

Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) 19
Denver Veterans Administration Medical Center (DVAMC)
Mental Illness Research, Education & Clinical Center (MIRECC)
Diversity Work Plan

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Intent/Statement of Purpose:

Consistent with VA national commitment and policy regarding Equal Opportunity Employment practices, the VISN 19 MIRECC adheres to the tenets within the VHA Directive governing “Nondiscrimination in Federally-Conducted and Federally-Assisted (External) Programs.” This directive “prohibits discrimination based upon race, color, national origin, Limited English Proficiency (LEP), age, sex, handicap or reprisal” and “applies to all programs or activities conducted by VHA.” As such, our staffing consistently follows Equal Opportunity Employment practices at every level.

However, MIRECC leadership and staff recognize the opportunity to expand existing practices and goals beyond non-discrimination to a more fully-realized inclusiveness. Therefore the MIRECC as a whole, in order to more accurately and fully represent the diversity of our Denver Veterans Administration Medical Center (DVAMC), seeks to develop a multi-year Diversity Plan honoring and explicitly articulating our commitment to individual and cultural diversity.

Denver VAMC Diversity:

Denver VAMC diversity is based upon a Veteran patient population with a wide range of individual and cultural characteristics, including age and military cohort, gender, sexual orientation, culture, ethnicity and race, and religious preference. Ranging in age from 18 to 90 years plus, Denver VAMC Vets include the following ethnic/racial groups: Caucasian, African-American, Hispanic, American Indian or Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, and Asian, as well as mixed racial and ethnic backgrounds. Veterans from every modern conflict (from WWII to the current Iraq/Afghanistan conflicts) are represented. The majority of patients are male, but females also receive services and are seen in increasing numbers as troops from the current conflicts return to the United States. Likewise, Veterans who are transgender are also represented and receive services within the Denver VA. Veterans of all sexual orientations including heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual seek care. Many major religious groups and spiritual traditions or preferences are represented by our Veterans ranging from Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, Chinese Traditional Religion, and Irreligion (e.g., Secular, Nonreligious, and Atheist).

Additionally, individual diversity encompasses a range of physical and/or mental health conditions, such as: traumatic brain injury, spinal cord injury, amputation, and chronic health conditions (e.g., diabetes, cardiac disease, HIV/AIDS), depressive disorders, anxiety disorders (e.g., PTSD), alcohol and substance use and dependence, adjustment disorders and personality disorders, as well as serious mental illness (i.e., schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and psychotic disorders and symptoms).

As the VISN 19 MIRECC staff strives to fulfill its mission – to study suicide with the goal of reducing suicidality in the Veteran population – we further aim to create and implement a plan that will best serve this full range of Veterans.

DVAMC/MIRECC Diversity Plan, Core Target Areas:

A. Infrastructure:

As the basis for all on-going diversity planning and activities, the DVAMC MIRECC will build an infrastructure supporting the three subsequent core target areas (Partnerships/Collaboration, Veteran Outreach, and Staffing). This will be accomplished through actions designed to attract a wider range of personnel, plus additions to physical and online resources reflecting our commitment to diversity, and evaluation of current/future research efforts to identify potential areas that could be supplemented to be inclusive of all Veterans we serve. To accomplish this, the first goal/task will be establishment of a VISN 19 MIRECC Diversity Work Group (Facilitators: Brooke Dorsey-Holliman, MS, Melissa McHarg, BA, & James Pease, LCSW).

B. Partnerships/Collaboration:

Once key elements of the Diversity Infrastructure have been established (e.g., Diversity Work Group, and certain key changes to existing resources to include a Diversity Web Page), work group members will strategize to create new, increasingly diverse ties, widen recruitment pools, and diversify outreach. Target groups may include educational organizations and schools with graduate level Psychology programs, Veteran organizations, and Federal, regional or other community agencies and organizations.

C. Veteran Outreach:

MIRECC will work to strengthen and develop new ties with other hospital services and/or clinics in order to expand the range of consultation and direct services. These new ties will also allow the MIRECC to extend topics of research in order to boost scientific knowledge of Veteran issues. New research areas may encompass gender-specific topics, assessment and/or interventions for diverse racial/ethnic groups, and other issues that serve a full range of DVAMC Veterans.

D. Staffing:

This target area represents the overall expression, or “face” of the MIRECC Diversity Plan, as well as one of our overarching goals: to increase and retain diversity in every level of MIRECC staffing (including leadership, research and administrative staff, and Post Doctoral Fellows) that reflects the demographic make-up of DVAMC. In

addition, the MIRECC will provide ongoing education and resources for MIRECC staff on issues of diversity in working with Veterans and other populations. We will strive to integrate issues of diversity in discussions during research team, clinical, and administrative meetings. Our expectation is that these efforts will promote sustained attention to issues of diversity so that it becomes an integral part of the culture of the MIRECC.

DVAMC/MIRECC Diversity Plan, Target Area Goals:

A. Infrastructure:

- i.* The MIRECC Diversity Work Group will meet monthly (or as needed) to: first, assess MIRECC accomplishments and identify specific areas needing development, then identify and prioritize tasks that work towards the attainment of each goal/core target area. The work group will assign tasks to work group member(s) or teams of members, update group and track progress towards each goal, and review and/or revise work group activities as appropriate.
- ii.* The VISN 19 MIRECC will create a Diversity page on the MIRECC website that provides resources for MIRECC staff and Postdoctoral Fellows, as well as other clinicians, Veterans, and community members.
- iii.* The MIRECC will also continue to update all resources and educational materials (e.g., clinical tools, brochures, posters, educational pamphlets) to reflect inclusiveness of diversity-related topics and educational information regarding Veterans. Resource updates will include procurement of new MIRECC library materials (both print and electronic) providing information and tools on conducting culturally-competent research and clinical practices.
- iv.* In addition, didactics that provide training to Post Doctoral Fellows will be augmented to offer further opportunities to explore issues of diversity (see below, Section D, Staffing).

B. Partnerships/ Collaboration:

- i.* One of the key focuses of the Diversity Work Group will be to identify possible partnerships and collaborative opportunities with organizations in the Denver community as well as nationally. Outreach will serve to create partnerships and expand networking opportunities with multiple groups: educational (including Universities/colleges and other non-profit education-focused groups), federal and national non-governmental organizations, and Veteran organizations. These partnerships will both enlarge the existing recruitment pool for new MIRECC staff and Post Doctoral Fellows, and increase collaborative opportunities with diverse researchers and clinicians serving Veterans or other populations.
- ii.* Educational organizations that have students from diverse backgrounds will be identified by the Diversity Work Group. The purpose of this collaboration will be to promote the MIRECC Postdoctoral Fellowship for these students, and to generally promote awareness of research/clinical opportunities available within MIRECC and VA (including long-term career potential). Towards this end, the Diversity Work Group will identify graduate school psychology programs across

the country from Universities and colleges historically having large numbers of students reflecting our Veteran population's diversity, such as African-American and Hispanic. Additionally, non-profit organizations such as the Hispanic Scholarship Fund or the American Indian College Fund will be explored as potential supplemental sources to share information.

- iii. In addition to education-focused organizations, the MIRECC Diversity Work Group will reach out to other national-level organizations in order to inform members of professional and Post Doctoral Fellowship opportunities available (see Section D, Staffing, below). This could include professional organizations such as the Association of Black Psychologists, and/or mentorship programs, such as American Foundation for Suicide Prevention's Virtual Mentoring to Enhance Diversity of the Mental Health Research Workforce (VMED).
- iv. Finally, the MIRECC will expand outreach to Veterans as it continues to provide educational resources/materials for Veterans and their family members, as well as recruiting for Veteran research participation. Additionally, the committee will make a specific effort to recruit Veterans for staff/leadership and/or Post Doctoral Fellowship opportunities. This effort will encompass local as well as regional/national efforts (see Section C, Veteran Outreach below).

C. Veteran Outreach:

- i. Utilizing possible partnerships identified by the Diversity Work Group (see section B, Partnerships/Collaboration), Veteran outreach will focus on existing national and community organizations including the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, American GI Forum Mile High, Veterans of Hope Project, and Disabled American Veterans.
- ii. MIRECC staff will utilize the Diversity Work Group and the Education Committee to identify existing research areas that the MIRECC can further develop. These research areas can include diversity-related issues which need to be addressed within the Veteran population such as gender issues, issues related to cultural diversity, LGBTQ issues, disabilities, and Military Sexual Trauma (MST).

D. Staffing:

- i. The MIRECC Diversity Work Group will review and assess staff recruitment numbers on an annual basis.
- ii. In addition, the MIRECC Diversity Work Group will re-affirm and set specific goals regarding staff training, including training for MIRECC Post Doctoral Fellows. Currently Fellows receive cultural competence training via local and national didactics, as well as through individual and group supervision. These existing resources will be enhanced through determination of topics that could be explored further, such as military culture, rural mental health, working with Veterans with severe mental illness (e.g., Schizophrenia, psychotics disorder, bipolar disorder), multicultural and ethical issues in clinical assessment and psychological interventions, "Don't Ask Don't Tell", clinical work with LGBTQ Veterans, Veterans with disabilities, and multiculturalism within supervision. Towards this end, the Fellowship

Training Committee, in conjunction with the MIRECC Diversity Work Group, will invite outside speakers who represent and/or work with members of the above target populations.

DVAMC/ MIRECC Diversity Plan, Potential Barriers:

It is important to identify potential barriers that MIRECC staff and work group members may face as the diversity target goals are implemented. These barriers primarily include limited resources to facilitate implementation. Certain structural barriers could also exist, such as smaller overall numbers of students/professionals from diverse backgrounds in the mental health field. This may narrow the potential number of diverse graduate students, clinicians and researchers for available recruitment. To deal with these potential barriers, the Diversity Work Group and the MIRECC Training Committee will consider these issues during initial development of all Diversity target area goals, and strategize ways to minimize potential limitations. The Diversity Work Group will also include “barriers encountered” in its annual re-assessment of the progress of work group goals (see Section D, Staffing, above).

DVAMC/MIRECC Diversity Plan, Multi-Year Outline:

A. Year One:

- i. Establish and create infrastructure of the Diversity Work Group
- ii. Establish and work toward Staffing goals including: 1) discussing goals for recruitment of Postdoctoral Fellows and staff, and develop tracking system to monitor progress, and 2) developing enhanced diversity syllabi for Post Doctoral Fellowship didactic program.

B. Year Two:

- i. Establish and work toward Partnership/Collaboration goals such as identifying partnerships/collaborative opportunities and initiating outreach to educational, federal, and national non-governmental organizations and to local and national Veteran organizations. These efforts will be prioritized according to available staff and other resources, with special regard to groups with the largest numbers represented within the Denver VAMC. Efforts will encompass local events identified above (see B, Partnerships/Collaboration), as well as new presence in national events and conferences and online with partner organization web sites.
- ii. The Diversity Work Group will continue to develop and work toward more diverse staffing by: 1) expanding recruitment efforts to reflect new partnerships, collaborations, and contacts established through this outreach, and 2) reviewing and assessing success of recruitment efforts based upon data from tracking information, and modifying as appropriate.
- iii. Establish and work toward Veteran outreach goals including: 1) identifying Veteran organizations locally and nationally, 2) reviewing existing diversity-focused research, and 3) identifying needed diversity-related research to be completed within the Veteran population

C. Year Three:

- i. The Diversity Work Group will continue to develop and work toward more diverse staffing by: 1) expanding recruitment efforts to reflect new partnerships and collaborations and contacts established through this outreach, 2) reviewing and assessing success of recruitment efforts based upon data from tracking information, and modifying as appropriate; 3) expanding diversity/clinical competence resources available to MIRECC Post Doctoral Fellows, clinician/researchers, and MIRECC staff (including invited speakers, workshops, trainings and conferences available locally and nationally). This will also include the availability of physical resources for the MIRECC library and online resources available on the MIRECC website.
- ii. Following review of progress and success towards Partnership/Collaboration goals, a continuation of established priorities and/or new priorities will be implemented as agreed upon by the Diversity Work Group.
- iii. Establish and work toward additional Veteran outreach goals.
- iv. At the end of year three, the Work Group will conduct a comprehensive review of the VISN 19 Diversity Work Plan, and will develop a subsequent plan based upon data from the tracking system for staffing recruitment. In addition to tracking form data, the work group will consider the following: feedback from new staff and Post Doctoral Fellows, feedback from Diversity Work Group and MIRECC staff members, success of new partnerships/collaborations, resources/materials developed, research projects established or augmented, progress of efforts to expand recruitment pools, the number of diversity resources accessed, and retention and satisfaction of diverse staff members, Post Doctoral Fellows, and collaborative partners.