Understanding and Building Effective Narrative on Veteran Experiences to Compel Program and Policy Action

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Abstract

Virginia has the third highest per capita population of veterans, and the seventh highest in total population. Many of these veterans are faced with wide-ranging and complex health issues, which vary greatly depending on their age, time of service and location of residence. Virginia's geographic and socio-economic diversity provide for varied and unique characteristics among its general and veteran populations. Those conditions yield a rich research environment, but also a heightened need to translate and disseminate findings to varied populations and individuals. A growing body of veterans' assessment and clinical research is aimed at improving health services for military service men and woman returning from deployment. Concurrently, military and veterans advocates are calling for improved connections between community health providers and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, as well as, integrated care provision among physical, mental and behavioral health specialists.[1]

The Virginia Tech Institute for Policy and Governance conducted the 2010 Veterans Needs Assessment which asked the broad questions of "what are the needs and experiences of Virginia veterans, particularly needs and experiences related to veterans' health and wellbeing" and "how do the needs and experiences of veteran differ based on key characteristics of the veteran". Subcategories of health and well-being questions included the following topics: physical health, with emphasis on traumatic brain injury, hearing loss, orthopedic conditions, chronic disease, access and utilization, mental and behavioral health, which included PTSD, depression, substance use, family relationships, access and utilization, education and employment measures and life status satisfaction. Characteristic categories for the assessment included stratification by region of residence, era served, branch of service, age, type of service and deployments. In order to obtain representative results

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1   Post, E. P., & Van Stone, W. W. (2008). Veterans Health Administration primary care-mental health integration initiative. *NC Med J*, *69*(1), 49-52.

across characteristics, the research team surveyed over 2,000 veterans. Additionally, researchers were able to add texture to the data through conducting focus groups with veterans and service providers throughout the state to consider the needs and experiences identified in the survey and to determine strategies for meeting unaddressed needs and improving services.

To update and build on this 2010 Veterans Needs Assessment the Institute will strive to do so in a manner that will most fully benefit veterans, inform agencies and providers in Virginia who serve veterans, and set a national standard for conducting veteran population needs assessment. Considerations for updating the 2010 Virginia Veterans Needs Assessment in 2015 will require the development of a methodology to not only update the assessment, but allow for continued nuancing and texturing of the veterans story through interviews and focus groups. The Veterans in Society: Humanizing the Discourse Conference will provide an opportunity for the research team to present their methodology for the revised mixed methods approach, focusing on methods to help build narrative on the experiences of military personnel and veterans and their place in society that will compel program and policy action.

Keywords: veteran culture, health, communication, research methodology, narrative

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