**FY2013 - TWO-PAGE Appropriations White Paper**

Title/Topic: DEVELOPING AND ASSESSING FAMILY BASED INTERVENTIONS FOR YOUNG VETERANS’ READJUSTMENT TO CIVILIAN LIFE

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We request funding to develop and assess family based interventions for preventing and treating substance abuse issues and mental health problems of military personnel upon their return to civilian life. Our research seeks insight on interventions for returning area veterans that could lead to a reduction in substance abuse, domestic violence, and mental health problems. Our findings will be useful in developing and improving best-practice family-based interventions that will be cost effective, self-sustaining, and evidence-based.

A request for research of this sort is timely as the wars in Iraq (OIF) and Afghanistan (OEF) now wind towards their closure. Veteran Affairs statistics demonstrate that over 1,000,000 veterans reside in the state Pennsylvania and 322,000 reside in Western PA[[1]](#footnote-1). Pennsylvania is the ninth most populous state of young veterans with 168,000 younger than 45 years old. These factors make Pennsylvania an ideal site for such a study because of its geographical size, racial/ethnic and gender diversity, variation of population density, and varied access to veteran health services. A large portion of Pennsylvanian veterans have served in one or more deployments for the wars in Iraq (OIF) and Afghanistan (OEF) and research[[2]](#footnote-2) shows that the prevalence of mental health problem for combat related stress among returning service members is upwards of 14% for PTSD, 14% for major depression, and 19% for TBI related issues. Many of these service members (47%) do not seek professional treatment for such problems and of those that do, about only half receive minimally adequate treatments. Combat exposure problems such as PTSD and depression have been linked with a variety of other problems that impede reintegration for returning veterans. For instance, research suggests that rates of heavy-alcohol consumption and drug use are increased for returning veterans as they cope with readjustment through self-medication.[[3]](#footnote-3) Veterans experience higher rates of divorce and domestic violence as well, about which one advocate described the problem as “wounded service members have wounded families.”[[4]](#footnote-4) One major barrier to quality treatment is veterans’ reliance on the family to help them deal with their combat exposure problems, which places strain on families who are ill equipped to assess and treat the extent of the problem. There is a call for research that investigates the family processes that lead veterans with combat exposure related mental health problems to mainly rely on the family for support and for family members to accept the therapeutic role.

With a focus on creating effective therapeutic intervention strategies, our research team plans on examining the family processes involved in aiding veterans as they readjust to civilian life. We seek understanding of family involvement in both the success and failure of veteran readjustment in order to create effective assessments that identify high-risk environments and disseminate interventions that increase the probability of successful reintegration. The family processes we wish to examine include how veterans and family members negotiate the sharing of war experience, how families manage support for veterans when problems of readjustment occur, the patterns and limitations of family emotional and physical support for veterans, and the circumstances and consequences for seeking outside interventions. Sociologists have yet to focus on these issues for the veteran population in a substantial way despite a long standing tradition of relevant research in related areas.

Our research team’s professional background makes us well suited for such a study. Dr. Victor Garcia is an expert in the field of transnational substance abuse including substance abuse among transnational migrant workers in PA. Dr. Garcia is also a professor of anthropology with an expertise in substance abuse and ethnographic field methods. He has conducted three NIH funded studies on substance abuse, is a member of a NIH study group, and a member of National Hispanic Science Network on Drug Use. Dr. Alex Heckert has extensive research experience on intimate partner violence, social deviance, and family problems with over forty peer-reviewed articles in leading journals. His previous funded research has included predicting levels of abuse and reassault among batterers, evaluating an inclusion program for children with disabilities in day care settings, and an NSF instrumentation grant, among other projects. Dr. John Mills is a professor of psychology with specialization in addiction therapy and is a supervising faculty member at the IUP applied psychology research laboratory. Dr. Christian Vaccaro is a sociological social psychologist with a background in the sociology of emotions, identity, and manhood. His previous research on men in the sport of mixed martial arts and on batterer intervention programs makes him well suited to study the social processes within veteran families. Our project will be located under the purview of the Mid-Atlantic Addiction Research and Training Institute (MARTI), which has an established tradition of conducting funded research and clinical advisement projects on family problems and substance abuse interventions.

We propose to develop our evidence-based intervention strategies through research on the setting of veterans’ families and within therapeutic settings over a five year period. We expect that the tangible impacts for this study will include:

* Gathering and compiling information and developing assessment scales on the processes within veteran families which aid or exacerbate veteran readjustment problems.
* Developing, testing, and assessing intervention practices for dissemination among preventative and intervention therapy agencies that cater to veteran needs.
* Informing policy on veteran affairs in regards to funding effective preventative and intervention therapies for substance abuse, family dysfunctions and domestic violence, and mental health problems.

We request 2.5 million to fund this project which includes data collection, organization, analysis, equipment, office space, travel cost, staffing, 75% faculty pay, consulting fees, and project manager pay over a five year period.

1. Western PA encompasses 26 counties west of the Appalachian divide. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://www.rand.org/news/press/2008/04/17.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Jacobson, I.G., Ryan, M.A., Hooper, T.I., Smith, T.C., Amoroso, P.J, Boyko, E.J., Gackstetter, G.D., Wells, T.S., & Bell, N.S. Alcohol use and alcohol-related problems before and after military combat deployment. *Journal of American Medical Association*, 2008 Aug 13; 300(6):663-75. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Shane, L. 2005. Researchers: Alcohol misuse, divorce rates higher among returning troops. *Stars and Stripes.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-4)