Social Workers Join Forces Supporting Veterans and Families

At VA, we’re fortunate to have an extraordinary mission. We are truly privileged to care for Veterans, men and women, who put on America’s uniform and left their homes and families to keep our country free, strong and secure.

Today, there are over 22 million living Veterans with over eight million enrolled in VA health care and over four million Veterans and survivors receiving VA compensation and pension benefits. In the next five years, as America turns the page on a decade of war, we expect that more than one million active-duty personnel will join their ranks, according to Dr. Robert Petzel, Under Secretary for Health.

VA has over 10,000 social workers dedicated to providing clinical services to Veterans. Social workers are key members of the inter-disciplinary health care team and are recognized as leaders in psychosocial care and treatment. We serve Veterans who have served in times of war and in times of peace. Social workers, in their clinical practice, help Veterans understand how their military experiences affect their health and life. Our focus is to provide them with opportunities to rebuild their lives through recovery and rehabilitation and reintegration in their communities.

Our approach in VA is team based, providing Veteran and family-centered care as a cooperative partnership with the Veteran.

We have developed a well laid-out system of care for Veterans transitioning from military to civilian life with our VA Liaisons for Healthcare and Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation New Dawn (OEF/OIF/OND) Care Management teams.

We recognize the incredible sacrifices of family members and family Caregivers in meeting the needs of our injured Veterans. We provide caregiver support services to all eras of Veterans and have expanded our traditional support services to include comprehensive education and training, stipend payments, counseling and health insurance for Caregivers of Seriously Injured post 9/11 Veterans. We offer temporary overnight accommodations for families of hospitalized Veterans and Active Duty Servicemembers at lovely VA Fisher Houses providing a “home away from home” during times of stress, illness and injury.

In January 2013, national awareness trainings introduced the "Lead Coordinator" role, a joint Departments of Defense and VA initiative. The Lead Coordinator role provides a single point of contact within the care management team for Recovering Service Members/Veterans throughout their recovery.

Building community capacity to meet the needs of returning Veterans is a shared responsibility and includes formal and informal support systems and interagency networks anchored in community values.

I had the privilege of speaking on a panel “Building Hope with Honor for Veterans and Military Families” at the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) national practice conference: Restoring Hope: The Power of Social Work, sharing the unique and vital skill set social workers can offer to those who served our country. At the conference, Dr. Jill Biden announced a Joining Forces commitment aimed at educating all social workers to have a better understanding of Veteran and military issues.

Our National Social Work Program, Care Management and Social Work Services, has been working with NASW to develop social work "Standards of Practice with Service Members, Veterans and Military Families" which has recently been published. We are currently working with NASW to create professional "Credentials for Social Work Practice with Service Members, Veterans and their Families." We also participated with NASW in conjunction with the Congressional Social Work Caucus briefing on Social Workers Join Forces to Support Service Members, Veterans, and Their Families.

While we are collaborating at the national level, social workers across the country are working together to ensure that our newest generation of Veterans and all era Veterans are getting the care and the community support they need. Strong social networks are being created that support our Veterans and their families and honors the family experience.

We hope you enjoy the many articles in this edition of Synergy that illustrate the significant contributions of social workers in meeting the needs of our newest generation of Veterans, their families and Caregivers.
A decade of combat has placed enormous demands on a generation of Servicemembers, Veterans and their families – particularly the wounded, ill and injured. These individuals require complex coordination of medical and rehabilitation care, benefits and other services to successfully transition from active duty to Veteran status and to optimally recover from their illnesses or injuries. While both VA and DoD have implemented excellent programs in support of these wounded warriors, we must now better harmonize our efforts, simplify processes, and reduce confusion for those we serve. To meet this mission, VA and DoD are implementing a Lead Coordinator role to improve clarity and reduce confusion for warriors, Veterans, and their families. This Lead Coordinator will coordinate care and services among the various supporting programs to ensure that wounded, ill and injured Servicemembers, Veterans and their families know who to turn to for answers and how to plan for the future.

Every patient receiving medical or rehabilitative care requiring case/care management services will have a Lead Coordinator assigned to serve as the central communication and facilitation point for the patient, family, and the Care Management Team. The Lead Coordinator is not a new position but a function performed by a designated member of the Care Management Team. The assignment of the Lead Coordinator is based on the unique needs of the patient. VA is well positioned to implement this as we have had a Lead Case Manager role in place for several years.

The Lead Coordinator role will have a phased implementation throughout DoD and VA health care facilities. Phase I of the implementation will occur at the following sites:

- Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, Washington DC
- Richmond VA Polytrauma Rehabilitation Center
- Washington DC VA Medical Center

However, Servicemembers transitioning from Walter Reed may transfer to VA Medical Centers throughout the country. Thus each VA Medical Center must be prepared to implement the Lead Coordinator role as Servicemembers and Veterans from Walter Reed enter their VA Medical Center. Phase I implementation began January 23, 2013.

National training sessions were held nationwide in January as well as individual training sessions for each of the Phase I sites; over 800 potential Lead Coordinators were trained on this new initiative. Each training consisted of awareness training targeted toward VA providers providing care to wounded warriors and Veterans such as primary care and post deployment providers as well as PACT nurse case managers and social workers as well as more detailed training for all potential Lead Coordinators such as OEF/OIF/OND Program Managers, OEF/OIF/OND Case Managers, and specialty case managers.

We appreciate your support in implementing the Lead Coordinator concept throughout VA and your support in improving the transition and coordination of care for recovering Servicemembers and Veterans. If you have any questions, please contact Peggy Kennedy, National OEF/OIF/OND Care Management Program Manager, at (202) 461-5147 or via email at Peggy.Kennedy@va.gov.
Since this successful demobilization we have continued this practice of traveling to on-site demobilizations of our Oregon Troops. In September 2011, our team traveled again to JBLM. In December 2011, we traveled to Ft. Dix, New Jersey. In September 2012, we traveled to Ft. Bliss, Texas. We are anticipating another large Oregon National Guard Deployment mobilizing in 2014 with 1,700 troops returning in 2015. We will meet them again to continue our support and to build supportive and helping relationships. This effort encompasses the heart and soul of the OEF/OIF/OND Programs and demonstrates the lengths the VA will go to ensure that our Veterans receive the highest quality of care from the Department of Veterans Affairs Care Management Programs.

Above: Oregon Flag at Ft. Bliss, Texas Barracks
Left: Darla Darville, Portland VAMC Transition Patient Advocate, prepares to brief Oregon Troops at Ft. Bliss, Texas

Photos courtesy of Pete Perri
Sarah Merlina, LCSW, OEF/OIF/OND Social Work Care Manager with Shelley Nulph, Public Affairs
VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System

On September 11, 2012, seventy-two VISN 4 OEF/OIF/OND Veterans and each of their chosen guests were welcomed by eleven Pittsburgh Steelers at the annual “Heroes at Heinz” Field event. The Steelers in attendance included Brett Kiesel, Max Starks, Ziggy Hood, Ryan Mundy, Doug Legursky, Ramon Foster, Will Allen, John Malecki, Sean Suisham, Greg Warren and Drew Butler.

OEF/OIF/OND social workers and program coordinators from VISN 4 OEF/OIF/OND programs identified Veterans and arranged their attendance at this event. Social workers and VISN 4 employees attended the event to help coordinate logistics and were able to see the Veterans participate in kicking, throwing and catching drills on the field with the players. Veterans were also treated to dinner in the Great Hall at Heinz Field following their time on the grid iron.

This event is a wonderful opportunity to outreach the OEF/OIF/OND Veterans, to engage them in an informal setting, and to build rapport with them to encourage utilization of needed services, care, and resources at VA.

The Veterans were noticeably honored and humbled to be welcomed by the Steelers for this event, especially on such a notable and solemn day, the eleventh anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. One Veteran wore the Purple Heart medal that he earned during a tour in Afghanistan in 2009. He said it was to honor the "Pittsburgh Steelers fans in Afghanistan who didn't make it back."

The appreciation and gratitude was shared by all. Steelers offensive lineman Max Starks eloquently stated, "These are the men and women who lay their lives on the line to protect our freedom and allow me to come out here on Sundays with peace of mind. The chance to say thank you means a lot."

See more pictures of this wonderful event on the Steelers website.
Establishing communication with our newest group of combat Veterans can sometimes be a moving target. Engaging them in group interactions can be a challenge. Many avoid crowds and noises and keep their backs to the door. The Overton Brooks VA Medical Center OEF/OIF/OND Team and Shea Wilkes, the Local Recovery Coordinator (LRC) joined forces to create a pilot program to determine the effectiveness of utilizing a classroom format with this group of Veterans in Shreveport, LA. Shea, a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW), is also a Captain in the Army Reserve and has been deployed to Afghanistan. Laura Campbell, LCSW, is the OEF/OIF/OND Program Manager. Prior to coming to the VA, Laura worked in the private sector where she taught mental health professionals about treating patients with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

The program engages ten to twelve Veterans in a small setting over four weekly classes, providing them with information to assist in coping with stress they commonly experience. The first phase of the pilot program involved sending letters to OEF/OIF/OND Veterans who have been diagnosed with PTSD, but were not engaged in treatment. The letter invited them to a reintegration class led by a combat Veteran who has experienced the impact of war. Twenty-one Veterans attended the reintegration class, many expressing their discomfort being in a room with others at the first meeting. The first group encounter saw abbreviated conversations and cold stares, but by the second class, the Veterans were talking to each other without prompting. At the beginning of the program, members measured their anxiety level using a SUDS scale of 1-10. They were able to identify their anxiety decreasing as the class progressed. This is used as a direct example of how exposure works. Class participants are encouraged to identify situations they automatically avoid and to begin taking small steps to expose themselves to triggers using the same SUDS scale. They learn that avoidance sustains symptoms, and that overexposure may exacerbate them. Soon they independently identify the need to raise their anxiety to a 4-6 level and then retreat from the triggering situation.

Many triggers were identified by the Veterans participating in the reintegration classes. Each time an avoidance situation was described, the Veterans were asked how this reminded them of combat. They quickly saw the connection. One shared example is dealing with civilians who do not seem to take their jobs seriously. Many OEF/OIF/OND Veterans report becoming enraged when co-workers appeared lazy or incompetent in their duties. The reaction was tracked by asking what would happen if someone behaved this way in combat. The class was able to identify that things could go wrong and someone could get hurt or die. They were able to recognize that they were expecting civilians to act as if their work is life or death, but civilians do not have that experience. The Veterans expressed that this perspective gave them a new way to frame triggers when dealing with frustrating people, including family members.

Another Veteran shared a story of pushing a table through the wall. When asked what upset him, he identified that he was trying to put a leaf in the table with several family members watching him. He said that no one offered to help him, leaving him with the feeling that he was all alone and on his own. When questioned about how this related to combat, he quickly identified that if he was alone in combat, he was in greater danger. Other class members said they would have helped without being asked because that is what they did in the service, they jumped in to get the job done. Each noted that this was necessary to keep everyone safe.

Neurobiological theories of PTSD are offered to the Veterans to show how adrenaline responses are triggered by events. Understanding this physical reaction is connected to basic survival helps Veterans to normalize their symptoms. Identifying irrational thoughts that make normal events seem like life-or-death is emphasized. The Veterans are asked to challenge automatic thinking and to remind themselves that they are no longer in combat. Using the example of an older woman in Wal-Mart using her cell phone, (an anxiety trigger for many), they are asked to challenge thoughts that insist this woman poses a threat to them.

The last session is spent reviewing the Evidence Based Therapies (EBT) available for the Veterans, emphasizing continued treatment and recovery. Most Veterans who complete the classes are motivated to start EBT. The classes provide an opportunity to establish rapport with a combat Veteran and a therapist. Five reintegration classes have been held and the team learns something from each new group of Veterans, which is incorporated in the discussions of subsequent classes. The team is encouraged by the enthusiasm of the Veterans who have participated and in their willingness to engage in further treatment utilizing Evidence Based Therapies. Unique problems require innovative solutions and the Overton Brooks team feels they have hit on a winning combination to provide the best care possible for our Veterans.
Jacqueline Spry is a social worker who is not easily deterred. Jacqueline first started working with the VA as a University of Texas social work intern 2011-2012 in the Domiciliary at the Central Texas Veterans Healthcare System VA in Temple. She is currently a social work fellow in the Psychosocial Rehabilitation Fellowship at the Edith Nourse Rogers Memorial Veterans Hospital in Bedford, MA helping to pilot a program for Veterans using supported volunteerism in their recovery and wellness plans.

Jacqueline is in the process of developing a curriculum for the OEF/OIF/OND Veterans on the wait list for the CWT (Compensated Work Therapy) that focuses on civilian re-integration and job preparation using a peer support model where Veterans teach and learn from each other to network and build upon job-transferable skills and practical tasks such as building resumes, applying for positions, and practicing for interviews.

Jacqueline speaks with passion about her commitment working with Veterans, in particular OEF/OIF/OND Vets. “My work with Veterans is some of the most rewarding work in my life. Not only is this an extremely deserving population, it is also an extremely grateful one. I am awed and humbled by the experiences these Veterans have been through, and their strength and resilience to carry on. They are willing to work hard to survive and overcome their experiences.”

Perhaps it is the Veterans that inspire Jacqueline’s passion for giving back and for overcoming obstacles. After training for months to run the New City Marathon in November, (and raising a sizable donation for the Allied Forces Foundation, Inc.), she received word two days before the run that it was cancelled due to the devastation of Hurricane Sandy. Determined to keep her word to those who pledged donations on behalf of the AFF and those who supported her. She found a marathon in Manchester, NH scheduled that weekend that accepted her last minute registration. She completed the 26.2 miles she had promised in support of the AFF and those who supported her. Some of her donors even doubled their pledges upon hearing her story. The Allied Forces Foundation was so impressed by her drive and commitment that they set up a page on their website to share her story.

Jacqueline's motivation, commitment, and passion both on and off the job is something to be admired. When things seem to veer completely off course, with a little optimism, adaptability, and creativity, you can still cross the finish line!
The losses suffered by combat Veterans are deep, often unacknowledged, unknown by their family and friends, their community, their country, and some are unbeknownst to themselves. Their pervasive, shared life experience is profound grief. Recognizing this allows the Veteran to begin to fully reintegrate within him/herself.

Their sense of safety is gone due to the nature of war. Their innocence is extinguished. Once fanciful fireflies in the night might be seen as tracer rounds. The once brilliant Fourth of July fireworks can be perceived as mortar attacks. Browsable store aisles or drivable overpasses now pose a potential ambush.

Most have had friends wounded or killed in action. So often a Veteran will say “He is always with me…” as they struggle to honor their friend and fellow Soldier. The accompanying survivor guilt is an added heavy weight as they wonder, why me? Why did I survive?

Society has many rituals to symbolize and honor life transitions, however there are no communal rites for participation in the killing of war. Typically, society thinks Veterans grieve for lost friends only, not for those he/she has killed. Veterans return as disenfranchised grievers, with no place to mourn those they have killed. More important than recognition, a combat Soldier seeks the meaning of their encounter with killing and death in the moral stance of civilian community. They question if their actions are viewed as necessary, purposeful, brave and heroic or cowardly and meaningless. They are called “hero” when they return home but they may feel that the heroes are those who didn’t come home. They carry guilt for “things they have done” and wonder how they can be called “hero”.

Upon returning home the realization of what they suspected is glaringly confirmed, they are no longer who they were before war. The impact of this on their relationship with self, loved ones and community brings yet another loss. “Why can’t I be who I was before?” This loss of the feeling of belonging in civilian life highlights a longing to return to the combat zone where they can be themselves, with those who seem to know them best, those who share mission, purpose and the intense bond of depending on one another for survival.

Veterans ask how it is possible to live with this. Their plea is that we understand that he/she is different now and has not returned as the same person who left. We cannot and would not take their combat experience away, it is their experience, their story. The therapeutic work is toward accepting painful truths and terrible losses suffered, attempting to make peace with what they have survived. What we do is not combat therapy, it is grief counseling for the Soldier who could not mourn losses in the field, because that would have put his/herself and fellow Soldiers at risk.

We do not identify pathology. We do not expect the Soldier to “get on with life”. We do not measure them against a civilian norm. We support, acknowledge and honor their experience. “Who am I now?” may be the most difficult and most important question the survivor answers.

We offer a warm welcome. We set the tone, closing the door to listen, to “be” with them, to “go” with them, and to “stay” with them. Our presence is one of the most valuable gifts we offer as human beings. We examine the raw losses suffered, allow feelings to come forth, and share the moment they know we know, and they are no longer alone with it. They are not telling the memory for the horrific nature of it, but to express sadness, to mourn and to find their way back by accepting, and integrating their experience, honoring what was lost. Often when we “go there with them” we see tears in their eyes and feel them come up in our own. This warrior has suffered tremendous loss, is in pain, and is in mourning. The therapeutic experience involves the embrace, honoring and bearing witness to the Veteran’s experience.

Making this therapeutic journey with the Veteran helps war to become part of their past and helps them to focus on their identity in the here and now, with inner order, strength, meaning, and their place, once again, in civilian life.
Developing Community Partnerships for a Smooth Transition Home

Stacey Jones, LCSW-C
Caregiver Support Social Worker
Carl Vinson VAMC
Dublin, GA

Social Work staff members of the Carl Vinson VA Medical Center in Dublin, Georgia, are connecting with key community partners to create the best transition home for our local Servicemembers and Veterans. At the end of October, staff from the OEF/OIF/OND Program, along with the Caregiver Support Program, attended the Operation Georgia Cares Inaugural Regional meeting. Recognizing the growing need for reintegration services, the Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities contacted community stakeholders to organize “Operation Georgia Cares,” a system of care ensuring a proper welcome home to Servicemembers and their families. The goal of this collaboration is to involve local leadership in community education about resources for Servicemembers and their families, fostering an accepting environment of military culture and needs. Stacey Jones, LCSW-C was identified to serve on a local leadership board. In the future, the OEF/OIF/OND and Caregiver Support Programs will continue this partnership to support this transformative effort.

Also in October, staff from the Caregiver Support Program attended the 25th Annual Rosalyn Carter Institute Summit, “Enabling Caring Communities: Promoting Evidence-based Programs Across the Lifespan.” Several of the workshops focused on issues relevant to care of returning service members and Veterans. We had the honor of hearing Mrs. Rosalyn Carter and other leaders in the field while gaining valuable information on emerging best practices. Social work staff members were able to network with community agencies within our fifty-two county catchment area.

A third partnership was showcased during the OEF/OIF/OND Program sponsored Career Expo, a highly anticipated feature of the November Welcome Home Events. Through a partnership with the Georgia Department of Labor, over fifty employers were present to interview and offer jobs on the spot! In addition to the Department of Labor, other VA resources were present to educate and connect over 500 Veterans in attendance with needed services.

A final event held at the Dublin VAMC was the Caregiver Support Program sponsored Family Caregiver’s Month Resource Fair and Recognition Luncheon held in November. This event showed our appreciation for the efforts made by our OEF/OIF/OND Caregivers, and allowed the opportunity to connect with additional VA and statewide resources.

Front: Genetta Johnson, OEF/OIF/OND Program Manager, back left: Maxine Easley, Social Worker Case Manager and back right: Katherine Robinson, OEF/OIF/OND RN Case Manager
Social worker, Lori Vosika, Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation New Dawn (OEF/OIF/OND) Program Manager and staff from VA Black Hills Health Care System (BHHCS) orchestrated an event they called “Soldier Days” to help returning Soldiers start their VA healthcare. The event was designed to provide Soldiers easy access and same-day-service. With the help of many VA BHHCS employees, Ms. Vosika realized that many returning Army National Guard Unit Soldiers were eligible for VA care but lived up to four hours away from the Fort Meade VA Medical Center. Vosika knew they would be busy integrating back into civilian life and might not have time to make several trips across the state for medical care. “We identified geographically where our Soldiers were coming from and we decided how best to get them here,” Vosika said. “We ended up incorporating returning Soldiers from three South Dakota Army National Guard Units.”

The team attended Yellow Ribbon events to market VA health care services, to run health screens and to interface with every Soldier to schedule them for a Soldier Day visit. The OEF/OIF/OND team, including two nurses and a social work case manager, each had an area of responsibility during each Soldier Day to keep the event running smoothly. With the help of the VA BHHCS Business Office, VA enrollment was finalized on site so they could go directly to their appointments on the Soldier Day event. “The idea was to get all the business stuff out of the way, except for ID cards, so that when the Soldiers arrived, it could be a one-stop-shopping health care extravaganza,” Vosika said.

After detailed planning and preparation, including meetings with leaders from the National Guard, VA BHHCS hosted four Soldier Days events this past summer.

The Soldiers received a checklist of pre-scheduled appointments, some made by a health care screener from the Yellow Ribbon events. An ambassador was assigned to each Soldier to help them to find their way to their appointments. Ambassadors included volunteers from local service organizations such as the Disabled American Veterans Association the American Legion Riders, the Christian Motorcycle Rider Association and the VFW.

“The idea was to get all the business stuff out of the way, except for ID cards, so that when the Soldiers arrived, it could be a one-stop-shopping health care extravaganza,” Vosika said. “If we show one or two the way and they have a good experience, they go out there and talk to each other.”

At Soldier Days, returning Soldiers were able to see health care professionals in primary care, women’s health, dental and vision. X-ray, lab and MRI technicians, orthopedic, physical and occupational therapy, audiology, behavioral/mental health and traumatic brain injury specialists offered same day service. Soldier Days events included breakfast, lunch and snacks provided by Veteran Service Organizations, the American Red Cross and VA BHHCS Nutrition and Food Service.

Throughout the four Soldier Days events, Sixty-two Soldiers attended and received same-day health care appointments across many specialty areas. Ms. Vosika reported that the Soldiers were very impressed. “We had a Soldier tell us, ‘you guys rock!’ She told her fellow Soldiers, ‘oh my gosh, you guys have to go to VA.’ The word of mouth has been great.”
On October 9, 2012, the Huntington VAMC OEF/OIF/OND team and Mental Health social workers were honored to be included in the Air Guard’s Employers Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR) Bosslift. Employers of the Guardsmen were invited to have a first-hand glimpse of their employees’ role in supporting the nation on drills, two-week trainings and deployments.

The day started with breakfast and briefings by the West Virginia Adjutant General, Major General James A. Hoyer, and Col. Jerald Gouhin, Commander of the 130th Air Lift Wing. The Adjutant Major briefed the participants on the national and state missions and the importance of the Guard in support of national defense and disaster relief efforts, emphasizing that the Guard and Reserve constitute forty-nine percent of our national defense. Col. Gouhin related the specific mission of the Air National Guard and its importance, demonstrating the various Air Force hazardous uniforms and equipment used for attacks, firefighting, poisonous gas and chemical environments.

The invited guests participated in weaponry familiarization, including firing simulators, and visited the newly erected hangar complex used for maintenance of the state’s eight C-130 aircraft. After a briefing on the intricacies of the aircraft, they boarded a C-130 for a one and one half hour flight across West Virginia.

The comments from the employers were all positive, most expressing a new appreciation for the service provided by their dual-hatted employees, (those that serve two employers), defending us all.
Elizabeth Price, LICSW
OEF/OIF/OND Program Manager
Edith Nourse Rogers Memorial Veterans Hospital Bedford MA

The Third Annual Veterans Fun Run in partnership with the Paul Revere Chapter of the Air Force Association and the Bedford VA was held Veterans Day weekend. Over 300 runners and walkers came to this Welcome Home event to celebrate Veterans, to learn about VA and community services, to have fun, and to exercise!

Proceeds benefited local deployed troops and their families through the Paul Revere chapter of the Air Force Association. On site enrollment was offered for VA Healthcare while many other health, education and state services were showcased.

Close to 100 volunteers, including the entire OEF/OIF/OND Team, local Reserve Officer Training Corps, (ROTC) and others, came to staff booths, and to help with race logistics in true team spirit.

“I decided to set a goal to do the AFA Fun Run to inspire myself to live a healthy, active lifestyle. Consistently exercising and setting healthy goals helps me to combat symptoms of PTSD. I was extremely happy with myself for setting a goal, training for it and seeing it to completion. As an added bonus, and without my knowing in advance, a few of my fellow Iraq Veterans/Soldiers from the 272 Chemical Company also participated in the Fun Run. It was really nice crossing the finish line and seeing my former Captain there to cheer me in. I then turned around and did the same for my fellow comrades. It is an awesome feeling at the end of the day to know that active duty or not, through good or bad, we will always support one another. The same goes for our friends and family. My friend Angela took time away from her family to be with me and nudged me throughout the entire race, pushing me to beat my own personal goal. I am truly lucky to have friends, family and fellow Veterans by my side.”

–Becky Lodi OIF Veteran

Photo: Alison Sheridan

“Team Smith 2012” made the day a family affair.

Photo: Kristin Pressly, Public Affairs
Association of VA Social Workers: Supporting VA Social Workers through education, resources and communication

AVASW is the independent professional organization established in 1979 created to promote the expertise and professionalism of VA social workers across the diverse spectrum of VA health care. This mission is accomplished through the dissemination of accurate and pertinent information, resources, and networking opportunities through the website quarterly newsletter, and social media sites on Facebook and LinkedIn.

VA social work is a unique, versatile and adaptive profession that permeates a wide range of practice in many different settings and services. As a result, VA social workers (especially those who may be working remotely or independently from the medical center or assigned service) often face challenges to feeling professionally connected to the field. AVASW provides a supportive professional network specific to VA social workers to obtain information, engage in discussion, share resources and celebrate achievements.

The Association works collaboratively with the Social Work Leadership Council (SWLC) and VA social work leadership to serve as a bi-directional conduit of communication for our membership. The president of AVASW actively interacts with the SWLC on monthly calls, provides SW leadership with updates from the Association, and shares questions and issues raised on our websites to increase awareness and obtain clarification and information. This information and research is then disseminated out to our membership and posted on the website for easy access.

One recent example of the benefits of this collaboration between AVASW and the Evidence-Based Practice and Research committee (under the SW Leadership Council) is the posting of the Evidence-Based Practice and Research (EBP&R) Tool Kit on the AVASW website main page to allow greater distribution and access. This comprehensive resource was recently featured in Synergy (September 2012) and is permanently located on the VA Social Work Share-point site.

AVASW has many activities and initiatives throughout the year to support the professionalism and growth of VA social workers including supporting achievements, education, training, outreach, networking, and community service.

For more information on AVASW, or to access the EBP&R Tool kit, visit our website at www.vasocialworkers.org.

Submitted by AVASW Officers
Written by LeAnn Bruce, LCSW AVASW President Elect 2013

The online eVetRecs system creates a customized order form to request information from Veteran's military personnel records.

From their website:
“Other individuals with a need for documents must still complete the Standard Form 180, which can be downloaded from the online web site. Because the requester will be asked to supply all information essential for NPRC to process the request, delays that normally occur when NPRC has to ask veterans for additional information will be minimized. The new web-based application was designed to provide better service on these requests by eliminating the records centers mailroom and processing time.”

http://www.archives.gov/veterans/military-service-records/

The National Association of Social Workers has chosen the theme for Social Work Month 2013, “Weaving Threads of Resilience and Advocacy,” which builds on last year’s theme of hope and continues to emphasize strength based treatment. For more information visit NASW.

The next edition of Synergy will highlight the ways VA Social Workers observe Social Work Month.

Send us pictures, descriptions and stories from your celebrations!

The deadline is April 5, 2013!
See last page for more information.

We look forward to hearing from you!
For More Information contact
Erin Butler (San Francisco)
or Jennifer Wood (Austin).
Cleveland VA Selected as NASW Chapter Agency of the Year

Timothy T. Moss, LISW-S, FACHE

Congratulations to the Social Work Department at the Cleveland VA, selected as the inaugural NASW Ohio Chapter Agency of the Year for their commitment in hiring and valuing social workers. The award seeks to recognize an agency that: Promotes and upholds NASW standards and Code of Ethics, develops and implements innovative approaches for the provision of more effective services, makes a significant contribution to a population of concern to the social work profession (i.e.—advocacy for consumers or social workers, impacts on social policy, exceptional program and program creation, has excellence in administrative development, innovative research...), has a diversity of employees that reflects their clientele and/or has policy that implements culturally competent practice.

Joe Aquilina (Chief of Social Work, Cleveland VA Medical Center) is a long-time member of NASW whose outstanding performance is unmatched; he has exhibited exceptional leadership as a truly stellar and consummate social work role model who has exemplified the best of the profession’s values throughout his career, contributing to a positive image for the social work profession. Moreover, he is an astute, conscientious, Veteran-centric leader whose achievements consistently serve to greatly enhance the Cleveland VA Medical Center, the Department of Social Work, and all the lives of his fellow employees and clients alike.

Under Joe’s superlative leadership, our current NASW Ohio Chapter President, Ms. Victoria Marion (who is also a Cleveland VA Social Worker) has led our NASW chapter in such a demonstrably powerful way, resulting in an eight percent increase in membership as well as increased revenue. Congratulations to Cleveland VA Social Work Service and VISN Social Workers leading Ohio.

Joanna C. Kadis, LCSW, Selected as 2012 VA Social Worker of the Year

Joanna C. Kadis, LCSW, Chief, Social Work Service, VA Eastern Colorado Healthcare System was selected as the 2012 VA Social Worker of the Year.

Joanna was selected for this prestigious national social work award because she exhibits exemplary service in the performance of her job, builds links between individuals and groups in the organization, thinks and acts innovatively, exceeds the needs of internal and external customers, and demonstrates outstanding competency in her job.

Congratulations Joanna – you are most deserving of this national recognition for your outstanding leadership, dedication and initiative as Chief, Social Work Service, VA Eastern Colorado HCS.

Cleveland Social Workers Pictured left to right: Ruth Fiala-LISW-S, Supervisor Patricia Scott-LISW-S, Cailen Haggard-LISW-S, Supervisor Victoria Marion-LISW-S (also NASW Ohio Chapter Board President).
Texas Social Worker Receives Lean Sigma Six Black Belt

On October 31, 2012, VA Texas Valley Coastal Bend Health Care System Social Work Supervisor, Frank Ferrigno, LCSW, FACHE, was recognized as the first certified Lean Six Sigma (LSS) Black Belt to complete the VISN 17 LSS training program.

Mr. Ferrigno presently serves as a member of the National Social Work System Redesign Committee and believes that the training social workers receive in systems thinking makes them uniquely qualified to be an integral part of VA Systems Redesign efforts nationwide.

Retirements

Doug Mitchell, Chief of Social Work
Phoenix VA Health Care System, Arizona

Katharine Thomas, Social Work Executive
Amarillo VA Health Care System, Texas

Edna Tizol, Social Work Chief
VA Caribbean Health Care System, Puerto Rico

Chuck Clancy Chief of Social Work
Louisville VA Medical Center, Kentucky

Appointments

Patricia Robinson, Social Work Executive
VA Boston Health Care System, Massachusetts

Melinda Hogue, Social Work Chief
VA Butler Healthcare, Pennsylvania

Social Work Leadership Council Expands to Meet Needs of VA Social Workers

The Social Work Leadership Council continues to expand; social work in the VA now totals over 10,000 workers, nearly twice the number of VA social workers that were employed in 2007. The Council has grown to meet the changing needs of social workers in the field. It is the advisory council to the National Social Work Program Office and it consists of chairs from the eight different national committees.

The Leadership Council and the committees work with the National Program Office to create products and educational opportunities. Examples include: systems redesign calls, social work education calls, career development calls, data management calls, the Military Facts for Non-military Social Workers document, the boarding tips documents, and the recently released Research and Evidence Based Practice Toolkit.

In collaboration with the Association of VA Social Workers (AVASW), the Research and Evidence Based Practice Toolkit was recently placed on the AVASW website to make it available to providers who do not have access to our SharePoint.

In January, the Council met for a Strategic Planning Summit to set goals for 2013 in order to meet the new, exciting, and changing needs of social work in VA.

It is not too early to consider applying for a national committee. These committees provide social workers an opportunity to be involved in projects at the national level.

If you are interested in being a member of one of these committees, watch for applications in March through your social work chief or executive.

“It is not too early to start thinking about applying for a national committee! These committees give any social worker an opportunity to look at the big picture and to be involved in national projects.”
Databytes

Did you know there is a difference between co-signing your student’s note and being an additional signer? That’s right! Per VHA Handbook 1400.04, Supervision of Associated Health Trainees, a supervisor has three options for correctly documenting their involvement with a trainee-Veteran encounter. One of those is to co-sign the trainee’s note. This indicates the supervising practitioner has reviewed the contents of the student’s note and concurs with the information. Use of an “additional signer” would not meet this requirement and is not an acceptable way to indicate supervisor oversight and concurrence with the plan. Please review the Handbook, or check out Data Management’s “Common Data questions related to MSW Student Interns” on the Social Work SharePoint for further information about the other ways supervisors can fulfill this requirement.

Caitlin Oliveira, LICSW
Acting Social Work Supervisor
Medical Foster Home Coordinator
Inpatient Respite Coordinator
Boston VA Healthcare System

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## National Social Work Monthly Calls

**Data Bytes**
- **Feb 20, Mar 20, Apr 17, 1:00pm ET**
  - 1-800-767-1750, code 17386

The Social Work Data Management Committee hosts a monthly question & answer (Q&A) session for the field featuring guest speakers who discuss data management topics of concern to VA Social Work managers. If you have specific questions that you would like addressed please send them to the Social Work Data Management Committee prior to the call so that we can be as helpful as possible. The call is held the third Wednesday of the month.

Moderator: Melissa Harding, Assistant Chief of Social Work, VA Eastern Colorado HCS

**New SW Leaders Coaching Call**
- **Feb 15, Mar 15, Apr 19, 1:00pm ET**
  - 1-800-767-1750, code 11573

This call is designed for new Social Work Chiefs and Executives.

The call is held the third Friday of each month.

Moderator: John Petek, Chief of Social Work, Long Beach, CA

**Social Work Managers Call**
- **Feb 8, Mar 8, at 1:00pm ET**
  - 1-800-767-1750, code 16389

This conference call is designed for Social Work Chiefs and Executives.

The call is held the second Friday of each month.

Moderator: Melissa Harding, Assistant Chief of Social Work, VA Eastern Colorado HCS

**SW System Redesign Round Table Call**
- **Feb 25, Mar 25, Apr 22, at 1:00pm ET**
  - 1-800-767-1750, code 35678

These Round Table presentations and discussions are designed for dialogue among Social Work staff and are open to all social workers to share information and discuss experiences with System Redesign and to learn from one another. **1 CEU Credit** during the Sept., March, June and August calls only.

The call is held the fourth Friday of each month.

**SW Career Development Call**
- **Feb 26, Mar 26, Apr 23, at 2:30pm ET**
  - 1-800-767-1750, code 30485

Brought to you by the Social Work Career Development Task Force. These calls are designed to provide career development to social workers interested in leadership and expanded roles within VA.

The call is held the fourth Tuesday each month.

Moderator: Taylene Watson, Director of Social Work, VA Puget Sound Healthcare System

**VA/DoD SW Education Training Consortium**
- **Feb 13, Mar 13, Apr 10 at 1:00pm ET**
  - 1-800-767-1750, code 49114

Monthly calls held on the 2nd Wednesday of the month using Defense Connect Online. Social Workers can earn **1.5 CEU’s** per session.

Moderator: Lorn Gingrich, National Social Work Program Manager

**SW Quarterly Training Call**
- **April 12 at 1:00pm ET**
  - 1-800-767-1750, code 16389

This call focuses on Social Work Practice services and programs.

The call is held the second Friday of each quarter, (Jan, April, July, Oct.) for **1.5 CEU credits**.
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Photography: Special thanks to Christian Sasse, for permission to use the eagle photographs in this edition.

The theme of the next edition of Synergy is Social Work Month! Share your ideas, pictures and stories!

We invite submissions from social work chiefs, executives, and staff for consideration for this coming issue. Please send with your Chief’s/SW Executive’s approval to Laurel.Holland1@va.gov and Lesley.Reece@va.gov by April 5, 2013

SYNERGY provides an excellent opportunity to share information with thousands of social work peers and VA stakeholders. SYNERGY welcomes articles on leadership and innovation in practice relating to social work within the Department of Veterans Affairs. Talented social work photographers are encouraged to submit digital photography for use in Synergy.

All articles and photographs with Veteran information must be accompanied by a signed Release of Information form. Photographs of VA employees also must be accompanied by a signed Consent to Use Picture form.

Contact editors Laurel.Holland1@va.gov and Lesley.Reece@va.gov for forms or for information.

Questions and feedback are always welcome!