes no two patients with TBI exactly alike.

Unfortunately, there are no first-line pharmacological or medical interventions to treat the damaged brain cells and cure the injury. Those who do not fully recover often have residual symptoms that interfere with daily functioning and need help beyond existing traditional treatments.

Are there any patient experiences that really exemplify your work with TBI?

We have a series of case studies using a low-level laser therapy (LLLT) treatment. Like light-emitting diode (LED) therapy, LLLT uses a light source, in this case a laser, to treat TBI. The underlying principle between the two is called 'phototherapy,' using light to stimulate healing.

These patients experienced head injuries three to 10 years ago and continue to be affected by chronic symptoms such as limited attention, fatigue from mental exertion, reduced emotional regulation and memory impairment. The impact is significant enough to affect their ability to work.

After completing a course of treatment, patients' attention, concentration and recall improved. They experienced increased mental stamina, and their families observed that they were calmer and could better control their emotions. These results extend beyond the laboratory to real-world impacts that are meaningful to patients and their families.

Where do you see TBI treatments going in the future?

If the CCI-facilitated [LED therapy home treatment demonstration currently underway at the Jamaica Plain](#) campus of VA Boston Healthcare System continues yielding positive results, I think that a home treatment protocol could be refined and applied in VA clinics more broadly. This could really make a big difference in the lives of Veterans with TBI across the country, especially those who live in rural areas or who have other limitations accessing care. I look forward to the therapy becoming a validated and recognized standard VA treatment.

MORE INFORMATION

Read the press release announcing the TBI clinical demonstration at <https://www.va.gov/opa/pressrel/pressrelease.cfm?id=3986> to learn more about the CCI-led clinical demonstration of TBI.

Check out an online article about LED treatment and TBI on Vantage Point at <https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/46633/expanding-traumatic-brain-injury-treatment-options-veterans/>.



INNOVATIONS INBOX

The Center for Compassionate Care Innovation (CCI) accepts proposals for emerging health care treatments or innovative uses of existing treatment options. In particular, CCI is interested in treatments intended to help Veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, chronic pain and Veterans at risk for suicide. Being proactive to prevent Veteran suicides is one of VA's top priorities. Share innovative treatment options with CCI through our online submission portal: <https://www.va.gov/HEALTHPARTNERSHIPS/CCISubmitaProposal.asp>.

Innovative ideas shared with CCI should be safe and appropriate for possible adoption within the Veterans Health Administration. CCI subject matter experts critically review all submissions and assess the potential benefits and risks of all proposals. For further guidelines about submitting a proposal to CCI, as well as answers to frequently asked questions, please visit the link above.

Up next

OCE

Special Edition Newsletter: 2018 VHA Community Partnership Challenge Winner Spotlights: Learn about the impact community partnerships have for Veterans and their families.

Summer Newsletter: Learn more about the 100 Million Healthier Lives Veterans Hub campaign. See what's new with Mental Health Mobility Service Dog Initiative.

Get Involved

- Want to partner with VA? Email us at CommunityEngagement@va.gov.
- Visit our website at <https://www.va.gov/HEALTHPARTNERSHIPS/oceabout.asp>
- Get previous issues of the newsletter on the website by visiting the link above and clicking the left-hand navigation bar.

CCI

On the horizon from CCI: HBOT video and information.

Get Involved

- Share stories of Veteran-service dog pairing successes under the Mental Health Mobility Service Dog Initiative to VHACCISD@va.gov.
- Visit our website at <https://www.va.gov/HEALTHPARTNERSHIPS/index.asp>
- Submit an emerging therapy proposal through our portal at <https://www.va.gov/HEALTHPARTNERSHIPS/CCISubmitaProposal.asp>

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