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Southern Illinois University System report highlights health care, education and justice-related issues impacting Illinois veterans during COVID

The Southern Illinois University School of Medicine's Department of Population Science and Policy, the Southern Illinois University School of Law and the Southern Illinois University System are sharing results from a virtual summit (Summit II), which was a continuation of their work started in 2019 to support veterans in central and southern Illinois. At the event, held at the end of 2021 and funded by a grant from the Robert R. McCormick Foundation, participants continued earlier discussions related to key "access" issues important to veterans: health care, education and justice.

"Building on our earlier Robert R. McCormick-funded work, our goal for the SIU System Veterans Summit II was to better understand the challenges faced by central and southern Illinois veterans with access to healthcare, education and justice and how COVID-19 changed the way those services and opportunities could be promoted and delivered. Thanks to our continued funding from the Robert R. McCormick Foundation we were able to obtain a measure of that challenge and discuss how this work needs to be modified in a post-pandemic world order to be successful," said Dan Mahony, SIU System President.

The original summit was held in September 2019. Organizers had intended to follow-up on the successful event in the fall of 2020, however with the spread of COVID, it was delayed one year. In order to protect the health of attendees, the 2021 summit was held virtually. During Summit II, participants - an invitation-only group of 24 stakeholders from different sectors working with veterans (healthcare, academicians, organizational and community leaders, lawyers, and public officials) - were asked to revisit the original access issues through the lens of COVID-19 to develop policy recommendations in the new COVID-reality.

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. Specifically, participants discussed:

Access to Healthcare - The US Veterans Administration (VA) system plays a larger role in veterans' lives' beyond just providing medical care and its role cannot be overstated. Unfortunately, long-standing staff shortages, especially in disciplines such as psychiatry were exacerbated during the pandemic. Participants recommended federal and state governments increase funding to train more mental health professionals as well as provide greater opportunities for the use of telehealth to treat veterans with metal health issues.

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

Access to Education – Attendees of the summit frequently mentioned the difficulty student veterans have in transitioning to a less regimented lifestyle going from active service to the college campus. By increasing funding for military and veteran services at colleges and universities, Illinois can lead the way in making their higher education institutions more inclusive. Participants also called for state resources to be directed, as they were in past years, to fund state Illinois Veterans Grant and National Guard Grants.

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

Access to Legal Services – Studies have shown that Veteran treatment courts have been very successful as "problem-solving courts" helping participants achieve 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 (VTC) address the challenges with drugs and alcohol some Veterans face because of their military service. The VTC gives them treatment and tools to help overcome these challenges," said Martin Parsons, clinical assistant professor at the SIU School of Law and the retiring director of the Veterans' Legal Assistance Program Clinic at SIUC.

The summit's organizers believe the report should serve as a continuing next step in a conversation in connecting with veterans, especially those who are the hardest to reach. Among many things, the COVID-19 pandemic has reiterated the need for innovative strategies to combat the health, social, and economic challenges confronting veterans, as highlighted in the report.

Organizers and participants recognized how, because of the pandemic, these issues have become more complex and require greater collaboration across different groups, including policymakers, healthcare organizations, philanthropic groups, and corporate and community leaders. Stakeholders across academia, government, non-profits, healthcare, and law also have a key role in helping this population become successful in the classroom, access better healthcare, and/or strengthen the legal support structure.

You can read the full report by clicking here.

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