

THE VISN 5 MIRECC MATTERS

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THE RETURNING VETERANS OUTREACH, EDUCATION AND CARE PROGRAM (RVOEC)

Submitted by Christina Watlington, PhD & Sonja Batten, PhD

A significant number of military personnel have deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). Returning OIF/OEF service members may experience significant mental health problems, including posttraumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, generalized anxiety and major depression. When returning service members are transitioning from the war zone back to civilian life, their reactions to war can also have a negative impact on their family members. However, many returning service members are resistant to seeking professional help due to concern about stigma.

The VA is engaged in a number of activities to inform veterans and their families of the benefits and services available to them. In August of 2006, five mental health professionals were hired to make up the VAMHCS Returning Veterans Outreach, Education and Care Program (RVOEC) team. Led by MIRECC investigator and Trauma Recovery Program Coordinator, **Sonja Batten**, the RVOEC team consists of psychologist Christina Watlington, social workers Peter Allman, Sara Meyd, and Matt Camardese, and mental health nurse practitioner Linda Zetter. The VAMHCS RVOEC program is

one of 37 such programs in the nation. Through a concerted effort at early detection and intervention, the RVOEC program aims to lower the incidence of long-term mental health problems in OIF/OEF veterans.

To date, the VAMHCS RVOEC team has participated in a number of outreach activities to inform veterans and their family members of the benefits and services available to them. On December 3, 2006, the team participated in a Post Deployment Health Reassessment event that took place at the Baltimore Division of the VAMHCS as part of outreach to the Maryland National Guard's 243rd Engineering Company that served in Iraq. Of the 95 service members who were screened, 46 individuals were in the VAMHCS catchment area and scheduled for Primary Care appointments. Further, for those 46 soldiers, the RVOEC team was able to schedule 22 mental health appointments. We hope that these appointments will allow us to provide preventive maintenance and early intervention for any readjustment problems these veterans may have. Members of the RVOEC team are also developing creative ways to reach out to our returning service members by building partnerships with local religious and civic organizations. In addition to the outreach activities, the RVOEC team offers peer support groups for post-deployment readjustment, individual counseling, couples and family counseling, residential treatment, and referrals for vocational rehabilitation. We feel that this comprehensive spectrum of care will assist the returning veterans with an efficient and effective return to productive civilian functioning.

NEW PEER HOUSING LOCATION ASSISTANCE GROUP (PHLAG)

Submitted by Alicia Lucksted, PhD, and Vera Sturm, MS

Finding permanent housing and avoiding a relapse into homelessness is a daunting problem for thousands of veterans who are on the streets. The VA offers a variety of special programs designed to help homeless veterans live as self-sufficiently and independently as possible. But while the VA Homeless Veteran programs assisted 63,283 veterans in FY 2004, only 45% of the vets served had an apartment, room, or house at discharge from these programs. In response to this problem, the VA Central Office (VACO) funded a pilot project called Peer Housing Location Assistance Group (PHLAG). The PHLAG pilot program is based on a successful program which empowers veterans by using a peer-assisted permanent housing assistance group. It is a recovery-oriented program which encourages and enables each veteran to take the responsibility and initiative to find permanent housing. PHLAG is currently being implemented in six VA facilities across the US.

The VISN 5 MIRECC is assisting VACO in the implementation of this crucial project, and will conduct the evaluation of the pilot. Alicia Lucksted, PhD and Vera Sturm, MS, are working to develop the evaluation strategy and will be managing, analyzing, interpreting and reporting the data. The MIRECC is also assessing each site's needs in regard to implementing the model

and will work with them to meet those needs. In October 2006, VACO and the MIRECC organized the first PHLAG Conference, which brought together representatives from the six pilot sites to discuss the implementation.

Watch this newsletter for updates on this important program.

MENTAL ILLNESS: PATHWAYS TO RECOVERY

Submitted by Cynthia Clark, RN, C, CD

On Saturday, November 4, 2006, the VISN 5 MIRECC and clinical staff from the Baltimore VA Medical Center presented a conference entitled "Mental Illness: Pathways to Recovery". Seventy-seven people attended, including veterans with mental illness, their family members and friends, and community residence staff. The informative program included a talk from **Alicia Lucksted, PhD** about the Recovery Model and the impact of family/caregivers on the recovery process. Consumers involved with The National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI) gave a workshop titled "In Our Own Voices", which shared their personal experiences on the road to recovery. Finally, Bette Stewart, a consultant and trainer for the Family to Family Psychoeducation Program, presented information about the Family-to-Family Program, a NAMI sponsored educational workshop.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Monthly SGA Consultation Seminar

January 4, 2007 (first Thursday of every month)

1:00 - 2:00 PM

MIRECC conference room, BVA (6A-168)

or PPVA VTel conference room, Bldg 364

or call 800-767-1750, code 79846

There has been increasing concern, both within and outside of the VA, about the metabolic side effects of second generation antipsychotic medications (SGAs). VAMHCS clinicians are encouraged to bring their difficult or complicated SGA cases to this seminar for consultation and advice. All VA clinicians are invited to attend even if you don't have a case to present. Your consultants are **Dr. Robert Buchanan** from the MIRECC Psychopharmacology Clinic and Maryland Psychiatric Research Center, and **Dr. Julie Kreyenbuhl** from the MIRECC.

Recovery-Oriented Small Grants Program

Application Deadline

March 1, 2007

The VISN 5 MIRECC 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. This 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. The first round of applications were received September 1, 2005, and reflected a diversity of VA programs and innovative ideas.

For more information, or to receive an application, please contact Alicia Lucksted, PhD, MIRECC Recovery Coordinator, at Alicia.Lucksted@va.gov, 410-605-7451 or 410-706-3244.

Schizophrenia And Other Mental Illnesses: Involving The Family, Improving Care

This one hour, three-part (20 minutes each) DVD program highlights the importance of including families in the treatment of patients with schizophrenia and other mental illnesses. This program is highly recommended for families, patients, clinicians, policy makers and the general public. For a copy, contact Fran Broomall at fran.broomall@va.gov or 410-605-7000, x 4740.

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<http://www.va.gov/VISN5mirecc>