



Southern Illinois University System's Veterans Summit Report

Overview

On September 12-13, 2019, the Southern Illinois University System hosted the Veterans Summit at the Mt. Vernon Armory to address the unique challenges that veterans face in the southernmost 66 counties of central and southern Illinois, including healthcare access, mental healthcare, educational opportunities, legal assistance, and veteran's treatment courts. The Summit sought to evaluate rural healthcare infrastructure, address legal support structure, and explore how the educational delivery system could better serve veterans. To address these issues, the Summit sought to serve as a catalyst, creating strategic partnerships to improve cross-sector collaboration and communication between the SIU system partners, veteran service organizations, governmental agencies, and elected officials.

Individuals across various sectors/organizations such as healthcare, philanthropy, law, community-based organizations, governmental agencies, policymakers, and veteran service organizations attended the September 12th Veterans Summit Symposium to share their perspectives and their organization's role in addressing veteran-specific issues in Illinois. On September 13th, the Veterans Summit Resource Connection Fair held a day of service open to all veterans. The SIU System and veteran service organizations provided educational, medical, dental, and legal referrals free of charge.

Organized by SIU System partners, including the Office of the President for the Southern Illinois System, the SIU School of Medicine's Department of Population Science and Policy and Office of Community Initiatives and Complex Care, SIU Edwardsville's Veterans Services and Pharmacy School and the School of Dentistry, and SIU Carbondale's Center for Rural Health and Social Service Development, Conference and Scheduling Services, Extended Campus, the School of Law, and Veterans Services, the goal of these two days was to understand the current issues disrupting veterans' lives and develop sustainable, innovative programs and policies.

Key Takeaways

- **Illinois is home to over 700,000 veterans, many of whom are served through the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs (IDVA)¹.**

The IDVA maintains four veterans' homes and 81 offices that serve Illinois' 102 counties.

Despite the assistance provided through several of these programs, health disparities and gaps in economic well-being still exist for veterans across the state.

- **Veteran treatment courts have an important role in reducing recidivism and overcrowding in jails, helping veterans transition to civilian life and connecting veterans with behavioral health services.**

One in six veterans who served in Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom have a substance use issue. Recent studies show a link between substance use and combat-related mental illness. The court's regular appearances, mandatory treatment appointments, frequent drug testing, and structured environment help veterans to meet their obligations to the court and community².

- **Obtaining a lawyer is difficult for many veterans for multiple reasons, including affordability of legal services for civil matters and lack of access to lawyers in rural areas.**

Attendees of the Summit frequently mentioned cost and availability as two barriers for veterans in the civil justice system. Without quality legal representation, veterans may be caught up in a never-ending cycle of legal challenges. Additionally, many veterans lack legal assistance with appealing the VA system's disability ratings, reducing their eligibility for earned benefits.

- **Veterans need more help transitioning into higher education.**

Veterans would like to receive information on ways to acquire higher education during their service time, before discharge, and during transition to civilian life. Attendees described a lack of financial support, specifically for higher education fees, not necessarily tuition, which can be between \$2,000 - \$3,000 per year.

- **Veterans are disproportionately affected by mental illnesses.**

One study found that 25% of veterans from Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom had some type of mental illness as compared to the 18% of the general population³. Many of these veterans, especially ones that live in rural areas, are not receiving treatment for these illnesses. One study found that veterans living in rural areas were 70% less likely to receive mental health treatment

¹ <https://www.sj-r.com/news/20190812/gold-star-family-member-ceremony-gives-veterans-chance-for-legacies-to-live-on>

² <https://justiceforvets.org/what-is-a-veterans-treatment-court/>

³ <https://www.psychiatrictimes.com/view/va-statistics-show-large-number-vets-psychiatric-diagnoses>

than veterans in urban areas⁴. This statistic is especially alarming in Illinois, where two-thirds of the counties (66 total) are considered non-metro, or rural.

- **The mental health challenges that veterans face is a prevalent risk factor, both in Illinois and across the United States, for another major issue: homelessness.**

One survey found that nearly half of homeless veterans reported some type of mental health condition⁵. In the United States, there are around 37,000 veterans who are homeless on any given night, comprising around 8% of the total homeless population⁶. The issue of homelessness affects Illinois veterans as well, where over 860 veterans are homeless⁷.

- **These challenges are just a few of the many facing veterans, in Illinois and across the nation.**

Other areas of concern include high unemployment rates (3.6%), unaffordable housing (25% of Illinois veterans are cost burdened or severely cost burdened), and challenges reintegrating within civilian society⁸.

Immediate Post-Summit Innovations:

- **The Veterans Summit led to the creation of the VetLAMP (Veterans Legal and Medical Partnership) on November 7, 2019. This program expands on the work already done by a Law School clinic to provide free assistance to veterans whose claims for a service-connected disability have been denied.**

SIU School of Law Veterans' Legal Assistance Program reviews the VA claims for evidence/documentation that the medical problem was acquired during active duty service. The School of Law students and faculty can seek assistance from SIU School of Medicine students and physicians to review a veteran's military and civilian medical record. The goal is to find evidence to establish a likely causal relationship between the in-service injury and the current medical condition. Critically, the students have one year to complete and file the appeal. This partnership provides a more thorough review of a veteran's claim and improves their chances of a successful appeal. Within months of the program's creation, over 50 veterans had reached out to SIU School of Law to review their cases.

⁴ Teich, J., Ali, M., Lynch, S., & Mutter, R. (2016). Utilization of mental health services by veterans living in rural areas. *The Journal of Rural Health*, 33(3), 297-304

⁵ https://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset_library/BkgrdPap_Veterans.pdf

⁶ <https://www.stripes.com/news/veterans/veteran-homelessness-reaches-10-year-low-but-unused-housing-vouchers-could-help-more-vets-1.614808>

⁷ <http://veteransdata.info/states/2170000/ILLINOIS.pdf>

⁸ Housing Assistance Council. (2018). Supporting veterans in Illinois. [PDF]. Retrieved from <http://www.veteransdata.info/>

Effect of COVID-19 on Veterans

The situation around COVID-19 and its effect on veterans' issues is evolving rapidly, however some of the core issues of economic impact and mental health disorders have been exacerbated during the ongoing pandemic. Thus, recommendations made during the Veterans Summit in September 2019 can serve as meaningful guidance for policy makers and administrators to improve the condition of veterans affected by the pandemic.

- **Veteran Health and COVID-19**

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has adversely impacted the nation's healthcare system, especially those serving rural, at-risk and underserved populations. As of August 6, 2020, the US has seen 4.8 million cases, with 158,552 deaths⁹. On the same day, the Department of Veterans Affairs reported 41,357 cases of COVID-19 amongst the veterans' population¹⁰. While the incidence of COVID-19 cases across the country is varied in distribution, there have been concerns about the effect of COVID-19 on veterans' healthcare issues. This is due to the effect of the shutdown on jobs, income, housing and mental health.

- **Veteran Employment and COVID-19**

A shutdown earlier this year was instituted to reduce the spread of COVID-19 as well as prevent an overrun of the country's existing healthcare system and facilities. As a result, businesses had to close or significantly scale back their operations in order to conserve costs. Consequently, several businesses across the country had to furlough or lay-off employees. At the peak in April, the US unemployment rate during the pandemic was 14.7 percent, which was the highest unemployment rate since the Great Depression¹¹. The effect of a smaller job market is expected to be reflected on veteran's employment as well. According to a report published by Bob Woodruff Foundation in March 2020, approximately 14 percent of veterans were employed in the five industries which could see immediate lay-offs due to COVID-19¹². According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the unemployment rate in veterans stood at 8.6 percent for June 2020, with peak unemployment for veterans being 11.7 percent in April 2020¹³.

- **Veteran Mental Health and COVID-19**

The sudden loss of income due to economic adversity is also expected to negatively affect our veteran's mental health. According to a study published by the Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute (MMHPI), every five percent increase in unemployment (compared to pre-COVID levels) during the pandemic could

⁹ <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/>

¹⁰ <https://www.accessstocare.va.gov/Healthcare/COVID19NationalSummary>

¹¹ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jackkelly/2020/05/08/us-unemployment-is-at-its-highest-rate-since-the-great-depression-at-147-with-205-million-more-jobs-lost-in-april/#19b49165656d>

¹² https://bobwoodrufffoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/BWF_WhitePaper-COVID19-5.0-Final.pdf

¹³ <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/empsit.pdf>

lead to an additional 550 suicides and 20,000 veterans becoming affected with substance use disorders per year¹⁴.

A Path Forward: Framework for Improving the Lives of Illinois Veterans

The challenges faced by veterans in Illinois are daunting. The following is only a sample of the innovative ideas proposed by Summit participants:

- Utilize technology to improve access to telehealth and tele-mental health. This includes continuing investment in rural broadband expansion to ensure everyone, including veterans seeking telehealth services, have appropriate access.
- Implement community health worker programs throughout the state to provide veterans with a warm referral and connection to mental healthcare providers.
- Support programs that hire military veterans as community health workers. As participants at the summit heard, veterans often prefer communicating with someone who shares similar military experiences and with whom they can more readily identify. Support for the establishment of community health workers who are military veterans could serve as a vehicle to reduce unemployment in this population as well as better provide services.
- Increase the funding of veterans' treatment courts to provide greater access and more efficient coordination of medical care and available services for veterans.
- Improve vocational training opportunities for veterans wanting to expand their employment opportunities.
- Develop trauma recovery centers in Central and Southern Illinois to be able to treat trauma-related health struggles.

A Call to Action: Putting Illinois Veterans First

Our veterans have sacrificed, served and fought for this country; now it's our turn to fight for them. One of the most important conclusions, identified at the very beginning of the Veterans Summit was that greater cooperation is needed throughout all levels of government and society as we care for those who have shouldered the burden of protecting our democracy. Policymakers, healthcare organizations, philanthropic groups and corporate and community leaders across the state can do more in coordinating the delivery of services and opportunities for our veteran community. No individual can solve this on their own; meeting these goals will require individuals working together to find innovative solutions. This report briefly explains some of the most pressing issues discussed at the summit that community and organizational leaders, as well as policymakers can use to coordinate positive changes for Illinois' veterans and their families.

¹⁴ <https://www.texasstateofmind.org/uploads/whitepapers/COVID-MHSUDImpactsVeterans.pdf>

Whatever the outcome, the Veterans Summit, through the thoughtful and diligent work of its participants, clearly illustrated that people working together can create the continued momentum necessary to more fully understand the health needs of our veterans, innovate with communities to create effective programs and sustain health improvement with policy changes. This report is delivered with the assurance that the resources of the Southern Illinois University System are and will continue be available to support our veteran students and our wider military veteran community across Illinois.