

VA is a Leader in Mental Health and Social Service Research and Operations

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The US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) mission is defined by President Abraham Lincoln's promise "to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan." Critically, the biopsychosocial needs of veterans differ from the needs of civilians due to the nature of military service.¹ Veterans commonly experience traumatic brain injury (TBI) due to combat- or training-related injuries.² Psychologically, veterans are disproportionately likely to be diagnosed with mental health conditions, such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), often linked to military exposures.³ Spiritually, veterans frequently express moral injury after living through circumstances when they perpetrate, fail to prevent, or witness events that contradict moral beliefs/expectations.⁴ Veterans also have significant social challenges, including high rates of homelessness.⁵ A critical strength of the VA mission is its awareness of these complex sequelae and its ability to provide well-informed treatment and social services to meet veterans' unique needs.

Foundational to a well-informed health care system is a robust research and operational quality improvement infrastructure. The VA Office of Research and Development (ORD) has worked tirelessly to understand and address the unique, idiographic needs of veterans. In 2024 the ORD had a budget of \$2.4 billion, excluding quality improvement initiatives enhancing VA operations.⁶

The integrated VA health care system is a major strength for providing state-of-the-science to inform veterans' treatment and social service needs. The VA features medical centers and clinics capable of synergistically leveraging extant infrastructure to facilitate collaborations and centralized procedures across sites. The VA also has dedicated research centers, such as the National Center for PTSD, Centers of Excellence, Centers of Innovation, and Mental Illness, Research, Education and Clinical Centers that focus on PTSD, suicide prevention, TBI, and other high-priority areas. These centers recruit, train, and invest in experts dedicated to improving veterans' lives. The VA Corporate Data Warehouse provides a national, system-wide repository for patient-level data, allowing for advanced analysis of large datasets.⁷

This special issue is a showcase of the strengths of VA mental health and social service research, aligning with the current strategic priorities of VA research. Topics focus on the

unique needs of veterans, including sequelae (eg, PTSD, homelessness, moral injury), with particular attention to veterans. Manuscripts highlight the strengths of collaborations, including those between specialized research centers and national VA operational partners. Analyses highlight the VA research approach, leveraging data and perspectives from inside and outside the VA, and studying new and established approaches to care. This issue highlights the distinct advantages that VA research provides: experts with the tools, experience, and dedication to addressing the unique needs of veterans. Given the passion for veteran care among VA researchers, including those featured in this issue, we strongly believe the VA will continue to be a leader in this research.

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