Success Stories: Health Centers & Military Veterans

NACHC is committed to enhancing the ability of health centers to serve Veterans in their communities. For over 50 years, health centers have proudly served Veterans and their families in need of care. NACHC has also helped health centers find, hire and retain qualified and experienced Veterans as staff members. Over the past five years, NACHC has made a concerted effort to help health centers understand and participate in the Department of Veterans Affairs’ (VA) evolving community care programs. The success stories highlighted here are just a few examples of the unique and meaningful ways that health centers are successfully supporting Veterans in their local communities.

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For over 40 years, Horizon Health Care has provided high-quality, affordable primary, dental, and mental health services to medically underserved areas and populations in South Dakota. Horizon has long been committed to hiring and serving Veterans within their communities.

Veterans face many barriers to employment during the transition from active duty to civilian life: translating military experience into civilian work skills, accessing and connecting to community resources and programs, and finding available opportunities in the private sector.

Veteran Hiring: A Leadership Priority Horizon’s commitment to Veterans starts with the board and executive team leading the charge to increase Veteran hiring at their sites. For example, Horizon has made it a policy to automatically interview all applicants that identify as having served in the Military.

Army PaYS Program The Army Partnership for Youth Success (PaYS) program guarantees transitioning service members a job interview and possible employment after their Army service. In 2016 Horizon joined the PaYS program to provide recruits who are interested in pursuing a health-related profession after their military service an opportunity to interview with Horizon for a specific job at a specific location. Horizon views its partnership with Army PaYS as a long-term commitment to hiring Veterans and transitioning service members. To date, Horizon has hired over 10 transitioning service members through Army PaYS.

Compensated Work Therapy Horizon contracts with the VHA Compensated Work Therapy (CWT) program for a range of services at their health centers including janitorial services and lawn care. CWT is a national vocational rehabilitation program that helps Veterans return to competitive employment, make a living wage, and build their self-esteem while contribution to the community. CWT provides work opportunities for Veterans with physical and mental disabilities in most large metropolitan areas and many smaller communities.

Lessons Learned Health centers and Veterans are a nature fit with a shared set of values:

◎ Mission driven
◎ Commitment to service
◎ Strong connections to their communities
◎ Sense of accountability

Horizon Receives U.S. Department of Defense Patriot Award

“Community health centers provide a wide range of employment opportunities for Veterans, Reservists and members of the National Guard and are a natural fit for transitioning Service members. With a singular mission to serve the community, the core values that define military service also guide community health centers: mission driven, loyalty, service and accountability.”

- John Mengenhausen, CEO, Horizon Health Care
Improving Access to Oral Health Care for Veterans

Family Health Center of Marshfield

The doors of Family Health Center (FHC) in Wisconsin first opened in March 1, 1974 as part of a partnership with Marshfield Clinic, a multispecialty group practice, and the Greater Marshfield Community Health Plan, an HMO. The partners shared a mission to provide comprehensive health services.

Most Veterans do not receive dental benefits from VA

FHC learned from County Veterans Service Officers that access to dental care for low income Veterans was the most difficult health-related issue they faced. With that knowledge, FHC committed to try to address this problem both within the counties where dental centers were being built and within adjacent counties. FHC’s goal is to ensure that no Veteran in the State of Wisconsin need to go without access to quality dental services.

Oral Health Access Initiative

Oral Health Access Initiative had a target area roughly the size of the state of Maine. Serving a population this large required both significant capacity and significant outreach efforts. To implement the initiative, FHC took three major steps: 1) develop physical capacity (both facilities and equipment); 2) recruit and retain a strong talent pool of dentists, hygienists, and other vital staff members; and, 3) implement a targeted outreach plan to expand awareness of FHC’s dental offerings. FHC opened new facilities, addressed staffing needs by establishing partnerships with dental schools to host rotations at several clinic locations, and developed a targeted outreach plan to ensure that Veterans knew about the initiative. As a result of these efforts, FHC’s dental program is now one of the largest community health center dental programs in the country.

Lessons Learned & Next Steps

- Never assume! FHC did not fully realize there was a need for Veteran dental services until they were told by County Veteran Services Officers.
- Board buy-in is vital: FHC’s Board of Directors was very supportive and took risks to support and expand services and outreach for Veterans. Without this support, it would have been much more difficult to expand their services.
- VA can be a helpful partner. Even when oral health benefits are limited, make contact with staff at local VA facilities and make the effort to build a strong relationship.
- Serving those who have served is its own reward and boosts staff morale. Providing dental care not only helps Veterans, it also provides an opportunity for service providers to honor Veterans.

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For over 50 years, Northwest Michigan Health Services Inc. (NMHSI) has provided culturally appropriate primary medical and dental care, serving seven counties in northwest lower Michigan. Northwest Michigan Health Services is dedicated to always serving with dignity and compassion.

Yet most Veterans do not have access to the dental care they need from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and many have significant untreated dental health issues. When the staff at NMHSI realized how many Veterans in their community were in need of affordable dental care, they created the Victors for Veterans program to help!

Victors for Veterans With support from corporate sponsors, NMHSI provides free dental care for Veterans in the seven counties served by NMHSI. Once a year, NMHSI enrolls dozens of Veterans who to receive a year of free care coordination and dental care. At the beginning of the program, NMHSI works with each newly enrolled Veteran to develop a treatment plan designed to address their dental needs over the course of a 12-month period. Additional Veterans are accepted into the program throughout the year as volunteer time becomes available. To serve these patients, NMHSI closes the clinic to all non-Veteran patients for two Fridays each month. NMHSI relies on a dedicated group of volunteer dentists and dental assistants to provide a wide range of dental services to program participants. Approximately 60 patients complete their treatment each year, where the value of dental services provided is estimated to be over $115,000 annually.

Lessons Learned & Next Steps

- **Community is vital to the program’s success.** Without a strong network of volunteers, the program would not be possible. NMHSI has been able to build the network of volunteers through an existing partnership with the University of Michigan that allows volunteers to receive continuing education credits in return for their efforts.

- **Word of mouth is powerful.** Most Veterans find the program through word of mouth—past program participants, local Veterans organizations, and VA staff all help ensure that Veterans know that dental care is available. To raise awareness of the program beyond word of mouth, NMHSI places flyers in local VA facilities and hosts an annual celebration with staff at local VA facilities.

- **Scheduling is challenging.** Schedules for both volunteer dentists and Veteran patients can change unexpectedly, and it is always a time crunch to finish every participant’s care by the end of the year.

Point of Contact: Jennifer Kerns
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HSNHC’s Veteran programming originally started as a gathering to help Veterans connect with each other. Over time, word spread and community members, other nonprofits, and government agencies offered to help. The program expanded into a full-service Veteran center that offers support with housing, employment, benefits, legal, and healthcare support available every weekday. While many of those services are available in downtown Boston, HSNHC’s program reduces the red tape and travel difficulties many Veterans face when trying to apply for the benefits they have earned. After running the program as a full volunteer effort for some time, HSNHC was recently able to secure funding to hire a staff member to lead the program and renovate the HSNHC basement for use as the permanent location for the Veterans Center. HSNHC has also developed relationships with a number of Veteran Service Organizations to ensure that they can provide referrals to Veterans who need additional support.

Many Veterans Have Difficulty Reaching Services
HSNHC is located in one of the poorest communities in Boston, and many Veterans services are located downtown. For many Veterans in the Mattapan, Dorchester, Roxbury, and South End areas, that can mean multiple bus rides to impersonal government office buildings. HSNHC staff identified this need and expanded their services for Veterans to offer more support closer to home.

Lessons Learned & Next Steps
◎ Data is important. HSNHC has recently started collecting formal data about every program participant. Collecting this data has provided a powerful tool to use when talking to potential partners and funders.
◎ Word of mouth is vital to program success. As HSNHC worked to expand its offerings for Veterans, a number of government agencies and other organizations that serve Veterans heard about their success and offered to bring staff members to the HSNHC facility to provide regular support.
Incorporated in 1992, Brockton Neighborhood Health Center (BNHC) serves 33 thousand patients in the medically underserved area of Brockton, MA, and its surrounding communities.

Psychiatry Residents at VA need more Primary Care Experience & Health Centers need more Psychiatrists

Prior to 2015, the medicine portion of VA’s psychiatry residency training program was entirely hospital-based, leaving residents without the crucial primary care training they need to provide well-rounded medical care. At the same time, health centers are challenged to meet patient need for psychiatric services. Physicians at BNHC recognized an opportunity for collaboration and established a residency rotation program that benefits residents, health centers, and Veteran and non-Veteran patients alike.

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<th>Resident Likelihood of Working in a Health Center in the Future</th>
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<td>Pre-Rotation</td>
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**CHC Primary Care Rotation** BHNC established a Primary Care Rotation at its facility in partnership with the local VA Medical Center and Harvard Medical School in order to provide psychiatry residents with the crucial primary care training they need. The program introduces first-year VA psychiatry residents to vulnerable and low-income patient populations and familiarizes them with the health center setting. The program allows residents to provide coordinated psychiatric and primary care services to the local Veteran population.

There are 8 psychiatry residents each year. Each of them rotates at BNHC for one month, 4 days per week. Rotations include time in primary care and specialty areas as well as at least 4 hours per week of didactic training, in accordance with Harvard Medical School standards. In order to gain exposure to the social determinants of health, residents go out into the field, including to homeless shelter clinics and Brockton’s tent city, as part of their training.

**Lessons Learned & Next Steps**

© 30 residents have completed the rotation, many of whom have demonstrated interest in working at a health center in the future. Additionally, residents have been able to identify Veteran patients in the community that were lost-to-follow-up in the VA system and then were able to reengage them in care. Programs like BHNC’s are critical to bridging the gaps between VA and community provided care.

© Four out of six of the faculty involved in the residency program received part-time lecturer status at Harvard. These opportunities are valuable to both staff retention and their professional growth.

© Grant funding is available for health centers to establish residency programs. BNHC received a grant from the Kraft Center for Community Health Leadership.

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Helping Veterans Access and Navigate VA Healthcare
Union Community Health Center

Originally founded in 1909 as a large community hospital, Union Community Health Center is a cornerstone of the Bronx, serving all those in need of healthcare. Today, Union is an award-winning health center providing comprehensive healthcare services to over 38,000 unique patients across six locations in the Bronx.

Access to Healthcare is a Challenge for Urban Veterans Too

Although frequently characterized as a problem for rural Veterans, access to comprehensive, quality healthcare services is also an issue for many Veterans living in urban environments like New York City. Many Veterans face transportation challenges or struggle to understand and navigate the complex eligibility requirements and referral processes within the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Union recognized that these obstacles existed for some of the many Veterans in its service area, and has committed to helping Veterans overcome the barriers they face in accessing healthcare services.

Veterans Healthcare Liaison

Union tried for several years to establish both formal and informal partnerships with its local VA Medical Center (VAMC) in the Bronx in order to provide better care and access to services to Veterans living in the Bronx. VAMC staff turnover, combined with the bureaucracy of the VA healthcare system and the administrative challenges in implementing the Veterans Choice Program, made it clear to Union that they needed a full-time resource solely dedicated to managing and coordinating care for Veterans. As a result, Union developed a unique template for a new staff position, the Veterans Healthcare Liaison.

This position includes three primary areas of responsibility:
1. Serving as a bi-lingual patient access representative, assisting Veterans with obtaining and tracking referrals and consults through appointment completion;
2. Delivering Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) services to screen, treat and refer Veterans to social network providers when needed; and,
3. Providing essential case management support

Lessons Learned & Next Steps

◎ This position has significantly streamlined the administrative aspects of working with VA
◎ Funding for a position like this needs to come from reimbursable services (e.g., LCSW) as well as grants to cover the non-reimbursable parts of the job

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Bringing Dental Care to Veterans Where They Are
Zufall Health Community Health Centers

Co-founded in 1990 by a WWII Veteran and retired physician, Zufall Health provides quality, affordable and culturally competent medical and oral health care to 37,000 patients a year in north, west and central New Jersey.

400 Thousand Veterans Live in New Jersey
Yet the vast majority of Veterans do not receive benefits for dental coverage from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).
Several years ago, the staff at Zufall Health recognized that many of the Veterans in their community lacked access to affordable oral health services and decided to do something about it!

The Dental Van
Zufall set up a medical van that traveled to a local VA clinic where Veterans received some limited dental treatment from the van. As the need for services grew, the health center obtained a fully-equipped dental van that could provide more comprehensive services. Today, the Zufall dental van goes to many locations, including soup kitchens, shelters, Stand Downs, and The American Legion, where they can reach low-income Veterans.

Smiles for Heroes
For the last three years, Zufall has partnered with corporate sponsors to bring a weekend of free dental care to 200 Veterans and their families. Dentists from all over New Jersey generously donate their time and labor. In addition to oral health services, Zufall also provides free breakfast and lunch as well as other medical services over the two days.

Lessons Learned & Next Steps
- Zufall Health has established a permanent part-time Veterans’ outreach position, to help reach Veterans who may not realize that they qualify for services at Zufall Health. A benefit to providing outreach and care is that Veterans are also able to bring their families to the health center.
- Many Veterans have gone years without adequate oral healthcare care and require a significant amount of work. Zufall has been successful in securing foundation support to help make these services accessible and affordable.
- There is tremendous community support for providing assistance to Veterans, and community health centers provide many of the services Veterans need. Zufall is currently examining where gaps exist in coverage for women’s health and is looking to expand its outreach efforts to focus on reaching women Veterans.

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Community Health Centers of Southeastern Iowa (CHC/SEIA) provides affordable primary health care through a network of nonprofit community health clinic sites to communities in the southeast corner of the state. In 2018, CHC/SEIA served 16,827 patients.

7.4% of Iowa’s population identify as Veterans

However, in Iowa and around the nation, screening for Veteran status is an inconsistent process. The Veterans Rural Health Resource Center, Community Health Centers of Southeastern Iowa, and the Iowa Primary Care Association have launched a partnership to improve Veteran status screening, and then care coordination, in the state.

Standardized Methodology & Intended Impact

CHC/SEIA employed a standardized methodology to better identify Veterans among their patient population. Once Veterans were identified, CHC/SEIA’s care goals included 1) identifying Veterans with behavioral health issues (including depression, anxiety, substance use disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)); 2) engaging them in care, both within VA and the FQHC network; and, 3) delivering timely care.

Screening Interventions

A revised screening question was added to CHC/SEIA’s electronic medical record as a required field, and staff were trained on the new protocol at all sites. They also implemented behavioral health screening and established referral processes, including a VA Program Care Coordinator role and treatment workflows. Once Veterans were identified, CHC/SEIA and partners assisted interested Veterans with understanding eligibility, applying for VA health benefits, and enrolling in VA services.

Revised Screening Question

Have you served in the military or armed forces? This includes: Air Force, Army, Coast Guard, Marines, Navy, National Guard, or Reserves?

Yes____ No_____

Lessons Learned & Next Steps

- CHC/SEIA has dramatically increased reliable data on the number of identified veteran patients across all sites.
- Next steps for program implementation include:
  - Addition of a provider on site that can perform VA-eligible services
  - Eventual expansion of behavioral health screening to all adult patients across all sites
  - Introduction of telehealth services to the pilot program
- CHC/SEIA is capturing best practices and collecting internal/external reform recommendations for project duplication efforts.

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Veteran Hiring in Health Centers
Peak Vista Community Health Centers

Peak Vista Community Health Centers provides medical, dental, and behavioral health care to the East Central and Pikes Peak areas of Colorado. Peak Vista serves 94,000+ patients through 26 outpatient centers.

400 Thousand Veterans Live in Colorado

Many of whom have current medical skills that could easily transfer to the civilian sector. However, due to challenges ranging from incompatible resumes to frequent relocation to lack of awareness of job postings, Veterans often miss out on local employment opportunities.

Recruitment Strategy

Upon realizing this gap, Peak Vista designed a strategy to better meet the unique circumstances Veterans and their families face. This strategy begins with publicizing job listings and creating a welcoming and inclusive environment and extends into 1) actively recruiting; 2) hiring and accommodating; and, 3) proactively retaining Veterans. Peak Vista also established a presence at Veteran-focused career fairs and got involved in the Veterans Day parade.

Key Partners

Peak Vista worked closely with Pikes Peak Workforce Center to establish a strong connection and presence within the local community. Other critical partners include the Department of Labor & Employment, vocational rehab centers, Ft. Carson Connections (a service provided on local military base), and PIMA Medical Services.

Lessons Learned & Next Steps

- Participating in job fairs specifically geared towards military Veterans can go a long way toward meeting Veterans in the area interested in a career at a community health center.
- The hiring process is not often clear or intuitive, and assisting qualified applicants in navigating it can be extremely helpful.
- Removing bias in current staff was extremely critical to Peak Vista’s success; one method of doing this was actively sharing the strengths of Veteran hires.
- Work study programs can be extremely useful: one participant in a program at Peak Vista worked on the local military base and offered valuable insight to the Veteran community and members of the military transitioning into civilian roles.

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Yakima Neighborhood Health Services’ (YNHS) first clinic opened in downtown Yakima, Washington in May 1975. Today, YNHS has medical and dental clinics in Yakima, Sunnyside, and Granger, serving both urban and rural communities. In 2017, YNHS served 22,784 patients.

**40 Thousand Veterans are Homeless in the US**

and Veteran homelessness affects every community – large or small. YNHS has worked for many years to provide healthcare to the local veteran population. In recent years, the YNHS Homeless and Housing Services division’s team of outreach staff and case managers decided to place a special focus on supporting ~60 local homeless veterans in their community.

Stand Down YNHS participates in Stand Down, a national grassroots community-based intervention program designed to help the nation’s homeless Veterans by offering a variety of free and low-cost resources.

Supportive Housing for Veterans

YNHS has worked with the Yakima Housing Authority (YHA) for many years, and has recently embarked on an exciting new venture that it hopes will provide outreach and more services to Veterans. The YHA has acquired property specifically to provide 41 units of supportive housing for homeless Veterans and their families. An additional 12,000 square feet will be dedicated for social services that target homeless Veterans. Through this partnership, YNHS will be able to provide medical, dental, and behavioral services onsite at the armory, providing care for both Veterans that live there, as well as other Veterans in the community who need medical services.

Lessons Learned & Next Steps

- **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a major contributor to Veteran Homelessness.** While Yakima provides a wide variety of general medical services, they place a particular emphasis on their behavioral health services with Veterans. By integrating services for PTSD into the primary care program, YNHS helps to alleviate patients’ worries about being stereotyped for receiving behavioral health support.

- **Knowledge of Community Resources is Vital.** An essential part of the program’s success is making sure that health center staff are familiar with what’s available in the community so that they can both refer Veterans for care, and identify gaps and needs.