



VA Portland Health Care System  
Health Services Research & Development

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## Life After Loss: Comparing Student Service Member/Veteran and Civilian Mental Health Characteristics Among Individuals Exposed to Death by Suicide

Suicide rates among Veterans continue to climb at an alarming rate, increasing the number who have lost a loved one to suicide. It is known that depressive symptoms, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts increase following exposure to suicide but these studies are specific to the general public. CIVIC post-doctoral fellow **Dr. Jason Chen** and colleagues sought to investigate how well these findings generalize to college students who are active duty or former military (student service members/veterans or SSM/V).

Past studies attempting to characterize SSM/V help-seeking behaviors are mixed. In the present study, Dr. Chen and coauthors used an epidemiological survey distributed as part of a larger study to identify SSM/Vs who had and had not been exposed to suicide. Additionally, the authors identified a sample of civilian students who had been exposed to suicide match by gender and age.

While suicide exposure was widespread, the authors were surprised to find that SSM/Vs



who were exposed to suicide were not more likely to express suicidal ideation than SSM/Vs who had not been exposed to suicide.

Moreover, civilians exposed to suicide were less likely to use psychotherapy than SSM/Vs. There were not significant differences between the two groups with regard to suicidality, beliefs, or stigma.

With this study, Dr. Chen and colleagues offer a deeper look into the mental health characteristics and beliefs of SSM/V who have been exposed to suicide. The authors propose that these findings have the potential to inform campus prevention programs for student service members/Veterans in addition to broader clinical implications.

[Read more about Dr. Chen's Study HERE](#)

### Upcoming Events

HSR&D CIVIC Research Conferences, Fridays from 9:30 a.m. – 11:00 a.m. Room 214, Building 6. Unless otherwise noted.

**August 17<sup>th</sup>**  
**Dr. Ginnifer Mastarone presents:**  
What is User Experience?

**September 7<sup>th</sup>**  
**Dr. Ginnifer Mastarone presents:**  
What about trust?

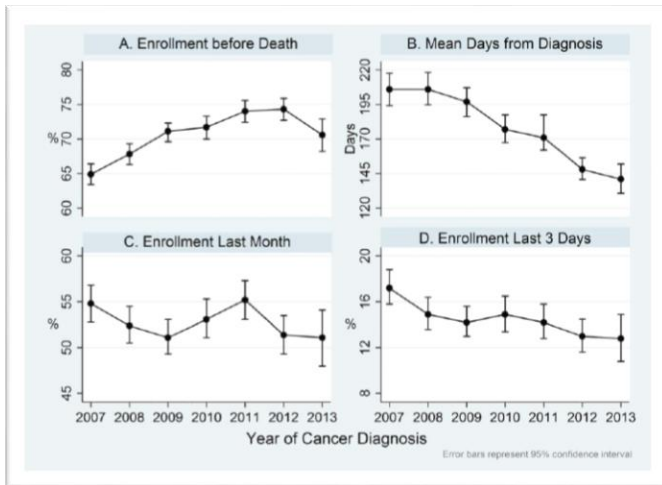
**September 14<sup>th</sup>**  
**Dr. Shannon Nugent presents:**  
TBD

**September 21<sup>st</sup>**  
**Dr. Chris Slatore presents:**  
Smoking Cessation: Trial of an  
Automated Teachable Moment



## Improvements in Hospice Utilization Among Patients with Advanced-Stage Lung Cancer in an Integrated Health Care System

Through a retrospective cohort study using data from the VA Central Cancer Registry (VACCR) and the Corporate Data Warehouse (CDW), CIVIC Investigator, **Dr. Donald Sullivan** and colleagues sought to investigate trends in hospice utilization among VA patients with lung cancer.



Despite national guidelines that emphasize the benefits to early enrollment in hospice care, enrollment frequently occurs too late to make an impact on quality of life for cancer patients. VA has introduced a comprehensive end-of-life care initiative intended to improve access to palliative care and bolster collaboration with hospice programs at a local level. Additional VA characteristics such as financial structure may add to improved hospice enrollment, which has been largely unexplored among Veteran cancer patients.

The investigators found that overall hospice utilization increased and late enrollments decreased. However, variations in enrollment were also identified based on patient characteristics such as age, race, and income level in addition to regional differences. The present study provides a framework to enhance utilization through targeting patients in groups and regions who tend to have lower and later hospice enrollment.

*[Read more about Dr. Sullivan's Study HERE](#)*

## Suicidal Ideation and Suicidal Self-directed Violence Following Clinician Initiated Prescription Opioid Discontinuation Among Long-term Opioid Users

Despite the current emphasis on the opioid crisis and the attention on reducing opioid use more generally, little focus is paid to patient outcomes following provider initiated opioid discontinuation. This is precisely the question members in **Dr. Travis Lovejoy's** research group sought to answer. Their study aimed to identify correlates of suicidal ideation (SI) and suicidal self-directed violence (SSV) following discontinuation of long-term opioid therapy.

Past research has demonstrated that opioid discontinuation is most often clinician initiated due to risky patient behaviors such as opioid misuse, poor adherence to the treatment plan, and use of illicit or other prescribed controlled substances. Despite this, clinicians have expressed

concerns that discontinuing long-term opioid therapy has the potential to exacerbate or even create suicidal ideation in some patients.

The investigators identified a national cohort of VA patients prescribed long-term opioid therapy through the VA Corporate Data Warehouse (CDW). Patients who were prescribed opioid therapy and were diagnosed with a substance use disorder prior to discontinuing opioids were identified and matched to a sample of patients without a substance use disorder diagnosis.

The findings indicate that mental health diagnoses, specifically PTSD and psychotic disorders, are more strongly related to SI and SSV than pain-related factors such as pain severity or physical functioning.



The authors maintain that the study supports the current clinical practice to ask Veterans about current SI, which provides an opportunity to intervene before patients engage in self-harm. In all, the findings suggest that providers who initiate long-term opioid therapy discontinuation should take extra safety precautions with patients with mental health diagnoses.

*[Read more about the Lovejoy Lab's study HERE](#)*

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## **CIVIC'S Veteran Engagement Group**

CIVIC's Veteran Engagement Group (VEG) is comprised of Veterans from various service eras, branches, and backgrounds who regularly come together to meet with investigators. VEG members provide diverse and individualized feedback to CIVIC investigators at all stages of the research process. The incorporation of VEG member's perspectives, especially as users of the VA healthcare system, can bolster translation to practice and help CIVIC research be more patient-centered.

### **VEG Member Highlight: Jennie Boster**



**Jennie Boster** is a OEF/OIF Air Force Veteran and has been a member of CIVIC's VEG since 2017. Jennie originally joined VEG because she wanted to help Veterans on a larger scale but continues to participate because she "learn(s) a great deal from each meeting regarding the newest research studies being conducted at VA." Jennie says that learning about ongoing VA research inspires her to take a deeper look into topics that spark her interest. As a VA employee in the Research and Development Office, she is very familiar with administrative research processes such as IRB approval but through VEG Jennie feels that she has expanded her knowledge of compliance procedures especially from an investigator's perspective. Additionally, Jennie says she has learned "a great deal about the process by which research study proposals evolve into funded research studies and how the outcomes are used to guide future research projects." When she's not at VA, in school, or with VEG, Jennie maintains her connection with the Veteran community through a close-knit group of friends she met while serving.

**Fun Fact:** Jennie is currently attending a Master's program for Professional Mental Health Counseling and during breaks between semesters she really enjoys skydiving and hiking.

*If you are interested in presenting, joining, or learning more about CIVIC's VEG, contact the VEG Liaison **Rachel Matsumoto** ([Rachel.Matsumoto@va.gov](mailto:Rachel.Matsumoto@va.gov)).*

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## **CIVIC Announcements:**

The **CIVIC's Bike More Challenge Team** biked the most out of all Portland VA Medical Center department teams with a total of 1,169 miles and 103 commute trips during the month of May.



Good news! **CIVIC** has been renewed by VA Health Services Research and Development (HSR&D) as a Center of Innovation (COIN) for the next 5 years beginning in October 2018.

Congratulations to **Drs. Lauren Denneson, Sam Edwards, Travis Lovejoy, and Alan Teo** who were recently awarded HSR&D grants.

CIVIC is excited to welcome two new HSR&D Fellows: **Drs. Julie Kahler and Carolyn Peterson**. Drs. Kahler and Peterson will be starting in mid-September.

CIVIC's **Dr. Sarah Ono** and colleagues recently launched a Strengthening Excellence in Research through Veteran Engagement (SERVE) toolkit on the HSR&D website. You can view the toolkit and its associated resources [here](#).

### **CIVIC Core Investigator Introduction: Denise Hynes, PhD, MPH, RN**



**Dr. Denise Hynes** has been a Research Scientist in the US Department of Veterans Affairs since 1991 and joined CIVIC as a Core Investigator in 2018. She is an experienced nurse, health services researcher, and data scientist. Her research focuses on innovative approaches to improve healthcare quality and access. Her service focuses on database and informatics methods to support research and evaluation of healthcare interventions.

She received her Bachelor of Science in Nursing degree from Loyola University of Chicago, Master of Public Health degree from Johns Hopkins University, School of Hygiene and Public Health, and her Doctoral degree (PhD) from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, School of Public Health. She completed postdoctoral training at the Cecil B. Sheps Center for Health Services Research at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and at Drexel University through the Hedwig van Ameringen Executive Leadership for Academic Medicine (ELAM) in 2014. She served as tenure track faculty at Duke University, Loyola University Chicago, and the University of Illinois at Chicago. Dr. Hynes also holds an appointment at Oregon State University as Professor in the College of Public Health and Human Sciences and as the Director of the new Health Data & Informatics (HDI) Center in the Center for Genome Research and Biocomputing.

### **CIVIC Member Highlight: Philip Tostado, MA**



**Philip Tostado** started working as a Research Assistant for **Drs. Christopher Slatore, Donald Sullivan, and Kelly Vranas** on the PDX-PCCRT team in July 2017 after receiving his Master's Degree in Sociology at Portland State University. During his educational career, he developed an interest in studying depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues. He is the study coordinator on a variety of projects concerning lung cancer, palliative care, and intensive care units. When he is not working, Philip enjoys overanalyzing reality television shows, listening to podcasts, and exploring the great outdoors.

### **CIVIC Member Highlight: Akeesha Simmons, BA**



**Akeesha Simmons** is a research assistant for **Dr. Ben Morasco** at the Chronic Pain Research Lab. She is currently working on their Improving the Safety of Opioid Prescriptions (ISOP) project. Her research interests include pain management and mind-body interventions for mental health. She is located in Room 332 in Building 6 and welcomes CIVIC members to to come stop by to say hello!

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## CIVIC Publications

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Bourgeois JA, Mariano MT, **Ganzini L**, Wilkins J, Brendel RW, Kaplan L: Physician Assisted Death Psychiatric Assessment: A Standardized Protocol to Confirm to the California End of Life Option Act. *Psychosomatics* (epub ahead of print), PMID 29653821

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Kondo KK, **Wyse JJ**, Mendelson A, Freeman M, Low A, **Kansagara D**. Pay-for-performance and Veteran care in the VHA community: a systematic review. *J Gen Intern Med*. 2018;33:1155.

**Lesselroth BJ**, Adams K, Church VL, Tallet S, Russ Y, Wiedrick J, Forsberg C, Dorr DA. Evaluation of multimedia medication reconciliation software: a randomized controlled, single-blind trial to measure diagnostic accuracy for discrepancy detection. *Applied Clinical Informatics*. 2018;9(2):284-300.

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Liu LL, Li TM, **Teo AR**, Kato TA, Wong PW. Harnessing Social Media TO Explore youth Social Withdrawal in Three Major Cities in China: Cross-Sectional Web Survey. *JMIR Ment Health*. 2018 May;5(2):e34. doi: 10.2196/mental.8509. PMID: 29748164.

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