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**U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs**

Veterans Health Administration  
*Office of Health Equity*

# **VHA Health Equity Action Plan FY2020 Operational Plan Final Report**

VHA Office of Health Equity (12POP1)

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**VA**



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## Introduction

The [Health Equity Action Plan](#) (HEAP) is a living strategic document to achieve health equity for U.S. Veterans. The HEAP contains 5 Aims with a specific Goal shown below. Each Aim has Benchmarks Activities to be completed over the next five years. The Health Equity Coalition (HEC) approved the current HEAP in fiscal year (FY) 2020. VA leadership provided concurrence.

Aim	Goal
<b>Awareness</b>	Increase awareness of the significance of health disparities, their impact on the nation, and the actions necessary to improve health outcomes for racial, ethnic, and underserved populations.
<b>Leadership</b>	Strengthen and broaden leadership for addressing health disparities at all levels.
<b>Health Outcomes</b>	Improve health and healthcare outcomes for racial, ethnic, and underserved populations.
<b>Workforce</b>	Improve cultural and linguistic competency and the diversity of the health-related workforce.
<b>Data, Research, and Evaluation</b>	Improve data availability and coordination, utilization, and diffusion of research and evaluation outcomes.

Annually, the Office of Health Equity (OHE) develops an Operational Plan (OP) with specific Activities towards the 5-year Benchmarks for each Aim. The OP contains Activities with specific Objectives for OHE and operational partners to complete. Members of the HEC review the OP regularly. OHE provides regular progress reports to HEC members and VHA leadership throughout the FY. The HEC approved the OP in FY 2020 2nd quarter. The purpose of this report is to describe the FY 2020 Operational Plan actions and progress.

## FY2020 Operational Plan

The FY 2020 Operational Plan was approved by the HEC in FY 2020 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter. The Plan describes HEAP Activities and specific Objectives to be completed by OHE staff and operational partners including the Center for Health Equity Research and Promotion (CHERP), OHE-QUERI Partnered Evaluation Initiative (PEI), and VISN 1. More information about the FY 2020 Operational Plan can be found [here](#).

The table below shows the FY 2020 targeted Objectives for each HEAP Aim.

Aim	FY2020 Objectives
<b>Awareness</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>OHE and HEC will work collaboratively to be engaged and support OHE's Awareness activities by co-authoring or contributing to at least one information brief each Fiscal Year and sharing at least one relevant publication (e.g., information</li> </ul>

	<p>briefs and newsletters) or training to be highlighted in OHE’s publications and website, across their networks each Fiscal Year.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Distribute monthly newsletters highlighting OHE accomplishments, disparities research highlights, and opportunities for training.</li> <li>• Host quarterly Cyberseminars on relevant and timely health equity topics.</li> <li>• Prepare monthly information briefs highlighting health disparities and efforts throughout the VA to reduce disparities through health interventions.</li> <li>• Regularly update the OHE website with new information briefs, newsletters, Cyberseminar announcements, and other relevant publications, announcements, and updates.</li> </ul>
<b>Leadership</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide briefing to VHA and service line leadership on equity, disparities, and diversity.</li> <li>• Develop and propose an FY 2021 spend plan to VHA leadership.</li> <li>• Partner with Integrated Ethics and Diversity and Inclusion to propose leadership training on equity, disparities, and diversity.</li> </ul>
<b>Health Outcomes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Produce a report on variation in health, access to care, and health care quality among Veterans.</li> <li>• <i>Complete Equity Dashboard and identify one clinical test site to pilot s new improvement strategy.</i></li> <li>• <i>Expand use of eScreeener, resource guides, and other data tools for social determinants.</i></li> <li>• Partner with at least one VHA central office to examine disparities in the services they support.</li> <li>• Partner with Community Care to understand data needs.</li> </ul>
<b>Workforce</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Distribute training/learning resources for the workforce and Veterans via the monthly OHE newsletter and announcements.</li> <li>• Co-host Health Equity Day at one local facility and establish a plan to expand this activity at multiple locations to promote equity-related resources.</li> <li>• Establish relationships with two professional organizations or key VHA offices to initiate programs to diversify the workforce.</li> <li>• Update the OHE website and add specific population web pages that include resources that address equity and competency needs.</li> <li>• Establish usage monitoring and user feedback mechanisms.</li> </ul>
<b>Data, Research, and Evaluation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct an environmental scan of equity-related activities by surveying VHA program offices and VA medical centers.</li> <li>• Produce a report based on OHE analyses of the All Employee Survey to examine equity, diversity, and inclusion issues.</li> </ul>

- Draft a report based on natural language processing to identify vulnerable groups that are not systematically identified using existing CDW data fields (e.g., sexual orientation and gender identity).
- *Document the completeness and accuracy of VHA race/ethnicity data. OHE and partnering offices will use the report to develop recommendations to VA offices/leadership for improvement.*
- Submit a topic nomination for Evidence Synthesis Program review of Veteran health equity issues.

**Note:** Italicized objectives denote actions to be completed by OHE operational partners.

## FY2020 Progress

### OHE Staff Actions

OHE successfully met the five Objectives for the HEAP Awareness Aim. OHE developed a series of podcasts in collaboration with CHERP and VISN 1 partners. A newsletter was mailed out monthly to more than 89,000 subscribers each month. OHE organized quarterly virtual seminars through the Focus on Health Equity and Action Cyberseminar Series. Below is a list of the session.

- Exercise Disparities and Creating Sports Opportunities Through the Winter Sports Clinic
- Mental Health Disparities Among Racial and Ethnic Minorities and LGBT Veterans and the Impacts of Experiencing Discrimination
- Reducing Disparities in Diabetic Foot Ulcers with Research, Clinical Care, and Technology

The OHE website underwent constant updates, including the creation of new population pages. Monthly information briefs were created and shared in the OHE newsletters and on the public-facing website.

OHE successfully met the three Objectives for the HEAP Health Leadership Aim. OHE briefed the VHA Executive in Charge, Dr. Richard Stone, VHA chief medical officers, nursing staff, and VISN strategic planners on multiple occasions about equity and disparities related to COVID-19. OHE developed the FY2021 spend plan with the Health Equity Coalition and partners and the plan was approved by VHA leadership. OHE worked with the Diversity and Inclusion Integrated Project Team and the National Center for Ethics in Health Care to develop and recommend equity and diversity tools for VHA leaders including resources to address structural bias and racism.

OHE successfully met the three Objectives for the HEAP Health Outcomes Aim. Staff collaborated with the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality to produce the Veterans Health Chartbook. OHE worked with the National Center for Prevention to examine disparities in preventive services. Also, OHE worked with Community Care to better understand data needs to improve care to Veterans.

OHE successfully met the five Objectives for the Health Workforce OHE published eight monthly newsletters and 13 announcements shared with more than 89,000 monthly subscribers. These newsletters and announcements included training for providers and Veterans and training resources from external partners. OHE staff conducted usage monitoring via Google 360 Analytics (new users, page views, etc.) and Granicus (listserv members, link outs to OHE products/pages). OHE staff partnered with the Hampton VAMC to highlight the PRIDE Program national expansion and staff activities in the June newsletter for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Pride Month.

OHE staff developed partnerships and participated in efforts to increase the pipeline of minority health providers. Highlights include the White House Initiative (WHI) for Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU), Workforce Management and Consulting to exhibit VA opportunities at conferences for racial/ethnic minorities, and Office of Academic Affiliations on geo-mapping of minority-serving institutions health science schools and WHI activities. As previously mentioned, OHE staff created new population pages for the OHE website (LGBT, Rural, Women Veterans) and added a new page for social determinants of health. Also, OHE increased website traffic over FY 2019 weekly analytics.

OHE successfully met the four Objectives for the HEAP Data, Research, and Evaluation Aim. OHE deployed the Health Equity Environmental Scan and received over 100 submissions. OHE developed interactive reports to analyze the All Employee Survey results to understand equity, diversity, and inclusion issues. The data tools focus on employee disability status, ethnicity, race, and sexual orientation. OHE staff conducted a literature review on natural language processing. The review's purpose was to determine how the methodology could identify vulnerable groups not systematically captured using data from the electronic health record. OHE partnered with other VA offices to provide feedback on an Evidence Synthesis Program review nomination on Veteran health equity issues.

### **Operational Partner Actions**

OHE had another successful year working with operational partners to further health equity for Veterans. The Center for Health Equity Research and Promotion completed an Equity Dashboard and identified a clinical test site to pilot a new improvement strategy. Partners in VISN 1 expanded eScreeener, resource guides, and other data tools for social determinants. Also, the OHE-QUERI Partnered Evaluation Initiative (PEI) led an evaluation to document the completeness and accuracy of VHA race/ethnicity data.

### **Emerging Issues**

The emergence of SARS-CoV-2 impacted the operational activities of OHE. Specifically, the pandemic highlighted health equity issues across the U.S. and

specifically to Veterans. In response, OHE assisted in increasing understanding of COVID-19 and health equity. Below are some of OHE's activities:

- Assisted leadership to understand and address inquiries related to COVID and equity;
- Served as subject matter experts for the VA Palantir common data platform;
- Identified available data sources and measures;
- Maintained a Corporate Data Warehouse project space with curated data on COVID-19 and health equity;
- Conducted analyses of vulnerable Veteran population groups;
- Shared strategies, with input from OHE-QUERI PEI, for health equity analyses and reporting;
- Developed COVID-19 and disparities dashboard to support planning and operations;
- Developed SharePoint resources for partners with information that includes National and VISN-specific information briefs, population-specific information briefs addressing disparities, COVID-19 screening tools, and data visualizations;
- Featured SharePoint COVID-19 resources in monthly newsletters and announcements;
- Highlighted equity-related COVID-19 training and webinars (VA and external) in monthly newsletters; and
- Compiled COVID-19, diversity, bias, racism-related training resources to be added to OHE Workforce SharePoint and website (VA and external sources) as permitted.

## Conclusion

OHE set out to accomplish over 20 objectives in FY 2020 to achieve health equity for Veterans and help the VA become a leader in this pursuit. OHE was successful in completing the FY's objectives. OHE staff and operational partners demonstrated agility in meeting the targeted goals while taking on the challenges brought by COVID-19. OHE staff completed other activities that are not mentioned in this report; for example, efforts in ensure equity in all policies (e.g., responding to legislative inquiries, Government Accountability Office reports, informal policy reviews). The dedication of OHE staff, HEC members, operational partners, and VA leadership to Veteran health equity cannot be understated.