



QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER
VOLUME 4 ISSUE 4
SEPTEMBER 2020

VHA's Office of Community Engagement and
Center for Compassionate Care Innovation

We Are All Partners In Suicide Prevention

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VA



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Veterans Health Administration



A Note From the Nurse Executive



As a team dedicated to improving Veterans' physical and mental health and well-being, there is no topic more heartbreaking to us than Veteran suicide. As members of the Veterans Health Administration (VHA)'s Office of Community Engagement (OCE) and Center for Compassionate Care Innovation (CCI), preventing these tragedies is top of mind when we consider forming a partnership with an organization or fostering exploration of a safe medical innovation for Veterans. Suicide prevention education for our partners is included in every collaboration OCE facilitates, and CCI upholds suicide prevention as one of its four main focus areas.

September is Suicide Prevention Awareness Month. To that end, we bring you a story on **page 3** about a new partnership with OnStar that is designed to help Veterans in crisis get help with the touch of a button. We want all of our partners to have access to the latest and best resources and education to prevent Veteran suicide. See **page 4** for details on that and how our new partners are helping Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors thrive. Speaking of partnerships that are doing excellent work in the field, meet the winners of the 2020 VHA Community Partnership Challenge on **page 8**.

Also, we have good news coming out of CCI on **page 7** for Veterans who are diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Our team member reports that she expects the use of stellate ganglion block to expand after more than 185 treatments have been successfully completed with no adverse events.

Finally, as we announced in July, OCE and CCI are now aligned under the VHA Office of Discovery, Education and Affiliate Networks (DEAN) as part of VHA's modernization. This fall, OCE and CCI's name will change to the *National Center for Healthcare Advancement and Partnerships* to reflect the combined mission of our office. In the meantime, we have received a warm welcome from Dr. Carolyn Clancy, Assistant Under Secretary for Health.

"We are tremendously excited to have the Office of Community Engagement and Center for Compassionate Care Innovation join the DEAN family. OCE's outstanding work in partnership formation has opened new doors for collaboration and CCI's innovative approach to compassionate care has given new hope to Veterans. Having our OCE colleagues on board will greatly bolster DEAN's efforts toward making VHA a learning organization."

—Dr. Carolyn Clancy, Assistant Under Secretary for Health,
VHA Office of Discovery, Education and Affiliate Networks

In good health,
Dr. Tracy L. Weistreich

*Nurse Executive, Office of Community Engagement
and Center for Compassionate Care Innovation*

VHA partners with OnStar to prevent Veteran suicide

A Veteran's potential death by suicide, prevented by quick thinking and an in-vehicle safety and security system, resulted in a partnership that could help save Veterans' lives.

VHA psychologist Dr. Jamie Davis was working with a Veteran who reported that her spouse, also a Veteran, was out driving and reported that he did not want to live.

"He wouldn't tell her where he was, go to the VA, or meet her anywhere," said Dr. Davis. "When asked about locating him through her phone's GPS, she said his car was **OnStar**-equipped. We called OnStar, and police were able to coordinate with OnStar to locate him and bring him in safely for an evaluation."

The story's happy ending inspired Dr. Davis to contact OnStar to develop an official partnership with VHA after she joined OCE. OCE facilitates and manages nonmonetary partnerships with nongovernmental organizations to improve the quality of life for Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors.

The partnership, which became official this year, will help connect Veterans in crisis with mental health assistance by using OnStar's in-vehicle emergency services button or OnStar's smartphone app. Veterans who contact OnStar because of a mental health crisis can be transferred to VA's **Veterans Crisis Line** (VCL), a 24/7 hotline that is staffed by trained responders, many of whom are Veterans themselves. Through the partnership, VA will provide resources and education to OnStar about suicide prevention, military culture, and how to determine if the caller has served in the military.

Additional partnership objectives include providing training to VA clinicians and OnStar call center staff to facilitate suicide prevention efforts for Veterans and explore opportunities for how to use OnStar tools, techniques, and services to

improve access to suicide prevention resources. VA clinicians, for example, will be trained to ask at-risk Veterans if they have OnStar and include that information in a Veteran's suicide prevention safety plan as a resource should the Veteran experience emotional distress or a suicidal crisis, Dr. Davis said.

"OnStar's emergency-certified advisors are trained in how to help people who have a mental health crisis," said Ms. Ann Maher, assistant manager of emergency service and technology at OnStar. For Veterans who wish to speak to a crisis line responder, OnStar will provide a "warm hand-off" to VCL. "We're not going to conference you in and then hang up," said Ms. Maher. "We're going to stay connected and let the VCL know what's going on. We're going to bridge all the parties together, and we will remain in the background until the person who called in or the crisis counselor determines we're no longer needed."

OnStar safety and security devices require a trial or paid subscription plan and are available on most General Motors vehicles. Additionally, OnStar's Guardian smartphone app allows members with active service plans and up to seven family members or friends access from their phones. The app also has an emergency services button, which can help OnStar advisors locate members in distress. Members can also choose to share their locations with each other within the app.

Suicide prevention is the top clinical priority for VA and educating partners about suicide prevention and intervention for Veterans is a cornerstone of any partnership VHA pursues. Dr. Davis said the partnership has the potential to help any Veteran who is in crisis, regardless of discharge status or whether they are enrolled in VA care.

For more information on how OCE builds effective partnerships to support Veterans, visit va.gov/healthpartnerships.

To learn more about VA-wide suicide prevention efforts and supportive services for Veterans, please visit: mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide_prevention/.

Calling all partners: Suicide prevention is everyone's business

Suicide prevention is VA and VHA's top clinical priority and as a result, all VHA partnerships include education about suicide awareness, prevention strategies, and resources. VA and VHA call on everyone, including our partners, to help prevent suicide among Veterans.

As part of each partnership's memorandum of agreement, VHA agrees to share Veteran-specific care concerns and suicide prevention strategies, including publicly available VHA-developed educational resources and publicly available health-related information, resources, and training such as the **PsychArmor Institute S.A.V.E. course** and the **Veterans Crisis Line**.

The free, online S.A.V.E course, developed by PsychArmor Institute in collaboration with VA, is designed to help everyone become empowered to play a vital role in suicide prevention. The course helps participants develop a general understanding of the problem of suicide in the United States; understand how to identify a Veteran who may be at risk for suicide; and know what to do if they identify a Veteran at risk.



Veterans Crisis Line (VCL) is available 24/7 via phone, text, or online chat to connect Veterans with trained crisis responders. This confidential resource is available to all Veterans, current military members, and their loved ones. Veterans are encouraged to reach out to VCL for support when issues reach a crisis point, even if it is not a suicidal crisis. Many of the responders are Veterans

themselves and have a personal understanding of issues that their peers are going through, such as transitioning to civilian life, sleeplessness, relationship struggles, depression, and more.

In addition to immediate support, VCL also offers resources such as how to recognize signs of crisis, a self-check quiz, and tools the Veteran can use to find support within their community.

In the last year, OCE has facilitated several partnerships. One, with **OnStar**, was formed as a result of a Veteran's threat of suicide. Please see page 3 for the full story on this new collaboration. The others focus on support and resources that promote good physical and mental health, which in turn, can help Veterans thrive. Partnerships improve Veterans' access to social determinants of health (SDOH), which are the conditions in the environments where Veterans live, learn, work, worship, play and age. Positive SDOH include education, employment, food security, housing, social connectedness, spiritual support and transportation. A **VA study** published in 2019 found that negative SDOH are strong predictors of suicide risk.



GO₂ Foundation for Lung Cancer

The goals of this partnership are to increase Veteran lung cancer screening and earlier health care interventions. VHA's National Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention is also focused on screening for lung cancer and offers informative resources for Veterans about screenings and VA's work in this area.

VA diagnoses 7,700 Veterans with lung cancer each year and an estimated 900,000 remain at risk. In addition to increased access to lung cancer screening for Veterans through its national network of more than 700 screening centers, **GO₂ Foundation** is working with VHA to provide additional resources for screening implementation, professional development training, patient education campaigns, and potential research programs.

GO₂ Foundation also offers a helpline, a phone buddy program for one-on-one peer support, the National Lung Cancer Support Group by Telephone, which meets the second Tuesday of the month, except in July; and a monthly online forum called Lung Cancer Living Room, featuring presentations by lung cancer specialists, physicians, and researchers. Topics can include early detection, treatment options, molecular and genetic testing, clinical trials, drug discoveries, personalized medicine, nutrition, surgical equipment and procedures, up-to-date news about advancements, and more.

MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger

VHA and **MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger** have formed a partnership to improve Veterans' access to food security. MAZON leads a national effort to eliminate barriers to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which helps to keep food on the table for an estimated 1.4 million Veterans. SNAP effectively reduces food insecurity and poverty rates, contributes to savings

in long-term health care costs, and positively impacts health, education, and economic self-sufficiency outcomes, according to MAZON.

The partnership increases awareness about the risks associated with food insecurity and options to address it through outreach to Veterans. MAZON's #FreedomFromHunger campaign calls on people to write Congress members to let them know that Veteran hunger is unacceptable and that SNAP should be protected. According to MAZON, 27% of Veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are struggling to put food on the table. These Veterans suffer from food insecurity at more than double the national rate.

MAZON is a national advocacy organization working to end hunger among people of all faiths in the United States and Israel.

Parkinson's Foundation

VHA and the **Parkinson's Foundation** work together to increase Veterans' and health care providers' access to Parkinson's disease information and resources, educate and train staff on disease management, and improve service coordination and navigation for Veterans.

The Foundation supports outreach efforts that promote education and awareness among Veterans. The Foundation's goal is to make life better for people with Parkinson's disease by improving care and advancing research toward a cure. It is estimated that 80,000 Veterans suffer from Parkinson's disease.

VA operates six specialized Parkinson's Disease Research, Education, and Clinical Centers, (PADRECCs) which assist Veterans in effectively managing Parkinson's and other movement disorders by way of VA pharmacy benefits, physical, occupational, and speech therapies, medical equipment, surgical services, and other valuable resources. PADRECCs offer state-of-the-art clinical

care, education, research, and national outreach and advocacy.

VA and the Foundation will work together to advance scientific knowledge of the disease. To foster collaboration, a Parkinson's Foundation representative has been included as a liaison to the PADRECC work group, and a VHA representative has been added as a liaison to the Foundation's Scientific Advisory Board, the Centers of Excellence Advisory Committee, and the People with Parkinson's Advisory Council.

Pet Partners

Pet Partners collaborates with VA to develop opportunities for Veterans to benefit from pet visitation, clinical interventions with therapy animals, and other activities and events. The aim of this partnership is to bring more Veteran patients the benefits of the human-animal bond. Research shows that people in contact with animals may experience lower blood pressure, reduced risk of cardiovascular disease, lessened anxiety and pain, and decreased feelings of loneliness.

Pet Partners volunteer teams have long made visits to patients in VA medical centers. When the coronavirus pandemic made in-person visits impossible, Pet Partners volunteers started emailing photos of the animals to patients and conducting Facebook Live events to stay engaged with Veterans.

In addition, Pet Partners is also offering a program to help Veterans create structured family time and help their children maintain and improve their reading skills, especially when they are unable to be in the classroom. "We Are All Ears" encourages children to read to their pets to increase their confidence in reading aloud. Many children feel more at ease reading to animals, according to research reported by Pet Partners. The organization has created a pledge form that families and children can sign and, on the "**We Are All Ears**" website, families can find reading logs, bookmark templates, and other activities and resources.

Y-USA

Through this partnership, which began in 2015 and was renewed in 2019, VHA employees throughout the country work with local YMCAs to connect Veterans to opportunities for exercise, physical movement, and socialization.

Veterans can access volunteer opportunities plus services and benefits in the areas of healthy lifestyle programming and community reintegration. In addition, **Y-USA** is offering free, online, on-demand fitness videos for activities such as yoga, barre, weightlifting, core conditioning, and tai chi through its "**YMCA 360**" platform in response to stay-at-home orders issued due to COVID-19. Recently, videos featuring the arts have been added for children. Classes include dance, culinary arts, visual arts, and teen poetry.

The benefits to Veterans' health of physical activity are well-documented: "Sport and physical activity enhance subjective well-being in Veterans through active coping and doing things again, PTSD [posttraumatic stress disorder] symptom reduction, positive affective experience ... and quality of life," according to The Institute for Veterans and Military Families.

The offerings of this partnership extend to improving social connectedness. In an example of a local VA/YMCA partnership, Veterans who engage in VA programming at the San Francisco YMCA locations are finding a sense of community, said Mr. Chris Geronimo, Veterans' strength and wellness program coordinator at the San Francisco VA Medical Center. He explained that Veterans become unofficial peer supports, making sure that new Veterans are welcomed and reminded that they are not alone.

For more information on OCE and its partnership work, please visit va.gov/healthpartnerships.

Use of stellate ganglion block as treatment for Veterans diagnosed with PTSD expected to expand

A successful clinical demonstration project led by CCI and VA Long Beach Healthcare System is expected to expand the use of a treatment that can help Veterans who have been diagnosed with PTSD.

Since its inception in September 2017, the clinical staff members at VA Long Beach have treated more than 120 Veterans who have PTSD symptoms with an injection of an anesthetic to a bundle of nerves, called the stellate ganglion, at the base of the patient's neck. Many Veterans experienced immediate relief after the procedure, and some Veterans benefitted from an additional injection. More than 185 treatments have been successfully completed with no adverse events.

VHA health system specialist and CCI team member, Ms. Christine Eickhoff, said the treatment, called stellate ganglion block (SGB), is being used increasingly to treat Veterans diagnosed with PTSD at other VA facilities. She expects that trend to continue as the CCI team shares what it has learned in terms of best practices, more anesthesiologists are trained on how to administer the treatment, and more evidence about SGB's effectiveness becomes available.

SGB is not considered an established first-line treatment for PTSD. However, there is **growing evidence** that SGB may help alleviate PTSD symptoms such as anxiety and feeling hyperalert. SGB appears to calm the "fight or flight" feeling many Veterans experience. It is not known exactly how the treatment works, but according to Drs. Michael T. Alkire and Christopher Reist at VA Long Beach, SGB likely affects the parts of the brain that manage anxiety.

Ms. Eickhoff said SGB is an adjunctive treatment for PTSD—meaning it can be used in addition to the

"gold standards" for treating the disorder—such as psychotherapies like cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR).

"Sometimes Veterans have trouble starting CBT or EMDR, they have trouble even getting their foot in the door because their physiological hypervigilance and reactivity is so high," said Ms. Eickhoff. If that anxiety can be reduced through SGB, the Veteran may be able to proceed with other therapies. Likewise, if CBT or EMDR is not successfully decreasing hypervigilance symptoms, SGB can be explored as an additional treatment in combination with psychotherapy.

SGB has long been used for the treatment of chronic pain conditions, Ms. Eickhoff said, but mental health providers may not know about how effective SGB could be for Veterans diagnosed with PTSD. Publicity, such as a segment on "**60 Minutes**" featuring VA Long Beach, and more studies will build awareness, she said. In addition, CCI has captured best practices put into place by VA Long Beach so that other VA facilities have a roadmap for how to set up a clinic and the recommended SGB treatment protocol for Veterans diagnosed with PTSD.

While clinicians focus on patient outcomes, CCI is more focused on identifying barriers to bringing treatments into clinical practice, such as the referral process, cost, patient education, difficulty getting to a VA medical center or living in an area where the treatment is not available.

"We're filling in the remaining unknowns to fully bring this innovative approach to PTSD treatment into clinical practice throughout VHA and increase accessibility for Veterans who may benefit," Ms. Eickhoff said.

For more information on SGB or CCI, visit va.gov/healthpartnerships.

VHA Community Partnership Challenge winners help Veterans lead healthier, happier lives

Three years ago, a 55-year-old U.S. Army Veteran was ready to give up after his mother died, and he lost his job, car, and home. He became addicted to alcohol and suffered from depression. With assistance from the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center (VAMC) and a program called Turnaround Tuesday, the now-sober Veteran has a job at a local hotel, lives in an apartment he pays for himself, and has been granted overnight visits with his two sons.

The Ralph H. Johnson VAMC/Lowcountry Hospitality Association partnership has resulted in the placement of 97 Veterans in jobs since its inception in 2017. A professional hospitality recruiter, in partnership with the VAMC's Homeless Program, meets in-person with Veterans every Tuesday to match them with positions that fit their skill sets. The goal is not only to employ Veterans, but to keep them employed in careers that come with comprehensive benefits that can give them a steady income and help them become independent.

This is just one example of how lives can be changed for the better when VHA facilities collaborate with community organizations to provide services and resources designed to help Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors. The partnership between Ralph H. Johnson VAMC and the Lowcountry Hospitality Association in Charleston, South Carolina, which resulted in Turnaround Tuesday, is one of the three winners of the 2020 VHA Community Partnership Challenge. The others are a partnership between Cincinnati VAMC and food bank and a collaboration between VA Ann Arbor Medical Center Toledo Community Based Outpatient Clinic and a local bar association.

Cincinnati VAMC and Freestore Foodbank have provided more than 10,000 meals to hungry Veterans and their families over the last three years. It is estimated that food insecurity, or lack of access to fresh and healthy food, affects more than 25% of the Veteran population.

The food pantries, each known as a Red, White and Blue Mart, are located within the medical center, at a VA outpatient clinic, and in a VA homeless clinic in Cincinnati. Veterans are screened by their Patient Aligned Care Team (PACT) for food insecurity and can be handed several bags of food the same day as their visit. One of the families helped was an elderly Veteran and his wife with limited financial means who are raising two grandchildren. The PACT sent the family home with several bags of food including child-friendly items such as cereal, macaroni and cheese, ravioli, and several coloring books, crayons, and puzzles. Items like coloring books and snacks are kept in stock since more young children are coming to primary care visits with Veterans.

One of Cincinnati VAMC's strategic goals is to establish viable on-site food pantries for all VA Community Based Outpatient Clinics in the area. Freestore Foodbank has agreed to support one-year startups of new pantries at six VA clinics.

VA Ann Arbor Medical Center Toledo Community Based Outpatient Clinic partners with the Toledo Bar Association and provides free monthly walk-in clinics to help Veterans with noncriminal legal issues that affect the SDOH. Examples of SDOH include access to employment, food security, and safe housing, or, as one 95-year-old Veteran found out, income, based on annuity payments from his retirement account after he mistakenly received notice that he was no longer eligible. A volunteer attorney helped the Veteran prove he was still living in order to receive his payments, prompting

the grateful man to quip, “Wait ‘til I tell my cat. She’s gonna be glad I can still afford the fancy cat food.”

Since 2015, 895 Veterans have been served by a team of private practice lawyers, some of whom are Veterans themselves. Three lawyers who attend the monthly clinics have obtained VA accreditation and are well-versed in benefits and surviving spouse benefits. The pro-bono attorneys work to prevent and remedy employment discrimination, secure service-connected educational benefits, and assist in securing unemployment compensation and/or unpaid wages. They also help Veterans with eviction notices, landlord-tenant issues, and bankruptcy, which has a direct effect on securing stable, safe housing for Veterans and their families.

This partnership helps to release Veterans from legal burdens, which aids in reducing the overall “stress of life” which, in turn, can also reduce suicidality. Partnership leaders estimate that the monthly clinics, in addition to clinics devoted to special topics, such as durable power of attorney, have provided more than \$344,000 in free legal services to Veterans.

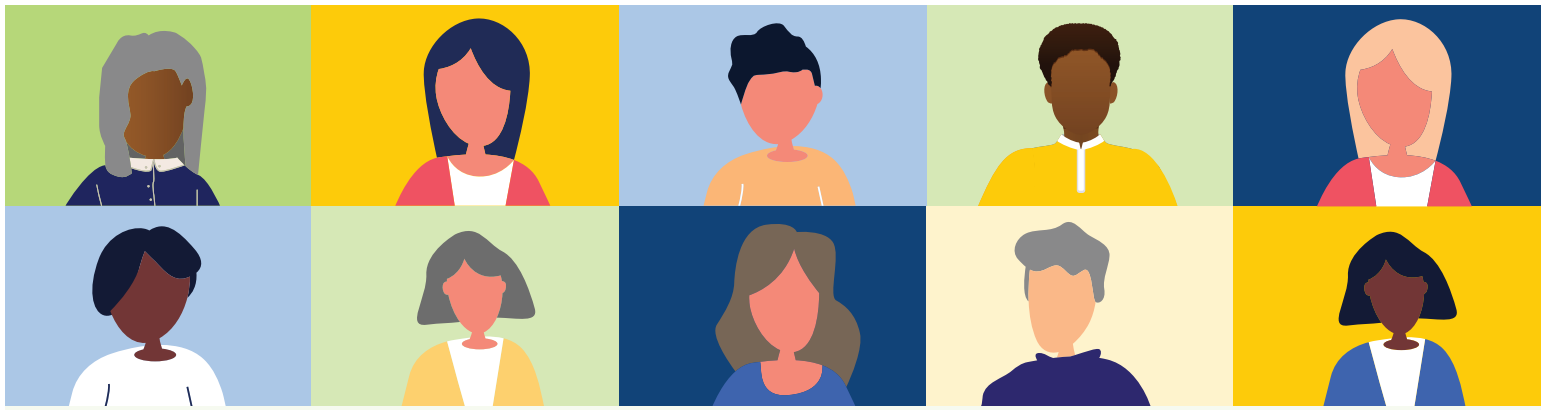
“The Community Partnership Challenge showcases the amazing work that’s being done by VA employees at a grassroots level to augment the services VHA provides,” said Dr. Tracy Weistreich, nurse executive for OCE. “Partnerships like these result in making life healthier and happier for Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors.”

SDOH is the theme for this year’s annual contest, which is hosted by OCE. When Veterans have access to critical SDOH such as housing, employment, health care, food security, education, spiritual support, and transportation, they have better health outcomes.

The winners of the 2020 VHA Community Partnership Challenge were honored in a virtual ceremony on Aug. 27.

For more information on OCE and its partnership work, please visit va.gov/healthpartnerships.





Meet three of OCE and CCI's staff members

In this issue, we wrap up our series of profiles on our team members.

» Dr. Jamie D. Davis Health Systems Specialist

Dr. Davis has spent the past 15 years supporting Veterans, service members, and their families by providing direct mental health services and conducting health services and policy research. Within OCE and CCI, she manages a portfolio of national partnership initiatives and innovative clinical demonstration projects for Veterans. Dr. Davis obtained her Ph.D. from Oklahoma State University and her pre- and post-doctoral fellowships at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center.

What is the most memorable or meaningful interaction you've had with a Veteran in the course of your work?

The most memorable and meaningful interaction I've had is not with a single Veteran, but with the many Veterans with whom I have collaborated to facilitate their wellness journeys. I am a psychologist who specializes in trauma and disaster mental health. I feel so honored to have worked with Veterans and been trusted to hear their stories—and to help them find their strengths and use resources to recover and heal.

Why is the work you do so important for Veterans and their families, caregivers, and survivors?

At least one member in my family has served in every major war or conflict since the American Revolution. I have seen, firsthand, the impact that serving in the armed services can have on Veterans and their families, caregivers, and survivors—not only because of my family's strong commitment to serving their country, but also through my work as a psychologist providing direct care to Veterans.

Why is the work coming from OCE and CCI so important?

Partnerships increase access to services and benefits for Veterans who choose VA as their health care provider as well as Veterans who do not seek medical care through VA. CCI's work is also impactful because it provides innovative treatments for the small segment of Veterans who suffer from PTSD, TBI, suicidal ideation, and pain, but who do not experience the type of treatment gains that might allow them to live happier, healthier lives.

How does collaboration factor into your work, and why is it important?

Collaboration ensures that multiple perspectives are considered for a project or initiative. Including various viewpoints is essential so that proposed solutions address the diversity of Veterans, their

caregivers, and families. Collaboration also helps our team get to know other stakeholders, both internal and external to VA, who are also committed to providing the best care and services to our nation's Veterans.

» **Christine Eickhoff**

Health Systems Specialist

Since joining OCE in 2016, Ms. Eickhoff has worked to explore partnership opportunities and health innovations that directly impact Veterans across the VA system. She has also worked with VA's War Related Illness and Injury Study Center and the Patient-Centered Care Integrative Health and Wellness Program as both a research coordinator and in support of clinical services. Ms. Eickhoff received her master's degree in psychology from American University.

What is something about OCE and CCI that you think readers should know about?

In many cases, our office works with existing programs and organizations to increase the impact of an innovative partnership or practice to serve more Veterans and their families. By collaborating with local VA experts and community organizers, we are able to increase VA's capacity to serve Veterans and their beneficiaries across the nation, meeting them where they are and making VA care more accessible than ever before.

Why is the work you do so important for Veterans and their families, caregivers, and survivors?

Our work is important because the health and well-being of every Veteran, family member, caregiver, and survivor is important. Our growing community of partners helps us reach more Veterans than we could on our own. While our aim is to serve as many as possible, some of my days are spent troubleshooting issues that individual

Veterans face. On these days in particular, I see the importance of dedicating all of my effort to helping this one person and the meaningful impact that can have.

What about the work you do are you most grateful for?

I remember fondly one of my grandfather's friends whom I met when I was young; another Veteran, like my grandfather, who had served in the Navy. I was shocked to hear that he had taken his own life; that someone whom I remembered as being so joyful had been in so much pain and hadn't been able to find the help he needed. The work we do in OCE and CCI helps provide Veterans with innovative approaches to overcoming their challenges, through both community partnerships and innovative clinical care. I'm grateful for every opportunity I have to make a difference, big or small, in the lives of Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors.

» **Heather M. Luper**

Social Work Program Manager

Within OCE and CCI, Ms. Luper specializes in supporting the development of new and innovative medical treatments and partnerships that benefit Veterans and their families. She currently administers program evaluation of the VA Mental Health Mobility Service Dog Initiative, coordinating VA's efforts to extend veterinary health benefits for service dogs of Veterans with mental health disorders. She is also the lead for OCE's efforts around the SDOH. Ms. Luper received her master's degree in social work from West Virginia University.

What is the best part about working with your team?

The OCE team is truly collaborative. We have the opportunity to volunteer to lead projects that we are passionate about, and we meet together regularly to brainstorm and come up with solutions to any barriers we may face. Working with this team has absolutely resulted in better service to our Veterans and innovative solutions.

Why is the work you do so important for Veterans and their families, caregivers, and survivors?

We are eager to discover new, innovative approaches to Veteran treatment and care. We are open to new ideas, and we encourage safe yet creative treatment solutions.

Why is the work coming from the Office of Community Engagement so important?

OCE partners with the community to expand and enhance services being provided to Veterans. VA does so much for Veterans and their families, but we cannot do everything alone. Community partnerships are so important because they bridge the gap in access to services for our Veterans.

What is something surprising about the work you do that you think readers probably wouldn't realize?

Some may think that the VA Central Office (VACO, where VHA's OCE and CCI are located) is isolated from the direct work of serving Veterans. We think about, talk about, and advocate for Veterans every single day. We may not be working directly with Veterans each day, but every day our focus, our drive, and our goal is to serve Veterans.

Coming Soon: OCE and CCI's 2020 annual report

OCE and CCI have done great things for Veterans this year. To feature just a few key examples, since October 2019, the team has enabled:

- Animal-assisted activities and animal-assisted therapy that has brought smiles to Veterans' faces by way of therapy animal visits at VA medical centers;
- Crisis alleviation and suicide prevention services through the push of a button in Veterans' General Motors cars;
- Access to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, so that Veterans' families never feel the effects of going hungry.

The arrival of COVID-19, of course, presented new challenges, but an encouraging refrain arose: We are all in this together. OCE, as VHA's trusted resource for partnership growth on behalf of Veterans everywhere, has always acted upon this idea of togetherness, that collaboration begets positive results. Our annual report, coming out this month, takes a look back at those positive results and looks ahead to what our team and our partners will continue to do to help Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors lead healthier, happier, more well-rounded lives.

