Building Coffee Socials: Veteran Outreach Into the Community to Expand Social Support (VOICES)

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Agenda

• What are VOICES
• What are Coffee Socials
• How Veterans in the Community Connect
• Current Engagement
• How VOICES Evolve
• The Ingredients to Build a Coffee Social and other VOICES Events
• Sustainability
WHY ENGAGE IN THE COMMUNITY

- Loneliness is a pervasive concern \(^1\)

- Loneliness is more deadly than obesity, and has the same impact on mortality as smoking 15 cigarettes per day \(^2\)

- It can impair mental health and physical functioning, \(^3, 4\) as well as predict depression severity and suicidality \(^5\)

- Social support acts as a protective factor to these risks \(^6-10\)

- The Veteran Coffee Social is an upstream preventative intervention that is uniquely positioned to engage with Veterans
The Veteran Outreach In the Community to Expand Social Support (VOICES) project is specifically designed to increase social support and connection in the community.

- They are transdiagnostic and accepting of family, friends, and significant others

- The intervention typically begins as a Veteran Coffee Social, an organic platform to engage Veterans in the community and expands from there

- Low-cost and sustainable because Veteran community leaders gradually take ownership of weekly meetings

- Veteran Coffee Social facilitators and attendees decide how to expand beyond the coffee socials
VETERAN OUTREACH INTO THE COMMUNITY TO EXPAND SOCIAL SUPPORT (VOICES)

Coffee Socials
- Wellness activities
- Community service
- Recreational activities
- Healthcare services
WHAT ARE COFFEE SOCIALS?

- Veteran Coffee Socials are a gathering of Veterans at a specific time and place each week, no formal initial agenda other than to be together in the community
WHAT ATTRACTIONS VETERANS TO COFFEE SOCIALS?

• Easy access: Veteran status

• Opportunity to connect with other Veterans (leisure, camaraderie, social support)

• Requires little more than willing facilitators and a venue

• Informal, no expectations

• No dues or fees required

• No RSVP - come when you want, leave when you want

• Opportunity for leadership: attendees become facilitators
HOW COFFEE SOCIALS INTEGRATE WITH VA CARE

• Developing understanding of how to close out the continuum of care
  • Well developed programs from acute to transitional care
  • Data showing frequent returns to acute care
  • Encouraging self-care

• A three pronged approach to wellness & recovery enhancement
  • Scaffolding the individual toward community involvement
  • Building community capacity
  • Education & access
ACCESS: AN EXAMPLE OF HOW VETERANS CONNECT TO VA SERVICES FOR UNMET HEALTH NEEDS

- Joe: Father of three in his mid 30’s
- Initial Experience: Presented as reserved and quiet
- Activating Event: He mentioned to another coffee social Veteran that he had health problems
- Outcome: The coffee social facilitator was alerted and the Veteran accessed VA and community resources
- Social Implications: Expanded social network and noticeable behavioral change
HOW WE CONNECT VETERANS TO VA SERVICES

- Establishing a connection to the VA
- Warm handoff—they have a contact number and familiar face
  - Reducing frustration for the Veterans and their families when accessing the VA
SCAFFOLDING TO THE COMMUNITY
BOBBY’S STORY

• Bobby: Older adult transitioning from the domiciliary

• Initial Experience: Attended the hospital coffee social, presented as quiet

• Activating Event: In the process of transitioning to the community into VASH housing and met someone in the hospital who also goes to a community coffee social

• Outcome and Current Status: Still attends community coffee social, no residential care since transitioning to the community, has stable employment and maintains community connection and romantic relationships
CONNECTION TO COMMUNITY SERVICES

• Mike: Mid-twenties Post-9/11 combat Veteran

• Initial Experience: Struggled with substance use and homelessness

• Activating event: Coffee attendee asked if he would attend a coffee social, Mike opened up about his situation

• Outcome and Current Status: Enrolled in VA services, connected to permanent housing resources, state services, and phone numbers to other attendees at the coffee

• Social Implications: New social supports and continued support from the local community
SURVEY OF 8 VETERAN COFFEE SOCIALS
2019

VETERAN COFFEE SOCIAL SURVEY (N = 70)

% of Veterans

Very/Extremely Valuable: 76%
No VA use: 30%
VA use after attending a CS: 26%

Survey Topic

VETERANS HEALTH ADMINISTRATION
DO SOCIAL CONNECTIONS LAST PAST THE INITIAL MEETING?

• **Meeting new people:** Over half (56%) of Veterans reported meeting at least one person at the coffee social that they later spent time with doing other activities

• Of the individuals who did not know any participants at the coffee social before attending (16), 44% reported met someone at the coffee social and spent time with them outside the coffee social doing other activities
SECOND TIER ACTIVITIES

• Second tier activities are activities that tend to evolve from coffee socials
• Second tier activities vary but some that have emerged from coffee socials include

  ❖ Meditation group  ❖ Artists groups
  ❖ Breakfast club    ❖ Cooking club
  ❖ Bowling league    ❖ DIY group
  ❖ Volunteer groups  ❖ Networking groups
BUILDING A COFFEE SOCIAL- RESOURCES NEEDED

• Initial resources needed for one coffee social
  • 3-6 hours per week
• Activities include:
  • Outreach calls to the community
  • Emails
  • Driving to and from a location
  • VA laptop/cell phone
  • Advertising for the event
  • Presenting at program team meetings

• Ongoing resources needed
  • ~4 hours of coffee social time, travel, and Veteran follow-up
  • Coffee social is typically 90 minutes in duration, but it varies
Benefits to Veterans and the Hospital

• Increasing enrollment and outreach

• Connecting Veterans to care for unmet health needs

• Bridging Veterans to a community
  – Keeping people in the community to allow for other individuals in need to access intensive resources
  – Access to VHA for unmet health needs and decrease suicidality

• Create a platform for communities to interface with the VA and Veterans
• Strategy 1.2.1: VA Helps Veterans navigate the full array of care, benefits, and services
  – The warm handoff and the direct connection to offices within the VA system

• Strategy 2.1.4: Emphasizing Veterans’ and their families’ whole health and wellness
  – These coffee socials are for all community members

• Strategy 2.2.2: Early intervention and full access to mental health and suicide prevention

• Building community to reduce social isolation

• Increased social support and reduced isolation

• Suicide prevention
  • Veterans identifying other Veterans at risk
  • Peer-led Gate Keeper trainings
  • VA SAVE presentations

• Invited speakers promoting Veteran organizations and services
  • Speakers invited at attendees requests

• Connection to community and VA services
Strategy 2.2.4: Increased access for Rural Veterans

- 4.7 million Veterans reside in rural communities\(^\text{11}\)

- Coffee socials can be created in locations more accessible to Veterans in rural areas

- This increases information availability of VA services
BUILDING A COFFEE SOCIAL – COMMUNITY SUPPORT

- You can start local...even in the hospital
- Community involvement
  - Ask representatives to stop into socials

- What if you do not have contacts?
  - Contact your local Vet Center- they have outreach coordinators that have local contacts
  - Start networking with Local Veteran coalitions and groupings (e.g., Veteran Service Officers, VFW, AMVETS, DAV) and others
BUILDING A COFFEE SOCIAL - MESSAGING

• Its not a “VA thing” but a community effort
  • Acknowledge that there are connections to the VA, but emphasize that coffee socials exist to support Veterans and build a community capacity

• Community Engagement: When a coffee social is formed by a Peer or another VA employee, there is an intention to empower a community member to take over the facilitator role

• Peers and VA employees maintain contact with the facilitator and support them
BUILDING A COFFEE SOCIAL – CHOOSING A LOCATION

• Geographic location:
  • Free parking
  • Options for local transit

• Community Involvement
  • Is there a community already formed
  • Is there service providers that can assist
  • Do you have contacts in a specific community
  • Vet Center Outreach Coordinators (~180 in U.S.)
BUILDING A COFFEE SOCIAL- ADVERTISING

• Use multiple methods to reach out to the community. You can start by reaching out to your known network
  • Posters, Emails
  • Newsletters
  • Newspaper articles
  • Social media-public affairs through the VA
  • Word of mouth
• Have community partners identify their own resources
  • Tap into other Veteran networks through partners in the community

• Identify what resources Veterans gravitate toward
Ongoing check-ins with the hosting venue
Be flexible to attendees needs, what do they want?
  - Do they want speakers? Specific information? Topics? Informal social situations?
Continue to market the coffee socials in team meetings, events, and to Veterans in the community
When a natural leader presents at the coffee allow that leader to slowly take over
Cultivate leadership through graduated levels of responsibility
  - Provide this leader with ongoing support after the transfer happens
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