Conclusion

Throughout the first part of this paper, I explored a more general approach to what access to mental health care services from the VA looks like on a national scale, and for the second part, I chose to focus on how veterans who may be slipping through the VA cracks are finding suitable means to treat their need. Based on what I learned through the veterans I interviewed, and how they felt they had the space to express themselves through the Art4Vet art programs, I feel there needs to be a stronger presence in local communities in addition to the national initiatives I outlined in the first section of this honors thesis. Some of the veterans I interviewed did not receive any VA healthcare, either because they were denied, didn't seek it out, or didn't know they had PTSD. Considering those scenarios, it is unreasonable to assume the VA can provide adequate services for all veterans. The local groups are more approachable and provide longer lasting programs that introduce veterans to therapy programs. If there is more funding given to these groups, either through taxpayer money or not-for-profits, they can provide more services for veterans and expand their work. Spreading local groups throughout the country, especially to regions without VA branches, would provide greater and more sustained accessibility to therapy programs.

What responsibility does the American government have to provide for those who fought our wars? The federal government is already funding the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs through tax dollars, and given the current economic climate, it may be unrealistic to expect that a larger portion of the federal budget will be directed at VA programs. In addition, some veterans may not want the federal government getting more involved given their lingering perceptions of the biases and prejudices of the VA system. The art therapy programs that the VA does provide are helpful and sought after by the veterans, but it can be very hard to access them. The difficulty

in getting into one of their programs exemplifies why the inclusive Art4Vets organization is crucial in supplementing the needs of veterans that they can't find through national institutions. Art4VetAZ explained that when she started going to the VA, they didn't have an art therapy program, but her doctor had started bringing art therapists in. She described her frustrating experience trying to see the art therapist: "Unfortunately I always got put on the waiting list. So I never got into the programs, because they were always... You have to have your provider put your name in and if you don't get put in soon enough, you get put on the waiting list."[1] Through the VA, there are too many barriers that don't give the opportunity for many veterans to utilize their services. Even if those services are effective, the limited capacity of attendees and infrequent visits, cause veterans to give up on pursuing therapeutic programs. As I found in my research last semester and saw through these interviews, too many veterans are falling through the cracks of the VA.

Keeping the focus on locally funded therapy projects, paid for by donations and some local taxpayer money could be a viable solution. Art4Vets currently gets money through the American Legion, for instance, which is a not-for-profit organization that is donation-based. Of course, local organizations, such as Art4Vets, have successes and places for improvement. These groups are effective in providing an accessible and community-based environment for veterans. The element of long-term care and being surrounded by those with shared experiences provides a supportive network that may not always be found in larger institutions such as the VA. Although there are many positives to local groups, they can still do more in outreach and funding. Many people found out about Art4Vets through coincidence, such as seeing the words on a tote bag, or word of mouth, limiting the widespread knowledge of this group. They have the support and

[1] Art4VetAZ, Personal Interview, March 29, 2022.

funding through the American Legion, but if connected with the VA, they could reach a wider audience and grow their organization on the local scale. The goal is to have more of these groups around the country because they provide resources that the VA cannot.

A solution for the needs of veterans not accessing the services that the VA provides or can't provide is collaboration between the local organizations and the VA. Instead of picking up the veterans who aren't finding adequate services at the VA, local groups can collaborate with the VA to provide each other with what the other can't. This enables the VA to provide the local group with the resources they have, as well as widespread outreach. When speaking with the psychologist I interviewed in the first part of this paper, Valerie Abel, she informed me about the partnership she has at her VA with the community and local veteran initiatives. In response to the benefits I told her from the local groups in comparison to the VA's services, she said, "our veterans often can benefit from services in the community… but we at the VA can be a great resource for these organizations in ideas of how to best engage these veterans and work with us as veterans may already be in our care."[2] Working with the VA allows for more veterans to become aware to the smaller, local initiatives, and join those groups to supplement the services that the VA can't provide. In addition to funding local organizations more and spreading them throughout the country, I advocate for collaboration between the two.

There are art therapy programs on the national scale and at the local level, so this prompts the question of how can they work together? We have seen the disconnect between veterans and the VA through both semesters of my work, but I believe the connections can be made stronger. Community organizations may have veterans they serve that need other services that the VA could offer, and the VA could be interested in what outside organizations are offering. An

[2] Valerie Abel, Personal Interview, April 29, 2022.

example of a partnership may be having someone from the VA come to the organization and speak with veterans about the services available to them and provide support in walking them through the process to get connected. The connection process is often a step that gets veterans lost and dissuades them from receiving benefits at the VA, so having someone lead them through the steps would be helpful. Alongside that, the VA could connect their veterans to programs in the community, ensuring access to both VA services and community services.

As we've seen through the experiences of veterans in Art4Vets, those who have gone to the art therapy programs at the VA found them successful, but timing is an ongoing issue. Funding streams dry up after a set number of weeks. Some veterans left the VA because they weren't finding the care they needed and joined Art4Vets because of the continuous support and therapy programs. Therefore, not all veterans may want to get services at the VA, so there are other partnership models that don't involve enrollment. The VA can work with local organizations to get money for new programming through grant proposals. For example, Art4Vets could reach out the recreation department at the VA, and "develop an innovative idea to use creative arts therapy for veterans by using unique services that the VA offers and unique services that the outside organization offers."[3] This would encourage a partnership where the VA mental health service works with the Art4Vets to identity veterans in their mental health care who could benefit from the services of Art4Vets. In addition, the VA has the resources to provide education to the Art4Vets about the best way to support doing more extensive arts programs like these ones with the veterans with mental health needs. Because the counselors and psychologists at the VA, like Valerie Abel, are trained in specifically veteran needs, they would be a vital source for helping more local organizations create more programs to benefits veterans.

[3] Valerie Abel, Email, May 3, 2022.

Art4Vets gives veterans the opportunity to heal through their art therapy program, and could reach a greater audience with more funding and education through collaboration with the VA. They are each able to provide one another crucial services that the other may not have. Developing a partnership would benefit both agencies because it would allow veterans who are not finding everything they need at the VA to have access to community organizations, and those who are in the local groups to expand their services through the resources of the VA.

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