

Working with Veterans Service Organizations to Improve Your Research

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Objectives

- **Understand the diversity of veterans organizations and their members**
- **Value the perspective that veterans organizations can provide regarding veteran-focused research**
- **Stimulate thoughts on how to interact with veterans organizations in your environment**

Organization of Talk

- **Background regarding VSO: Whittle**
- **Thoughts around collaboration with VSO to increase the value of veteran-focused research: Whittle, Kurtz**
- **Case study of a project done in partnership with a range of VSO posts: Ertl**

POLL

- **Choose all that apply to you:**
 - I am a veteran
 - I use VA healthcare services
 - I am a first-degree relative (parent, sibling, child) of a veteran
 - I am a first-degree relative of a veteran who uses or has used VA healthcare services

Background: VSO I

- **Various numbers of members**
 - **Congressional Medal of Honor – 79**
 - **American Legion – 2.4 million**
 - **American Red Cross – none**
- **Varying length of time in existence**
 - **Navy Mutual Aid Association 1879**
 - **American Legion 1919**
 - **Wounded Warrior Project 2006**

Background: VSO II

- **Variable sources of mission**
 - Service branch – Marine Corps League
 - Era – Vietnam Veterans of America, KWVA
 - Ethnicity – Black, Polish, Italian
 - Religion – Catholic, Jewish
 - Condition – PTSD, Paralyzed, Blind
- **Variable membership requirements**

Common Features of VSO

- **Focus on member benefits – National/State**
 - Political advocacy
 - Represent veterans seeking benefits
 - Elected leaders and paid administrators
- **Focus on the community – Post**
 - Youth – Legion baseball, Boys State
 - Patriotism – Flag etiquette, etc.
 - Elected volunteer leaders and administrators
- **Peer support**

American Legion Preamble

*For God and Country, we associate ourselves together
for the following purposes:*

- To uphold and defend the Constitution of the United States of America; to maintain law and order; to foster and perpetuate a one hundred percent Americanism; to preserve the memories and incidents of our associations in the Great Wars; to inculcate a sense of individual obligation to the community, state, and nation; to combat the autocracy of both the classes and the masses; to make right the master of might; to promote peace and good will on earth; to safeguard and transmit to posterity the principles of justice, freedom, and democracy; to consecrate and sanctify our comradeship by our devotion to mutual helpfulness.

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Roles of VSO in Our Research

- **Vet, local unit, or VSO as co-interventionist**
- **Encourage vets to participate**
- **Organizational partners**
- **Guidance regarding direction and approach**
- **Co-authors on manuscripts**

Help Deliver Interventions

- **Encourage lifestyle change**
 - Peers deliver message within post
 - Deliver message via VSO media
 - Facilitate behavior at post level – peer support, provide material, organize activities
- **Increase use of My HealthVET**
 - Peer education, role modeling, advising
 - Build or encourage use of post infrastructure

Encourage Participation

- **Wisconsin and National Legion support of the Million Veteran Program**
 - **Publications**
 - **Post visits**
 - **Statewide convention visits**
- **“Ask the Doctor” blog on VFW website**
- **Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation Committee of American Legion**

Organizational Partners

- **Statewide identifying and recruiting posts**
- **More flexibility with some types of expenditures**
- **Combined you can get grants you could not even consider alone**
 - **This also emphasizes sharing expertise**
 - **Broadens what you consider your job**

Guidance from Veterans

- **Formal Community Advisory Board**
 - Multiple VSOs represented
 - Can be sustained across projects
- **Regular communication with veterans who have represented their posts**
- **Ad hoc discussions with post members**
- **Interactions with organizational leaders**
- **Making oneself available for input**

Example of a Partnered Project

Kristyn Ertl, BA, CCRC, Project Leader

Steps per CBPR Textbook

- **Identify a champion/partner within VSO**
- **Develop a study focus with VSO partner**
- **Recruitment of posts to the study focus**
- **Recruitment of individuals within post to the study focus**
- **Recruitment of individuals to study whether the intervention does anything**

1) Develop a Study Focus

- Hypertension (HTN) is researcher's interest**
- HTN "should" be of interest to veterans**
- Relatively easy to tell if you are changing blood pressure**
- Most post members are likely affected**
- Peer support for disease self management could be delivered in post infrastructure**

Oops ...

- Identify a champion/partner within VSO
- Develop a study focus **with VSO partner**
- Recruitment of posts to the study focus
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1A) Find a Partner

- **Get advice from local VA leaders**
- **Make personal contacts with VSO**
 - **Visit the volunteer coordinator at the VA**
 - **Cold call the VSO professionals**
 - **Cold call elected VSO statewide leaders**
- **Rely on serendipity**
- **Being a VA doctor is helpful**

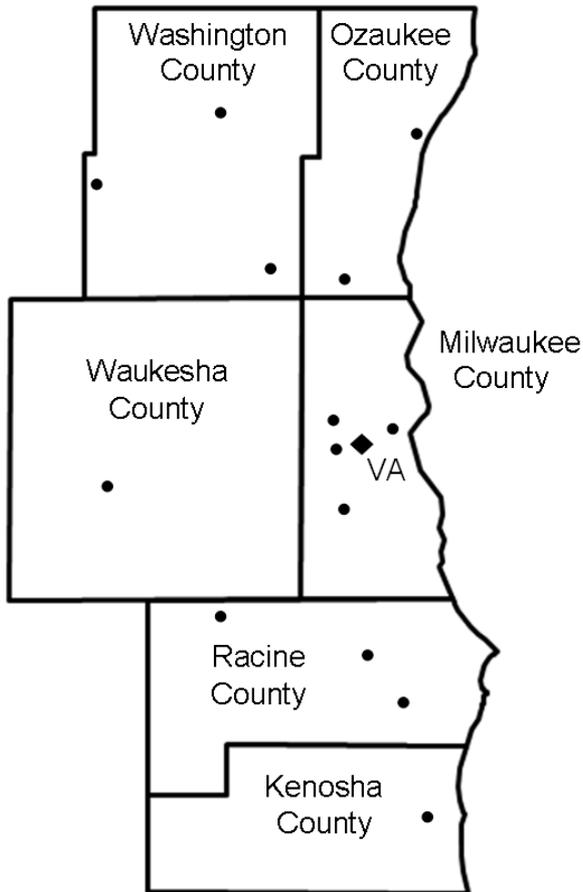
2) Convince VSO of Your Idea

- **Pilot visits to 9 posts in the Milwaukee area**
- **“Dog and pony” show**
 - **Presentation on hypertension (5-10 minutes)**
 - **Q & A (10-40 minutes)**
 - **Check blood pressures**
- **Presentation to WI VFW elected leadership**

Pilot Visits to Test Idea

- 25 letters sent to post leaders
- 9 posts visited (11-20 members/post)
- Learned post demographics
 - Median age 74; overwhelmingly white men
 - 66% of members had BP \geq 140/90
 - 27.5% of members used VA healthcare
- Local posts and statewide leaders liked the idea
- Got foundation funding

Post Recruitment – POWER I



Peer Leader (PL) Training

- **8-hour initial training session**
- **Nine 90-120 minute follow-up sessions for debriefing and training**
- **Training topics included:**
 - **Self-management information**
 - **Active orientation – be the physician's partner**
 - **Behavior change**
 - **Small group leadership**



Peer Leaders and POWER Staff

Lessons Learned

- **Posts that sign up, stay involved**
 - 14 out of 15 posts completed the 2-year project
 - All posts contributed follow-up data
- **Privacy/time limited at post meetings**
 - Few members (not none) concerned about health privacy
- **Peer leaders always well intentioned, but...**
- **Be there early!**

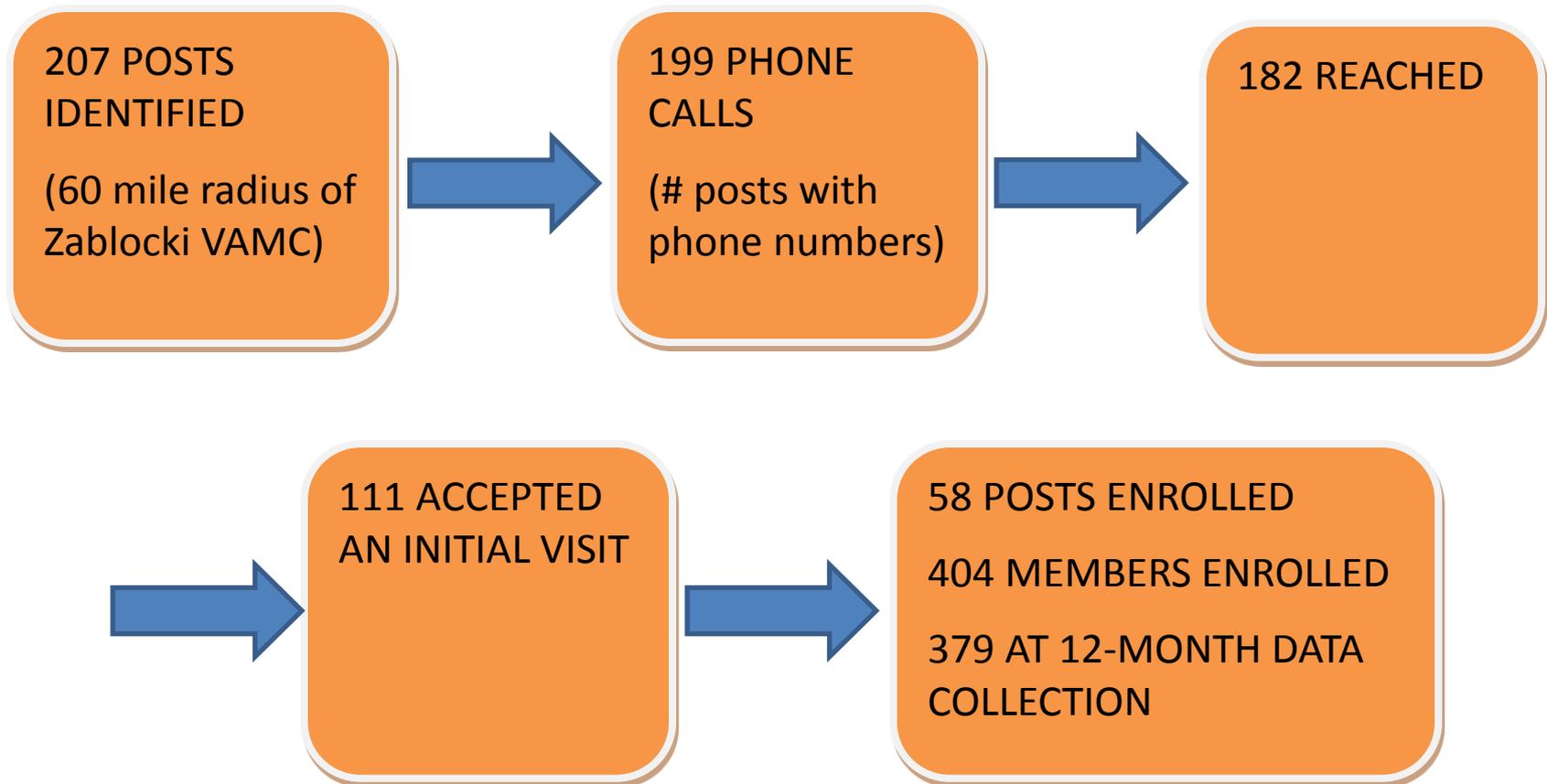


Poster Presentation

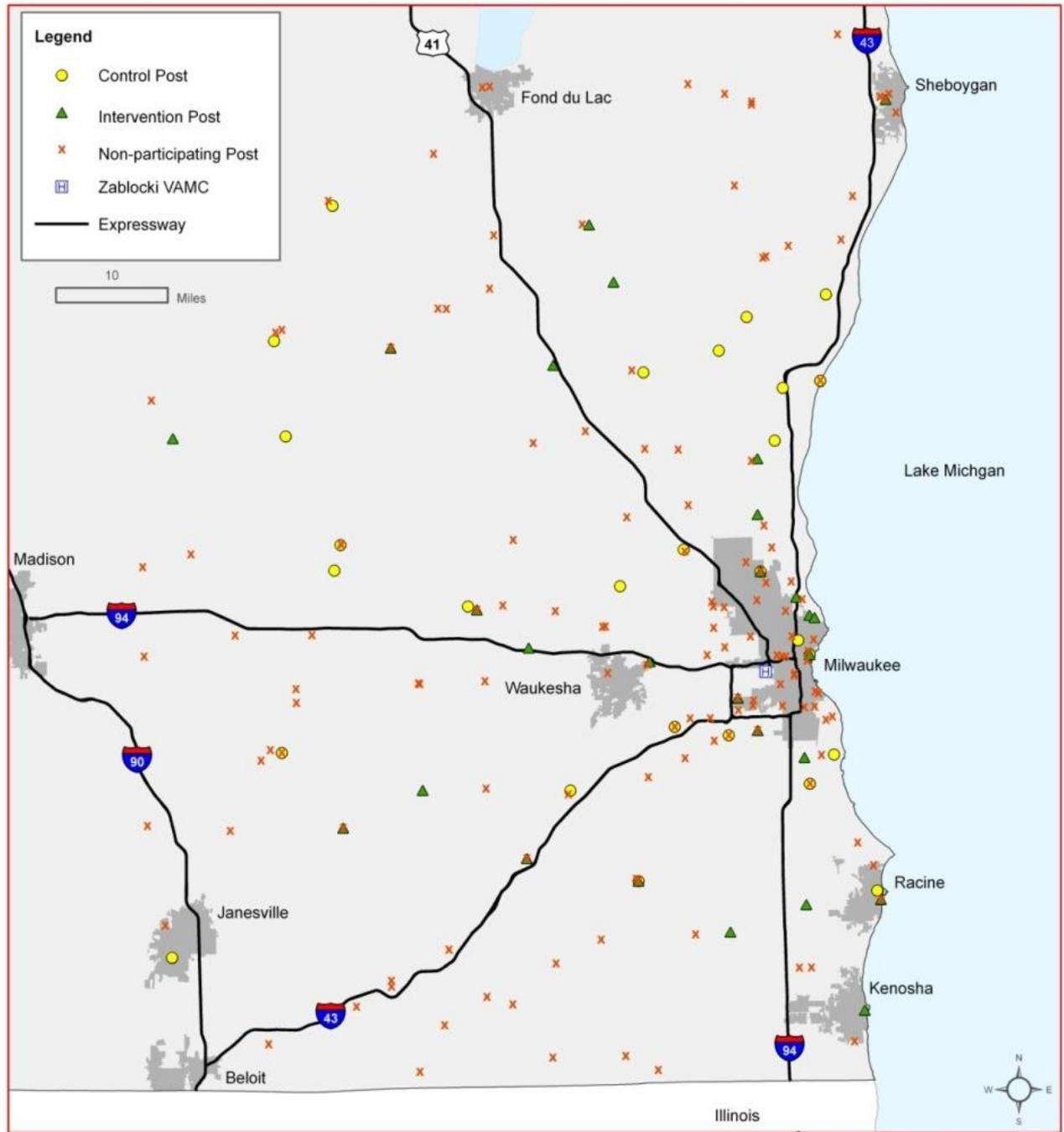
POWER II

- **Randomized controlled trial of 58 posts**
 - Randomization at the post level
 - 6 groups of approximately 10 posts
- **Peer support intervention**
- **Active control**
- **Primary outcome: Systolic blood pressure**
 - Secondary outcomes: Weight, physical activity, diet, knowledge, attitude

POWER II – Post Recruitment



Map of Potential and Participating Posts





American Legion Post 384 in Kewaskum

Intervention over 15 months

- **12 month intervention, but staggered start**
- **Several on-site visits**
 - **Initially recruiting posts**
 - **Then recruiting study participants**
 - **Then monitoring fidelity to intervention**
 - **Data collection visits**
- **Regular training of peer interventionists**



**Using the Blood Pressure Cuffs @
American Legion Post 171 in Union Grove**



**Weighing in “For the Good of the Post” @
American Legion Post 157 in Horicon**

Lessons Learned/Reinforced

- **Veterans/VSO willing to be randomized**
- **Recognition valuable – e.g. Commander letter**
- **VSO and veteran contacts not homogeneous**
 - **More resources ► higher functioning post**
 - **Demographics don't identify veterans who are most able to be local leaders**
- **The researcher should go to the veteran/VSO**
- **Repeated contacts lead to more sustained relationships, better information**

Our VSO Partners to Date - 1

- **Veterans of Foreign Wars**
- **The American Legion**
- **Vietnam Veterans of America**
- **National Association of Black Veterans**
- **AMVETS**

Our VSO Partners to Date - 2

- **Korean War Veterans of America***
- **American Jewish War Veterans**
- **Marine Corps League**
- **Disabled American Veterans – DAV**
- **Benevolent and Protective Order of the Elks***
- **Dryhooch of America***

*Not recognized to represent veterans regarding claims

Veteran Collaborators to Date

- **POWER I – 29 veterans (15 posts)**
- **POWER II – 117 (58 posts)**
- **Dryhootch (needs assessment) – 4 (1 post)**
- **MOVE OUT – 32 (16 posts)**
- **My HealtheVet (peer support) – 28 (12 posts)**
- **Overall, 86 actively engaged posts**
- **Over 175 veterans and family members**

POWER Academic Team

- Kristyn Ertl, BA
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- Heidi Cortese, LPN
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Questions/Comments

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