

## **Vocational Rehabilitation Outcomes for Veterans with Mental Illness Not Affected by Substance Abuse Diagnoses**

New England MIRECC researchers have found that work may be an area of strength for vets with both serious mental illness and substance abuse (dual diagnosis). In two studies with total of over 40,000 participants, the researchers compared dually diagnosed vets to those with mental illness alone. The first study looked at the process of referring homeless vets to a VA vocational rehabilitation program. Compared to those with mental illness alone, dually diagnosed vets in the Healthcare for Homeless Veterans program had a greater chance of being referred for vocational rehabilitation and were twice as likely to follow through with the referral. A second study evaluated participants with mental illness in the Compensated Work Therapy (CWT) Program, the major vocational rehabilitation program within the VHA. This program attempts to maximize patients' vocational success by initially providing paid, structured employment with a later transition to competitive employment in the open job market. In a comparison of dually diagnosed and seriously mentally ill CWT participants, the dually diagnosed vets had equal or better work functioning, better participation in vocational rehabilitation and better overall outcome. The trend for substance abuse to have little negative impact on work functioning for patients with serious mental illness had been found in prior studies that looked at non-veteran vocational program participants. These findings go against a general trend for substance abuse to play a major negative role in the course of mental illness. Compared with patients with mental illness alone, dually diagnosed patients are less likely to have improved symptoms and more likely to require hospitalization, to be homeless, to have financial problems and to have legal problems. The most important implication of these findings is that clinicians and researchers should not be pessimistic about the potential for dually diagnosed adults to work and participate successfully in vocational rehabilitation. Despite the risks posed by dual diagnosis in other areas of life, work functioning is an area of relative strength that can provide a foundation that dually diagnosed patients can build on in their recovery efforts. MIRECC researcher Charles Drebing led this research group that included MIRECC researchers Robert Rosenheck and Walter Penk and Wesley Kasproff from Yale School of Medicine and Russell Schutt from University of Massachusetts.