

Veterans' mental health addressed; free summit available to providers, family

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The Tuscaloosa Veterans Affairs Medical Center will focus on mental health care of veterans and engaging veterans and their families this week through a community mental health summit.

On Wednesday, the Tuscaloosa VA, along with the West Central Alabama Area Health Education Center, will host the second annual Community Mental Health Summit.

The free event targets mental health professionals, community organizations, clergy and family members of veterans who may suffer from mental illness, said Damon Stevenson, Tuscaloosa VA spokesman.

"Community providers and organizations who wish to learn more about veterans' mental health needs are encouraged to attend," Stevenson said. "It is important for our community health care providers and other organizations to understand the unique mental health needs of veterans and their families, and how they can partner with VA to assist veterans."

The purpose of the summit is to enhance the quality of mental health care for veterans and their families through collaborations between the VA and community health-care providers and organizations.

Given that most veterans, and virtually all of their dependents, use at least some health care services outside of the VA, it is critical for VA to collaborate to support the mental health needs of veterans and their families, Stevenson said.

Topics to be discussed include veteran caregiver and peer support programs, employment resources for veterans, veterans' family focus and veteran patients civilian health care providers.

One of the main sessions, “Understanding Military Culture: The Missing Link in Engaging Veterans and their Families” will be led by Rand L. Moore, a retired lieutenant commander with the U.S. Navy Reserve who is the co-director of the VA Nursing Academic Partnership at the Birmingham VA Medical Center and the University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Nursing.

“The goal is for us to bring together as many individuals as we can who provide services to our veterans in the community,” said Dr. Carlos Berry, chief of the mental health service line at the Tuscaloosa VA.

“The Tuscaloosa VA provides services to veterans, but there are many in the community who do as well, and this is a vehicle for us to get together and discuss ways to improve services and exchange ideas. This brings everyone around the table.”

The sponsors hope the event will grow this year. “We’d love to have 75 or 100 people or more,” Stvenson said.

The mental health summit will be held at the Tuscaloosa VA’s Building 4 auditorium from 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. Attendees can register early online at wcaahec.org/

registration.php, or at the summit on Wednesday.

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