Unidentified Female: Welcome to the VA HSR&D Veteran Voices Podcast Series. In this episode, HSR&D Research Content Editor Maria Hecht talks with Veteran Mark Flower about his experiences working with VA HSR&D investigators as part of a Veteran Engagement Panel.

Mark Flower: Well, hi, Maria. Thank you. I'm an Army Veteran. How did I get into Veteran Engaged Research? So, I'm a co-founder of Dry Hootch of America, and my journey started with actually the Medical College of Wisconsin and some of the folks that I started working with there. It was kind of a fluke. I have a lot of different interests in the mental health, suicide prevention, the addiction side. I'd like to say that I'm also a veteran in recovery, so I have a lot of personal experiences in the aspect of these issues, and through Dry Hootch and hooking up with the researchers that I have met for and have been working with probably for the last almost 12, 13 years now, we just started doing stuff in those realms, and it was cool that I was able to help and formulate ideas or solidify ideas with the help of researchers that we were actually to start making differences in a lot of different ways.

Maria Hecht: So, you know what? I'd love for our listeners to know a little bit about your organization, Dry Hootch, and how it got started and how you founded it and what you guys do.

Mark Flower: Well, actually, I'm a co-founder. Bob Curry's the founder, but how did we start it? Ironically, we just put up a little tent and started selling coffee and giving coffee away and started raising money that way, and this was talking about veteran stuff. And it grew, but the idea is we're a peer support organization, and really it's all about peer support and veterans helping other veterans in the aspect of transitioning, in my mind, wherever they're transitioning from, because we transition sometimes in many different ways.

Maria Hecht: Right.

Mark Flower: So, our realm of starting was helping other veterans survive the war, survive the peace. It's kind of our little tagline.

Maria Hecht: So, do you remember who the first researcher was that you talked to who was in VA health services?

Mark Flower: Jeff Whittle from the Milwaukee VA. Actually, the first time I met Dr. Whittle, we were laying tile at our first location of Dry Hootch, and then we were doing this small little HWPP project, Healthier Wisconsin Something Partnership grant, trying to figure out, is Dry Hootch a good idea, and why folks may not use the VA system. It was a very small little thing, but we had to go out to different spots and talk to vets and ask them a bunch of questions. So, that's kind of how and why my stuff got started.

Maria Hecht: When you're in the military, you guys have your battle buddies, you have your brothers and sisters in arms, talk a little bit about how that carries through and how it makes it easier when you're out and you've transitioned out of military service to understand each other, because you do have that common experience.

Mark Flower: We get the politics of personality of military service sometimes. We get the long hours and lack of sleep and insane orders, and we get all that. Sometimes when we bring it home, it's hard to transition that into civilian life, I guess. So, I believe personally that when we're talking to each other, there's no judgment that's more mutual. We get it. Where other folks don't have a clue.

Maria Hecht: Because where other people might be on the outside, we're looking in. We have certain preconceived notions. We might think we know what your service might be like, or people will see movies or they'll see pop culture stuff.

Mark Flower: Oh, yeah, all the propaganda. Yeah.

Maria Hecht: And we might think we understand, but we don't. And so, when you're in a veteran engagement forum, and you're with other veterans, and you're looking at research ideas and research questions, you bring a really unique perspective to that. If you guys, if there's a group of veterans getting together and you're on a veteran engagement forum, and a researcher's bringing you something, do you get together and talk about it amongst yourselves as veterans and say, wow, you know, we've never really asked that kind of question because that doesn't really apply to our real lives?

Mark Flower: It depends on the group I'm with.

Maria Hecht: Do you have any examples?

Mark Flower: So, I've worked, well, with the folks around Dry Hootch.

Maria Hecht: Yes.

Mark Flower: We sat around, talked about stuff, brought up ideas to our researchers. Kind of the cool thing is, is I've been working with our researchers probably for 11, 12 years, and pretty much the same folks. So it's almost like I can pick up the telephone, see them at least twice a week. So if we ever have an idea, we can bounce it off them. And if it's a really good idea, we go after some money for it.

Maria Hecht: That's great.

Mark Flower: And I know one particular grant we went after, we got it on our third try. So there was two tries prior to that before we actually got it. So that's kind of one of the cool things about our little group was they stuck it out and decided to hang out for a time. It's very important, and I'm very happy that the VA is looking at us veterans as a partner in research versus a participant in research, because for a very long time it was, well, we were participants.

Maria Hecht: Yeah, you were just taking part in sort of these research questions were being developed in relative isolation.

Mark Flower: Or actually being a participant in the research.

Maria Hecht: In the research itself.

Mark Flower: Yes. And didn't have much input. But to me, I think veteran input into the questions is very important, because one, it may catch something part of the idea or the thought that wouldn't make any sense to us. Whereas when we're participating in it, we can at least work through what the research will look like and what could best benefit not only the veterans in the partnership, but also the researcher in the partnership. So maybe we don't spend the first year figuring out something may not work.

Maria Hecht: Right, you weren't involved in the actual research development process. If you had maybe one piece of advice to give to our HSR&D investigators, and even other investigators, what would that advice from your point of view as a veteran be?

Mark Flower: Get to know the folks you're working with, and if you do happen to get a thing out of it, keep it going. Look how you can keep the folks involved in that partnership so it can grow and grow and grow and grow. I mean, don't be a, no offense to all of our academic friends out there, but don't be a one-hit wonder. I don't want to use this word, use us, but then don't use us anymore. If that makes any sense.

Maria Hecht: It does. It sounds like what you're saying is once you establish those relationships with veterans and keep them on an engagement forum, or work with them even as a participant in a study, keep in touch with them. So if they're a participant in a study, let them know what the research results were. If they're working in a forum, a veteran engagement forum, listen to them, and then don't just do it once. Keep that relationship going.

Mark Flower: Build on the stuff that you're working on. A lot of the stuff I've been doing prior to the VA engagement stuff was constantly working on issues and having conversations on building a better grant, which then built better research, which then built better relationships. I mean, one of my researchers, we continue building that relationship and talking about things and exploring different things. So my research also, find the folks in the veteran community that kind of, veteran community to the researchers, but then researchers to the veterans community that there's interest. So I'm really interested in crisis, suicide, addiction, mental health, that whole side. But yet it allows me an opportunity to talk with my colleague, Dr. Zenofranco from the Medical College.

And we work through, because he's got a big interest in crisis, mental health, suicide prevention, that whole thing. And then it's amazing how through those conversations, we actually have put together and are putting together certain ideas that we're moving forward with and trying to figure out. To me, it's about persistence and not giving up. And if one group does attempt for a grant and don't get it, try again.

Maria Hecht: Right. Don't just drop it.

Mark Flower: Don't drop it because it's not a good idea or a bad idea. It's just that we had to figure out how to present our idea that intrigued the powers with the money.

Maria Hecht: And it also sounds, too, like you personally have spent that time building that relationship and you don't want it just to be, as you said, a one-hit wonder. You want to keep that relationship going. So the persistence part of it plays into that, too.

Mark Flower: Oh, not only that. And then I got to teach my researchers how to be better researchers, as crazy as that sounds.

Maria Hecht: It doesn't sound crazy because we always talk about in VAs, research is a collaborative process. The investigators are doing this research not in a vacuum. We're doing it so that it hopefully has impact to benefit the veterans who use VA care.

Mark Flower: Oh, it's all about benefiting the people that we're trying to help. I mean, it's all about, I call it, allowing folks to get to that point of personal wellness where then they can move forward and actually just get on with things.

Maria Hecht: If you had a vet who came to you, maybe somebody that you don't know, someone who you referred to who said, hey, I've been asked to be on this veteran engagement panel at my medical center. What do you think? Should I do this? What would your advice be?

Mark Flower: My advice would be to someone new into this is, one, be patient with the researchers because they're too smart sometimes to understand anything. Two, kind of build a relationship with the individuals you're working with because that's important. But more importantly, now if I'm going to take that to the other side, is for the researchers and our academic folks is you guys be patient with us. Kind of build that relationship also because it's a mutual type of thing. And don't underestimate, and back now back to the veteran side, don't underestimate yourselves in the aspect of not knowing because our experiences are wonderful. Sometimes we have to figure out how to tell our researchers to stop being too smart and listen.

Maria Hecht: So just because you come from a different background, it's almost like you're speaking two different languages.

Mark Flower: All there is to it. I mean, our first couple of years was digesting. I was digesting and they were digesting what we were trying to say because the language is very important for us that have higher education, might understand better but for us that are just normal everyday people with some really interesting experiences, terminology can get very confusing because...

Maria Hecht: Well, maybe your next project can be a crib sheet for other veterans. A research crib sheet. So you could get to say that when they say this, it means this.

Mark Flower: That's actually a pretty good idea.

Maria Hecht: Alright. There you go. There's a grant.

Mark Flower: Let's write a grant and see what we can do.

Maria Hecht: Collaboration. Is there anything else you want to add?

Mark Flower: Thanks for letting me come and speak on this for a minute.

Maria Hecht: It's been a total pleasure. And I really appreciate you being here.

Mark Flower: And I appreciate all the work that you've allowed me to participate in and more to come, I hope.

Unidentified Female: If you'd like to learn more about the organization Dry Hootch, visit their website, www.dryhootch.org. D-R-Y-H-O-O-T-C-H.org. Dry Hootch is a certified 5013C nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting veterans in transitioning back to civilian life. If you'd like to learn more about HSR&D Research, visit the HSR&D website at www.hsrd.research.va.gov. Content and opinions expressed in the preceding podcast do not reflect formal VA policy.