

# THE VISN 5 MIRECC MATTERS

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(VISN 5) Mental Illness Research, Education, and Clinical Center

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Editor: Shannon Thomas-Lohrman, MS ([shannon.thomas-lohrman@med.va.gov](mailto:shannon.thomas-lohrman@med.va.gov))

## FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

Submitted by Alan S. Bellack, PhD, ABPP

It seems appropriate to have an annual Director's commentary on where we are, what we have recently accomplished, and what is on the agenda for the coming year. We are never quite sure whether this should coincide with the fiscal year or the calendar year, but given that I have not contributed to the newsletter in a while, the editorial staff requested an update for this first issue of the 2006 calendar year. As we enter our seventh year, I can report that things are going quite well. As we have indicated in previous issues, all of our investigators have external funding. We are especially proud that we continue to be successful in helping our junior colleagues secure their own VA or NIH grants.

**Aaron Murray-Swank, PhD**, completed his 2-year MIRECC Fellowship last summer and was recently awarded a HSR&D Career Development grant, titled *Enhancing Implementation of Family Psychoeducation for Schizophrenia*. The goal of the research is to better understand the service needs of veterans living with serious mental illness and their families, and to identify and overcome barriers to participation in family support services. The VA has become increasingly interested in engaging families, and Aaron's project, along with work being conducted by our Associate Director for Research, **Lisa Dixon, MD, MPH**, should

provide important information on reducing barriers and engaging families.

**Seth Himelhoch, MD, MPH**, was recently awarded a NIDA sponsored K-23 grant entitled *HIV Care for Substance Users with Psychiatric Disorders*. The goal of this project is to develop an assertive case management intervention targeting HIV+ individuals with co-occurring psychiatric and substance use disorders who are at risk of not receiving HIV-related medical care. Seth's research, along with Dr. Richard Goldberg's work on hepatitis, address important clinical problems for veterans with severe mental illness.

**Richard Goldberg, PhD**, our Clinical Core Director, is currently funded by an NIH K-Award. He recently received an excellent score on an RR&D MERIT review application, and *Using MOVE! with Seriously Mentally Ill Veterans*, will be funded this spring. This study will evaluate the effectiveness of adapting a VA program entitled MOVE! (Managing Overweight/Obesity for Veterans Everywhere) for use with veterans with a serious mental illness (SMI). The study will evaluate the effectiveness of using an SMI-optimized version of MOVE! to improve medical outcomes (including weight loss and reduced laboratory indicators of cardiovascular risk) and enhance participant quality of life and self-esteem. Weight gain and metabolic syndrome have been shown to be significant side effects of some antipsychotic medications, making this a most timely project. **Lisa Dixon, MD, MPH, Bob Buchanan, MD, Dwight Dickinson, PhD**,

**James Gold, PhD, and Julie Kreyenbuhl, PharmD, PhD,** are also working on innovative projects to examine diabetes and related side effects in veterans with SMI.

As evidenced by the projects described above, the VISN 5 MIRECC is conducting important and seminal work on medical comorbidity among veterans with serious mental illness. We also have an expanding portfolio of projects on substance abuse comorbidity. We are conducting NIH funded projects on alcohol abuse, cocaine and heroin abuse, and smoking. Our work on comorbidity will be significantly expanded in the coming years as a result of a new contract between NIDA and MIRECC investigators at Maryland Psychiatric Research Center (MPRC). NIDA will be moving their inpatient research program from Baltimore to a building at MPRC, which is currently undergoing significant reconstruction to house investigators, laboratories and patients. The new program, which will be directed by **Robert Conley, MD,** will inject significant new resources and technical expertise into our joint programs, and will foster basic and clinical research that may have important implications for veterans. We will provide a more detailed description of the program in a future issue.

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## SMALL GRANT PROGRAM AWARDS

*Submitted by Alicia Lucksted, PhD*

The MIRECC Small Grant Program awards small grants to any VISN-5 mental health entity (program, unit, consumer council, etc) to catalyze educational and/or clinical innovations that promote the transformation of VA mental health services to a recovery-oriented model. We encourage applications from all sites in the VISN. Below are the recipients from the first two rounds of awards as well as a brief description of each project. Please join us in congratulating these pioneering awardees!

Awarded from the September 2005 applications

### **1. Learning Life Skills Through Peer Support Suzanne Greer, Perry Point MHICM**

This project will create a new recovery-oriented psychoeducation program for MHICM clients through the purchase of the Life Skills curricula and related materials, which will be used in therapeutic groups.

### **2. Mental Health Recovery Group Neil Weissman, Baltimore PHP & MH Clinic**

This project aims to start at least one new group, and one new aftercare group for veterans discharged from the PHP. Groups will use the "Recovery Workbook" (parts 1 and 2). In addition to a PHP clinician, the groups will be co-led by a psychology intern, psychiatry resident or social work student.

### **3. Psychosocial Rehabilitation Group Kellyann Gibson, Baltimore MHICM**

This project will create a monthly psychosocial rehabilitation group focusing on social skills training and personal growth for MHICM veterans. It will also provide access to real life practice through community-based leisure activities.

Awarded from the December 2005 applications

### **1. Volunteer Mentoring Program Jane Manlove, Perry Point Partial Hospitalization Program**

This project will make possible the resumption of PHP clients' participation in community-based (non-VA) volunteer opportunities, initially with staff support but with the goal of becoming peer/self-run.

### **2. Veterans Service Day Tracey Stambaugh, Perry Point Unit 364-A**

In this project, veterans will complete a service project in the community, with 364-A veterans and community volunteers working together.

### **3. DRADA Support Group** **Susan Reed, Baltimore Mental Health Clinic**

The goal of this project is to reestablish a veteran-run DRADA (Depression and Related Affective Disorders) support group by providing facilitator training for six veterans, and support for the new leaders in establishing and running the group.

Application materials can be found on the MIRECC website: [www.va.gov/visn5mirecc](http://www.va.gov/visn5mirecc); look under "quick links" on the right side. **The next deadline for application is March 1, 2006.** For more information and/or help with an idea or application, please contact Dr. Alicia Lucksted (VISN-5 MIRECC Recovery Coordinator) at [Alicia.Lucksted@va.gov](mailto:Alicia.Lucksted@va.gov).

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### **SOCIAL SKILLS TRAINING THE CENTERPIECE OF HEALTH IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM (HIP)**

*Submitted by Richard Goldberg, PhD*

In response to a VA initiative to implement evidence-based psychosocial rehabilitation practices for treatment of veterans with serious mental illness, **Richard Rosse, MD**, Washington DC VA Medical Center, has received funds to implement a social skills and related medical care management program for veterans with serious mental illness across VISN 5. The intervention, the Health Improvement Program (HIP), builds on the solid evidence supporting the effectiveness of using social skills training to help people with schizophrenia and other serious mental illnesses more effectively collaborate with providers. Specifically, HIP uses traditional social skills training, including didactic instruction, modeling, role playing and social enforcement, to help participants learn how to

communicate more effectively with medical providers. Group sessions focus on helping patients become more skilled at making doctor's appointments, seeking referrals, asking questions, describing symptoms and concerns, and requesting new medications or medication changes. Complementing these services, HIP also provides veterans with medical information, support in developing a healthy lifestyle, assistance in building chronic medical illness self-management skills, and targeted medical care case management.

Development and implementation efforts are well underway across the VISN. With active participation from Baltimore, Perry Point, Washington and Martinsburg-based personnel, HIP programming is on track for full implementation in the coming months. The VAMHCS HIP program is scheduled to begin delivering HIP services within the next few weeks. Stay tuned for periodic updates to learn more about the broader dissemination and implementation of HIP across the VISN.

For more information about the HIP program, contact Richard Goldberg at [Richard.Goldberg@va.gov](mailto:Richard.Goldberg@va.gov) or by phone at (410) 706-8473.

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### **VISN 5 MIRECC SOUTH BY SOUTH WEST**

*Submitted by Nina R. Schooler, PhD*

Most of the MIRECC's research activity over the past five years has been in Baltimore, but there is a growing base of action down I-95 at the Washington DC VAMC, located close to the heart of the District.

**Dr. Stephen Deutsch's** behavioral animal laboratory has been a key translational component of the MIRECC since its inception. Dr. Deutsch and Dr. John Mastrapolo use animal behavior to evaluate compounds that modulate NMDA receptor-mediated neurotransmission. Medications to increase

NMDA receptor function (agonists) are highly relevant to schizophrenia because NMDA hypofunction may be part of the pathophysiology of schizophrenia. The current model used by the lab is to administer MK801, a compound related to phencyclidine (PCP) to reduce NMDA receptor function and then to administer other compounds or conditions to see if they reverse or enhance the effects of MK801. The behaviors that are examined are hind limb extension and irregular episodes of intense jumping behavior (they have named this behavior “popping”) in mice. Very recently, they have been studying D-serine and sarcosine – medications related to glycine and d-cycloserine that have been studied in the MIRECC for treatment of the negative symptoms of schizophrenia. Both D-serine and sarcosine modulate MK-801’s antiseizure efficacy in an inbred mouse strain BALB/c but only if the mice are stressed. There is no effect in mice that were unstressed. Is stress in mice like stress in humans? Can the findings help us understand the role of these medicines in schizophrenia? Certainly these data suggest that both genetic and environmental factors influence response to these medications. Moreover, the stressed BALB/c mouse may mimic at least some aspects of NMDA receptor hypofunction thought to occur in schizophrenia. Stay tuned!

Alpha7 nicotinic acetylcholine receptor agonists represent another novel treatment mechanism in schizophrenia. Following an innovative hypothesis of Dr. Deutsch’s, Barbara Schwartz, PhD, Richard Rosse, MD, and Nina Schooler, PhD, joined him to conduct a pilot study to explore the safety and tolerability of CDP choline in combination with galantamine to treat persistent symptoms of schizophrenia. Dr. Deutsch hypothesizes that galantamine will prevent the receptor from becoming desensitized over time, allowing choline to continue to serve as a selective agonist rather than becoming an antagonist. Because of its novelty, the work required permission from the FDA and the generous contribution of CDP-choline from LifeLink. To date, three subjects have entered

the pilot study and so far tolerability looks very good. Although testimonials are not science, two of the patients have actually reminded the study doctor to give them a prescription!

**Dr. Wendy Tenhula’s** study of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and social skills training to augment Compensated Work Therapy/Veterans Industries (known as the M-PROVE study) has just gotten under way at DC VAMC. Administrative hurdles, like IRB approvals and credentialing, have been surmounted (thanks to Barbara Schwartz’ help). Melissa Smith, along with Rebekah Majors and Ellen Kahn-Greene, both clinical psychology graduate students, complete the team. The first patient has been consented and will be undergoing baseline assessments as this newsletter hits your desk. Soon the study will be positioned within the new supported employment program at DC VAMC directed by Mary Rooney, who heads the social work department for the mental health service line and has been a great help in getting the research going.

And last but not least, **Dr. Alan Bellack’s** study of Computer Assisted Cognitive Remediation for Schizophrenia is coming to DC. Dr. Deutsch will provide oversight at the DC VAMC. The protocol is currently making its way through the DC IRB approval process.

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## CONGRATS ARE IN ORDER!

**Amanda Dutton, LCSW-C**, was featured in a recent issue of The Navigator, a quarterly publication for VISN 5 social workers. Amanda is a Research Assistant who recruits and administers diagnostic assessments for several MIRECC studies, and serves as a group therapist for two dual diagnosis treatment studies. The lengthy article detailed Amanda’s involvement with the MIRECC since 2000, and described the MIRECC’s current research protocols. We’re pleased that the rest of the VISN 5 social

workers now know what we've known for years about Amanda's dedication to serving veterans with serious mental illness.

## **UPCOMING EVENTS**

### **Family Support and Education Program**

March 18, 2006

10:00 – 11:30 AM

Baltimore VA Medical Center, Room 2B-136

The Family Support and Education Program is a monthly program for family members of veterans with serious mental illnesses, including schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and major depression. The program is designed to help families support veterans' treatment and recovery, as well as assist family members and other caregivers as they cope with the effects of mental illness on the family. Group meetings are held one Saturday a month at the Baltimore VA Medical Center, and involve presentation of information and discussion, which is adapted to the needs of family members and veterans who attend.

To register for the workshop, or if you have any questions about the program, please contact Dr. Aaron Murray Swank by phone: (410) 605-7000 x4756, or email: [aaron.murray-swank@va.gov](mailto:aaron.murray-swank@va.gov).

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### **NAMI Walks for the Mind of America**

April 30, 2006

Check-in at 10:00 AM

Centennial Park, Ellicott City, MD

From [www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org): "Every journey begins with that first step. In 2006, thousands of concerned citizens in more than 60 communities across the nation will join NAMI's Campaign for the Mind of America and walk together to raise money and awareness about our country's need for a world-class treatment and recovery system for people with mental illness."

For more information about the NAMI Maryland event, contact Dana Lefko at [dmlefko@aol.com](mailto:dmlefko@aol.com), or 410-863-0470.

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### **Schizophrenia And Other Mental Illnesses: Involving The Family, Improving Care**

This one hour, three-part (20 minutes each) DVD program highlights the importance of including families in the treatment of patients with schizophrenia and other mental illnesses. This program is highly recommended for families, patients, clinicians, policy makers and the general public. For a copy, contact Fran Broomall at [fran.broomall@va.gov](mailto:fran.broomall@va.gov) or 410-605-7000, x 4740.

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<http://www.va.gov/visn5mirecc>