

Warriors' Health-Research Network: A model for an integrated health- research system

RAC-GWVI Meeting
September 2018

Background

In **2016**, the RAC-GWVI recommended:

Establish a national hub-and-spoke coordinated system of centers within VHA that integrates research and clinical care in a way that meets Veterans' health care needs and advances knowledge of complex chronic conditions of post-deployment. The system should have a presence at the national, VISN and local levels but function as an integrated research and care network committed to improving by continuously learning. Success will require effectively using data from disparate sources and forming strategic partnerships so that VA can fully serve Veterans in understanding and caring for post-deployment health conditions, an area where VA is uniquely positioned to lead.

Background

In **2017**, the RAC-GWVI recommended:

Commit to piloting and establishing a coordinated system of centers and expertise focused on complex chronic conditions of post-deployment, and operationalize the beginning stages of such a system by 2019. The Committee continues to believe there would be great value in pursuing a demonstration project for how research and clinical efforts can interface more seamlessly throughout the VA system.

VA Response: **Concur-in-Principle.**

“Piloting a project like this will have to be coordinated with VA’s modernization plan.”

RAC-GWVI 2018 Recommendation

Draft RAC-GWVI recommendation for **2018**:

Form a working group, to include VA's Office of Research and Development (ORD) and Post-Deployment Health Services (PDHS), tasked with identifying steps to operationalize a pilot of the Warriors' Health-Research Network in coordination with VA's modernization plan.

In 2016 and 2017 the RAC-GWVI made recommendations pertaining to the VA establishing a coordinated system of centers focused on integrating research and clinical care to better understand and treat complex chronic conditions of post-deployment. To help continue advancing this concept, the RAC-GWVI has suggested key features of the overall system, the national centers and individual medical centers that would help bring research into closer proximity to clinical care, and we propose the VA call this system the Warriors' Health-Research Network.

RAC-GWVI 2018 Recommendation

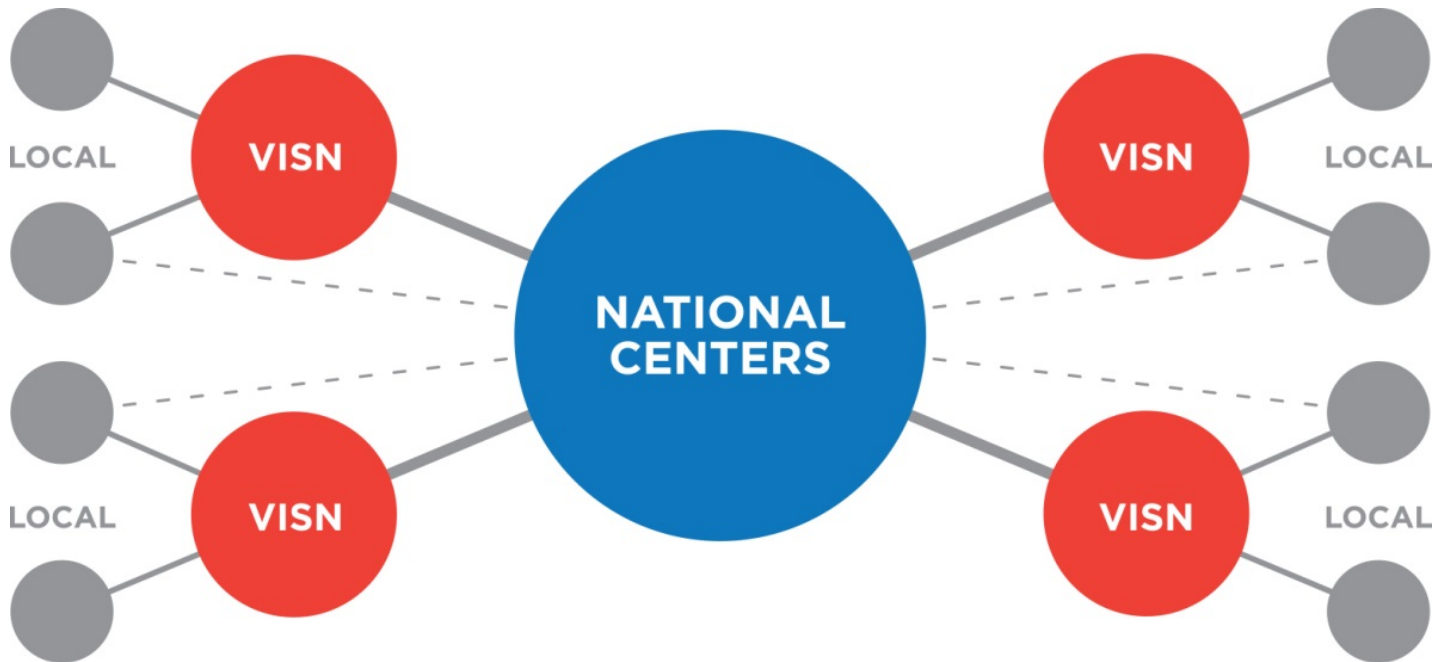
Draft RAC-GWVI recommendation for **2018** (cont'd):

*The initial focus for the working group could be to **develop a demonstration project focused on recruitment and retention of research participants that would be supported by ORD issuing a request for proposals (RFP)**. Having access to otherwise healthy Veterans who have predominant complaints of pain, fatigue, and other symptoms of interest would be invaluable to efforts to decipher the underlying biology of these vexing health problems. Furthermore, without connection to Veterans receiving comprehensive clinical care, identifying and recruiting research participants will remain a major impediment to advancing scientific research in areas related to post-deployment health.*

Warriors' Health-Research Network Overview

“Developing an integrated health-research network will do more than modernize the VA’s approach to clinical care, it will position the VA to pioneer new approaches to health care and create a model system for how a health system can develop, validate, and implement medical advances.”

- RAC-GWVI 2018



Benefits of Integrating Research and Clinical Care

Benefits to Research:

- Research teams closer to their foundational mission: to serve Veterans
- Identification of new research directions
- Access to data and biospecimens for analysis
- Recruitment of participants to research studies
- Opportunity to validate research findings

Benefits to Clinical Care

- Quicker validation and dissemination of therapeutic interventions
- Deeper understanding of health conditions of interest
- Greater Veteran engagement
- Improved ability to recruit and retain top physicians

Benefits of Integrating Research and Clinical Care

Benefits to Veterans:

- Easier to volunteer for research studies
- Enables more active involvement in care
- Deepens understanding of their condition
- Offers an element of hope as Veterans become aware of research dedicated to improving their health

Additional Benefits

- Recruitment for Project IN-DEPTH
- Opportunities to further investigate findings from Project IN-DEPTH

Key Features: Network-level

System-wide Focus

- Involve Veterans more broadly in research conceptualization, design, implementation, and dissemination of research findings
- Collect biospecimen samples as part of standardized exam and store samples in a centralized biorepository widely available for research purposes
- Promote ongoing research studies in regions where patients are seen or where recruiting is conducted nationally
- Leverage resources from VA and DoD databases to identify and recruit participants for research studies
- Educate clinicians, Veterans, and caretakers on the latest research findings pertaining to treatments and best practices for care management

Opportunities for Implementation:

- Issue a RFP that would support a demonstration project focused on recruitment and retention of healthy and ill Veterans for research studies
- Establish a biorepository that national and individual medical centers can easily contribute to, perhaps by leveraging existing resources (e.g., MVP or CSP #585)
- Set-up a means for data sharing across the Network, perhaps by leveraging existing resources (e.g., EHR, VINCI)
- Develop data sharing agreements with DoD for databases and biorepositories

Key Features: National-level

National Centers

- Recruit population-based national cohort for 1990 – 1991 Gulf War veterans and more recent conflicts
- Contribute biospecimen samples to centralized biorepositories
- Promote research studies in the region
- Help manage cohorts and veteran relationships to support recruitment for future research studies.
- Ensures sufficient management and access to data and biorepository samples

Opportunities for Implementation:

- Incorporate these best practices into the WRIISCs
- Create a national council of VISN-level Deployment Health Champions to work closely with national centers and VA Central Office to guide research and policy
- Ensure national centers serve as MVP enrollment sites

Key Features: VISN- and local-level

Medical Center Exemplars and Deployment Health Champions

- Create Deployment Health Champions to serve as experts and lead contacts for post-deployment health in the region that are also knowledgeable about research
- Collect biospecimen samples as part of standard post-deployment health exam and send to centralized biorepository accessible to researchers
- Serve as a hub for information on research studies, including promoting recruitment, within VISNs and help disseminate research findings
- Help manage cohorts and veteran relationships to support recruitment for future research studies
- Coordinate with relevant VA registries (e.g., Gulf War Registry Health Exam, Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry) active in its VISN and associated personnel (e.g., Environmental Health Coordinators and Clinicians)

Opportunities for Implementation:

- Identify an appropriately scaled number of local Deployment Health Champions in different VISNs
- Incorporate into standardized exams the collection of data and biospecimens for inclusion in databases and biorepositories
- Work with Environmental Health Clinicians and Coordinators to achieve standardization of registry exams and data management across VHA, ensuring their usefulness for research and clinical care

Questions and Comments?