



**VA Advanced Fellowship Program in
Mental Illness Research and Treatment**

**VA Capitol Health Care Network (VISN 5) Mental Illness Research,
Education, and Clinical Center (MIRECC)**

VA Maryland Healthcare System (VAMHCS)

Fellowship Handbook

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Welcome to VISN 5 MIRECC!

Welcome to the VA Capitol Health Care Network (VISN 5) Mental Illness Research, Education and Clinical Center (MIRECC)! The primary mission of the VISN 5 MIRECC is to improve the care of all veterans with schizophrenia and other serious mental illnesses within the VISN, and ultimately, within the entire VA system as well as in the community. This goal is achieved by:

1. **GENERATING RESEARCH DATA** that lead to the development and evaluation of effective treatment strategies.
2. **CONDUCTING EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS** for staff, trainees, veterans, and their families.
3. **DEVELOPING CLINICAL PROGRAMS** to test new strategies of care for veterans with mental illness.
4. **EVALUATING** the cost effectiveness of new programs and systems of care.

Our MIRECC focuses primarily on five topic areas within the broad domain of schizophrenia.

1. Recovery and Psychosocial Rehabilitation Interventions
2. Behavioral Health & Health Services Research
3. Technology Innovations in Education & Treatment Interventions
4. Psychopharmacology
5. Financing & Cost Analysis of Mental Health Services

As one of 25 sites in the VA Advanced Fellowship Program in Mental Illness Research and Treatment, our program follows the broad organizational structure of the national program, which aims to provide clinical research activities in concert with clinical experiences over a two-year time frame. Our program has been in existence and offering continuous postdoctoral training since 2003.

Our program adheres to the overarching mandate of the national Fellowship—to train psychologists to become leading clinical researchers in high priorities of Veteran mental health. Within the context of generalist training, our program emphasizes the assessment and treatment of schizophrenia and other serious mental illnesses through the VA Maryland Health Care System, Mental Health Clinical service. A breadth and depth of training occurs through advanced clinical assessment opportunities and clinical research interactions with Veteran patient populations.

The VA Maryland Health Care System (VAMHCS) is part of a national network of hospitals and clinics operated by the Department of Veterans Affairs. The mission of the Department of Veterans Affairs is to provide primary care, specialty care, extended care, and related social services in the context of an integrated health care delivery system aimed at improving the health of the Veteran population. For 65 years, VA has demonstrated an ongoing commitment to training and to the development of academic affiliations for the purpose of: 1) training and

retaining high quality VA health care providers, 2) improving Veteran health care, and 3) promoting an environment of scientific inquiry. The VA is legislatively mandated to support the training of healthcare professionals, such as psychologists, for its system and the nation. Our MIRECC Post-Doctoral Fellowship in Advanced Psychology is housed within the VA Capitol Health Care Network (VISN 5), which serves the state of Maryland, the District of Columbia and the greater Martinsburg West Virginia area.

Introduction to the Fellowship Handbook

The goal of the VA Special Fellowship Program in Advanced Psychiatry and Psychology is to develop outstanding academic and/or healthcare system leaders who will lead mental health research in the 21st century and effectively translate their research findings into clinical practice and educational activities. This goal will be achieved by providing Fellows with state-of-the-art training in mental health research, advanced clinical training, and cutting-edge educational experiences.

Fellows will develop advanced knowledge and skills in research design and implementation, assessment and intervention, teaching, and administration. Moreover, they can expect continued professional development, including further consolidation of professional identity, increased confidence in assuming an advanced level of professional responsibility, and advanced knowledge and skills in ethics, professional and legal standards, and in culturally competent practice. The postdoctoral fellowship also serves as preparation for licensure and independent functioning as a practicing psychologist.

Graduates of the Fellowship will be trained to pursue a range of career options. The Fellowship program aims to train Fellows for academic careers in mental health research within the VA system. Many will focus on research and education on mental health treatment development, testing, and implementation in non-VA academic settings. Others pursue VA and non-VA leadership careers that emphasize education and clinical contributions in the field of mental health and policy that impact persons with serious mental illness.

This handbook presents the policies and procedures of the VISN 5 MIRECC Fellowship Program. It is designed to provide an overview of the program and key guidelines for potential applicants, applicants, and beginning Fellows. Unforeseen circumstances may call for exceptions to or changes in guidelines.

Program Structure

There are three main components of the Fellowship program: research, clinical, and educational activities. Research and educational activities comprise 75% of the Fellowship training, while advanced clinical training comprises 25% of the Fellowship.

Research Activities: Fellows will work with their mentors on existing programs of research within the MIRECC and work towards designing and conducting their own studies. The MIRECC has a pilot funding mechanism and Fellows are encouraged to apply for such funding in order to collect pilot data in their area of interest. The application process is rigorous and provides good training in developing and submitting research ideas for funding, responding to critical feedback, and implementing research (submitting to the IRB, VA Research and Development, and other regulatory agencies, managing research staff, coordinating data collection and management, etc). Fellows are expected to write research papers for publication, participate or lead writing projects such as research reviews, present research at conferences, and apply for funding from VA and other sources.

Clinical Activities: Through the clinical component of their Fellowship Program, Fellows gain tools crucial to skilled mental health clinical care. Through specialized seminars and mentorship, Fellows increase their understanding of the legal and ethical issues involved in clinical practice in mental health. They also enhance their knowledge of advanced clinical approaches in mental health, such as telepsychiatric consultation, the use of cutting-edge neurochemical, neuroimaging, and chronobiological assessments and the identification, evaluation, and selection of best clinical assessment measures. Through the clinical component of their Fellowship Program, Fellows gain tools crucial to skilled mental health clinical care. Through specialized seminars and mentorship, Fellows increase their understanding of the legal and ethical issues involved in clinical practice in mental health. They also enhance their knowledge of advanced clinical approaches in mental health, such as telepsychiatric consultation, the use of cutting-edge neurochemical, neuroimaging, and chronobiological assessments and the identification, evaluation, and selection of best clinical assessment measures.

Educational Activities: The program contains a didactic component delivered via a monthly Video Teleconference (V-Tel) seminar hosted by the Hub Site. This seminar provides an in-depth overview of key topics in mental health research and clinical practice by experts in the field. Seminars and programs provided by the MIRECC, the Mental Health Service of the VA Maryland Health Care System (VAMHCS), VISN 5, VA, and our affiliate institution are widely available so that Fellows can tailor their educational experiences to their research interests and training needs.

Requirements for Completion

By the end of the Fellowship Program, Fellows pursuing academic clinical research careers should be ready to submit applications for career development awards. In particular, Fellows should be ready to apply for a VA career development award, a NIH K-Award, or other appropriate clinical research grants. Additionally, Fellows ought to be ready to pursue entry-level leadership roles, which integrate state-of-the-art research, education, and clinical approaches to mental health in the VA healthcare system and other academic institutions.

Statement of Nondiscrimination

Equal opportunity laws and Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) regulations prohibit discrimination based upon race, color, national origin, Limited English Proficiency (LEP), age, sex, handicap or reprisal. This applies to all programs or activities conducted by VHA. This policy establishes a civil rights administrative complaint procedure to process allegations of discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, LEP, age, sex, handicap, or reprisal. A combination of procedures are modified as outlined in Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Executive Order 13166, Title IX of the Education Amendment of 1972, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Age Discrimination Act of 1975, and VA Policy as outlined in Title 38 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) Chapter 1, Parts 15, 18, and 38.

EEO, Diversity Statement

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is committed to ensuring equal employment opportunity (EEO), promoting diversity and inclusion, and resolving workplace conflict constructively to maintain a high performing workforce in service to our Nation's Veterans. To that end, the Department will vigorously enforce all applicable Federal EEO laws, regulations, Executive Orders, and Management Directives to ensure equal opportunity in the workplace for all VA employees. For additional information, please consult the VA EEO Policy at <http://www.diversity.va.gov/policy/statement.aspx> or contact the VAMHCS EEO office.

We are committed to ensuring a range of diversity within our Fellowship and welcome applications from candidates representing different geographic areas, ages, racial and ethnic backgrounds, sexual orientations, disabilities, and life experiences.

Learning Goals and Objectives

The purpose of the VISN 5 MIRECC Postdoctoral Fellowship program is to train professional psychologists for eventual leadership roles in clinical research, services, and education-- particularly in Medical Center, public sector and academic settings. The goals of the program are as follows:

GOAL 1: SCHOLARLY INQUIRY AND RESEARCH: Fellows will pursue a program of clinical research with guidance from a team of mentors. Fellows will become proficient in the process of developing research ideas and communicating these ideas for various scholarly purposes.

GOAL 2: APPLICATION OF CURRENT SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE TO CLINICAL PRACTICE: Fellows will develop competency in the administration of measures for clinical assessment and diagnosis as well as in the use of empirically supported treatments. Opportunities exist for Fellows to gain competence in neuropsychological evaluation.

GOAL 3: CONSULTATION, SUPERVISION, AND TEACHING: Fellows will gain advanced skills in clinical consultation, clinical-research supervision, and teaching through experiences that allow him/her to interact within his/her area of expertise and knowledge with Veterans, MIRECC investigators, research staff, and mental health treatment teams. Opportunities exist for Fellows to work with junior trainees in psychology and family members.

GOAL 4: ORGANIZATIONAL MANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATION: Fellows will gain experience in organizational management and administration pertinent to their career development and clinical research program. Fellows may choose training experiences that facilitate the development of advanced competencies in program evaluation.

GOAL 5: PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT, ETHICS, AND LEGAL MATTERS: Fellows will become competent (as appropriate for an entry level professional) in professional and collegial conduct, knowledge of the ethical guidelines of clinical assessment, diagnosis and delivery of interventions and services. Fellows will also become competent in their knowledge of guidelines that govern the appropriate conduct of human subjects research, and they will become appropriately familiar with the wide array of legal issues pertinent to the proper conduct of clinical psychology and human subjects related research.

GOAL 6: CULTURAL AND INDIVIDUAL DIVERSITY ISSUES: Fellows will further develop their awareness, appreciation, and handling of cultural and individual diversity in conceptualizing, preparing, and executing research and clinical work. This will include adding to their cultural competence regarding the design, delivery and evaluation of mental health services for a diverse range of veterans and families.

GOAL 7: CONFIDENCE AND PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY: Fellows will develop a strong professional identity and confidence and professional demeanor commensurate with their entry-level status in the profession.

Organization and Resources

Orientation

Orientation to the Fellowship has two main components. First, at the beginning of the Fellowship, Fellows attend an orientation session where they are provided the orientation manual and introduced to Fellowship supervisors. During orientation, standard operating procedures, facility policies, and general information about psychology service is covered. Second, Fellows spend the first several weeks engaged in individual meetings with all MIRECC and MIRECC-affiliated investigators in order to get an in-depth introduction to the breadth of research, clinical, and educational activities and opportunities that are available. In addition, Fellows also meet with all MIRECC clinical supervisors, learn about the different clinical service opportunities that are available, and can establish ties with supervisors in areas of particular interest to the Fellow.

Research Mentoring and Supervision

By the end of this comprehensive orientation, Fellows are prepared to identify investigators to serve on their Mentoring Team as well as clinical supervisors who will work with them on their clinical activities. The Mentoring Team consists of the 2-3 investigators selected by the Fellow who will be involved in the Fellow's research training in some way. Fellows can select investigators with overlapping research interests, those with interests that the Fellow hopes to develop, those who can provide guidance around establishing a new research program, etc. The Mentoring Team may or may not include the Training Director.

All clinical and clinical research activities received advanced supervision and are complemented by a strong didactic curriculum offered through the Fellowship Hub Site designed to deepen Fellows' knowledge on key aspects of clinical practice, research, legal and ethical issues pertinent to clinical psychology (or research) and matters of individual and cultural diversity. When requested additional mentorship and career coaching is provided. Supervisors and Fellows are asked to sign a supervision contract at the beginning of the Fellowship.

Fellowship Meetings

At the start, Fellows meet weekly or bimonthly with the Training Director. The number of meetings can stay the same or decrease depending on the needs of the Fellow. These meetings cover a range of issues including training needs, status of key administrative components of the Fellowship, and review of research, clinical, and other training activities. Fellows will meet regularly with members of the Mentoring Team and will meet quarterly with the entire team. Fellows also meet regularly with their clinical supervisors. In addition, Fellows attend seminars, didactics provided by the Hub Site, and other meetings as needed.

Other Resources for Fellows

Fellows have access to a range of library resources through VA and UMB. These libraries contain a large selection of current materials and periodicals and provides extensive assistance for information searches and inter-library loans. The MIRECC offers state-of-the-art computer resources, Internet access, and computer-support personnel to assist in patient care and research.

Fellows are encouraged to attend local, state, and national professional meetings and conventions of their choice as a means of participating in the larger professional world, and of pursuing individual professional interests. Authorized absence may be granted for such activities in an amount comparable to other Psychology staff. Absences for such meetings must be negotiated with the supervisor and submitted electronically to the supervisor for approval.

Preparation for Licensure

All Fellows have access to licensure study materials through VAMHCS and are encouraged to seek licensure when they become eligible in the state of Maryland. Fellows are provided a small amount of release time to prepare for licensure, and Authorized Absence is granted for the date of the exam, if taken during the Fellowship year.

Early Completion

One complete training year entails 2080 hours (4160 for two-year Fellowship). Completion of the Fellowship requires full-time commitment, as well as, successful attainment of the program competencies (described in detail in the Learning Goals and Objectives section of the manual. Upon fulfillment of these requirements, a Certificate of Completion is awarded, verifying the Fellow's completion of the postdoctoral training program. We are unable to provide a Certificate to Fellows who leave the program prior to completing the Fellowship.

Administrative Information

Fellowship Calendar

The term of the VA Advanced Fellowship Program in Mental Illness Research and Treatment is full-time for two years beginning on or about Labor Day and ending on or about that day two years later. The didactic component takes place over the 10 months of the academic year, from October, 1st through the end of June of the following year and starts up again in October.

Tour of Duty

Postdoctoral Fellows are required to arrive at work during their scheduled tour of duty. This position adheres to the basic 40-hour workweek, 5 days per week. The normal tour of duty is 8:00am – 4:30pm, Monday through Friday.

Dress Code

According to VAMHCS Policy Memorandum 512-05/HR-24, unless the occupation requires a particular uniform, business attire is to be worn by all employees. The policy does not allow for casual attire. Business attire is considered to be suits, dresses, pantsuits, blouses, skirts, dress slacks, and shirts with collars. Business attire does not include jeans. Since the Dress Code Policy is VAMHCS-wide, it does not permit individual management officials to allow employees to wear jeans or other apparel not specifically identified as appropriate attire for the workplace.

All management officials are directed to review the Dress Code and ensure employees under their supervision are in conformance with the Dress Code Policy. The Dress Code Policy must be consistently applied with no variances.

Telework (flexiplace)

In accordance with VAMHCS Policy Memorandum 512-05/HR-027, and based on the nature of the job, this position is not eligible for telework (flexiplace). Participants selected for flexiplace arrangements must be permanent employees and employed in the VAMHCS for a minimum of two (2) years.

Stipend and Benefits

Stipend

The MIRECC Fellowship is a 2-year Fellowship. Fellows must work at least 2080 hours per year. Please note: Only the first 2080 hours are funded. Any work beyond 2080 hours is without compensation. The stipend for the first year is \$45,961; the stipend for the second year is \$48,446. Fellows may not be paid overtime or holiday pay. State and Federal income tax and FICA are withheld.

Leave/Benefits

Fellows accrue 4 hours of annual leave every two weeks (13 days total), 4 hours of sick leave every two weeks (13 days total) and 10 federal holidays. Additional authorized absence may be approved for attendance at conference, workshops, or other educational activities; they may also apply for travel and tuition expenses for training or conference experiences consistent with their training goals. Fellows are eligible for federal health insurance but not life insurance or retirement programs.

Please plan ahead for using authorized absence/professional leave early in the year. Authorized absence may not be used to attend conference outside the United States unless the Fellow applies for and receives an official government passport (issued only to federal employees). It takes a minimum of 60 days to apply for and receive a government passport. It is very difficult to get international travel approved for trainees. The pay schedule for VA employees/Fellows can be found at <http://vaww.vamhcs.med.va.gov/QuickLinks/paidcalendars.html>.

Parking

Fellows who drive personally owned vehicles to and/or from work daily are permitted to park in government-owned parking facilities for a fee. Fellows must complete a Staff Parking Registration form and submit the form to VA Police. Parking fees are automatically deducted from checks on a bi-monthly basis.

Transit Benefit

The VA's Transit Benefit Program provides non-taxable subsidy to encourage employees and trainees to use mass transportation for their daily commute to and/or from their duty station. It is prohibited by law to use the program in conjunction with a VA subsidized parking permit. Employees applying for the program are required to complete and sign an Application for Public Transit Fare Benefit (VA form 0722). Conditions for receiving VA transit subsidy are explained in the Employee Certification Section.

Evaluation Procedures

Overview

A variety of evaluation methods are used in the training program. Because feedback and instruction are most valuable when they are immediate and specific, supervisors and Fellows are expected to exchange feedback routinely as a normal part of their daily interactions. Evaluations focus on the learning goals identified by each Fellow in their individualized training plans as well as the competencies required by the Fellowship. Evaluations are discussed between the Fellow and the supervisor and may be modified by their consensus before being finalized.

Training Plans

Fellows submit an individually tailored training plan that identifies specific training needs. The training plan is developed at the beginning of the Fellowship in collaboration with the Mentoring Team and delineates appropriate goals (and benchmarks for performance). The plan is reviewed with the Team every six months and is flexible such that goals and topics within the plan can develop and change over time. While all Fellows must attain a common set of skills, the development of a tailored training plan allows for more individualized evaluation and helps to ensure that adequate advanced progress is being made.

Fellow Self-Evaluation

The training plans serve as the basis for ongoing self-evaluation and guide much of the mentorship and supervision discussions that occur between Fellows and the Training staff. In this way, we help to ensure that Fellows are tracking their own progress and meeting their own training goals. Self-evaluations are completed midway and at the end of each training year.

Formal Evaluations

Our program offers Fellows a two-year, advanced training experience in which they may partake in a rich array of "hands on" experiential training activities that foster their readiness for independent practice. In order to fulfill the goals of Fellowship training, all Fellows should demonstrate an advanced level of skill and knowledge in the following areas by the completion of the Fellowship program, as measured by supervisors' evaluations of the specific competencies. Foundational and functional competencies are collapsed into the following domains for ease of dissemination and discussion with Fellows. The specific skills, behaviors and attitudes described below are measured in the Fellowship Evaluation form.

Evaluation of Supervisors

The VISN 5 MIRECC believes in 360° evaluation. While supervisors evaluate Fellows twice a year, Fellows are also asked to complete a supervisor evaluation at the end of each Fellowship year. Supervisors are evaluated on: 1) whether the supervisory content was effective in meeting Fellows' training needs for the Fellowship; 2) whether the supervisor addressed issues adequately in supervision; 3) whether the supervisory process was open, and appropriately facilitated; 4) whether the supervisor provided adequate assistance in Fellow's development as a scientist-practitioner; and 6) whether the supervisor provided adequate assistance in Fellow's professional development.

Due Process and Grievance Procedures

Grievance Procedures

Trainees who receive an Acknowledgment Notice or Probation Notice, or who otherwise disagree with any Review Panel decision regarding their status in the program, are entitled to challenge the Panel's actions by initiating a grievance procedure. Within ten working days of receipt of the Review Panel's notice or other decision, the trainee must inform the Psychologist Executive in writing that s/he disagrees with the Panel's action and provide the Psychologist Executive with information as to why the trainee believes the Review Panel's action is unwarranted. Failure to provide such information will constitute an irrevocable withdrawal of the challenge. Following receipt of the trainee's grievance, the following actions will be taken:

- a. Upon receipt of the written notice of grievance, the Psychologist Executive will convene an Appeal Review Panel consisting of the Psychology Executive, two staff members selected jointly by the DOT and the Psychologist Executive and two staff members selected by the trainee. The trainee retains the right to hear all allegations and the opportunity to dispute them or explain his or her behavior.
- b. The Appeal Review Panel's decisions will be made by majority vote. Within 10 days of completion of the Appeal Review Panel, the panel will write a report of its decision and recommendations and will provide the report to the trainee and the DOTs. This will be final and binding.
- c. Once a final and binding decision has been made, the trainee will be informed in writing of the actions taken.

Due Process

When supervisors' evaluation indicate that a trainee's skills, professionalism, or personal functioning are inadequate for the trainee, the Co-Directors of Training and the Psychologist Executive, with input from the relevant supervisory staff, initiates the following procedures:

- a. The negative evaluations(s) will be reviewed and a determination made as to what actions need to address the problem(s) identified.
- b. The trainee will be notified in writing that such a review is occurring and that the Psychologist Executive is ready to receive any information or statement that the Trainee wishes to provide with reference to the identified problem(s).
- c. If it is determined that a review is necessary, a Review Panel will be convened by the Psychologist Executive. The panel will consist of three staff members selected by the Executive with recommendations from the Co-Director from the other track will serve on the Review Panel as long as they are not directly involved in the grievance.
- d. The trainee will be given the opportunity to meet with the Psychologist Executive and the Review Panel to discuss the identified problems(s).

- e. In the event that the grievance involves both DOTs they will excuse/recuse themselves from the activities in response to the identified problem(s) due to a conflict of interest.
- f. After reviewing all available information, the Review Panel may adopt one or more of the following steps, or take other appropriate action:
 - i. They may elect to take no further action.
 - ii. The Co-DOT may issue an Acknowledgment Notice, which states the following in writing
 - 1. The Review Panel is aware of and concerned about the negative evaluation.
 - 2. The evaluation has been brought to the trainee's attention, and the committee or other supervisors will work with the trainee to rectify the problem within a specified time frame.
 - 3. The behaviors associated with the negative evaluation are not significant enough to warrant more serious action at the time.
 - iii. Alternatively, depending upon the gravity of the matter, the Review Panel may issue a Probation Notice which specifies that the committee through the supervisors and Co-DOTs will actively and systematically monitor the degree to which the trainee addresses, changes, and/or otherwise improves the problem performance or behaviors.

Local Information

To find out more about the VISN 5 MIRECC:

Our MIRECC Website: <http://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn5/>

The website of our institutional affiliate: <http://www.umaryland.edu/>

The VA Medical Center in downtown Baltimore is located on the West side of the city about 4 blocks from Camden Yards and Ravens Stadium. We are in walking distance to the Inner Harbor, the Hippodrome, the Walters Art Museum, and various historic landmarks. Baltimore has an active live music scene, interesting neighborhoods with unique shopping, and a vital downtown arts program (www.baltimore.org).

The surrounding area offers access to the Shenandoah Mountains, a variety of National and State Parks, and various historic sites. The Baltimore VAMC is a 40-minute drive from downtown Washington, DC.

Resources to use to find out more about the Delaware-Maryland-Washington Region:

<http://www.baltimorecity.gov/>

<http://baltimore.org/>

<http://www.delmarvabeachguide.com/>

<http://dc.gov/DC/>

<http://www.maryland.gov/Pages/default.aspx>

Please contact Dr. Melanie Bennett, Training Director, with questions:

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