



QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER  
VOLUME 5 ISSUE 4  
FALL 2021

VHA National Center for Healthcare  
Advancement and Partnerships

In recognition of fall observances:

**Suicide Prevention Awareness Month,  
National Traumatic Brain Injury  
Awareness Month, Healthy Aging Month,  
Pain Awareness Month, and Disaster  
Preparedness Month**

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VA



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
Veterans Health Administration  
National Center for Healthcare  
Advancement and Partnerships



# A Note From the Nurse Executive



All of us at the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) National Center for Healthcare Advancement and Partnerships (HAP) hope that you had a safe and restful summer. As we enter the fall season (and the end of our fiscal year this September), HAP is reflecting on all that has evolved and all we've accomplished over the past 12 months.

VHA continues to help as many Veterans and employees as possible access COVID-19 vaccinations—this is paramount to their health and well-being, which is of course a VHA and HAP focus. As the pandemic continues to be a presence in our lives, we are acting upon the best practices we've learned since March 2020—we continue with The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)'s [Fourth Mission](#), we're meeting Veterans wherever they are and supporting them however they need, and we are supporting the creativity, passion, and commitment of those who serve Veterans every day.

We accomplish this in part through nonmonetary partnerships with nongovernmental organizations who help us go even further than we already do for Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors. VHA and our partners continue to offer virtual resources such as support groups, exercise classes, and online educational materials. Organizations such as Pet Partners have volunteers visiting Veterans virtually while in-person visits continue to be on pause (**see page 9**). Another partner, Parkinson's Foundation, offers "Fitness Fridays" videos that patients can stream at home, from anywhere (**page 6**).

Along with our partners, we're continuing to offer resources to Veterans that align with many observance months this September in particular: Read about everything we're doing for Veterans during Suicide Prevention Month (**page 12**), Healthy Aging Month (**page 10**), Disaster Preparedness Month (**page 4**), Pain Awareness Month (**page 5**), and Traumatic Brain Injury Awareness Month (**page 3**).

All our partnerships help Veterans access positive social determinants of health (SDOH)—the conditions where they live, learn, work, worship, play, and age. Our partnerships also serve a diverse population—VHA partnerships bring services, education, and support to Veterans of all lived experiences and backgrounds, no matter where they live, even if they aren't currently enrolled in VHA health care.

Diversity, equity, inclusion, and access are paramount in our partnerships and are also the foundation upon which the theme of the 2021 VHA National Community Partnership, HAP's signature event, is built. We were thrilled to honor the three winners of this year's Challenge at a virtual ceremony on Aug. 19, where they were honored with remarks and awards presented by VHA Acting Under Secretary for Health Dr. Steven Lieberman. Read more about the contest and how you can get to know the winners on **page 7**.

We hope you enjoy reading more about how VHA, HAP, and our partners continue to creatively support all Veterans, everywhere, especially during uncertain times and in a changing world.

In good health,  
Dr. Tracy L. Weistreich

*Nurse Executive, VHA National Center for Healthcare Advancement and Partnerships*

## VHA partnerships assist Veterans who have experienced traumatic brain injuries

Autumn is known for ushering in cooler temperatures and changing leaves across the country, but the month of September also brings several observances that contribute to a time of reflection.

National Traumatic Brain Injury Awareness Month takes place each September as a time to raise awareness about traumatic brain injury (TBI) and to educate individuals on how to recognize signs of TBI, prevent such injuries, and treat a TBI if it occurs.

"It's important to remind Veterans who have experienced a TBI that they are not alone, and that VA is committed to their health and well-being," said Jennifer Perez, VA's national director for Post-9/11 Transition and Care Management.

Between 2000 and 2017, the U.S. Department of Defense reported more than 375,000 diagnosed cases of TBI around the world. Physically demanding trainings, vehicle crashes, explosions, and other combat-related activities place Service members and Veterans at a higher risk for being diagnosed with a TBI when compared to the general population.

To ensure Veterans receive the quality of care they deserve for these types of injuries, VHA maintains successful nonmonetary partnerships with both the Wounded Warrior Project (WWP) and the Marcus Institute for Brain Health (MIBH). These partnerships, facilitated by HAP and managed by Post-9/11 Transition and Case Management, augment the services VHA already offers for Veterans with TBI including [screening services](#) and a variety of cognitive, physical, speech, and occupational therapies.

VHA's partnership with WWP allows for VA Liaisons for Health Care to be on-site at four Warrior Care Network (WCN) clinics that specialize in providing short-term care to Veterans diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder, TBI, and other conditions. VA Liaisons are vital members of the health care team at these locations and coordinate ongoing health care and case management at VA

medical centers, which also includes: scheduling follow-up appointments; connecting Veterans with important VA resources; and facilitating VA benefit claims with the Veterans Benefits Administration.



Since 2015, VA Liaisons within the WCN have successfully transitioned 2,399 Veterans from short-term care with WWP to ongoing care within the VA health care system. Many of these Veterans had not received health care from VA previously.

"VA Liaisons are there from the very start, which is why over 90% of Veterans have follow-up appointments scheduled at VA locations before their discharge from the WCN Facility," said Ms. Perez.

VHA's partnership with MIBH is very similar: VA Liaisons work together with MIBH health care providers at the University of Colorado to treat TBI and other co-occurring conditions which may be worsened by TBI, including substance abuse and depression. In FY20, these Liaisons provided 99 professional consultations and ensured 100% Veterans who wanted a follow-up VA health care appointment had one scheduled.

"Our goal is to provide the best possible care and case management to Service members and Veterans regardless of where they first seek treatment," said Ms. Perez. "Partnerships are a great way to accomplish that."

For more information on WWP, click [here](#), and the MIBH website can be found [here](#).



## How Veterans on dialysis can prepare for natural disasters

September is Disaster Preparedness Month, and [VHA partner American Kidney Fund](#) is sharing [important information for Veterans on dialysis](#) to remember during disasters. Dialysis is a medical procedure that removes blood from an artery, purifies it, and returns it to a vein. Patients diagnosed with kidney failure or severe kidney disease usually need dialysis on a consistent and repeated basis.

VHA offers supportive services for Veterans with kidney disease through its [Nephrology Program](#), and this partnership adds to VHA's services by offering tools for early identification of kidney disease and referral for appropriate treatment. VA's "[Fourth Mission](#)" also focuses on emergency response and [its natural disasters page](#) provides reliable information to Veterans and the public about emergency preparedness activities within the VA health care system.

The key to getting through a disaster, said Dr. Paul M. Palevsky, deputy national program director of the [VHA Nephrology Program](#) and president of the National Kidney Foundation, is having a plan well beforehand that should include:

- **Emergency [three-day diet](#) information:** To avoid a life-threatening abnormal heartbeat, patients should be aware of the amount of fluid they take in, how much salt they eat, and how much potassium is in their food.
- **Emergency "go bag":** This should include information about the three-day diet, fluids, appropriate foods, current health documents, information about medications, a copy of your dialysis prescription, insurance cards, emergency contact information, the name of your dialysis unit, the name and contact information of your doctor, flashlights, spare glasses, a phone charger, an external battery, and a change of clothes.



- **Knowing what to do if your dialysis center is closed:** If you live in an urban area, you may be able to use a neighboring dialysis center as a back-up. However, in a rural area, the next-closest dialysis center may be in another county. If there is notice about a disaster—like in the case of hurricanes—patients may be able to dialyze early or squeeze in extra treatments before their center closes. Your health care team can advise you.
- **Knowing what to do if your at-home dialysis isn't possible:** According to Palevsky, 10% of dialysis patients dialyze at home. As long as patients have access to their supplies, they are trained to do the treatment manually.

No matter their situation, patients can take comfort in the fact that there is a network of clinicians, nurses, and dialysis providers working together during a disaster to make sure dialysis patients have access to their lifesaving treatment.

"With dialysis, we are dealing with disaster preparedness as a life and death issue—we're not dealing with this as an inconvenience," said Palevsky.

After Navy Veteran and [American Kidney Fund Ambassador](#) Candie Gagne and her husband, also a Veteran, were unexpectedly diagnosed with kidney disease, she relied heavily on resources from the American Kidney Fund and advocates for educating yourself and preparing for emergencies. You can read more about her story [here](#).

## How Veterans can cope with the discomfort of arthritis

September is Pain Awareness Month, which aims to help people become more aware of the underlying causes of pain and access resources and treatments to ease pain.

Arthritis is common among Veterans. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, one in three Veterans (35%) has arthritis. Though arthritis is frequent among Veterans, that doesn't mean it's not a serious condition. Arthritis can be chronic, painful, and sometimes disabling.

VHA offers many pain management-focused programs, education, and resources through its [Pain Management](#) office, including information about [Whole Health](#)-focused pain management that doesn't include medications. Such treatments include physical activity, acupuncture, and [cognitive behavioral therapy](#) for chronic pain. VA's [Office of Research and Development](#) also offers a diverse slate of information on many types of pain.

Partnerships can help VHA offer even more services and support to Veterans experiencing pain, including arthritis pain. Peer support can help both the physical and mental components of living with arthritis. A [support group](#) for Veterans learning how to manage pain was just launched by the Arthritis Foundation, a [VHA partner](#). HAP facilitated this partnership, [which began this summer](#).

Being around others with arthritis and learning from their experiences can be very beneficial, according to Dr. David T. Felson, professor of medicine and epidemiology at Boston University Schools of Medicine and Public Health. Dr. Felson is a member of the Arthritis Expert Panel at the Arthritis Foundation.

"You can get advice from other patients on how to control arthritis symptoms better," he said. "Through sharing experiences, you can learn from others' strategies to alleviate pain."

Dr. Felson shared some information about treatments and how to manage arthritis.

First, determine what kind of arthritis you have. There are many different types, but the main are osteoarthritis, gout, and rheumatoid arthritis. Osteoarthritis tends to produce periodic pain, but when it's advanced, can produce chronic pain. Gout tends to produce episodic pain and is often triggered by eating [certain foods](#). Rheumatoid arthritis often produces chronic pain. A primary care provider or specialist can help with a diagnosis.

Next, figure out what treatment works best, which according to Dr. Felson, is based on the type of arthritis and includes: exercise; noninvasive approaches like meditation, music therapy, yoga, and acupuncture/acupuncture. Other treatments include anti-inflammatory drugs; cortisone injections, and joint replacements.

The key is to keep moving, even though that can seem counterintuitive to someone in pain.

"Ironically exercise can make some of that pain better because it strengthens the muscles that support and protect the joints," said Felson, who says to find an exercise that doesn't cause pain to become worse. Swimming can be a good low-impact exercise.

Other [VHA partnerships facilitated by HAP focus on physical exercise](#), such as the partnership with Y-USA. Veterans can take advantage of Y-USA's free, streaming [fitness videos](#) from the comfort of their homes.



## Exercise can be like ‘medicine’ for Veterans with Parkinson’s disease

Dr. James F. Morley has seen it again and again: His patients with Parkinson’s disease (PD) who embrace exercise often experience slowed progression of the disease. He particularly remembers one patient who was skeptical but enrolled in a study of exercise.

“She had never been someone who had really exercised, but she didn’t want to disappoint us and wanted to be a good patient for the study,” said Morley, co-director for Parkinson’s Disease Research, Education, and Clinical Center (PADRECC) at the VA Medical Center in Philadelphia.

The [PADRECCs](#) provide comprehensive care to Veterans with PD around the country. An estimated 110,000 Veterans have PD. Now, a partnership between VA and the Parkinson’s Foundation [will add to what VA already offers to Veterans diagnosed with PD](#). The Parkinson’s Foundation recently launched its free “[Fitness Fridays](#)” videos focused on different aspects of exercise designed to support people living with PD.



When Dr. Morley’s patient continued with her exercise program after the study, she found many of the symptoms that come with PD improved. That patient’s experience, along with countless others, cemented the value of exercise to Morley.

“We should think of exercise as medicine for PD. Doctors should treat it as a medication and we need to prescribe exercise in the same way—aerobic

walking, three times a week. Here are the side effects and what to look out for and we’ll check in six weeks and see how you’re doing,” said Morley.

Studies have found, Dr. Morley said, that exercising helps the motor symptoms associated with PD—tremors, muscle rigidity or stiffness, and balance problems—and the non-motor symptoms that also come along with the disease: lack of good sleep, cognitive and mood issues, anxiety, and apathy. Non-motor symptoms don’t respond well to traditional PD medications, said Morley, so exercise is even more important to patients experiencing them.

What kinds of exercises are beneficial? Fitness Fridays focus on cardio like dancing, strength training, balance, agility, and flexibility. The key is personalizing the exercise according to an individual’s likes and disease progression and consulting with a health professional to make sure the type of exercise selected is safe and appropriate. As with all exercise, patients should set realistic goals, do exercise that seems right and comfortable, and just as with medication as the disease progresses, exercise should be reassessed periodically.

Another tip is to consult a physical therapist.

“We send people for rehabilitation, sometimes someone needs pre-habilitation to talk about their abilities and limitations and what kind of exercise programs may be best tailored to their interests and best match their abilities,” said Morley.

The bottom line is to manage PD so staying active is possible.

“I tell people all the time our role as the physician is to make sure their medication regimen is up to snuff so they can take their exercise medication,” said Morley. “One of the ways I gauge if we have people treated well enough is if they’re able to be active.”





## 2021 VHA National Community Partnership Challenge demonstrates VHA's adaptability

2021 VHA National Community Partnership Challenge (CPC) had an especially timely theme this year: "Adaptability in a Changing World." The coronavirus pandemic has fundamentally changed how everyone in the country lives day-to-day, but VHA partners have continued helping Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors by offering virtual resources or making other changes to operations.



The CPC recognizes and awards front-line employees who engage with local partners all over the country working on behalf of Veterans. This year, entries had to demonstrate how the partnerships serves Veterans of all races, ethnicities, sexual identities, languages, learning styles, and or/spiritual preference. Entries also had to address one or more of the following categories: clinical and self-care; support of social determinants of health; newly transitioning Service members; COVID-19 pandemic/flu; and caregivers/families.

The CPC received 44 submission this year from across the United States.

The purpose of CPC is ultimately to spread best practices across the health care system, said Dr. Tracy L. Weistreich, nurse executive for HAP, which has managed the challenge since 2014 on behalf of the Office of the Under Secretary for Health.

"When we promote the winners of the CPC each year, people all over the nation can see exactly what a

great partnership looks like," Dr. Weistreich said. "This can be inspirational—people can replicate good ideas and successful processes from one another. The winners demonstrate the value of collaboration to expand services to Veterans wherever they are and meet their needs in creative ways."

The CPC also represents a "deference to expertise," she said.

"We want to lift up these stories of passion, commitment, and excellence," Dr. Weistreich continued. "VHA employees taking care of Veterans every day are collaborating with their community partners to address local challenges and expand available resources."

The chief judge of the Challenge this year, Dr. Kameron L. Matthews, previously [spoke](#) about why diversity, equity, and inclusion are woven into the fabric of the CPC in 2021.

"To adapt to our changing world, we must put diversity, equity, and inclusion at the forefront of the work we do, and I know that so many people are stepping up to the plate in that regard," Dr. Matthews said.

Georgeanna Bady, health systems specialist for HAP, has led the efforts for the CPC for the last three years.

"The CPC is so important because it recognizes partnerships that often are putting in hard work every single day without wider recognition," Ms. Bady said. "We want these tremendous efforts to have a moment in the spotlight, and also inspire other staff to take a page out of these partnerships' play books."

The top three winning facilities were honored in a ceremony on August 19, where they received crystal awards for local display, were commended by VHA Acting Under Secretary for Health Dr. Steven Lieberman, and will receive certificates of appreciation from the VA Secretary. To read more about this year's top-three winners, visit [va.gov/healthpartnerships/updates.asp](https://va.gov/healthpartnerships/updates.asp) and click on the "2021 VHA National Community Partnership Challenge" tab.

## Stay tuned for HAPs' Advancing Healthcare Through Partnerships toolkit

Over the past fiscal year, HAP has embarked on an exciting and special project: developing the Advancing Healthcare Through Partnerships toolkit. The objective is to create a robust “toolkit” for VA Medical Center (VAMC) employees throughout the country to use as they explore nonmonetary partnerships with nongovernmental partners at the national, regional, or local facility level. The items in this toolkit will cover all aspects of partnership creation in depth and in easy-to-read language. Think of it as a “partnership how-to guide.”

HAP's mission is centered on advancing Veterans' health and well-being by serving as a trusted resource for partnership development. VHA employees who wish to develop a partnership will, by way of this toolkit, have the tools and knowledge at their disposal to ensure partnerships advance health care, benefits, and services for Veterans.

Users of the toolkit will learn about these and other elements of partnership creation:

- The steps involved in forming a successful partnership, from identifying a Veteran need to implementing the partnership;
- Understanding of best practices in partnership development from the various VA and VHA program offices, including HAP, that are responsible for coordinating, facilitating, and managing partnerships;
- The process of developing a memorandum of agreement (MoA) including writing a “goal statement,” outlining specific partnership objectives, and evaluating the partnership using performance measures;
- The concurrence process, from drafting an MoA to obtaining the VHA Under Secretary for Health signature, and;
- Identifying the stakeholders who should be included in partnership discovery and subsequent meetings.

Many items in the toolkit have “case studies”—which are learning tools that provide education to support the drafting of various MoA sections—and worksheets so that toolkit users can work through the partnership creation steps on their own.

“We want to make this toolkit readily available and easy to use; even if starting from square one with considering a partnership, this toolkit is a reference that will help employees make informed decisions throughout the process,” said Dr. Tracy L. Weistreich, nurse executive for HAP. “HAP will continue to serve as a consultant for all VHA field or central office employees who need information and guidance on public-private partnerships.”

To view the toolkit once it goes live, stay tuned to HAP's website for announcements: [va.gov/healthpartnerships](https://va.gov/healthpartnerships).

### A Guide to VA/VHA Offices & Programs that Manage Partnerships

If you want to create a VA or VHA partnership with an outside entity, this guide provides an overview of four offices or programs that facilitate or manage partnerships: VHA's National Center for Healthcare Advancement and Partnerships (HAP), Veteran Community Partnerships (VCP), the Secretary's Center for Strategic Partnerships (SCSP), and the Community Veterans Engagement Board (CVEB).

**Which Office or Program Should I Contact to Help Me Develop a Partnership?**

	HAP VHA Office	VCP VHA Program	SCSP VA Office	CVEB VA Program
<b>Partners:</b>	VHA, governments, & national nongovernment organizations (NGO), often with local presence	VAMCs, community NGO	VA, VHA, VBA, NCA, national NGO	Local NGO, local & state governments
<b>Works well for:</b>				
National partnerships	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Regional (VISN) partnerships	Yes	No	No	No
Local (facility) partnerships	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
<b>Veteran impact:</b>				
	Veterans regardless of enrollment & eligibility	Local Veterans regardless of enrollment & eligibility	Veterans regardless of enrollment & eligibility	Local Veterans regardless of enrollment & eligibility
<b>Provides:</b>				
Consultative services	To VHA & national & community NGO	VAMC & community NGO	To VA, VHA, VBA, NCA, local and state governments, & national NGO	To VA, VHA, VBA, NCA, local & state governments, & NGO
Facilitation	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
<b>Structure:</b>				
Defined by MOA	Yes	No	Yes	No
Informal	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Inter Agency Agreement (IAA)	Yes	No	No	No
<b>Has authority to:</b>				
Accept donations & gifts to VA	No	No	Yes	No

VHA National Center for Healthcare Advancement and Partnerships



## Veteran-and-dog team virtually visit fellow Veterans, spread joy wherever they go

Lou Lewis of Nashville, Tennessee, is retired from the United States Army and has a very popular dog. Petey, a 9-year-old, 80-pound greyhound works with Ms. Lewis to provide animal visitation with Veterans as part of the Pet Partners organization.

"I had a visit yesterday, and one of the individuals said, 'I could just talk to Petey all day long,'" Ms. Lewis said.

Right now, the volunteer team visits Veterans virtually and should return to in-person visits when it is safe to do so. [Pet Partners](#), which promotes the health and wellness benefits of animal-assisted interventions including animal-assisted therapy, activities, and education, established a partnership with VA in 2019. [Many Veteran](#) Pet Partners volunteers talk about their positive experiences.

Ms. Lewis, who has five greyhounds, adopted Petey seven years ago. The people she and Petey visit provide a sense of social connection as well as a sense of levity and fun from how others respond to him. Petey helps Ms. Lewis healthy by increasing physical activity through walks and training.

"When we're out for walks, people will point and say 'That's a greyhound! I think that's the one I lost my money on at the track!'" Ms. Lewis said with a laugh.

Petey is a retired racing greyhound and Ms. Lewis adopted him via the [Music City Greyhound Adoption](#) program, which finds loving homes for retired racing greyhounds. She and Petey trained with Pet Partners to become a therapy animal team and registered through [Music City Pet Partners](#), a volunteer therapy animal organization, to provide animal-assisted therapy.

"The handler and the therapy dog have to have a great connection," she explained. Petey learned how to maneuver around wheelchairs and walkers and stay calm around different or loud voices like he might encounter during U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) medical center visits.

When Ms. Lewis visits fellow Veterans, she experiences a sense of bonding and social connection to them.

"I can relate to some of the experiences these Veterans have had. I've served during the Vietnam era, like some of them. They know my rank, which was First Sergeant, and they'll call me 'Top' or salute me," she explained.

Once, Ms. Lewis said, a patient who had difficulty speaking had a visit from Petey.

"I went in and said, 'This is Petey, he wants to be your friend,' and the patient was able to say the word 'dog,'" Ms. Lewis said. "I've got goosebumps right now! It just shows you the power of what animals can do for people."

Therapy animals are used, usually in a clinical setting, to improve physical, developmental, social, cognitive and/or emotional health functioning. Visits with animals can improve people's health and well-being through the [human-animal bond](#).

Veterans can also experience the benefits of the human-animal bond, as well as physical activity, by participating in [Pet Partners' World's Largest Pet Walk on September 25](#).

For more information about becoming a therapy animal team, visit: [petpartners.org/volunteer/](https://petpartners.org/volunteer/).



## September is Healthy Aging Month: Many VHA partnerships and programs help support older Veterans

September is Healthy Aging Month, [observed each year](#) to encourage people to take charge of their physical, mental, and social well-being as they age. [According to the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs](#) (VA), the median age of male Veterans is 65 and the median age of female Veterans is 51.

Many Veterans Health Administration (VHA) partnerships specifically support older Veterans. Within VHA, [HAP](#) supports partnerships with the Arthritis Foundation, MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger, Food Research & Action Center (FRAC), and the American Cancer Society, among many others.

### The Arthritis Foundation

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, one in three Veterans is diagnosed with arthritis. [Arthritis most commonly affects people 65 and older](#). Together, VHA and the Arthritis Foundation (AF) increase access to care, education, and support for Veterans diagnosed with arthritis. VHA offers support for Veterans diagnosed with arthritis through primary care, rheumatology clinics, and health care and treatment research done by the [Office of Research and Development](#). This partnership makes more services available in addition to what VHA already offers. AF has [online resources](#) on arthritis self-management, creating a diet plan to reduce swelling, and ways to manage pain.

### MAZON and FRAC

Two VHA partnerships focus on food security for Veterans, including older Veterans. A 2020 report from [Feeding America found that 7.3% of the senior population](#) (60 and older) is food insecure. People who are food insecure [lack consistent access](#) to enough food for a healthy life. VA's partnership

[with MAZON](#): A Jewish Response to Hunger assists food-insecure Veterans by creating strategies to reduce the number of Veterans who are at risk of food insecurity. [VHA and FRAC](#) work to connect Veterans to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and other nutrition programs.

### American Cancer Society

According to VA's Office of Research and Development, [approximately 40,000 cancer cases are reported to VA's Central Cancer Registry annually](#), and, [according to the National Cancer Institute](#), the median patient age at the time of a cancer diagnosis is 66. [American Cancer Society, Inc.](#) (ACS) is collaborating with VHA with an emphasis on lung cancer education and resources for those diagnosed with cancer. ACS has a support line (1-800-227-2345) in addition to the information and resources available on its website. HAP supports many cancer-related partnerships: [Read more here](#).

Additionally, the [Older Veteran Behavioral Health Resource Inventory](#), created by VHA's [Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention](#), provides resources for health care professionals to help them support older Veterans who have or are at risk for behavioral health conditions, such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and suicidal ideation.

According to the World Health Organization, [approximately 15% of adults aged 60 and over](#) suffer from a mental health disorder; and [despite higher rates of PTSD, older Veterans are less likely to seek mental health services](#). To address these concerns, the inventory outlines VA resources like [VA Mental Health](#), [VA Benefits for Elderly Veterans](#), and [VA Community Care](#). The inventory offers information health care professionals can use to treat older Veterans with behavioral health conditions, which promotes healthy living for Veterans as they age. [VHA's Office of Geriatrics and Extended Care](#) can also serve as a valuable resource for older Veterans.

## For one Veteran, a local ‘Clubhouse’ is a place he can be himself and connect with friends

Mr. Paul Harney, a 58-year-old Army Veteran, said that the [Circle City Clubhouse](#) in Indianapolis is “a good place to just be somebody, to just be yourself.”

Mr. Harney loves art (painter Norman Rockwell is his hero) and classical music by composers like Tchaikovsky. One of his favorite things to do at Clubhouse is tend to the chicken coop there.

“The chickens are so much fun to watch. I let them out for an hour every day. They’re amazing little critters,” he said.

Mr. Harney has been a member of the Clubhouse for more than two years. He and other members do household tasks they choose and like to do, have social interactions with other members, and have meetings and activities focused on mental health recovery.

[Clubhouses](#) are community mental health services where people with a history of mental illness can find opportunities for work, wellness, and socialization. The Clubhouse model focuses on finding people’s strengths and abilities; Clubhouse staff will ask members: “[What’s right with you?](#)” to find out members’ interests and abilities. Clubhouses also help members get back into the workforce—nearly 42% of Clubhouse members [are employed](#).

Mr. Harney, who experienced what he described as a “nervous breakdown,” said that Clubhouse members can avoid feeling like “stereotypical mental illness [patients],” since Clubhouse gives him a “purpose” and a sense that he’s a member of a community.

A [Veteran Community Partnership](#) (VCP) in Indianapolis is helping provide Veterans like Mr. Harney an option for treatment to “enhance their social network and give them an opportunity to use their knowledge in a new environment,” said Mr. Jason Riddle, a social worker and co-chair of the Indianapolis VCP.

VCPs are collaborations—and each is part of the larger VHA VCP initiative—that bring together community leaders, some of whom are Veterans, and organizations with VAMC programs to help Veterans access health care and supportive services at VA and beyond. The VCP initiative is a joint project of the VHA Geriatrics and Extended Care, [HAP](#), and other VHA offices. VHA plans to have a VCP at each of the VAMCs by September 2024.

Mr. Riddle said that the Indianapolis VCP is working closely with Clubhouses in the area to engage more Veterans, but the VCP also wants to link each local VA with a local Clubhouse. The VCP aims to continue to “engage more with our communities,” Mr. Riddle said.

In the end, that’s good for Veterans like Mr. Harney, who said that the social interaction he gets at Clubhouse helps him be more open and conversational with his providers. The members at Clubhouse are in a “chipper mood,” he said, and he can interact with his health care providers with that same attitude.

“We’re all friends who work here,” he said. “This is a wonderful place to be.”

To find a Clubhouse in your area, visit: [clubhouse-intl.org/what-we-do/international-directory](https://clubhouse-intl.org/what-we-do/international-directory).

To become a VA point of contact to a local Clubhouse, visit: [VISN 5 MIRECC - Connecting Veterans to Community Care: VA/Clubhouse Points of Contact - MIRECC / CoE](#).

To learn more about how to establish a VCP, visit [va.gov/healthpartnerships/vcp.asp](https://va.gov/healthpartnerships/vcp.asp).



## Suicide Prevention Awareness Month: VA partnerships work to bolster Veterans' mental health

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)'s [top clinical priority](#) is preventing suicide among all Veterans, including those who do not seek care within the VA health care system. To this end, VA offers and uplifts a suite of suicide prevention resources, such as the 24/7 [Veterans Crisis Line](#) (VCL), self-help resources like [Make the Connection](#), where Veterans can learn stories of recovery, [tools to help establish mental health practices](#), and [mobile apps for mental health](#). VA has a specially trained suicide prevention coordinator at [every VA medical center in the country, as well as Vet Centers](#) that can help Veterans readjust to civilian life.

VA also partners with nongovernmental agencies to bring even more suicide prevention resources to Veterans. September is recognized as [Suicide Prevention Awareness Month](#)—Sept. 5-11 is [National Suicide Prevention Week](#), and [World Suicide Prevention Day is Sept. 10](#)—and [HAP](#) is uplifting its support of VA partnerships with OnStar, American Lung Association (ALA), and Expiration Term of Service Sponsorship program (ETS-SP).

### OnStar

VA partnered with OnStar, an in-vehicle safety and security system, in late 2020. VA and OnStar help connect Veterans (who have a General Motors vehicle and who are enrolled in OnStar) to the VCL for mental health assistance by using OnStar's in-vehicle emergency services button or OnStar's [Guardian smartphone app](#). The VCL is staffed by trained responders, many of whom are Veterans themselves. VA will also provide resources and education to OnStar about suicide prevention, military culture, and how to determine if the caller has served in the military. [Read more](#) about how

one HAP staffer worked with a Veteran in crisis, which led to this partnership.

### American Lung Association

When it comes to suicide prevention, many health care providers are focused on the social determinants of health (SDOH), which are the conditions in the environments where Veterans live. Positive SDOH help Veterans live better lives, while [negative SDOH are strong predictors of suicide risk](#). Social connectedness is a crucial positive SDOH, especially for Veterans diagnosed with a lung condition. Through the ALA partnership, Veterans can connect to the Association's [Better Breathers Network](#), a nationwide online patient support program where Veterans and their caregivers can sign up for regular, virtual support meetings. As part of the partnership—as is the case with all VA partnerships—VA will share information with ALA specific to Veterans' needs, including on suicide prevention, the VCL, and the public-facing, free [S.A.V.E. Training](#).

### ETS-SP

ETS-SP assists Service members in their transition back into civilian communities by facilitating access to community resources, facilitating VHA or [VA benefits](#) enrollment, and connecting Service members to peer sponsors in their destination community who help them reintegrate into civilian life. Sponsors are trained and certified and assist with employment, housing, legal concerns, and more. Having a sponsor and easier access to resources before, during, and after the transition process can increase social connectedness, can increase resilience and protective SDOH such as employment and financial stability, and can address environmental and social conditions that can contribute to suicidal behaviors. VA and ETS have both identified reducing the risk of suicide and facilitating mental health resiliency as critical priorities within this nonmonetary partnership.