
Partnering with Communities to Address the Mental Health Needs of Rural Veterans

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Outline

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Background

- Research indicates 1 in every 4 or 5 veterans return from war with serious mental issues.
- The return of Veterans to rural areas where mental help is limited is seen as a public health crisis.
- Veterans Health Administration (VHA) has opened Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs) in rural areas with Mental Health providers.
- Many rural Veterans never obtain the Mental Health care they need.

Background

- To address the needs of rural OEF/OIF Veterans, it is important to connect with community stakeholders.
- Community stakeholders are key participants in early responses.
- Forming a link between informal care networks and the formal care system is essential for providing care in rural areas.
- Building upon this conceptual framework, we identified 3 community stakeholder groups who are particularly important for OEF/OIF veterans in rural areas:
 - Clergy
 - Post secondary educators
 - Criminal justice personnel

Methods

- Funded by VA Office of Rural Health
- Embedded within and staffed by the Central Arkansas Veterans Healthcare System (CAVHS).
- The purpose was to create and implement initiatives that would enhance access to MH and substance use care for returning OEF/OIF veterans through community collaborations and stakeholder education/ training.

Program Description and Early Accomplishments

- *Program Advisory Board*
 - Consists of representatives from military, VA, state government, criminal justice, clergy, higher education system, and advocacy groups
 - Ensured the opinions of returning veterans and community stakeholders were incorporated into the development and implementation of the program's arms
 - Provided recommendations to overcome barriers
 - Met quarterly

Clergy Description and Results

- Goal: Create a standardized educational curriculum for clergy on the physical, psychosocial, and spiritual issues of OEF/OIF veterans and their families one rural county.
- Developed local partnership in a rural county
- Formed a local advisory group
- Provided training workshops
- Results:
 - Collaborations have been established in 2 rural counties in the state
 - Developed a curriculum from training workshops that included program objectives and activities

College Description and Results

- Goal: Create a veteran outreach project for rural-2 year colleges on at least 2 separate college campuses
- Identified a network of community colleges affiliated with Arkansas State University (ASU)
- Developed veteran-friendly campuses
- Developed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)
- Results:
 - Established projects on 4 college campuses and received 32 referrals for various student services
 - All referrals received counseling, only 1 was referred for VA services
 - Establishing student veteran groups on 2 year campuses

Criminal Justice Description and Results

- Goal: Establish a Veterans Treatment Court (VTC) to support veterans involved with the criminal justice system in at least one rural county.
- Partnered with the Arkansas Drug Court Coordinator on a location for the VTC
- Developed the VTC with the 23rd Judicial District in Lonoke County, AR
- Results:
 - 16 veterans were referred for eligibility assessments, 2 were admitted to the VTC, and 4 were being evaluated
 - Most common reason for non-participation was the veteran's decision not to participate
 - Most referrals were OEF/OIF veterans and nearly all had recorded substance abuse problems

Evaluation

Development of a Resource Toolkit

- A comprehensive 34-page toolkit was created outlining psychosocial issues for returning OEF/ OIF veterans, the community, governmental programs, and services available for care and education.
- Ninety stakeholders attended formal training workshops
- The professional roles of participants varied
- A slight majority (53.9%) stated that they knew of veterans having difficulty within their organization, and 40.0% knew family members of veterans having difficulties.

Summary

- A strong point of the program is its embedment within a VA medical center providing health care to veterans in Arkansas.
- The success of this pilot program has encouraged program and clinical leadership in the VA to expand each of the arms into additional rural areas.
- The needs that inspired the development of this program are not unique to the US
- Across the US, the VA has started several initiatives that will support the implementation and sustainability of this type of program.

Discussion

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Help for those who served aim of courts

Aid for addiction, mental illness needed, Veterans Treatment Courts officials say

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ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

LONOKE — Arkansas' judicial system has expanded its specialized criminal courts to include one specifically for veterans who may be struggling with the aftermath of war.

Veterans Treatment Courts are popping up across the country, from Buffalo, N.Y., to Tulsa. Modeled after drug-treatment courts, veterans courts focus on helping defendants fight the addiction and mental illness that contributed to their crimes.

"This program was in

response to an increase in veterans being seen in drug courts," said Toby Lambert, Veterans Treatment Court liaison for the Central Arkansas Veterans Healthcare System. "In December 2009, there were five Veterans Treatment Courts in the nation. Today, there are 70 either in existence or developing."

Drug courts were established in Arkansas by Act 1266 of 2003 as an alternative form of probation that required participation in a state-funded treatment program. The program was billed as a way to reduce prison overcrowding

by addressing addiction as well as crime. Veterans courts operate in the same way, only they rely on volunteer mentors who work as probation officers to help keep defendants on track.

A major difference, however, is that while drug courts require state funding to pay for private treatment, veterans courts take advantage of treatment programs veterans are already entitled to through the Department of Veterans Affairs.

"To me, that's the beauty of the Veterans Treatment Court," said Lonoke County

2nd District Circuit Judge Phillip Whiteaker, who started the state's first veterans court this spring.

Veterans courts in Arkansas function as an extension of the drug-court system — avoiding the need for new legislation because they don't use state funding, according to VA and state officials. Oklahoma, Illinois, Washington and New York have all passed state laws to establish their veterans-court programs, however.

"That is not to say legislation could not be pursued," Lambert said. "But at this

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Courts

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time, it's simply not needed."

Arkansas' veterans court began with a grant to the Central Arkansas Veterans Healthcare System that allowed Lambert to be hired as the VA liaison, the program's only paid position.

"The National Guard is being deployed more than ever expected and multiple deployments have led to more reintegration issues. There's a legal need, but there is also a physical need for this program," Lambert said. "It was really started as an outreach program to find the veterans who were falling through the cracks. The idea that these young folks and other veterans are having trouble with reintegration is nothing new."

The initial grant focused on rural veterans, leading to the establishment of the state's first veterans court in Lonoke County. It convened April 2 in Lonoke County with Whiteaker presiding.

"I was just excited about what I could do," Whiteaker said. "I saw it as being very similar to drug court in that it's a problem-solving court."

There are currently three participants in Whiteaker's court.

"I personally don't want excuses," Whiteaker said. "To me it's accountability but in a closed-type of dialogue. Part of what we want to do is figure out what was the behavior and factors that brought you here. We can deal with

the charge. We can deal with that. If we don't deal with those other things, chances are, you'll be back."

The state's second veterans court started this month in Pulaski County, with 10 defendants enrolling in the court's inaugural session Dec. 15. Circuit Judge Mary



McGowan

McGowan is presiding over the court in Little Rock's 9th Division.

In comparison, the Administrative Office of the Courts has reported that Arkansas' 42 drug-court programs divert about 17,000 offenders with a dependence on illegal drugs or alcohol into treatment programs involving drug testing, counseling and required employment. The office said it costs about \$14.04 per day for each offender participating in a drug-court program.

A 2008 performance audit by Arkansas' Legislative Joint Auditing Committee indicated the average daily cost per defendant in drug court is significantly lower than the cost of housing a defendant in the Department of Community Correction, at \$47.66 per day, or the Department of Correction, at \$54.82 per day.

Lambert said the challenge is getting the word out to defendants and the potential volunteer mentors who will work with the program. There is no way to identify veterans, so judges have started asking every defendant at their first appearance whether they currently serve or have served in the military.

That doesn't guarantee admittance to veterans court, however. The Lonoke County Veterans Court only handles cases involving drugs. McGowan expanded her court to include crimes determined to be mental health-related.

Like drug court, veterans court requires a defendant to plead guilty to his crime and openly admit that he wants and needs help with his addiction. The program is built on an 18-month model, but defendants can stay in the program longer, depending on how they do. Each time a defendant breaks probation or has a setback, the timeline is extended.

If a defendant doesn't participate or refuses treatment, probation can be revoked and he is sent to jail. But if he successfully completes the program and probation, his charges will be expunged.

"They will either have an epiphany and change, or wash out very quickly," Whiteaker said.

Lambert said the VA screens all defendants who claim veteran status to ensure they are eligible for veterans benefits. Before the plea bargain is accepted allowing a defendant into the program, he is also screened for drug addiction and mental illness. He is then tested by a forensic psychologist to figure out his issues and plot a proper plan for treatment.

And the judge is a major part of the treatment plan, as participants are required to meet frequently with the judge for progress updates.

"It's a total team effort," Lambert said. "Everyone recognized the value of helping a veteran who's in trouble."

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