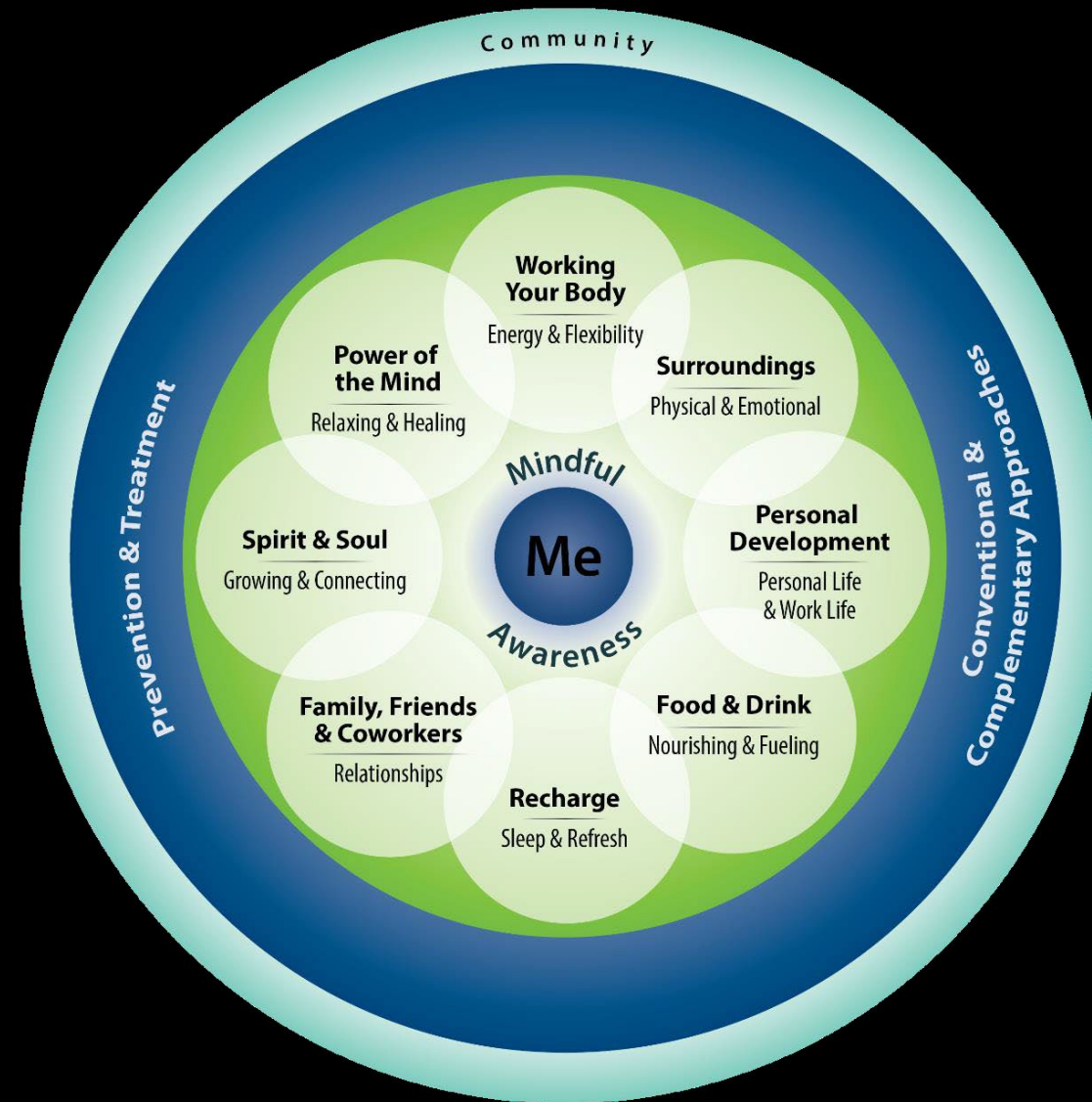


**GUIDANCE ON SPIRITUAL SUPPORT FOR
VETERANS
RE-ENTERING COMMUNITY
POST-INCARCERATION**

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DEFINITIONS



- As one of its national priorities, the VA pursues a **Whole Health** approach to health care
- The Whole Health approach focuses on 8 health domains while coaching Veterans in developing their own goals and action plans

[WH-Handout It-Starts-with-Me IB10-1142-P96903 508.pdf \(va.gov\)](#)

DEFINITIONS

(CONTINUED)

- Relying heavily upon VA Whole Health's definition, we defined **spiritual wellness** as wellness derived from:

“Finding meaning or purpose in something (e.g., an entity or experience) larger than oneself”

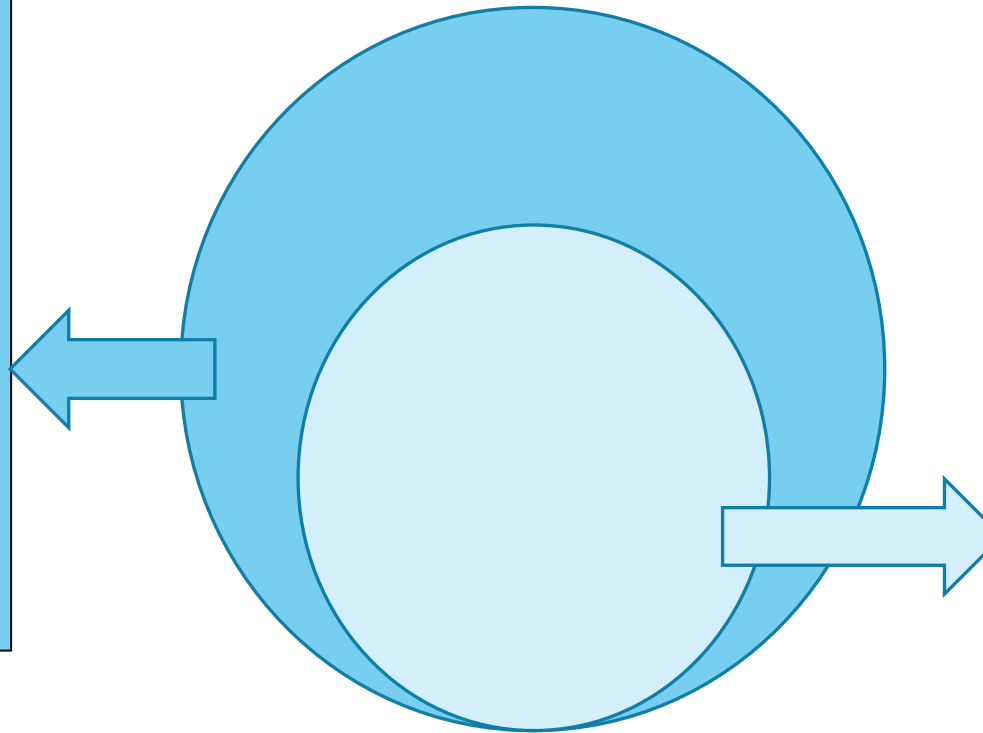
We also defined **spirituality** as encompassing organized religion.

DEFINITIONS

(CONTINUED)

SPIRITUALITY

A way to find purpose and /or meaning through connectedness outside of oneself – through the Divine, other persons, nature, etc.



RELIGION

A way to find purpose and /or meaning through connectedness outside of oneself – through God (or gods) within a formal faith tradition

INTRODUCTION

SIGNIFICANCE

- Successful community integration among re-entry Veterans can be difficult for a number of reasons:
 - High levels of medical, mental health, and substance use challenges within the population
 - Challenges inherent to having a criminal record, including: obtaining employment, some forms of public assistance, and financial credit

SIGNIFICANCE

(CONTINUED)

- Evidence indicates that spirituality as a resource can be important to successful re-entry into community:
 - Can serve as a personal coping mechanism in face of challenges
 - Can protect against repeat substance use or re-offending

CONTEXT:

VA'S BRIDGE QUERI

VA's BRIDGE QUERI*

- Leads: Keith McInnes, Rani Elwy, Amanda Midboe, David Smelson
- Goals is to help Veterans negotiate the care continuum, focusing on homelessness, justice system, and substance abuse
- Consists of 3 core quality improvement projects:
 - Homeless Overdose Prevention Expansion (HOPE)
 - Maintaining Independence and Sobriety through Systems Integration, Outreach and Networking-Criminal Justice (MISSION-CJ)
 - **Post-Incarceration Engagement (PIE)**

[*Bridging the Care Continuum for Vulnerable Veterans across VA and Community Care \(Bridge\) QUERI](#)

CONTEXT:
“POST-
INCARCERATION
ENGAGEMENT
(PIE)”

- Carried out in partnership with VA’s Health Care for Re-entry Veteran (HCRV) program
- An intensive peer support intervention for Veterans re-entering community post-incarceration which offers:
 - Social support
 - Connection to health care
 - Skill building and role modeling
- Grounded in VA’s Whole Health approach
 - Peers draw on conversations with Veterans to facilitate development of goals and action plans

CONTEXT:

“PIE-PEACE”

- Despite its grounding in the Whole Health approach
 - PIE had not targeted spiritual wellness in its project with re-entry Veterans
- Other VA QI projects had not either
- Thus, we applied for QUERI funding for a 4-month supplemental project to PIE – nicknamed “PIE-PEACE” – to address this gap

OBJECTIVE

- PIE-PEACE's objective was to conduct an evaluation to:
 - Assess the spiritual needs of re-entry Veterans
 - Explore how VA could support the spiritual needs of re-entry Veterans
 - Including the acceptability of delivering such support via a VA-based mobile phone application

METHODS

SAMPLE

- Veterans who recently re-entered community from incarceration (~1 year or less back in community)
 - Recruited in-person at a VA Medical Center's weekly socialization group for re-entry Veterans
 - Via outreach within the same VA Medical Center by a PIE team member
- VA Health Care for Reentry Veterans (HCRV) and/or Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO) staff and peer support specialists
 - Sent e-mails to staff from 3 VA Medical Centers who were known by the PIE team

DATA COLLECTION

- J. Palmer conducted 1:1 open-ended interviews in July and August, 2021:
 - Conducted by telephone
 - (Except for 1 in-person interview as per a Veteran's preference)
 - Interviews lasted ~ 45-60 minutes
 - Digitally recorded
 - Professionally transcribed verbatim

DATA COLLECTION

(CONTINUED)

- The PIE-PEACE team collaboratively developed two distinct interview guides (one for Veterans, one for staff)
- Interview questions fell within several domains:
 - ❖ Personal definitions of spirituality
 - ❖ Presence/absence of spiritual needs in re-entry Veterans
 - ❖ Suggestions for VA-based spiritual interventions for re-entry Veterans
 - App-based
 - Non-app-based
 - ❖ Perceived facilitators and barriers to implementing such interventions

ANALYSIS

- Two experienced analysts (J. Palmer, R. Engle)
- Employed thematic analysis to identify common and unique themes across participant interviews
- Given project's short time-frame, used rapid qualitative analytic techniques
- Microsoft Excel spreadsheets and Microsoft Word documents facilitated data management

FINDINGS

PARTICIPANTS

- 6 Veterans from 1 VA Medical Center
 - Branch of service: Army, Air Force, Marines
 - Back in community: Range of 3 weeks to 14 months
 - Length of recent incarceration: Range of 3.5 to 32 years

- 6 staff members from across 3 VA Medical Centers
 - Program Leads
 - Social Workers
 - Peer Support Specialists

THEMES

#1: Varying definitions

#2: Positive impact

#3: Tensions around primacy

#4: Existing supports & Limitations

#5: Potential improvements

#6: Potential for app-based support

THEME #1:

VARYING
DEFINITIONS

- Spirituality & Religion: The Same Thing?
- Personal Meaning of Spirituality
- Respect for Variation

“When people talk about spirituality - right away to me - it brings up religion.”

- Re-entry Veteran #1

“[Spirituality] has nothing to do with religion.”

- Re-entry Veteran #6

“...some people think religion is spirituality. Some people think, you know, spirituality is religion.”

- Re-entry Veteran #5

**Spirituality
& Religion:
The Same
Thing?**

- Being a good person
- Feeling part of and/or Surrendering to something larger than oneself
- Finding salvation and redemption
- Following a literal interpretation of the Bible
- Feeling “lost” or not

Personal Meaning of Spirituality

"I mean I respect people who, you know, if you wanna have religion and you wanna praise God and you wanna go, you know, and have that, that's fine. That's absolutely, you know, that's what America's all about, you know. You do you."

- Re-entry Veteran #1

"I appreciate...spirituality meaning different things to different people and trying to define as broadly as possible...understanding that for the Veterans that we serve, their vantage point of spirituality is very inclusive and means many different things."

- Staff Member #5

"...I think we're just going to have to go that extra degree and literally ask the Veteran we're working with to define it for themselves and for us."

- Staff Member #5

**Respect
for
Variation**

THEME #2:

POSITIVE IMPACT

- Social connection
- A sense of peace and security
- Healing
- Personal growth / Transformation
- Improved outcomes

[When a Veteran re-connected with a church that had visited him in prison:] "...he thought it was very good because it kept him busy and connected with people."

- Staff Member #6

"...sometimes when the Veteran gets out of jail and there's nobody – there's nobody there. All of their friends that they've made over the last 25 years are still incarcerated...And they don't have family in the area and so, you know, having a spiritual base could help them to kind of create this new level of community that they didn't have before."

- Staff Member #3

**Social
Connection**

“[when you]...come into the spiritual thing, you know, where you feel at peace with yourself - you can find that peacefulness, know it’s a higher power and it looks after us, and stuff like that.”

- Re-entry Veteran #6

“I feel like when you are in the presence of God, that’s when you feel the most safe, like no matter where you are...”

- Re-entry Veteran #2

**A Sense
of Peace
& Security**

“...[re-entry Veteran] really finds the spiritual part a major part of his recovery. He actually goes down to the chapel at least a few times a week just, you know, to go in there and he finds like a lot of relief.”

- Staff Member #6

Healing

“...I've grabbed a hold of this and I'm never gonna let go of it. And it's the only thing that, you know - I was like a real mess like before all this had all taken place. I was a career criminal for 40 years. I spent 32 years locked up. And I was like a hopeless case...this is the only thing that ever seemed to work for me.”

- Re-entry Veteran #2

**Personal
Growth /
Transformation**

A Veteran discussed how if he had “listened...or paid attention to” the spirituality he followed earlier in his life, it “would have kept me out of a lot of trouble”.

- Re-entry Veteran #3

“I do find, like, Veterans that are involved in some type of, like, spiritual higher power - or however you want to word it - they do seem to succeed and relax a little bit more, so.”

- Staff Member #6

**Improved
Outcomes**

THEME #3:

TENSIONS AROUND PRIMACY

Basic Needs as Primary

Spiritual Needs As Essential

Needs Interact With One Another

Lost Opportunity

“Cash would help.”

- Re-entry Veteran #4

**Basic
Needs as
Primary**

“...I don’t know if it's spiritually, it’s - what they need is housing often, they need money, they need food, they may need mental health treatment. Those are the big, you know, just like you, imagine if you were yourself, God forbid, found yourself homeless and have to go to a shelter or live in my car. You know, we have Veterans making those decisions.”

- Staff Member #2

“...getting that housing piece is important...and then I think the spirituality piece is important.”

- Staff Member #2

**Basic
Needs as
Primary**

(Continued)

“...you need it in your life like you need water and food.”

- Re-entry Veteran #3

**Spiritual
Needs As
Essential**

“[Re-entry Veterans] have said that during these very difficult times in their life that they could definitely use a force surrounding their beliefs of something greater than them. Because that’s the only thing in the situation that they can’t get on their own and they need some help. They need some guide – they need some strength outside of themselves...”

- Staff Member #3

**Spiritual
Needs As
Essential**

(Continued)

“Someone might pray fervently to say God, please help me find a place to live, please help me out of this situation. God, please help me find food or help me put my life back together, you know.”

- Staff Member #2

**Needs
Interact
With One
Another**

“I don't think we give them [re-entry Veterans] the opportunity to [find spiritual meaning] sometimes...we're really interested in seeing them housed whether that's permanent or shelter and getting into one of our treatment programs.”

- Staff Member #5

“...there's kind of so many tasks that kind of come about in the process of transitioning to the community... And it [re-entry Veterans' spirituality] doesn't end up being the priority in terms of like what we're communicating about - which is perhaps a fault of my own...”

- Staff Member #4

**Lost
Opportunity**

THEME #4:

EXISTING SUPPORTS & LIMITATIONS

- VA Programming
- Peer Support Specialist Role
- Physical Space

- Current offerings:

- Whole Health newsletter's links to spiritual resources
- Availability of spiritual groups, meditation groups, and links to AA/NA groups
- Special programming (e.g., recreational outings, equine therapy)

- Limitations:

- Some Veterans and staff did not know what programming exists

“...especially for spiritual health, like I honestly am not even sure, like, what we offer for Veterans right now.”

– Staff Member #4

- Special programming can depend on adequate staffing or initiative of individual staff member

VA Programming

- Current offerings:
 - Some assess basic spiritual needs
 - Some offer warm hand-offs to other providers
 - Some research and make introductions to community resources
 - Some encourage use of NA/AA programs as a resource

- Limitations:

- Offerings not consistently provided

“...otherwise [unless re-entry Veterans initiate a discussion] it’s [spiritual needs] not usually identified as an area that they want to kind of focus on in their transition.”

- Staff Member #4

- Do not typically follow up on spiritual needs on an ongoing basis


Peer Support Specialist Role

- Current offerings:

- Multi-denominational chapel exists on local VA Medical Center's campus

- Limitations:

- The chapel is not “easily visible”
- It is not clear if the chapel is in use
- Veterans mentioned presence of distractions and limited privacy in communal living situations



**Physical
Space**

THEME #5:

POTENTIAL IMPROVEMENTS

- VA Programming
- Staff Involvement

- Maintaining / consistently offering programs in yoga and meditation
- Offering outings to foster community and Veteran-staff relationships
- Inviting faith-based organizations to hold Veteran study groups

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VA Programming

- Training VA's Justice Program staff in basic spiritual needs assessment and spiritual need content (e.g., stages of grief)
- Peer support specialists asking consistently and “proactively” about spiritual needs
 - As part of initial assessment conducted at re-entry
 - Conduct ongoing check-ins on spiritual needs too
- Peer support specialists doing warm hand-offs to VA spiritually-focused providers (e.g., chaplains)
- Peer support specialists connecting Veterans with external supports (e.g., faith-based organizations, AA groups)



Staff Involvement

“You know, a peer basically only talks about what the Veteran wants to talk about and some generally are not experts in that field.

But things -- besides the mental health professional, you know, if there was a Chaplain that, you know, would say – we could say – “Hey, here’s a – here’s a new person that’s going through whatever.” Or if it’s a part of the intake, “Hey, you know, do you have any spiritual needs? Or you wanna connect with somebody at the VA that, you know, that can help with those needs?” And introduce them to a spirituality class.

...that way the Veteran would be able to get the things that they’re looking for.”

- Staff Member #3

**Staff
Involvement**

(Continued)

THEME #6:

POTENTIAL FOR APP-BASED SUPPORT

- Content
- Design
- Barriers

A “spiritually-oriented” mobile phone app could provide:

- Daily readings: e.g., devotional prayers, little quotes that “stick with you”
- Structure: study schedules of religious texts or of daily practices
- Information: about faith-based organizations and support groups
- Connection: to other spiritual or religious Veterans / to clergy / to chaplains via:
 - “Live” chat
 - “Live” prayer
 - Prayer request submissions
 - Virtual meetings



Content

- Consider whether to develop a stand-alone app vs. building upon existing VA apps (e.g., VA Mindfulness Coach, CALM app, PTSD Coach)
- The app, upon being opened, could offer thematic selections that lead to in-depth material by faith tradition / spiritual orientation
- Offer options for social connection to minimize the isolation that can characterize app use
- Offer audio features to assist those with lower levels of reading literacy

Design

- Equivocal response even among Veterans who endorsed potential use

“...it [a spiritually-oriented app] definitely would be useful...”

- Re-entry Veteran #5

But later, the Veteran said:

“I think nothing can take the place of that personal relationship with your spirituality. You know there’s no app that can touch you like...one-on-one with yourself.”

- Re-entry Veteran #5

Barriers

- Technology-based barriers

- Challenges in using technology - especially for older Veterans and those who were incarcerated long-term

“...I’m not like anybody else...everybody else has been riding this technology wave for like 21 years. I can’t do it. It just doesn’t work for me.”

- Re-entry Veteran #1

- Limitations of technology resources (e.g., Veteran who owns a flip phone)
- Inadequate technology support, e.g., local staff having:

- Limited comfort with technology

“I’m like: ‘Go find a young kid.’”

- Staff Member #6

- Limited time to spend on training Veterans in technology

➤ Would detract from time for providing therapies and basic services

Barriers

(continued)

DISCUSSION

RECOMMENDATION

#1

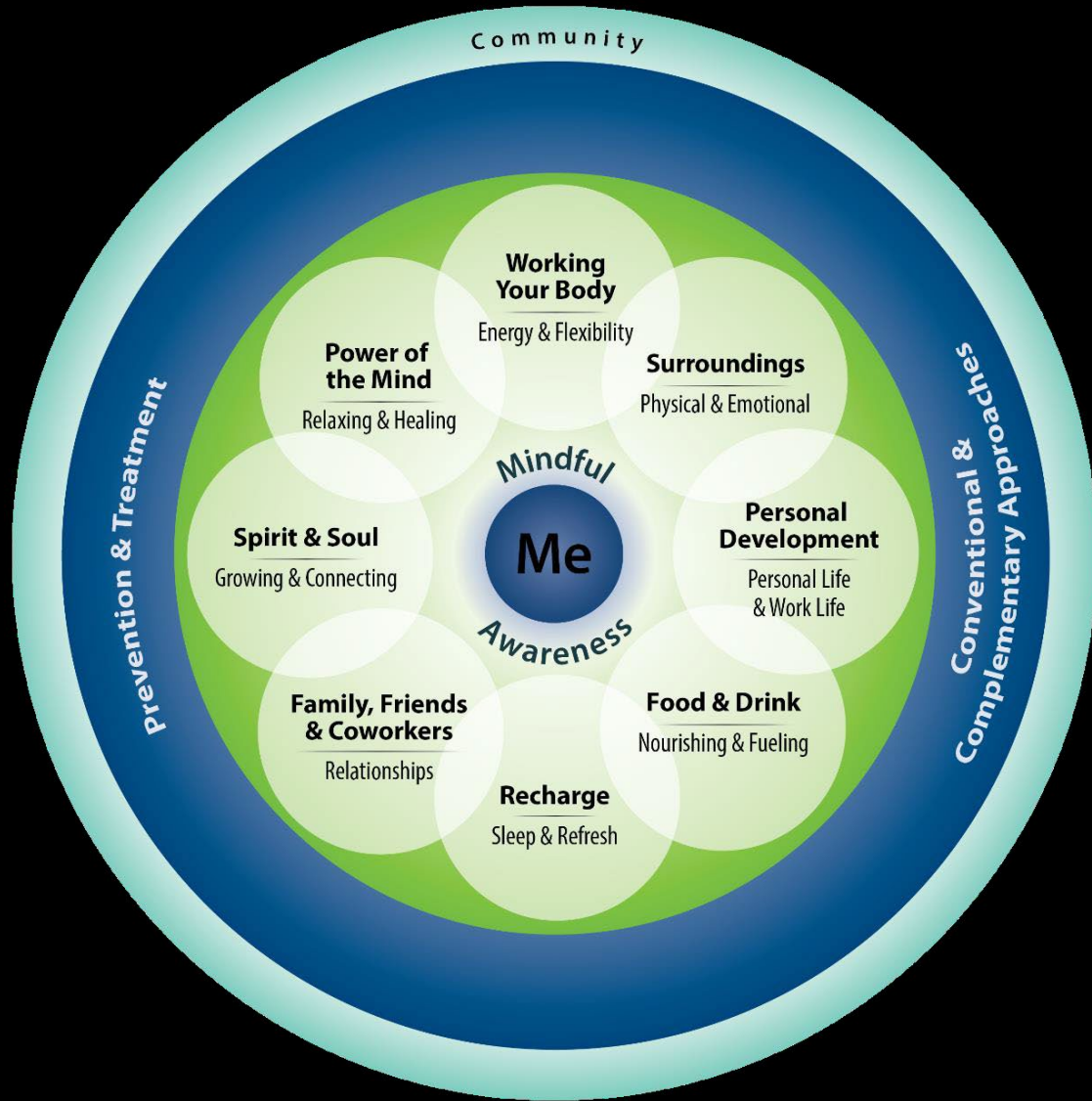
- Continue to spread the word about:
 - VA's patient-centered approach to spirituality
 - Existing spiritual programming

RECOMMENDATION

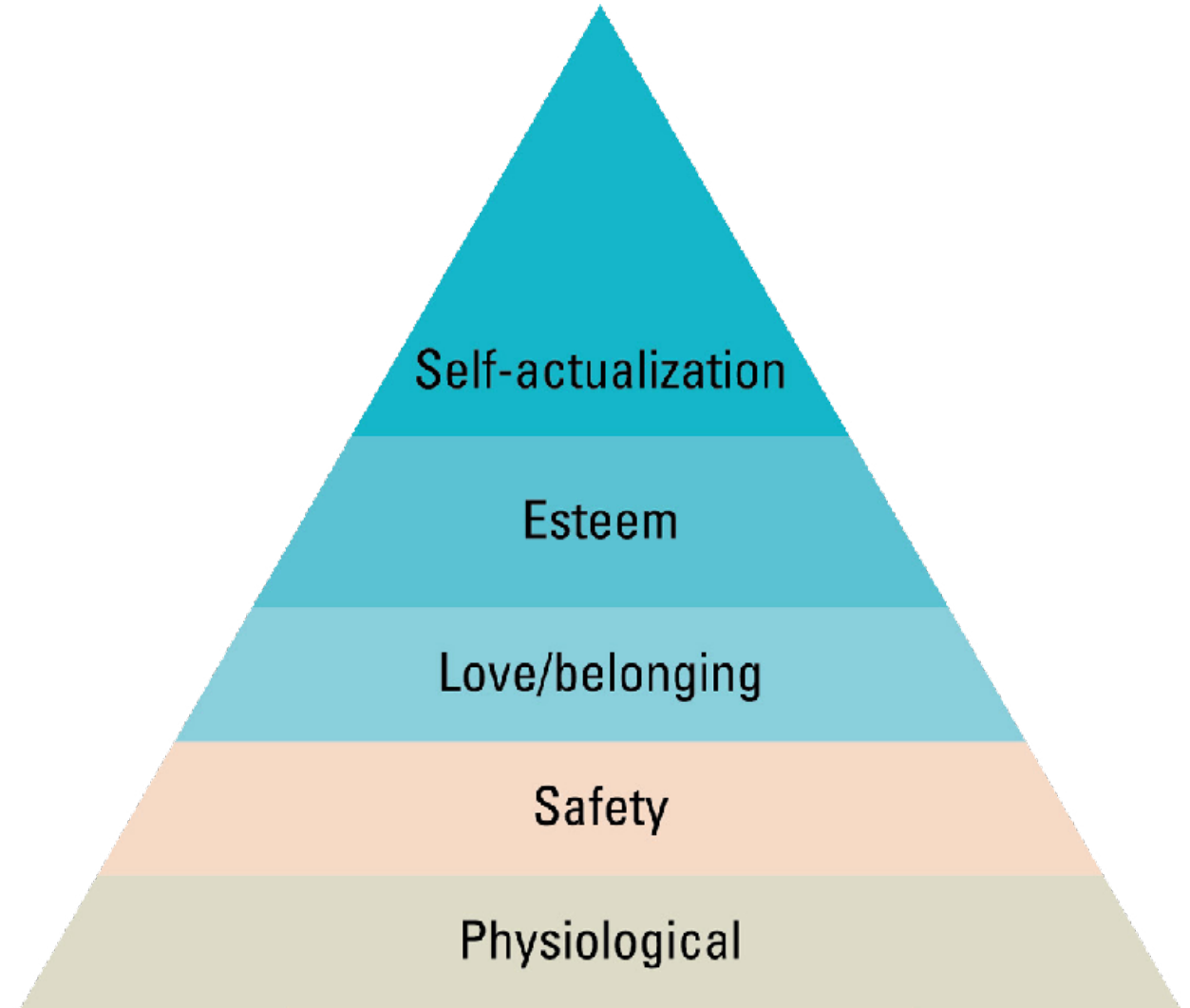
#2

- Continue to promote the vision of Veterans' needs (including spiritual needs) as:
 - Overlapping, and
 - Interactive

VA's Whole Health Model



Maslow's Original Hierarchy of Needs



RECOMMENDATION

#3

- Assess VA Justice Program staff members' perceptions of training needs around re-entry Veterans' spiritual needs, e.g.,:
 - Training in basic screening
 - Training in making referrals

RECOMMENDATION

#4

- Strengthen multi-disciplinary collaboration among VA Justice Program staff members and Chaplains

RECOMMENDATION

#5

”

- Consider a 1st things 1st approach to developing a spiritually-oriented app:
 - First focus on getting technology supports in place
 - Meanwhile, start prototyping an app with self-reported “technology users”

LIMITATIONS

- Potential bias of spiritually-/religiously- oriented Veterans being more likely to volunteer
 - However, we need to hear from these key informants to learn how to optimize spiritual programming
- Given PIE-PEACE's small # of participants – unable to affirm a possible pattern of differential experiences across:
 - Re-entry Veterans who had been incarcerated for shorter vs. longer durations
 - Re-entry Veterans who were older vs. younger

LIMITATIONS

(CONTINUED)

- Potential influence of COVID pandemic on findings:
 - i.e., COVID may have impacted knowledge of spiritual programming and the availability of programming itself

CONCLUSION

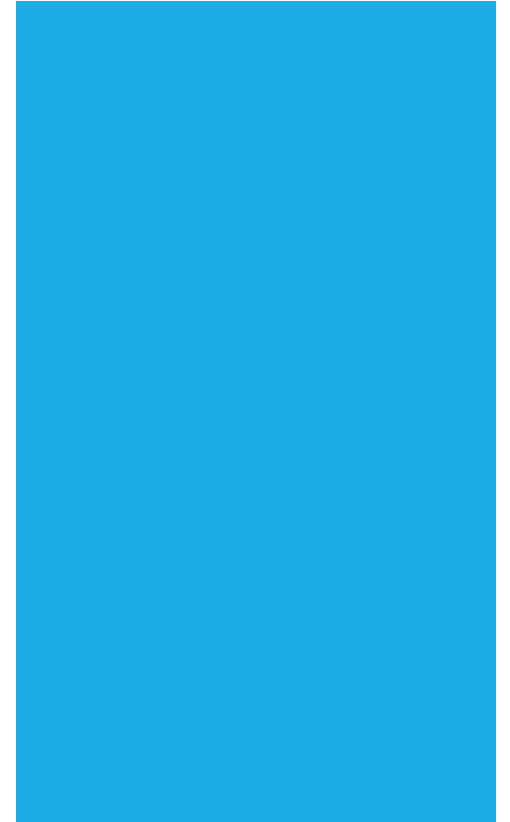
- The PIE-PEACE project highlights:
 - A rationale for & potential ways to build upon spiritual supports for re-entry Veterans
- PIE-PEACE's recommendations could help VA:
 - Fortify successful re-entry for Veterans by:
 - Empowering re-entry Veterans' efforts to cope with a challenging transition
 - Minimizing recidivism

“...I had a lot of hard times in life, you know. I had a lot of hard knocks because I couldn't get the spiritual part of everything. I couldn't get a higher power 'cause I wanted to be the higher power. I wanted to be in charge of everything. And it just doesn't work like that, you know.”

- Re-entry Veteran #6

“...And it's -- it's just a -- it's just a beautiful thing.”

- Re-entry Veteran #2





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