

Department of Veterans Affairs

# MIRECC Matters

A Publication of the VISN 5 MIRECC

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## ***LIVING WELL: Putting Recovery-Oriented Research Into Practice*** ***Richard Goldberg, Ph.D.***



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My colleagues and I recently completed a VA Health Services Research and Development funded hybrid effectiveness-implementation trial of *Living Well*, an illness self-management intervention for adults with serious mental illness. *Living Well* is a manualized 12-session group intervention designed to enhance self-efficacy and motivation through education and skills training in action planning and problem-solving. Groups are co-facilitated by two providers, one of whom has lived experience with co-occurring mental health and medical conditions. A range of health-related topics are covered (e.g., healthy eating, physical activity, medication management, symptom management, making good use of health care). Participants create weekly action plans, report on progress, and engage in group-based problem solving to overcome barriers. The peer facilitator engages in self-disclosure regarding his/her own illness self-management, as relevant to session material and participant experiences.

For the trial, 242 Veterans were randomized to *Living Well* or a health and wellness education group control condition. Adults in *Living Well* had significantly greater improvements immediately posttreatment in mental health related quality of life, self-management self-efficacy, patient activation, internal health locus of control, behavioral and cognitive symptom management, and overall psychiatric symptoms. Significant group differences in self-management self-efficacy and behavioral and cognitive symptom management were maintained 3 months later. Those in *Living Well* also had greater improvements in physical activity related self-management and relationship quality at the 3-month follow-up. The control group showed greater increases in physical health related quality of life immediately posttreatment. Results will appear in an upcoming issue of *Psychiatric Services*.

We are working on implementation and training manuals that draw on data collected concurrent to the trial to inform future dissemination of the *Living Well* Intervention. Locally, I have provided consultation and training to staff in the Baltimore VAMC PRRC and the Perry Point VAMC Recovery Center to support their delivery of *Living Well*. Plans are in the works to also make *Living Well* available in the DC VAMC.

## Mentoring the Future of Serious Mental Illness (SMI) Treatment

Samantha Hack

In addition to mentoring and training post-doctoral fellows through the VA Advanced Fellowship in Mental Illness Research and Treatment, the VISN 5 MIRECC helps to prepare SMI researchers and clinicians at all stages of their training.

**Psychology Externs.** This year marks the VISN 5 MIRECC's first year as an official member of the VA Maryland Health Care System (VAMHCS) Psychology Externship Program. The VAMHCS Psychology Externship Program utilizes the scientist-practitioner approach to training. The Program strives to incorporate evidence-based practice for the psychological treatment of mental illness and aims to train and refine skills in core competency domains to advance extern training and prepare externs for internship. Externs participate in a variety of activities that expose them to working with individuals with SMI. During the course of their externship they gain clinical experiences in different settings that serve Veterans with SMI, lead recovery-oriented psychoeducational and treatment groups, conduct psychodiagnostic and cognitive assessments, and work on a research projects with the goal of assisting with papers, posters, or presentation. Externs receive twice monthly mentorship consultation

with Dr. Melanie Bennett, as well as weekly mentorship with on-site supervisors.

**Psychology Interns.** Investigators serve as clinical supervisors and research mentors for psychology interns in the VA Maryland Health Care System / University of Maryland School of Medicine Psychology Internship Consortium.

**Trainee Didactic Series.** The VISN 5 MIRECC organizes and hosts a biweekly SMI didactic series which provides trainees with educational opportunities tailored to their specialization in issues affecting people who are struggling with especially challenging mental health concerns. The series is traditionally organized by the first-year post-doctoral fellow, who this year is Dr. Peter Phalen, and takes advantage of a series of invited speakers and experts. Among other topics, the didactics cover advanced techniques for working with people who have serious mental health conditions, updates on current SMI research programs by investigators who are active in the field, professional development guidance from SMI researchers and clinicians at various career stages, as well as provide interns



and externs with time to seek feedback from supervisors and each other on challenging cases. Trainees have also valued these SMI didactics as an occasion to receive guidance as they prepare for the next step in their careers such as post-doctoral fellowships, clinical, or policy positions.

**Training in Evidence-Based, Recovery-Oriented Practices.** All psychology and social work trainees are offered participation in several MIRECC trainings. On August 31, psychology trainees participated in a one-day Social Skills Training (SST) Workshop. SST is a psychosocial intervention aimed at enhancing the social functioning and social problem-solving of people with serious mental illness. Workshop participants reviewed the SST evidence base, watched SST session recordings, and took turns leading an SST mock-group. On September 6, Dr. Samantha Hack, assisted by MIRECC research staff members Lynn Calvin, Katie Despeaux, Kelly Lloyd, and Lache Wilkins, led a Virtual Voices experiential workshop for the Veterans Affairs/University of Maryland Baltimore Psychology Internship Consortium. This 1.5 hour workshop allows participants to experience hearing distressing voices, or what is clini-

## Mentoring, continued

cally referred to as auditory hallucinations, while completing typical daily tasks and interactions. The goal is to help participants better understand the day-to-day challenges that face people with psychiatric illnesses and how they can change practices to better address the needs of people who hear distressing voices.

**Current Trainees.** We have several psychology trainees working with us at the MIRECC this year. Here's a brief summary of them and their interests.

Ivana Alexander, M.Ed., MSW is a



Graduate Research Assistant at the VISN 5 MIRECC and a 2<sup>nd</sup> year doctoral student in social work at the University of

Maryland Baltimore. She is working with Dr. Amanda Peebles on a qualitative study of veterans' beliefs, conceptualizations, and expectations about treatment and recovery in PTSD. Her research interests are veterans' mental health, mental health treatment outcomes, racial/ethnic minorities and serious mental illness, PTSD, stigma, and social policy. She hopes to pursue a career that combines research and practice to promote optimal health and social outcomes for vulnerable people living with serious mental illness.



Jacob Scharer, M.A. is a psychology intern at the University of Maryland School of Medicine and a 6th year doctoral student in clinical psychology at the University of Missouri - St. Louis. He is working with Dr. Melanie Bennett on smoking cessation research. His research interests are in treatments for problem substance use and he hopes to pursue a career as a researcher in an academic medical setting. He enjoys running and rock climbing.

working with Drs. Alicia Lucksted and Amy Drapalski on their research looking at the role of self-stigma on recovery in serious mental illness. Her research and clinical interests focus on improving functional outcome for individuals in the early and late stages of schizophrenia and related disorders. She enjoys spending her free time with her recently adopted puppy.

Naomi Stahl is an extern at the



MIRECC and a 4<sup>th</sup> year doctoral student in Clinical Psychology at American University. She is working with Dr. Melanie Bennett on

research targeting treatment approaches for Veteran smokers with SMI. She is also training with Dr. Beth Klingaman on Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Insomnia (CBT-I) and with Drs. Clare Gibson and Peter Phalen on Illness Management and Recovery (IMR) through a group offered in PRRC. Her research and clinical interests are cognitive-behavioral treatment approaches for smokers with serious mental illness. She hopes to pursue a career as a clinical psychologist working

with Veterans with SMI. She enjoys playing soccer and cooking.

Heather Wastler, M.S. is a psychology doctoral intern at VAMHCS and a sixth-year doctoral candidate in clinical psychology at Binghamton University. She is



working with Drs. Alicia Lucksted and Amy Drapalski on their research looking at the role of self-stigma on recovery in

serious mental illness. Her research and clinical interests focus on improving functional outcome for individuals in the early and late stages of schizophrenia and related disorders. She enjoys spending her free time with her recently adopted puppy.

Eryka L. Boyd, M.S. is an intern at VAMHCS and a doctoral candidate in Clinical Psychology & Behavioral Medicine at University of Maryland, Baltimore County. She is working with Dr. Samantha Hack on evaluating the Art with a Heart intervention program at Loch Raven Medical Center. She is interested in identifying psychological and sociocultural factors of resilience in minority health outcomes and she hopes to pursue a career as a clinical health psychologist within the VA. In her free time, Eryka likes to watch Great British Bake-Off and make poorly constructed baked goods.

## Meet the New MIRECC Post-Doctoral Fellow



Dr. Peter Phalen is originally from Seattle, Washington. After receiving his BA in Philosophy from Reed College in Portland, Oregon, he spent a couple of post-bac years working with people with serious mental illness (SMI) as a counselor before deciding to pursue a graduate degree in Clinical Psychology. He received his PsyD from the University of Indianapolis and recently completed his clinical internship at the VA Maryland Health Care System / University of Maryland School of Medicine Psychology Internship Consortium in the UM SMI track.

**(1) Tell us about your research interests.** I'm interested in developing and evaluating psychosocial interventions for people struggling with poor mental health—particularly those who are experiencing active psychosis. I'm also interested in strength-based approaches to mental health, and in public health issues affecting people with serious mental health conditions and how these impact mental health policies. Among other things, I hope to develop research on Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) for people with psychosis. The majority of DBT research programs, including Linehan's own, have excluded people who hear voices or who have clinically significant "delusional" beliefs from participating in clinical trials. I'd like to see DBT evaluated for psychosis because this treatment targets domains that tend to be particularly important to people with psychosis. More simply, I've lead many DBT groups as a clinician and have witnessed people with psychosis drawing major benefits from the DBT skills. It would be nice if people with psychosis were allowed to participate in DBT groups as a matter of course.

**(2) What are the potential benefits of your program of research for Veterans?** I hope to improve/increase treatment options for Veterans who are struggling with their mental health. I also hope to continue researching structural/policy-level issues affecting people with mental health conditions, which may be especially relevant given the many policy upheavals we've seen over the past decade.

**(3) What are some things you plan to get involved in here at the VISN 5 MIRECC?** The Baltimore MIRECC has one of the most exciting, clinically relevant research programs for serious mental illness in the country, and its researchers are serious about having a real-world positive impact on the lives of people who are struggling with their mental health. It's an embarrassment of riches. I hope to collaborate on several of the many clinical trials being implemented by this group.

**(4) How can people get in touch with you if they have questions about your work?** I can be reached in my office in the MIRECC suite in the VA Annex at 206-371-1107 or by e-mail at [Peter.Phalen2@va.gov](mailto:Peter.Phalen2@va.gov).

## VISN 5 MIRECC Recent and Upcoming Educational and Research Activities

Our mission is to support recovery and enhance community functioning of Veterans with serious mental illness. Here we list some recent educational and research activities:

**(1) Clinical Research Coordination Group (CRCWG) at the Washington DC VA Medical Center.** In October 2017, MIRECC Affiliate Dr. Barbara Schwartz and MIRECC Coordinator Natalie Kiddie started the first ever Clinical Research Coordination Group (CRCWG) at the Washington DC VA Medical Center. The mission of this group is to “foster a community of research professionals at the DC VA dedicated to exploring innovative care for our Veterans.” The main objectives of the Work Group are to help foster a community of research collaboration and to assist with the navigation of the day-to-day logistical activities when conducting clinical research. The group meets monthly to discuss a variety of topics or to host an educational topic of interest to local VA investigators. These meetings are casual and are meant to foster an open dialogue amongst investigators and their study staff. Some of the discussion include, but are not limited to: research recruitment, without-compensation

appointments, IRB/R&D compliance and best practices, statistics, regulatory audits and many more. This group is open to any VA staff members interested in or currently involved in research at the Washington DC VA Medical Center. For more information, contact Natalie Kiddie at [natalie.kiddie@va.gov](mailto:natalie.kiddie@va.gov).

**(2) You can now follow the VISN 5 MIRECC on VA Pulse!**

While some of the site is still “under construction” we’ve already added a ton of great resources. You can learn a little bit more about our staff, find copies of the MIRECC Matters, learn about upcoming webinars/trainings, access intervention manuals, and so much more! Any VA employee can sign up to use VA Pulse.net. Follow us at <https://www.vapulse.net/groups/visn-5-mirecc/pages/welcome>.

**(3) The MIRECC runs a bi-monthly Science Meeting** (2nd and 4th Tuesday of the month, 12-1, at the MIRECC, VANTS 800-767-1750, 71129). **Good news—we will now have CEs available for the 2018-2019 series!** We have some great presentations planned, including an update on outcomes from Dr. Richard Goldberg’s trial of Living Well, and a review

of Dr. Melanie Bennett’s pilot study of a smoking cessation program that starts when Veterans are in the hospital and continues via telephone when they leave. For more information, contact Melanie Bennett at [Melanie.Bennett@va.gov](mailto:Melanie.Bennett@va.gov).

**(4) The VISN5 MIRECC can now provide CEs to clinicians from multiple disciplines for participating in our educational offerings.** The completion certificates, provided through TMS for VA employees in VISN5, can be used to meet the CE requirements of the accreditation bodies of Psychologists, Social Workers, Physicians, Nurses, and Certified Counselors. We are pleased to be able to provide needed information and training to clinicians and researchers, which will ultimately enhance the recovery and community function of Veterans with serious mental illness.

**(5) On Wednesday, October 31 at the Washington DCVA, the MIRECC will sponsored an all day Workshop for VA mental health clinicians entitled: *Whole Health in Mental Health Care: Strategies and Resources*.** Sessions will focus on smoking cessation, sleep improvement, and exercise with older Veterans with serious mental illness. For more information, contact Ralf Schneider at [Ralf.Schneider@va.gov](mailto:Ralf.Schneider@va.gov).

## **Learn about Current Research Studies at the VISN 5 MIRECC**

*The mission of the VISN 5 MIRECC is to help Veterans “put recovery into practice”. A number of investigators are conducting studies that are aimed at assisting Veterans in identifying, planning for, and achieving their personal recovery goals. These studies are recruiting participants who receive mental health services within the VA Maryland Healthcare System. Below are descriptions of two of them, with phone numbers to call if you or someone you know receives mental health services at the VA Maryland Healthcare System and would like to learn more.*

**Improving Negative Symptoms & Community Engagement in Veterans with Schizophrenia.** Our team is looking for Veterans between the ages of 18-75 who have been diagnosed with Schizophrenia or Schizoaffective Disorder to evaluate a new intervention aimed at improving negative symptoms. Negative symptoms include things like having low energy to do things, not feeling pleasure when doing things, and difficulty socializing with other people. Participation includes four study interviews and group sessions that occur twice a week for 12 weeks. You will be paid for your participation. This study is being conducted by Melanie Bennett, Ph.D. at the Baltimore, Perry Point, and DC VA Medical Centers. **Please call Kelly Lloyd at 410-637-1887 to see if you are eligible.**

*A number of investigators are conducting studies that are aimed at exploring mental illness risk factors as well as assisting Veterans in identifying, planning for, and achieving their personal recovery goals. Both approaches have many implications for mental health recovery. These studies are recruiting participants who receive mental health services within the VA Maryland Healthcare System. Below are descriptions of them, with phone numbers to call if you or someone you know receives mental health services within the VA Maryland Healthcare System and would like to learn more.*

**Toxoplasma gondii, the Kynurenine pathway, and Suicidal Behavior in Veterans.** We are looking to recruit Veterans for a research study examining the link between suicide risk factors and brain molecules. We are looking for veterans who are: (1) between the ages of 18 and 65, (2) have no current substance abuse or dependence, and (3) are able to complete one blood draw and approximately 6 hours of questionnaires/interviews with study staff. Participants who complete all study procedures will be paid for their time. All study procedures are completely voluntary. Research is conducted under Dr. Teodor Postolache. **If you or someone you know would like more information about this study, please contact Amanda Federline at 410-637-1433.**



## ***Family Support for Mental Health Recovery***

Do you work with Veterans who have been diagnosed with a mental illness and want to offer resources to their family members on ways of assisting in the recovery process? This brochure provides tips, information and resources on how to support a loved one and at the same time consider self-care for the family member.

If you would like to receive copies of this brochure to hand out, please contact Tracy Robertson, CPRS at 410-637-1522 or by email at [tracy.robertson@va.gov](mailto:tracy.robertson@va.gov). Thank you.



## ***Monthly Psychopharmacology Case Conference***

All VISN Clinicians are invited to attend this conference and to bring questions about a difficult or challenging psychopharmacology case. Note that the topic of the conference has been expanded from a focus only on metabolic side effects of antipsychotic medications to include all areas of psychopharmacology. Case Conference facilitators are Robert Buchanan, M.D., MIRECC investigator and Professor of Psychiatry at the UMB School of Medicine; Julie Kreyenbuhl, Pharm.D., Ph.D., MIRECC investigator and Associate Professor in the UMB Department of Psychiatry; and Neil Sandson, M.D., inpatient attending psychiatrist in the VAMHCS and MIRECC staff member. The case conference is held on the first Thursday of every month, 1:00 - 2:00 PM, 1-800-767-1750, code 79846. **For more information, contact Julie Kreyenbuhl at [Julie.Kreyenbuhl@va.gov](mailto:Julie.Kreyenbuhl@va.gov).**

## ***Educational Webinar Series for Peer Specialists***

The VISN 5 MIRECC hosts educational webinars for VA Peer Specialists. The most recent webinar, titled *Effectively Assisting LGBTQ Veterans*, was held on July 12, 2-3:30 pm. This webinar educated attendees about VA services to support the many Veterans who are in the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender community. Because of a history of past obstacles to receiving access to health care, there are unique treatment considerations and concerns for LGBT Veterans. Among these are concern about disclosure and discrimination. Peer Specialists are in an ideal position to help LGBTQ Veterans confidently navigate the VA system and knowledgeably support their fellow Veterans with the unique issues and obstacles they may face. Our presenter was **Jillian Silveira, OTR/L the VAMHCS LGBT Veteran Care Coordinator** who has done outstanding work to support the VA's initiative to "Serve all who served". Stay tuned for information on Webinars coming in 2019!



## MIRECC Staff Conduct Trainings in Evidence-Based Practices for Veterans with Serious Mental Illness

The mission of the VISN 5 MIRECC is to *put recovery into practice*. Our Clinical Core partners with clinical programs and staff at the VAMHCS, VISN, and national levels to support *recovery-oriented* and *evidence-based* clinical services for Veterans with mental illness. MIRECC investigators offer workshops to enrich the staff at your clinical program or provide training on an unmet clinical need. We have expertise in a range of topics related to

*mental health recovery*. Topic areas include:

- Ending Self Stigma
- Promoting Community Integration
- Family and Mental Health Treatment
- Person-Centered Care
- Treating Substance Use Disorders

- Early Psychosis Services
  - VA Peer Specialists and Peer-Delivered Interventions
- Seminar length can be modified if needed. If you're not in VISN 5, our investigators can make presentations remotely to VA programs anywhere in the country.

**For more information, contact Anjana Muralidharan at [Anjana.Muralidharan2@va.gov](mailto:Anjana.Muralidharan2@va.gov).**

## Staff Training to EASE Self-Stigma Among Veterans in Recovery

Self-Stigma is the harm caused when people start to define themselves by the stereotypes they are exposed to. It interferes greatly with wellness, recovery and treatment. EASE is a 90 minute program designed to be useful to mental health staff, of all disciplines, levels, and positions, to refresh our knowledge about stigma and its harmful effects

and to learn practical strategies we can use to help the Veterans we work with be resilient in the face of common stigmatization of mental health problems. **EASE** strategies employ four principles, from which it gets its name: **E**ducation, **A**wareness, **S**hifting perspective, and **E**mpowerment.

**For more information and to access EASE training materials so you can deliver EASE yourself, go to <http://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn5/training/ease.asp> or contact the EASE Team at [EASETeam@va.gov](mailto:EASETeam@va.gov).**

## Learn about the Post-doctoral Fellowship at the VISN 5 MIRECC

The VA Advanced Fellowship Program in Mental Illness Research and Treatment at the VISN 5 MIRECC has one open post-doctoral allied health fellowship position (clinical psychology, counseling psychology, social work, nursing, pharmacy) and one open post-residency psychiatrist fellowship position each year. The goal of these two-year fellowships is to train psychologists and psychiatrists to become leading clinical researchers in the

area of serious mental illness. Fellows develop independent programs of research on topics related to psychosocial treatment development and implementation of recovery-oriented services and engage in supervised clinical training, delivering clinical services in settings that serve Veterans with serious mental illness. Detailed information can be found on the national MIRECC website at <http://www.mirecc.va.gov/>

[mirecc-fellowship.asp](http://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn5/mirecc-fellowship.asp) and at the VISN 5 website at <http://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn5/>.

**Potential applicants are encouraged to contact Dr. Melanie Bennett at [Melanie.Bennett@va.gov](mailto:Melanie.Bennett@va.gov) to discuss details of the opportunities available for fellows.**

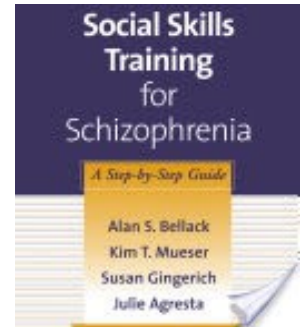
## Recovery-Oriented Small Grants Program

The VISN 5 MIRECC offers a small grant mechanism to fund recovery-oriented clinical and educational innovations within VISN 5 in response to the VA's Action Agenda to transform VA mental health services to a recovery model. The program especially encourages (but is not limited to) proposals such as: creating, adopting, launching or expanding recovery-oriented clinical or self-help projects; new programs to educate staff, Veterans, and/or family members of Veterans about mental health recovery models; or specific recovery-oriented services/programs. Past grants have been used by clinicians and peer specialists to attend trainings, bring in speakers, start new programs, and support creative activities that promote mental health recovery.

We will work with you to develop your application. Apply today! Grant amount can range from \$300-\$5000. Application Deadlines are the 1st of March, June, and December. **For more information or to receive an application, please contact Alicia Lucksted, Ph.D., MIRECC Recovery Coordinator, at 410-706-3244 or email her at [Alicia.Lucksted@va.gov](mailto:Alicia.Lucksted@va.gov).**

## VA Social Skills Training

Since 2008, the VA Social Skills Training (VA-SST) program has been training VA clinicians nationwide in the delivery of SST for Veterans with serious mental illness. Over the years, the VA-SST program has trained over 1020 VA staff across the country, including 87 Peer Specialists, and more than 48 Master Trainers, and 273 PSR fellows. Trainings are scheduled by region. **For more information on Social Skills Training, the VA-SST Training program, and upcoming trainings, please visit our website: [http://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn5/training/social\\_skills.asp](http://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn5/training/social_skills.asp) or email Elizabeth Gilbert, Ph.D. at [Elizabeth.Gilbert@va.gov](mailto:Elizabeth.Gilbert@va.gov).**



## Check Out the VISN 5 MIRECC Website

Check out the VISN 5 MIRECC Website for great information, tools, and announcements. We have recently added to our MIRECC News Spotlight details of a podcast titled *The Role of Pain Management in Recovery from Serious Mental Illness* that was presented in part by VISN5 MIRECC Fellow, Letitia Travaglini, PhD. This 45 minute podcast is part of the Complex Clinical Decisions in Psychopharmacology Series from SAMHSA's Recovery to Practice (RTP) Program. In the podcast, national experts discuss the current research and clinical practices around managing chronic pain in individuals with serious mental illness (SMI). Additional Presenters: Jennifer Murphy, PhD; Robert McCarron, DO; Amber Guererro, LMFT, and Curley Bonds, MD.

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**Putting Recovery Into Practice**



**MIRECC Matters is also  
available online:**

[www.mirecc.va.gov/visn5/](http://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn5/)

