



Promoting equity in engagement, access, and quality of mental health care for Veterans facing barriers to care, especially rural Veterans

March 2015 Vol 17, Issue 3

www.mirecc.va.gov/visn16

Communiqué

In This Issue

The Veteran Student Partnership: Perspectives from Navigators and Peer Advisors	p. 1
March CBOC MH Rounds: Addiction in Late Life	p. 4
SC MIRECC Pilot Study Program Deadline is April 1	p. 4
LGBT Health Awareness Week is March 23-27	p. 5



The Veteran Student Partnership: Perspectives from Navigators and Peer Advisors

By Ashley McDaniel, M.A., Megan Branch, Aaron Scruggs, Carolyn Jones-Hargrove, M.C., and Jennifer Hollis, B.A.

Since 2013, the VA Veteran Student Partnership (VSP) has been working with campus and community leaders in four rural areas of Arkansas to improve outcomes for military and Veteran students. Funded by the VA Office of Rural Health and administered by SC MIRECC, the mission of VSP is to provide colleges with information about Veterans' mental health needs, improve access to VA and community resources, and create a Veteran peer support and linkage to care program so that military and Veteran students can thrive in their local communities.

This mission is accomplished through the work of project navigators and peer advisors. The project navigators work with college administrators to provide resources and education to campuses. They also recruit peer advisors. The peer advisors identify the specific needs of military and Veteran students and link them to available resources. Peer advisors also build supportive relationships with these students so they can achieve their personal and academic goals. VSP staff have worked hard over the past year and a half to get the partnership off the ground at project sites. The project navigators and two peer advisors from Arkansas Tech University (ATU) give an inside look into what military and Veteran students are up against and what they are doing to help.

South Central MIRECC Anchor Sites:

LITTLE ROCK
HOUSTON
NEW ORLEANS
OKLAHOMA CITY

Mark E. Kunik, M.D., M.P.H.
Director

Michael R. Kauth, Ph.D.
*Co-Director and Associate Director
for Education*

Jeffrey Pyne, M.D.
*Interim Associate Director
for Research*

Patricia Dubbert, Ph.D.
*Associate Director
for Research Training*

Kathy L. Henderson, M.D.
*Associate Director
for Improving Clinical Care*

See VSP on page 2

VSP (continued from page 1)

Roll Call

Carolyn Jones-Hargrove and Jennifer Hollis have recently joined the partnership as Veteran navigators. Jones-Hargrove is a Gulf War Veteran who served in the Army. Hollis is an Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom Veteran who served in the Air Force. Megan Branch and Aaron Scruggs are two peer advisors at ATU. Branch served in the US Marine Corps and Scruggs serves in the Army National Guard. Both are seniors studying electrical engineering and hold leadership positions in the ATU chapter of Service-Members and Veterans of America (Scruggs, President; Branch, Vice President).

Understanding the Challenges

Military and Veteran students face unique challenges on college campuses, such as a lack of comradery, which is a staple of military life, and feeling that they lack a sense of purpose when there are no missions to complete. These individuals are non-traditional students, generally being at least a few years older than most of their classmates. This age and lifestyle gap can make it difficult for military and Veteran students to connect with classmates who are younger or never served.

Furthermore, military and Veteran students are facing resource access issues that can impact their ability to be successful in college. They could need assistance getting services from VA, the state, and in their community. In addition, they may need help accessing G.I. Bill benefits, getting tuition assistance, or attaining credit for education they received while in service. Ultimately, it will take Servicemembers, Veterans, their family members, and civilians who care to advocate for and work with military and Veteran students to help them succeed.

How Navigators and Peer Advisors are Helping

VSP navigators and peer advisors serve as links to organizational and interpersonal support that military



and Veteran students need to succeed in life and college. Because of their unique experiences in varied military branches and as students, each of these representatives has their own definition of what students need and how to help them. This allows them to reach out to a diverse group of military and Veteran students while utilizing knowledge they have received on VA and community resources from VSP staff.

Jones-Hargrove works with Henderson State University in Arkadelphia and the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff (UAPB). Though she has not yet had contact with students, she has found working with administrators to be great. “Administrators with UAPB Veterans Services and the Henderson Veterans Upward Bound program are very welcoming and looking forward to working with us in terms of providing services and support for the Veterans on campus, and I’m excited about working with them.” When she does start working with students, her main goal is to be available. “If this program was around when I was a student, I would have wanted someone to point me in the right direction...Don’t just tell me to call so-and-so; give me a name and a phone number. Maybe even call that person first and let them know that I will be calling.”

Hollis works with the University of Central Arkansas

continued on page 3

ATTRIBUTION: ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF MIRECC RESEARCH SUPPORT/EMPLOYMENT

SC MIRECC researchers and educators have a responsibility to ensure SC MIRECC receives proper credit for SC MIRECC-supported studies or projects in articles, presentations, interviews, and other professional activities in which the results of those projects are publicized or recognized. All investigators should credit SC MIRECC if they receive either direct or indirect SC MIRECC support. For example, "This work was supported in part by the VA South Central (VISN 16) Mental Illness Research, Education and Clinical Center." If you receive salary support from SC MIRECC, you should list SC MIRECC as an affiliation.

continued from page 2



in Conway and ATU in Russellville. She is excited about this opportunity to assist fellow student Veterans navigate through college life. “As a navigator, I can help recognize challenges student Veterans face and refer them to appropriate resources on and off campus. Also, the peer advisor program will help with retention and academic success,” she adds. Her work with these students has confirmed the need of this partnership on campuses. Hollis says, “Overall, the Veterans I have met agree that there is a need to elevate awareness of Veterans on campus, as well as increasing resources for academic needs.” She finds that moral support seems to be the biggest area of common ground for these students, as it allows them to connect and gain the comradery they had in the service.

While the navigators are focusing on service connection and warm handoffs, the peer advisors are building relationships with fellow military and Veteran students and educating civilians. At ATU, Branch finds that this project is helping build awareness of issues to civilians who have never served and to build relationships between Servicemembers of varying branches, job, and rank. As an advisor, she hopes to enlighten her peers and help them get the professional help necessary to overcome issues they are facing without stigma. Scruggs adds, “It is one thing to get help from local Veteran services but it’s good to talk to students who have gone through the same things.” Scruggs finds that advice from peers about classes, professors, and getting things done on campus can make a big difference in the life of a military or Veteran student.

Project Impacts

Not only is VSP impacting the lives of military and Veteran students, it is impacting the lives of VSP staff and the community at large. Jones-Hargrove sees similarities between her needs when she discharged from the military

years ago and the needs of students today. “No one was there to guide me. I had to find my own way and it shouldn’t be like that. It’s frustrating, and gives you that ‘just forget it’ mentality, ‘I’m not going to bother with it’ and that is what we don’t need to do because if a student gets to that point, they are going to drop out of school and give up, and we don’t want that to happen,” says Jones-Hargrove.

Hollis believes that the VSP project would have helped her when she started college. “I wish we had this kind of program while I was completing my degree. College is stressful enough! A connection of like-minds or a peer group that understood me as a Veteran would have improved my overall sense of well-being and helped me in the integration process. One of my biggest frustrations was understanding my VA benefits and working through the maze of options. Having knowledge of the resources available could have alleviated most of those concerns. The personal challenges associated with separating from the military caused hardship and some setbacks. Resources such as an on campus Veteran Resource Center, a VA administrative advisor on campus, or peer support from other Veterans would have definitely lessened my disorientation,” says Hollis.

Scruggs hopes this project will help Servicemembers and Veterans understand the importance of education. He also wants people to know that building relationships with these individuals can help with other big issues, like suicide awareness. He hopes the public will start “checking on people, and as we called it in the military, checking on your Battle Buddy.”

Through peer advising, Branch has increased her interactions with other Veterans on campus. Branch says, “Seeing how many different solutions Veterans come up for their own problems, and how they handle each of those problems is a real eye-opener.” It has affirmed her belief that “One person can make the difference,” and she encourages everyone to reach out to their friends and families about the challenges facing Veterans so that they do not have to overcome these massive hurdles alone.

For more information about the Veteran Student Partnership, contact the project coordinator, Susan Jegley, at Susan.Jegley@va.gov. ♦

CBOC Mental Health Rounds

Sponsored by the South Central MIRECC

VA mental health providers are invited to attend the next CBOC Mental Health Rounds session titled “**Addiction in Late Life**” on Wednesday, March 11 at 8:00-9:00 a.m. CT and Thursday, March 12 at 11:00-12:00 p.m. CT. This Microsoft Lync session will be presented by David Oslin, M.D. At the conclusion of this educational program, learners will be able to:

1. Discuss the main findings of major epidemiological studies pertaining to prevalence of addiction in late life;
2. Analyze the available treatment options for older adults; and
3. Describe the limitations of the current literature related to older adults.

Call 1-800-767-1750 and use access code 37009# to participate. Email Ashley.McDaniel@va.gov or call (501) 257-1223 for registration and continuing education credit information.

**Upcoming CBOC Mental
Health Rounds
Second Wednesdays
(8:00-9:00 am CT)
and
Thursdays
(11:00-12:00 am CT)
Monthly
(800) 767-1750; 37009#**

April 8 & 9, 2015
Brief CBT

May 13 & 14, 2015
Hoarding

SC MIRECC Pilot Study Program Quarterly Application Deadline is April 1

We accept applications for the SC MIRECC Pilot Study Research Program four times a year: January 1, April 1, July 1, October 1, or the following Monday after a weekend. The next application deadline is April 1, 2015.

Generally, pilot study grants are less than \$75,000. Investigators proposing multi-site studies may request additional funds. Study expenses must be justified and we welcome proposals with more modest budgets. All SC MIRECC core and affiliate faculty and fellows are eligible to apply. A SC MIRECC core or affiliate investigator must serve as co-principal investigator on trainee proposals (fellow, resident, or intern).

For more information, contact Dr. Ellen Fischer at fischerellenp@uams.edu or (501) 257-1711. Visit <http://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn16/research.asp> to download the application. ♦

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Health Awareness Week is March 23-27

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) people experience higher rates of some health risk factors such as depression and smoking compared to the general population. LGBT Veterans may be at even higher risk of some health conditions. Please help raise awareness about LGBT health concerns. March 23-27, 2015 is LGBT Health Awareness Week. Visit <http://vaww.infoshare.va.gov/sites/LGBEducation/trainingenvironment/LGBT%20Health%20Awareness%20Week%200315Final.pdf> to download a poster to publicize this event. You can also visit the VHA Transgender Education SharePoint (<http://vaww.infoshare.va.gov/sites/pcscipro/trer/default.aspx>) or the LGB Education SharePoint (<http://vaww.infoshare.va.gov/sites/LGBEducation/default.aspx>) for educational and clinical resources for meeting the healthcare needs of LGBT Veterans. For a list of resources to help you learn more about LGBT Veterans, email LGBTProgram@va.gov.

Do Ask, Do Tell
Good communication is good health care

There are more than **1 Million** LGBT Veterans in the USA^{1,2}

62%
VHA providers who do not ask about LGBT status³

**Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender (LGBT)
HEALTH AWARENESS WEEK
MARCH 23-27, 2015**

For a list of resources, email LGBTProgram@va.gov

¹ Gates, 2004
² Gates & Herman, 2014
³ Sherman, Kauth, Shipherd & Street, 2014

VA HEALTH CARE | Defining EXCELLENCE in the 21st Century

Published by the South Central MIRECC
Editor: Ashley McDaniel, M.A.
Reviewer: Carrie Edlund, M.S., M.A.



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Veterans Health Administration
South Central MIRECC