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For Immediate Release

NYSPA, MSSNY & NASW-NYS Veterans Mental Health Training Initiative Continues to Enhance Capacity of Practitioners in Community to Care for Veterans & Families As NYS & U.S. Commemorate Veterans Day

ALBANY, NY – As New York State and the U.S. commemorate Veterans Day on November 11, 2022, the New York State Psychiatric Association (NYSPA), the Medical Society of the State of New York (MSSNY), and the National Association of Social Workers – New York State (NASW-NYS), continue to support veterans and their families through the collaborative statewide Veterans Mental Health Training Initiative (VMHTI).

“The VMHTI has been an important component in the State’s effort to address the ongoing needs of veterans and their families” said Edward Herman, MD, JD, NYSPA President. “While thousands have been trained through the VMHTI, NYSPA and its statewide partner organizations appreciate that the Senate has recognized the need to fund this program so we can continue to offer trainings and expand our curriculum so our practitioners as well as peers in the community have the knowledge and skill set to care for veterans and their families.”

The VMHTI is a joint program of NYSPA, MSSNY and NASW-NYS supported by funding from the New York State Senate, including \$300,000 in the 2022-23 enacted state budget, for educating community mental health practitioners and primary healthcare physicians and specialists on veterans-specific mental health issues including combat/service-related post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, suicide in veterans, substance use, military culture, and women veterans’ mental health conditions including the impact of military sexual trauma. The VMHTI has two pathways, one led by NYSPA and MSSNY training primary care physicians and health practitioners from across the primary care specialties, including internal medicine, family practice, emergency medicine and OB-GYN and one led by the NASW-NYS, providing an accredited education and training program for community mental health workers.

“The Medical Society of the State of New York has been training primary care physicians on the mental health needs of our veterans through the Veterans Mental Health Training Initiative (VMHTI). MSSNY has engaged physician faculty who have trained their colleagues on issues such as post-traumatic stress, traumatic brain injury, substance use and military sexual trauma. MSSNY is grateful to all veterans who have served this country and state, and we believe physicians have a role in the physical and mental health needs of the increasing number of veterans that they are seeing in medical practice. MSSNY sincerely appreciates the New York State Senate’s recognition of the importance of the VMHTI through its funding of this program,” said Parag Metha, MD, MSSNY President.

The VMHTI is equipping New York’s healthcare workforce to meet the challenges of combat veteran specific mental health and related problems, which is critical to the overall health of the veteran community. Data indicates that more than half of all military veterans will seek care from a practitioner in his or her community upon return from combat. Prior funding for the VMHTI has allowed the VMHTI to successfully train over 3,400 primary care and psychiatric practitioners through the NYSPA & MSSNY programs, and over 4,000 social workers and community mental health providers through the NASW-NYS program.

New York State currently has the fifth largest population of veterans with 790,000, according to the New York Health Foundation’s New York’s Veterans: An In-depth Profile (October 2021).¹ The report estimates that three-quarters of New York’s veterans have served during wartime – 4% during WWII, 8% during the Korean Conflict, 32% during Vietnam Era, 30% in the Gulf War and 13% post 9/11 only. More than half of New York’s veterans are over the age of 65. While the majority of New York State veterans are males, at 92%, the proportion of female veterans is expected to reach 10% by 2025.

According to the Health Foundation’s report, veterans in New York die by suicide at a much higher rate than the general State population (nearly twice as high in 2019). A particular mental health issue that impacts veterans more than nonveterans is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PTSD can develop after experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event that is beyond a typical stressor, including warfare, sexual assaults, natural disasters, or other life-threatening events. PTSD is associated with persistent mental and emotional stress, substance use, smoking, increased violence, poor work performance, and poor quality of life in U.S. war veterans. Individuals with PTSD also have a relatively high prevalence of comorbidities associated with low physical activity such as obesity and diabetes. The rate of PTSD in the veteran population has been found to be double that of the general population (12.9% compared with 6.8%).

“NASW-NYS has a Veteran Advisory Committee, comprised of 13 Veteran service providers that creates all the services and trainings offered through the VMHTI. Due to COVID-19, veterans are facing exacerbated mental health symptoms and geographic barriers to treatment. The veteran committee members consider the VMHTI part of their continued military service to train mental health clinicians to deliver accessible, effective, and culturally competent services for veterans in this increased time of need. On Veterans Day, it is the civilian’s duty to remember and honor veterans who made numerous sacrifices to protect our freedoms and way of life,” said NASW-NYS Executive Director, Dr. Samantha Fletcher.

Through concerted efforts at the federal and state level, some progress continues to be made. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) released the [2022 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report](#), which reports that veteran suicides decreased in 2020 for the second year in a row – the most significant decrease (9.7 percent) in the veteran suicide rate since 2001. There were 6,146 veteran suicide deaths in 2020, 343 fewer than in 2019.² This report is the first to evaluate veteran suicide during the initial period of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the decrease is welcome news, the fact remains that veterans die by suicide at disproportionate rate and efforts must continue to address this crisis at federal, state and local levels.

In a separate report also issued by the New York State Health Foundation (*COVID-19 & Veterans’ Mental Health. January 2021*), it was noted that the pandemic has amplified veterans’ mental health needs, citing that “the pandemic has presented significant challenges for veterans, including exacerbating mental health and substance use issues...” In addition, a recent national survey found a majority of veterans had reported that their mental health worsened since social distancing measures were implemented and more than half reported having had mental health appointments canceled or postponed during the pandemic. The consequences of such changes have in some instances been deadly.

New York continues to take decisive action to meet the needs of veterans and their families, including provisions in the FY 2022-23 enacted budget providing additional funding for the VMHTI and the Joseph P Dwyer Peer to Peer Program as well as elevating the NYS Division of Veterans’ Services to a department-level agency.

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¹ <https://nyhealthfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/new-york-veterans-in-depth-profile-oct-2021.pdf>

² <https://news.va.gov/108984/2022-national-veteran-suicide-prevention-annual-report/>