



News from the federal health sector

★ 13 States Get Grants for Home-Visiting Programs

Thirteen states have received grants in recognition of their high-quality, evidence-based home-visiting programs, according to the Department of Health and Human Services. The grants award \$69.7 million to expand Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) Program activities.

The MIECHV Program, funded by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), helps states deliver critical health, development, early learning, and family support services to children and families. The program provides voluntary home visits for eligible families who “welcome education and support to strengthen their relationship with their infants and young children.”

Since the MIECHV Program was enacted in 2010 through the Affordable Care Act, it has served about 15,000 families in 544 communities across all 50 states; Washington, DC; and 5 territories. “This program plays a crucial role in the national effort to build comprehensive statewide early childhood systems for pregnant women, parents and caregivers, and children from birth to 8 years of age—and, ultimately, to improve health and development outcomes,” said Mary Wakefield, PhD, RN, administrator of HRSA, which partners with The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) to run the program. (ACF also leads the Tribal Home Visiting Program.)

The awards went to programs in Alabama, Delaware, Maryland, Michigan, Montana, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Texas, and Wisconsin.

★ Student Nurses Get a Wider View of Veteran Life

Student nurses at Emory University School of Nursing in Atlanta, Georgia, are getting a step closer to real-world nursing of veterans with mental health problems. Emory has partnered with the Atlanta VAMC in Georgia to create a new collaborative program that assigns students to a Dedicated Education Unit (DEU) led by Emory clinical faculty and VA staff nurses.

The new program offers benefits to students, nurses, and patients alike. Two to 3 students are paired with the same nurse and clinical instructor for their entire rotation. Each student interacts with all of the clinical instructor’s patients, which is in contrast to the usual model of inpatient clinical rotations. (Usually, a clinical faculty member is responsible for 8 to 10 students, each of whom is assigned to 1 patient.) The staff nurse, supported by the clinical faculty guide, also develops experience as an educator.

The DEU has been used nearly exclusively in medical-surgical inpatient units, and using the program in the VA inpatient psychiatric unit was an innovation. Since its launch, 97 students have completed their clinical rotations. The program’s success has led to the model being expanded to include the Community Living Center at the Atlanta VAMC.

★ Claims Backlog Drops Another 34%

Nearly all disability claims older than 1 year have been completed, according to a November 7, 2013, VA press release. The backlog has been reduced by 34% since it peaked in March 2013—from 611,000 to 400,835.

Waiting for benefits “has never

been acceptable,” said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki, “but we are executing our plans and moving in the right direction to meet our 2015 goal of eliminating the backlog.”

In April 2013, the VA launched the initiative to eliminate the oldest claims first. Since then, claims processors at the 56 regional Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) offices have been focused on claims older than 1 year. As of November 4, 2013, the VBA had completed 93% of those.

Of the more than 476,000 decisions made since April 2013, the proportion that resulted in benefits being granted is “on par with historical averages”—between 65% and 70%, the VA says. The accuracy of rating decisions has improved, the VA adds. The 3-month average for decision accuracy when evaluating a complete claim file is 90%—up 5 percentage points since 2011 and 7 percentage points since 2010. The 3-month average accuracy for rating individual medical conditions inside each claim has climbed 3 points to 96.7% since December 2012.

The VBA has been working overtime to process the claims, although the government shutdown in October 2013 interrupted. Mandatory overtime has been reestablished and is expected to continue through 2014, depending on available funding. Optional overtime is in effect. “[Many employees] have been working long periods of overtime since May,” said Under Secretary for Benefits Allison A. Hickey. “I talk to them every day and they are committed to building on their record-breaking progress, helping transform the VA into a paperless system, and ending the backlog for good.” ●