PROJECT NAME: Dryhootch: Veterans using peer support to make sure their comrades get the care they need
HWPP PROJECT NUMBER: 2009D-16

Without exceeding this one (1) page, briefly describe the project:

A Task Force including veterans and VA Health professionals, formed to address the unmet needs of veterans, found that many veterans suffer from premature, preventable illnesses such as heart disease and cancer because of untreated physical and mental illnesses, exacerbated by chronic stress, PTSD, addictions, and unhealthy lifestyles. The Task Force found that VA services were not used by some of the highest-risk veterans, especially those who lacked social support and those affected by undiagnosed mental illness. To address these needs, Milwaukee veterans formed Dryhootch whose goal is to promote the healing of veterans and their families in collaboration with community resources. We seek to achieve this goal through outreach, providing safe venues that can engage at risk veterans, and facilitating timely access to resources.

Plan - Describe the project’s implementation plan, methods to be utilized, and involvement of affected communities.

Many of the veterans who formed Dryhootch were at high risk for health complications, but were able to avoid them. Based on their experience, we believe that establishing a safe, non-governmental location close to but distinct from VA services is the first step. The facility will offer access to peer support and information in a Coffee Shop atmosphere. The space would also host meetings of veterans groups and support groups (e.g., AA/NA) which will increase the likelihood that at risk veterans will use it. Our project goals are: 1) To explore the logistics of such a resource, location, initial training of peer supporters, ongoing funding requirements, and clarifying how VA can best interact with Dryhootch; 2) To clarify the need for such a facility, including assessing the target population size (with VA and DoD administrative data), gathering qualitative data on likelihood such a facility would be used, and mapping overlap with existing VA outreach.

Partnership - Describe how the project will capitalize on the strengths and skills of community and academic partners.

This project builds on existing partnerships. Members of Dryhootch are also members of the VFW, American Legion, Vietnam Veterans of America, etc. These organizations have worked with Dr. Whittle on projects promoting chronic disease prevention and self-management since 2005. Dr. Whittle has visited nearly 100 veteran organization posts over the last 3 years. Robert Beller is Director of the Milwaukee VA Medical Center. He oversees the entire facility as well as community based outpatient clinics in Union Grove, Appleton, Cleveland and Green Bay. He has worked with members of Dryhootch to identify shared, feasible activities to achieve their common goal of improving the health of veterans.

Evaluation - Describe the evaluation method that will be used to measure quantifiable and significant outcomes.

We will use the "process, progress, products" paradigm to evaluate the project. We will track PROCESS by recording minutes of quarterly data monitoring and VA leadership meetings, and by tracking the occasions (e.g., post meetings) where we collect survey data. This will document adherence to a timeline that will be refined during the period between grant award and the start of funding. We will specify milestones for PROGRESS towards each of the action items on our implementation plan e.g., we expect to complete analysis of use of VA by local OEF/OIF veterans in the first quarter. Our product will include an issue statement, relevant data, a summary of current status and an action plan.

Sustainability - Explain how the partnership will be financially and programatically sustained.

We acknowledge we will need to rely on volunteer support on an ongoing basis. The VA Mental Health staff has committed volunteer hours for initial training of veteran peer to peer counselors. Architects, contractors, carpenters, etc. have all pledged in-kind hours and work for the Coffee Shop facility. Dryhootch leaders have extensive networks of contacts in the veteran community, a group noted for volunteerism. The Milwaukee VA is committed to providing in kind support, both for training and for resources, if this program can demonstrate improved access for veterans. The details of such ongoing support will be an important item under the logistics section of the implementation plan. Dr. Whittle's primary career focus is supporting veterans self-management activities. He has been able to support his non-voluntary time in this area through research collaborations.

Dissemination - Describe how the project results will be shared.

Our experience with projects addressing hypertension suggests that successful interventions are rapidly adopted by other veteran organizations. Similarly, we can use the network of veteran organizations to encourage spread by the Dryhootch model to new geographic areas. Dissemination will be enhanced by emphasizing the benefits of peer support in an existing health issues column in the VFW Wisconsin (WI) News, a bimonthly statewide newspaper distributed to all WI VFW members. We can also disseminate information via the Dryhootch website. Veterans groups are organized on the national as well as state level, a model that works in WI will rapidly spread to other states. Dr. Whittle has published over 50 peer reviewed articles and will ensure that the results of our work is available in published form.