

VA Advanced Training for Clinician Researchers and Data Scientists in Mental Health

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Background: The mission of the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) is to bring state-of-the-art clinical care to veterans. To achieve this goal, VHA has invested in clinical translation from scientific discovery to system-wide implementation of evidence-based approaches for veteran mental health care. A skilled workforce of clinician researchers and data scientists has been essential for this scientifically-informed work.

Observations: This commentary provides an overview of the US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Advanced Fellowship in Mental Illness Research and Treatment (MIRT), as well as the

activities of its national coordinating center. Since 2000, this program has successfully supported workforce sustainability and innovation in evidence-based mental health care for veterans. In addition to the high research productivity of recent fellows based on their peer-reviewed publications and grant awards, almost two-thirds of recently graduated fellows secured postfellowship positions with the VA.

Conclusions: VA Advanced Fellowship programs, such as MIRT, are cost-effective and efficient, allowing VHA to remain at the forefront of providing high quality mental health care to veterans.

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The US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) mission realizes President Abraham Lincoln's promise to "to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan."¹ Evidence-based care fulfills this promise and is the backbone of Veterans Health Administration (VHA) mental health care.^{2,3} To ensure veterans receive state-of-the-art clinical care, a skilled workforce and investment in data-driven approaches are necessary to identify best treatments and strategies to implement them in practice.

Through scientific and clinical training tailored to VA, the 23 VA Advanced Fellowships have secured a steady flow of highly trained PhD professionals (ie, psychologists and other allied health professionals), and medical doctors (ie, psychiatrists and neurologists) into the VA workforce.⁴ The VA Advanced Fellows are funded by the Office of Academic Affiliations (OAA) and offer 2-year training opportunities for postresidency MDs and postdoctoral PhDs. This article describes a VA Advanced Fellowship in mental health as an example of how these programs can have a broad and positive impact on the VA health care system.

ADVANCED FELLOWS PROGRAM

The VA Advanced Fellowship in Mental Illness Research and Treatment (AF MIRT), formerly known as the VA Special Fellowship Program in Advanced Psychiatry and Psychology, educates and trains

clinician and nonclinician researchers to meet VA priority mental health care needs.⁵ Clinical AF MIRT fellows dedicate 75% of their time to training and research activities and 25% to direct clinical services. Data science fellows complete projects that inform veteran clinical care through qualitative data collection, program evaluation, and analysis of large datasets. The full translational pathway to evidence-based clinical care is represented by fellow research spanning basic animal models, genetics, and neuroimaging to implementation science and applied clinical care for veterans.

In 2025, AF MIRT marked its 25th year of training postdoctoral-level mental health scientific practitioners and scholars. This investment in clinical research training has had profound benefits for innovation and retention of clinicians and scientists within the VA system. As of April 1, 2026, AF MIRT trained 700 fellows, including 152 MD or MD/PhD fellows, 544 PhD or PsyD fellows, 3 PharmDs fellows, and 1 doctor of nursing practice fellow.

FELLOWSHIP STRUCTURE

The AF MIRT coordinating center provides key administrative support to fellowship site directors and topical didactic training to Advanced Fellows, ensuring consistent standard of quality training across locations in 15 states and 4 times zones. The training provided by the AF

MIRT coordinating center deepens the nationally-mandated focus of local translational clinical centers (eg, Mental Illness Research Education and Clinical Centers, Centers of Excellence) on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), serious mental illness, dementia, and other areas.

The AF MIRT coordinating center also promotes VA workforce sustainability. Advanced Fellows in programs with a coordinating center are much more likely to be retained in VA for postfellowship employment compared with fellows in programs without such a coordinating center (60% vs 38%) according to unpublished Office of Academic Affiliations data (Joel Schmidt, oral communication, May 15, 2025). The AF MIRT coordinating center provides central standardization and uses evidence-based approaches to ensure fellows receive consistent support, resources, and training. More specifically, the coordinating center develops and delivers a standardized, core curriculum to the program's 28 sites. The program pioneered video delivery of integrated didactics that enlist national experts, many of them VA researchers and clinicians themselves. Didactics include high priority veteran mental health topics, such as suicide prevention, new and emerging evidence-based treatments (eg, neurostimulation for treatment resistant PTSD, psychotherapeutic approaches for traumatic brain injury), and VA health system considerations for mental health treatment delivery.

This curated didactic series also covers professional and technical issues, such as statistical and methodological considerations for clinical trials, scientific writing, and grant-writing skill development. These offerings support the career pathways of advanced fellows to pursue careers as researchers, scientifically-informed clinicians, or data scientists at VA or academic medical centers. The coordinating center prepares fellows to apply for mentored career award funding or independent investigator awards through the VA, National Institutes of Health (NIH), US Department of Defense, and other organizations by offering an annual mock grant review session and monthly reviews and discussions of fellows' grant applications.



FIGURE. Geographic location of graduated fellow postfellowship employment across all settings, July 2020 to June 2025.

AF MIRT continuously fine tunes the didactic series curriculum based on feedback from fellows on how the program meets their training needs. For example, learning about the strategies Advanced Fellows used to remain productive during COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns revealed a strong trend toward use of secondary data (eg, publicly available data or VA electronic health record data). This fueled curriculum adjustments to include more topics relevant to fellow interests and needs for accessing secondary data resources for high priority veteran mental health topics.⁶

VA ADVANCED FELLOWSHIPS SUCCESSSES

From July 2020 to June 2025, MIRT advanced fellows published 906 peer-reviewed articles in psychiatry, psychology, and other disciplines. Each year, about 20 to 25 articles are published in high-impact journals. In this 5-year period, fellows have received 153 grants (114 VA grants) as principal investigators—many examining new innovations to improve the quality of care of veterans. Of the 165 fellows who graduated since 2020, 63% continued working in veteran health care: 38% transitioned to full-time VA employment and 25% moved to VA employment with an academic-affiliated role. Nineteen percent transitioned to academic positions, 12% transitioned to the private sector, and 5% transitioned to other government, industry, or nonprofit employment

where these professionals contribute to scientific and clinical innovation benefiting the US public; 1% did not provide postfellowship employment information. The Figure displays geographic locations of graduated fellows' postfellowship employment from July 2020 to June 2025.

The accomplishments of fellows are wide-ranging and aligned with VA's mission. Each year, roughly 15 fellows receive new investigator awards, travel awards, and poster or presentation awards from prominent professional societies. Fellows have obtained VA Career Development Awards in diverse topics, including suicide prevention through clinician resources and training programs, firearm safety discussions, digital phenotyping and neuroimaging to enhance social integration in veterans with schizophrenia, rapid transcranial magnetic stimulation to treat nicotine use and PTSD, and evidence-based psychotherapy techniques for female veterans experiencing issues in menopause.

Several recent MIRT fellows have also received highly competitive NIH K Career Development Awards. One notable example is a fellow who studied pharmacologic approaches for treatment-resistant depression informed by novel brain circuit findings, first testing these approaches in community samples through a NIH K grant and translating findings to veterans. Fellows have gone on to become directors of important national research centers and studies, chairs of academic departments, and presidents of national medical organizations. Importantly, many MIRT fellows have become local directors and mentors to a new generation of VA fellows and researchers.

CONCLUSIONS

The AF MIRT coordinating center supports the VA's mission of fulfilling President Lincoln's promise to care for veterans. There are multiple benefits to evidence-based work that helps veterans and fosters a highly skilled VA workforce. Veterans are at the center of the MIRT data-driven approach, which is critical given their complex needs. Approaches to building the AF MIRT's evidence base include

randomized controlled trials open to veteran participants; program evaluation of current local, regional, or national VHA clinical services through measurement-based care and evaluation of national clinician training programs; and even smaller quality improvement projects in local VA clinics. These efforts support effective, efficient, and accessible provision of treatments that benefit veterans.

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Ethics and consent

The authors adhered to the ethics of their professions and US Department of Veterans Affairs ethical guidelines in the writing of this article.

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