



# Consequences of COVID-19: Research on Mental Health and Other Disorders

Gulf War Research Advisory Committee

07/07/20

**VA**



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# Agenda: Mental Health Research Related to COVID-19

- Background
- Timing and overview of rapid response RFA
- Review of funded projects
- Next steps

# COVID-19 and Mental Health – Background

- More than half of VHA patients have a mental health condition
- Numerous factors related to COVID may put vulnerable MH patients at risk:
  - Anxiety and uncertainty over COVID infection and risks
  - Social isolation
  - Economic stress
  - Interruption of in-person clinical services
  - Some mental health services (e.g., medication therapy for opioid use disorder) may require in-person care

# How we initially approached establishing new portfolio

- **Initial Funding Opportunity**
  - Initially offered by CSRD and HSRD
  - Rapid review, short timeline (9 months), limited budget
  - **HSRD**: 120 proposals submitted/17 funded
  - **CSRD**: 88 submitted; 14 funded; 2 referred to submit clinical trial; 2 referred to ongoing protocols as local site investigators

# HSRD Rapid Response Proposals

- Received 120 proposals
- 15 related to mental health, including issues of PTSD, anxiety, suicide risk, substance abuse
- Funded 5 based on timeliness, likelihood of actionable findings, feasibility

# Impact of COVID-19 and Social Distancing on Mental Health and Suicide Risk in Veterans

- **PI:** Bryann DeBeer, PhD (Aurora, CO)
- **Other Sites:** Durham, NC
- **Patient Population:** 200 nationally representative Veterans, oversampled for MH conditions
- **Goals:**  
Investigate the impact of changes to one's social support system, due to social distancing, on mental health and suicide risk, as well as moderators of this association (e.g., social cognition, expressed emotion, coping, psychological inflexibility)



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# Piloting a Self-Help Intervention to Improve Veteran Mental Health During the Covid-19 Pandemic

- **PIs:** Jennifer Funderburk, PhD and Robyn Shepardson, PhD (Syracuse, NY)
- **Study Population:** Rural Veterans with MDD or PTSD
- **Goals:**  
Evaluate implementation of self-help program for patients with Major Depressive Disorder or PTSD and assess impact on psychological distress, depressive symptoms, and anxiety symptoms and increases in well-being and social connectedness



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# Applying the After Action Review Methodology to Examine Mental Health Residential Rehabilitation and Treatment Programs' Response to COVID-19

- **PI:** Bo Kim, PhD (Boston, MA)
- **Other Sites:** Bedford, MA
- **Population:** Veterans and staff at Boston and Bedford VA's Residential Rehabilitation and Treatment Centers (serving chronically homeless with MH problems)
- **Goal**
  - Assess how RRTPs modified practices during COVID to reduce risk, and how it affected services. Devise report to guide practices at other RRTPs.



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# Impact of Social Distancing During the COVID-19 Pandemic on Cognitive, Physical, and Mental Health in Urban and Rural Veterans in the Pacific Northwest

- **PI:** Lisa Silbert, MD, MCR (Portland, OR)  
Leverages existing HSR&D study, IIR 17-144: Collaborative Aging (in Place) Research using Technology (CART), jointly funded by the VA and NIA
- **Population:** 114 older Northwest Veterans participating in CART
- **Goals:** Examine changes in daily activity as tracked by CART during social distancing, how they are associated with psychological and physical health and whether daily activity is a mediator of adverse effects during periods of social distancing.



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# Adapting Caring Contacts to Counteract Adverse Effects of Social Distancing Among High-Risk Veterans During the COVID-19 Pandemic

- **PI:** Alan Teo, MD, MS (Portland VA)
- **Other Sites:** Little Rock, AR
- **Population:** Veteran's at increased risk from social isolation
- **Goals:**  
Adapt the “Caring Contacts” intervention – regular mailed outreach to Veterans expressing concern for their well-being – to patients at risk from isolation during COVID, and collect preliminary data to support an RCT to test it in a pragmatic trial.



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# CSRD Funded one Rapid Related to Mental Health

- PI: Jennifer Loftis, Portland VAMC
- conduct a prospective pilot study to determine the inflammatory and mental health sequelae of COVID-19 in Veterans
- evaluate immune factors, blood brain barrier (BBB) integrity, and behavior at two time points in those who do and do not develop COVID-19
- blood samples and mental health screenings will determine premorbid baseline measures
- Identifying cytokine changes and mental health symptoms in Veterans who acquire COVID-19 infection will improve our understanding of the neuropsychiatric effects and our ability to respond to future infectious disease outbreaks.

# Expanding Focus to Broader Impacts of COVID-19

- HSRD
  - Focus on impacts on non-COVID-19 related care
  - How has COVID affected the self-management, treatment and outcomes of chronic diseases in Veterans?
  - Is COVID affecting care-seeking for acute conditions (MI,etc)?
  - Cross-cutting questions related to transition of more care to tele-health (es. specialty care, role of remote monitoring, etc.)
- CSRD
  - Impacts on critical populations of interest:
    - Mental health, Suicide prevention, Substance Use/Abuse
    - Evaluation of data and evidence needed for cross-cutting impact (vs. disease specific), and how to organize our investment for greatest COVID-related impact

# Rehabilitation R&D Service Projects

PI Name	Project Title	Notes
<b>Leslie Morland</b> San Diego	An Integrative Technology Approach to Home-based Conjoint Therapy for PTSD	COVID-19 stress measure added to existing project
<b>Sonya Norman</b> San Diego	Combining Topiramate and Prolonged Exposure for PTSD and Alcohol Use Disorder	COVID-19 stress measure added to existing project
<b>Michael Green</b> West Los Angeles	Enhancing Community Integration for Homeless Veterans	REAP-initiated study on the effects of COVID-19 on community integration of recently-housed (previously homeless) Veterans
<b>Suzannah Creech</b> Temple TX	Impact of COVID 19 on Mental Health, Relationship Functioning and VA Tele Mental Health Service Use in a Longitudinal Cohort Study	Intent-to-fund issued. Project transferred to RR&D from HSR&D COVID-19 Rapid Response RFA (4/6/2020 deadline)
<b>Brett Litz</b> Boston	Psychosocial Rehabilitation after Moral Injury and Loss with Adaptive Disclosure	Multisite RCT on an intervention for COVID19 added to existing project

# Next Steps

- Bring the investigator community together as new work is being started
  - Case definition focus
- Opportunities to widely share information
- Continue to strategically plan and develop the research portfolio