



# **Veteran Engagement Activity Summary + Veteran Feedback**

**April 11, 2023**

# The Veteran Engagement Team

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## **VE Co-Chairs**

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Susan Zickmund, PhD

## **VE Activity Planning Committee:**

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\*Provided in separate PDF

# Background



**At the 2017** HSR&D-QUERI Meeting, an idea for a “Veteran Summit” was pitched during a Q&A after a panel about tailoring Veteran engagement groups to local contexts. This idea was borne from liaisons discussing how Veterans in their groups wanted to the opportunity to meet other engaged Veterans from across the nation. After the conference, members of the Veteran engagement workgroup had a call with Dr. David Atkins and began the work of envisioning how to include Veterans in a scientific conference that has been historically constrained by capacity restrictions. The exploratory committee met with their Veteran engagement groups and gathered Veterans’ input. Veterans reported being interested in attending and agreed to sending 1-2 representatives from each VEG.

**In 2019**, Veterans from existing HSR&D VEGs were invited to attend the meeting and participate in “Veteran engagement forums,” which at the time, were designed as a live Veteran engagement meeting conducted at the conference, with an investigator presenting their work to a panel of Veterans for feedback. Veterans could choose which panel they wanted to participate in however, at the conference, there was confusion between Veterans being part of the panel vs. contributing as part of the audience. The Veteran panel members were representatives from various groups nationally, most of whom had not previously met. The 2019 meeting also included a social mixer, a Veteran engagement information table, and a feedback session the final morning of the conference.

# Background (cont.)



By and large in 2019, Veterans who attended reported a positive, emotionally intense, experience. Many felt unsure of their role at the conference, and for some, this was their first time attending a professional conference of any kind. Some felt lost, uncomfortable, and a few felt tokenized. Veterans whose liaison was at the conference as a presenter reported how vital it was to have someone they trusted with them. Others noticed that researchers did not seem aware that Veterans were attending the conference, thus creating a feeling of not belonging. From Veterans' feedback on the conference, we learned that Veterans need:

- A clear sense of purpose/reason to be attending the conference.
- An established support system present at the conference.
- Researchers to be aware and mindful of Veterans' attendance.
- Orientation to the HSR&D\QUERI Meeting
- Caregivers to be included

# Evolution to 2023 Implementation



After reviewing feedback from 2019 and having many discussions with the National Veteran Engagement Workgroup (VEW), we decided on some goals that would make their experience better for the Veterans and Caregivers invited:

- Build a supportive community among the invitees
- Develop equitable roles for all meeting participants
- Provide Veterans with a solid foundation for conference attendance via pre-meeting orientations.

To meet these goals, a VEW subgroup was dedicated to the 2023 HSR&D meeting. From those discussions, the committee planned to

1. Include a call for Veteran posters in the general call for abstracts,
2. Revise the Veteran engagement forums to be in the format of workshops about VE,
3. Review & score submitted abstracts, and
4. Offer multiple orientation sessions for those invited

***“I was at 2012 as an employee. Not a Veteran voice in the room! such a difference now”***

***“Based on previous experiences with this meeting, this conference rocked. It really helped level the playing field”***

# 2023 HSR&D Conference VE Planning & Execution

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# VE on the National Planning Committee

HSR&D leadership and the National Planning Committee for the 2023 HSR&D\QUERI Meeting invited representatives from HSR&D's National Veteran Engagement Workgroup (VEW) to attend regular meetings with the full committee, which included Karen Bossi & Gerald O'Keefe from CIDER, David Atkins, and leadership from hosting COINs.

Ray Facundo, a U.S. Army Veteran and health sciences research project manager, was asked to join as the "Veterans' representative," and to co-chair alongside Susan Zickmund, the VEW chair. Including Veteran engagement experts, one of whom is a Veteran, ensured Veterans' voices were included from inception. Immediate buy-in from COIN hosts and leadership further facilitated inclusion of VE into the very fabric of the meeting.

As planning progressed Kenda Steffensmeier, Katie LaChappelle, and Tanya Olmos-Ochoa were nominated to chair Veteran engagement activity planning for the meeting.



# Travel Logistics



Unlike 2019, the responsibility for Veterans' travel arrangements was delegated to local travel offices to alleviate the tremendous workload of organizing travel arrangements for all Veteran attendees. Vendorization was required of all Veteran attendees, so they could be reimbursed for travel.

To aid Veterans in navigating VA's fiscal and travel systems, CIDER & the VE activity committee emailed Veteran attendees listed VE liaisons or PIs, so that they would have a local VA contact. Additionally, CIDER staff and the VE committee spent many hours answering liaison questions, troubleshooting vendorization, travel, and reimbursement issues.

## **Veterans' travel was complicated by:**

- Local VAs' unwillingness to shepherd Veterans' travel.
- Delayed local travel approval for Veterans and researchers.
- Opacity of the vendorization processes. Veterans were unable to track their progress.
- Local liaisons' and PIs' unfamiliarity with travel and vendorization processes.

***“We need more training on how to get a Veteran in Concur and to get the travel arrangements together”***

***“When planning logistics, inviting Veterans and employees, we need to consider different abilities and address unfair VA policies.”***

***“I appreciated Karen Bossi and CIDER's willingness to let veterans travel in the day before or leave day after.”***

# Meeting Logistics

- Worked closely with Karen Bossi to determine availability of tables and space for Veteran concierge desk, social mixers, and “chill-out room.”
- Obtained outside funding for refreshments at the social mixer and debrief breakfast. Organized catering requests and billing between all parties.
- Developed comprehensive FAQ sheet for Veterans attending the conference.\*
- Created reflection sheets for Veterans to keep notes during the conference.\*
- Designed promotional materials for Veteran engagement opportunities during and after the conference.\*

\*See Appendix

# Veteran Concierge Desk

In order to provide round-the-clock support for Veterans and Caregivers present at the meeting, we asked to set up a concierge desk next to the registration area in the main foyer.

The desk was staffed during all conference hours by the VE team and volunteers from the National VE Workgroup. The VE team also provided printed materials specifying conference content related to VE and mobile numbers of staff, in case invited Veterans/Caregivers had questions during off-hours or while traveling.

In addition to Veterans and Caregivers, we supported researchers by answering questions about VE and provided resources and information about VE activities at the conference.



***“It was a very overwhelming scene – so much energy, so much excitement. Without support staff it would’ve been impossible.”***

# Orientation Sessions

The VE team prioritized enhancing the experience of this year's Veteran and Caregiver invitees by ensuring they felt comfortable with the activities, the team, and each other. We developed and hosted three, 90 minute orientation sessions focused on community building and designing posters from abstracts.\*

**Session 1: What to expect when you are presenting** - Introductions to VE team (support staff) and other Veterans and Caregivers; overview of conference activities; intro to poster sessions.

**Session 2: Poster building workshop**- Breakout rooms led by VE team members covering the ins and outs of poster design, in small groups.

**Session 3: Networking tips and tricks** - Overview of conference activities, who gets invited, and how to connect with them.



***"Orientation sessions were helpful and appropriately timed, especially having the final session 1 ½ weeks prior to the conference."***

***"Prepping us for the meeting was crucial...having staff [to turn to] made a huge difference..."***

\*Orientation slide sets are located in the Appendix

# Veteran & Caregiver Posters



## Primary Goals

1. Promote Veteran Engagement to researchers who might be interested in duplicating these kinds of collaborations.
2. Expose the Veterans and Caregivers invited to the wide range of VA research that exists “behind the scenes” of the Veterans Health Administration.

Through brainstorming meetings with the VEW, we suggested a competitive activity to determine who would be invited to the meeting. The workgroup agreed that this would be a better way to ensure the Veterans and Caregivers would be fully engaged and willing to participate in the meeting. This would also help the invitees feel less tokenized, as they would be invited as presenters, using the same mechanism as investigators.

The VE team created a set of guidelines and templates along with a comprehensive FAQs document to help instruct and standardize submissions (See appendix).

***“I was very impressed with the amount and scope of the research that the VA is doing on behalf of our veterans.*”**

***Previously, I had had no idea about the amount of vital and current research being funded by the VA and the hundreds of professionals involved across the country... all reporting on amazing and exciting projects dealing with the health, well-being, quality of life, and health care of veterans and their families.”***

-Excerpt from the [United Veterans Coalition of Colorado Monthly Newsletter, March 2023](#). Article written by Pat Hammon, Regional Vice President

# Veteran & Caregiver Posters



## Call for Abstracts

With input from the VEW, we developed a set of guidelines to elicit the narratives of Veterans and Caregivers. We asked for submissions that shared examples of how the presenter engaged in a VA research project and the bidirectional impact their collaboration had made. We developed an abstract review form in Qualtrics to score and manage the data.



## Poster Selection

Sixteen abstracts were selected from the 18 poster submissions through a blinded review. A committee of 20 VA researchers, all members of the VEW, reviewed and scored 1-3 abstracts. We reviewed results with the Veteran Engagement subcommittee and selected the highest scoring submissions.

# Veteran & Caregiver Posters



Presenter	Poster Title
<b>Ray Facundo, MSW</b>	Leveraging Veterans Experience for Research
<b>Chasity Wohlford, MHPS</b>	Leveraging Community Outreach and Veteran Peers to Enhance Mental Healthcare Access for Rural, Racially Diverse Women Veterans
<b>John Evans</b>	Veteran-to-Veteran Outreach and Group Support for Rural Veterans with Chronic Pain
<b>Stephen Drop</b>	It's a Two-Way Street: Veteran Engagement Benefits Research and the Veterans it Serves
<b>April Schmidt, MS</b>	Engaging All Veterans: My Experience with the Multi-Veteran Engagement Group Meetings to Improve Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in VA Research
<b>Michael Beck</b>	This Partnership Made Me Feel Like I Have Value Left in Me Still: A Veteran's Experience Developing a Diabetes Texting Program
<b>Sean Baird</b>	"Moving the Needle" on Veteran Engaged Research on Community Reintegration
<b>Paula Edwards, MA</b>	The Evolution of a National Women Veterans' Research Engagement Group: The VA HSR&D Women's Improvement Network (WIN)
<b>Charles Lindsay</b>	Veterans Research Town Hall of the CHERP Veterans Community Advisory Board
<b>Angela Dickson, PhD</b>	Building Deeper Veteran Engagement One Hour at a Time
<b>Aaron Call, EdM</b>	How Can We Establish Trustworthiness in Remote Trials to Promote Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion?
<b>Rebekah Layton, PhD, CMC, PCC</b>	Co-Designing a Model of Veteran and Veteran Family Caregiver Engagement in Research: The VetREP Experience
<b>Kathryn Peoples-Robinson</b>	"Made Me Feel Like I Have a Seat at the Table in VA Research": A Veteran's Experience Developing a Diabetes Texting Program
<b>Mark Flower</b>	Veteran Engagement in the Healthcare-Associated Infection Prevention Research Process: Perspectives on Hospital Cleanliness
<b>Carols Urbina</b>	Acknowledging Caregiver Experiences To Arm Veteran Families With Resources

# Veteran Engagement Forums



The inclusion of Veteran Engagement Forums in the agenda carried over from the 2019 meeting.

Four abstracts were selected from 6 forum submissions through a blinded review. The abstracts were scored by a group of volunteers from the VE Workgroup. We reviewed results with the Veteran Engagement subcommittee and selected the highest scoring submissions.

Each forum session was well attended and introduced audience members to the ins and outs of their VE groups and projects.

However, the forum category did not have templates or guidelines to follow in the abstract phase, which some reported would be helpful in future calls for abstracts.



***“Having some templated examples of how presenters might go about organizing their time [would have been helpful]. Our group spent about a month and half of weekly planning meetings to derived what we thought HSR&D might want, but we ultimately didn't know. So, any examples of ways people organized their forums and examples of generative activities would be helpful during the abstract phase, so we might know what's in the toolbox (and what's not and potentially up for some creative license).”***

– VE Forum lead presenter.



# Veteran Engagement Forums



## ***Suicide Prevention Research and Enhancing Veteran Engagement: Building Trust, Cohesion, and Collaboration***

Wendleton LR, Hoffmire CA, Drop S, Flower M, Nolan JP, Parham C, Jones R, Monteith LL

## ***Conducting Impactful and Relevant Research with Underrepresented Populations: Perspectives of Transgender and Gender Diverse Veterans***

Littman AJ, Boyer TL, Wolfe HL, Neira P, Blosnich JR

## ***Engagement is at Our CORE: Sharing the Successful Model of the Pain/Opioid CORE Veteran Engagement Initiative***

Sides T, Amundson EC, Miedema K, Washington K, Jensen A

## ***A Decade of Grassroots Veteran Engagement to Informing National VA Policy - A Veteran's Journey***

Flower M, Franco Z, Whittle J



# Veteran-Centered Events



To thank the Veterans and Caregivers for their contributions to the conference and for their continued engagement with VA research, we solicited research partners for funds to contract catering and hosted two events.

## Welcome Reception Mixer

The first evening of the conference we held a one-hour informal meeting space where ORD and HSR&D leadership, VE liaisons, investigators and staff could meet and greet Veterans & Caregivers invited to present at the conference. Dr. Rachel Ramoni, CRADO, and Dr. David Atkins, Director of HSR&D provided remarks. For Veteran and Caregiver attendees, leadership's willingness to meet with them underscored the value of Veteran engagement to VA research. Food and beverage was sponsored by the University of Iowa Carver College of Medicine.

## Thank You Breakfast and Debrief

The final morning we held a one-hour, closed session to capture the experiences of the Veterans and Caregivers who participated in the conference. This type of feedback mechanism was preferred over the suggestion of a post-meeting survey. Food and beverage was sponsored by the Medical College of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.





# Veteran & Caregiver Feedback

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# Veteran Feedback



## Abstract Submissions:

The submission process was difficult or confusing for some. The portal did not give instructions tailored to Veteran and Caregiver submissions.

Many of the presenters were unfamiliar with the general process of abstract submission, so their VA partners submitted the abstracts on their behalf. In a few cases, this made the list of accepted authors different from who was presenting the poster or forum, *and* the VA partner was listed on the agenda instead of the presenter.

Many Veterans and Caregivers suggested making the window for abstract submissions longer.

Veteran Engagement Forum presenters asked that in the future we create a detailed set of guidelines or template to aid submissions.

***“Please edit the directions of how to submit, like “the name of the first author listed in this portal submission will be the presenter’s name listed in the agenda...””***

***“Any examples of ways people organized their forums and examples of generative activities would be helpful during the abstract phase, so we might know what's in the toolbox (and what's not and potentially up for some creative license).”***

# Veteran Feedback



## Poster Session

Some presenters said that the posters were placed too close together and didn't allow for many folks to come by, and it was too loud to carry on a conversation. Some said that the proximity of the posters made it easy to meet and talk with at least one other person.

***"The poster display was a real highlight. We were happy to see the various posters and speak to all of the researchers doing important work."***

***"I wished the Veteran posters were closer to the front of the space, more visible and accessible."***

***"It would be great to have posters available online."***

## Networking

Many said they were happy to meet others and network, and that it was great to see and feel the community at the conference.

***"I had a blast meeting so many different people and having conversations."***

***"It was important that we had the opportunity to talk with leaders."***

***"How this group supports each other - the comradery was really inspiring, even for people who just met one day ago."***

# Veteran Feedback



## Veteran Plenary Speaker

Some Veterans and Caregivers thought that Kayla Williams did an excellent job of representing Veterans in research, while others thought that a Veteran with “boots on the ground” would have been a better choice.

Most Veterans and Caregivers agreed that they would like the opportunity to help choose nominees for future speakers.

*“The keynote speaker was not a perfect choice – she is a great advocate. A veteran in research would be good. Maybe let the veterans choose and nominate next year. If they were given a list, it would be helpful.”*

*“One of the highlights was Kayla Williams, was very inspirational and that set the stage for the work we were presenting.”*

*“I know that the veteran community is a wide and diverse body, and picking presenters is a challenge, but when I think of who I would like to see as a veteran keynote speaker, I would rather hear from a more “rank and file” veteran... The presenter felt more like a high-level Rand Corp representative and maybe not necessarily representative of the veteran experience. The presenter was great and obviously super intelligent. I realize that the answer isn't simple, but I believe a bit more discretion should be applied to selecting a representative veteran to present.”*

# Veteran Feedback



## Inclusivity

***“I would like to have had talks to go to that were less ‘clinical’. I stepped into a few and the language was not in my wheelhouse, so at times I felt a little lost. This was my first conference, so maybe I just didn't find the presenters who spoke more my speed.”***

***“For the registration packet, a list of acronyms and a glossary of common terms and phrases would have been very helpful.”***

***“Please add a ‘How to navigate the agenda section’ to the orientation sessions.”***

## Accessibility

***“I’d request that presenter’s slides have a bigger font and copies made available to attendees”***

***“Larger or closer screens at the plenary talks would have been nice.”***

***“Make it a standard to offer chairs to poster presenters, for those who cannot or should not stand for so long”***

***“Make more signage for things like water fountains and bathrooms”***

***“Include vegan options for the Veterans breakfast and mixer events.”***

# Veteran Feedback: More Kudos!



**“I learned that Veterans are appreciated!”**

“It felt important that we had the opportunity to talk with leaders.”

“It felt easier, as a caregiver, to attend and give support to the Veteran I care for.”

“It felt different from the previous meeting – we felt more heard.”

“This is fantastic - all of this, it’s changing lives!”

“This meeting has given me a new sense of loyalty and respect to VA and its processes.”

**“Our work got us here! So much better than just being invited to wander around.”**







# Considerations for 2025

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# Ideas for Future Meetings



Veterans and Caregivers recommended a **separate conference the day before the HSR&D meeting**, so that they have a chance to network, learn more about what others are doing, and discuss their work without missing other sessions. **This could be held at the same time as the CDA meeting**, and building in time to meet with the CDA awardees would be beneficial to both groups.

Many agreed that designing some sessions targeted to a lay audience (easy-to-understand) would be beneficial to the Veteran and Caregiver attendees as well as to researchers who would like to learn how to effectively present their work to in the public sphere.

*“Since the conference started later in the day – we could have used that time to have some Veteran specific meetings.”*

*“It would be nice to have more Veterans present, and lower barriers to entry so that others who could be really inspired could come and see this.”*

*“We should create a partnership with VBA/Voc Rehab to look for students who might be interested in coming to future conferences, and get younger Veterans interested in collaboration or careers with VA research.”*

*“A non-scientific discussion/session about fieldwork, not because people don’t understand the science, just to talk about the importance of the journey into something that is approachable by anyone”*

# Ideas for Future Meetings, cont'd



## Meeting Logistics

- Reformat the abstract submission form to clarify how to submit a project for a Veteran.
- Make sure Veterans' names are in the app and program.
- Would like an extra 5-10 minutes between sessions.
- Schedule Veteran forums in “prime time” to facilitate greater attendance.

## Ideas for VE activities

- A “speed-mentoring” activity that would give Veterans and researchers time to meet one another and share ideas.
- Add a mixer for Veterans and junior researchers (CDAs awardees).

## Accessibility & Inclusivity

- Veterans emphasized the importance of a trauma-informed approach to the meeting organization.
- Provide a glossary of acronyms in the program or on the app.
- Visible signage for bathrooms and water fountains.
- Larger fonts on slide presentations during plenary sessions.
- Make slides available to attendees.
- Provide chairs for the poster presenters.
- Add “how-to-navigate-the-agenda” section to orientation.

# Thank You!

