

USC CIR'S CALL TO ACTION

ANSWERING THE PRESIDENT'S CALL TO IMPROVE THE LIVES OF VETERANS, SERVICE MEMBERS, AND THEIR FAMILIES

On August 31, 2012, President Obama signed an Executive Order directing key federal departments to address the behavioral health issues affecting veterans, service members, and their families. In his Executive Order, *Improving Access to Mental Health Services for Veterans, Service Members, and Military Families*, he calls for an increase in the number of VA mental health providers as well as greater coordination between government and community providers to reduce the time that a veteran might wait to receive services. The year before, in January 2011, President Obama approved the report *Strengthening Our Military Families*, which outlined a coordinated approach at the federal government level to support military families. This document enumerated the behavioral health needs of military families and also included a call to develop career opportunities for military spouses.

The Center for Innovation and Research on Veterans and Military Families (CIR) at the University of Southern California School of Social Work recognizes the urgent need to address the reintegration challenges faced by veterans, service members, and their families. Since 2009, USC CIR and the USC School of Social Work have answered President Obama's call to:

1. INCREASE THE NUMBER OF MENTAL HEALTH PROVIDERS SERVING VETERANS (*Improving Access to Mental Health Services, 2012 – Section 4*)

The USC School of Social Work has built a full graduate specialization in Military Social Work with **an evidence-based curriculum**. This Military Social Work program is also available through the school's Virtual Academic Center (VAC), an online master's degree program which allows students to study from anywhere in the country.

The program is affiliated with approximately **400 community organizations throughout 43 states** to offer military-specific field internships for its students, ranging from VA hospitals to community nonprofit veteran support organizations. **This program is designed to produce the behavioral health providers required by the VA and community organizations** to treat veterans, service members, and their families with competence and understanding.

- The Military Social Work specialization has grown exponentially in just three years, from 12 students graduated in 2010 to **more than 250 on track to graduate in 2013**. As of Fall 2012, **54 Virtual Academic Center students** have also earned their MSW with a specialization in Military Social Work.
- In a 2010-2011 survey of program graduates, nearly **70% of respondents reported employment with an organization serving service members, veterans, or military families** within an average of 2.5 months post-graduation.

MILITARY SOCIAL WORK SPECIALIZATION

On-Campus Students

- ⇒ **Over 100** are currently enrolled
- ⇒ **One-fifth** are veterans, service members, or family members

Virtual Academic Center Students

- ⇒ **273** are currently enrolled
- ⇒ **One-third** are veterans, service members, or family members

Total Graduates

- ⇒ **210** since program began in 2009
- ⇒ **250** projected for 2013

2. DEVELOP CAREER AND EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR MILITARY SPOUSES (*Strengthening Our Military Families, 2011 – Priority #3*)

The USC School of Social Work's Military Social Work specialization has attracted substantial interest due to its distinct focus, but **the program particularly appeals to veterans, service members, and family members** who have a background in the military and wish to continue to serve this community. Furthermore, the USC School of Social Work's Virtual Academic Center (VAC) offers a **unique opportunity for military spouses to earn an MSW from wherever they are stationed**, as well as a **flexible career and skill set** that can be practiced anywhere in the country—even on U.S. military installations abroad. The school also offers several scholarships to support military-affiliated students and others specializing in military social work.

- Approximately **one-fifth** of students enrolled in the on-campus Military Social Work specialization are veterans, service members, or military spouses.
- Of the 125 students who have graduated from the USC School of Social Work's Virtual Academic Center (VAC), **43% specialized in military social work and one-third were veterans, service members, or military spouses**. Currently, **one-third of the 273 students** enrolled in this specialization through the VAC are also military-affiliated.
- The **Gary Sinise Scholarship** provides financial means for service members, veterans, or their family members to attend the school, and both the **Pamela and Mark Mischel Family Endowed Scholarship** and the **Catherine Hutto Gordon and Eileen Clare Hutto Scholarship for Military Social Work** support students pursuing the Military Social Work specialization.

3. PROMOTE RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT OF MORE EFFECTIVE TREATMENT METHODOLOGIES (*Improving Access to Mental Health Services, 2012 – Section 5*)

CIR is exploring how **cutting-edge technology and innovative, interdisciplinary approaches** can improve the way military social workers meet the needs of veterans. In partnership with the USC Institute for Creative Technologies (ICT), CIR is currently developing:

- Artificially intelligent **virtual avatars to advance learning, clinical skills, and therapeutic outcomes** of the next generation of therapists working with military-affiliated clients. Once complete, the avatars will be used in the classroom with USC Social Work students and will be adapted to a web-based platform to train providers worldwide
- A **military clinical skill assessment tool to measure clinical skill level** by evaluating a therapist's responses to video vignettes depicting a veteran/therapist interaction
- An **immersive avatar training system to teach evidence-based practices** to providers

Fighting On!

The USC School of Social Work's Military Social Work specialization is the only such program in the nation and CIR's Virtual Patient is a unique and innovative approach to training the next generations of military behavioral health providers. In the coming years, both the school and CIR will continue to support veterans, service members, and their families through innovative education and training programs, research, technologies, and partnerships to provide them with the care, understanding, and support they deserve.

Numbers and statistics regarding the Military Social Work specialization were provided by the University of Southern California School of Social Work and the Virtual Academic Center.

For more information on the USC Center for Innovation and Research on Veterans and Military Families, please visit <http://cir.usc.edu/> or contact cir@usc.edu.