

Rural Promising Practice: Community Clergy Training to Support Rural Veterans' Mental Health

Medical Issue

For some Veterans, serving in combat may lead to one or more mental health issues. The reintegration process can cause distress for Veterans who are caught between military and civilian cultures and feel alienated from family and friends. Transitioning back to civilian life may cause stress, depression, and anxiety which can intensify underlying mental health concerns such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Struggles returning to “normal” combined with a mental health condition and issues such as moral injury, military sexual trauma or substance abuse can lead to a behavioral health crisis. While rural life provides benefits such as a tight-knit community and less crowding, rural Veterans have a higher risk of suicide than their urban counterparts (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; 2015 QuickStats: Age-Adjusted Rates for Suicide,* by Urbanization of County of Residence† — United States, 2004 and 2013).

Access Challenge

With only 16 psychologists per every 100,000 rural residents, there are fewer resources to support Veterans with mental health issues (American Psychological Association, 2007). In fact more than 85 percent of rural residents live in a mental health professional shortage area (Smalley et al., 2010).

Solution

Most rural communities have clergy-led faith groups, and research shows that up to one-in-four individuals who seek help for mental health problems do so from clergy (Wang, P. S., Berglund, P. A., & Kessler, R. C. [2003]. Patterns and correlates of contacting clergy for mental disorders in the United States. *Health Services Research*, 38(2), 647-673). However, clergy are often unfamiliar about:

- Reintegration and transition challenges,
- Common post-service, mental health-related issues,
- Differences between PTSD and traumatic brain injury (TBI);
- Military culture and mental health stigma, and
- How to build community partnership to support Veterans and their families.

To increase rural clergy's ability to identify and support rural Veterans' with mental health challenges, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) Chaplain Center and the Office of Rural Health established a national clergy training program. Through a train-the-trainer model, participants access a clergy training guide and toolkits on the following topics:

- Military Culture and the Wounds of War,
- Pastoral Care for Veterans and their Families,
- Mental Health Services and Referrals, and
- Building Community Partnerships.

Clergy and others may also subscribe to a quarterly newsletter and attend free webinars that expand on the training curriculum.

According to fiscal year 2015 program data, 96 percent of the trained clergy increased their understanding of the potential needs for assistance among those returning from war.

To Learn More

The Promising Practices initiative is overseen by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Office of Rural Health (ORH) as part of its enterprise-wide initiatives that increase care for the 3 million Veterans living in rural communities who rely on VA for health care. As VA's lead advocate for rural Veterans, ORH works to see that America's Veterans thrive in rural communities.

To discuss implementing a Promising Practice at your facility or to learn more, visit www.ruralhealth.va.gov or email rural.health.inquiry@va.gov.