

# VA Health Services Research & Development Service

## 2023 HSR&D/QUERI National Meeting:

### Engaging Veterans in Research



[Advancing Health Equity through Research, Implementation Science, Diversity, and Inclusion](#) was the theme of the 2023 VA Health Services Research and Development Service (HSR&D) and Quality Enhancement Research Initiative (QUERI) National Meeting, which emphasized diversity and inclusion, implementation science, and Veteran engagement. Twenty-six Veterans and caregivers played an active part in the meeting, with Ray Facundo, MSW—U.S. Army Veteran and health sciences research project manager—serving as a meeting co-chair and Veteran representative on the planning committee.

#### Veteran Forums and Workshops

Four Veteran Forums were held during the conference, covering topics including: conducting impactful research with under-represented Veteran patient populations; effectively and safely treating pain with opioids; suicide prevention; and Veteran engagement informing national VA policy. For example, one [Veteran Forum](#) shared perspectives and experiences of

*This is fantastic—all of this; it's changing lives!*

—Veteran Attendee

Veterans and researchers involved in research related to the health and wellbeing of transgender and gender diverse Veterans. Another [Veteran Forum](#) provided a summary of more than 10 years of grassroots Veteran engagement in Wisconsin, which encompassed a variety of non-profit agencies, a civilian hospital, multiple colleges, as well as VSOs (Veterans Service Organizations) and the providers at the Milwaukee VA.



Twenty-six Veterans attended the 2023 HSR&D/QUERI National Meeting in Baltimore, MD.

There also was a [workshop](#) on Veteran Engagement titled “Basic Training in Military and Veteran Cultural Humility” that sought to create a shared understanding of the U.S. military culture. People who have served in the U.S. armed forces have their own customs, traditions, and language. As such, civilians who are not connected to the military may

not realize that there are significant differences in attitudes and values that characterize a unique military culture. The workshop included diverse Veteran presenters who offered attendees:

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

—Veteran Attendee

an overview of the U.S. military, its customs, and culture; a common language when engaging with Veterans; a description of the most frequent disabilities encountered in combat Veterans (e.g., PTSD/TBI); and resources to improve outreach to Veterans.

#### Veteran and Caregiver Poster Presentations

Veterans and Caregivers also were invited to participate in the poster sessions, highlighting research projects, Veteran Engagement Groups, or other research-related activities. Sixteen Veteran and/or Caregiver hosted posters included topics such as “[Leveraging Community Outreach and Veteran Peers to Enhance Mental Healthcare Access for Rural, Racially Diverse Women Veterans](#),” “[How to Establish Trustworthiness in Remote Trials to Promote Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion](#),” “[Advance Care Planning and Healthcare Equity](#)” and “[Leveraging Veterans’ Experience for Research](#).”



Veteran Mark Flower describes his poster on participating in a Veteran Engagement Group.

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

—Veteran Attendee

#### Building on a History of Inclusion

HSR&D and QUERI have a tradition of including Veterans in research as well as their national meeting. Following these meetings, purposeful discussions are held with Veteran attendees to learn how we can do better in making sure they feel even more included and valued the next time. For example, after the national meeting held in 2019, many discussions were held with the National Veteran Engagement Workgroup (VEW). From their feedback, three goals came to the forefront in planning future meetings:

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

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Establishing a clear “welcome” for Veterans through a dedicated Veteran Engagement Concierge table.

## Planning and Support with Veterans in Mind

With feedback from the 2019 meeting in mind, the 2023 National Meeting Planning Committee included a call for poster presentations from Veterans, offered multiple meeting orientation sessions for meeting invitees, and included plenary speakers that would be relevant for Veteran attendees. The Planning Committee also strove to make Veterans feel more welcome at the meeting by establishing a concierge desk in the main foyer to provide continuous support for Veterans and Caregivers. The desk was staffed by the Veteran Engagement team and VEW volunteers.

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

**–Veteran Attendee**

## Recommendations

As HSR&D and QUERI continue efforts to include Veterans in future meetings—and to make them feel included, highly respected, and valued, more post-meeting discussions were held with Veterans who had a few recommendations for the next HSR&D/QUERI National Meeting, including:

*We should create a partnership with VBA/VocRehab 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.*

**–Veteran Attendee**

*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.*

**–Veteran Attendee**

## Continuing to SERVE Beyond the Meeting

The [Strengthening Excellence in Research through Veteran Engagement](#) (SERVE) Toolkit supports VA Research Centers and investigators in efforts to include Veterans and other stakeholders in the development, implementation, and dissemination of research studies. The Toolkit was developed through a collaborative process that included representatives from seven VA hospitals where Veteran engagement in research is an established priority. The goal of the SERVE Toolkit is to provide guidance to VA Research Centers and investigators to support the development of opportunities for Veterans to be engaged in research. The information presented is a synthesis of a range of successful practices developed during the process of creating the Toolkit. Since 2018, when the SERVE toolkit was first published, many exciting steps have been made to move Veteran engagement forward, with many of HSR&D’s national [Centers of Innovation](#) now having established Veteran Engagement Groups (VEGs), while HSR&D’s [Consortia of Research](#) have established topic-specific VEGs to help guide their research agendas.

## Veteran Engagement: Assessing Almost a Decade of Work

Engaging Veterans in research began almost a decade ago, with the 2015 establishment of a national workgroup that sought to outline an approach to local Veteran engagement initiatives and to develop goals for promoting Veteran research engagement nationally. To assess the work conducted and look at future goals, the [Journal of General Internal Medicine](#) and HSR&D produced a special supplement in April 2022. Sponsored jointly by HSR&D and PCORI (the [Patient Centered Outcomes Research Institute](#)) the supplement highlights research on patient and Veteran engagement in health research—and features more than 20 articles that provide a rich reflection of how partnering with patients and Veterans in research has evolved over the past decade.