

CCBHC Innovations:

Enhancing Pathways to Care for Veterans and Members of the Armed Forces

NATIONAL
COUNCIL
for Mental
Wellbeing



“When you focus your planning efforts on the outcome of supporting veterans and members of the armed services in accessing services, rather than getting an agreement signed, you are not just improving care, you are saving lives.”

— Joseph (JC) Carrica II, EdD, Vice President/Chief Healthcare Innovation and Strategy Officer, Valley-Wide Health Systems

Valley-Wide Health Systems is a Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC) covering 16 counties in south-central and southeast Colorado. Southeast Health Group and Valley-Wide merged in 2023. Before the merger, Southeast Health Group received a two-year Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinic Expansion (CCBHC-E) grant in 2021. The CCBHC-E grant was seen as an opportunity to expand services and support across the counties, with special consideration for tailoring care for veterans and members of the armed services, in an area where veterans make up 7.4% of the population.

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CCBHC-E National Training & Technical Assistance Center

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Starting with what's in place

Before receiving the CCBHC grant award, Valley-Wide had already secured a grant from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) through the [Staff Sergeant Parker Gordon Fox Suicide Prevention Program](#). This funding was used to hire two full-time veteran navigators and build on existing efforts to improve services for veterans and members of the armed services. Additionally, Valley-Wide was credentialed as a service provider through Connected Care, the managing entity for veterans and military members in the area.

However, Valley-Wide encountered a significant bureaucratic barrier when attempting to establish the required signed Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) or Designated Collaborating Organization (DCO) agreement to meet CCBHC standards. Despite numerous efforts through both formal and informal channels, obtaining a signed agreement from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs for a single behavioral health agency proved to be impossible.



Shifting focus to providing support to veterans and members of the armed services and their families

As a result, Valley-Wide shifted its strategy and sought out opportunities to speak directly to veterans and members of the armed services and their families. It started with an invitation to meet with a local [American Legion](#) post and the county veteran's services office. The group warmly welcomed Valley-Wide to discuss services, but the discussion quickly turned into a listening session for Valley-Wide.



Being open to listening and learning from veterans and members of the armed services and their families

Veterans and members of the armed services and their families discussed their concerns about the confusing and conflicting processes needed to access medical and behavioral health services, not just through the VA but also at Valley-Wide. The participants shared that it was difficult for veterans and members of the armed services to request help for mental health needs, and families seeking help often encountered barriers, especially if their loved one was unwilling to engage in services.



Prioritizing access to crisis care

According to [2023 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report](#), more than 17 veterans and members of the armed services take their own lives each day. In its discussions with the American Legion, Valley-Wide found that the top priority of family members was to have a concrete understanding of what they should do if their veteran was experiencing a mental health crisis.

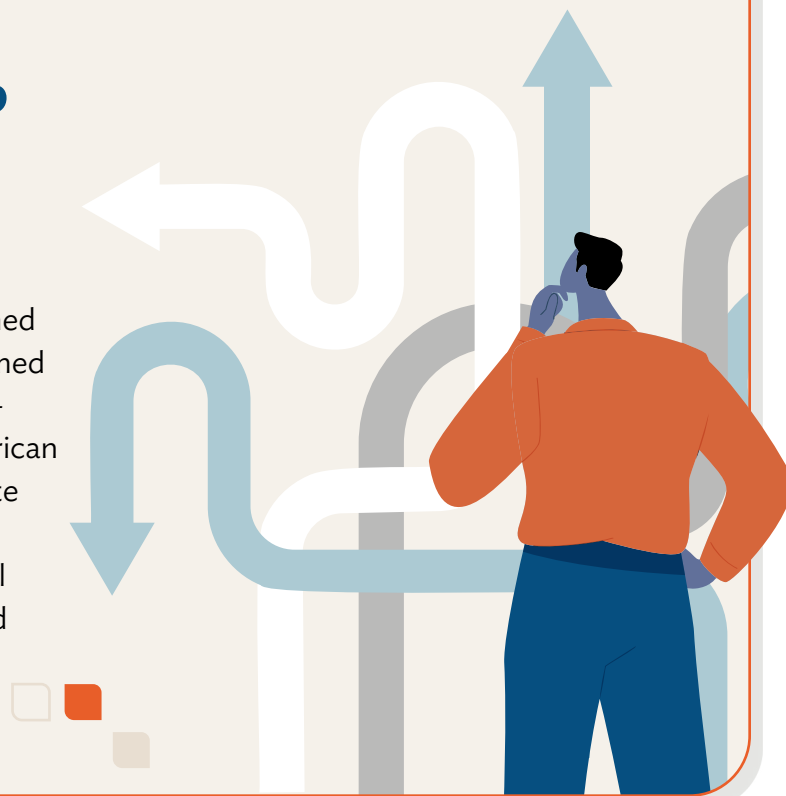
Listening to concerns

Veterans and members of the armed services and their family members described what was working and not working in accessing services. The group concluded that the current process was too confusing, with many barriers and processes that resulted in shuffling the person to other systems of care — often resulting in the person and their family giving up the pursuit of care.



Developing a step-by-step process to access crisis services

Recognizing that veterans, members of the armed services and their families were highly accustomed to the military decision-making process, Valley-Wide, the county veteran's office and the American Legion developed a simple flowchart to illustrate the steps to use VA services. The protocol was distributed through the American Legion's local network to veterans and members of the armed services and their families.



Instant impact

Valley-Wide and the American Legion have credited this simple protocol with supporting many veterans and members of the armed services and their families in getting lifesaving care. The very first day the flowchart was shared, one family used it to prevent a family member's suicide. The protocols have expanded to include accessing a variety of medical, behavioral health, and other services.

Creating a model for collaboration

The flowchart was the first in a long list of ideas and recommendations generated by initial meetings. Valley-Wide, the American Legion, and local veterans' offices committed to ongoing meetings and formed the Veterans Advisory Committee. The committee ensured ongoing communication and involvement by holding monthly discussions with veterans and members of the armed services, growing to over 40 members who continue to meet regularly. It also provided accurate information and dispelled rumors about services. The Veterans Advisory Committee continues to serve as a uniting force for all area veterans' groups and exists without any written MOU or DCO.



Ensuring cultural competencies for professionals working with veterans and members of the armed services

A second priority of the Veterans Advisory Committee was to ensure all professionals working with veterans and members of the armed forces were practicing culturally competent behaviors that reflect the unique needs, beliefs, and values that exist in the military culture. Valley-Wide changed its screening instruments to better reflect the military culture and hired veterans as veteran navigators. Further, it ensured that onboarding training for all staff included training on veteran trauma and suicidality.



Becoming a credentialed provider

Valley-Wide remains a credentialed provider for Connected Care to ensure reimbursement for its outpatient mental health and psychiatry services, but it faces ongoing challenges in recruiting independently licensed providers as required by the credentialing process. Reimbursement through Connected Care may not be financially sustainable in areas where workforce recruitment is difficult, but it is a good start in ensuring there is a safety net for veterans. Valley-Wide has found that being an FQHC has improved its ability to receive a more sustainable reimbursement for behavioral health services, while also ensuring coordination of physical and behavioral health care needs are being met.



Current and future strategies

Valley-Wide and the Veterans Advisory Committee recognize that their collaboration is not a point-in-time activity but is an essential service to the communities they serve. The collaboration is in its fifth year, continuing well beyond the initial six months needed to develop the flowchart. Veterans' groups were worried that once the funding ran out, the CCBHC would abandon them, but Valley-Wide stayed committed to meeting monthly and now rents workspace for its veteran navigators at local American Legion halls.

The committee continues to educate the community and has also identified the need to increase involvement and awareness among younger returning veterans and members of the armed services. It is actively discussing the safe storage of firearms for veterans and active-duty members and communicating how to navigate benefits outside of Connected Care when there is a choice.



Commitment to lasting change

Valley-Wide and its partners update community resource guides for all services every six months. Navigators and members of the Veterans Advisory Community attended over 500 events in the past year to continue improving access to care. Valley-Wide is working toward convincing the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to adopt a less stringent credentialing process, in which all providers within an organization with sufficient status can be credentialed, to better recruit and retain its workforce.



Getting started



Understand that merely having a DCO or MOU does not create opportunities — **agreements are only useful if they lead to successful outcomes.**



Reach out to the local veterans' groups and **be prepared to listen to their feedback and work to fix things.** Listening without making changes erodes trust.