



Association of VA Psychologist Leaders

Essential Healthcare for Veterans: Psychologists Improve Lives

The Role of the Psychologist in Veterans' Healthcare

The mental health needs of our veterans are well documented. Figures show that over 40% of veterans utilizing VHA have an identifiable mental health diagnosis and 80% of veterans seen in primary care clinics have underlying mental health issues. Psychologists should be an integral part of healthcare for veterans because of their unique training in the following areas:

- Organizational Development
- Clinical Supervision and training
- Program Development
- Assessment
- Research/Outcome & Program evaluation
- Statistical Analysis

This training equips psychologists with the skills necessary to:

Answer the following questions:

- Are we treating VHA's core population?
- What are the best models of healthcare delivery?
- What are the best practices in healthcare that result in the highest quality of treatment for least expense?

Address the following challenges:

- Implement identified best practices across VISN's when and where appropriate
- Develop methodologies for determining productivity standards
- Build Multi/Interdisciplinary Teams to treat the varied needs of different patient populations across the entire continuum of care

Training and Credentialing

- No other mental health profession requires as high a degree of education and training in mental health as psychology. Accredited doctoral programs in health services psychology involve a median of seven years of training beyond an undergraduate degree. Psychologists are licensed, independent practitioners with specialized clinical and research skills.

Therapeutic Interventions

- It is well known that psychology offers effective diagnosis and treatment for all mental health, substance use and behavioral health issues. Psychological treatment approaches have been shown to be equally, if not more, effective than drug therapies. Alternatives to drug therapies are particularly valuable to elderly populations (part of VHA's core population), who are often suffering from overmedication and numerous side effects of various drugs and drug interactions.
- Psychological interventions have a profound positive impact on the care of patients suffering from chronic illnesses. Psychological interventions help control high blood pressure, manage chronic

pain, help cancer patients cope with the side effects of chemotherapy and provide effective treatment for the depression and anxiety that accompany adjustment to these physical problems.

- Psychologists help patients develop coping strategies and healthy behaviors, which are effective in reducing the factors associated with the development of illness (e.g., cardiovascular disease, cancer, and HIV).
- Pre-surgical psychological counseling is associated with fewer complications and a reduction in medication utilization.

Assessment

- Diagnostic tests performed by psychologists are state-of-the-art tools. Increasingly, physicians and other health care professionals turn to psychologists for their diagnostic capabilities. These diagnostic services detect functional impairment and assess the prognosis for improvement or deterioration in functioning. Psychologists apply these results and develop rehabilitative services and treatment.

Leaders Across the Full Continuum of Care

- **These skills in program development, team building, research/outcome and program evaluation and in assessment and treatment interventions equip psychologists to be leaders in planning and providing a coordinated service approach. This includes models and practices of care that encompass inpatient, partial hospitalization and outpatient services including CBOC's, psychosocial rehabilitation programs, homeless programs, geriatric services in the community, residencies and the home.**
- **Psychologists initiate and evaluate innovative programs, such as tele-mental health services. They go beyond the provision of service to initiate, plan and evaluate the efficacy of such services and their clinical and cost benefits.**

Psychologists Represent Value Added

- The provision of psychological services to high frequency Medicaid users has been associated with a nearly 40% reduction in their Medicaid utilization.
- Many primary care clinics which include psychologists have shown as much as a 27% reduction in hospital admissions and bed days.
- Psychologists at the AVAPL/APA VA Leadership conference presented numerous examples of value added from the provision of mental health services in VHA. Further details about these are available upon request.

Portions of this document were taken from materials on the American Psychological Association- Practice Directorate web-site.