Veteran Community Partnerships:
Expanding the Reach

Fiscal Year 2021
Summary of Activities
Vision

To ensure Veterans choice in their access to care, services, and benefits through organized VA and community partnerships.

Mission

To empower collaborative action between VA and community partners to develop and expand personalized options for Veterans.

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Executive Summary

**Veteran Community Partnerships (VCPs) support Veterans, their caregivers and families.** The VCP model of collaboration – Veterans, caregivers, VA staff and community organizations – is a coalition working together to integrate knowledge and action for the combined mutual benefit of all involved. It continues to be a low-tech, high-touch, Veteran-centric, easily replicated and readily adapted approach to optimizing civilian and VA services for Veterans.

In FY2021, VCPs impacted their Veteran communities by:

- Hosting 96 events to educate and support Veterans, caregivers and health care and service providers
- Conducting 196 virtual meetings
- Adding 17 new VCPs
- Increasing the number of VA community partners by 13%, including Mental Health agencies, Caregiver agencies and Veteran Service Organizations

“Our VCP experienced an increase in new community partners or re-engagement of former partners, which led to strengthening our network and tightening the safety net for the Veterans in our community.”

Wilkes-Barre VCP Co-Chair—VISN 4
Foreword

Veteran Community Partnerships (VCPs) are coalitions of Veterans and their caregivers, Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) facilities, community health providers, organizations and agencies working together on the common goal to facilitate connections to, and transitions among, the full continuum of care and support services in VA and the community.

VCPs began with 3 pilot sites in 2011 and have steadily expanded to 53 active sites across the country. In Fiscal Year 2021, 33 sites received VCP training, and 17 new locations opened. VCPs are located in all 18 Veterans Integrated Service Networks (VISNs), in 30 states and Puerto Rico.

VCPs, along with the rest of world, endured another difficult year because of the pandemic. Amazingly, we watched communities and VA meet this challenge by working together in unique and diverse ways to serve Veterans and their families while keeping their lives moving forward through difficult times.

The pandemic may have slowed down VCP activities for FY2021, but VCP members continued the work through adversity. All VCPs converted face-to-face meetings to virtual platforms. Several VCPs held virtual education events on topics related to suicide prevention (Eastern Colorado – VISN 19) and COVID-19 such as new treatments and vaccination fatigue (Lebanon – VISN 4). Some VCPs even continued community events by using drive-through or drive-by approaches that allowed for social distancing – for flu shots (Tennessee Valley Health Care System – VISN 9) and a Veterans Day Parade that passed a Community Living Center to honor its Veteran residents (Northern California-Martinez – VISN 21).

This year’s summary will highlight the work done by VCPs and showcase the creative ways that VCPs adapted to the new normal.

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"VCPs solve problems together.”
Pittsburgh VCP Co-Chair – VISN 4
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Overview

History and Background

VCPs – modeled after the successful Hospice-Veteran Partnership initiative, which was started in 2009 – were piloted by the Office of Geriatrics and Extended Care for the purpose of bringing together VA staff and community partners to improve access to care, services and benefits for Veterans, their families and caregivers.

The Veteran Community Partnership (VCP) initiative is a joint project of Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Office of Geriatrics and Extended Care, National Center for Healthcare Advancement and Partnerships (HAP), with collaboration from the VHA Offices of Rural Health, Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, Care Management and Social Work, Caregiver Support and the Center for Development and Civic Engagement.

Rationale

While VA operates the largest integrated health care system in the U.S., streamlined coordination of access to services for Veterans can be a challenge:

- There are over 19 million Veterans in the U.S., however only 9 million Veterans are enrolled with the VA for health care

- 4.5 million enrolled Veterans are over the age of 65. Older Veterans tend to have:
  - More interacting diagnoses and medications
  - More functional dependence
  - More caregiver needs and challenges

So, they are more likely to rely on services and supports from a variety of medical providers and community programs.

- 70% of VA patients over 65 use one or more non-VA health care service – VCPs work to improve the connections between providers and services

Neither VA nor community agencies alone can provide all the services a Veteran may need, so there is a great need for strong partnerships to be developed and nurtured among VA and community providers and organizations to provide the coordinated quality health care that Veterans and their families deserve.

1 - Source: VHA Internal Data Source (VSCC)
VCPs in Action

Program Expansion

VCP was included in the Geriatrics and Extended Care 2020-2024 Transformational Plan with the goal of establishing a VCP at all VA facilities. VCP leadership is poised to implement this plan through 2024 with 3 strategic goals identified for FY2021.

VCP Sites

A roster of VCPs can be found at www.va.gov/healthpartnerships/vcp.asp.

VCP Strategic Plan

The VCP national team developed an annual work plan with 3 main goals to guide FY2021 activities.

1. Update VCP training from face-to-face to a virtual/hybrid format.
2. Expand VCP to all medical centers in 4 VISNs.
3. Identify a VISN VCP Point of Contact at each of these VISNs.
**Key Accomplishments**

- All 3 of the strategic plan goals were met. VCP training was converted to work in both virtual and hybrid formats. Four VISNs (4, 8, 9 and 16) volunteered to have an active VCP at each of their medical centers and VISN VCP contacts were identified. Thirty-three medical centers were trained or retrained in VCP, resulting in 17 new VCPs becoming active in FY2021.

- While the pandemic may have slowed down VCP activities for FY2021, VCP leaders continued to work despite those challenges. VA staff representing 19 different service lines and over 1,000 individuals from community organizations participated in VCPs.

- In addition to the key accomplishments listed in the Executive Summary, nearly 3,000 Veterans met with VA staff and community partners to make connections, build relationships and receive valuable information on the resources available in their respective communities. Some of those events included:
  - Butler VCP – VISN 4 held 2 food donation events for Veterans
  - Nashville VCP – VISN 9 held a drive-through Flu Shot Clinic and provided “Caring During COVID Kits” that included hygiene items and information about VA programs, services and benefits -- more than 1,000 kits were distributed
  - Wichita VCP – VISN 15 hosted the Great Bend Vet Breakfast and provided information and assistance on accessing Veteran benefits; they held a drive-through resource fair (also called a stand down) with 42 booths
  - Eastern Colorado VCP – VISN 19 provided Suicide Prevention Training
  - Northern California-Sacramento Valley – VISN 22 held a panel discussion on Trauma Informed Care
  - Lebanon VCP – VISN 4 hosted an education event on COVID 19: New Treatments and Vaccination Fatigue
  - Salisbury VCP – VISN 6 held 2 Yellow Ribbon events to welcome home returning Servicemembers and offer enrollment and information on Veteran health care
  - Hampton Roads VCP – VISN 2 hosted a virtual conference, “Veterans of the Vietnam Era: Honoring Loyalty, Looking Towards Hope,” which offered information for Veterans and caregivers on topics like mindfulness; factors that specifically impact Vietnam Veterans and benefits available through the VA
Spotlight Story

The Memphis VCP – VISN 9 held one of its first meetings to discuss challenges for Veterans in their community. One concern brought forward was the inability for Veterans to get admitted to a highly sought-after long-term care facility in their community. Feeling empowered, members of the VCP gathered together key stakeholders and met with leadership at the community facility.

During the meeting, they discovered process issues within the VA and the long-term care facility that had previously led to missed opportunities. Prior to the meeting, there were only 3 Veterans admitted to that facility.

Since the meeting, there have been 24 Veterans admitted to this facility. VCP empowers VA staff and community partners to reduce barriers to care, services and benefits for Veterans, families, and their caregivers.

“It is critical for the future success of the VA to have good relationships with community partners. The VCP emphasized our level of commitment to developing strong partnerships by having a team of motivated members assist in identifying barriers and working through challenges.”

Memphis VCP Co-Chair – VISN 9

Community Events

VCPs conduct community events on a multitude of topics and to address a variety of needs. In FY2021, VCPs held:

- 2 food distributions
- 5 stand downs, which are grassroots, community-based programs designed to help the nation’s Veterans access VA and community services – for example at one stand down there were 42 booths where Veterans, caregivers and other agency staff who serve Veterans could learn about and access resources and services
▪ 18 educational events on topics such as COVID fatigue, care coordination, moral distress, mental health and caregiver benefits

▪ 15 caregiver events, including a Veteran, Caregiver and Family appreciation event the day before Veteran’s Day, which featured food, music and extensive resource displays

▪ 17 events to acquaint Veterans as well as community organization staff with the range of benefits available to Veterans through the VA

▪ 5 enrollment-oriented events to provide Veterans with an overview of VA health care benefits and assistance with the enrollment process, if desired

▪ 9 events focused on VA and community programs and services for older Veterans, working with older adults and promotion of healthy aging

▪ 2 events to acquaint attendees with VA’s Whole Health initiative by hosting resource fairs focused on creative arts therapy and wellness

▪ 4 events targeted to Veterans experiencing homelessness to include health fairs, homeless stand downs and Mayor Give a Day

▪ 17 events on Mental Health/Suicide Prevention topics, including education on Trauma Informed Care, PTSD and Moral Injury, Afghanistan Panel Discussion, Suicide Prevention Symposums, Mental Health Summits and Domestic Violence Awareness

“The ‘Drive-Through Resource Fair’ was so successful that the community members want to do it again biannually. Veterans appreciated the 42 vendors offering everything from resume writing to information about services in their community.”

Wichita VCP Co-Chair – VISN 15
Overall Successes and Challenges

Successes and challenges are shared via an online tracking tool for meetings, events, partners and changes in practice. They are also shared during monthly VCP Co-Chair networking calls, through contact with members of the VCP Leadership Team, informational emails, news and social media posts as well as a 6-session mentoring session series that provides coaching and support on all aspects of starting and sustaining a successful VCP (see page 7 to learn more about the Mentoring Sessions).

This sharing allows successes and benefits to be replicated or adapted, and challenges can often be addressed through consideration of innovative approaches or viable solutions – these established methods proved to be highly beneficial during the pandemic.

Since strengthening relationships and enhancing communication on behalf of Veterans is the major goal of VCP, it is gratifying that the benefits most often cited by VCP participants are exactly those:

- Developing/strengthening relationships and improving communication between VA and community organizations and agencies
- Promoting continuity of care to meet the needs of Veterans and caregivers
- Increasing referrals and support for caregivers and improving service plans for Veterans

The progress of the national VCP initiative affirms the continuing need for strong and healthy partnerships among VA and community providers, agencies and service organizations to provide coordinated quality health care and services for Veterans and their families.

Indeed, VCPs support VA’s expanding efforts to amplify community engagement and partnerships to optimize choice and service for those who served.
VCP Trainings, Technical Assistance, Tools and Resources

Trainings
Virtual mentoring and training were provided to VA and Community Co-Chairs seeking additional support or who were new to their positions. VCP mentoring training consists of 6 interactive 1-hour sessions focused on building and sustaining a VCP. The sessions are offered quarterly and cover the following topics:

- **Week 1:** VCP Overview, Mission and Vision and Goals
- **Week 2:** VCP Resources
- **Week 3:** Build a Strong Foundation
- **Week 4:** Define a VCP Focus
- **Week 5:** Develop Action Plans
- **Week 6:** Promote, Sustain, Advocate and Evaluate VCP

The VCP Mentor Program started in 2019 and has offered the series of 6 sessions nine times.

To date, 36 VCP Co-Chairs have participated in the mentor program. Of those that completed the program, 100% of the participants reported feeling more confident as a VCP Co-Chair because of their participation in the program.

Attendees identified changes in professional practice/job function based on what they learned, with the top 6 likely changes cited including:

1. Improved networking with VA staff and community partners
2. Increased collaboration
3. Using knowledge gained about VA and community resources
4. Conducting a needs assessment
5. Building relationships to make connections
6. Discovering the balance between marketing to Veterans and connecting Veterans to the VA and community partners
VCP trainings provided relevant education and relationship building opportunities that benefit Veterans served by VA and in the community. Participant comments included:

- Focused, interactive and educational – highly professional and beneficial
- Great training on creating partnerships and building relationships
- Also appreciated information that provided a base for moving forward

Ideas suggested for topics and presenters at future VCP trainings or events, to optimize the impact of partnerships included:

- Ensure wide base of community partners and include key community partners on leadership teams; communicate benefits to community partners
- Hold on-site meetings at partner member locations and offer tours
- Provide brief overview of VCPs at all meeting so newcomers are quickly brought up to speed; allow plenty of time for networking
- Share stories about what other VCPs have done to empower collaborative action between VA and community partners

Technical Assistance, Tools and Resources

Monthly Networking Calls – Ongoing technical assistance is made available to all VCP Co-Chairs through monthly networking and mentoring phone calls where they can share successes, challenges and lessons learned as well as seek coaching and advice. Guest speakers and periodic trainings provide additional education about issues relevant to VCPs.

VCP Toolkit – The VCP Toolkit, updated in FY2020 with significant input from VCP members across the nation, provides step-by-step guidance on forming a VCP and links to materials that can be customized. To model the benefits of partnerships as well as meet pledges made to Congress, content from VHA’s Mental Health Summit Toolkit was integrated into the VCP Toolkit. In addition, the updated Toolkit contains links to VA services and resources, the VA App Store, videos, other VA Toolkits, statistics about Veterans and more.

Online VCP Resources – A Site Roster, Fact Sheet, templates for Action Plans, Needs Assessments, Evaluations, PowerPoints and more can be accessed via the VCP Website.
Other FY2021 Accomplishments and Future Plans

- Developed Talent Management System (TMS) courses for supervisors of VA VCP Co-Chairs and VISN VCP Points of Contact
- Refined standardized tools used to collect quarterly data about VCP progress and activities and updated the Reporting System User Guide to reflect changes
- Expanded promotion efforts through “telling the VCP story”
- Conducted a survey of VCPs to determine areas of focus (see below)

Expand VCP to every VHA Medical Center
- Update VCP Mentoring Program content to include due diligence
- Update the VCP website and VCP SharePoint site
- Develop a diversity training course for VCPs, accessible on TMS and TRAIN
- Offer additional training on evaluation to VCP Co-Chairs and members
- Create a series of infomercials to promote VCP
- Evaluate new VCPs and get their feedback on VCP training, their progress, successes and challenges
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VCP National Advisory Board
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