



QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER
VOLUME 7 ISSUE 2
SUMMER 2023

VHA National Center for Healthcare
Advancement and Partnerships

Empowering Veterans Through Partnerships

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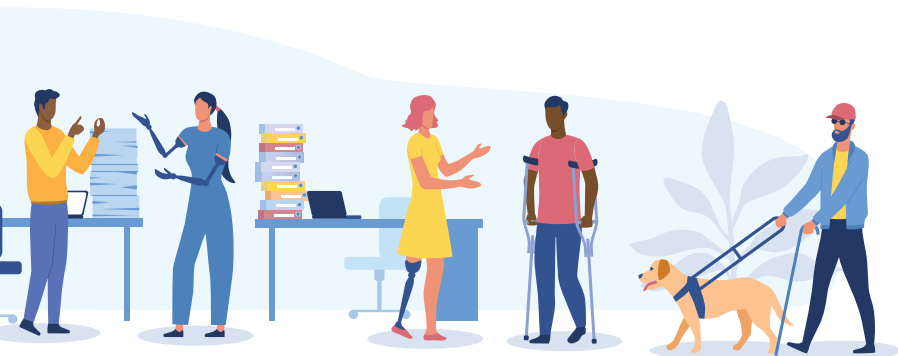
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VA



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

A Note from the Nurse Executive

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) National Center for Healthcare Advancement and Partnerships (HAP) is unwavering in our dedication to support the Veteran community on their journey toward healthier and happier lives.

VHA is the largest integrated healthcare system in the country, dedicated to serving 9 million enrolled Veterans. The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and VHA recognize that partnerships are pivotal in enhancing and expanding the invaluable services provided to Veterans. HAP facilitates and explores relationships that enrich the services available to both Veterans within VA care and those who receive care outside VA. HAP's strategic partnerships support health care advancement initiatives (HAIs), which positively impact the health and well-being of Veterans and foster innovation in VHA.

June was Pride month, and HAP stands in solidarity with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) Veterans, acknowledging their exceptional achievements and invaluable service to our nation. This issue explores how VHA's partnership with the LGBTQ+ Health Program is making a difference through initiatives that promote equity, diversity, inclusion, belonging, and improved healthcare outcomes for LGBTQ+ Veterans. (page 3)

HAP recently announced a new partnership between VHA and Mediflix, which gained recognition in a [featured VA News article](#). Through the partnership, Veterans receive access to a wealth of information about major health conditions from renowned medical institutions. The VA News article highlights how the joint effort empowers Veterans with vital healthcare resources and guides them toward informed decisions. (page 4)

In response to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, VHA's collaboration with the American College of Emergency Physicians (ACEP) expanded the tele-urgent care program and optimized the allocation of resources to emergency departments (EDs). This strategic shift ensures that Veterans receive timely and comprehensive care amidst difficult circumstances. (page 6)

Discover how VHA's partnership with Salesforce empowers active military, Veterans, and their families to thrive in technology careers through events like the Salesforce World Tour in Washington D.C. The event connects Veterans with industry experts and professionals, fostering networking opportunities and knowledge sharing. (page 7)

We are excited to continue working alongside community partners such as the Arthritis Foundation, dedicated to improving access to care, education, and support for Veterans with arthritis. Through the Arthritis Foundation's Walk with Ease (WWE) program, we are empowering Veterans to engage in regular physical activity, enhancing their overall health and well-being. This issue highlights how Veterans with arthritis can improve their health and register for a WWE program. (page 8)

VHA's collaboration with the Crohn's & Colitis Foundation (CCF) is committed to providing valuable resources, support, and specialized care for Veterans living with Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD). Read about the partnership's best insights, practices, and personalized care approaches, developed specifically for the unique needs of Veterans with IBD. (page 9)

Partnerships and innovative HAIs enable the VHA to explore what is possible for Veterans' health care. This issue highlights alternative methods for supporting Veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), such as Stellate Ganglion Block (SGB) treatment and animal-assisted interventions (AAI). (page 10)

We invite you to embark on a journey of artistic expression and healing with the VHA and Americans for the Arts (AFTA) partnership. Learn more about creative art therapy and opportunities for Veterans to express themselves through engaging activities such as music, dance, visual arts, and writing. (page 11)

Every stride we make fuels our mission to serve those who served our nation. Our dedicated team remains steadfast in our commitment to serving Veterans and their families, and it is our honor and privilege to contribute to the betterment of Veteran healthcare.

We encourage you to be a part of this journey, learn more about our partnerships and projects, and be inspired by the stories of resilience and transformation.

In good health,

Chien Chen, MSN, RN, PMH-BC, NPJ-BC, NEA-BC
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Nurse Executive*
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Celebrating Pride: VA Collaborates with the LGBTQ+ Health Program for Inclusive Healthcare

Pride month has long been recognized as a time to honor and celebrate the diverse contributions and experiences of the LGBTQ+ community. Traditionally observed in June, VA strives to continuously acknowledge and support LGBTQ+ Veterans throughout the year.

VA is dedicated to promoting the health and well-being of LGBTQ+ Veterans by providing personalized care that addresses each individual's unique needs. Embracing diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging, and cultural sensitivity, VA aims to deliver equitable, affirming, and high-quality health care to all Veterans, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. At the forefront of these efforts is the [LGBTQ+ Health Program](#), which focuses on addressing LGBTQ+ Veterans' healthcare needs and ensuring appropriate access to healthcare services. HAP works with the LGBTQ+ Health Program to support diversity and inclusion-driven initiatives that improve healthcare outcomes for LGBTQ+ Veterans.

"For Pride month and beyond, HAP proudly joins in the celebration and recognition of the LGBTQ+ community with an unwavering commitment to ensure that they receive the highest quality of care," said Dr. Jamie Davis, HAP health system specialist. "The support extends to ongoing collaborations with the LGBTQ+ Health Program, continuous improvement of healthcare policies, and fostering a culture of inclusivity within the VA healthcare system."

VA is actively engaged in initiatives and programs designed to support LGBTQ+ Veterans. As a fundamental component, VA ensures each medical facility has at least one [LGBTQ+ Veteran Care Coordinator](#) specifically trained to support LGBTQ+ Veterans. These coordinators actively contribute to creating a welcoming environment, building partnerships, connecting Veterans with necessary services, and educating staff on the unique healthcare needs of LGBTQ+ individuals. They also [help navigate documentation and name or sex changes](#) in medical records.

Additionally, VA emphasizes the [inclusion of sexual orientation and gender identity in Veterans'](#) medical records and utilizes the data to personalize care, address health risks, and reduce disparities. VA healthcare providers have the capability to update both sexual orientation and gender identity in Veterans' medical records, which allows them to provide tailored care that promotes health equity among LGBTQ+ Veterans. As of June 2022, VA patients can independently modify their gender identity and preferred name online at [VA.gov](#). This enhancement empowers Veterans to update their health record information without VA staff assistance. Veterans need to sign in or create an account on [VA.gov](#) to access this feature.

Although progress has been made since the era of the [Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy](#), which prevented lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals from openly serving in the military, further work is needed to address the specific obstacles encountered by LGBTQ+ Veterans. The LGBTQ+ Health Program takes the lead in developing [patient and provider](#)

[education initiatives and services](#). Through patient education materials, LGBTQ+ Veterans, their loved ones, and healthcare providers gain insight into the unique challenges LGBTQ+ Veterans face. The LGBTQ+ Health Program also offers services designed to meet the unique needs of transgender and gender-diverse Veterans, which fosters inclusive healthcare experiences for this community. This year, the LGBTQ+ Health Program launched a Pride campaign with the message ‘[Pride Counts at VA](#).’ The campaign’s purpose was to celebrate Pride month and highlight VA’s dedication to providing a welcoming place for LGBTQ+ Veterans.

“VA’s participation in Pride month activities serves as a crucial open invitation for life-saving health care for LGBTQ+ Veterans,” said Dr. Jessica Morris, VHA national education manager of the LGBTQ+ Health Program. “Recognizing both the history of discrimination and the incredible resiliency of the LGBTQ+ community is key to creating a welcoming environment for LGBTQ+ Veterans and encouraging them to choose VA for their health care needs.”

VA’s commitment to supporting LGBTQ+ Veterans extends far beyond a single month of celebration. By embracing diversity, inclusion, and cultural sensitivity, VA strives to provide equitable, affirming, and exceptional care to all Veterans, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

**For more information about the LGBTQ+ Health Program, visit <https://www.patientcare.va.gov/LGBT/>.
For more information about HAP, visit <https://www.va.gov/HEALTHPARTNERSHIPS/index.asp>.**



VHA and Mediflix Partner to Improve Health Education for Veterans

In May 2023, VHA partnered with [Mediflix](#), which hosts a vast selection of educational content and technology, to improve health care for Veterans. Founded by a team of renowned media executives, Mediflix employs the latest digital technologies to virtually connect Veterans to hundreds of physicians across 37 medical specialties.

The collaboration amplifies Veteran-focused health resources that VA offers to support and enhance the well-being of Veterans such as the [Veterans Health Library](#) (VHL). The VHL offers Veterans, family members, and caregivers 24/7 access to printable health sheets, videos, worksheets, and other helpful resources.

“VHA is dedicated to ensuring that Veterans have access to the healthcare resources they need to live a healthy life,” said Randy Moler, VHA program analyst. “By increasing awareness of VHA-health educational materials through the Mediflix streaming platform, the partnership aligns with VA’s strategic goal of effective [communication with customers and partners](#).”

“By actively collaborating with our community partners across the nation, VHA can enhance the accessibility to healthcare resources to all Veterans,” said Chien Chen, HAP chief officer/nurse executive. “HAP is committed to sharing and disseminating impactful resources and innovative content that advances our Veteran’s overall health and well-being.”

Through the VHA-Mediflix partnership, Veterans and their families gain access to a wealth of information about major health conditions. The information is sourced from renowned medical institutions and associations such as the Cleveland Clinic, Yale Medicine, and the American Heart Association. Additionally, Mediflix presents educational health content in an engaging and informative manner, ensuring that Veterans can comprehend and retain critical information that is essential to their well-being.

Mediflix's unique approach combines user-generated questions and expert guidance to provide valuable health information and support. The platform aims to empower users to make informed decisions about their health while encouraging them to engage with their healthcare providers. By offering a seamless and interactive experience, Mediflix bridges the gap between users and healthcare knowledge, fostering a better understanding of various health concerns.

Steps to Accessing Healthcare Support through Mediflix

- 1 User Submits a Question:** Users can submit their questions on the Mediflix website, ranging from general inquiries to specific health concerns.
- 2 User Receives a Response:** Mediflix generates a response from its extensive library of content, featuring insights from medical experts and reputable associations, to address the user's query.
- 3 Option for Expert Guidance:** If the user feels that their question wasn't directly addressed or requires more in-depth information, they have the option to submit the question to Mediflix's panel of medical experts.
- 4 Customized Video Response:** Mediflix reviews the user's request and creates a personalized video, specifically addressing the question. The video provides general guidance, not medical treatment or a second opinion, and may include suggestions for follow-up discussions with their healthcare provider.
- 5 Timely Response:** Mediflix strives to provide a prompt response within 24 hours, ensuring that users receive the information they need in a timely manner.

In 2024, the VHA-Mediflix collaboration will significantly advance with the introduction of Vetiflix, a not-for-profit Veterans Health Channel (VHC) exclusively designed by Veterans for Veterans. Vetiflix will enhance Mediflix's services and grant Veterans, caregivers, and their families

free access to an extensive library of video responses.

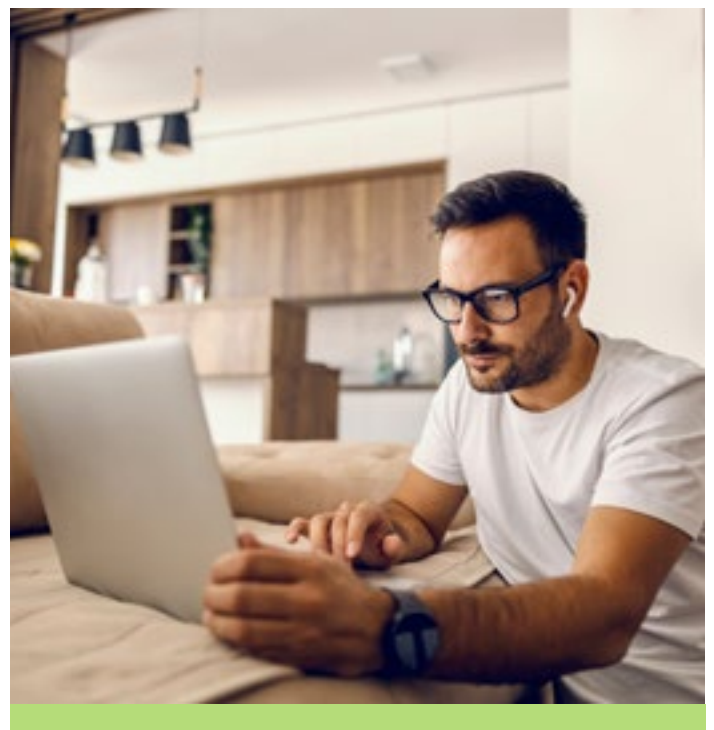
"This public-private sector partnership between VHA and Mediflix will empower Veterans to take control of their own health and help inform their caregivers and loved ones," said retired Marine Lt. Col. Kevin Schmiegel, strategic advisor to Mediflix. "VHC is created by Veterans for Veterans and provides access and advice from a 'dream team of doctors,' regarding the unique health conditions they face."

Gerry Byrne, a Marine and Vietnam War Veteran and chairman of VHC, added: "Our primary commitment is to serve and support the lifelong healthcare needs of Veterans. Our Veteran community has gifted our nation with their service, and the VHC has been created as a superior platform to serve and thank those who have served."

The collaboration between VHA and Mediflix improves the health and well-being outcomes of Veterans across the nation. Through the partnership, Veterans gain access to vital healthcare resources, which will help them make informed decisions and lead healthier lives.

For more information about Mediflix, visit <https://www.mediflix.com/>.

For more information about HAP, visit <https://www.va.gov/HEALTHPARTNERSHIPS/index.asp>.



VHA's Partnership with American College of Emergency Physicians Supports Veterans Beyond Covid-19

Since 2018, VHA has partnered with [ACEP](#) to educate community ED providers about Veteran-specific needs, services, and care. The partnership, which is facilitated by HAP, aims to inform non-VHA community ED providers about Veteran benefits and resources, equip non-VHA medical professionals with Veteran-centered care education, and enhance recruitment of ED professionals to work in VHA medical facilities. The partnership has increased ED providers' ability to deliver prompt Veteran-centered emergency care services.

Throughout the pandemic, the VHA-ACEP collaboration adapted and took on renewed significance as it embraced innovative platforms to support Veterans. The partnership pivoted its focus toward expanding the tele-urgent care program and allocating additional resources to EDs. This adjustment allowed clinicians to utilize the [ACEP ED COVID-19 management tool](#), a standardized, up-to-date framework designed to assess patients with suspected or confirmed COVID-19.



“Our partnership with ACEP allows us to strongly advocate for the emergency care needs of Veterans through the largest professional organization for emergency medicine physicians while assuring that VHA EDs are well positioned to meet or exceed community emergency care standards,” said Neil Patel M.D., deputy executive director, VHA Emergency Medicine Program.

The VHA-ACEP partnership also issued resources to keep Veterans and the public informed during the pandemic, including “[Stop the Spread: A Patient Guide to the Novel Coronavirus](#)” (COVID-19) and guidance on determining when to visit an ED. This strategic shift aimed to address the challenges presented by the pandemic and ensure that Veterans continued to receive high-quality care. The partnership delivered accessible and timely healthcare services to Veterans amidst unprecedented circumstances.

“During the pandemic, Veterans gained convenient access to a wide range of medical services, including consultations, diagnosis, monitoring, and follow-up

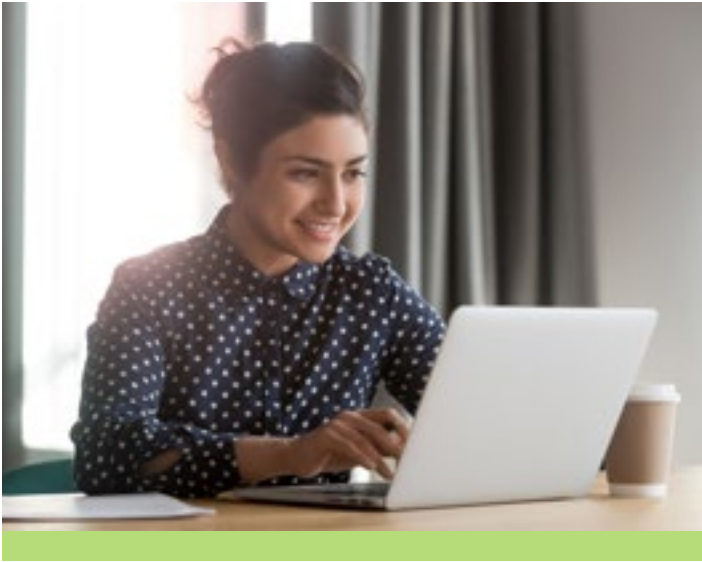
care, all conducted remotely and securely,” said Heather Luper, HAP social work program manager. “This approach not only addressed urgent care needs but also minimized the risks associated with in-person visits, protecting both Veterans and healthcare providers from potential exposure to the virus.”

After three years marked by global shutdowns, widespread telework, and vaccine mandates, the [White House officially ended the emergency status related to the COVID-19 pandemic](#) on May 11, 2023. As the nation moves forward from COVID-19, the focus remains on providing exceptional services to those who have served and sacrificed for the country. VHA and its partner facilities, including medical centers nationwide, are committed to ensuring that Veterans receive healthcare through a combination of in-person and teleurgent care modalities.

For more information about ACEP, visit <https://www.acep.org/>.

For more information about HAP, visit <https://www.va.gov/HEALTHPARTNERSHIPS/index.asp>.

VHA-Salesforce Partnership Empowers Veterans with Careers in Technology



VHA partners with [Salesforce](#) to support Service members and their spouses as they transition into the civilian workforce and strive to advance their careers. The partnership, which is facilitated by HAP, helps Veterans and military spouses access free training, education, and job opportunities offered through Salesforce Military. Salesforce and its partners have created an ecosystem that [is projected to create 4.2 million jobs](#) by 2024. This significant job growth offers a tremendous opportunity for Veterans and military spouses to seize new career opportunities in technology.

William Galinat, an Army Veteran and Salesforce Military alumnus reached a point in his career where he felt stuck and didn't know what to do. While researching in-demand career paths, he learned about the [Salesforce Military training](#), a program that connects Veterans, Service members, and military spouses to the classes, certifications, and support needed for successful careers in technology. Alumni of the program have taken positions as consultants, system administrators, and developers.

Galinat completed the Salesforce Military training, as well as the [Hiring Our Heroes Salesforce Fellowship Program](#), and now works on Salesforce technology for America's Warrior Partnership. America's Warrior Partnership is a national nonprofit with a mission to partner with communities to prevent Veteran suicide. Galinat states, "I was at a ... place that was [wasn't] really progressing. Now, I'm able to both give back to the community and work on Salesforce technology..." Galinat continues, "I'm

able to help Veterans prevent Veteran suicide via holistic methods...[and] help on the tech side."

In April 2023, Salesforce hosted [World Tour Washington D.C.](#) to showcase the latest innovations, best practices, and industry trends related to Salesforce products and services. During the event, HAP collaborated with Salesforce Military to provide a focal point for Veterans and their spouses to connect with one another and share career success stories. Galinat was also in attendance to speak about his successful career transition.

"The DC World Tour is a unique opportunity to hear from Veterans and military spouses who have leveraged their military experience to advance their career in the tech industry," said Christine Eickhoff, HAP health system specialist. "Hearing from Veteran Trailblazers is inspiring and encourages other Veterans and military spouses to pursue their professional goals in a truly innovative field."

"VA is committed to supporting the health, well-being, and unique needs of Veterans, their families, spouses, and caregivers," said Chien Chen, HAP Chief Officer. "Innovative nonmonetary partnerships with nongovernmental organizations enable VA to reach these key stakeholders. The personal life-changing stories from Veterans and spouses were truly remarkable, highlighting the impact of our collaborative efforts."

"Hearing the career success stories from Salesforce Military alumni is the reason our program exists," states Katherine Clark, head of Salesforce Military. "Salesforce recognizes the incredible skills that Veterans and military spouses bring to the workplace. We are committed to helping 80,000 members of the military community learn about these in-demand careers." Clark continues, "Galinat is an inspiring example of an alumnus who wasn't happy in his previous job, saw the potential of working in the Salesforce ecosystem, and did the hard work to make that transition."

HAP and Salesforce Military strive to collaborate on opportunities that amplify learning and employment opportunities for Veterans and military spouses in the rapidly growing Salesforce ecosystem.

For more information about Salesforce, visit <https://www.salesforce.com/>.

For more information about HAP, visit <https://www.va.gov/HEALTHPARTNERSHIPS/index.asp>.



Walk with Ease Program: VHA and the Arthritis Foundation Empower Veterans

Research shows that Veterans and Service members [experience arthritis at a higher rate](#) compared to the civilian population. Arthritis often becomes a determining factor for military discharge, highlighting the substantial impact on individuals' lives.

VHA partners with the [Arthritis Foundation](#) to increase access to care, education, and support for Veterans with arthritis. The partnership, which is facilitated by HAP, provides valuable resources such as articles, workshops, and events to improve the overall health and well-being of Veterans with arthritis. The Arthritis Foundation's Walk with Ease (WWE) program is an ongoing event that [helps Veterans increase their physical activity](#). The program provides a structured yet adaptable approach to walking, making it easier for Veterans of varying fitness levels to participate.

"The partnership provides Veterans enhanced support to improve fitness, increase peer connections and reduce arthritis pain," said Nick Turkas, Arthritis Foundation, senior director of Patient Education. "Together, the Arthritis Foundation and Department of Veterans Affairs are increasing access to beneficial programs and resources."

Since its inception in 2003, the WWE program has garnered [recognition from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) as an evidence-based program due to its effectiveness and scalability within communities. Walking is a low-impact form of exercise offering numerous benefits such as promoting heart health, balance, flexibility, weight management, and alleviating arthritis-associated stiffness and chronic pain.

Evaluations of the WWE program consistently show positive outcomes and increased physical activity among adults with and without self-reported arthritis. [Research conducted by the Thurston Arthritis Research Center and the Institute on Aging of the University of North Carolina](#) demonstrates that WWE has been proven to reduce arthritis pain and discomfort, increase balance, strength, and walking pace, build confidence in physical activity, and improve overall health. Additionally, the program exhibits promising results in [improving arthritis-related pain, fatigue, and stiffness among African Americans](#) and [Hispanic adults with arthritis](#). The WWE program is offered in both individualized and group formats, ensuring adaptability to the unique preferences and needs of Veterans.

"Through the collaborative efforts of VHA and the Arthritis Foundation, Veterans with arthritis are empowered to take control of their health, find relief from pain, and enhance their overall well-being," said Georgi Bady, HAP health system specialist. "We hope that numerous Veterans and communities feel empowered to walk with ease during the summer, furthering the positive impact of the program."

There are many ways [Veterans can participate in WWE](#). They can choose the self-guided format, an in-person community session, or a self-directed enhanced format with coordinated communication. All formats of the program are structured as six-week cycles. Participating Veterans receive a guidebook to support their walking journey and track their progress. The guidebook facilitates assessments of readiness for starting a regular walking program, setting personalized goals, and scheduling walking times. Veterans interested in joining the WWE program can also contact their [local VA facility](#) for more information.

For more information about the Arthritis Foundation, visit <https://www.arthritis.org/home>.

For more information about HAP, visit <https://www.va.gov/HEALTHPARTNERSHIPS/index.asp>.

VHA and Crohn's & Colitis Foundation Partnership Supports Veterans with IBDs

An estimated 66,000 Veterans in the U.S. live with [inflammatory bowel disease \(IBD\)](#), which includes Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis. In October 2021, VHA Healthcare Advancement and Partnerships (HAP) partnered with the [CCF](#) to enhance the health and well-being of Veterans with IBD.

The primary objective of the VHA-CCF partnership is to bring together the expertise and resources of both organizations and provide resources, support, and specialized care for Veterans who are navigating life with IBD. Since its founding in 1967, CCF has played a crucial role in IBD research. Simultaneously, VHA offers a wealth of knowledge and expertise in the field of IBD, contributing insights, best practices, and specialized care approaches developed specifically for Veterans with IBD.

Dr. Kimberly Pugh, HAP health system specialist, states, "Through the collaborative efforts of VHA and CCF, a meaningful support system is being established to address the unique challenges faced by Veterans with IBD." Dr. Pugh continues, "By ensuring access to vital information, support networks, and specialized care, this partnership aims to enhance the overall well-being and quality of life for Veterans living with IBD."

Dr. Meena A. Prasad, director of IBD at the Atlanta VA Medical Center, associate professor of medicine at Emory University, and chair of the National GI/Hepatology Field Advisory Board IBD subcommittee, further highlights the positive impact of the partnership adding, "The collaboration has led to the development of patient educational videos, professional education videos, testimonial videos, non-branded educational materials, a transition checklist for Veterans transitioning care to VA, an online support group for Veterans with IBD on



Facebook, and a dedicated Veterans webpage that consolidates all available resources."

Since its launch, the partnership has achieved notable milestones, such as the production of a [Veteran-focused webpage](#) and a [Facebook Veterans Support group](#), which provide educational content and support to Veterans. The Veteran-focused webpage has received 25,357 unique page visits, indicating a significant interest and engagement from Veterans seeking information and support. The Facebook Veteran Support Group offers a space where Veterans with IBD can connect, share their experiences, and find solace in knowing they are not alone in their journey. The online community, which was initiated in May 2022 has approximately 60 members who gather for open discussions, mutual support, and the exchange of valuable insights.

By actively participating in this support group, Veterans can connect with fellow warriors, access information and resources, and receive empathy and encouragement from others who understand firsthand what it's like to live as a Veteran with IBD. Former Navy Secretary Ray Mabus, a Veteran with Crohn's, shares his experience and highlights the value of the support group stating, "I'm so happy to join the group." Mabus also adds, "It's so helpful to have a support group and fellow warriors who understand what it's like to go through this."

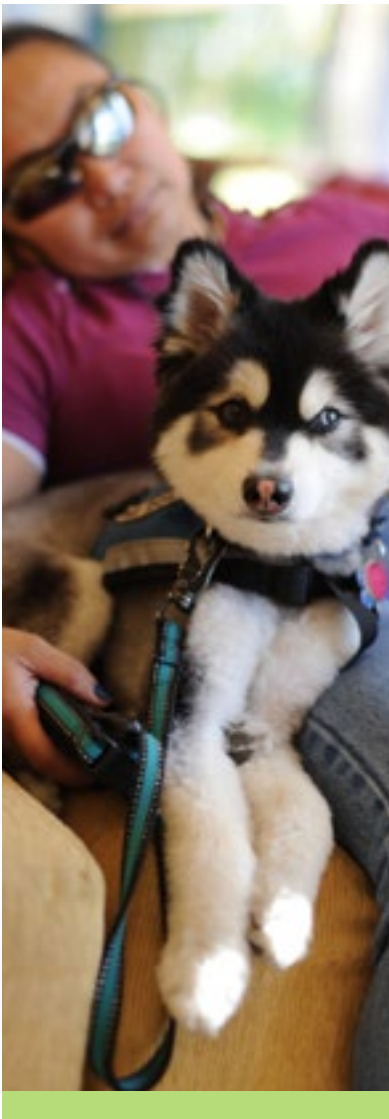
Catherine Soto, associate vice president, Patient Education and Support at CCF, emphasized the significance of the partnership's accomplishments, stating, "This partnership reinforces the support that VA offers Veterans with IBD. Our partnership strengthens the connection to educational resources that can help Veterans with IBD be informed participants in their healthcare and feel supported through their journey." Soto also adds, "The

Foundation and VHA aim to ensure that Veterans with IBD know they are not alone."

The CCF, in collaboration with VHA, is working on developing video resources to support patients and healthcare professionals, including a panel discussion about the needs of Veterans with IBD. Together, VHA and CCF aim to ensure that Veterans have access to essential information, support networks, and specialized care, allowing them to make informed decisions about their health and actively engage in managing their condition.

For more information about CCF, visit crohnscolitisfoundation.org.

For more information about HAP, visit <https://www.va.gov/HEALTHPARTNERSHIPS/index.asp>.



Innovative Resources and Support for Veterans with PTSD

Every year in June, HAP observes [PTSD Awareness Month](#), dedicated to raising awareness about PTSD. This month-long observance serves multiple purposes: It aims to bring attention to how PTSD impacts individuals, families, and communities; it strives to reduce the stigma around PTSD by fostering open conversations; and it gives an opportunity to honor and support Veterans and Service members who may be coping with the challenges of PTSD.

HAP serves as a trusted resource and a catalyst for the growth of effective partnerships at the national, state, and community levels. With a mission to advance the health and well-being of Veterans through the exploration of innovative, safe, and ethical emerging therapies, HAP actively engages in partnerships that support the development of healthcare advancement initiatives for PTSD.

"Through ongoing innovation and research, HAP strives to uncover new insights into the nature of PTSD and effective treatment approaches," said Christine Eickhoff, HAP health system specialist. "Providing innovative resources and support for Veterans coping with PTSD is crucial in helping them lead fulfilling lives."

Over the course of their life, approximately [7% of Veterans experience PTSD](#), a rate slightly higher than that of civilians. PTSD experiences may vary based on combat area, influenced by the challenges present in different regions. Veterans may develop PTSD after experiencing combat, military sexual trauma, and significant training accidents. Veterans may also develop non-combat-related PTSD and become service connected, due to experiences beyond combat such as exposure to natural disasters, traffic collisions, or violence in their community. While the symptoms of PTSD vary for every person, they often include anxiety, flashbacks, nightmares, and a constant sense of hypervigilance. These symptoms can hinder various aspects of an individual's life, affecting their daily functioning and overall well-being.

[VA National Center for PTSD](#) conducts ongoing research to further advance the

understanding of PTSD and offers valuable assistance through diverse treatment options, including medication and trauma-focused talk therapy. Recent research suggests that trauma-focused talk therapy, which focuses on addressing the memory or significance of the traumatic event, is [the most effective approach for treating PTSD](#). In addition to traditional treatments, additional approaches such as SGB treatment and [AAI](#) show promise.

SGB involves injecting anesthetic medication around the stellate ganglion, a cluster of nerves responsible for the fight or flight response. Early clinical trial evidence suggests SGB treatment may help individuals diagnosed with PTSD gain better control over their fight or flight reactions by blocking or changing nerve impulses between the body and brain. Although evidence-based treatments like [cognitive processing therapy, prolonged exposure, and eye movement desensitization and reprocessing](#) are commonly recommended, additional approaches like SGB can be considered for Veterans who have not achieved significant improvement through standard treatments alone.

HAP collaborates with [VA Long Beach Healthcare System](#) as part of a program evaluation on the use of SGB in combination with psychotherapy for Veterans with PTSD. In fiscal year 2022, VA Long Beach Healthcare System treated 52 Veterans diagnosed with PTSD using the SGB procedure, resulting in a significant reduction of their PTSD symptoms.

“SGB continues to provide more space, more time, more calm for Veterans to heal,” said Dr. Michael Hollifield, section chief of the Program for Traumatic Stress and co-lead of the SGB for PTSD Innovation Program.

Additionally, AAI, which are structured activities and interactions that incorporate animals to enhance one’s physical and mental well-being, have proven to be beneficial for many Veterans with PTSD. Therapy animals, such as dogs, cats, horses, rabbits, birds, and llamas possess an innate ability to sense anxiety or distress in Veterans, providing comfort and emotional support. HAP’s collaboration with [Pet Partners](#) emphasizes the HAB as a crucial element in supporting Veterans with PTSD. Pet Partners works with nine species of animals that include dogs, cats, equines, rabbits, guinea pigs, birds, llamas/alpacas, pigs, and rats, to create a calm and relaxed environment, reducing anxiety and fostering connection and comfort.

“Our Veterans deserve support for the sacrifices they have made, and sometimes, a therapy animal can reach us in just the right way at the right time,” said Annie Peters, Pet Partners president and CEO. “From encouraging Veterans during recovery to bringing smiles to their families when missing loved ones away on deployment, our teams are proud to serve Veterans and provide the unique support that therapy animals offer.”

For more information about National Center for PTSD, visit <https://www.ptsd.va.gov/index.asp>.

For more information about HAP, visit <https://www.va.gov/HEALTHPARTNERSHIPS/index.asp>.

VHA’s Collaboration with AFTA Encourages Veterans to Explore the Arts

VHA partners with [AFTA](#), a nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing arts and humanities across the U.S., to ensure that Veterans and Service members have access to the therapeutic benefits of the arts. The collaboration, which is facilitated by HAP, reflects VHA’s approach [to care that supports the health and well-being of Veterans](#).

Since 1960, AFTA has worked to promote the transformative power of the arts in various sectors, including healthcare, education, and community development. By championing arts education, AFTA plays a vital role in enhancing the quality of life for individuals and communities nationwide.



“The arts and humanities play a meaningful role in the lives of our military and Veteran communities,” states Marete Wester, senior director of arts policy and the National Initiative for Arts & Health Across the Military, AFTA. “Participation in

VA creative arts therapy programs help many severely injured Service members cope with anxiety, depression, and other symptoms that come with their conditions. And often, the personal creativity and expression that is unlocked through these activities catalyze progress towards improved health and well-being across a lifetime.”

The partnership focuses on [Whole Health](#) approaches, empowering Veterans to take an active role in their well-being by combining creative arts therapies into their care plans. The joint effort recognizes the healing aspect of the arts and opens avenues for personal expression through activities such as music, dance, visual arts, and writing.

“The Whole Health approach focuses on what matters to the individual and their personal goals for life and health. Within this model is the opportunity to partner with Veterans and Service members through creative arts therapies in treatment as well as to expand Veteran access to the arts in support of health and well-being,” said Donna Faraone, associate director of Whole Health System Development in the VHA Office of Patient Centered Care and Cultural Transformation (OPCC&CT). “At the core of the arts and humanities initiative is the belief that the arts have the power to heal, inspire, and empower individuals.”

The partnership supports events and initiatives that engage Veterans and Service members in the arts. The internal collaboration with [OPCC&CT](#), [VA Center for Development and Civic Engagement](#), and [Recreation/Creative Arts Therapy Service](#) focuses on holistic care and engagement. Together, these offices organize an annual workshop that helps sites engage in Whole Health initiatives and expand access to arts and humanities activities within VA. Participants receive ongoing support through office calls following the workshop, and a year-end celebration marks achievements and concludes the event.

AFTA supports the [National Veterans Creative Arts Festival](#), an annual competition that acknowledges the progress and healing made through creative arts therapy and amplifies the creative accomplishments of Veterans. In 2022, over 2,000 Veterans from 129 VA medical facilities entered over 4,000 submissions in art, creative writing, dance, drama, and music competitions. Of those submissions, 145 Veterans received gold medals and an invitation to participate in the 2023 National Veterans Creative Arts Festival, hosted by the VA St. Louis Health Care System in St. Louis, Missouri last April.

“VHA is committed to supporting Veterans with innovative approaches to healing and personal growth,” expressed Dr. Jamie Davis, HAP health system specialist. “Our Whole Health initiatives allow us to put Veterans first and craft personalized health plans based on their unique values, needs, and goals, prioritizing what truly matters to them.”

The collaboration is dedicated to empowering Veterans and Service members by incorporating the arts into their health and well-being journey. Through Whole Health initiatives, which include clinical treatments and [visual and performing arts](#), the partnership emphasizes self-empowerment, self-healing, and self-care to support the health and well-being of Veterans.

For more information about AFTA, visit <https://www.americansforthearts.org/>.

For more information about HAP, visit <https://www.va.gov/HEALTHPARTNERSHIPS/team.asp>.

For more information about VHA partnerships, visit [va.gov/HEALTHPARTNERSHIPS/partnerships.asp](https://www.va.gov/HEALTHPARTNERSHIPS/partnerships.asp)

VA



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Veterans Health Administration
National Center for Healthcare
Advancement and Partnerships

To share a partnership opportunity or consult with HAP on a non-monetary partnership, please contact our office via email:

VHA_Partnerships@va.gov
[va.gov/healthpartnerships](https://www.va.gov/healthpartnerships)