

# THE VISN 5 MIRECC MATTERS

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## TAKING A LOOK AT STIGMA

*Submitted by Aaron Murray-Swank, PhD*

Stigma is a central barrier to recovery for people living with schizophrenia and other serious mental illnesses. The President's New Freedom Commission Report underscores the negative effects of stigma, noting that "stigma is a pervasive barrier to understanding the gravity of mental illnesses and the importance of mental health." Due to stigma, many people who experience serious mental illness are hesitant to seek treatment. Furthermore, stigma in society and within the mental health service system limits quality of life and opportunities for recovery among people living with mental illness. Recognizing this, the recent VA Mental Health Action Agenda has identified the reduction of stigma as a top priority.

Most previous research on stigma has largely focused on understanding societal attitudes and behaviors towards persons with serious mental illness. However, a few recent studies have begun to examine internalized stigma, or the process by which people living with mental illness "take in" stigmatizing attitudes and beliefs into their identity, or the way they think and feel about themselves. From this line of research, Dr. Jennifer Boyd Ritsher, affiliated with the San Francisco VA Medical Center, developed the Internalized Stigma of Mental Illness (ISMI) scale, to assess consumers' level of internalized stigma. Dr. Ritsher recently

discussed this topic at a well-attended seminar at the Baltimore VAMC.

Within the VISN 5 MIRECC, a research team that includes **Aaron Murray-Swank, PhD**, **Alicia Lucksted, PhD**, **Richard Goldberg, PhD**, and **Lisa Dixon, MD, MPH**, has begun a study to better understand stigma in the lives of veterans who are living with serious mental illness. The primary goal of this study is to collect data about the experiences of stigma and discrimination, and to look at measures of internalized stigma such as the ISMI. We are also seeking to learn whether certain consumer characteristics are associated with experiences of stigma (e.g., age, symptoms). We will use this data to inform MIRECC educational and clinical programs about reducing the effects of stigma on veterans living with serious mental illness, and their families.

For more information about this protocol, contact Dr. Aaron Murray-Swank by phone: (410) 605-7000, ext. 4756, or email: [aaron.murray-swank@med.va.gov](mailto:aaron.murray-swank@med.va.gov).

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## SMALL GRANTS PROGRAM FOR RECOVERY-FOSTERING CLINICAL AND EDUCATIONAL INNOVATIONS

*Submitted by Alicia Lucksted, PhD*

The VISN 5 MIRECC now offers a small grant mechanism to fund recovery-oriented clinical and educational innovations. In response to the

VA's Action Agenda to transform VA mental health services to a recovery model, the MIRECC has initiated various activities to support and encourage recovery-oriented efforts across the VISN, including this Small Grants Program.

Recovery-oriented mental health services have as a core value that people living with mental illnesses are not defined by their illness and can live rich, satisfying lives. More specifically, such services: view the veteran as the center of the process and foster empowerment, include the veteran and involved family members as partners in setting goals, recognize that recovery is a dynamic process that the veteran pursues over time, and work to maximize quality of life. Therefore, the Small Grants Program especially encourages (but is not limited to) proposals such as: creating, adopting, or launching new recovery-oriented clinical, self-help, or related projects (or expanding existing ones to reach more veterans), new programs to educate staff, veterans, and/or family members of veterans about mental health recovery models, or specific recovery-oriented services/programs.

Proposals may come from any individual or group (e.g. unit or program) within VISN 5 mental health services, including veteran and consumer groups. We encourage applications from all VISN 5 sites. Grant awards are between \$300 and \$5,000 and will be made four times per year. The remaining deadlines for application for this year are September 1st and December 1st. Applicants receiving a Small Grant will receive ongoing support and assistance from the MIRECC Recovery Coordinator throughout their project. For more information, or to receive an application, please contact **Alicia Lucksted, PhD**, MIRECC Recovery Coordinator, at [Alicia.Lucksted@med.va.gov](mailto:Alicia.Lucksted@med.va.gov), 410-605-7451 or 410-706-3244.

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## **NEW TRAINING SERIES: TREATING DUALY DIAGNOSED VETERANS IN THE MHICM PROGRAM**

*Submitted by Richard Goldberg, PhD*

On June 30, 2005, staff from the four Mental Health Intensive Case Management (MHICM) programs across the VISN attended the first of a three-part program designed to help them more effectively serve dually diagnosed veterans in the context of providing assertive community treatment. This half-day event, sponsored by the VISN 5 MIRECC in collaboration with the D.C. and VAMHCS MHICM programs, was held at the Baltimore VAMC and consisted of two keynote addresses. First, Fred Osher, MD, presented an overview of the treatment principles associated with the comprehensive and coordinated treatment of this special population. The second presentation, by James Metts, LGSW, CSC-AD, focused on the theoretical and practical considerations of working with dually diagnosed vets. The program concluded with an open forum for discussion and problem solving.

The second program in the series, scheduled for Thursday, September 16, 2005, will focus on evidence-based individual and group interventions designed to meet the multiple care needs of dually diagnosed veterans. **Alan S. Bellack, PhD, ABPP**, Director of the VISN 5 MIRECC, and **Melanie Bennett, PhD**, a MIRECC investigator specializing in substance abuse interventions, are the invited speakers for this event.

For more information on this ongoing training series, please keep an eye on our web-site: <http://www.1va.gov/visn5mirecc>.

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## CONGRATS ARE IN ORDER!

**Aaron Murray-Swank, PhD**, was recently awarded a VA Health Services Research and Development (HSR&D) Research Career Development award, “Enhancing Implementation of Family Psychoeducation for Schizophrenia”. The goal of the research proposed in this award is to better understand the service needs of veterans living with serious mental illness, and their families, and to identify and overcome barriers to participation in family support services. Dr. Murray-Swank will also continue to develop and coordinate the MIRECC Family Support Program for veterans with serious mental illness and their family members. For more information on this monthly program, see the Upcoming Events section of this newsletter, or visit our website at <http://www1.va.gov/visn5mirecc>.

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### WELCOME TO NEW MIRECC STAFF

**Kathleen Tallent, PhD**, has joined the MIRECC as a postdoctoral fellow in Advanced Psychology. Dr. Tallent received her doctorate in clinical psychology from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2005. Her previous research has focused on cognitive processing in individuals with schizophrenia and other psychotic disorders, as well as those at risk for psychosis. She will be involved in cognitive remediation studies as well as other research projects within MIRECC.

**Matt Specht, PhD**, joins the MIRECC following the completion of his pre-doctoral internship at the University of Maryland School of Medicine/VA Maryland Health Care System Consortium. Originally from Prairie du Chien, WI, he recently received his doctorate in clinical psychology from Idaho State University. Dr. Specht’s research and clinical work has focused on borderline personality disorder, parasuicide, and cognition. Dr. Specht will be working on various research projects examining event-related

potentials (ERPs) and neurocognitive processes in relation to schizophrenia.

Welcome also to **Elizabeth Olson, MA**, who recently joined the MIRECC as the Data Manager for the Center for the Behavioral Treatment of Schizophrenia. Elizabeth graduated from Towson University in January 2005 with a Master’s degree in Experimental Psychology. Her previous research experiences include working on studies of various aspects of memory and learning.

**Tim Ralston, MA**, comes on board as a Research Assistant who will be involved with our dual diagnosis treatment interventions. Tim received his Master’s degree in General Psychology from Boston University in 2003. Prior to coming to the MIRECC, he worked for the University of Massachusetts Medical School as a study coordinator for clinical trials involving medications used in the treatment of schizophrenia.

**Jason Smith, MA**, will also be a therapist for our dual diagnosis treatment protocols. After receiving his Master’s degree in Psychology from Shippensburg University, Jason worked on an inpatient unit where he provided group and individual counseling to mentally ill patients. He also worked for a counseling agency providing crisis, individual and group therapy to children and adults in homeless shelters, domestic violence shelters and a neighborhood health clinic.

**Melissa M. Smith, MSW**, joins the MIRECC as a Research Assistant and site coordinator for Dr. Wendy Tenhula’s protocol, “The Use of Skills Training to Augment CWT/VI for Veterans with SMI” at the Washington DC VAMC. Melissa received her Master’s degree in Social Work from University of Maryland, Baltimore in 2001, and previously worked on studies that evaluated the effectiveness of adolescent substance abuse treatment and the effectiveness of a critical time intervention for psychiatric patients. Melissa will be a critical link between the MIRECC and the Washington DC VAMC as we expand our

research efforts in order to better serve the veterans in VISN 5.

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## **GOOD-BYE AND THANKS**

**Virginia “VJ” Iannone, PhD**, recently left the MIRECC to focus on her private practice in animal-assisted therapy. After completing her internship in 2002 at the MIRECC, VJ contributed significantly to our research center as project manager on the VA cooperative study, “A Randomized Clinical Trial of Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment for PTSD Women” and Dr. Lisa Dixon’s “Does a CTI (Critical Time

Intervention) Improve Psychiatric Inpatient-Outpatient Transition Outcomes?” protocol. VJ also supervised the neuropsychological assessors in Dr. Bellack’s laboratory, and was instrumental in recent Clinical Core program development. We wish her much success and happiness in her new venture.

## ***UPCOMING EVENTS***

### **Family Support and Education Program**

August 27, 2005  
10:00 – 11:30 AM  
Baltimore VA Medical Center, Room 2B-136

The Family Support and Education Program is a monthly program for family members of veterans with serious mental illnesses, including schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and major depression. The program is designed to help families support veterans' treatment and recovery, as well as assist family members and other caregivers as they cope with the effects of mental illness on the family. Group meetings are held one Saturday a month at the Baltimore VA Medical Center, and involve presentation of information and discussion, which is adapted to the needs of family members and veterans who attend.

To register for the workshop, or if you have any questions about the program, please contact Dr. Aaron Murray-Swank by phone: (410) 605-7000, ext. 4756, or email: [aaron.murray-swank@med.va.gov](mailto:aaron.murray-swank@med.va.gov).

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### **“Mental Illness: Pathways to Recovery” Family Conference**

October 22, 2005  
9:30 AM – 2:00 PM  
Perry Point VAMC Auditorium

Veterans and their families/caregivers are invited to attend this half-day conference presented by the VISN 5 MIRECC and clinical staff from the Perry Point VA Medical Center. Alicia Lucksted, PhD, will present information about the recovery model and the impact of family/caregivers’ involvement in the recovery process. Support services in both the VA and the community will be highlighted, and consumers who are involved with the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI) will present a

workshop entitled “In Our Own Voices”. In addition, Bette Stewart and Maureen Kilby, NP, will present information about the NAMI “Family to Family” Program.

For more information, please contact Cynthia Clark, RNC, at [Cynthia.clark2@med.va.gov](mailto:Cynthia.clark2@med.va.gov) or by phone at 410-605-7298.

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### **13<sup>th</sup> Annual Maryland Schizophrenia Conference**

November 1, 2005

8:30 AM – 4:30 PM

Martin’s West

6817 Dogwood Road, Baltimore

E-Mail: [MDSchizConf@mprc.umaryland.edu](mailto:MDSchizConf@mprc.umaryland.edu)

Web Site: [www.mdschizconf.org](http://www.mdschizconf.org)

On-line registration Starts September 1, 2005

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VISIT OUR WEBSITE AT  
<http://www1.va.gov/visn5mirecc>