Overview

The rates of suicide among Veteran Crisis Line (VCL) callers are much higher than other Veterans. Many callers may not be in mental health treatment, or even be connected to VA. Therefore, outreach and evidence-based interventions are needed for all callers to extend existing VCL approaches.

To address these challenges, the Evaluation of a Caring Letters Suicide Prevention Campaign will reach out to all new VCL callers with an identifiable address over the course of one year with letters expressing care and support, as well as highlighting available VA resources. The use of Caring Letters for suicide prevention is an evidence-based intervention that has been tested since the 1970s and is currently one of only two suicide prevention strategies that have reduced suicide rates in a randomized controlled trial. This QUERI evaluation will provide a unique opportunity to assess the feasibility and clinical outcomes of implementing this promising campaign on a national scale.

Methodology

Investigators will tailor the use of Caring Letters to accommodate the unique situation of VCL callers. The evaluation will examine the effects of Caring Letters on clinical outcomes and VA clinical utilization rates. It will also examine the facilitators and barriers to implementing the Caring Letters intervention to determine how to improve implementation and sustainability. Furthermore, the project will conduct budget impact analyses of implementing the Caring Letters program in VA from the health system perspective. New VCL callers will be identified monthly and sent Caring Letters, initially monthly and decreasing to bi-monthly for a period of one year. Clinical outcomes and VA utilization rates will be compared with rates from a comparable historical cohort of VCL callers.
Findings and Anticipated Impacts
This partnered evaluation project brings together expertise in suicide prevention from the VA Puget Sound Health Care System (HCS), implementation science expertise from the VA Central Arkansas Veterans HCS in Little Rock, and research and program planning leadership from the VA Office of Mental Health's Suicide Prevention Program and VCL. The QUERI Partnered Evidence-Based Policy Resource Center (PEPReC) in Boston will conduct randomization and provide rigorous data analysis.

The Evaluation of a Caring Letters Suicide Prevention Campaign aims to:

• Assess whether the intervention affects health outcomes.
  – The main outcomes include: incidence of VA-documented suicide attempts, incidence and frequency of VA psychiatric hospitalization, all-cause mortality, rates of suicide, rates of engagement in VA healthcare (in general), and outpatient mental health utilization rates.
• Answer important operational questions, such as the effects of Caring Letters on a new population.
• Identify barriers and facilitators to program implementation and sustainability.
• Emphasize Veteran engagement and input in the project design and evaluation.
  – Qualitative evaluation will include key informant interviews to gather Veteran perspectives on Caring Letters (e.g., ratings of satisfaction, perceived “caring” nature of messages, how helpful, the number of letters received, whether recommended resources were used/helpful, as well as general feedback and suggestions).
• Assess the budget impact of implementing the Caring Letters campaign on a national level for the VA healthcare system.

This will be the first-ever test of Caring Letters with Crisis Callers, and will be the largest evaluation of a Caring Letters intervention ever conducted. Caring Letters Suicide Prevention QUERI will provide direct and actionable data to leadership regarding impacts of this campaign. Investigators hope to identify an effective and sustainable evidence-based practice to address this critical problem on a public health scale.

Operations Partners
VA’s Suicide Prevention Program, and Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention.