

VA Health Services Research & Development Service

2019 Program Impact

The mission of VA's Health Services Research & Development Service (HSR&D) is to develop, evaluate, and rapidly implement evidence-based strategies that optimize the health and care of Veterans. HSR&D pursues research encompassing all aspects of VA healthcare, including: delivery, quality, safety, access, equity, patient satisfaction, and coordination of care—both inside and outside VA.

HSR&D 2019 Key Highlights



\$107 million
FY2019



68 newly-funded
projects



368 ongoing
projects



48 clinical
office
partnerships



2189 journal
publications



845 active
investigators

68 New Studies Launched

In 2019, HSR&D began 68 projects on topics of importance to Veteran care, including high priority topics such as suicide, access and community care, care of women Veterans, mental health and substance use, and care coordination.

New Initiatives to Speed Implementation and Innovation

Rewarding Innovation

HSR&D launched a new Innovation Initiative in 2018 modeled on strategies in use by other funders and healthcare organizations to promote work that is innovative and higher risk but in return offers the potential for bigger impacts. Following a call for proposals in five priority areas—suicide, opioids/pain, access, mental health, and long-term care/aging—122 applications were reviewed in March 2019, with **ten selected** for initial 18-month planning funds. After successful completion of the planning phase, researchers can apply for the 4-5 year implementation phase of the project. Projects include:

- A mobile app for detecting acute suicide risk and providing coping strategies;
- Reducing post-surgical opioid use;
- Using incentives to reduce appointment no-show rates; and
- Using peers as part of a gun safety messaging intervention to prevent suicide.

Consortia of REsearch (COREs)

HSR&D announced the funding of three CONsortia of REsearch (COREs): Suicide Prevention, Opioid Reduction and Pain Management, and Access. The goal of the COREs is to accelerate research that will lead to measurable improvements in the care delivered to Veterans, in part by developing an inclusive national network of researchers collaborating to further evidence in these priority areas.

- **Suicide Prevention Research Impact NeTwork (SPRINT)**. SPRINT will: 1) facilitate help-seeking and engagement in care; 2) match level of risk to suicide prevention approaches, and tailor approaches to Veterans' needs; and 3) implement, evaluate, and sustain evidence-based and promising interventions.
- **Pain/Opioid CORE**. Major themes include: 1) behavioral and self-management approaches for pain; 2) pain management interventions and care delivery; and 3) issues related to long-term opioid therapy, opioid misuse, and opioid use disorder.
- **Veteran Access Research Consortium (VARC)**. The VARC will work to: 1) foster a network of VA researchers to guide access-related research and evaluation; 2) develop access metrics and a Research User Guide for these metrics; and 3) identify high-priority access research and metric questions to help target research.

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U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Veterans Health Administration
Health Services Research & Development Service

VA HSR&D 2019 Program Impact

Key 2019 Research Findings

- Even minor operations are high-risk for frail patients. Investigators are currently scaling up a highly effective clinical tool to screen frail elderly Veterans before they have surgery. (Shinall, et al., *JAMA Surgery*, 2019)
- Researchers developed a conceptual framework to understand the shared risk for suicide and overdose together and approaches that can be used to prevent both problems. (Bohnert, et al., *NEJM*, 2019)
- Substantial savings for VA were found with 12-month dispensing of contraceptive pills, while also reducing unintended pregnancies among women Veterans. (Judge-Golden, et al., *JAMA Internal Medicine*, 2019)
- Exposure to a brief evidence-based psychotherapy intervention in primary care may significantly reduce distress and suicidal ideation among Veterans with chronic illness, with effects enduring over a long period of time. (Ecker, et al., *General Hospital Psychiatry*, 2019)
- Surgical antibiotic prophylaxis for greater than 24 hours has more harms than benefits for major surgical procedures, and limiting post-operative antibiotic exposure has the potential to improve post-operative outcomes while also reducing costs. (Branch-Elliman, et al., *JAMA Surgery*, 2019)
- Women Veterans reporting stranger harassment on VA grounds are more likely to delay or miss healthcare, and both VA senior leadership and VA Women's Health Services are using and enhancing this HSR&D research in their campaigns to change the environment and culture of VA to be more inclusive, welcoming, and respectful of women Veterans. (Klap, et al., *Women's Health Issues*, 2019)
- Specialist-delivered palliative care is shown to be associated with an increase in survival among patients with advanced stage lung cancer. This is the first time this survival benefit has been shown in real-world settings. (Sullivan, et al., *JAMA Oncology*, 2019)
- Social stressors (e.g., experiences of violence, housing instability) are strongly related to suicide ideation and attempts even after accounting for psychiatric conditions; odds increase when more than one social stressor is involved. (Blosnich, et al., *JGIM*, 2019)
- Opioid misuse may be a marker of more lethal near-term suicide behavior: past year opioid misuse was associated with past-year suicide attempt among high-risk Veterans. (Chesin, et al., *Addictive Behaviors*, 2019)

Achievements in Research

- **Steven Asch, MD, MPH**, earned the 2018 Under Secretary's Award for Outstanding Achievement in Health Services Research—the highest honor for a VA health services researcher. Dr. Asch applies access/quality measurement techniques and implementation science methods to reduce disparities among vulnerable populations. He directs HSR&D's Center for Innovation to Implementation.
- **Walid Gellad, MD, MPH**, was named a recipient of the Presidential Early Career Award for Scientists and Engineers (PECASE). Dr. Gellad's research focuses on developing more effective prescribing practices for physicians and Veterans. He has conducted long-running research into the risks of dual use of VA and Medicare prescription coverage, revealing how many prescriptions are missed for Veterans when only VA coverage is considered. This work contributed significantly to a recent landmark agreement between VA and the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services that will greatly improve drug safety monitoring of prescriptions, including opioids.
- **Donna Washington, MD, MPH**, was the recipient of a 2019 Congressional Black Caucus Veterans Braintrust Award. She was selected based on her unique support of women Veterans, as well as for her service to the wider Veteran community. Dr. Washington has devoted her career to addressing the healthcare needs of vulnerable and underserved populations. Her research focuses on access to ambulatory care, racial-ethnic and gender disparities in healthcare, and women Veterans.
- **Daniel Hall, MD, MDiv, MHSc**, 2019 VHA Shark Tank Competition finalist, achieved Gold Status for his promising practice in the development and use of a highly effective clinical tool to screen frail elderly Veterans before they have surgery. Mortality among frail patients fell 17% at one VAMC using the tool, and it is now planned for use in multiple additional locations.