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VHA National Center for Healthcare
Advancement and Partnerships

VHA Partnerships: Enhancing Veteran Health and Well-being



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Learn more about the organizations featured in this newsletter:

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VA



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

A Note from the Chief Officer and Nurse Executive

To support the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA's) Whole Health approach, Veterans Health Administration's (VHA's) [National Center for Healthcare Advancement and Partnerships \(HAP\)](#) leverages partnerships with Veteran-centric community organizations. These partnerships expand VA's health care resources and further support Veterans' values, needs, and goals. This note highlights HAP's key partnerships and initiatives, and the tangible impacts they have had on the Veteran community in 2024.

Highlighting new and renewed partnerships

VA's partnership with [Salesforce](#) expands career and employment resources for transitioning service members (TSMs), Veterans, and their spouses by providing free learning resources, skills training, and career advancement opportunities. VA and Salesforce collaborated on two Veteran-centric learning modules focused on mental health resources and understanding VA benefits. A recent update to the [Veteran Mental Health and Resiliency Resources](#) module incorporates vital information about the [Veterans Crisis Line](#).

The HAP-facilitated partnership with [Pet Partners](#) enables VA to increase access to animal-assisted interventions (AAI) at VA medical centers (VAMCs), further supporting Veterans' physical, social, and emotional well-being. Pet Partners recently celebrated National Therapy Animal Day with 79 local government proclamations recognizing the value of therapy animals. They provide opportunities for Veterans and their families interested in becoming therapy animal teams.

VA partners with the [Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis \(ALS\) Association](#) to expand support and health care resources for the estimated [1,055](#) Veterans diagnosed with ALS each year. Through their collaborative efforts, VA and the ALS Association have placed over 170 ALS coordinators across VHA facilities nationwide and have recently increased the number of VA ALS Centers of Excellence across the country by a third.

HAP's [Veteran Sponsor Partnership Network \(VSPN\)](#) supports the network of community partners who help VA implement the [Veteran Sponsor Initiative \(VSI\)](#) program designed by the Transitioning Servicemember/Veteran and Suicide Prevention Center (TASC). VSI, one of HAP's healthcare advancement initiatives (HAIs), is an evidence-based program that reduces military-to-civilian transition challenges for hundreds of Veterans every month through peer sponsorship support across social determinants of health (SDOH).

Through VA's partnership with the [Crohn's and Colitis Foundation](#), Veterans with inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) have access to health care resources like a [Veteran-specific webpage](#) and an [online support group](#). VA continues to improve IBD continuing education opportunities for providers and trainees through an IBD Bootcamp, monthly IBD conferences, a Virtual IBD support program, an IBD SharePoint resource hub, and a newly developed Tele-IBD Program.

Save the date: National Community Partnership Challenge Showcase

HAP is pleased to acknowledge the hard work and collaborative efforts of our partners and the partnerships created and renewed in 2024. The power of collaboration will be further celebrated at the inaugural VHA National Community Partnership Challenge (CPC) Showcase in August where HAP will recognize impactful Veteran-centric VHA partnerships and announce the winners of the 2024 Challenge.

Celebrating success in 2024

The [2024 National Nurses Week](#) runs from May 6 to May 12 and provides an opportunity to celebrate nurses across the nation and the vital support they provide. The 2024 theme, "Nurses Make the Difference," is embodied by HAP's continued commitment to keeping nurses at the forefront of partnership facilitation.

In closing, and with sincere appreciation, I announce my induction into the 2024 [National Academies of Practice \(NAP\)](#) class of fellows. I look forward to the opportunity to expand and strengthen collaboration with other health professionals inside and outside of VA to better serve Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors.

To learn more about current partnerships, projects, and events, visit the [HAP website](#).

In good health,

Chien Chen,
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VHA and Salesforce Modules Provide Mental Health and Benefits Resources for Veterans

Recent data indicates that Veteran suicide rates were [nearly 72% higher](#) than nonveteran suicide rates in 2021. To support VA's [top clinical priority](#) of preventing Veteran suicide, [HAP](#) leads partnerships with Veteran-focused community organizations that can reduce risk factors. As a vital social determinant of health (SDOH), unemployment can negatively impact Veterans' mental health, while full-time employment may be a [protective factor](#) against suicide risk.

VA partners with [Salesforce](#) to increase learning and employment opportunities for TSMs, Veterans, and their spouses, providing technology sector skills training, certifications, and opportunities for career advancement. Salesforce helps the military community and empowers Veterans and their spouses with skills they need for successful careers in technology, as well as resources to support their careers, health, and mental well-being.

“Community partners are essential to advancing suicide prevention meaningfully into non-clinical services, including financial, occupational, and social domains,” said Christine Eickhoff, HAP health system specialist. *“Together, VA and Salesforce address upstream risk and protective factors that span SDOH, reach a larger audience, leverage robust technology, and improve access to effective resources.”*

[Trailhead](#), Salesforce's free online learning platform, is a cornerstone of the effort to support TSMs, Veterans, and their spouses in career development and advancement, offering free virtual learning modules and certifications. Using a [gamified learning process](#), Trailhead content engages users and encourages them to continue learning through “trails” and certifications. Trailhead also includes [several Veteran-specific modules](#) with information about VA benefits, mental health resources, military-friendly workplaces, hiring military spouses, and more.

Built in partnership with VA to support Veterans as they navigate career changes or move to new communities, the [Veteran Mental Health and Resiliency Resources](#) and [VA Benefits for Veterans](#) modules help Veterans and military spouses who may not already be enrolled in VA to learn more about these benefits and start accessing them sooner.

“To date, over 13,000 TSMs, Veterans, and military spouses have completed the Veteran Mental Health and Resiliency Resources module, and over 8,000 individuals have completed the VA Benefits for Veterans module,” said Josh Kahn, Global Public Sector Digital Acceleration lead, Salesforce. *“Salesforce recognizes the challenges TSMs and Veterans face before, during, and after the military-to-civilian transition, and we are proud to collaborate with VA to provide additional mental health, learning, and career resources to support the military community.”*

The [Veteran Mental Health and Resiliency Resources](#) module educates Veterans and their families about suicide risks and suicide prevention, with individual courses focused on [understanding Veteran suicide risk](#), [how to get support](#), and [resources for family members, friends, and employers](#). Salesforce is one of VA's many partners helping to raise awareness of VA's suicide prevention resources and increase access to resources for Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors.

A recent update to the module added information about the [Veterans Crisis Line](#), a free, confidential resource administered through the [988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline](#) national network. After dialing 988, callers can press 1 to connect with crisis responders trained to support Veterans. [Since the launch](#), the Veterans Crisis Line staff have fielded nearly one-million contacts. This includes over 750,000 calls—an increase of 12.5% from the same timeframe from the previous year and with an average speed to answer of 9.37 seconds.

Animal-Assisted Therapy Improves Veteran Mental Health

Building on VA's Whole Health approach, [HAP](#) facilitates and manages VHA's partnership with Pet Partners. Pet Partners is a national leader in spreading the health and wellness benefits of [animal-assisted activities and therapies](#). Through this collaboration, VHA further supports Veterans' physical, social, and emotional well-being by leveraging the human-animal bond (HAB) and incorporating animal-assisted interventions (AAI) at VA medical centers.

"Pet Partners envisions a future filled with happier, healthier communities through greater access to meaningful therapy animal interactions," said Mary Margaret Callahan, Pet Partners chief mission officer. *"As part of my role overseeing the Therapy Animal Program, it's my honor to partner with colleagues at VHA to help bring therapy animals and Veterans together."*



[Existing research](#) on AAI shows that interaction with therapy animals in medical settings has been correlated with decreased perceptions of pain, improved recovery rates, decreased anxiety and stress, less fear and worry, and improved biobehavioral markers of stress. Leah Blain, clinic director and licensed clinical psychologist at the Steven A. Cohen Military Family Clinic at the University of Pennsylvania's department of Psychiatry, believes that animal-assisted therapy [complements](#) traditional treatments when combined with patients' care plans.

"Improving Veteran mental health is a crucial factor in meeting VA's [health care priority](#) to prevent Veteran suicide," said Dr. Jamie Davis, HAP health system specialist. *"Collaborating with Pet Partners enables HAP to leverage HAB resources and increase opportunities to incorporate AAI into [what matters most](#) in Veteran care and healing."*

Pet Partners celebrates National Therapy Animal Day on April 30 to honor the therapy animals and their humans who are committed to leveraging the HAB to improve health and well-being. Every year, Pet Partners invites local governments to recognize National Therapy Animal Day through proclamations to build awareness of the value of therapy animals. In 2024, they received 79 proclamations, including 6 statewide recognitions, in 32 states across the country.

Volunteering with pets and therapy animals is an effective way to improve the physical, social, and emotional well-being of Veterans and their families through meaningful time spent with animals. Pet Partners is proud to note the recent increase in volunteers and therapy animal visits. The number of Veterans visited by therapy animals so far in 2024 is nearly equal to the number of Veterans who were visited in all of 2023.

Humans and animals at "both ends of the leash" must meet the highest standards to volunteer with Pet Partners. Individuals must complete and pass the [Handler Training course](#) and background check, and therapy animal teams must pass an in-person evaluation. This course and evaluation include therapy animal team essential traits and skills, the importance of effective teamwork between handler and animal, and how to build effective relationships with clients while maintaining safety and program standards. Veterans and their families interested in becoming a therapy animal team can use the code **Veterans24** to receive a 25% discount.

"Some people were born to be doctors, lawyers, or soldiers, and some animals were born to be therapy animals—comforting strangers, building community, and bringing joy to all they visit," said Callahan. *"The greatest role we can play is giving the animals in our lives the opportunity to share their unconditional love with the people who need it most."*

VHA and ALS Association Collaborate to Support Veterans and Caregivers



Veterans are [more likely](#) to be diagnosed with [ALS](#) than people with no military background. Since July 2021, VA has partnered with the [ALS Association](#) to address growing concerns about the number of affected Veterans. This partnership, facilitated by [HAP](#), enables Veterans to access a broader range of VA resources and services, including ALS Centers of Excellence and ALS Coordinators, and ensures a positive impact for those living with ALS.

*“VHA estimates that [1,055 Veterans](#) are diagnosed with ALS every year,” said Georgi Bady, HAP health system specialist. *“The VHA-ALS Association partnership is instrumental in providing necessary health care resources and support for Veterans and their caregivers.”**

Dr. Ileana Howard is an ALS specialist at the Seattle VA Medical Center and works for the VHA national program office of neurology to help build a national ALS System of Care. *“Partnering with the ALS Association extends the reach of our team beyond the clinic walls,”* said Dr. Howard. *“Together, VHA and the ALS Association ensure that all Veterans treated in VA ALS clinics have equal opportunity to the additional support offered by the ALS Association Care Services staff, both in the clinics and out in the community.”*

ALS, sometimes known as Lou Gehrig’s disease, is a progressive disease of the motor neurons that affects a person’s ability to speak or swallow, causes breathing difficulty, and leads to muscle weakness in the extremities. Though currently no cure exists, the ALS Association focuses their efforts on advancing treatments and improving the quality of life for people diagnosed with ALS.

“This partnership between VHA and the ALS Association is an example of VHA’s commitment to ensure Veterans receive the ‘soonest and best care possible,’” said Dr. Chien Chen, HAP chief officer and nurse executive. *“HAP’s cultivation of this partnership leverages the collective efforts of both organizations to expand health care access and assistance for Veterans.”*

According to the [ALS Association](#), although the reasons are unknown, Veterans are twice as likely to be diagnosed with ALS as the general population. Significantly, Post-9/11 Veterans show the greatest prevalence rate at [19.7 per 100,000](#) compared to the nonveteran average of [5.5 per 100,000](#).

VHA recognizes ALS as a service-connected disease, meaning ALS-diagnosed Veterans with at least 90 continuous days of active-duty service can access financial and medical support through the VA health care system. Veterans who meet this service requirement are eligible, regardless of when or where a Veteran served or the length of time between discharge from the military and an ALS diagnosis.

The ALS Association measures the quality of ALS centers by American Academy of Neurology-issued standards. The ALS Center of Excellence designation is the highest level of certification for this assessment. VHA and the ALS Association recently increased the number of VA ALS Centers of Excellence across the country by a third, with more clinics currently applying for designation as a Center of Excellence.

In addition, VHA requires every facility in the country to have a named ALS coordinator to help Veterans and families navigate ALS care. Currently, there are over 170 ALS coordinators across VHA, forming potentially the largest ALS clinic network in the country.

“The VHA-ALS Association partnership allows for an open forum to work together as part of a larger team, united in our cause to care for and support Veterans and families impacted by ALS,” said Dr. Howard. *“The ALS community is coming to the realization that we must build relationships and work collectively if we want to have true impact in the fight against this disease.”*

VSI Helps Reduce Risk Factors and Improve Health Across Social Determinants

[HAP](#) empowers the community and VHA to develop meaningful partnerships for Veterans by providing expertise, direction, and support at the national, state, and local levels. HAP's healthcare advancement initiatives (HAIs) leverage partnerships and novel approaches to advance Veteran health and social determinants by providing expertise, direction, and support for field-based initiatives. HAIs are aligned with HAP's pillars, such as mental health and suicide prevention, which guide partnerships and HAIs to directly improve the health and well-being of VA beneficiaries.

"The [Veteran Sponsorship Initiative \(VSI\)](#) is one of HAP's HAIs that leverages the power of community partnerships to proactively provide resources across SDOH and reduce suicide risk factors," said Christine Eickhoff, HAP health system specialist. *"VSI moves interventions upstream to better engage all Veterans, including those not currently receiving VA care, prior to the onset of severe mental health symptoms."*



VSI is an evidence-based program designed to reduce military-to-civilian transition challenges by matching TSMs with community-based sponsors who assist with housing, employment, educational opportunities, and access to mental health support. [Research suggests](#) that VSI is successful in decreasing Veteran suicide risk by reducing psychological pain, increasing social connectedness, and helping individuals be more engaged in health care resources. VSI is led and implemented by the [Transitioning Servicemember/Veteran and Suicide Prevention Center \(TASC\)](#) in collaboration with HAP, which developed the [Veteran Sponsor Partnership Network \(VSPN\)](#) to support VSI implementation across VHA.

"Through research studies focused on TSMs and Veterans, we found that providing peer sponsors for TSMs and Veterans during the transition back into civilian life is an effective support measure," said Joseph Geraci, director, TASC. *"A [recent study](#) confirms that community-based interventions, when combined with trained peer sponsor support, more effectively reduce suicide risk factors and improve health outcomes for service members."*

VSPN is a coalition of VHA partners that helps TSMs, Veterans, and their families access VA services and community resources. VSPN supports a national network of peer sponsors trained by TASC to implement the VSI program locally. These sponsors are managed by community organizations throughout the nation, allowing the program to reach more of the military community, both inside and outside of VA.

"HAP is committed to expanding community partnerships focused on improving Veterans' [social determinants of health](#)," said Dr. Chien Chen, HAP chief officer and nurse executive. *"Through collaboration with key stakeholders in the community, VSI is better able to engage with all Veterans, especially those not currently receiving VA care."*

HAP is committed to enhancing Veterans' whole health through partnerships and HAIs with community organizations dedicated to improving health care access and equity for the military community. The VSPN initiative enables HAP to support the national network of TASC-trained peer sponsors and the community organizations that manage them. With certified peer sponsorship as a foundation, these collaborative efforts reinforce VHA's top priority to decrease suicide risk factors for TSMs and Veterans.

VHA and Crohn's & Colitis Foundation Support Veterans living with IBD

A 2019 [study](#) found that rates of anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress disorder are high among Veterans diagnosed with inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) and have continued to increase. To support the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) mission to [prevent Veteran suicide](#) and to support Veterans' whole health, VHA collaborates with the [Crohn's & Colitis Foundation](#) in a partnership facilitated by VHA's [HAP](#).

"HAP's efforts to facilitate and manage partnerships with community organizations enable VHA to more fully support Veterans' physical and mental well-being," said Dr. Chien Chen, HAP chief officer and nurse executive. *"The VHA-Crohn's & Colitis Foundation partnership illustrates the positive impact of this collaboration for the [more than 66,000 Veterans](#) currently living with IBD."*

[Crohn's disease](#) and [ulcerative colitis](#) are chronic inflammatory diseases affecting the gastrointestinal tract and the large intestine, respectively, and are collectively known as inflammatory bowel disease, or IBD. Through the VHA-Crohn's & Colitis Foundation partnership, Veterans now have access to additional health care resources, like a Veteran-specific webpage and online support group.

The Crohn's & Colitis Foundation collaborates with VA's National Gastroenterology and Hepatology Field Advisory Board (GI FAB) IBD subcommittee — a multi-disciplinary team of VA medical center clinicians, mental health specialists, and social workers — to develop programs and

resources for Veterans living with IBD. The shared efforts of this subcommittee enable VHA and the Foundation to meet gaps identified by the VA professionals who care for IBD patients.

"VHA and the GI FAB have been incredibly supportive of our national efforts to improve the quality and access to care for Veterans with IBD," said Dr. Meena A. Prasad, chair of the GI FAB IBD subcommittee and the Crohn's & Colitis Foundation Working Group. *"VHA has improved IBD continuing education for providers and trainees through an IBD Bootcamp, monthly IBD conferences, a virtual IB support program, an IBD SharePoint resource hub, and an IBD provider contact list."*

"HAP works to develop health care partnership collaborations enhancing Veterans' health and wellness through improved coordination of services, enhanced support systems, and increased access to health resources and expertise," said Kimberly Pugh, EdD, RN, HAP health system specialist. *"For example, the partnership with the Crohn's & Colitis Foundation offers a variety of educational resources and webinars for Veterans. The Crohn's & Colitis Foundation also offers a Veterans' support group. This support group helps Veterans cope emotionally with the challenges of living with inflammatory bowel diseases."*

With many Veterans currently living with IBD, HAP acknowledged the May 19 World IBD Day, and the opportunity to unite people worldwide in the fight against Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis.



Partners in Care: Celebrating Nurses and Their Role in Enhancing Veterans' Health through Partnerships

[National Nurses Week 2024](#), running from May 6 to May 12, is a time to celebrate and recognize the invaluable contributions of nurses across the nation. This year's theme, "Nurses Make the Difference," underscores the pivotal role nurses play in health care settings, embodying compassion and care. In [HAP](#), nurses are at the forefront of facilitating partnerships that significantly improve the health and well-being of Veterans.

VA nurses are integral to HAP's mission of supporting Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors across SDOH. HAP nurses collaborate with the [Crohn's & Colitis Foundation](#) to provide vital educational resources and webinars, along with a dedicated support group for Veterans battling inflammatory bowel disease. They also join forces with the [Global Liver Institute](#), bringing their expertise and compassionate care to support Veterans suffering from liver conditions. Their clinical insights ensure that partnerships are not only strategic but also deeply aligned with Veterans' specific health needs.

"As we look to the future, our partnerships continue to embrace mental health support and alternative therapies, reflecting our ongoing commitment to adapt and evolve in ways that best serve the health and well-being of Veterans," said Kimberly Pugh, EdD, RN, HAP health system specialist.

Though having the input of a registered nurse is not a prerequisite for fostering successful partnerships, the expertise nurses bring to HAP's team is a valued asset. The foundation of HAP's collaborative success lies in clear communication, aligned goals, and mutual trust and commitment, ensuring that our partnerships with nongovernmental organizations provide safe and inclusive environments that uphold the comprehensive well-being of Veterans.

"I am continually inspired by the dedication and innovative spirit of nurses. Their deep understanding of patient care and commitment to partnerships enable us to meet and exceed the health needs of Veterans," said Dr. Chien Chen, HAP chief officer and nurse executive. *"Our collaboration with diverse organizations ensures that we are at the forefront of providing compassionate and cutting-edge care. Every day, nurses prove that they are not just part of a health care system—they are leaders in shaping for the betterment of patients and Veterans."*

For Nurses Week, HAP invites everyone, including health care professionals, patients, and community members, to join us in applauding the tireless efforts and dedication of nurses. Their ability to integrate care with compassion and innovation through partnerships not only enhances the lives of Veterans but also inspires all of us.



Dr. Chien Chen, HAP Chief Officer and Nurse Executive, 2024 National Academies of Practice Fellow



HAP is pleased to announce that Dr. Chien Chen, HAP chief officer and nurse executive, was inducted into the 2024 [National Academies of Practice \(NAP\)](#) class of fellows. Awards were presented on March 16 at the NAP Annual Meeting and Forum.

Awarded 501(c)(3) nonprofit status in 1982, NAP is an organization dedicated to affordable, accessible, and quality health care for all. NAP is driven by the mission to educate, recruit, and mentor members, facilitate collaborative scholarship and research, and advocate for the value of interprofessional practice.

Through the Distinguished Fellowship in nursing, NAP recognizes individuals with exemplary careers of ten years or more who are committed to interprofessional practice and accessible, affordable health care for all. In a rigorous selection process, distinguished peers who have made significant and enduring contributions in their professions review submissions and grant successful applicants lifetime appointments.

Dr. Chen is board certified in Nurse Executive Advanced, Nursing Professional Development, and Psychiatric Mental Health Nursing by the American Nurses Credentialing Center. As HAP's chief officer and nurse executive, Dr. Chen is recognized for his work providing national strategic oversight and leadership to VHA's robust public-private partnerships and innovative, safe, and ethical emerging therapies at the national, state, and community levels.

"NAP's belief that health care should address the whole person aligns with VA's Whole Health approach and with my own personal values," said Dr. Chien Chen. *"I'm proud to join this distinguished organization as a 2024 Fellow and am excited to contribute to the mission of increasing health care equity and accessibility for Veterans."*



For more information about VHA partnerships, visit va.gov/HEALTHPARTNERSHIPS/partnerships.asp

VA



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Veterans Health Administration
National Center for Healthcare
Advancement and Partnerships

To share a partnership opportunity or consult with HAP on a non-monetary partnership, please contact our office via email:

VHA_Partnerships@va.gov
va.gov/healthpartnerships