



Points of Excellence

The Newsletter of the VISN 17 Center of Excellence for Research on Returning War Veterans

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Dr. Michael Russell and U.S. Congressman Bill Flores cutting the ribbon to the new CoE building

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The VA VISN 17 Center of Excellence for Research on Returning War Veterans is dedicated to conducting research that serves to improve the quality of life of our nations Veterans and foster the wellbeing of their families.

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Ribbon-Cutting Ceremony



On Thursday, April 20, 2017, the CoE was proud to host the official ribbon-cutting ceremony to mark the grand opening of our new building. The building is a 53,000 square foot, state-of-the-art facility with space for 75 staff members and faculty, as well 25 trainees (including undergraduates, graduate students, practicum students, interns and postdoctoral fellows.) The new facility features multiple examination rooms, observation rooms, wet labs, electrocardiography (EKG), electroencephalography (EEG), a three Tesla MRI for brain imaging, a Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation suite (TMS), as well as a custom built laboratory wing.

The keynote speaker for the ceremony was U.S. Representative Bill Flores, who spoke about the need for mental health research in the VA. His speech was preceded by addresses from Dr. Rachel Ramoni, the Chief Research & Development Officer of the Department of Veterans Affairs, Christopher Sandles, the Director of the Central Texas Veterans Health Care System, and Dr. Michael Russell, the Director of our CoE. Jessica Jacobsen, from the Office of Public & Intergovernmental Affairs, served as master of ceremonies.



Over 100 people attended the ceremony, including members of the Waco City Council, Baylor University, Texas A&M University, Scott & White Hospital, the Heart of Texas Mental Health/Mental Retardation Office, the National Alliance on Mental Illness, the Veterans One Stop, the VFW, the American Legion, the TexVet Initiative, the McLennan County Veterans Association, and our own Veterans Advisory Council.



L-R: Jessica Jacobsen, Dr. Michael Russell, Christopher Sandles, & Dr. Rachel Ramoni



Friends, associates, and guests of the CoE attend the ribbon-cutting ceremony



Dr. Steve Nelson shows visitors the new transcranial magnetic stimulation (TMS) suite



Dr. Eric Meyer discusses some of the research findings that have resulted from Project SERVE



Dr. Rick Seim leads a tour of the facility for members of the press



Dr. Evan Gordon explains the differences between the types of MRI scans used for our research

Welcome Our New Staff



Lisa Boynton, BBA is a Program Support Assistant for the Education and Dissemination Core. She has previously worked for the Department of Defense and the VA's Health Resource Center. As a family member of a fallen Veteran, Ms. Boynton feels a special calling for working with the Veteran community.



Ed Millican, B.A. is a psychology technician working on Project S.E.R.V.E. As a Navy Veteran, Mr. Millican served as an explosives handler in Desert Storm and as an Aviation Ordnanceman during Operation Enduring Freedom before becoming an instructor in Washington, D.C.



Leslie Dannhaus, M.S., LPC is a psychology technician working in the Neuroimaging Core. Prior to joining the CoE, she worked as a therapist and case manager for a large community mental health agency in the Waco area. She has also volunteered for the REACH Therapeutic Riding Center of Waco.



Dawn Pierson, M.S. is a project coordinator for the EPIC study in the Implementation Science Core. After retiring from the Air Force, she worked for the Department of Defense 720th Special Tactics Unit in Hurlburt Field, Florida. Dawn recently moved to Waco after completing her Master's degree.



Andrea MacCarthy, B.S. is a data analyst working for the Implementation Science Core. During her career in the Army, she attended the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC) and later joined the National Security Agency. She also served in Iraq for one year as a Reservist.



April Salinas is a program support assistant working in the Business Core. As an OEF Army Veteran, she received the Army Certificate of Appreciation Award. A native of Central Texas, April is excited to be a part of the CoE's efforts to support Veterans.



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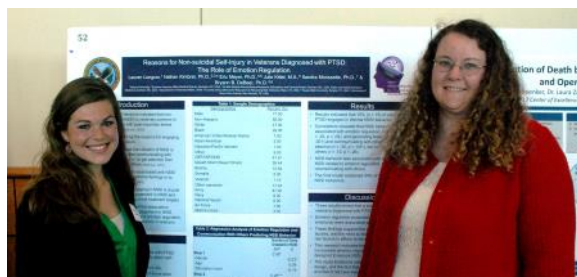
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Baylor URSA Conference



This spring, Baylor University hosted its annual Undergraduate Research and Scholarly Achievement (URSA) Scholars Week, where a select group of students were chosen to present their research to a local audience. This year, posters from eight students from our VA-CERP research internship were selected for the conference, quadrupling our posters from

last year, and two of our students, Rob Athey (from our Neuroimaging Core) and Lauren Longcor (from our Behavioral Science Core) received Outstanding Poster awards from the Department of Psychology & Neuroscience.



Lauren Longcor with her mentor, Dr. Bryann DeBeer



Rob Athey with his mentors, Drs. Geoff May and Steve Nelson

Preliminary Data from the ROBI Study

The Regulating Oscillations in Brain Injury (ROBI) study from the CoE's Neuroimaging core is well underway and has collected data from nearly 20 participants. This study was designed to investigate the effects of EEG neurofeedback on traumatic brain injury (TBI), to test whether it can serve as a novel or supplemental form of treatment for TBI. Neurofeedback, a form of biofeedback, uses real-time brain activity, in this case EEG, to teach self-regulation of brain function. The goal of the neurofeedback in ROBI is to train Veterans to match their brain activity to people who have never had a brain injury.



Preliminary data from this study shows that after 20 sessions of treatment some participants learned to change their brain activity to be more similar to that of healthy subjects. Specifically, some participants reduced their coherence, the degree of coupling in activity between two brain regions. This reduction in coherence can indicate more individualization within brain networks and has been associated with higher intelligence; however, it is still unclear whether these EEG changes lead to improved cognitive functioning or TBI symptomatology. These results are only preliminary and therefore more data is being collected and analyzed as part of this promising study.

Staff Spotlight



Randy Tea, M.S. is a psychology technician and study coordinator working for the REGIONS Study, a medication trial examining possible treatments for the symptoms of Gulf War Illness. While completing his bachelor's degree at Austin College, Randy was awarded the Global Outreach Fellowship which gave him the opportunity to teach English in Cambodia. Since completing his master's degree from the University of Texas at Tyler in 2014, Randy has been heavily involved with clinical research. He feels especially passionate about the work he does with the REGIONS Study because he believes he can help give a voice to Veterans' and possibly provide them with relief from chronic pain.

Recent CoE Publications

Here is a sample of some of the recent articles published by our researchers:

Breeden, A. L., Siegle, G. J., Norr, M. E., **Gordon, E. M.**, & Vaidya, C. J. (in press). Coupling between spontaneous pupillary fluctuations and brain activity relates to inattentiveness. *European Journal of Neuroscience*.

Contractor, A., **Frankfurt, S.**, Weiss, N., & Elhai, J. (2017). Latent-level relations between DSM-5 PTSD symptom clusters and problematic smartphone use. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 72, 170-177. doi:10.1016/j.chb.2017.02.051

DeBeer, B., Davidson, D., Meyer, E. C., Kimbrel, N. A., Gulliver, S., & Morissette, S. (2017). The Association Between Toxic Exposures and Chronic Multisymptom Illness in Veterans of the Wars of Iraq and Afghanistan. *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, 59 (1), 54-60. doi:10.1097/JOM.0000000000000922

Falkenstein, M. J., C'de Baca, J., Belon, K., & **Castillo, D. T.** (2017). Predictors of PTSD Improvement with Cognitive/Exposure Group Interventions in Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom Female Veterans. *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, 1-10.

LaMotte, A. D., Taft, C. T., Weatherill, R. P., Casement, M., **Creech, S. K.**, Milberg, W., Fortier, C., & McGlinchey, R. (2017). Sleep problems and physical pain as moderators of the relationship between PTSD symptoms and aggression in returning veterans. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 9, 113-116. doi:10.1037/tra0000178

Poritz, J., **Mignogna, J.**, Christie, A., Holmes, H., & Ames, H. (in press). The Patient Health Questionnaire Depression Screener in Spinal Cord Injury. *Journal of Spinal Cord Medicine*. doi:10.1080/10790268.2017.1294301

Zambrano-Vazquez, L., Levy, H. C., Belleau, E. L., Dworkin, E. R., Howard Sharp, K. M., Pittenger, S. L., Schumacher, J. A., & Coffey, S. F. (2017). Using the Research Domain Criteria Framework to Track Domains of Change in Comorbid PTSD and SUD. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, Epub, xx-xx. doi:10.1037/tra0000257

2017 VA-CERP Graduates

In May, the CoE was proud to graduate nine students from our VA-CERP undergraduate research internship:

Rob Athey, Kensi Boenker, Krupa George, Lauren Longcor, Jeff Rossiter, Mollie Shin, Janani Srikanth, from Baylor University, and Courtney McCutcheon and Joy Rowe from Tarleton State University.



Each of them did outstanding work with us and greatly contributed to our research.

Dr. Meyer Presents in Spain

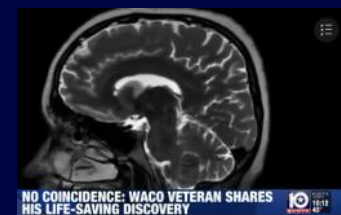
Dr. Eric Meyer, Investigator in the Behavioral Science Core, gave two presentations over the summer at the World Conference of the Association for Contextual Behavioral Science (ACBS) in Seville, Spain. In addition to his work on Project SERVE, Dr. Meyer is a trainer of Acceptance & Commitment Therapy (ACT). His presentations were about using ACT and values-based assignments to treat Veterans suffering with comorbid PTSD and alcohol use disorders.

Kudos

- **Dr. Suzannah Creech** was elected as Co-Chair of ISTSS Gender and Trauma SIG.
- **Dr. Bryann DeBeer** was selected to be the program chair for the 2018 APA Convention for Division 56 – Trauma
- **Joel Reid**, one of our second-year undergraduate interns from Baylor University, received an award from Psi Chi, the National Honors Society of Psychology
- **Dr. Heidi La Bash** completed her two-year advanced fellowship with us in August. She is now working as a Research Associate at the prestigious National Center for PTSD at the Palo Alto VA in California, where she will continue pursuing her research interests in PTSD
- **Dr. Michael L. Russell** was inducted into the 2017 class of Leadership VA (LVA)
- **Dr. Richard Seim** was featured in the KWTX documentary, “From the Ashes of Vietnam”, which won the 2017 National Edward R. Murrow Award for television news documentary.
- **Zachary Stickley**, CoE post-baccalaureate research and former VA-CERP intern, was accepted into a Ph.D. statistics program at Texas Tech University

Brain Tumor Successfully Detected

Last year, Drs. Steven Nelson and Geoffrey May discovered a small tumor in the brain of a Veteran participating in the MAVEREX study. Thanks to their careful attention, the Veteran was referred for surgery in time to prevent any major long-term damage. The story was featured in a two-part news feature on KWTX, our CBS television affiliate.



To view the story, go to:
www.kwtx.com/video/

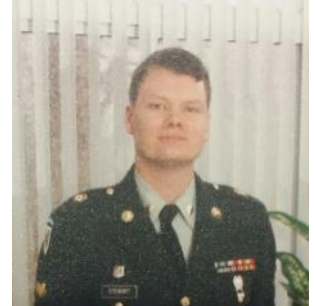
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Will Stewart Celebrates 15 Years of Federal Service



The COE is proud to announce that William Stewart, a laboratory technician in our Biomarkers & Genetics Core, received his 15 Years of Service Pin last month over his combined seven years with the US Army and eight with the Veteran Affairs.

Will joined the Army to help pay for his education and to get a chance to travel the world. His seven years of active duty service included two tours in Iraq attached with the 24th



CSH and the 704th BS. During his last tour, he had several mortars go off a few feet from him and he decided that “my luck would only take me so far before it ran out.” He then went on to attend AMEDD and gained experience as a medical lab technician while stationed at Fort Hood, Fort Bragg, and Fort Sam Houston. He worked at the VA hospital in Temple for a time and before he came to the CoE he worked at a CBOC in Abilene, Texas. He joined the CoE in June of 2015 as a medical laboratory technician, a role he still fills today.

VISN 17

Center of Excellence for Research on Returning War Veterans

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