

# RESEARCH in BRIEF

## On Working With Veterans: What Social Work and Nursing Students Need to Know

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Specialized care for veterans and military families is needed to respond to the unique health problems they experience. However, specific components of such training have yet to be examined.

**Purpose:** This investigation aimed to gather feedback from social work and nursing students on their experiences in a veteran-specific clinical placement to determine content for a new inter-professional training program at a large northeastern US university.

**Materials and Methods:** Two focus groups were conducted, one with master of social work students (n=8) and one with master's level nursing students (n=4), all of whom had recent clinical placements in a veteran-specific site. A semi-structured interview guide was followed.

**Results:** Three broad categories of themes emerged from the data: challenges encountered (including challenges related to forming relationships with veterans and in working in the American Veterans Affairs healthcare system); strategies for responding to these challenges; and insights for training future clinicians.

**Conclusion:** Clinical training programs should consider including content that will both prepare students to work with veterans and military families and to face the challenges that exist in healthcare systems. Specialized training that includes military culture and problems specific to the population may help improve outcomes for veterans and military families.

## RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- Challenges related to working with veterans and military family members included building trusting relationships, limited time for assessments, limited medication options, restrictions in employment at the VA following graduation, and compartmentalized training. Students noted that some of these challenges, such as limited time for assessments and limited medication options, were particular features of the VA healthcare system and may not be present in other healthcare systems.
- Students in both professions reported that strategic use of supervision, informal (in the moment) consultation, and use of supplemental readings helped them respond to challenges they encountered. Students also reported that learning on the go, being tenacious, and developing a tolerance for the discomfort of being a novice helped them meet challenges.
- Students recommended that military culture and health/mental health issues specific to the population be components of clinical training programs for those interested in working with veterans and military families.

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## IMPLICATIONS

### FOR PRACTICE

- This report and others have suggested that forming a therapeutic alliance with members of the veteran community can be a challenge. New clinicians may wish to make this a focus of their professional education and development and may benefit from clinical consultation and supervision with more experienced clinicians.
- It may be useful for clinicians at all stages of their careers to reflect on successful strategies for engaging with this population.
- Supervisors and program administrators should be aware of the importance of the therapeutic alliance and endeavor to support all clinicians in developing engagement skills.

### FOR POLICY

Policy changes may help to alleviate burdens imposed at the institutional level by the VA healthcare system. Our findings suggest that these should include:

- Access to additional medications used in other settings.
- Permitting clinicians to have more time with their patients so that full assessments can be made. Increasing the amount of time that clinicians have with patients may also prevent some of the frustrations that may occur for patients and allow clinicians to demonstrate military/veteran cultural competence.
- Changes in resource allocation so that more staff may be hired. Increasing the number of staff, which has been a recent stated priority of the VA, may help to additionally alleviate wait times, reduce caseloads, and ultimately improve outcomes.

### FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research can do much to increase the quality of care delivered to veterans.

- In addition to studying the effects of policy changes at the institutional level, future research could examine clinician characteristics and practices associated with the best outcomes.
- The importance of the therapeutic alliance, and its effect on outcomes, remains understudied in the veteran population.
- Similarly, there is an opportunity for qualitative research to examine the features and nuances of the clinical consultation process and develop recommendations for maximizing the utility of such a process for new clinicians.

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