



CAREGIVING

Caring for an injured, disabled or ill family member can entail emotional, physical, and financial strain. To advance research in this field, VA experts are developing and refining questionnaires and survey tools, as well as cross-cutting strategies that can be used to implement and test programs across a wide variety of caregiving situations. Several VA studies are looking at the impact of caregiver education and stress-reduction programs on caregiver and Veteran health and wellness. Studies focus on both the short- and long-term needs of caregivers, as many of these individuals will provide care for years or even decades.

EXAMPLES OF VA RESEARCH ADVANCES

REACHING OUT—REACH, short for Resources for Enhancing Alzheimer’s Caregiver Health, provides support to caregivers at VA sites nationwide. The six-month program includes 12 individual in-home and telephone sessions, as well as five telephone support group sessions. A pilot of REACH, monitored by a Memphis VA team, showed that the program decreased depression, frustrations, and caregiver burden, as well as dementia-related behaviors in those being cared for. The program decreased on-duty caregiver time by about two hours per day. It is now being rolled out nationwide by VA.

CAREGIVER TRAINING BOOSTS KNOWLEDGE, CONFIDENCE—Training caregivers before older Veterans leave the hospital increases caregiver preparedness and self-efficacy, says a Durham, N.C., VA team. Forty caregivers received training in medication management, VA community-based resources, medical red flags, and home care. VA researchers were able to recruit and train caregivers before Veterans left the hospital. Two questionnaires were used to assess caregivers’ senses of preparedness and self-efficacy. Both measures improved after the training, and the improvement was sustained four weeks later. The researchers note that this type of training program may smooth the hospital-to-home transition, which can be a difficult period.

MOTHERS, WIVES ARE PRIMARY CAREGIVERS—Caregiving responsibilities for Veterans with polytrauma fall primarily on women, finds a study from four VA groups, in conjunction with university colleagues. About 80 percent of caregivers are women; of those, about two-thirds are parents and the others are spouses. About 25 percent of caregivers reported more than 40 hours a week of care. Nearly 60 percent were solely responsible for caregiving. Besides helping with daily activities, such as dressing, bathing, shopping and eating, many also provided emotional support and help with obtaining legal and health care. Most of the Veterans and Service members in the study had traumatic brain injuries.

★ **FACTS ABOUT CAREGIVING**—*Estimates vary widely on how many Americans are now caregivers for loved ones, but the Department of Health and Human Services estimates that up to 37 million U.S. adults will be caregivers by 2050, an 85 percent increase from 2000. The burden tends to fall disproportionately on women. Between the overall aging of the Veteran population and the influx of younger Veterans disabled in Iraq or Afghanistan—more than 90,000 Service members have been seriously wounded or injured in the wars—the number of family members caring for Veterans has substantially increased in recent years. In February 2011, VA initiated a toll-free National Caregiver Support line to provide help and information to caregivers of Veterans. It provides resources, referrals to Caregiver Support Coordinators (located in every VA medical center), and emotional support. The line also provides information on the Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act of 2010.*