

## Veteran's Health Equity Podcast Transcript

VA's Campaign for Inclusive Care and Equity

>> I want to welcome everyone and thank you all for joining. My name is Lauren Korshak, and I lead Translation Activities for V.A.'s Office of Health Equity. The Office of Health Equity champions the advancement of Health Equity and the reduction of health disparities in veterans.

My job means that I get to tell stories about all the work and the data we have on veterans and their health. Today on the Health Equity and Veterans podcast series, we'll be discussing V.A.'s Campaign for Inclusive Care. But before we begin I want to introduce our speaker.

Leah Christensen is a licensed clinical social worker and program manager for Caregiver Support Services, part of the Caregiver Support Program at V.A. The Caregiver Support Program provides a wide range of services and support to caregivers of our nation's veterans. Leah also helps leads the Campaign for Inclusive Care, a V.A.-wide initiative.

So, as we begin, can you tell me what V.A.'s Campaign for Inclusive Care is?

>> Yeah. Thanks, Lauren. Thanks for having me today. So, the Campaign for Inclusive Care is really an awareness and education campaign. And it's focused on V.A.'s integration of caregivers as partners in the care of veterans. And so, we do this by embracing, encouraging, and empowering caregivers in their role. And so, it's a holistic approach in how we provide for veterans, and allows us to provide customized care to veterans, by bringing that caregiver, that person that really knows them best, most often, into treatment planning, and then engaging them in decisions about care and supporting that caregiver. And inclusive care really helps us to honor who that veteran is outside of the medical appointment or that health care setting.

I often think that as health care providers, we really only kind of have a glimpse into a patient's life. We see what's in front of us, we may ask questions, but bringing the caregiver's voice into the room and then supporting them with the type of care that they provide, as well as directly supporting the caregiver as well, it's really critical to understanding the veteran and to provide comprehensive care.

So, what we do with the Campaign for Inclusive Care is we teach these primary principles, and we teach them through, what we call our CARE acronym, so, it's C-A-R-E. And that way that allows us to at V.A., have a more of a systematic approach, to care, and to how we integrate caregivers as those partners in care. And so, Care stands for Consider, Acknowledge, Review Role, and Encourage. So, let me just tell you a little bit about each of those, pieces, of that CARE acronym.

So, for Consider, it's really thinking about who needs to be present? And so, it's not asking the veteran, "Do you have a caregiver?" But it's real asking them, "Is there someone you'd want in the room here during your visit? Or "Is there somebody that you're relying on for support? Is there somebody that should be part of this conversation as we plan your care? Is there someone who might be helping you at home with your everyday medical needs?" And it's really about not assuming, that the veteran can't handle their medical care, it's asking them directly if they have that support so that we're really clear.

And then, Acknowledge. So, acknowledging is really, acknowledging with that caregiver that they have taken on extra responsibilities, and that it can impact their health and well-being. And so, really gives that clinician that opportunity to build rapport with that caregiver, by bringing up empathic, responses

such as, "I imagine this is a big responsibility. I really appreciate all you're doing to care for your veteran."

And then, Review Role. So, this is really asking the caregiver, are the responsibilities that they have taken on, they feel comfortable with or that they don't? And what tasks are easy for them to perform and what makes them feel uneasy? And really helping to identify what the caregiver can and isn't able to do, to help ensure that, that veteran receives that highest, possible level of health and well-being.

And then, finally Encourage. So, that's really looking at any barriers that you can help to, breakdown and help make the caregiver's responsibilities easier. So, are there things that they need in the home to help care for the veteran? What would make caring for that veteran simpler? And then, really connecting those caregivers to additional supports like the V.A. Caregiver Support Program.

>> So, why did V.A. decide to go ahead and implement this program?

>> Yeah, that's a great question. So, what we know from the landmark RAND study on military caregivers that was conducted in 2014, that study talked about how the best chance for a Wounded Warrior or a veteran to recover and thrive is having a strong, well supported caregiver. And that same study actually also recommended that health care environments should really make every effort to acknowledge caregivers as part of the health care team.

So, in 2017, V.A. went ahead and examined how caregivers were or weren't being included by conducting interviews with caregivers. And we found that many caregivers reported that they weren't actually being asked for their ideas about how to manage the veteran's health. They weren't being asked whether they have the skills to provide that care, that they were already providing in the home, or whether they needed help managing the veteran's health conditions.

You know, and truthfully, we don't think this is isolated to V.A., but really to the U.S. Health Care System overall. And I've had this conversation with colleagues and friends who've experienced this in the private sector as well. If you can think about a time you've had a family member with health challenges or you were caring for someone, and you were, you know, along with their health care journey, how difficult it can really be at times to share your perspective as that loved one in the room or to talk about your concerns, or to ask questions even. And to really get that clear picture of what's the care plan, for that patient or loved one that you're caring for? What kinds of things are they going to need at home? And really whether you have felt if you've ever had that support that you may need in that role.

So, I think this is really kind of, a health care system challenge that we have. And really when we don't include caregivers in treatment planning, we might have incomplete information about that patient or that veteran's health. And so, as health care clinicians, I just think it's really important that we think about that we're really just visitors in our patient's lives or in these veterans' lives. And caregivers are often the ones who know the veteran or their loved one best. They're the ones that are providing that care outside of the hospital. They're the ones who are taking them home after a clinic visit and providing that additional follow-up.

And at V.A. we just recognized that, we can provide the best care by integrating care givers as partners in veterans care, as really members of that health care team. And then, what we really know is that caregivers, actually can have increased anxiety and depression. They can even have poor health outcome because of their caregiving, and especially when they're providing that caregiving on a long-

term basis. And so, supporting caregivers and really ensuring that they have what they need to care for someone at the home or for a veteran in the home, it's a preventative measure, and can contribute to the overall health and well-being of the caregiver. Kind of tying it back to that RAND study of giving that caregiver that best opportunity to, feel supported, to feel strong, to be well, and then in turn to help that veteran have that best chance to thrive.

>> That all sounds really amazing. What has been the impact of the program so far?

>> So, just, to frame this up a bit, I wanted to acknowledge that we partner on this Campaign for Inclusive Care, with the Elizabeth Dole Foundation, and this is truly a joint initiative. So, when we first initiated this together, we brought, key stakeholders that included caregivers and health care providers, clinical, as well as non-clinical staff to really help us understand and sort through the problem, and then think about and design solutions that could help address it.

So, from that point we then really kind of developed the education and awareness campaign. And we conducted a pilot with three what we call VISNs, the Veteran Integrated Service Networks, and those VISNS were 10, 17, and 20, so shout out to those VISNs. And this was followed by a national rollout in 2020, and that's when we formally launched the Academy for Inclusive Care, which is our online training course, and it's really, available to anybody inside or outside external to V.A.

But as you can imagine, being January of 2020, we did have to pivot a little bit about how we, went about outreaching and training the V.A. Health Care Providers to accommodate to an even more virtual environment. So, what we did was we trained what we called Champions of Inclusive Care at every medical center. And they're the ones who are really helping to spread awareness, they're providing presentations to clinical staff at V.A., they're hosting Lunch and Learns. And they're just really, just sitting in a place, of having expertise on caregiver inclusion at their medical centers. And then, we just started training V.A. staff through the Online Academy for Inclusive Care.

And it's really interesting that, kind of the first initial reaction that we get from some health care providers when they first hear about inclusive care is, "Oh, I do that, I include caregivers." But then after hearing more about the concept of inclusive care and really digging in and learning the CARE principles, and then when they take the Academy for Inclusive Care Course, they realize just how much more they can do, and what integrating a caregiver really looks like.

So, what we found throughout this process with our Quality Improvement Team, is really promising results. We found with our health care teams an increased interest and understanding of the need, to practice inclusive care. And then, probably most importantly, we found a statistically significant increase in self-efficacy around inclusive care, from those who took the training. So, what we know, when we have greater self-efficacy, we're more likely to take responsibility for our own learning, and then go and apply those skills we learned.

So, it's one thing to learn about it, it's another thing to have that greater self-efficacy to go out and actually use that applied knowledge. So, really looking at your own belief system, your own capacity to carry out those specific behaviors, those specific strategies that you learned in the training. So, seeing that self-efficacy has increased amongst these health care teams is really, really promising.

And the campaign has really provided V.A. teams with that common language, around caregiver inclusion and given us a framework that we can all use, and then of course, easily remember, based on

those principles of Care, Consider, Acknowledge, Review Role and Encourage. So using that acronym of CARE, gives all a simple way to remember these principles and helps V.A. to, really achieve a more system wide approach to the care we provide, while still allowing us to, of course, customize care to each individual veteran, by integrating that caregiver as a partner in care.

>> So, before we go, and this has been such important information, so I really want to thank you for taking the time to share all of this with all of us. If anyone is looking for more information about the Campaign for Inclusive Care and information on V.A.'s Caregiver Program, how can they get more information about these initiatives?

>> Of course. We would love it if you would visit our website, for the V.A. Caregiver Support Program, which is [www.caregiver.va.gov](http://www.caregiver.va.gov).

>> Fabulous. Thank you so much for, coming on and talking about this important work. I want to thank everyone who listened, and I hope you all will join us next time. Take Care.