Veterans Health Project (VHP)

Elizabeth Johns, Ranjana Kodwani, Laree LaPierre, Emily Muly, Johnny Nwankwo, Kemi Ogunbiyi, Amaka Ume, Sarah Vosti, Marina Zhou

Our Team

The VHP Learning Community is comprised of a diverse group of public health students and nursing student key stakeholders from the George Washington University, who aim to serve the local veteran community through a variety of outreach activities. In particular, we serve veterans who reside in the Community Living Center (CLC) of the D.C. Veterans Affairs Medical Center (DCVAMC).

We also take part in the Veterans History Project, an initiative supported by the Library of Congress to preserve and make accessible first-person accounts of the military experience. By encouraging story-telling and social engagement, our team has supported the improved wellness of the local veteran population.

Population and Health Issues

A military veteran is any person who served for any length of time in any military service branch. The VHP team primarily worked with veterans who currently live in the CLC, a long-term care facility. The veteran population can have a variety of unique health needs and challenges, including the possibility of:

- Social isolation or limited meaningful relationships/interactions
- Mental health issues, including boredom and stress
- Unhealthy built environment

Project: What We Did and How We Did It

One of the primary goals of the Veterans History Project is to collect and preserve the personal stories of military veterans. To this end, the VHP team worked with veterans to record their experiences, providing a platform for them to reflect on their service and share their stories.

Our project had two components: the CLC visits and formal interviews for the Veterans History Project.

CLC Visits: A variety of activities were planned for the residents of the CLC with the guidance of our community partner site. These visits were normally twice a month and included lots of food and fun!

Interviews: We conducted interviews with individual veterans and recorded them via video camera. This provided a space for veterans to reflect on their course of service and how it has impacted their life. These videos were sent to the Library of Congress to be preserved for others to listen to and learn from their experiences.

Connecting the Dots

The VHP team implemented a variety of activities to address social support and mental health needs of our population:

- CLC visits, parties, and card-making (informal interviews and story-telling): Offered social support and the creative outlet to reduce boredom
- Veterans History Project (formal interview): Provided therapeutic value of "telling their story" to achieve wellness
- Dog Tag Project: Encouraged meaningful relationships and story-telling; Aimed at decreasing feelings of social isolation
- Just Breathe Project: Influenced the built environment through relaxing art to support mental health and wellness

What We Learned

In this process, we also learned about:

- Team effectiveness
- Open communication
- Coming together to discuss ideas about projects and execution

Looking forward:

- The knowledge and skill acquired will help in planning ahead
- Establish priorities and solve problems
- Effective teams have better outcomes

Recommendations

- Take the time to show the veterans you care about them as individuals.
- Be open about your availability and communicate with your team about expectations.
- It’s just as important to care about your teammates and what is going on in their lives as it is to care about the veterans you serve.
- There is always room for improvement. Don’t be afraid to speak up, try something new, and abandon old habits.
- Be patient. Communication with team members, the ISCOPES office, site contacts, and the veterans themselves is key.
- Effective evaluation tools can help improve your team outcomes.

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