

## Case Example: Veteran Consultants on Individual Research Studies



### Organization

The Center for Healthcare Organization and Implementation Research (CHOIR) is one of 19 Centers of Innovation (COINs) across VA. It formed out of a partnership between the Bedford, MA and Boston, MA VA research centers in 2012. Today it is one of the largest COINs in the nation and benefits from individual and organizational research and implementation expertise across the two campuses. CHOIR's Veteran Engagement in Research Group (VERG) is a joint endeavor of both campuses that began in 2015.

### Mission Statement

The mission of CHOIR's Veteran Consultant Network (VCN) is to enhance the quality, relevance, and use of health services studies by engaging Veterans in all phases of a research project. The VCN is an avenue for Veterans to participate actively in the planning, direction, conduct, and conclusion of research as consultant partners with Principal Investigators (PIs) and study teams on one or more research and/or Veteran engagement projects. CHOIR's vision is that every research team includes 1-2 Veteran consultants that contribute to every phase of a study.

### Who is involved?

- **VCN Coordinator:** The VCN Coordinator is the main point of contact for Veterans and study staff across both Bedford and Boston CHOIR campuses and is responsible for outreach and administrative duties for the VCN. Outreach tasks include identifying opportunities (e.g., standing or ad hoc events, meeting with Veterans or Veteran liaisons) to meet Veterans, Veteran care partners, or others to talk with them about becoming involved in research as consultants. Administrative tasks will include Veteran screening interested individuals, entering key interests and contact information into a secure database, and then using the database to identify Veteran consultants when research teams request a consultant. Other administrative duties include organizing monthly meetings with the VCN team and reporting to CHOIR's VERG subcommittee.
- **Veteran Consultants:** Veteran consultants contribute their unique viewpoint to enhance research projects during all phases of research. Veterans may be required to do specific VA and/or research training sessions, as well as a 1 hour orientation to CHOIR and health services research. They will work directly with research teams, participating in team meetings, reviewing study materials, and other responsibilities that are determined by the PI heading the project.
- **CHOIR Investigators and Research Teams:** It is the responsibility of the PI to meet with the Veterans they believe may be a good fit for their research project(s), based upon the information in the VCN database. The PI will determine which Veteran(s) they would like to participate as a consultant on their study. The PI and/or their research staff will coordinate training of their Veteran consultant(s), which will depend on the needs of a given project, regulatory requirements for the proposed level of engagement, and interests of Veteran consultants. The PI will clearly communicate goals of the research project throughout its life cycle, as well as roles and responsibilities for the Veteran consultant. The research team will provide Veteran consultants with the information needed to fully participate on the study (e.g., sending draft instruments or other study materials in advance of a meeting to review).
- **VCN Sub-committee:** The VCN sub-committee is comprised of CHOIR volunteers who meet monthly with the VCN Coordinator and VERG leadership to advise on VCN policy and practices. The VCN Subcommittee also facilitates review of the VCN activities and gathers feedback from Veterans, PIs, and the VCN Coordinator for quality improvement purposes.

### How it Works

While Veteran consultants may contribute to any part of a CHOIR project, it is strongly encouraged that research teams include the Veteran consultants in the proposal development phase. In its ideal form, the process for identifying and working with a Veteran consultant is as follows:

1. Investigators who are planning grant submissions and would like Veteran consultants should contact the VCN Coordinator to identify at least two Veterans who can participate in proposal planning phase.
2. The VCN Coordinator will choose a small set (no more than 6 Veterans) of potential Veteran consultants from the VCN database who may be a suitable fit for the research group, based on information gained from the screening questionnaire about availability, skills, and interests.
3. The Investigator and/or member of the research team reaches out to each Veteran to discuss the opportunity to partner on a study. They select Veterans who are interested in and able to consult on the project, schedule a time to meet, and begin the onboarding process as determined by their specific project needs and guidance from the VERG Training Subcommittee.
4. Investigators and/or research teams are expected to hold consultative meetings with Veterans over the course of proposal planning and writing. Veterans are anticipated to be influential partners in all aspects of proposal planning (e.g. identification of a topic of need, narrowing of the research question, development of specific aims, selection of research methods including design, measures, recruitment procedures, and the design of dissemination activities).
5. Submitted proposals should provide a clear description of how Veteran consultant partners will contribute throughout the study and a budget for Veteran engagement (see below: Budget and Compensation).
6. A variety of consultative designs are possible, from minimal and infrequent consultation to full involvement as research team members. A typical method would be to employ Veterans as consultants on the grant and have them participate in monthly or periodic meetings with Investigators and project staff.
7. It is recommended that at least two Veterans are engaged to promote camaraderie and facilitate sharing opinions with numerous study staff. Ultimately, this will be determined by the needs and budget of each individual study.

### **Compensation**

Veteran consultants are compensated \$25 per hour, with a maximum of 100 hours (or \$2500) per year.

Pre-Grant Compensation: The VCN Coordinator works with CHOIR's administrative officer to set up a line of accounting for VERG consultants. The hospital's fiscal department provides the Coordinator with pre-approved vouchers that can be made out for cash or check. PIs (or designated research team members) alert the VCN Coordinator to meetings that have occurred with Veterans. A voucher is made out to the Veteran, who can then cash it with the Agent Cashier at the main hospital or request a check.

Compensation for Work on Funded Grants: Once a research project has become funded, it is the responsibility of the PI and study team members to take over compensation activities, ensuring each Veteran consultant is compensated directly from their individual grant. Research teams may opt to have a Veteran go through the WOC process (thus becoming a "vendor" and able to be paid directly) or continue with the use of cash vouchers (as described above).

### **Evaluation**

In 2018, VERG will begin evaluating the impact of the VCN on Veterans and the research teams who are engaged with them. Planning for the evaluation is underway.