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VHA's Office of Community Engagement and the  
Center for Compassionate Care Innovation

# VHA partnerships bring resources to Veterans in their communities

VA



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
Veterans Health Administration

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## A Note From the Acting Director:

Welcome to 2020! In this edition of our quarterly newsletter, we're kicking off the new decade with a roundup of the resources, initiatives, and services that various populations of Veterans can take—and are taking—advantage of right now. The Veterans Health Administration (VHA)'s

Office of Community Engagement (OCE) and Center for Compassionate Care Innovation (CCI) are dedicated to uplifting partnerships and innovations that are helping Veterans live healthy, vibrant lives.

We hope you'll enjoy reading about resources for Veterans such as: PATRIOTlink, a technology platform that helps Veterans search more than 6,000 extensively-screened programs; the Mental Health Mobility Service Dog Benefit Initiative, which helps cover some expenses for the care of qualified Veterans' service dogs; at-home light-emitting diode (LED) therapy, which brings Veterans relief from symptoms of traumatic brain injury (TBI); and partnerships developed by VHA's Social Work office, which mirror many of the same priorities of OCE and VHA as a whole—these partnerships connect Veterans to programs like The Dream Foundation and the National Domestic Violence Hotline.

Many of these resources support the social determinants of health (SDOH), which are conditions within the environments where Veterans live, work, and play that affect a wide range of health outcomes. These conditions—such as access to education, food security, housing, and many more—are so important that SDOH is the theme of OCE's 2020 VHA Community Partnership Challenge; you can learn more about that annual contest on page 8. OCE will announce the top three winners of the Challenge this summer!

OCE and CCI look forward to a year of creating and spreading the word about partnerships and innovations that aim to enhance Veterans' health and well-being.

Sincerely,

Dr. Tracy L. Weistreich

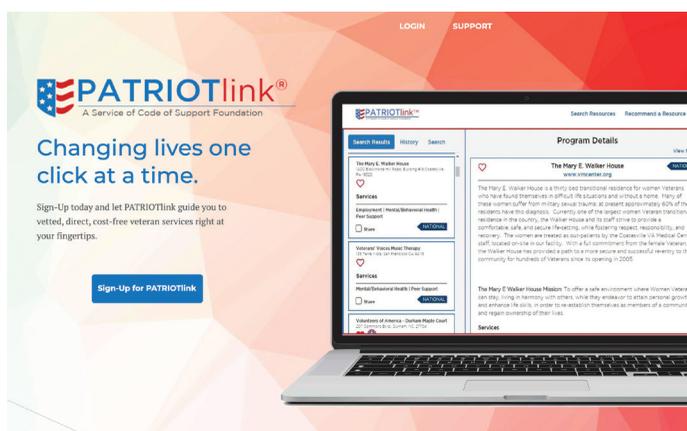
*Acting Director, Office of Community Engagement and  
the Center for Compassionate Care Innovation*

## PATRIOTlink helps Veterans find resources

For Veterans, finding the best resources, support services, and programs can be an overwhelming and time-consuming process. A new resource-navigation platform from the nonprofit Code of Support Foundation is designed to help speed up and simplify this process for Veterans and their health-care providers. Anyone who creates a basic account can use PATRIOTlink for free.

Veterans can connect via PATRIOTlink to services such as financial counseling, caregiver support, peer support, and Veteran benefits.

**PATRIOTlink** helps users connect more quickly with trustworthy resources that are specific to stakeholder needs. The platform parses through the nearly 6,000 programs that have cleared its extensive screening process to provide refined search results for many topics. Because the tool is cloud-based, the information on PATRIOTlink is continually updated as platform administrators are notified of changes to program offerings and as users provide feedback on program quality.



Code of Support Foundation is a member of the **Veterans Hub**, an OCE-supported platform that enables social service organizations and individuals supporting Veterans to collaborate and connect, find resources and tools, and receive training to measurably improve Veterans' lives. "Just like Veterans Hub, we want to create

a network of support for military and Veteran families ... increasing collaboration across organizations in a manageable way," says Jennifer Skinner Bingham, PATRIOTlink product director.

Speaking about her team's strategic decision to join Veterans Hub, Ms. Skinner Bingham says that she hopes PATRIOTlink will help make the jobs of VA providers and staff easier and more efficient. The technology platform lets users enter the location and as many as 20 types of client needs to view a list of vetted resources with verified points of contact.

Heather Luper, social work program manager for OCE, says that PATRIOTlink helps her find location-specific programs for her Veteran clients on job training and placement services in just a few clicks. She appreciates that she can trust the information to be up to date. "A downfall with some directories is that once they are developed, they are not well-maintained," Ms. Luper says.

Programs in PATRIOTlink are reviewed every six months to ensure that they continue to meet qualifying criteria for the database: They must provide direct, cost-free services, training, or employment opportunities to Veterans, and they must be fiscally responsible, responsive to user requests, and transparent about their program capacity. As of May 2019, nearly 8,000 people were using PATRIOTlink.

Kristina Kauffman, co-founder and CEO of Code of Support Foundation, envisions that wider adoption of PATRIOTlink nationwide will eventually help VA and other support organizations gain insight into the types of services Veterans seek. "For example, 70% of the searches run in Austin, Texas, last month [might be] for legal resources," she says, which could "facilitate more strategic program, policy, and funding decisions."

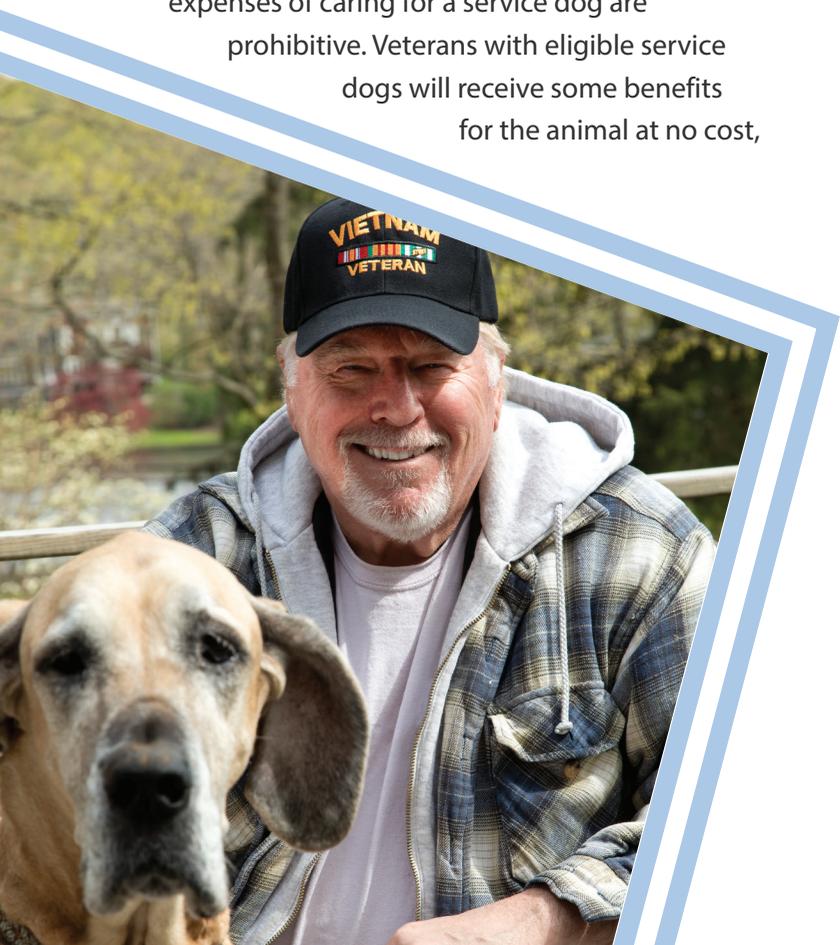
For more information on the Veterans Hub, visit <https://www.va.gov/HEALTHPARTNERSHIPS/docs/VetHubFactsheet.pdf>. For more information on OCE, visit <https://www.va.gov/healthpartnerships/>.

## Mental Health Mobility Service Dog Benefit Initiative extends veterinary benefits to animals supporting qualified Veterans

VHA provides a veterinary health insurance benefit in support of service dogs for those Veterans who qualify. VHA's Prosthetic and Sensory Aids Service (PSAS) administers the benefit through a contracted insurance policy. Such benefits can maximize a service dog's life and utility.

In 2016, VHA launched the Mental Health Mobility Service Dog Benefit Initiative to extend veterinary health benefits to service dogs supporting Veterans with substantial mobility limitations associated with a mental health disorder, such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or anxiety. These disorders can limit Veterans' ability to leave the house and conduct activities of daily living.

This Initiative helps Veterans for whom the expenses of caring for a service dog are prohibitive. Veterans with eligible service dogs will receive some benefits for the animal at no cost,



such as: veterinary care and hardware, or repairs or replacements for required hardware. Veterinary care includes prescription medications, office visits for medical procedures, and dental procedures. Travel expenses associated with obtaining a prescribed dog will be provided.

Veterans may be eligible for the benefit depending on three factors: there is a chronic mobility limitation associated with a mental health disorder; other interventions were tried unsuccessfully; and a service dog is the optimal means to manage the mobility limitation. When Veterans apply, mental health clinicians conduct the initial assessment. The local prosthetics office will then review the documentation from a mobility perspective to assess whether the Veteran and dog are eligible for the benefit.

Service dogs are not pets—they provide specific functions, the loss of which would severely impact the Veteran's ability to manage a mobility limitation due to a mental health diagnosis. They undergo customized training to address the Veteran's mobility needs. Dogs must be obtained from organizations accredited by Assistance Dogs International.

Dr. Tracy L. Weistreich, acting director of CCI, said that some Veterans struggle with the costs associated with maintaining their service dog.

"This benefit helps alleviate that potential struggle," said Dr. Weistreich. "It can provide the Veteran with peace of mind, knowing that care is covered for their animal—and the animal is key to improving their quality of life."

VA does not provide or pay for service dogs. If a Veteran is not currently paired with a service dog, they can search for a service dog organization at [assistance-dogs-international.org](https://www.assistance-dogs-international.org). To learn more about the Initiative, contact PSAS at: [vhpsasservicedogbenefits@va.gov](mailto:vhpsasservicedogbenefits@va.gov).

CCI coordinated this Initiative for the first 100 approved Veterans. For more on CCI's work, visit <https://www.va.gov/HEALTHPARTNERSHIPS/CCIMission.asp>.

## LED therapy shows promising results for TBI patients



*An LED headset affixed with LEDs, which transmit energy without generating heat.*

A collaboration between CCI and the Veterans Affairs Boston Healthcare System (VABHS) has resulted in positive outcomes for Veterans experiencing TBI. Boston's innovative LED Home Treatment Program is one of VA's first programs to use near-infrared LED therapy to treat TBI in the home and it has already served more than 120 Veteran patients since its launch in fall 2017.

LED therapy is a relatively safe, noninvasive, pain-free treatment that is known to benefit some conditions, such as joint and muscle pain. Through the collaboration between CCI and VABHS, Boston area Veterans can now access a new form of LED therapy that addresses some of the most common TBI symptoms, such as problems with attention, sleep, and mood—issues that are also associated with PTSD and depression. It differs from other approaches to TBI treatment because it is portable, can be used at home, and does not involve medication. Instead, participants spend about 30 minutes a day wearing a headset affixed with LEDs, which transmit energy without generating heat.

Some Veterans have a personal preference for the convenience and non-medication aspects of LED therapy. VABHS clinical program lead and researcher Dr. Yelena Bogdanova also recommends the treatment because of how effective it can be. "All Veterans demonstrated significant improvement in at least two of the functional domains," she said, referring to the brain's ability to help a person concentrate, regulate their mood, sleep, and generally get through the day.

Veterans in the Boston area can talk with their VA provider at a polytrauma or outpatient TBI clinic to see if they are a good fit for the LED treatment. Consideration for the 12-week program depends on the patient's treatment history, severity of symptoms, and other factors. Treatment begins during the Veteran's initial outpatient visit, under supervision by Dr. Bogdanova and her team. After that, Veterans enjoy the rest of the treatment sessions in the privacy and convenience of their own home. Clinicians regularly check in on patient progress via phone calls and video calls, using **VHA telehealth tools**.

At the VHA Innovation Experience (iEx) event in October 2019, Dr. Bogdanova partnered with Christine Eickhoff, health system specialist for CCI, to share the latest outcomes of this collaboration with health care providers, the press, and the public. The presentation included feedback from Veterans about their positive experiences with the treatment, and they discussed progress that has been made toward increasing Veteran access to treatment options that can restore cognitive function.

"We were honored to participate in this event," said Dr. Bogdanova. "It was truly inspiring to hear other VA teams' success stories and to see that the hard work and the team effort can lead to changes that can significantly improve the Veterans' health outcomes."

"CCI works with clinical experts across the VA network who are also committed to exploring new and effective ways to help Veterans restore and maintain their health," said Ms. Eickhoff. "The collaboration

with Dr. Bogdanova and the team at the Boston VA is one example of how VHA is exploring new treatment options that are relatively safe, convenient, and help make health care more accessible.”

CCI explores emerging therapies that are safe and ethical to enhance Veterans’ physical and mental well-being when other treatments have not been successful. LED therapy is known already as a relatively safe treatment approach for other conditions, such as joint pain, and research continues to more fully understand how it also can help patients with TBI symptoms.

TBI is one of CCI’s focus areas, along with suicidality, PTSD, and chronic pain. To learn more about CCI, visit <https://www.va.gov/HEALTHPARTNERSHIPS/CCIMission.asp>.

## VHA Social Work office supports partnerships for Veterans’ health, shares mission with OCE

OCE is a trusted resource and a catalyst for the growth of effective partnerships at the national, state, and community level. Many partnerships throughout VA and VHA are realized through collaboration among many offices, such as VHA Social Work, an office that shares many priorities and goals with OCE.

The social workers who support the office assist Veterans with their needs around housing, finance, transportation, mental health, and many other social determinants of health (SDOH). Laura Taylor, national director of Social Work at VA, **recently co-authored an article** in the Journal of General Internal Medicine on SDOH explaining that adverse SDOH (such as a lack of housing, legal problems, violence, and others) are strong predictors of suicide risk.



That’s why Social Work, along with OCE, is committed to creating and supporting partnerships that bring Veterans access to positive SDOH. Partnerships enhance VHA’s ability to provide programs, resources, and services that help Veterans lead healthy lives.

“Housing, employment, transportation: these are basic needs for Veterans to feel safe, to feel purposeful, to be productive members of society. When there are deficits or challenges in these areas, it can start a downward spiral,” explained Ms. Taylor. “If you lose your job, that impacts your housing; if your car breaks down, that may affect your employment. We want to ask Veterans about these things [during their health care appointments] so we can intervene, to connect them to other services that will help them.”

There are now 15,000 social workers at VA who, Ms. Taylor said, are all working to be the connectors to community and national resources that can help Veterans—that’s where partnerships come in.

Social Work has a partnership with **The Dream Foundation**, which grants requests from Veterans battling life-threatening illness. One dream this partnership was able to fulfill, Ms. Taylor explained, was a Veteran’s desire to have a washer and dryer in their home; access to resources for daily needs **is an SDOH**. Some Veterans wish to reconnect with family members far away, and Ms. Taylor explained that this kind of social support is also a very important, positive SDOH.

Social Work also partners with the **National Domestic Violence Hotline**. Since the hotline already existed as a resource outside VA, this partnership was able to connect Veterans to this service and to provide Veteran-specific training to hotline counselors. The hotline can help Veterans at risk for violence, which is an adverse SDOH.

Within VHA, Social Work has partnered with the Office of Rural Health to provide funding for positive SDOH in rural areas where some Veterans may not have access to VA Social Work services.

“Whether what matters most to a Veteran is their transportation or employment needs, we want to attend to everything about that whole person,” Ms. Taylor explained. “We need to meet Veterans where they are.”

That’s a goal shared by OCE in all its partnership work, said Dr. Tracy L. Weistreich, acting director of OCE.

“We know how important SDOH are for the health and well-being of Veterans everywhere; as VHA continues to offer high-quality care, we know partnerships help us by augmenting services for Veterans,” Dr. Weistreich said. “VHA employees work together to leverage partnership efforts that bring Veterans, wherever they live, these important resources and services.”

For more information on the types of resources made possible through VHA Social Work, visit <https://www.socialwork.va.gov/links.asp>. Veterans and caregivers can also click the links at the bottom of the following page to learn about resources for caregiver support, help for homeless Veterans, and long-term care options: <https://www.socialwork.va.gov/index.asp>.

For more on OCE partnerships and how they support SDOH, visit: <https://www.va.gov/HEALTHPARTNERSHIPS/updates.asp>.



## 2020 VHA Community Partnership Challenge judging is now underway! Learn about this year's Challenge topic: The Social Determinants of Health

Staff members from VA medical centers throughout the country have submitted their nonmonetary, community-level partnerships for consideration to the 2020 VHA Community Partnership Challenge. A panel of judges representing various program offices, and the field, has been assembled. Now, this panel is reviewing all submissions to choose the top three partnerships between VHA and nongovernmental organizations. OCE is proud to be the steward of the Challenge. OCE is VHA's trusted resource for the creation and growth of effective partnerships that benefit Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors.

The winners of this year's Challenge will be announced this summer. Visit the **"Updates"** page of OCE's website to learn more about the winners, who will be recognized by the Under Secretary for Health/Executive in Charge during a formal awards ceremony. These winners will also receive the Under Secretary for Health award and will be publicized on VHA communications channels.

This year's Challenge theme is Social Determinants of Health (SDOH), which are conditions in the environments where Veterans live that affect a wide range of health outcomes. Contest entrants demonstrated how their partnerships support Veterans' access to these positive SDOH: education, employment, food security, housing, spiritual support, and transportation.

SDOH are the theme of this year's Challenge because OCE staff members know how important they are for Veterans: When Veterans have access to positive SDOH, they lead healthier lives. Exposure to adverse SDOH, such as violence or food insecurity, can put Veterans at risk of negative health outcomes.

OCE will also be publishing articles throughout the year about how VHA programs and groups support SDOH, such as **Veteran Community Partnerships, Medical-Legal Partnerships, and Whole Health**. You can read those articles on the OCE **"Updates"** page.

Be sure to look out for the winners in the summer and for the announcement of next year's Challenge theme, which will be made in October. We can't wait for you to learn more about the great work VHA teams are doing on behalf of Veterans and hope you will enter the contest in 2021!

**2020 VHA Community Partnership Challenge**

**This year's theme: Social Determinants of Health**  
Social determinants of health are conditions in the environments in which people live, learn, work, play, worship, and age that affect a wide range of health, functioning, and quality-of-life outcomes and risks.

Enter the 2020 VHA Community Partnership Challenge and gain recognition for your team's work! The Challenge highlights nonmonetary, community partnership between VHA and nongovernmental organizations that serve Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors.

**APPLY NOW**  
Visit the VHA Community Partnership Challenge Portal:  
<http://www.oce.med.va.gov/jpc/welcome.aspx>  
The portal for submissions is open from **December 2, 2019** through **January 31, 2020**

**The six social determinants of health that are the focus for this year's challenge are:**

- Education
- Employment
- Food Security
- Housing
- Spiritual Support
- Transportation

**Top Three Winners Will Receive:**

- Recognition in a ceremony by the Under Secretary for Health/Executive in Charge
- Inclusion in a ceremonial video clip to be shared and seen VA-wide
- Spotlight on the VA website
- Feature story on Vantage Point, a news article for placement with local media sources
- Coveted Under Secretary for Health award (for the facility)

VHA Office of Community Engagement  
[www.va.gov/healthpartnerships](http://www.va.gov/healthpartnerships)  
[CommunityEngagement@va.gov](mailto:CommunityEngagement@va.gov)

VETERANS HEALTH ADMINISTRATION (VHA)