

Veterans and Brain Injury: Shared Resource Guide

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Part I (Overview, Purpose, Acknowledgements, and Next Steps)

Overview & Purpose In 2021, the Brain Injury Association of Pennsylvania (BIAPA), in partnership with the Pennsylvania Department of Health (PA DOH), created a Short-Term Task Force. The goal was to gather stakeholders from the Veterans healthcare and brain injury communities to share information, explore unmet needs, and create a Shared Resource Guide.

It is well-recognized that brain injury is the signature wound of recent wars. Brain injury symptoms overlap with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other mental health issues and can impact an individual's ability to live independently and work as well as affect their ability to use treatment provided. There are also clear gaps in knowledge around the available resources which may be useful to assist Veterans with brain injury. These resources are government-based Veterans resources/programs, state resources designed to assist individuals with brain injury, and community providers of specialized services.

Members of the task force were recruited from across the state of Pennsylvania (PA), with specific attention paid to ensuring that its members represented a variety of geographic regions, Veterans' facilities and resources, as well as brain injury providers. Invitations were sent to representatives of all Pennsylvania-based Veterans Administration Medical Centers; a designated representative of the state agency, The Pennsylvania Department of Military and Veterans Affairs (DMVA); a designated representative of the County level Directors of Veterans Affairs; and a representative from one of PA's four Community Veterans Engagement Board, the Delaware Valley Veterans Consortium. Brain injury providers were invited to participate through the Rehabilitation and Community Providers Association (RCPA). The Task Force itself was facilitated by three team members from the BIAPA, in conjunction with the PA DOH.

The purpose of this task force was to offer a forum through which professionals who may work with Veterans, whether through Veteran-specific or brain injury programs, could gain knowledge of the many resources within PA that could be brought to bear for Veterans with brain injury. To this end, the Task Force met three times (April, May, and June of 2021) for 90-minute virtual meetings during which information was presented. In April, the focus of the meeting was on an introduction to the purpose of the group, the importance of the issue, and introductions of Task Force members to one another. The May meeting focused on community-based brain injury services and resources, with a variety of providers offering descriptions of the range of services available as well as a discussion of the resources available to potentially pay for care. In June, the focus was on government-based services available to Veterans and the points-of-entry within these. Presenters included Task Force members from the federal (VA), state, and community levels.

Acknowledgements The task force relied on the active involvement of its members who not only gathered and shared information, but who actively discussed, questioned and shaped this

Resource Guide. All Task Force members are listed at the end of this guide. Special acknowledgement, however, is due to the following members who formally prepared and presented information to the group:

Mark Cola, NeuroRestorative

Samantha Cossman, Department of Military and Veterans Affairs

Mary Cowgill, New Vitae Wellness and Recovery

Nancy Isserman, Delaware Valley Veterans Consortium and the Council for Relationships

Ann Marie McLaughlin, ReMed of Collage Rehabilitation Partners

Tim Muller, Michael J. Cresenz Veterans Medical Center

Dayna Scott, Moss Rehab

Next Steps It is hoped that this Task Force is a starting point for strengthened relationships between the brain injury and Veterans communities. The Shared Resource guide will be distributed to members for use within their organization and role. Additionally, the following specific actions have taken place:

- Creation and distribution of this Shared Resource Guide;
- Expansion of the Veterans Resources included in Brain Injury Resource Line Resource Manual.
The resource guide is utilized by volunteers for the Brain Injury Resource Line, a phone line designed to assist survivors of brain injury and their families with questions and resource needs. The resource guide has been updated to reflect additional questions about callers' Veteran status as well as include a Step-by-Step process for assisting Veterans or their families and a listing of the resources described herein.
- Exploration of a Veterans Focus Group to explore needs with Veterans with Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)

Part II (Resources in the Veterans System)

Veterans' Health Care and Benefits

VA Health Care The first, and most crucial step, in helping a Veteran or their family member to access the multitude of available services and resources for Veterans is to ensure that they are properly connected to Veterans Health Care. This is a relatively easy process and can be done online, in person, over the phone, or by the mail.

In order to enroll, the individual will need:

- DD214 (military discharge document). This can be requested online if needed.
- Financial information
- Health insurance information

Enrolling in VA health care is fast. Eligibility is generally provided right away if completing in person or over the phone. Mailed in applications are processed within a week.

Once determined eligible, individuals should set up an appointment with a Primary Care Physician (PCP) in their local VA Medical Center or satellite. The PCP need not replace the individual's "regular" doctor, but will be critical to discovering and accessing the many, many services and resources available, often for free, through the VA.

PCP Appointment During their first appointment with a VA Primary Care Physician (PCP), all individuals are screened for a number of conditions including brain injury (https://www.polytrauma.va.gov/system-of-care/TBI_Screening.asp). It is important that individuals are prepared for their appointment with the and the screening. Individuals and their families should be coached in advance of this appointment so that they are prepared with both information about their brain injury as well as their questions/requests around treatment, services, and resources. It is often best to direct individuals to have this information written down and organized in advance to ensure that their needs are made known.

Services Available through VA Once the brain injury is identified at the initial PCP appointment, the PCP will refer them to the VA's PolyTrauma Team for a more comprehensive evaluation of their TBI needs. The PolyTrauma System of Care (<https://www.polytrauma.va.gov/system-of-care/index.asp>) can provide a number of services including:

- Psychiatry
- Therapies: PT, OT, Speech, Neuropsychology, Cognitive Rehabilitation
- Residential care
- Vocational Rehabilitation
- Home Health Aide (up to 10 hours per week of a home health aide – based on need)
- Respite care – Up to 30 days of respite care per year:
 - In-home (for 6-hour blocks)
 - Adult Day Care
 - Facility Respite
- Mental Health Care

- PTSD treatment
 - Addiction Recovery Services
 - Mental Health Intensive Case Management (MHICM)
- Inpatient and Residential Rehabilitation Treatment Programs
 - Home-Based Primary Care (visiting doctors)
 - VA Nursing Homes / Contracted Nursing Homes
 - Home Improvement and Structural Alterations (HISA) grant: \$6800 for home modifications
 - Caregiver Support Program
 - Community Care

VA Benefits (Financial) Veterans who experienced an injury or exposure during their service and are disabled as a result may be eligible for financial support through the Veterans Benefits Administration. Application for VA Benefits is not as simple as application for VA Health Care but may be warranted. Individuals will be evaluated for and may receive benefits. Factors which are considered in determining financial benefits are related to one's level of disability. Some factors to consider are:

- Service-connected disability rating: A percentage rating based on severity of an injury/illness connected to a veteran's military service. The more severe the injury/illness, the higher the percentage is. This should be a veteran's second priority after enrolling in VA health care.
- Each percentage includes a monthly payment to the veteran (10% SC \$144/month to 100% SC \$3,146)
- Establishing service-connected disability opens many doors through the VA
- There is no time limit to apply for service connection
- Veterans and their families should never pay someone to help them access federal, state or local veterans' benefits and should always use an accredited Veterans Service Organization (VSO) to file claims for federal benefits.
 - County Directors of Veterans Affairs are an excellent resource to get assistance with applications for federal, state and local veterans' benefits. They are VA-accredited to provide free and safe assistance. [County Veterans Affairs Offices](#)
 - Identify a local Veterans Service Organization that offers VA-accredited Veterans Service Officers to help with federal VA benefits applications. [Veterans Service Organization VSOs](#)
 - The DMVA also has VA-accredited Veterans Service Officers on staff.

Advocacy and Support: State and County Level Assistance

State Resources The Pennsylvania DMVA is the state-level government agency which offers state benefits and resources for Veterans. One resource is PA VETConnect, an outreach program of the DMVA with a mission of connecting PA's Veterans to the appropriate resources

by networking, educating, and collaborating with veteran-centric and mainstream resources that serve and support veterans and their families. PA VETConnect has five Regional Program Outreach Coordinators (RPOCs) who are a source of support for professionals and advocates. RPOCs can identify resources and information and facilitate connection to points of contact for programs and services that will benefit Veterans, servicemembers and their families and caregivers. Advocates, veterans and families can use the PA VETConnect site to find accredited VSOs, as well as many other useful resources – www.dmva.pa.gov/vetconnect

PA also has a Bureau of Veterans Homes, with six DMVA-run long-term care facilities across the state (located in Erie, Pittsburgh, Hollidaysburg in Blair Co., Scranton, Spring City in Chester Co. and Philadelphia). <http://www.VeteransHomes.pa.gov>

County Resources Each of the Commonwealth of PA's 67 counties has a County Veterans Affairs Office. This is another resource available to Veterans and/or their families who are exploring resources, including federal VA benefits. The county offices are not part of federal VA or state DMVA systems but are local resources and one of the best places for helping Veterans apply for and access federal, state and county benefits, services and programs. Help from these offices is completely free.

County benefits include: gravesite registration, grave markers/flags, burial allowance, government/private headstones, discount cards, assistance programs, marriage and divorce records, and registering discharge papers (DD214) with County Courthouse

County Office of Veterans Affairs are listed at: www.dmva.pa.gov/vetconnect

Finding Local Veterans Resources In addition to federal, state, and county level resources for Veterans, there are a myriad of local, community-based organizations whose missions are to serve Veterans. The state of PA has three Community Veterans Engagement Boards (CVEB). <https://www.va.gov/ve/engagement/state.asp?state=PA&order=city>

CVEBs exist in every state to help local veteran-serving organizations establish a platform where they support the unique needs of veterans in their community. CVEBs are organized regionally and vary greatly in structure. They often consist of volunteer teams of local veterans, advocates, veteran-serving organizations, and other civic leaders.

The number and variety of supportive organizations and services available to Veterans at a local level cannot be understated! Within a local community, one might find a wide array of services including health and fitness clubs or services, housing resources, service dogs, transportation, and job training. The Philadelphia region's CVEB (Delaware Valley Veterans Consortium) has an amazing website listing organizations with links to their websites: <https://dvvc.org/> which might provide insight into the types of organizations and services that would be available in an individual's community.

Helping a Veteran with Brain Injury: A Step-by-Step Introduction to Connecting to Resource

The first step in connecting Veterans with available benefits/resources, is to identify them as Veterans and to get them connected to the VA system. Below is a step-by-step guide to that process. The following is a guide to where to start and the critical details for each point-of-entry. It is also available as its own document (Appendix II).

Step-by-Step Considerations when Helping a Veteran

1. Did you (or your loved one) ever serve in the U.S. Armed Forces?

If yes, you (or your loved one) may be eligible for a number of things including specialized health care and benefits through the VA. Once you are enrolled and known to the VA, there are often benefits that can help in the short and long term...

2. Are you (or your loved one) enrolled in the VA for health care?

If yes, ...continue ask question 3

If no,

There are many ways to enroll in Healthcare and there is not a significant wait for an enrollment decision after you apply. It is important to note that you will need discharge paperwork -DD-214 to enroll.

You can enroll:

- On-line
- In Person (local VA Medical Center, VA Clinics, County Assistance Office)
- By Mail
- By phone

To apply on line and learn detailed information on how to apply for VA Health care in person, by mail or by phone, click on the following link, <https://www.va.gov/health-care/how-to-apply/>

Once you are enrolled, VA Health Care allows you to have a Primary Care Physician within the VA System. This doctor does NOT replace your regular doctor. VA PCPs screen all new patients for history of brain injury and can make connections to a wide array of services that help after TBI. It will be in your best interest to set up an appointment with a VA PCP to explore what might be available to you.

3. Are you (or your loved one) enrolled in the VA for benefits (\$)?

If yes, ...continue to 4

If no,

Many Veterans are eligible for benefits and don't realize it. These can include money and other services, across a lifetime). A Veteran who suffered an injury or illness due to their military service should apply for VA Service-Connected Disability through the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA). The Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) provides a variety of benefits and services to Service members, Veterans, and their families.

If there is any question about whether someone's injury/illness is connected to their military service, encourage them to speak with a VA-accredited Veterans Service Officer.

Application VA benefits can be cumbersome, and determinations can take a long time. Veterans can get assistance with applying and advocating for services from:

- A VA-accredited Veterans Service Officer, such as a County Director of Veterans Affairs, or a Service Officer with the American Legion, AMVETS, Disabled American Veterans, Veterans of Foreign Wars or Vietnam Veterans of America.
- On-line at <https://www.ebenefits.va.gov/>
- At a Veterans Benefits Administration regional office (Philadelphia or Pittsburgh)
 - Philadelphia Office– 215-381-3024
 - Pittsburgh Office – 412-360-2832

- 4. VA Health Care allows you to have a Primary Care Physician within the VA System. This doctor does NOT replace your regular doctor. VA PCPs screen all new patients for history of brain injury and can make connections to a wide array of services that help after TBI. It will be in your best interest to set up an appointment with a VA PCP to explore what might be available to you.**

Preparing for meeting with your VA Primary Care Physician:

Be prepared:

- a. To talk about your history of brain injury and related problems
- b. Consider bringing any records, if available

Ask for connections to available resources:

- a. To be connected to Polytrauma System of Care
- b. To have a neurocognitive evaluation
- c. To be considered for cognitive rehabilitation therapy
- d. To be considered for other therapies (Physical, Occupational, Speech, Psychology)
- e. To learn more about or be connected to the Family Caregiver Program

- f. To be connected to resources for housing (HUDVASH)

Part III-Brain Injury Resources

Services for Individuals with Brain Injury There are a number of community-based and government funded brain injury services that are available, and which may be appropriate for Veterans with brain injury. Individuals with brain injury often need specialized services, delivered by experienced teams of clinicians, who have expertise in cognitive rehabilitation. Fortunately, many such services exist in PA, and there are also government resources which can be used to access these services within the state of PA.

The continuum of care after brain injury is often thought of in three phases: acute care; post-acute rehabilitation, and community-based rehabilitation and long-term care. Services can be further broken down by type: Residential Services (transitional and long-term); Outpatient, Structured Day, or Clinic-Based Services; and Home and Community-Based Services. There are a number of brain injury providers offering services across the continuum of care and by these service types in PA. Some suggestions for locating providers for a potential client to consider are:

- Contact the Brain Injury Resource Line at 1-800-444-6443
- Look for accredited programs via the Commission for the Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF) <http://www.carf.org/providerSearch.aspx>
- Therapists with special credentials in brain injury can also be found via <https://www.biausa.org/professionals/acbis>

Resources for funding Brain Injury Services Finding a provider or therapist who can offer specialized neurorehabilitation services is only part of the equation. It is also important to work with survivors of brain injuries and their families on identifying the resources to pay for such care. As mentioned, Veterans who are connected to VA Health Care have access to a number of programs and services at no cost to them through the PolyTrauma Team and their PCP.

Community resources also exist to citizens of PA through several government programs including:

- The Pennsylvania Head Injury Program
- The Acquired Brain Injury Program
- The NeuroResource Facilitation Program

- Community Health Choices (Medicaid Waiver)
- BrainSTEPS School Re-entry Program
- The Office of Vocational Rehabilitation
- LIFE Programs

A brief description of each of these resources appears in Appendix I.

Again, there are a number of considerations in identifying the resources that might be available to a given individual. Determining where to start is often difficult. Suggestions for those seeking resources include:

- Contact the Brain Injury Resource Line at 1-800-444-6443
- Visit the PA Department of Health website
<https://www.health.pa.gov/topics/programs/Pages/Head-Injury.aspx>

Other Resources Resources for information and support are also plentiful and can be beneficial to both Veterans with brain injury and their families. Many of these resources can be accessed online.

Information Resources

- www.brainline.org
- www.cdc.gov/traumaticbraininjury/
- www.biausa.org/
- <https://health.mil/About-MHS/OASDHA/Defense-Health-Agency/Research-and-Development/Traumatic-Brain-Injury-Center-of-Excellence>
- www.msktc.org/tbi/factsheets

Support Groups in PA

- <https://biapa.org/programs/support-group-listing/>

Brain Injury Association of Pennsylvania

- <https://biapa.org/>

Resources for Professionals There are a number of resources available to professionals who work with individuals with brain injuries. The informational resources listed above include information designed for professionals. Additionally, professionals in PA may consider these resources:

- *Brain Injury Association of Pennsylvania Annual Conference*
<https://biapa.org/annualconference/>
- The Academy of Certified Brain Injury Specialists (ACBIS) offers a voluntary certification program for both direct care staff and professionals working in brain injury. <https://www.biausa.org/professionals/acbis/about/about-acbis-mission-vision-history>

Appendix I

Brain Injury Resource List

PA BRAIN INJURY RESOURCES

BrainSTEPS: PA school re-entry program was created to build a bridge connecting the medical, rehabilitation, education sectors and families following student (K-12) brain injury. Referrals can be made at www.brainsteps.net Brenda Eagan-Johnson, BrainSTEPS Program Coordinator, eagan-johnson@biapa.org Phone: 724-944-6542

Office of Vocational Rehabilitation: State agency which assists individuals with disabilities obtain and maintain **employment**. Individuals can apply online or call their local district office. <http://www.dli.pa.gov/Individuals/Disability-Services/ovr/Pages/Individualized-Employment-Services.aspx>

PA Head Injury Program (HIP): The PA HIP is available to individuals who meet its eligibility requirements. HIP can pay for outpatient, home and community based or residential rehabilitation services for up to one year or \$100,000. To apply, an individual must first call to get an application: 717-772-2763. Pre-enrollment coordinators are assigned to applicants to help complete the application.

Acquired Brain Injury Program (ABIP): The ABIP provides brain injury rehabilitation services to individuals aged 18-25 who have sustained a brain injury from a non-traumatic cause. To apply, an individual must first call to get an application: 717-772-2763.

Community Health Choices/Waivers: PA offers services through the Waivers to individuals with brain injuries (and other disabilities) who are qualified and need supports in order to live safely and effectively in the community. Waivers can pay for residential or home/community based services and are lifelong. To apply, a person must go through a two-step application, and have open/active Medical Assistance. To start the application, call: 1-877-550-4227 or visit www.paieb.com

NeuroResource Facilitator Program-PA (NRFP): NRFP is a service that helps individuals with TBI and their families identify and navigate brain injury resources, services, and supports. Services are delivered by a NeuroResource Facilitator who will provide 1:1 support, free of charge. To enroll, call 1-717-772-2768.

LIFE Programs : An innovative model of long-term care that offers older adults the option of remaining at home with dignity and independence. The focal point of PACE is the **LIFE Center**, where members receive services such as primary medical care, dental and vision services, medications, rehabilitative therapies, social services. LIFE also offers **home care services** including nursing, personal care, meal prep, light housekeeping, home-delivered meals, and respite. PA CHC Helpline at 1-844-824-3655 (TTY 1-833-254-0690) or www.palifeprograms.org

Appendix II

Step-by-Step Guide to Helping Veterans with Brain Injury

Step-by-Step Considerations when Helping a Veteran

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Task Force Members--- *thank you*

NAME	ORGANIZATION
Peter Albert	Veterans Integrated Service Network - Lead for Suicide Prevention
Fred Aziz	Erie VA Medical Center
Mark Cola	NeuroRestorative
Stacia Comrie	Lebanon VA Medical Center
Samantha Cossman	PA Department of Military and Veterans Affairs
Mary Cowgill	New Vitae Wellness and Recovery
Karen Earhart	Veterans Integrated Service Network - Lead for Family Caregiver Support Program
Sarah Fischer	NeuroRestorative
Stephanie Hohos-Mahoney	Erie VA Medical Center
Adana Hooten	James E Van Zandt VA Med Center - Altoona Transitional Care Polytrauma Program Manager
Nancy Isserman	DVVC/Council for Relationships
Rick Matash	Wilkes Barre VA Medical Center
Ann Marie McLaughlin	ReMed/Brain Injury Association of PA (BIAPA)
Tim Muller	Michael J Cresenz VA (Philadelphia)
Julie Myers	PA Department of Health
Brian Newhart	Michael J Cresenz VA (Philadelphia)
Danny Osten	Cumberland County Veterans Affairs Office
Jennifer Oyer	Bath VA Medical Center
David Richards	Coatesville VA Medical Center
MJ Schmidt	Brain Injury Association of PA (BIAPA)
Dayna Scott	Moss Rehab
Taylor Smith	VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System
Amy Tabatcher	Erie VA Medical Center
Monica Vaccaro	Brain Injury Association of PA (BIAPA)
Sharon Webb	Brain Injury Association of PA (BIAPA)