Letter from the President: Connections: Both Personal and The Big Picture

Dear AVAPL Friends:

I hope you are enjoying the spring weather. I know when flowers bloom and the earth turns green I feel a sense of renewal and optimism. And I feel a similar sense of encouragement about the future of veteran’s health care after returning from our mid-winter meetings in Washington DC. The Executive Board completed our annual Midwinter Meeting last month and the minutes are undergoing final edits which will be posted on the website soon. Although this may not sound like exciting reading material I urge you take a few minutes and read over them. They give a snap shot of all the incredible work that is being done by OMHS and OMHO to put policies and procedures in place that enable our veterans to receive the highest quality health care. APA is a tireless advocate to Congress for VA research funds and new initiatives that provide education and resources for those treating veterans in the community. Psychology education and training are of paramount importance to both VACO and APA.

Sometimes we get so busy that it is hard to remember to look at the big picture. The mid-winter meetings reminded me that the “big picture” is a composite of individuals and organizations at all levels working toward a common purpose.

A week after I returned from our meetings in DC I received a book in the mail from a veteran service officer I met during our meeting with the VSOs titled Dear America: Letters from Vietnam. It was inscribed with the words “To Pam Fischer…who listens and understands.” I was deeply touched by this simple tribute. Isn’t this what it is all about? Isn’t this what each of us does every day? It was a powerful reminder that our ability to listen and understand is at the core of the services we provide and perhaps our greatest gift to veterans……and to each other.

Elections for AVAPL President-Elect are just around the corner. Although the person elected will not take office until the APA meeting in August, the process of soliciting nominations, sending out campaign statements and voting takes a while and it’s time to move in that direction. Being president of AVAPL takes a lot of work and you may not be the most popular person at times, but it is an endeavor worthy of the sacrifice. It is an honor and a privilege to serve in this capacity. I hope you will consider (or encourage someone else to consider) running for this office.

Pam
Pam Fischer, Ph.D.
AVAPL President
This conference continues to be the most attended and valuable for VA Psychologists. This year is no exception. Luminaries who will present and be informally available for conversation and networking include: William C. Schoenhard, VACO Deputy Undersecretary for Operations and Management, and his chief deputy for Mental Health (Mary Schohn) and her counter-partner in the Office of Mental Health Services Toni Zeiss); and many other VACO experts and leaders from every substantive and geographic area. Co-sponsor APA is well represented by President Suzanne Bennett Johnson and several APA advocacy and policy leaders, as well as co-sponsor Division 18. This year’s conference will provide special insights and practical training in use of the latest electronic methods of communicating (tele-mental health; secure messaging; wet-based approaches, and others). Opportunities for in-depth discussion will present for New Career Psychologists, Training Program leaders, Rural Population, EBP, Advocacy, and a host of specific specialty areas. A grand time will be had by all, and a passel of education and networking to boot!

Quick Sample of Conference Events:

**Wednesday, April 11, 2012**
5:30 pm -7:00 pm  Registration and Informal Networking Social

**Thursday, April 12, 2012**
Keynote: William C. Schoenhard, FACHE. Deputy Under Secretary for Health for Operations and Management, VA Central Office
Updates and Insights: Education, Expanding Technology options in MH
Breakouts and Special Interest Groups Networking
  Early Career Psychologists  Technology and Informatics
  VA Psychology Training  General Networking
Invited Address and Presentation of the Patrick DeLeon Advocacy Award
Social Hour/Poster Sessions

**Friday, April 13, 2012**
Keynote: APA President Suzanne Bennett Johnson, Ph.D.
Updates and Insights: VACO panel, What “counts” in MH, MH Information System Dashboards
Breakouts and Special Interest Groups Networking
  DBT implementation  Chronic Pain and SUD
  PTDS Family approaches  Leadership through stormy weather
Networking and Social Hour

**Saturday, April 14, 2012**
8:00 am -12:00 pm  CE Workshops
  Workshop 1: VA Integrated Ethics: Advancing the Transformation of Ethics Quality in Health Care
  Workshop 2: Developing and Implementing a Tele-mental Health Program
Highlights from the AVAPL Mid-Winter Meeting with VA Central Office
- by Elizabeth Valentine

Each year, AVAPL’s Executive Leadership team visits Washington to learn from and to inform VA Psychology’s many stakeholders about issues of current importance. This year’s trip was as fruitful as ever. This is a brief summary of the longer report soon to be available on AVAPL.org.

EBT Update

The MH Handbook does not specify which therapies to use and does not direct clinicians’ choices in specific situations. Staff must use their clinical judgment in selecting the treatment strategy with the Veteran, and document their rationale clearly. The National Healthcare Delivery Committee is on board and supports implementation of EBTs. The “8 in 14” Performance Measure (8 psychotherapy sessions within a 14 week period, within a single year for Veterans newly diagnosed with PTSD) is designed to bring attention to barriers to implementation of EBTs at the facility and VISN levels. Another related issue is that some veterans expect to receive therapy indefinitely; this is a paradigm shift that needs to be addressed by the clinician. Initially the actual delivery of the “8 in 14” is limited in the system, with only one VISN meeting the 20% target. It was suggested that increased use of peer support could assist with expectation for continued care.

The plan for future EBT trainings is to decentralize them to the VISNs. Progress is limited at this time in part due to the concern that financial concerns could impact local training budgets. Training that is decentralized will have more flexibility (i.e., interns may be able to participate). Progress is being made in certifying EBT equivalency training. When finalized, applications will be submitted to the VHA EBT training group.

Outcome measures for EBTs are currently being tracked during the training phase: symptom reduction, quality of life and therapeutic alliance are being measured. PN templates for documentation of EBT has been developed but delays have been experienced with IT roll-outs. It is expected that these templates will be ready for utilization by the end of this FY.

Staffing Model Pending Approval

It is expected that the new staffing model should solve the variable administrative support that mental health providers have throughout the system. Dr. Schohn stated that the staffing model will shape care and help develop a team to manage 1000 patients. The staffing model will be piloted in VISNs 1, 4 and 22. The model needs to fit all settings and systems and will influence care nationally.

Not all facilities have lead psychologists; some outpatient clinics have no one in charge at all. Promotion to GS-14 and GS-15 is uneven across the county. A better defined leadership structure could improve effectiveness of mental health services, as could a better understanding of mapping and productivity among front line staff. A Field Survey is currently being drafted, which could provide helpful information about the state of Psychology nationally. Dr. Schohn explained that productivity and workload are viewed as complementary given the number of patients, programs and complexity levels. The Productivity Directive will require that managers review all programs and ensure correct mapping. Data will be based on the median level across all facilities in 2010. New training will be released in April that addresses the business rules related to productivity. Three classes will be available on line and in Live Meetings to address labor mapping, VERA and DSS information. A Tool Kit is also anticipated for release to the field.

Office of Family Services Update

Susan McCutcheon, R.N., Ed.D., Director, Family Services, Women’s Mental Health and Military Sexual Trauma, VACO Office of Mental Health Services

Dr. McCutcheon’s office, previously in Psychosocial Rehabilitation and Recovery Services, currently reports to the Deputy Patient Care Services Officer. Family Services has successfully provided evidence based training in the family psycho-educational model for over 386 staff, 194 staff were trained in Behavioral Family Therapy, and 124 staff were trained in Couples Therapy. Future train-
ings will address PTSD/Family needs and Substance Use Disorders, including a half day on intimate family violence and assessment, and a half day on parenting.

There are two strategic initiatives related to the SAFE Program addressing family resilience and development of the FOCUS program for children. VA and DoD adopted Operation Enduring Family and parenting is the topic of a planned web-based application for patients.

**VAMCs Establish NAMI Partnerships**

Dr. McCutcheon reported on the status of the VA/NAMI Memorandum of Understanding which originally required that one VA in every state establish a partnership with NAMI. To date, 70 sites have established NAMI partnerships. In the future, sites will be expected to pursue a partnership with NAMI.

**Female Veterans and MST Update**

Fifty-five percent of new women Veterans are entering the VA for services; approximately half have mental health diagnoses; 29% have PTSD. The rate of women using inpatient services has increased by 20% and outpatient demand for services for women Veterans has increased by 70%. Seventy-three percent of women rated VA Healthcare as excellent. The Office of Family Services is planning a survey for MH on women’s issues which will include gender and LGBT sensitivity.

In FY 11, MST screening occurred for 98.4% of veterans with 23% of our women and 2% of our male veterans screening positive. There is planned mandatory education for MH providers in the area of military sexual trauma.

**Mental Health Operations, VACO Visits All Sites**

*Mary Schohn, Ph.D., Director, Mental Health Operations, VA Central Office*

The original plan to visit 45 sites this year has been accelerated to include all sites by the end of the fiscal year. Visits will be consultative and evaluate the progress toward implementation of the Uniform Services Handbook program requirements. The goal is to identify problems and strengths and to provide technical assistance. The visits will help address the variability across the field. Dr. Schohn noted that her staff is working to create data bases with site visit results so that annual follow up will clearly demonstrate the amount of change. The field should begin to see changes in hiring fairly quickly.

**Peer Support Update**

*Jeffrey Burk, Ph.D., National Mental Health Director for Psychosocial Rehabilitation and Recovery Services, VACO Office of Mental Health Services*

PL 110387 (2008) mandated the development of a “Peer Support Specialist.” In 2010, VA hired 237 peers and 120 WOC peers but there is wide disparity across the nation. The new Public Law requires that the Peer Support Specialist be a Veteran with MH concerns and be certified in their role. There are organizations that provide Peer Support Certification and several states have their own Peer Support Programs; VA requirements are more stringent. Dr. Burk’s office pays the certification fees and travel. We are continuing to work with HR to develop the position descriptions and define the progression from grade to grade.
Recruiting Early Career VA Psychologist Leaders

-Brent Kenney, reporting

Under Dr. Pam Fischer’s tenure as President of AVAPL this year, an Early Career Committee (ECC) was established as part of her presidential platform “to strengthen AVAPL recruitment efforts of new and early career psychologists.” The purpose of this group is to encourage more active involvement in our organization by EC psychologists and to promote opportunities for networking, exchanging ideas, career development, and taking on leadership roles. An active EC group invigorates AVAPL and fosters its mission to promote psychologist leadership in the Veterans Healthcare system. Although the group began very recently (in October 2011) we have already accomplished some things to report.

“I encourage current members of the ECC to aim high, think creatively, and continue to build this valuable resource.”

For the upcoming VA Psychology Leadership Conference the ECC is working on several networking opportunities. In collaboration with the Dr. Ann Landes, Hospitality Chair, we are encouraging all attendees to greet and welcome new AVAPL members, many of whom will be Early Career psychologists. A sticker will be placed on the ID badges of new members for easy recognition and to encourage established members to come up and say, “Hi” Last year was my first attendance at an AVAPL conference and I enjoyed the opportunity to participate in conversations beyond those psychologists I already knew. Last week, a flyer was sent out on the AVAPL listserv inviting all early career psychologists to meet for dinner to socialize and network on Thursday evening of the conference.

The conference will also have an exercise break that Dr. Ann Landes is coordinating, AVAPL Psychologists on the Run. This is the first time such an event has been formalized. I hope many members will put on their running/walking shoes and participate.

The ECC committee created a Facebook page (http://tinyurl.com/avaplecc). The page is active and has several “Timeline” posts with resources or articles relevant to early career psychologists. Posts seem to be broadly useful. For example, we posted a link to the VA Acronym database which is maintained by the Office of Health Information. Anyone new to the VA will appreciate how useful a resource to search for the meaning of a mysterious new acronym can be. I hope the Early Career Committee’s presence on Facebook will continue to be utilized and grow accordingly. In preparing this article, the “Likes” grew from 14 to 19 in a week and we expect that number to continue to increase.

Approximately a dozen psychologists have participated in email communiqué related to setting up the ECC and to planning activities for the conference. Interest in the ECC has also been expressed by trainees although officially the ECC is for psychologists with 1-7 years post doctorate experience. I am aware of a trainee who secured a neuropsychology fellowship in the VA for next year who asked about joining an ECC list-serv. As we are not currently using a list-serv, I passed along related information and recommended joining an APA division listserv as an early career psychologist. I pointed him toward the “NewPsychList” Yahoo group (NewPsychList@yahoogroups.com) and the APA Early Career digest (LISTSERV@lists.apa.org). I took the extra time because I am aware of how building a career as an early career psychologist can be a challenge. The VA, as well, can offer its own unexpected and unique professional tests. I encourage current members of the ECC to aim high, think creatively, and continue to build this valuable resource.
Jim Fitterling’s Remarkable Training Skills Tapped by University of Alaska

By Paul Dukarm, Ph.D., July 7, 2011

It is with very mixed feelings that the training committee of the Alaska VA Psychology Internship Program announces the departure of its founding leader, Dr. James “Jim” Fitterling. Jim has retired and will be moving on to the next chapter of his professional career where he will be Director of Training at the University of Alaska – Anchorage Joint Doctoral Program in Clinical and Community Psychology.

As a member of the Association of VA Psychologist Leaders, Jim has served as a clinical psychologist within the Veterans Health Administration for nearly 25 years. He spent 11 years as a psychologist and internship faculty member of the VAMC in Jackson, MS. In order to be closer to Denali and reduce the air time it took to mountaineer, Jim accepted a transfer to Anchorage, where he has served our facility for 13 years. Jim began developing the internship program in 2007. In 2008, the first interns arrived in Anchorage. The time, Jim was the Chief of the Homeless Veterans Service.

Thanks to Jim, the Alaska VA Psychology Internship is on its third year. Three psychology interns will be joining us for our first year as a newly accredited APA psychology training site. The program was officially accredited in May, 2011 for the maximum permissible period of 7 years, a real testament to the quality already recognized in this excellent program. It will be the first and only APA accredited internship program the State of Alaska has ever known. Hopefully it will not be the last. Jim will be working towards APA accreditation for the doctoral program at his new job.

All of us in the Alaska VA Psychology Internship Program thank Jim for his wonderful contributions to the Alaska VA Health Care System. We hope to honor Jim’s legacy by continuing to develop and enhance the psychology training program while serving the Veterans of our great state.

Thank you, Jim!