



Highlights

- A qualitative research study was created to discover the impact of COVID-19 on peer support specialists.
- Peer support specialists are also Veterans in recovery, increasing the importance of learning about this topic.
- Peers have been instrumental in helping Veterans navigate the challenges experienced because of COVID-19.

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, Dr. Johanne Eliacin identified the need to learn more about how the pandemic was affecting VA peer support services. To address this, she designed her most recent research study titled, **Expanding VA Peer Support Workforce Capacity to Facilitate Increased Access to VHA Mental Health Services and Continuity of Care for Veterans with Mental Illness During The COVID-19 Pandemic (HSR&D C19 20-393)**. This project is designed to analyze the impact of COVID-19 on peer support specialists, their service delivery, and to understand the utilization of peer support services during this time. Dr. Eliacin and her team are conducting qualitative telephone interviews with peer support specialists and their supervisors from VISN 10 VA facilities. Dr. Eliacin’s goal is to interview at least two peers and one supervisor per facility to collect a broad range of experiences.

Peers use technology to adapt to shifts in service delivery caused by the COVID-19 pandemic

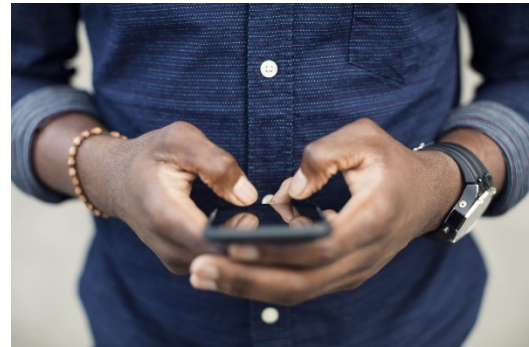
Prior to starting this study, Dr. Eliacin had already established a connection with the VA Peer Support Program through her ongoing research study, **Improving Patient-Provider Communication to reduce Mental Health Disparities – PARTNER-MH (HSR&D CDA 16-153)**. Through discussions with peers, she became interested in how the COVID-19 pandemic had affected peers’ work with Veterans. She noted that peer support specialists typically rely on in-person connection and noticed a rapid shift in service delivery towards virtual platforms during the pandemic. Dr. Eliacin became

“The peers are the first person they come in contact with and the peers are often a lot more accessible than other staff members/providers...They may be the primary contact to share information about COVID guidelines.” – Dr. Eliacin

interested in the effect of this change on both Veterans who were receiving services and the peers providing the services, as they are also Veterans in recovery.

This study’s approach allows for key insights into the effect of COVID-19 on Veteran Peers and the Veterans they serve

The study’s qualitative approach was selected because the pandemic is such a new phenomenon and these interviews allow the team to “get to know their [interviewees’] experiences and their stories”, according to Dr. Eliacin. As the primary research question was to learn about adaptations to treatment delivery, the open-ended approach allows for the team to capture the wide range of adaptations that may occur, as well as their effect on both Veterans and peers. Interviews assess service delivery methods before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, Veterans’ needs during the pandemic, the barriers and facilitators to adaptations, their potential impact on peer workforce capacity, and peers’ experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on their work. Interviews have been adapted as new insights have been gained, including questions on isolation, and working from home.



Peers become a lifeline for Veterans during the pandemic

Data analysis is in its early stages; however, Dr. Eliacin has discovered that peers are well-equipped to handle crisis situations, a role they have not typically been given in the past. Peer support specialists have been doing wellness checks and have become a “lifeline” for Veterans during the COVID-19 pandemic, both helping to support Veterans and also providing important information on COVID-19. Dr. Eliacin’s work will provide important information to illuminate the impact of the pandemic on the unique position of peer support specialists.