HEAL PROGRAM: STRATEGIC PLAN

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Military veterans face a range of personal, societal, and logistical barriers to accessing care. In addition to decreasing wait times for appointments, efforts to improve the transition to civilian life, reduce stigma, and offer assistance related to work, housing, and convenient access to health care may improve health in veterans. Some sub-groups within the veteran population, such as Vietnam veterans, women veterans, and recently discharged veterans, are reportedly at higher risk of suicide due to unmet needs. Other sub-groups, such as severely disabled veterans with special needs and veterans with severely mental conditions, also have needs that must be met through preventative care in order to avoid unnecessary and/or prolonged hospitalizations.

Providing high-quality care to U.S. military veterans is a national priority. Although recent focus has been on wait times at Veterans Affairs (VA) facilities, additional factors may prevent veterans in the community from seeking or accessing care. Veterans have a higher burden of illness than civilians, but fewer than one-third of individuals deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan since 2001 have used VA healthcare services. Issues of stigma and “not being able to ask for help” have been identified as barriers to seeking treatment. Mental health concerns, including issues related to substance abuse, stress related to multiple deployments, and family reintegration problems, may increase health risks but also may affect health-seeking behavior and use of non–mental health outpatient services.

In order to confront the rampant barriers to quality healthcare that veterans face, AMVETS commissioned a team of clinical experts with experience in eliminating these barriers nationwide through direct intervention and policy changes. HEAL, which stands for healthcare evaluation, advocacy, legislation, encompasses all necessary steps the HEAL Team will take to intervene directly on behalf of veterans, service members, families, and caregivers, primarily to assist these groups with navigating the complex VA healthcare system. The program’s core objective is to find the appropriate healthcare solutions for veterans and ensure they are offered quality holistic healthcare options. In doing so, the program strives to mitigates the secondary effects of poor health access, such as veteran suicide, unemployment, homelessness, and hopelessness as it relates to mental and physical wellness, particularly for those who are affiliated with AMVETS and utilize the Polytrauma/Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) system of care and mental health services within the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) and community healthcare facilities.

Key Findings from the Latest RAND Report Include:

- Veterans have a higher prevalence of many common health conditions than non-veterans. VA patients are older and less healthy than veterans who do not use VA health care, and the prevalence of many health conditions is expected to increase among VA patients over the next decade.

- The number of veterans who rely on VA health care is expected to increase over the next five years and then level off after that period.

- Wait times for health appointments are highly variable by location and type of care and some veterans in some facilities face very long wait times, such as almost 40 days for a primary care appointment at the extreme.

- Surveys show that VA patients are less likely than private-sector patients to get appointments, care and information as soon as needed.

- Over the next decade, the rates of some chronic conditions among veterans who use VA health care will increase, primarily a result of the group aging.
The Heal Team developed this Strategic Plan in order to set clear goals and objectives for the future. This plan serves as a road map for ensuring and promoting timely and quality physical and mental health services for veterans who live with complex healthcare needs, Post Traumatic Stress, Traumatic Brain injury, Polytrauma, and other threats to total wellness.

**HEAL Mission**

Supporting a better tomorrow by fighting the socioeconomic factors that contribute to poor health outcomes in veterans and making a difference in the lives of those with mental and/or physical health challenges, one veteran at a time.

**HEAL Vision**

AMVETS envisions a better tomorrow where the lives of veterans are enriched through the delivery of effective health services in the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the community. A better tomorrow exists when:

- All veterans have equal access to quality healthcare, services and supports in their communities.
- Technology, research, and outcome measures are routinely utilized to enhance veteran access to quality healthcare, suicide prevention, and mental healthcare services and supports.
- Stigmas surrounding mental illness, physical disabilities, substance abuse, and the effects of military service and combat exposure are completely dispelled.
- Communities at all levels proactively participate in screening at-risk veterans and opening seamless access to health intervention services.

**HEAL Core Values**

**People**
AMVETS believes that veterans are the focus of the VA healthcare system. We respect the dignity of everyone who has served in uniform, and we champion their choice and provision of services to meet the full range of their unique clinical needs.

**Community**
AMVETS believes that VA and community-based service and support options, to include telemedicine, should be reliable, available, and easily accessible in the communities where veterans live. We believe that services and support options should be designed to meet their particular needs of each veteran.

**Excellence**
AMVETS believes VA and community services and supports must be provided in a veteran-centric manner, meet actual health outcome measures, and are based on clinical research and best practices. We also emphasize the continued education and development of our staff and volunteers to provide the best support and intervention possible.

**Commitment**
AMVETS believes in the veterans we serve, our vision and mission, our staff, our departments, our posts, our locals, and the community-at-large. We are committed to assisting veterans in improving their mental health, quality of life, and their acceptance and participation in their communities.

**Accountability**
AMVETS believes it is our responsibility to diligently search for and identify veterans in need through the efficient and effective use of all resources, and we are dedicated to the continuous evaluation and improvement of VA and community healthcare systems that serve veterans.

**Awareness**
AMVETS believes awareness, education, prevention and early intervention strategies will minimize the rate of veteran suicide and behavioral health needs of veterans. We also encourage community education and awareness to promote an understanding and acceptance of veterans with behavioral health needs.

**Collaboration**
AMVETS believes serving and supporting veterans with the greatest physical and mental healthcare needs are the shared responsibility of federal, state, and local governments, communities, fellow service members and veterans, family members and caregivers, and service providers of all disciplines. Through open communication, we continuously build relationships and partnerships with local communities, government entities, and the medical community to meet the needs of veterans and their families.

**Innovation**
AMVETS believes it is important to embrace new ideas and change in order to improve access to health services for veterans in both the VA and community sectors. We seek dynamic and innovative ways to provide evidence-based services/ supports and strive to find effective solutions to inspire hope and help veterans achieve full recovery and reintegration after serving in the military.
Using the mission, vision, and values, the HEAL Team developed multi-year goals to address barriers to accessing quality healthcare, particularly as it contributes to veteran suicide, substance addiction, and other socioeconomic ills. These goals address the key issues of accountability at all levels, an accessible veteran-centered healthcare system, community services and supports, measurable outcomes, strategic partnerships, and exchange of information. The goals are as follows:

To markedly increase access to VA and community-based care and supports for veterans with healthcare needs, particularly those at risk for poor health outcomes, through a network of AMVETS HEAL program participants at the national, departmental, post, and local levels that are committed to a veteran-centered and recovery-oriented system of intervention for veterans in need.

Through effective oversight, collaborative partnership, and legislative advocacy, ensure veterans receive quality health services in safe and dignified clinical settings, and use information/data management to enhance decision-making, shape and enforce laws, regulations, policies, and standards, and continuously improve service delivery.

To promote the discovery and implementation of new interventions that build on lessons learned and markedly decrease the number of veteran suicides year to year, as well as ensure the integration and coordination of healthcare across clinical providers in all sectors that treat veterans, to include bilateral records exchange, reduction in the over-prescription of pharmaceuticals, and improved diagnoses and treatment of neuropsychological comorbidities, especially Post Traumatic Stress and moderate-to-severe Traumatic Brain Injury.

These goals will guide the HEAL Team’s actions in moving toward a more effective and cohesive multifaceted healthcare system. Each goal’s objectives include action plans, performance measures, timelines, and responsible parties. Furthermore, unless specified, these goals are inclusive of the veteran populations the HEAL team and its partners are charged to serve, and includes championing services and supports that take into account the unique needs of the diverse veteran sub-populations, along dimensions of age, gender, socioeconomic standing, military discharge status, access to lethal means, and overall physical and mental wellness.
Full recovery holds a different definition for every veteran and will not be possible in many cases for myriad reasons. Recovery is a process of change through which veterans improve their health and wellness, live a self-directed life, and are positioned to take advantage of opportunities to reach their full potential. The HEAL Team has delineated four outcome measures that, if achieved, satisfy the definition of “healing” in a continuum for every veteran who comes within the HEAL network:

### HEAL Recovery Continuum

**Health**
Each contacted or referred veteran’s ability to overcome or manage his/her mental and physical health symptoms. For veterans in healing process, this includes making informed, healthy choices that makes suicide increasingly unlikely.

**Purpose**
Each contacted or referred veteran’s ability to achieve independence and engage in meaningful daily activities, such as a satisfactory job, higher education, or volunteer opportunities.

**Home**
Each contacted or referred veteran’s ability to achieve and maintain a stable and safe place to live with adequate physical and emotional support to sustain and overcome periods of regression.

**Community**
Each contacted or referred veteran’s ability to build relationships and sustain peer and social networks that provide lasting love, hope, support, and friendship.
HEAL Team Services Overview

Healthcare

The HEAL program is staffed by licensed Registered Nurses and program support staff, who are responsible for ensuring the quality of complex care for veterans through active healthcare system monitoring and working in collaboration with the Veterans Health Administration, Suicide Prevention Office and local Suicide Prevention Coordinators, as well as community providers who serve veterans. The HEAL program mission entails identifying necessary resources to improve the efficiency of healthcare services, to include quality of care and coordination, which is critical to delivering effective, lifelong comprehensive healthcare to the veteran population. Veterans, service members, and family members who need immediate assistance with a VA-related healthcare issue can contact a HEAL Team member for assistance.

Evaluation

By continuously measuring the quality and effectiveness of healthcare services provided by VHA, to include services within the VA Polytrauma/TBI system of care and mental health services, the HEAL program seeks opportunities to promote the enhancement of those services through a solution-oriented approach to identifying needs that are specific to issues and concerns related to healthcare for AMVETS members. These assessment and recommendations for improvement will be shared with the Secretary of Veterans Affairs and designees.

Advocacy

Directly engaging and working in collaboration with VA healthcare professionals at all levels are a critical component of the HEAL mission. This includes facilitating discussions on the state of healthcare for veterans during town halls, round tables, public forums, and conventions attended by veterans, clinicians, providers, researchers, politicians, and others sharing a stake in the effectiveness of healthcare for veterans. The HEAL program will also develop, distribute, and review AMVETS Department, Post, and Local training curricula for designated HEAL directors, liaisons, and ambassadors that form the AMVETS nationwide HEAL network.

Legislation

Championing laws and policies that benefits AMVETS members is a significant component of the HEAL mission. The HEAL program will be staunch advocates in legislative and policy efforts that focus on the provision of comprehensive/complex healthcare and benefits for AMVETS members. These efforts will be carried out through direct engagement and collaboration with Congressional members and their designees with the intent to enhance quality and access to healthcare for veterans who desire to be heard on Capitol Hill.
The HEAL Network Intervention Model entails collaborative partnerships between AMVETS National, Departments, Posts, and Locals as well as federal, state, county, and community agencies, including VA and private-sector health providers and other health professionals that treat or manage care for veterans.

**HEAL Program Department Directors**

HEAL Program Department Directors are designated by each department, on a voluntary basis, to oversee and manage HEAL Program activities at the Post level, including the selection of Post Liaisons, training and directing their activities, receiving routine reports and data on activities, and facilitating timely communication in the event a veteran in crisis presents for assistance.

**HEAL Program Post Liaisons**

HEAL Program Post Liaisons are designated by each post and trained by the National HEAL program, on a voluntary basis, to provide community-level intervention support based on direct, front-line interaction and referral for care in the location where the veteran is experiencing a barrier to accessing care or presents suicide risk factors based on training administered by the HEAL program. Post Liaisons also collect relevant data for the National HEAL program and distribute educational materials to Post members and veterans within their jurisdictions, particularly those who are not affiliated with the VA or live in states with no AMVETS Post. The Post Liaison is tasked to ensure a referred veteran has a follow-up appointment with his/her preferred provider and will maintain contact with the veteran until the appointment takes place. Delays in accessing needed care or follow up should be immediately reported to the National HEAL program via email at VETHEAL@amvets.org.

**HEAL Program Local Ambassadors**

HEAL Program Local Ambassadors are designated, on a voluntary basis, to work hand-in-hand with Post Liaisons and Department Directors, under the guidance of the National HEAL program, to ensure families, caregivers, and veterans have access to relevant information, adequate community support, and seamless referral to appropriate services instances where a veteran faces difficulty accessing healthcare or a crisis, falls within a suicide risk category, or may be helped whether or not s/he is experiencing a serious problem. Delays in accessing needed care or follow up should be immediately reported to the National HEAL Program via email at VETHEAL@amvets.org.

**AMVETS National Service Officers**

The primary mission of the AMVETS Service Department is to provide VA benefits assistance and related services to veterans and their families. The Department accomplishes this using a cadre of AMVETS Service Officers, State Department of Veteran Affairs employees, and County Veteran Service Officers. Oftentimes, a Service Officer will be best positioned to determine whether a veteran is in crisis or needs immediate healthcare services. When faced with these instances, the Service Officer becomes a force multiplier for the HEAL network by, once trained by members of the HEAL team, using the skills necessary to screen veterans who may be at risk and refer them for clinical intervention through the HEAL network or directly to the VA and/or a community provider.
Department of Veterans Affairs

The VA is working with public and private partners across the country, such as AMVETS HEAL program, with the goal of ensuring that wherever veterans live, they can access quality, timely health care. VA is also working with universities, colleges and health professional training institutions across the country to expand their curricula to address the new science related to meeting the health needs of our Nation’s Veterans, service members, and their families. AMVETS and VA recently partnered to share training resources on various mental health topics to be disseminated to each entity’s provider and advocate networks to ensure more veterans have access to evidence-based mental health care and are served by providers who are competent in military culture.

The VA also works proactively to connect veterans and their families with the resources they need. In addition to VA’s Make the Connection outreach campaign and extensive suicide prevention outreach, many specific mental health programs and services have outreach as part of their efforts. Suicide Prevention Coordinators at each VA medical center are required to conduct at least five outreach activities per month in all of their local communities and are able to provide a Community version of Operation S.A.V.E. to Veterans and others. This includes liaising with community organizations in order to broaden VA’s outreach efforts and promote more positive outcomes from community providers.

State, County, Local Governments and Communities

States, territories, counties, and localities play an important role in the financing, organizing, and delivering health and treatment services for veterans. Individual state laws define and dictate which services are eligible and offered. In most states, behavioral health treatment and service funds flow from the state health authority or single state agency to counties or regions within the state. These funds are then awarded to various service providers to deliver care. In other instances, funds flow directly from the state to regionally or locally based provider organizations.

State and local governments also establish statewide policies and issue rules and regulations that govern the delivery of health services in accordance with federal and other state laws and regulations. AMVETS Departments, Posts, and Locals are encouraged to work collaboratively with local agencies to reduce barriers to accessing quality healthcare for veterans and to work with the National HEAL Program to evaluate and monitor healthcare any local providers and systems of care that serve veterans.
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