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South Central MIRECC Internet site: [www.mirecc.va.gov/visn16](http://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn16)

National MIRECC Internet site: [www.mirecc.va.gov](http://www.mirecc.va.gov)

## AFTER THE STORM: SOUTHEAST LOUISIANA VETERANS HEALTH CARE SYSTEM MENTAL HEALTH RESEARCH PROGRAM

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&

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Acting Chief of Mental Health, SLVHCS, SC MIRECC  
Clinical Assistant Professor, Department of Psychiatry, Tulane University

*This month, the SC MIRECC Communiqué talked with Drs. Joseph Constans and Madeline Uddo about the New Orleans VA Medical Center mental health program after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.*

*Q – After the devastation of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, when was the New Orleans VA Medical Center mental health research program able to start putting the pieces back together?*

Prior to the hurricanes, the New Orleans VA Medical Center hosted a large number of mental health research projects. Dr. Jennifer Vasterling, with support from the Department of Defense, was in the middle of the largest prospective study on the impact of deployment on neuropsychological function. Dr. Joseph Constans had recently received VA Merit Review support to study explanatory models for attention biases that occur in

Veterans with PTSD. With SC MIRECC support, Dr. Fred Sautter was developing a couples' therapy intervention and Dr. Madeline Uddo was beginning to investigate impact of mediation on PTSD. In the immediate aftermath of the storm, activity on all projects was suspended.

The investigators were hosted quite graciously in other VAs including Little Rock, Jackson, Houston, Memphis, and Atlanta. During this forced sabbatical, many began the process of writing and submitting grant applications. Five presentations and four articles have emerged from this research. During this time, Dr. Sautter also began communication with VA Rehabilitation Research and Development, and those efforts ultimately yielded a VA Merit Review award.

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## *SLVHCS Mental Health Research Program continued...*

### *Q – Has the hurricane impacted the type of research your center conducts?*

Because of the significant damage to the facility, the New Orleans VA Medical Center was reconstituted as the Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System (SLVHCS), a network of outpatient clinics with specialty care located in New Orleans and Baton Rouge. With the closure of the facility, all designated research space was lost. Tulane University proved to be a generous partner in our rebuilding process providing some SC MIRECC investigators lab and office space. VA Central Office has approved off-site lab requests allowing many of the lab-based studies to continue. However, with the loss of some resources, such as the fMRI and its designated physicist, other projects could not resume. Many investigators have been able to restructure their research programs to study the delivery of mental health services in VA community-based outpatient clinics. For example, Dr. Laurel Franklin, who has a longtime interest in the treatment of sleep disorders in PTSD patients, began investigating delivery of sleep intervention using telemedicine devices. Dr. John Hunter recently received SC MIRECC support to investigate delivery of prolonged exposure on handheld devices. Also impacting our investigator's research programs are the relationships we've formed with non-VA or academic affiliate organizations. For example, Dr. Uddo is now a Co-Principal Investigator on a Department of Defense funded project investigating meditation-based interventions for PTSD. Dr. Uddo formed this collaboration with members of The Center for Mind-Body Medicine while the organization was providing services in the New Orleans area following the hurricanes.

### *Q – Based on these changes in resources, what kinds of research do you hope the center can conduct in the future?*

The changes in the healthcare system (e.g., all outpatient and community-based outpatient center services) and loss of some of the more productive investigators have led us to modify both short and long-term plans for New Orleans mental health research. Recent recruitment efforts have focused on developing service-based mental health research. Toward this aim, SLVHCS, the SC MIRECC, and Tulane University recruited Dr. John Crilly through a joint effort. Dr. Crilly is interested in the

use of technology (i.e., secure message, texts) to communicate with Veterans and improve treatment adherence. Furthermore, Dr. Adam Kelley, a SC MIRECC methods consultant, was recruited to help build service-related research. Dr. Kelly is a well-known outcomes expert who is funded by VA Health Services Research & Development to investigate strategies to improve provider-patient communication. Finally, Dr. Greer Sullivan has been working with the SLVHCS Associate Chief of Staff for Research, Dr. Constans, in an attempt to develop a stronger service-related research program throughout SLVHCS.

### *Q – How have your affiliations with local research and academic partners been affected?*

As discussed earlier, our academic partners have been very supportive and helpful in the rebuilding effort. The Departments of Medicine, Psychiatry, and Psychology at Tulane have all offered office and lab space for our investigators. Dr. Daniel Winstead and the Department of Psychiatry as well as Dr. Karen DeSalvo in the Department of Medicine have been invaluable resources in our efforts to transform our research program and recruit talent in line with the research program aims. While many at first doubted the viability of Tulane University's undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs, the institution has not only survived, but has thrived with undergraduate applications now at an all time high. The relationship between Tulane and the VA is also stronger with the VA as a desired site for resident training.

### *Q – Anything else our readers should know about the SLVHCS mental health research program?*

Well, we would like to take this opportunity to let you know a little about the renaissance occurring in New Orleans. Forbes magazine recently rated New Orleans as number 1 on their list of "biggest brain magnets" and number 2 on their list for "best large cities for jobs." And, we want to emphasize that the VA will certainly prove to be a big part of this nascent renaissance. The new planned facility is designed to sit on a large university-styled campus complete with New Orleans-styled courtyards and "spine" designed to promote congregation and walking.

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The physical structures will be designed to meet the highest levels of energy efficiency and will have an emphasis on the use of natural lighting. And, research will be located in the historic former Dixie Brewery building. The structure is being designed to support

biomedical and health services research and will have ample office space for investigators. New Orleans' city leaders clearly recognize the importance of the VA to the community, and the VA development is largely viewed as the cornerstone for the development of our biomedical research district. The new facility is slated for an early 2014 opening. ■

## New Resource for VA Clinicians and Providers

### VA PTSD CONSULTATION PROGRAM

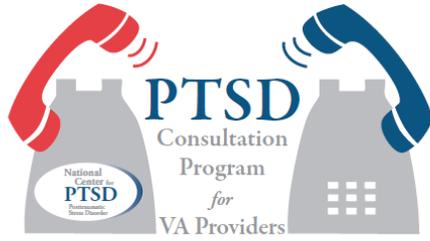
The National Center for PTSD has created a new consultation resource for VA providers and clinicians. The VA PTSD Consultation Program gives VA staff members the opportunity to ask an expert any question they may have about PTSD in a one-on-one prompt consultation. The consultations are free and clinicians can speak with a staff psychiatrist or a clinical psychologist to help with treatment or assessment questions, clinical practice or programmatic issues, general PTSD questions, finding resources or improving patient care.

The program is easy to use. Request a consultation by calling 1-866-948-7880, visiting [http://vaww.ptsd.va.gov/consultation/ptsd\\_consult\\_req.asp](http://vaww.ptsd.va.gov/consultation/ptsd_consult_req.asp), or by sending an e-mail to [ptsdconsult@va.gov](mailto:ptsdconsult@va.gov). When requesting a consultation by phone, callers will be asked a few questions before being referred to a consultant who will generally return the call within 24 hours. Consultations last approximately 30 minutes and may include a follow-up depending on the nature of the call.

For more information about the program, contact the PTSD Consultation Program Administrator, Cathy J. Lombardo, at [Cathy.Lombardo@va.gov](mailto:Cathy.Lombardo@va.gov).

## VA PTSD CONSULTATION PROGRAM





(866) 948-7880

One-on-one consultation at no charge for VA providers with questions about PTSD.

Toll free in US  
M-F 8:00 - 5:00 EST  
email: [ptsdconsult@va.gov](mailto:ptsdconsult@va.gov)  
Intranet: [vaww.ptsd.va.gov](http://vaww.ptsd.va.gov)

For VA clinicians and providers:

speak directly with staff psychologists and physicians about:

- ✓ TREATMENT
- ✓ CLINICAL MANAGEMENT
- ✓ RESOURCES FOR PTSD TREATMENT

- ✓ ASSESSMENT
- ✓ PROGRAMMATIC ISSUES
- ✓ IMPROVING CARE FOR THOSE WITH PTSD

**Who can call?**

ANY VA CLINICIAN working with persons diagnosed with PTSD, from mental health professionals to primary care clinicians, may request a consult.

The Consultation Program manager will ask for some brief contact information and the reason for the request.

Emails for consultation requests can be sent to: [ptsdconsult@va.gov](mailto:ptsdconsult@va.gov)

Note that a fillable Consultation Request Form is available at: [vaww.ptsd.va.gov/consultation/ptsd\\_consult\\_req.asp](http://vaww.ptsd.va.gov/consultation/ptsd_consult_req.asp)

**How does it work?**

STEP 1. CALL 1-866-948-7880 TO REQUEST A CONSULT  
You'll answer a few brief questions and provide your location.

STEP 2. DISCUSS YOUR QUESTIONS  
Consults are up to 30 minutes in length, but can vary according to need.

STEP 3. REVIEW RECOMMENDATIONS & GIVE FEEDBACK  
You and the consultant will review the recommendations. Later, you can provide your feedback on the process.

Consultation Program Team

Nancy Bernardy, PhD • Matt Jeffreys, MD • Karen Krinsley, PhD • Matthew Friedman, MD, PhD

The Consultation Program does not provide emergency services. For emergencies, contact 911 or emergency services, the VA Suicide Prevention Hotline at (800) 273-8255, then press "1," or other resources such as EMS when necessary to manage a crisis situation.

## SC MIRECC IMPLEMENTATION, DESIGN AND ANALYSIS SUPPORT (MIDAS) WELCOMES NEW TEAM MEMBER

MIDAS is a service arm of the South Central MIRECC created to assist VISN 16 investigators who are seeking intramural or extramural funding or conducting pilot studies. The MIDAS team offers design, methods, and analytic support for all phases of project development, implementation, analysis, and/or dissemination. Team members have expertise in biostatistics, epidemiology, psychometrics, qualitative methods and project implementation and management. The SC MIRECC welcomes its new MIDAS team member, Ann Cheney, Ph.D.

**Ann Cheney, Ph.D.** - Dr. Cheney is an assistant professor in the College of Medicine at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences and a Research Health Specialist at the Central Arkansas Veterans Healthcare System. She is a medical anthropologist whose research interests focus on the mental health care needs of women and individuals from disadvantaged populations, especially those of minority status and identities. Dr. Cheney completed her Ph.D. in anthropology in June 2010 at the University of Connecticut with a concentration in medical and applied anthropology and women's studies.

Dr. Cheney has worked with immigrant and minority persons living in the United States, utilizing ethnographic methods to explore the relations among acculturation, health, and psychological well-being as well as to assess disparities in health care utilization. She conducted extensive fieldwork in rural Calabria, one of the poorest regions of southern Italy, contextualizing educated women's eating disorder experiences and help-seeking behaviors in light of social change and gender inequalities. Dr. Cheney specializes in ethnographic and qualitative research methods.

Presently, Dr. Cheney is serving an investigative role on projects assessing perceived need of substance

use treatment among service members and African American cocaine users. The findings from these projects will lead to the development of innovative methods to improve quality of care to individuals in need of treatment for their substance use and dependence. Dr. Cheney is the daughter of an Army reservist and the sister of two brothers who are OIF/OEF Veterans; she is dedicated to understanding how the difficulties Veterans experience as they transition from military to civilian life and are expected to assume their roles within their family, community, and society impact their psychological well-being.

Dr. Cheney will bring qualitative expertise to the MIDAS team. She will provide methodological support to investigators in the South Central VA Healthcare Network who need assistance designing and implementing qualitative studies. She will consult with investigators and assist them as they develop their project, conduct their methods, and analyze their data.

*For all requests for assistance from MIDAS, please contact Dr. Ellen Fischer at [FischerEllenP@uams.edu](mailto:FischerEllenP@uams.edu) or Melonie Shelton at [Melonie.Shelton@va.gov](mailto:Melonie.Shelton@va.gov) to fill out an application. ■*

### **ATTRIBUTION (ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF MIRECC RESEARCH SUPPORT/EMPLOYMENT)**

SC MIRECC researchers and educators have a responsibility to ensure that the SC MIRECC receives proper credit for SC MIRECC-supported studies or projects in articles, presentations, interviews, and other professional activities in which the results of those projects are publicized or recognized. All investigators should cite references to the SC MIRECC if you receive either direct or indirect support from the SC MIRECC. For example, "This work was supported in part by the VA South Central (VISN 16) Mental Illness Research, Education, and Clinical Center." If you

receive salary support from the SC MIRECC, you should list the SC MIRECC as an affiliation.

## RECOVERY CORNER

### COMMUNITY-BASED PEER SUPPORT FOR VETERANS

By Leigh Ann Johnson, LCSW  
Mental Health Recovery Coordinator  
VA Gulf Coast Veterans Health Care System

Peer Support is a key component of mental health recovery and is strongly promoted by the Veterans Health Administration. A number of VA medical centers employ paid Peer Specialists to provide recovery services to fellow Veterans with severe mental illness. However, some medical centers do not have funding available to pay Peer Specialists and must work with individuals and organizations in the community to provide peer support resources for Veterans. As a result, some medical centers are exploring appointing volunteer peer support leaders with Workers without Compensation status at their facilities. In the VA Gulf Coast Veterans Health Care System, we are in the early stages of working with Veterans to help them develop peer support groups in local communities. These Veteran-led support groups are just one strategy we can use to improve access to peer support resources in the community. Given the current fiscal climate, medical centers may benefit from linking Veterans to two additional community resources, motorcycle associations and faith-based Veteran support groups.

#### Participating in Motorcycle Associations

A member of the Rolling Thunder motorcycle association provided me with insight about why so many Veterans find these groups attractive. He explained, "Motorcycle riding is a stress reliever, because you can clear everything out of your mind- you're concentrating on riding, thinking about traffic; so everything else just disappears. There is a group common bond- the love of riding motorcycles. We ride someplace and have lunch. While on the bike, you can't have a conversation so you are kind of isolated but you are in a group. When you do stop, [you find] some place you can chitchat [for] 15 or 20 minutes then get back on the bike. It's not like being expected to talk for hours." Furthermore, the Veteran said that participating in a motorcycle association is "not like a job where you have to be there. For example, with the Patriot Guard- you can show up or not. Nobody cares." The Veteran also recommended bike riding because it is less physically demanding than some other

sports, such as tennis and scuba diving, older people can participate, and even people with disabilities, such as a prosthetic leg, can ride a 'trike.'

Motorcycle associations also complete service projects. A Vietnam-era motorcycle association member shared with me, "You actually have an opportunity to do things for other people to help them. If you are doing things for other people then you are not thinking about yourself." Typical volunteer activities for most groups include local Toy Runs (that support the Marine Corp Toys for Tots Christmas program across United States) and Stand Downs for Homeless Veterans. Recently, a Rolling Thunder motorcycle association chapter identified Missing in Action Soldiers from Alabama who served in the Vietnam War, Cold War and the Korean Conflict. Next, they plan to contact surviving relatives and connect them to the Department of Defense DNA Database to submit genetic samples in an effort to identify recovered remains.

#### Finding Faith-Based Support Groups

Many local congregations offer recovery-based support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Celebrate Recovery, and Divorce Care that welcome Veterans. Celebrate Recovery was developed by Vietnam Veteran John Baker to help people across the globe dealing with "Hurts, Hang-ups, and Habits." For more information about Celebrate Recovery, visit [www.facebook.com/celebraterecovery](http://www.facebook.com/celebraterecovery).

Point Man International Ministries is a Veteran support organization focusing on spiritual healing from PTSD. The ministry hosts support group meetings known as "Outposts," publishes materials listed on their "Book Bunker," makes hospital visits, hosts conferences, supplies speakers for churches and Veteran groups, and completes welcome home projects. Learn more about Point Man International Ministries at [www.pmim.org/](http://www.pmim.org/).

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Military Ministry provides outreach to active duty military and Veterans. They also provide training and technical assistance to congregations wishing to start programs and support groups for active duty military, Veterans, and their families. They publish books such as the “Combat Trauma Healing Manual” for use in leading support groups. They also partner with the USO and Army One Source. For more information about Military Ministry, visit [www.militaryministry.org](http://www.militaryministry.org).

The PTSD Foundation of America provides training and guidance to help local communities create Veteran support groups. Their website provides an interactive map with contact information for group meetings. Many meetings are in the Houston, Texas area but the organization is expanding. For more information about PTSD USA, visit [www.ptsdusa.net/locations/](http://www.ptsdusa.net/locations/).

Congregations across the country have projects to support active duty military and Veterans that are not listed here. These groups may want to start Veteran’s ministries and support groups but lack the resources that the VA can provide. We encourage VA mental health staff to reach out to these groups and offer assistance. It will be good for the community and the Veterans we serve. ■

*Visit the following websites for more information about motorcycle associations and Veteran service organizations in your community!*

### **Key Veteran & Vet Friendly Motorcycle Associations**

- American Legion Riders: <http://www.legion.org/riders>
- Blue Knights (Police Officers): <http://www.blueknights.org/>
- Christian Motorcyclists Association: <http://www.cmausa.org/>
- Combat Veterans Motorcycle Association: <http://combatvet.org/>
- Goldwing Association (Honda): <http://www.gwrta.org/>
- Harley Davidson Owner Group (HOG): <http://www.harley-davidson.com/>
- Leathernecks: <http://leathernecksmc.org/drupal/>
- Patriot Guard Riders: <http://www.patriotguard.org/>
- Red Knights (Firefighters): <http://www.redknightsmc.org/>
- Rolling Thunder: <http://www.rollingthunder1.com/>
- VFW Riders: <http://www.vfwridders.org/>
- Vietnam Vets Motorcycle Club: <http://www.vnvmcfreedom.com/>

### **Key Veterans Service Organizations**

- American Legion: <http://www.legion.org/>
- American Veterans: <http://www.amvets.org/>
- Disabled American Veterans: <http://www.dav.org/>
- Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America: <http://iava.org/>
- Military Order of the Purple Heart: <http://purpleheart.org/>
- Paralyzed Veterans of America: <http://www.pva.org>
- The Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks: <http://www.elks.org/vets/>
- Veterans of Foreign Wars: <http://www.vfw.org/>
- Vietnam Veterans of America: <http://www.vva.org/>