



FILE PHOTO

The Canandaigua VA Medical Center has launched a program to identify veterans who show up in civilian emergency rooms and make sure they get mental health care specific to veterans, for example, for such problems as post traumatic stress disorder.

Canandaigua VA center programs go national

MENTAL HEALTH: Projects at the Canandaigua VA Medical Center are benefiting veterans in Philadelphia and Denver, just for starters.

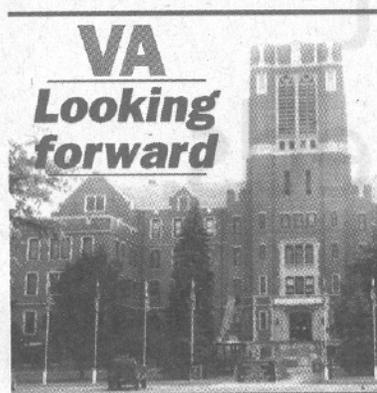
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Veterans in cities across the United States will have a better chance of receiving mental-health care because of work being done at the Canandaigua VA Medical Center.

One of several projects under way at the VA's Center of Excellence involves getting civilian emergency departments to work with VA hospitals and clinics to ensure no veteran falls through the cracks.

Called Safe Vet, the project entails hiring and training coordinators to work at selected VA facilities. So far,



Safe Vet programs are being started in Denver and Philadelphia, said Kerry Knox, executive director of the Canandaigua VA's Center of Excellence and associate professor of psychiatry and community and preventive medicine at the University of Rochester.

By the numbers

128,974

Calls to hotline since July 2007

3,305

Calls resulting in rescues

67,350

Calls in fiscal 2008

52,245

Calls in first six months of fiscal 2009

Source: Canandaigua VA Medical Center, statistics for national suicide prevention hotline (began July 2007), as of March 31, 2009. Hotline: 1-800-273-TALK (8255)

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VETERANS

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"We are bringing up different sites gradually," Knox said.

Here is a possible scenario: A veteran is brought to an emergency department by family members concerned because the veteran has taken an unknown substance and is exhibiting bizarre behavior. The emergency staff evaluates the vet and determines the patient is not an immediate threat to himself or others. Instead of the veteran just going on home, he or she is then referred to the coordinator for the Safe Vet program. That coordinator takes the veteran's care a step further, doing a separate evaluation specific to behavioral health, which includes developing a plan of care catered to that veteran's need and providing the veteran and family with the VA's suicide-prevention hotline information.

"We know many veterans end up in emergency departments," said Knox, "especially veterans experiencing a lot of stress."

Knox said the program is being developed and coordinated at the Canandaigua VA. It involves creating a training program for the Safe Vet coordinator, who will be an employee of the selected VA and must be a psychologist or social worker. Though the coordinators are hired by the selected VA facilities, the duties and oth-



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— Kerry Knox, executive director at Canandaigua VA Medical Center's Center of Excellence

er details of the position are determined by the program developed in Canandaigua. Knox said all Safe Vet coordinators, no matter where they work, will fulfill the same requirements. Canandaigua will also be the VA where all the data will be recorded, managed and analyzed, she said.

VA sites are selected based on the number of veterans living in an area and other factors, she said, with at least three more communities to be selected this year.

A VA coordinator and emergency personnel work together to share information and make sure veterans receive care through the VA, care they might not otherwise have sought or known about. The program also guarantees "intensive fol-

low-up" from the VA for up to a year, said Knox.

Though a Safe Vet program is not yet designed for a specific VA in upstate New York, Knox said, it is likely one will eventually be at a site in the region encompassing VA facilities in Canandaigua, Buffalo and Syracuse. Those working on the Safe Vet program involve others affiliated with the University of Rochester, including psychiatrist Glenn Currier, the center's chief of medical affairs and associate professor of psychiatry at the university.

"We are very aware we need to provide this kind of clinical service to veterans," said Knox. "We are rolling this out nationally to reduce suicide and find veterans in distress."

The rise in calls to the national suicide-prevention hotline operated out of the VA on Fort Hill Avenue is a sign of the dire need to help veterans.

Since launched in July 2007, dispatchers had fielded 128,974 calls as of March 31, including 3,305 rescues. The hotline received 67,350 calls in fiscal 2008. In the first six months of fiscal 2009, the number of calls were already at 52,245.

The number of employees at the Center of Excellence has remained at about 45 since it opened in 2007, said Knox, though the amount of work has increased with many part-time positions having become full-time.

Other projects at the Canandaigua VA's Center of Excellence include a coordinated effort with the VA and U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Through random surveys and data collection from many sources, the program seeks to help veterans who might not otherwise receive care because they are not already on record as seeking or receiving services from the VA or any other institu-

tion, said Robert Bossarte, chief of epidemiology and the health services division for the Center of Excellence. That program is a first in terms of taking a more aggressive approach to identifying veterans who need help before they seek help themselves, said Bossarte, an assistant professor in the department of psychiatry at University of Rochester. As with other projects at the center, he added, the data

will also be used to shed light on suicide risk and prevention. "I am excited about that," he said.

Other ongoing projects at the center include insomnia studies by Wil Pigeon, a clinical researcher who specializes in behavioral therapy treatment for insomnia. So far, about a dozen veterans have been recruited for studies taking place at the VA's Rochester outpatient clinic.