Evaluation of a Caring Letters Intervention for Service Members Transitioning to Civilian Life

Overview
Service Members transitioning to civilian life have higher rates of suicide than active duty service members, especially in the first year following separation from service. In response, both VA and the White House have identified improving suicide prevention services for transitioning Service Members as a national priority. While the factors driving this alarming trend are unclear, the period of transition from active duty service to Veteran status can be marked by new stressors, loss of former social bonds, as well as a potential gap in access to healthcare services.

To address these challenges, the Evaluation of a Caring Letters Intervention for Service Members Transitioning to Civilian Life project will reach out to all new Veterans 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 transitioning Service Members. The evaluation will examine two letter signatory models with 1) letters sent on behalf of a VA provider that the recipient does not yet know, and 2) a Peer Veteran model in which the signatory is matched to the Veteran on gender and service branch. While the latter presents a relatively new approach, the significance of peer support for Veterans is well documented. Additionally, investigators will assess the effectiveness of a standard (8 letters per year) vs. higher frequency mailing schedule (14 letters per year). Transitioning Service Members will be identified monthly and randomized to one of the four intervention groups (two signatory types and two letter frequency groups). Clinical outcomes and VA utilization rates among the contact groups will be compared with each other and with rates from a comparable historical cohort of Service Members transitioning to civilian life.
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. 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 Intervention for Service Members Transitioning to Civilian Life project aims to:

- Assess whether the intervention is effective from a health outcomes perspective (for the entire transitioning cohort and the subgroup who access care through VA).
  - The main outcomes of interest 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 two different Caring Letter signatories and two different mailing schedules on the clinical effectiveness of the intervention.
- Identify barriers and facilitators to program implementation and sustainability.
  - This component of the evaluation will apply the RE-AIM (reach, effectiveness, adoption, implementation, maintenance) analytic framework.
- 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 (for example 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 about the project).
- Assess the budget impact of implementing the Caring Letters campaign on a national level for the VA healthcare system.

This 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 Partner: VA Suicide Prevention Program, Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention

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