Points of Excellence

The Newsletter of the VISN 17 Center of Excellence for Research on Returning War Veterans

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The VA VISN 17 Center of Excellence for Research on Returning War Veterans is dedicated to conducting research that serves to improve the quality of life of our nations Veterans and foster the wellbeing of their families.

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A Word from the Director

LTC(R) Michael Russell, Ph.D.

It is with great pride that I introduce this inaugural issue of our COE Newsletter. The COE has had a very productive year, with over a dozen active studies underway, 37 presentations delivered at professional conferences or agencies, and 49 articles published or in-press as of this writing. In addition, we have been pleased to welcome 15 new staff members in the past year, and four out of our five Cores are now fully staffed for the first time.

In just a few months, the COE will be moving into its new building, a three-story facility on the Waco VA campus, featuring 53,000 square feet of research space, including conference rooms, computer labs, wet labs, a data storage center, and our MRI. We are very excited for the months ahead, and we thank you for your continued support of the work we do in the service of our nation's Veterans.

Project MAVEREX Studies Traumatic Brain Injuries

The Neuroimaging Core has launched ***Project MAVEREX*** (MRI/TBI Assessment in Veterans: Effect of Recent EXposure) to understand how traumatic brain injuries (TBI) can affect networks of the brain. The COE's Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) machine uses a strong magnet and produces an image of the brain's activity. This is a safe, non-invasive technique to learn more about the brain.

These MRI scans will help to shed light on the mysteries underlying these injuries that have caused severe setbacks for many Veterans in many areas of their lives. So far, the Core has collected over 1,000 MRI scans from dozens of Veterans, and Veterans are continuing to come in daily to provide more data for the study. As we collect more and more brain scans, COE researchers can begin to better understand the how TBI -related deficits manifest in the human brain.

This important information may guide treatment options and help understand larger issues underlying mental health disorders.

If you are interested in participating, please call the Neuroimaging Core at 254-498-7068.

Welcome Our New Staff

Diane Castillo, Ph.D. is the new leader of our Treatment Core. Dr. Castillo has a long history of service with the VA, and she is a Master Therapist and trainer of Prolonged Exposure therapy for PTSD. Her research focuses on clinical outcomes including the application of evidence-based treatments for PTSD provided in group format in female Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans.

Evan M. Gordon, Ph.D. is a cognitive neuroscientist and investigator in our Neuroimaging Core. Dr. Gordon's research focuses on executive function of the brain, traumatic brain injury, and differences in functional brain organization between individuals.

Geoffrey May, M.D. is a psychiatrist and investigator in our Neuroimaging Core. His primary research interests are in clinical trials of new medical devices and pharmacologic agents for the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury. He specializes in the use of EEG and fMRI to elucidate the mechanism of action for these novel treatments.

Central Texas Veterans Research Foundation Launches New Website

The Central Texas Veterans Research Foundation (CTVRF) is an organization that supports and sponsors research in the Central Texas Veterans Health Care System and works side-by-side with the COE. The foundation supports investigators by assisting in submitting grants and promoting education of research and enhancing our research community. Check out their recently updated website at **www.ctvrf.org**

CTVRF Exec. Director, Maggie McCarthy speaking to an audience at the Temple VA

American GI Forum Banquet

In September, several members of the COE attended the annual banquet of the American GI Forum at the Waco Convention Center.

Robert Cervantes (right) poses with McClennan County AGIF Leader and the winner of the 2015 Spirit of Achievement Award

Our Data Manager, Robert Cervantes, is a proud member of the group, which this year raised enough money to provide college scholarships to nine students.

Welcome Our New Research Assistants

The COE recently welcomed 23 undergraduate students who began their training with us on September 8th. The undergraduate research training program, called VA-CERP (VA-Center of Excellence Research Program) for short, has recently expanded by partnering with both Baylor University and Tarleton State University to recruit exceptional students for the 2015-2016 academic year. This two-semester program provides students with hands-on research experience in preparation for careers in research, clinical work, or service.

Dr. Lianna Evans and Dr. Richard Seim welcome the 2015 class of VA-CERP students from Baylor University (above) and Tarleton State University (below left).

Recently, the COE has also affiliated with McLennan Community College, which will further expand our training cohort beginning in the Fall of 2016. Having a diverse body of students from multiple training programs provides a great opportunity for students to learn from each other through different academic experiences as well as create a rich training environment within our Center. If you meet any of our students, please welcome them aboard!

Staff Embodies "I-CARE" Values

Dr. Russell presenting the I-CARE Spirit Award to Victoria King

The I-CARE Spirit Award is given to employees who exemplify the five Core Values of the VA (Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect, and Excellence). The COE is proud to announce that our very own Ms. Victoria King, a Program Support Assistant in the Education & Dissemination Core of the COE, was one of the awardees selected by the Central Texas VA Health Care System, and Ms. Christine Kuhn, a Study Coordinator in the Treatment Core, was selected as a runner up.

Dr. Evans commented, "Ms. King has an enormous amount of respect and passion for Veterans that shows itself on a daily basis. She models these values through her respectful demeanor, her sensitive and caring conduct, and through her commitment and advocacy in streamlining processes for all individuals with whom she interacts."

Keep showing us that I-CARE spirit!

COE Donates 562 lbs of Food to Local Pantry

The COE again participated in the "Feds Feed Families" program, which encourages VA employees to donate to food pantries. This year's effort was organized by COE staff members, Dr. Suzannah Creech and Bradley Gary. These canned goods were delivered to Caritas of Waco, to ensure that our donations would support local families in need.

This year's donation totaled 562 pounds of food from the COE, and our Director, Michael Russell, was recognized on the "2015 Wall of Fame" for individually donating 336 lbs of canned goods! The manager of the warehouse at Caritas, stated, "We're in dire need of food right now, and your donation came at just the right time."

Caritas depends on food donations to be able to serve the community of Waco, and anyone can donate during the week from 8 AM to 4 PM at their drop-off location, 300 S. 15th Street in downtown Waco.

Suzannah Creech, Bradley Gary, and Michael Russell presenting donations to the Caritas warehouse

For more information on the Feds Feed Families program, please visit www.usda.gov/fedsfeedfamilies

Project S.E.R.V.E. Update

Project SERVE: FX2 staff are happy to announce that they have now enrolled over 250 Veterans and would like to thank all the Veterans who have participated so far.

Participants will be contacted for follow-up assessments every 8 months to study Veterans' long-term experiences.

Project S.E.R.V.E.
Study Evaluating Returning Veterans' Experiences

For more information about Project S.E.R.V.E. please contact the study coordinators at 254-297-5175

Announcing the REGIONS Study

The REGIONS Study is looking for Veterans who served in the 1990-1991 Gulf War who currently suffer from symptoms often described as Gulf-War Illness. The REGIONS team of investigators are trying to determine if two FDA approved medications for the treatment of fibromyalgia can provide symptom relief to Veterans who suffer from Gulf-War Illness.

REGIONS
Research Examining Gulf-War Illness in Our Nation's Service-members

For information about the REGIONS Study, please call the study coordinators at 254-297-3954 or 254-297-3950.

Staff Spotlight

Dr. Suzannah Creech joined the COE last spring as an investigator in the Treatment Core. Her program of research emphasizes (1) family and intimate relationship functioning in vulnerable Veteran populations, (2) the intersections between mental health and interpersonal violence including military sexual trauma and (3) intimate partner violence (IPV). She comes to us from the Providence VA Medical Center and the Alpert Medical School of Brown University where she completed specialty residencies and research fellowships. As part of her IPV research, Dr. Creech is part of the "Strength at Home" initiative designed to reduce, and ultimately prevent, intimate partner violence in Veteran communities. One of her current projects is designed to provide evidence-based parent training to Veterans who are coping with PTSD-symptoms and are having difficulties with parenting.

For a recent blog post describing IPV research, please visit www.div12.org/preventing-interpersonal-violence-among-military-veterans-the-strength-at-home-program/

STRENGTH AT HOME

Waco VA Celebrates Farm Day 2015

Every year, the Doris Miller VA Medical Center hosts a "Farm Day" event sponsored by our local VFW. This year's event was a big success featuring games, food, live music, competitors from the local Future Farmers of America, and an exhibition from the 1st Cavalry Division, Horse Cavalry Detachment (HCD) based out of Ft. Hood, Texas. Thank you to VFW Post #6008 for sponsoring the event and providing more than 2,000 hot dogs and entertainment to our Veterans and their families.

Recent COE Publications

Here is a sample of some of the recent articles published by our researchers:

Young, K. A., Thompson, P. M., Cruz, D. A., Williamson, D. E., Selemon, L. D. (2015). BA11 FKBP5 expression levels correlate with dendritic spine density in postmortem PTSD and controls. Neurobiology of Stress, 2, 67-72.

Mignogna, J., Christie, A., Holmes, S. A., & Ames, H. (in press). Brief Report: Measuring Disability-Associated Appraisals for Veterans with Spinal Cord Injury. Rehabilitation Psychology.

Russell, M.L., Schlegel R.E., Coldren, R., Brown, T.A., & Walker, D.E. (in press). Accuracy of computer-based neuropsychological assessment timing: the need for external calibration. PLOS One.

Gordon, E. M., Petersen, S. E., Laumann, T. O., & Adeyemo, B. (in press). Individual variability of the systems-level organization of the human brain. Cerebral Cortex.

Creech, SK; Swift, R; Zlotnick, C; Taft, CT; & Street, AE. (in press). Combat Exposure, Mental Health, and Relationship Functioning Among Women Veterans of the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars. Journal of Family Psychology.

DeBeer, B. B., Kimbrel, N. A., **Meyer, E. C.**, Gulliver, S. B. & Morissette, S. B. (2015, September). Combined PTSD and depressive symptoms interact with post-deployment social support to predict suicidal ideation in Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom Veterans. Research Brief: Syracuse University Institute for Veterans and Military Families.

Meyer, E. C., Hermann, B.A., Schnurr, P.P., Batten, S.V., & Walser, R.D. (2015). A Pilot Study of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy for PTSD and Substance Use in Veterans. Mental Health Innovations: The VA MIRECC/CoE Newsletter.

Nelson, S. M., Savalia, N. K., Fishell, A. K., Gilmore, A. W., Zou, F., Balota, D. A., & McDermott, K. B. (2015). Default mode network activity predicts early memory decline in healthy young adults aged 18-31. Cerebral Cortex, 2015, 1–11.

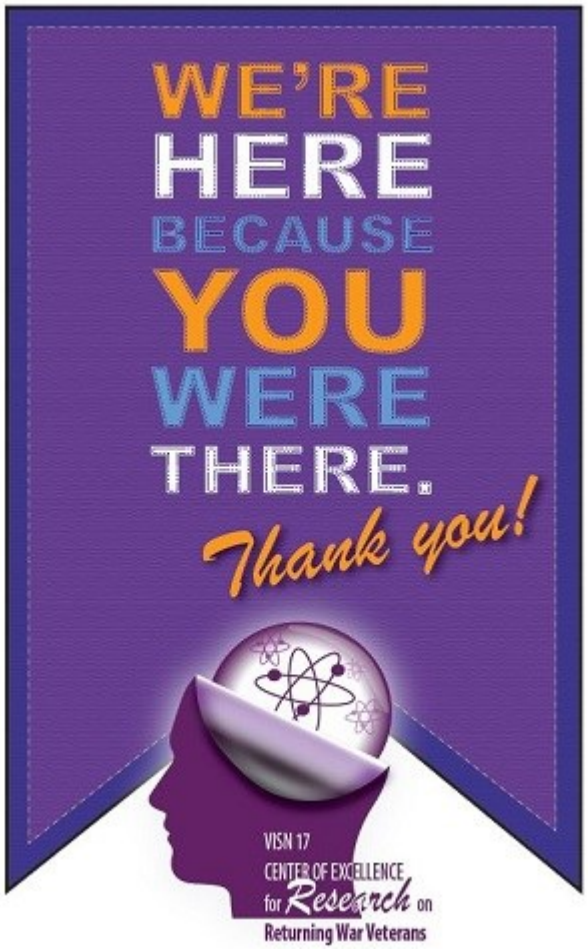
Dr. DeBeer Featured in Temple Daily Telegram

Dr. Bryann DeBeer, an investigator in our Treatment Core, was interviewed by the Temple Daily Telegram last month to discuss the high rates of suicide among Veterans and the factors that moderate risk. Dr. DeBeer was presenting some of her research at the Central Texas VA Mental Health Summit on the role of social cognition in suicidal behavior. To read the article, go to:

http://www.tdtnews.com/news/article_c148b09a-52b7-11e5-a0bd-ff944b2dea01.html

Closing the Year in Style

COE staff will be presenting and participating in a variety of conferences and summits over the next two months. With 11 events occurring in the next quarter, we are looking at a very full calendar! Our staff will be conducting workshops for VA staff and trainees, presenting symposia and poster sessions at scientific conferences, participating as Subject Matter Experts for community agency summits, and having panel discussions about suicide prevention on college campuses. This is an exciting close to a heavy presentation year!



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