

Department of Veterans Affairs Mental Health Centers of Excellence

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Since the first Mental Health Centers of Excellence opened in 1989, VA has expanded and strengthened its approach to veteran mental health through world-class, cutting edge science, education, and clinical care. Each center is staffed with researchers and clinicians who use their expertise to raise the VA's mental health standard of care.



Federal Practitioner's 30th anniversary celebration continues with the spotlight this month on the accomplishments of the Mental Health Centers of Excellence.

Specialized Mental Health Centers of Excellence (MH CoEs) are an essential component of VA's response to meeting the mental health needs of veterans. Mental health conditions commonly experienced by veterans include depression, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), schizophrenia, anxiety disorders, and substance use disorders. Veterans may meet criteria for more than one of these disorders and may also experience homelessness, suicidality, and difficulties at work and in relationships.

HISTORY

The first MH CoE, the National Center for PTSD (NCPTSD), was created by Public Law 98-528 and opened

in 1989. The NCPTSD was followed by the creation of Mental Illness Research, Education and Clinical Centers (MIRECCs) through Public Law 104-262; there are now 10 centers across the country. In 2005, 3 other specialized centers were established through Public Law 109-305; these centers were created to address the mental health needs of veterans returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The secretary of the VA also established the Center for Integrated Healthcare to address the importance of integrating mental health services into primary care across the VA system.

MISSION

All the MH CoEs have a mission to improve the health and well-being of veterans through world-class, cutting edge science, education, and clinical care. The centers are designed to be incubators for new investigators, new clinicians, new methods of treatment, new modes of education, and new ways of delivering care. The concept of the MH CoEs combines education, research, and improving clinical care into a single program

with the effect of dramatically reducing the time from scientific discovery to clinical implementation.

SITE SPECIALIZATION

Multiple MH CoEs are needed to address complex conditions that differ in terms of symptoms, causes, prevalence, course, prognosis, and treatment. Each MH CoE addresses a specific mental health problem or problems across the spectrum of veteran mental health. For example, one MH CoE focuses on maximizing recovery for veterans with serious mental illnesses; another focuses on postdeployment mental health in returning veterans. The MH CoEs must also specialize in understanding and improving the technical side of access to services and delivery within the VA, because the services needed are different for veterans with varying or multiple diagnoses and for different populations.

The MH CoEs bring added value, not only by leveraging regional and local VA expertise, but also by capitalizing on clinical, research, and educational expertise from academic affiliates, making it possible for a

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single site to conduct research and educational activities across the spectrum of basic and clinical domains necessary to fully address a given disorder.

CLINICAL, RESEARCH, AND EDUCATIONAL ADVANCES

Research by the MH CoEs has had a profound effect on enhancing the understanding and treatment of mental health conditions in veterans. For example, the NCPTSD-led VA Cooperative Study #494—the first randomized clinical trial of PTSD treatment for female veterans and service members—demonstrated the effectiveness of prolonged exposure therapy. Based on the study's results, the VA implemented a national training program for VA providers so that the treatment could be broadly disseminated to veterans across the country.

Education and training are central to the mission of the MH CoEs as well. Educational efforts include national provider trainings, conferences, consultation, demonstration projects, creation and dissemination of clinical tools, and public awareness campaigns. Content experts at MH CoEs work with other VA offices to develop national clinical trainings for mental health providers. The national MIRECC website,

<http://www.mirecc.va.gov>, is a major source for MH CoE educational products; the site had almost 400,000 visits and over 425,000 downloads in 2012. The NCPTSD website, <http://www.ptsd.va.gov>, receives more than 1 million visits annually and offers even more educational products focused on PTSD for veterans, professionals, and the general public. The MH CoEs use these websites to disseminate numerous excellent educational tools for professionals, veterans, families, and the general public.

LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE

The MH CoEs are dedicated to training the next generation of clinical leaders and researchers in VA. The VA Advanced Fellowship Program in Mental Illness Research and Treatment is an integrated program across the MH CoEs that has provided specialized postgraduate training to more than 100 current or former MD and PhD fellows. This program offers extensive centralized training that draws on the expertise from each CoE and ensures that the newest researchers and scientist-practitioners are using state-of-the-science methods.

SUMMARY

Accurately diagnosing and treating

mental health conditions require comprehensive efforts focused on specific disorders and populations. Specialized CoEs create environments that stimulate innovation and accomplishment. The concentrated expertise at each center informs and strengthens clinical care, research, and education tools essential to improving veteran mental health. Visit <http://www.mirecc.va.gov> for more information about the specific areas of focus for VA's Mental Health Centers of Excellence. ●

Author disclosures

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