

## ASSESSMENT OVERVIEW:

# VETERANS FACING HEALTH-RELATED SOCIAL NEEDS



**ACORN**  
SCREENING VETERANS FOR SOCIAL NEEDS

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The ACORN initiative uses an 11 question assessment to screen Veterans for non-clinical needs to provide resources at the point of clinical care. The assessment currently screens for the following nine domains of health-related social needs: food housing security; utility, transportation, legal, educational, and employment needs; and personal safety and social support.

## THE ACORN INITIATIVE AT A GLANCE

Veterans are asked to complete an 11-question assessment before their clinical appointment. Resource guides are given for any identified needs before they leave the clinic.

The screening results then become a part of the Veteran's electronic health record (EHR) for viewing by their clinical care team.

The ACORN pilot is currently established in three clinic locations within two Massachusetts VA Healthcare Systems:

- Mental Health Evaluation Center at the Bedford VA Medical Center
- Brockton Women's Health Clinic in the VA Boston Healthcare System
- Plymouth Community-based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) in the VA Boston Healthcare System

## THE NINE DOMAINS

*Various social determinants interact with other behavioral, environmental, and economic factors to contribute up to **80% of overall health outcomes**.<sup>1</sup> Addressing a Veteran's unmet health-related social needs can have a positive impact on their health and quality of life.*

### Food Security

Food insecurity is the disruption of typical eating habits due to lack of income and other resources.<sup>2</sup> Nearly one-quarter of Veterans receiving care in the VA Healthcare System report experiencing food insecurity,<sup>3</sup> double the rate for the US population of 12%.<sup>2</sup>

### Housing Insecurity

Housing instability encompasses a number of challenges, including homelessness. Over 40,000 Veterans experience homelessness on any given day,<sup>4</sup> and are more likely to experience poorer physical and mental health outcomes than the general US population who are homeless.<sup>5</sup>

### Utility Needs

With nearly 1.4 million Veterans at risk for homelessness,<sup>5</sup> utility bill assistance is an essential benefit for Veterans with financial burdens. Over 666,000 Veterans in low-income households paid more than half their income for rent and utilities in 2017.<sup>6</sup>

# HIGHLIGHT: KEY VETERAN STATISTICS

## 1 in 4 Veterans

receiving care at a VA Healthcare System report experiencing food insecurity<sup>3</sup>

## Male Veterans over the age of 50

in urban areas experience the largest rates of Veteran homelessness<sup>5</sup>

## Over 666,000 Veterans

in low-income households paid more than half their income for rent and utilities in 2017<sup>6</sup>

## 1/3 of women Veterans

experience intimate partner violence (IPV) compared to less than a quarter of civilian women<sup>8</sup>

## Veteran suicide rate

is 1.5 times the rate for civilian adults, calling for increased social support systems as protective factors for Veterans<sup>9</sup>

## 13% of Veterans

in Massachusetts surveyed identified needing legal services and did not receive them<sup>11</sup>

## Transportation Access

Whether it be age, disability, or income-related, Veterans may face several barriers to travel, requiring the need for increased access to transportation resources and assistance to get to medical appointments, work, and other things needed for daily living.<sup>7</sup>

## Personal Safety

Exposure to abuse and violence includes intimate partner violence (IPV) and elder abuse, among other forms of exposure to violence from friends and loved ones. In addition to immediate safety concerns and physical injuries, exposure to abuse and violence can promote emotional and mental health conditions like depression and PTSD.<sup>8</sup>

## Social Support

The more a Veteran can identify sources of support in their life, the higher the likelihood of them having positive perceptions of belonging and experiencing lower rates of isolation.<sup>9</sup> With the Veteran suicide rate being 1.5 times the rate for the US general population, the presence of a social support system is closely linked to a Veteran's mental wellbeing and behaviors.<sup>9</sup>

## Employment and Education

Transferring the skills and knowledge learned during their military service can prove difficult for Veterans, requiring many to complete additional schooling to meet civilian certification standards. Difficulty finding employment can further exacerbate financial strain, making it difficult to afford basic needs such as food, housing, utilities, healthcare costs.<sup>10</sup>

## Legal Support

Legal support is often an overlooked area of need for Veterans, who may have difficulties addressing legal issues such as divorce, child support/custody, benefit appeals, and resolving disputes, among others.<sup>11</sup> Needing or using legal services can be a significant stressor for Veterans, and can increase mental distress and negatively impact their quality of life.<sup>11</sup>

## References

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