



## VA - Social Skills Training (VA-SST) for Serious Mental Illness

The VISN 5 and 22 MIRECCs are pleased to announce a unique training opportunity!

The VA Office of Mental Health Services (OMHS) has been promoting several existing and newly developing VA evidence based practice dissemination initiatives. One such initiative is *Social Skills Training for Serious Mental Illness (SMI)*, which is being directed by the VISN 5 MIRECC in Baltimore, Maryland, and co-facilitated by the VISN 22 MIRECC in Los Angeles, California. The program is training staff on the delivery of Social Skills Training (SST) for Veterans with schizophrenia and other serious mental illness (schizoaffective, bipolar, and treatment refractory depression).

For this training initiative, only clinicians working with Veterans with SMI (as defined above) are asked to apply. Clinicians who work primarily in Dual Diagnosis, Substance Abuse, or PTSD settings are deferred to other existing or developing dissemination initiatives tailored specifically for those settings.

### **Overview of the VA-SST Program:**

Each year of the project, approximately 120 clinicians throughout the country will be trained in SST. Each training includes a 2-day workshop for 30 staff members, followed by weekly clinical consultation via audio-conference for 6 months. Trained clinicians will be expected to incorporate learned treatments into their routine clinical care.

Social Skills Training is based on social learning techniques and emphasizes the role of behavioral rehearsal in skill development rather than discussion. The primary modality of training is role play of simulated conversations, typically conducted in small groups (6-8 Veterans), and performed twice a week in 60-minute sessions. This training opportunity provides a hands-on learning approach to delivering SST from experienced clinicians. In addition, this training is unique in that you will be asked to actively participate in a 6-month consultation period after completing the initial 2-day workshop. During the 6-month consultation period, you will be asked to audio tape SST sessions, send them to your designated SST consultant, and participate in weekly group consultation calls. The purpose of the consultation period is to bolster your training experience by providing you with ongoing support from an experienced SST consultant. The SST consultant will provide feedback to help clinicians refine their delivery of SST as well as offer support as you implement SST at your site. Ultimately, the consultation component serves to foster the sustainability of SST at your site. The first months of the consultation period are absolutely critical in establishing SST at your site. Therefore, if you foresee any circumstances during the months surrounding the workshop dates that may significantly interfere with your participation in this initiative, we recommend that you apply to a later workshop.

### **Participation**

Participation by trainees will involve several things. All participating trainees will be asked to:

- 1) Attend a 2-day SST training workshop.
- 2) Develop, implement, and sustain *at least one* SST group during the 6-month consultation period.
- 3) Devote 1-1.5 hours per week to receive consultation via teleconference calls to support their delivery of SST. Consultation will be an integral part of training, as it will provide clinician trainees with support to develop competency in the treatment. Trainees must attend >75% of these weekly calls.
- 4) Participate in ongoing program evaluation efforts.
- 5) Since this effort is designed to bring evidence based practices into the VA system as part of routine services, trainees will be asked to make an ongoing commitment to integrating these services into their daily care for Veterans with schizophrenia and serious mental illness.

### **Preferred Clinician Settings**

The primary recruitment focus is clinicians from PRRC (Day Treatment Center) and RRTP (Domiciliary) settings. Preferably, we would like a minimum of 2 (and maximum of about 3) staff per site. Once the PRRCs and RRTPs are covered, staff from other settings serving veterans with SMI may be selected. If a particular facility treats a significant number of SMI Veterans in another setting that you feel would be appropriate to include, please feel free to provide applications.

## **Qualifications**

Ideally, potential trainees will be at least Master's level clinicians who have experience working with Veterans with schizophrenia and severe mental illness (schizoaffective, bipolar, treatment refractory depression). Since SST emphasizes the role of behavioral rehearsal in skill development rather than discussion, trainees must be willing, motivated, and comfortable in conducting structured group sessions utilizing an interactive teaching modality. Appropriate disciplines include Psychology, Social Work, Nursing, Occupational Therapy (Peer Support Specialists may apply, but we highly recommend they attend the training with a licensed clinician co-leader from their site). Lastly, clinicians must have sufficient time and administrative support in place to successfully conduct skills groups and actively participate in the 6-month consultation period at their respective sites. The success of this VA initiative requires clinicians dedicated to delivering this evidence-based treatment.

## **Rollout**

Each year, the program will conduct 4 training workshops (2 hosted by the VISN 5 MIRECC in Baltimore, MD, and 2 hosted by the VISN 22 MIRECC in Los Angeles, CA). To ensure widespread and systematic dissemination, each workshop will target a set of primary VISNs for recruitment. Approximately 3-4 months prior to a workshop, announcements will be sent to MH Leadership, Local Evidence-based Psychotherapy Coordinators, and front-line mental health staff from the targeted VISNs.

## **Trainee Selection Process**

Due to limited training spots (30 per workshop) all interested clinicians will be asked to submit an application which will be reviewed by the program directors. Priority will be given to applicants from within the targeted VISNs. However, any interested clinicians are encouraged to apply. To request an application, please email Matthew Wiley, Program Coordinator ([Matthew.Wiley@va.gov](mailto:Matthew.Wiley@va.gov)).

Selections will be finalized shortly after application deadlines. Once selections have been made, announcements will be sent out via email to all applicants. If selected, all travel and related participant costs for the training will be provided via central project funding (no local funds required).

In sum, any clinicians interested in attending the VA-SST program must:

- 1) Communicate desire to attend with Mental Health leadership
- 2) Obtain service line director's approval (signature required on application)
- 3) Complete & Submit the training application
- 4) If selected, clinicians will be directly contacted by the Program Coordinator with instructions on next steps (how to set up travel, prepare for the workshop, etc.)

## **Train-the-Trainer**

In addition to the regular Social Skills Training workshops, we will be training at least 21 Master Trainers (minimum of one per VISN) to serve as expert trainers and consultants in SST for their particular VISN. Multiple training opportunities for Master Trainers are planned to take place in the future.

Potential candidates for Master Trainers should be clinicians who excel in SST delivery, champion SST's overall cause, and most importantly, have ample time and support to serve in this role. As part of their training experience, SST Master Trainers will be expected to:

- Attend one 3-day workshop
- Provide at least one training to staff from a local PRRC/RRTP setting within 3 months of attending the workshop
- Provide ongoing support and consultation to these local clinicians
- Participate in weekly teleconference calls for 6-months post-workshop

Any expectations beyond those listed above will be at the discretion of the VISN mental health leadership. All selections for the Master Trainer workshops will be finalized and approved by VISN mental health leadership. Individuals interested in the VA-SST Master Trainer program should contact Matthew Wiley ([Matthew.Wiley@va.gov](mailto:Matthew.Wiley@va.gov)).

**For more information on the VA-SST program, please visit:** [http://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn5/training/social\\_skills.asp](http://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn5/training/social_skills.asp)

This is a national initiative being led by the VA Office of Mental Health Services, and individuals in all VISNs will be invited to participate. All travel and related participant costs for the training will be provided via project funding from the Office of Mental Health Services. If selected, you will be given specific instructions on arranging travel. Necessary arrangements should be made to ensure appropriate coverage during participation in the workshop and subsequent consultation sessions.