



## **Veterans Summit 2.0 Brief**

### **Overview**

On October 20<sup>th</sup>, 2021, the Southern Illinois University School of Medicine’s Department of Population Science and Policy, Southern Illinois University School of Law, and the Southern Illinois University System hosted a virtual summit, which was a continuation of their work started in 2019 to support veterans in central and southern Illinois. At that event, participants discussed three key “access” issues deemed important to veterans: access to health care, access to education, and access to justice.

In 2021, participants were asked to revisit these challenges through the lens of COVID-19 and develop specific policy recommendations addressing each issue. The summit convened an invitation-only group of 24 stakeholders from different sectors that work with veterans (healthcare, academicians, organizational and community leaders, lawyers, and public officials) to identify specific policy recommendations corresponding to the original three access areas. The summit was designed to facilitate the exchange of knowledge, foster innovative ideas and create a pathway to improve veterans’ lives.

The original summit was held on September 12-13, 2019 at the Mt. Vernon Armory in southern Illinois, and in keeping with its access-theme, focused on broader issues like veterans’ healthcare access, mental healthcare, educational opportunities, legal assistance, and veteran’s treatment courts. Organizers chose to tackle these issues at the time by inviting individuals who work with veterans through various sectors/organizations such as healthcare, philanthropy, law, community-based organizations, governmental agencies, policymakers, and veteran service organizations. At the first day Veterans Summit Symposium, participants were asked to share their perspectives and their organization’s role in addressing these veteran-specific issues in Illinois. The Symposium was followed by the Veteran’s Service Fair on day two, which provided an opportunity for any veteran or their family to obtain services from any of the many veteran-serving groups and organizations that were in attendance.

One immediate outcome of the 2019 summit was a partnership formed between participants from SIU’s School of Medicine and the SIU School of Law which joined together for the creation of the Veterans Legal and Medical Partnership (VetLAMP) in November 2019. This program built on the work of the Law School’s existing Veterans Legal Assistance Program (VLAP) which provided free assistance to veterans whose claims for a service-connected disability had been denied. By incorporating the medical expertise of School of Medicine faculty and students, who joined the partnership to assist in preparing appeals, the work of the group was

make stronger and more thorough thanks to the input of medically trained participants who could better explain the challenges of a veteran's diagnosis. Specifically, third and fourth-year medical school students, in collaboration with faculty, were given the ability to review medical records to find evidence to document a service-connected injury or disease or establish a likely causal relationship (called the "nexus") between a service-connected event and the medical claim.

### **COVID-19 Pandemic and Veterans**

**Organizers of the summit had intended to follow-up on the successful 2019 event in the fall of 2020. Unfortunately, with the spread of the COVID virus, it was delayed one year. In order to protect the health of attendees, the 2021 summit was held virtually. While both the delay and the need for a virtual event highlight the challenges everyone has faced in simply existing in this period, they go even further to demonstrate how those, who are already challenged because of their circumstances, have been impacted.** The COVID-19 pandemic has had pervasive effects on the whole population, however the effect of the pandemic on smaller subsections of the population is yet to be fully understood. This is true of the veteran population as well.

According to an article published in [Social Work Today](#), the veteran population showed a mortality rate that was slightly higher than the national average at the time of publishing in fall 2020.<sup>1</sup> The above-average mortality in the veterans' population can also be associated with a higher proportion of veterans being older as well as exposure to toxins and adverse environments while on active duty. A combination of these factors put veterans at a higher risk of severe respiratory illness or mortality. According to a 2021 study published in the Lancet Regional Health—Americas, veterans faced excess mortality of 13 percent in 2020, corresponding to 50,299 excess deaths.<sup>2</sup> However, mortality and cases within the veterans' population may be underreported for veterans who are not receiving services through the VA.

The pandemic-driven suspension of in-person events has also exacerbated some of the mental health challenges that veterans face due to increased social isolation. In a study conducted by researchers from the University of California, San Francisco, 75 percent of study participants reported worsening emotional wellbeing.<sup>3</sup> The study also found that emotions such as sorrow, despair, loneliness, and grief, which did not warrant a mental health diagnosis were significant factors impacting wellbeing. Researchers also found the VA was also relied upon as a source of communication, connection, and support, indicating the larger role that the organization plays beyond medical care.<sup>4</sup>

Clearly, there is more to be learned about the impact of the pandemic on veterans which future summits can continue to track in addition to following progress on the three access areas which have become the foundation of the summit's report.

## Veterans Summit 2021: Key Takeaways

### Access to Healthcare

- **The VA system plays a larger role in veterans' lives' beyond just providing medical care. It's role in veteran care cannot be overstated and federal support must continue to flow to this vital resource.**

Studies have found that the VA serves as a source of connection, communication, and support for veterans, indicating an outsized role beyond medical care for veterans.

- **Long-standing issues with staff shortages, especially in disciplines such as psychiatry were exacerbated during the pandemic. Both the federal and state governments should increase funding to train more mental health professionals and provide better pathways to enter the workforce.**

According to the OIG Determination of Veterans Health Administration's Occupational Staffing Shortages for Fiscal 2021, VHA medical facilities reported 2,152 severe occupational staffing shortages across 256 occupations in FY2021, with Psychiatry being the most severely affected by staffing shortages.<sup>5</sup>

- **Lack of community and increased loneliness due to pandemic-driven lockdown exacerbated some of the mental health challenges faced by veterans. In this area, community organizations can be used to support existing programs.**

In a study involving a large multi-campus VA healthcare system in California, researchers found that 75 percent of study participants reported worsening emotional health due to the pandemic, citing loneliness, sorrow, and despair as factors impacting mental wellbeing.

- **The changes to telehealth parity laws, spurred by the pandemic, has greatly reduced no shows for veteran's medical appointments. Going forward, telehealth should become an integral part of veteran care, especially in treating mental health diagnosis.**

From January 2020 to April 2021, the number of telehealth appointments jumped from from 41,000 to 965,000.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, an April 2022 study examined whether mental health care access, suicide behavior, or emergency department visits (ED) were affected by the US Veterans Affairs initiative to distribute video-enabled tablets. The cohort study of over 470,000 rural US veterans with a history of mental health care use found receipt of a video-enabled tablet was associated with an increase of 1.8 psychotherapy visits per year (3.5 more video psychotherapy visits per year and 0.7 more video medication management visits per year), a 22 percent reduction in the likelihood of suicide behavior, and a 20 percent reduction in the likelihood of an ED visits.

## Access to Education

- **Student veterans reported difficulties transitioning from a military-style of technical learning and a hierarchical organizational structure to a university learning environment. Funding re-entry programs is key to helping veterans readjust to life outside the service.**

Attendees of the summit frequently mentioned the difficulty that student veterans have in transitioning to a less regimented lifestyle. By increasing funding for military and veteran services on college campuses, Illinois can lead the way in making their higher education institutions more inclusive.

- **Our focus group of participants mentioned a campus culture shock for veterans, leading to a feeling of disconnectedness and social isolation. Here, campus veteran support offices and counseling services can work together to ease the transition from military to university life.**

Most colleges have a new student orientation to introduce incoming freshmen to the campus, but many colleges across the country have found veteran-specific orientation helps reduce culture shock. These sessions offer a specialized tour of campus offices, with a representative from each, so that veterans can receive individualized help.

- **Many student veterans would benefit from military admissions advisors, focusing on traditional support and academic counseling that will guide them into a career path, rather than “just a job”.**

Due to inadequate funding, military and veteran services organizations must limit the scope of their services. Our discussion forum attendees referenced Texas A&M’s Veteran Resource and Support Center as a leader. The Texas A&M Military Admissions team provides prospective student veterans and current military members with transitional support and academic counseling.

- **Fully fund the Illinois Veterans Grant and the Illinois National Guard Grant, so that high education institutions are reimbursed for IVG and ING awards.**

The State of Illinois has not included funding in the state budget for the Illinois Veteran Grant (IVG) Program or the Illinois National Guard Grant (ING) for many years. While qualified program recipients still have tuition and fees waived, higher education institutions are not compensated, removing an important funding stream.

*“Requiring Illinois state institutions to accept the unfunded Illinois Veterans Grant (IVG) and unfunded Illinois National Guard (ING) results in minimal levels of service for the military-connected on campus. With funding, the administrators at these institutions would be more inclined to provide additional full-time employees and support.”*

**-Kevin Wathen, Director of Military and Veteran Services at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE)**

## Access to Legal Services

- **Veteran treatment courts have been very successful as “problem-solving courts”. These courts have formed essential partnerships with job services and organizations focused on providing housing for those in need.**

The veteran treatment court model has been very successful at diverting justice-involved veterans away from the regular criminal justice system and achieving sobriety, recovery, and stability, through community cooperation and collaboration.

Summit attendees spoke of the model’s holistic approach, partnering with housing organizations to connect veterans with a place to live or mentorships to connect them with a steady job.

*“Veteran Treatment Courts address the challenges with drugs and alcohol some Veterans face because of their military service. The Veteran Treatment Court gives them treatment and tools to help overcome these challenges.”*

**Professor Martin Parsons, Clinical Assistant Professor of Law, Director of the Veterans’ Legal Assistant Program**

- **More than half of justice-involved Veterans have mental health problems—namely PTSD, depression, or high anxiety—or substance-abuse disorders, most notably alcohol or cocaine addiction. While treatment for these conditions needs to be part of the larger criminal justice reform discussion, it is especially true for the men and women whose service to our country and whose mental health problems are service-related.**

Summit attendees mentioned the Veterans Justice Outreach Initiative, a Veterans Affairs program that links eligible justice-involved veterans with the needed mental health and/or substance abuse treatment services, as an effective program for helping these veterans. The goal is to provide timely access to these services to avoid unnecessary criminalization and incarceration of veterans with mental illness, substance abuse disorders, and/or traumatic brain injuries (TBI).

- **Multiple focus group participants mentioned a need for better communication with veterans about available resources. The resources are there, but we need to have consistent communication and messaging.**

The group suggested a multitude of strategies to improve their outreach efforts, including constant communication with veteran service organizations (posters, flyers) and targeted social media advertisements (Facebook, Twitter).

## Rethinking Veteran's Issues in a Post-Pandemic Illinois

This report should serve as the next step in a conversation on connecting with the hardest to reach veterans. Leading up to the virtual event, organizers surveyed 2019 attendees. Our pre-Veterans Summit II survey indicated an overwhelming majority of respondents found that

conditions relate to access to healthcare, education, and legal services had all stayed the same or worsened. Additionally, all respondents reported that the pandemic has negatively impacted these same issue areas.

The COVID-19 pandemic reiterated the need for innovative strategies to combat the health, social, and economic challenges confronting veterans. These issues are complex and require collaboration across different groups, including policymakers, healthcare organizations, philanthropic groups, and corporate and community leaders. The time is now for Illinois to lead on this topic and make sustainable improvements in the lives of veterans.

The first step to improving our veterans' lives, is to develop a plan so we can begin to make inroads. Regarding veterans' access to healthcare, we need to make sure telehealth is available for veterans, when appropriate. The pandemic accelerated the use of connected technologies and innovative care methods, like telehealth. More widespread use of interventions based on connected technologies, such as telehealth and virtual care, can help address the medical and behavioral health gaps. Per summit attendees, no-show rates at their facilities dropped from 20 percent to zero, crediting increased telehealth usage for the significant change.

*“As COVID-19 spread, the VA announced that it would increase telehealth services. The increased access to care through telehealth was received well by veterans demonstrated by telehealth service use increasing by 1000%. Telehealth service availability allows those with social anxiety and a significant history of trauma to access care in a way that doesn't retraumatize.”*

**Dr. Tracey Smith, DNP, MS, PH-CNS, Director of Programs and Community Health, Illinois Public Health Association (IPHA)**

Regarding access to education, the State of Illinois needs to increase resources for campus-based military and veteran services offices. The resounding message from our focus group was that they felt hamstrung by a lack of funding to hire more staff, increase the number of programs offered, and provide the services that their students need. This would allow these offices to implement veterans-only orientations to help with the transition to campus life, implement cultural competency programs for staff across the school to understand the diversity of the student veteran population, and schools would be able to implement measures that assess the quality of their campus programming.

During the access to legal services discussion, attendees agreed that there are programs in place to help justice-involved veterans, but there is a disconnect in getting that message to those in need. The strategies that were discussed included a focus on social media platforms. Specifically, we need to utilize online targeted advertising on Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and others. This form of outreach is being utilized by many sectors, including health care, to reach patients and consumers.

This three-part plan is only the part of what needs to be a concerted effort to improve the lives of veterans and their families. Both summits have provided an insight into the struggles veterans are facing, while including the experiences and knowledge of those working with this population

every day. With genuine and continuous support, the challenges faced by a veteran can be mitigated and their full potential achieved. Stakeholders across academia, government, non-profits, healthcare, and law have a key role in helping this population become successful in the classroom, access better healthcare, and/or strengthen the legal support structure.

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1 Coyle, S., 2020. COVID-19's Impact on Veterans. Social Work Today.

<<https://www.socialworktoday.com/archive/Fall20p22.shtml>>

2 Feyman Y, Auty SG, Tenso K, Strombotne KL, Legler A, Griffith KN. County-Level Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Excess Mortality Among U.S. Veterans: A Population-Based Study. *Lancet Reg Health Am.* 2022;5:100093. doi:10.1016/j.lana.2021.100093

<sup>3</sup> Purcell N, Sells J, McGrath S, Mehlman H, Bertenthal D, Seal KH. "Then COVID happened...": Veterans' Health, Wellbeing, and Engagement in Whole Health Care During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Global Advances in Health and Medicine.* January 2021. doi:10.1177/21649561211053828

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.va.gov/oig/pubs/VAOIG-21-01357-271.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <https://federalnewsnetwork.com/veterans-affairs/2021/04/vas-meteoric-telehealth-expansion-poses-new-questions-for-the-future/>