



South Central MIRECC (VISN 16) Mental Illness Research, Education, and Clinical Center

Overview

The South Central MIRECC -- the only MIRECC focused on improving mental health care for rural veterans -- was funded in 1998 and is VISN-wide, encompassing all or parts of eight states: Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Mississippi, Texas, Florida, Alabama, and Missouri. The Center has anchor sites at five medical centers: Houston, Jackson, Little Rock, Oklahoma City, and New Orleans. The South Central MIRECC is closely aligned with the VISN 16 Mental Health Product Line, which oversees the delivery of mental health care, and the Mental Health Product Line Advisory Council, composed of the facility Mental Health Directors. VISN 16 is unique in that:

- VISN 16 treats more than 80,000 Veterans annually for mental health problems, compared to an average of 45,474 in other VISNs
- Almost half of VISN 16 Veterans live in rural areas
- Veterans residing in VISN 16 have the lowest per capita income, the lowest percent of college graduates
- Approximately 1 of every 4 Veterans treated are ethnic minorities
- Veterans living in this network report a higher physical and mental health disease burden relative to those in other VISNs
- In 2005, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita devastated small communities along the Mississippi Gulf Coast, the city of New Orleans, and communities along the Texas-Louisiana border, displacing hundreds of thousands of people, some for many months, and contributing to mental distress

The South Central MIRECC is known for its strengths in mental health services research, implementation science, educational/training programs, and innovative service delivery initiatives.

Mission

The Center's mission is *"To improve access to evidence-based practices in rural and other underserved populations, especially returning war veterans, veterans experiencing natural disasters, and vulnerable elderly veterans."* The South Central MIRECC's organizational structure includes four components: Research, Education, Improving Clinical Care, and Research Training.

Research

Investigators in the South Central MIRECC have extensive experience in research on rural mental health, distance delivery of mental health care via telemedicine, novel approaches to deliver mental health services in primary care settings, quality improvement interventions for older veterans, implementation and dissemination of evidence-based practices, understanding and predicting the development of PTSD, psycho-educational interventions for veterans' families, and exercise and mental health. South Central MIRECC investigators are in the process of developing a "practice network" with all 40 community-based outpatient clinics (CBOCs) in VISN 16 with the first step being a needs assessment of mental health providers in these clinics.

Education

At the request of VISN 16 clinical leadership, the South Central MIRECC has conducted more than six large scale trainings in evidence-based practices (EBPs) for providers, including training in psychosocial rehabilitation, dialectical behavior therapy, and cognitive behavioral therapy. The Center has explored various approaches to implementing and sustaining EBPs in VA clinical

settings, including use of learning collaboratives and a strategy known as “facilitation.” Also, the Clinical Educator Grant program has produced more than 30 excellent clinical education tools by frontline clinicians. The products are available for free upon request (<http://www1.va.gov/scmirecc/>).

Improving Clinical Care

The South Central MIRECC has worked closely with VISN leadership to implement and evaluate three models for providing mental health treatment in primary care (PC) clinics at all 10 medical centers and several CBOCs. To improve access to VA mental health services, we are reaching out to “first responders” in rural communities, including the clergy, court system, community colleges, and non-VA PC providers. Persons in these settings are often the first to see returning veterans, and many are not prepared to address mental health or substance abuse problems.

Research Training

The South Central MIRECC has two (2) two-year postdoctoral research fellowship programs for physicians and psychologists in Houston and Little Rock. The Training Residents in Psychiatry Scholarship (TRIPS) is a program designed to attract psychiatrists (PGY-II residents) to a research career in the VA. Periodically the Center holds intensive grant writing workshops and mock grant reviews for fellows and junior faculty.

Selected Studies and Projects

- *Facilitating Implementation of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) in Primary Care and Community-Based Clinics.* This pilot study examined the effect of external facilitation on implementation of brief CBT in primary care and community outpatient clinics. Facilitated therapists had a 19% increase in use of CBT at follow up.
- *Telemedicine Enhanced Antidepressant Management (TEAM).* This study evaluated a *telemedicine-based* collaborative care model adapted for small rural VA community clinics without on-site psychiatrists. Compared to treatment as usual, telemedicine-based collaborative care significantly improved medication adherence, depression severity, health status, health related quality of life, and satisfaction with care.
- *Preventing Aggression in Veterans with Dementia (PAVeD).* This study developed a psychosocial intervention that improves caregivers’ recognition of pain, communication skills, and activity-planning to decrease aggression in persons with dementia who have pain.

Selected Publications

- Akpaffiong MJ, Wilson-Lawson M, Kunik ME. Antidepressant-associated side effects in older adult depressed patients. *Geriatrics*, 63 (4), 18-23, 2008.
- Fortney JC, Pyne JM, Edlund MJ, Williams DK, Robinson DE, Mittal D, Henderson KL. A randomized trial of telemedicine-based collaborative care for depression. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 22(8): 1086-93, 2007.
- Kirchner JE, Owen RR, Dockter N, Kramer TL, Henderson K, Armitage T, Allee E. Equity in veterans' mental health care: Veterans Affairs medical center clinics vs. community-based outpatient clinics. *American Journal of Medical Quality* 23(2): 128-135, 2008.
- Sherman MD, Blevins D, Kirchner J, Ridener LC, Jackson T. Key factors involved in engaging significant others in the treatment of Vietnam veterans with PTSD. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 39 (4), 443-45, 2008.
- Stanley MA, Wilson NL, Novy DM, Rhoades HM, Wagener PD, Greisinger AJ, Cully JA, Kunik ME. Cognitive behavior therapy for generalized anxiety disorder among older adults in primary care: A randomized clinical trial. *JAMA*, 301(14).1460-7, 2009.
- Sullivan G, Blevins D, Kauth MR. Translating clinical training into practice in complex mental health systems: Toward opening the “Black Box” of implementation. *Implementation Science*, 3:33, 2008.

Leadership

Director – Greer Sullivan, MD, MSPH
Co-Director & Associate Director for Education – Michael R. Kauth, PhD
Associate Director for Research – John Fortney, PhD
Associate Director for Improving Clinical Care – JoAnn Kirchner, MD
Associate Director for Research Training – Mark Kunik, MD

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