

VISN3 VAC



VETERANS ADVISORY COUNCIL FOR MENTAL HEALTH

NEWSLETTER



VOLUME 1, ISSUE 1 — SPRING 2007

VISN 3 Employees and Veterans:

I am delighted to introduce our newly created Recovery Newsletter. It is a unique endeavor because it is produced by members of our Veterans Advisory Council. It is also a result of VISN 3's commitment to a "sea change" in the philosophy of the delivery of Mental Health services.

The Department of Veterans Affairs is the first federal department to commit to implementing the recommendations of the President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health. Our VISN leadership and veterans have wholeheartedly adopted the Mental Health Action Agenda which will transform our mental health system to one that fully embraces a RECOVERY philosophy.

In VISN3, we are working towards a more person-centered approach that is a cornerstone of the Recovery philosophy. Our goal is to have a health care system that acknowledges:

- A future when every veteran with a mental illness will recover;
- A future when mental illnesses can be prevented or cured;
- A future when everyone with a mental illness at any stage of life has access to effective treatments, healthcare partnerships and natural supports,
- And all the essentials for living, loving, working, learning, playing and participating fully in the community.

Key components of our efforts are the education of staff and veterans on this new philosophy, and the active participation of veterans as we move along on this journey. This Newsletter is an excellent way to meet those two goals. Our Network and local medical center Mental Health Veterans Advisory Councils will play a vital role as we move forward. We have only just begun this journey but are energized by the possibilities for the future and our vision for veteran centered mental health care delivery.

I know this newsletter will provide readers with valuable information on our progress and, more importantly, information on how you might get involved. My sincerest thanks to all the great work by our veteran representatives and VA staff.

Please remember that recovery is a journey not a destination.

Thank you.

Michael A. Sabo

VISN3 Mental Health Care Line Director



Veterans and Staff enjoying and learning together at the conference on Recovery in Parsippany, NJ

The planning committee included veterans and staff throughout VISN #3.



Susan McMillan, VISN VAC co-Chair, leading a discussion on committee responsibilities.



Listening attentively to Dr. Levine's instructions on Focus Groups.



Getting ready to go!!!



RECOVERY

By Leslie Pulvirenti

What is it, how will it change, and what will it mean for you?

Commission on Mental Health

Mission

1. Conduct a comprehensive study of the United States mental health service delivery system, including both the private and public sector providers

2. Advise the President on methods of improving the system

Goal

Recommend improvements to enable adults with serious mental illnesses and children with serious emotional disturbances to live, work, learn, and participate fully in their communities.

1. Review the current quality and effectiveness of public and private providers and Federal, State, and local government involvement in the delivery of services to individuals with serious mental illnesses and children with serious emotional disturbances, and identify unmet needs and barriers to services.

2. Identify innovative mental health treatments, services, and technologies that are demonstratively effective and can be widely replicated in different settings.

Formulate policy options that could be implemented by public and private providers and Federal, State, and local governments to integrate the use of effective treatments and services, improve coordination among service providers, and improve community integration for adults with serious mental illnesses and children with serious emotional disturbances.

The Veterans Integrated Service Network #3 (VISN3) which encompasses the NY Harbor Health Care system (Brooklyn, St. Albans and New York campuses), the Bronx VAMC, the NJ Health Care System (East Orange and Lyons campuses), the Northport VAMC and the Hudson Valley Health Care System (Montrose and Castle Point campuses) has developed a vision for a recovery driven system:

We envision a mental health care system that is person-centered and geared toward recovery. A future when every veteran with a mental illness will recover, a future when mental illnesses can be prevented or cured, a future when everyone with a mental illness at any stage of life has access to effective treatments, healthcare partnerships and natural supports -- all the essentials for living, loving, working, learning, playing, and participating fully in the community.

When I volunteered to write an article about recovery for the VAC Newsletter I wanted to write it from the veteran's perspective. The following quotes are from some of the veterans in our Comprehensive Day Treatment Program at Northport:

What recovery means to me:

"Having the desire to meet people and enjoying their company. Learning from them and hopefully they will be helped by me. It's a wonderful feeling to have a fellow veteran let you know that something we discussed is having a positive effect on his recovery." George B.

"Recovery means that we know more about our illness and we act accordingly ... we do not return to our previous condition of illness, but we have learned to live a more healthy existence." Tom M.

"Freedom from all fears." Kurt L.

"To bring back my happiness inside and outside." Charles G.

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Recovery Conference

On September 28th and September 29th, 2006 a historic event took place in Parsippany, New Jersey. Staff and veterans from VISN #3 met and learned about Recovery. It was a two day conference that had such notable speakers as Bruce Levine, MD, Miklos Losonczy, MD, Ph.D., Fred Frese, Ph.D., Kenneth Gill, Ph.D., John Kuhn, MSW, Bob Gresen, Ph.D., Dave Johnson, Peer Specialist, Steve Konyha, VISN VAC co-chair and Mr. James J. Farsetta, Network Director.

The conference had seminars on What is Recovery?, Change is Hard, Language and Stigma, and Dr. Frese spoke of Evidence Based Practices.

Focus groups were held to determine what each person's understanding of recovery is and where the different hospitals stood with recovery. To be noted, each focus group was conducted by a staff member and a veteran.

Certificates of Appreciation were awarded from the VISN3 to Mara Kushner-Davis for her support of the VAC, Mr. Michael Sabo for his work and partnership with the MHEB and VISN VAC and Mr. James J. Farsetta for his enthusiasm and willingness to work in partnership with the veterans.

A veteran dinner was held for all the veterans who attended the conference. It was a great opportunity to bond and network.

The conference was a success and a first step in solidifying the partnership between veterans and staff was an example of Recovery in Action.

Written by Michelle Smith

New Appointment at James J. Peters Veterans Consumer Advisory Council

Helen Rasmussen, LCSW is the newly appointed Local Recovery Coordinator for the James J Peters (Bronx) VAMC. She is enthusiastic about this new position and the challenges it presents. She is transferring from her job as social worker in outpatient psychiatry. She previously worked at VAMC's in Atlanta and Brooklyn. She also directed the U.S. Coast Guard Family Services Center at Governors Island, NY. She graduated from Columbia University School of Social Work and post-graduate training at the Ackerman Institute for the Family. Welcome Helen!

Ms. Rasmussen will be working closely with the local VAC co-chair Susan McMillan, Staff Representative Charmaine McPherson, Charles Witherspoon, and Sec. Tracey Darshan. The Bronx VAC was led in the past by Felicity Laboy, Ph.D. Dr. Laboy recently took a leave of absence from her position as staff co-chair of the VAC but the council looks forward to her returning to the VAC in the future. If you are interested in receiving more information concerning the Veteran Advisory Council for Mental Health in the Bronx, please contact Ms. McMillan at extension 2547.

Written by Ann Feder

Recovery

"Learning about my illness and the limits it puts on me. Plus learning how to accept these limits, and ways to deal with them on a daily basis. This helps me do the best I can, which helps me feel good about me and who I am."

"Being able to do things you would like to do and being able to handle stressful problems that come along."

"Having a traumatic experience and trying to get over

it with therapy help."

"It means returning to former well being of mind and body."

"For the first time in my life I am learning to live in sobriety. I am growing mentally and spiritually. I am an honest, good man today and I am not ashamed to have a mental illness anymore." Frank S.

"Recovery means to look at life in a positive way and to make changes in your way of thinking and changing your attitude about life. To look at things with respect, responsibility and honesty." Felix A.

"It means survival, the quality of life that all people deserve but are not always fortunate to acquire. Recovery to me is synonymous with life itself and without recovery there is only existence. It is the recovery that makes that existence worthwhile. Vive Recovery!" Lenny S.

I have been blessed with the opportunity to work in Mental Health at the VA Hospital in Northport for the past 25 years, and have witnessed many of the changes in perception and practice as they relate to the mental health care and treatment of our veterans. I am excited about the changes that are taking place (encouraged by the President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health, as noted above) to transform our current system of mental health care delivery to a recovery oriented, patient-centered system. It is our goal that this new direction of recovery and the partnership between veterans and their caregivers will greatly improve the quality of life for each and every veteran.

One of my favorite quotations is "*Knowledge is Power*" Sir Francis Bacon, English author & philosopher (1561 - 1626)

This is a concept that I review quite often in the weekly Recovery Group that I facilitate at Northport. Without continued growth and learning, situations remain stagnant and change is very difficult to effect. A desire to learn about your health in general and your mental health diagnosis in particular is crucial to being able to make positive changes that can greatly improve your quality of life. Becoming an active participant in the process of your recovery can be both a challenging and rewarding experience. You can successfully achieve your goals through partnering with your health care providers to receive the education and assistance that you need to make **informed decisions** about your care and treatment.

Come join us as we work together to improve and transform recovery for each and every veteran. Your participation and assistance is crucial to our success!

Brooklyn VA Veteran Advisory Council for Mental Health

The Brooklyn Veteran Advisory Council for Mental Health Services is made up of mental health staff and veterans. The council seeks to represent as many mental health programs as possible. The council strives to publicize mental health programs so that veterans are aware of the entire range of services offered and strives to empower veterans to take an active role in planning and managing their mental health care.

In addition the council also gathers information on consumer satisfaction and concerns, and reports these issues on a regular basis to the administration of mental health. The members are:

Don Feldman, Korean War Veteran Association Room 5-222 ext 6794

Ruben Pratts, Military Order Purple Hearts Room 5-224 ext. 6547

Tom Brooks, VFW representative Room 5-2222 ext 6794

Larry Drye, Clubhouse member

Luis Santos, Clubhouse member

Mike Decataldo, Day Hospital Grad

Leslie Wohfeld, VFW representative Room 16-117 ext. 6794

Bert Hirsch, Program Coordinator Day Hospital Room 16-117 ext. 3741

We meet every first Wednesday of each month at noon in the Day Hospital.

The Manhattan VAC

The Manhattan VAC meets on the 2nd Friday of each month in the 17W Conference Room at 3:00. The co-chairs are Steve Konyha, US Army veteran and Judith Slane, LCSW.

The members of the Council include many members of the Manhattan Clubhouse which is an active psychosocial rehab center that includes MyHealtheVet training, No Man Is An Island, and information on Recovery.

The Council recently attended the Creative Arts Festival in Bronx where they won several awards, including a first place for Pyrography (Wood Burning) which will also be entered in the National Competition.

For more information on the Manhattan VAC please contact Steve Konyha at (212)686-7500 ext. 4598, Judith Slane, LCSW at (212) 686-7500 ext. 4989 or Ms. Patricia Johnson at (212) 686-7500 ext. 7697.

Hudson Valley Veterans Administration

Psychosocial Rehabilitation Program

(Recovery Center)

HVHCS continues to make significant improvement in the transformation toward recovery for SMI veterans. The newly developing Psychosocial Rehabilitation Program (Recovery Center) has expanded and modified it's services to continue addressing the needs of the veterans on the inpatient units (4ab 4cd & 15ab) and Outpatient Substance Abuse & Domiciliary. As stated previously, the recovery model of treatment was initially piloted on the chronic unit and now is able to provide off unit programming. The Recovery Center staff continue to attend daily morning reports on those units providing staff education in recovery models, clinical observations of veterans, daily scheduling of activities for veterans and providing advocacy for inpatient veterans.

Veterans are assessed for rehabilitation readiness by the Recovery Center clinicians in collaboration with inpatient Multi Disciplinary Team. A veteran may either attend off unit recovery program or if not ready, will be seen individually by Recovery Center clinician on unit as introduction to off unit programming. The intention is to have all veterans able to tolerate off unit environmental stressors attend and participate in the Recovery Center. On unit coaching sessions are designed to prepare a veteran for off unit activities moving toward a less restrictive environment of care. As recovery models indicate, each veteran is unique with specific strengths and deserves individual treatment. Recovery Center clinicians chart veteran's progress in CPRS for both individual and group sessions.

The Recovery Center is working in collaboration with other disciplines including Art Therapy and is developing programming which addresses needs of less verbal veterans. The Recovery Center has been providing an average of 125 groups per month with average of 720 veteran visits. This does not include the on unit individual sessions. The Recovery Center anticipates increasing number of veterans "Recovery Center" in bldg. We will host an "open house", with more information to follow.

We now have an official Local Recovery Coordinator to assist us in publicizing this new initiative.

Thank you

Recovery Staff

Veterans Moving Forward

The Veterans Advisory Council for Mental Health at the Northport VAMC

By Edmund Zurawski

The members of the Northport Veterans Advisory Council (VAC) for Mental Health are as follows: Robert S. (Chairman), Kevin F. (Vice Chairman), John M. (Secretary), Edmund Z., Thomas B., Dorothy P., Duane H., James F., and Bob T. The staff co-chairs are Dr. Margaret Rayne (Psychology Service-CDTP Director), Gillian Dircks, LMSW (Social Work Service-MHICM), and Monica Lanning MS CRC (Psychology Service-Vocational Rehabilitation).

This group meets on the first Monday of every month at 9:15AM. And we attend the VTEL meeting on the second Wednesday of every month at noon with the other VACs in our VISN. Some of us also attend the Mental Health Council meeting on behalf of the VAC on the second Thursday of the month. Discussions are facilitated to incorporate and present the issues brought forth at our local VAC meetings.

The Northport VAC is presently working on the follow areas of concern:

Placing a VAC bulletin board in the Mental Hygiene clinic visible to veterans for review of local VAC and VISN-

VAC minutes, announcements and applications to join the VAC.

Addressing Veterans

Reminding employees to wear their ID and to introduce themselves when meeting a veteran and upgrading the quality of the food served on the inpatient units.

Pharmacy

Having the nicotine lozenge available to veterans who for whatever reason can not use the nicotine patch or nicotine gum.

Environmental and Safety

Having mirrors installed in our tunnels so we don't bump into one another; Fixing heaters and fans in our smoking rooms, and having the canopy over the ER fixed.

Transportation

Many of the veterans who come to Northport rely on DAV transportation which is run by volunteer drivers. The VAC is trying to make things fair and equitable for the hard working drivers to reward them for their help.

With the Northport VAMC Veterans Advisory Council for Mental Health, we make one small step with the Veterans Council, but take one giant leap for veterans. Things are changing!

VA NEW JERSEY HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

The veteran advisory council for mental health in New Jersey has been active for 12 years. Dr. Leon Green who is the Associate Chief of Staff for Psychology has been the staff co-chair and the current veteran co-chair is Mr. Thomas Bender, a Vietnam Veteran who was decorated for combat. The secretary for this council is Ms. Michelle Smith, a United States Marine Corps Veteran and the secretary to the Associate Chief of Staff/Mental Health & Behavioral Sciences.

The council meets on the 3rd Thursday of each month in Building 143, Room E120 of the Lyons Campus and the Director's Conference Room at the East Orange Campus.

Members of the Council include representatives from the Domiciliary, the TR Homes, LZ Hope and Lyons Combat Support United (two peer run PTSD groups), CORE DTC, Mental Health Clinic and inpatient PTSD programs and mental health programs.

Past agenda issues have included systemic problems with pharmacy, police and parking, food and nutrition service among many others. The veteran co-chair is a standing member of the local Mental Health Cabinet and has an equal vote and say in mental health policies and procedures.

For more information, please contact Ms. Michelle Smith at (908) 647-0180 ext. 4561 or by email mi-chelle.smith@med.va.gov

NEWSLETTER CHAIN OF COMMAND

Mr. James Farsetta
Network Director

Mike Sabo, Chair
Mental Health Care Line
VISN #3

Mara Kushner-Davis
Manager
Mental Health Program
VISN #3

Leon Green Ph.D., Chair
VISN-VAC

Susan McMillan, Co-Chair
VISN-VAC

Steve Konyha , Co-Chair
VISN-VAC

Michelle Smith, Secretary
VISN-VAC

Charles Witherspoon, Editor
VISN-VAC NEWSLETTER

Bruce Levine MD, Co-Chair
Education Subcommittee

Claire Henderson, Co-Chair
Structured Partnership
Subcommittee

Recovery is a Journey - Not a Cure

