



# Fact Sheet

November 2013

## VA Mental Health Care

### Summary

- **The health and well-being of the courageous men and women who have served in uniform is the highest priority for VA. We have made strong progress, but we must do more.**
  - VA continues to expand access to the high-quality, recovery-oriented mental health care services our Veterans have earned and deserve.
  - Working closely with its Federal partners, VA implemented President Obama's August 31, 2012 Executive Order to Improve Access to Mental Health Services for Veterans, Service Members, and Military Families.
  - Elements of the Executive Order included:
    - NATIONAL SUICIDE PREVENTION CAMPAIGN - VA strengthened suicide prevention efforts by increasing capacity at the Veterans/Military Crisis Line.
      - Status: VA completed hiring and training additional staff to increase the capacity of the Veterans Crisis Line (1-800-273-8255press 1) and phone lines by 50 percent in 2013.
    - PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN VA AND COMMUNITY PROVIDERS - To enhance access to mental health care VA established 24 VA, Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and community pilot project agreements to improve access to mental health service in pilot communities, and to develop partnerships in hiring providers in rural areas.
    - VA MENTAL HEALTH PROVIDERS – In 2013 VA increased mental health providers by recruiting and hiring (1) 800 peer support specialists (peer specialists and peer support apprentices); (2) mental health providers for vacant existing positions; and (3) 1,600 mental health clinicians for newly created positions to better serve Veterans and improve access.
    - MENTAL HEALTH RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT - Through collaboration, VA, the Department of Defense (DoD), HHS, and the Department of Education are promoting more effective treatment methodologies through the National Research Action Plan.
- **At VA, we have the opportunity, and the responsibility, to anticipate the needs of returning Veterans. As they reintegrate into their communities, we must ensure that all Veterans have access to quality mental health care.**
  - To serve the growing number of Veterans seeking mental health care, VA has deployed significant resources and increases in staff toward mental health services.
  - The number of Veterans receiving specialized mental health treatment from VA has risen each year, from 927,052 in fiscal year (FY) 2006 to more than 1.4 million in FY 2013.
  - We anticipate that VA's requirements for providing mental health care will continue to grow for a decade or more after current operational missions have come to an end.

- **VA is a leader in providing state-of-the-art, high-quality mental health care that improves and saves Veterans' lives. Treatment works and there is hope for recovery for Veterans who need mental health care.**

## **1. Comprehensive Mental Health Care**

- Mental health care at VA is comprised of an unparalleled system of comprehensive treatments and services to serve the individual mental health needs of Veterans and the needs of family members in relation to the Veteran's care.
- VA provides a full continuum of forward-looking outpatient, residential, and inpatient mental health services across the country. We have many entry points for care: through our 151 medical centers, 817 community-based outpatient clinics, 300 Vet Centers that provide readjustment counseling, the Veterans Crisis Line, VA staff on college and university campuses, and other outreach efforts.
- In FY 2013, more than 1.4 million Veterans received specialized mental health treatment from VA; this number has risen each year from 927,052 in FY 2006.
- VA believes this increase is partly attributable to proactive screening to identify Veterans who may have symptoms of depression, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), problem use of alcohol or who have experienced military sexual trauma (MST).
- VA offers expanded access to mental health services with longer clinic hours, telemental health capability to deliver services, and standards that mandate rapid access to mental health services.
- In 2010, VA simplified its rules for Veterans submitting PTSD-related disability claims, which has greatly eased access to care and benefits, and has contributed to growth in PTSD mental health service requirements.
- VA is a pioneer in mental health research, discovering and deploying effective, high-quality, evidence-based treatments.
- State-of-the-art treatment psychotherapies and biomedical treatments are available for the full range of mental health problems, including PTSD.
- While VA is primarily focused on evidence-based treatments, we are also monitoring, assessing, and using complementary and alternative treatment methodologies. Our ultimate outcome is a healthy patient, whatever acceptable treatment methodology may be used.
- VA is setting the standard for a new and emerging health care profession, Peer Specialist. Through the development of position descriptions that clearly outline the job duties of a Peer Specialist and the assurance of quality by requiring certification and developing job-specific competencies, Peer Specialists are poised to provide a unique set of services to Veterans seeking mental health care.
- VA offers high quality care, based on a recovery-oriented model that offers rehabilitation as well as symptomatic treatment.
- In November 2011, VA launched an award-winning, national public awareness campaign called Make the Connection, which is aimed at reducing the stigma associated with seeking mental health care and informing Veterans, their families, friends, and members of their communities about VA resources ([www.maketheconnection.net](http://www.maketheconnection.net)).
- VA has integrated mental health services into primary care in the new Patient Aligned Care Team model. Providing care within the primary care clinic minimizes barriers that can discourage Veterans from seeking mental health care. This program has increased the number of Veterans whose mental disorders are recognized and treated.

- VA has extended its care through telemental health capabilities, working with public and private partners, and ensuring access to specialty mental health services when needed.
- This improves both access by bringing care closer to where the Veteran can most easily receive these services, and quality of care by increasing the coordination of all aspects of care, both physical and mental.
- VA has partnered with DoD to develop the VA/DoD Integrated Mental Health Strategy to advance a coordinated public health model to improve access, quality, effectiveness and efficiency of mental health services for Servicemembers, National Guard and Reserve, Veterans, and their families.
- VA has programs for Veterans whose mental health problems result in interactions with the Justice system.
- VA places special emphasis on outreach to Veterans who are homeless or at risk for homelessness, given the high rates of mental health problems and substance use disorders among homeless Veterans.

## 2. Suicide Prevention

- One Veteran suicide is one too many. VA is absolutely committed to ensuring the safety of our Veterans, especially when they are in crisis. We have universal access for 24/7 emergency care through our Emergency Departments and VA's [Veterans Crisis Line \(www.veteranscrisisline.net\)](http://www.veteranscrisisline.net).
- August, 2013, marked 6 years since the establishment of VA's Veterans Crisis Line (1-800-273-TALK (8255), press 1), which has expanded to include a Chat Service and texting option for contacting the Crisis Line. The program continues to save lives and link Veterans with effective ongoing mental health services on a daily basis.
- As of September 2013:
  - Over 975,000 calls, over 128,000 chat connections, and over 15,000 texts
  - Over 32,500 rescues of those in immediate suicidal crisis;
  - Over 169,000 callers provided referral to a VA Suicide Prevention Coordinator;
  - Addition of the Military Crisis Line, branded to reach active duty Servicemembers.
- The Veterans Crisis Line is only one component of the VA overarching suicide prevention program.
- VA's basic strategy for suicide prevention requires ready access to high quality mental health (and other health care) services supplemented by programs designed to help individuals and families engage in care and to address suicide prevention in high-risk patients. Some of the initiatives that have proven to be very effective include:
  - Each VA Medical Center has a Suicide Prevention Coordinator or team.
  - Screening and assessment processes have been set up throughout the system to assist in the identification of patients at risk for suicide. A chart "flagging" system has been developed to assure continuity of care and provide awareness among care-givers.
  - Patients who have been identified as being at high risk receive an enhanced level of care, including missed appointment follow-ups, safety planning, weekly follow-up visits and care plans that directly address their suicidality.
  - Reporting and tracking systems have been established in order to learn more about Veterans who may be at risk and help determine areas for intervention
  - The development of two centers devoted to research, education and clinical practice in the area of suicide prevention. VA's Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) 2 Center of Excellence in Canandaigua, New York develops and tests clinical and

public health intervention strategies for suicide prevention. VA's VISN 19 Mental Illness Research Education and Clinical Center (MIRECC) in Denver, CO focuses on: 1) clinical conditions and neurobiological underpinnings that can lead to increased suicide risk; 2) the implementation of interventions aimed at decreasing negative outcomes; and 3) training future leaders in the area of VA suicide prevention.

### **3. PTSD Treatment**

- VA is one of the largest integrated mental health systems in the United States (US) that provides specialized treatment for PTSD. In FY 2013, 533,720 Veterans (131,651 Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation New Dawn (OEF/OIF/OND)) received treatment for PTSD in VA medical centers and clinics up from 502,546 Veterans (119,482 OEF/OIF/OND) in FY 2011.
- State-of-the-art treatments are available for Veterans with PTSD:
  - More than 5,200 VA mental health staff have received training in Prolonged Exposure and/or Cognitive Processing Therapy, the most effective known therapies for PTSD.
  - Medication treatments also are offered and may be especially helpful for specific symptoms of PTSD.
  - VA operates a National Center for PTSD (NCPTSD), which guides a national PTSD Mentoring program, which works with every specialty PTSD program across the country to improve care.
- The NCPTSD's award winning PTSD Web site [www.ptsd.va.gov](http://www.ptsd.va.gov) contains research based educational materials for Veterans and families, as well as for the providers who care for them. To help Veterans access needed care, AboutFace was added in 2012: an online video gallery dedicated to Veterans talking about how PTSD treatment turned their lives around. Each June the Center now runs a national campaign to raise awareness about PTSD and its effective treatment for PTSD awareness month.
  - The NCPTSD's Consultation Program was established in 2011 to reach any VA provider who treats Veterans with PTSD, including those in VA PTSD specialty care, those in other areas of mental health, primary care providers, and case managers. The Consultation Program helps with questions about assessment and treatment services for Veterans with PTSD. By the close of FY 2013, there were 668 consultations completed, 589 for PTSD and 79 for Suicide Risk Management, a feature added this year to the Consultation Service.

### **4. Substance Use Disorder (SUD) Treatment**

- In FY 2013, 517,338 Veterans received treatment for SUD in VA medical centers and clinics, up 6.7% from 484,785 Veterans in FY 2011.
- The number of Veterans receiving specialty addiction care was 147,323 in FY 2013, up 21% from FY 2008.
- VA has SUD-PTSD specialists in each facility who are promoting integrated care for these co-occurring conditions and provided direct services to over 19,300 of these Veterans in FY 2013 (6,527 from Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation New Dawn (OEF/OIF/OND)).

## **5. Military Sexual Trauma-Related Mental Health Treatment**

- Military sexual trauma (MST) is the term VA uses to refer to experiences of sexual assault or repeated, threatening sexual harassment occurring during a Veteran's military service.
- Recognizing that many survivors of sexual trauma do not disclose their experiences unless asked directly, it is VA policy that all Veterans seen in VHA are screened for MST. In FY 2012, 23.6 percent of women and 1.2 percent of men seen in VHA reported having a history of MST.
- VA provides all MST-related care free of charge, and Veterans may be able to receive this care even if not eligible for other VA care. Receipt of free MST-related services is separate from the VA disability compensation process; documentation and service connection (VA disability compensation) are not required.
- Every VHA facility has an MST Coordinator who serves as a contact person for MST-related issues. He or she can help Veterans find and access VA services and programs – more information available at [www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome.asp](http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome.asp).
- In FY 2012, every VHA facility provided MST-related outpatient care to both women and men – over 725,000 outpatient MST-related mental health visits were provided to Veterans with a positive MST screen. This is a 13.3 percent increase from the previous year (FY 2011).

## **6. Smart Phone Applications**

- VA and DoD developed a mobile app to provide education and self-management skills for PTSD in 2011. As of the end of FY 2013, the award-winning PTSD Coach had been downloaded free for iPhones and Android smartphones over 126,000 times in 78 countries. PTSD Coach Canada and PTSD Coach Australia, which integrated language, cultural, and local changes into the existing platform to create the foundation for the first truly global mobile resource for mental health. More countries will launch version in FY2014.
- VA and DoD have released various mobile apps to support the provision of evidence-based care including Prolonged Exposure (PE) Coach for PTSD (released 2012), Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Insomnia (CBT-i) Coach (released 2013), and Stay Quit Coach for smoking cessation (released 2013).
- VA and DoD collaborated with the National Child Traumatic Stress Network to develop and disseminate a mobile app for disaster responders, called PFA Mobile, which is based on Psychological First Aid. Since its release in August 2012, the app has been downloaded 6,877 times. It has additionally been localized into Japanese.
- Additional apps are in development to support Veterans, Service members, healthcare providers, and the families and communities affected by military service.

## **7. Web Resources for Veterans, their Families, and their Community**

- In November 2012, VA launched Start Moving Forward ([www.startmovingforward.org](http://www.startmovingforward.org)). [Start Moving Forward](http://www.startmovingforward.org) is an interactive web-based educational life-coaching program based on the principles of Problem Solving Therapy. It allows for anonymous, self-paced, 24-hour-a-day access that can be used independently or in conjunction with mental health treatment.

- In August, 2013, VA launched Parenting for Service Members & Veterans ([www.veteranparenting.org](http://www.veteranparenting.org)). This is a free online course developed jointly with DoD that provides military and Veteran parents with information and strategies to improve their parenting skills.
- In order to serve family members who are concerned about a Veteran, VA has expanded the Coaching Into Care line nationally after a successful pilot in two VISNs. The service helps family members and friends help a Veteran to seek care. Callers receive information about VA services and coaching on talking about treatment needs with the Veteran in their lives. Since the inception of the service in January 2010 through June 2013, Coaching Into Care ([www.va.gov/coachingintocare](http://www.va.gov/coachingintocare)) has logged 8,460 total initial and follow-up calls. Callers are 81 percent female, and most callers are spouses or family members.
- VA has created several additional web resources for Veterans, their families, and key partners in their communities. These include:
  - Veterans Employment Toolkit ([www.va.gov/vetsinworkplace](http://www.va.gov/vetsinworkplace)), a resource that supports Veterans seeking work and that also helps employers support their employees who are Veterans or members of the Reserve or National Guard.
  - VA Campus Toolkit ([www.mentalhealth.va.gov/studentveteran](http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/studentveteran)), a place where faculty, staff, and administrators can find resources to support student Veterans and learn about their strengths, skills, and needs.
  - Community Provider Toolkit ([www.mentalhealth.va.gov/communityproviders](http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/communityproviders)), this provides information about VA services and resources, understanding military culture and experience, and tools for working with a variety of mental health conditions.

## 8. Vet Centers

- VA provides a full range of readjustment counseling services through the network of 300 community-based Vet Centers located in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, American Samoa, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the US Virgin Islands ([www.vetcenter.va.gov](http://www.vetcenter.va.gov)).
- The Vet Centers also provide targeted outreach to returning combat Veterans through 70 Mobile Vet Centers that can provide confidential counseling and outreach to Veterans who live geographically distant from VA facilities.
- In FY 2012, the Vet Centers provided 1,500,053 visits to Veterans and their families. This represents a 9 percent increase in visits from FY 2011.
- Over 117,000 of the total visits were family visits, a 27 percent increase from FY 2011.
- The Vet Center program has cumulatively provided services to 458,795 OEF/OIF/OND Veterans and their families. This represents over 30 percent of the OEF/OIF/OND Veterans that have left active duty.
- The Vet Center Combat Call Center is an around the clock confidential call center where combat Veterans and their families can talk with staff comprised of fellow combat Veterans from several eras. The call center handled over 37,300 calls in FY 2012. This represents a nearly 470 percent increase from FY 2011.
- In 2010, Public Law 111-163 expanded eligibility of Vet Center services to members of the Armed Forces (and their family members), including members of the National Guard or Reserve, who served on active duty in the Armed Forces in OEF/OIF/OND. VA and DoD are working together to implement this expansion of services.

- One cornerstone of the Vet Center program's success is the added level of confidentiality for Veterans and their families. Vet Centers maintain a separate system of record which affords the confidentiality vital to serving a combat exposed warrior population. Without the Veteran's voluntary signed authorization, the Vet Centers will not disclose Veteran client information unless required by law. Early access to readjustment counseling in a safe and confidential setting goes a long way to reducing the risk of suicide and promotes the recovery of Servicemembers returning from combat.
- In addition, over 72 percent of all Vet Center staff are Veterans themselves. This allows the Vet Center staff to make an early empathic connection with Veterans who might not otherwise seek services even though they are much needed. The Vet Center program is a very effective program within VA in combating stigma and other barriers to care.

### **9. Public, Private, and Academic Partnerships**

- VA is working with public and private partners across the country with the goal of ensuring that no matter where a Veteran lives, he/she can access quality, timely mental health care.
- VA is working with universities, colleges and health professional training institutions across the country to expand their curricula to address the new science related to meeting the mental and behavioral health needs of our Nation's Veterans, Servicemembers, Wounded Warriors and their family members.
- VA has implemented a new outreach program, Veterans Integration to Academic Leadership. This program places VA mental health staff at colleges and universities to work with Veterans attending on the GI Bill.

### **10. Academic Affiliations and Training**

- VA is helping to build a pipeline of highly-trained mental health professionals. VA's Office of Academic Affiliations trains roughly 6,400 trainees in mental health occupations per year, and roughly 70% of VA psychiatrists and psychologists received some of their clinical training at a VA facility.
- VA has increased mental health training opportunities for several years through increases in mental health training positions and approval of new sites for training. For example, by July 2014, VA psychology internships will be present in 49 states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia, with New Hampshire being the only state without a VA psychology internship program. There has been some targeted expansion in training in rural and highly rural facilities. VA had the first accredited Psychology residency program in the state of Alaska.
- VA's Mental Health Education Expansion Initiative, a new five-year commitment, will increase clinical education in mental health professions. In the first year, Academic Year 2013-2014, over 200 training positions were added. In the second year, Academic Year 2014-2015, 126 positions at 45 different sites were added.
- VA's Office of Nursing Services (ONS) has focused efforts on mental health practice and staffing efforts over recent years and with targeted hiring efforts. Specifically, ONS has:
  - Appointed a field based Clinical Nurse Advisor for Mental Health;
  - Chartered a Mental Health Nursing Field Advisory Committee responsible for developing (1) a staff nurse guide on leading mental health groups; (2) mental health systems redesign collaborative guidance; (3) mental health nursing fact sheets for use

- by staff nurses; (4) toolkits for psychiatric patients with diabetes; and (5) mental health staff nurse competencies.
- Contacted key nursing organizations, such as the American Association of Nurse Practitioners (AANP) and the American Psychiatric Nurses Association (APNA), to assist with current recruitment, retention, and education of future mental health nurses;
  - Chartered a VA/American Association of Colleges of Nursing workgroup to develop a toolkit for preparing future nurses with a focus on Veteran specific clinical needs;
  - Sought collaboration with VHA mental health leadership to engage in staffing methodology for nursing personnel in mental health programs.

## **11. Hiring Efforts:**

- VA has taken aggressive action to recruit, hire and retain mental health professionals in order to improve Veterans' access to mental health care.
- As part of our ongoing comprehensive review of mental health operations, VA has considered a number of factors to determine additional staffing levels distributed across the system, including:
  - Veteran population in the service area;
  - The mental health needs of Veterans in that population; and
  - Range and complexity of mental health services provided in the service area.
- Because there are no industry standards defining accurate mental health staffing ratios, VA is setting the standard, as we have for other dimensions of mental health care.
- VHA has developed a prototype staffing model for general mental health and is expanding the model to include specialty mental health. VHA will build upon the successes of the primary care staffing model and apply these principles to mental health practices.
- VHA has developed and implemented an aggressive recruitment and marketing effort to fill specialty mental health care occupations. Key initiatives include targeted advertising and outreach, aggressive recruitment of qualified trainees/residents to leverage against mission critical mental health vacancies, and providing consultative services to VISN and VA Stakeholders.
- VA is committed to working with public and private partners across the country to support full hiring, to ensure that no matter where a Veteran lives, he or she can access quality, timely mental health care. For example, multiple professional organizations, including the American Psychiatric Association and American Psychological Association, have offered support in getting announcements to their members about fulfilling career opportunities with VA.
- VHA will continue to work closely with DoD to educate Servicemembers, VA staff, Veterans and their families, public officials, Veterans Service Organizations and other stakeholders about all mental health resources that are available in VA and with other community partners.