



Robert A. McDonald
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20420

September 16, 2014

Dear Secretary McDonald,

On behalf of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), I want to take this opportunity to congratulate you on your recent confirmation as Secretary of Veterans Affairs. We are grateful for your dedication to our veterans and ensuring they receive the best services, healthcare, and support possible.

As you may know, CSWE is a nonprofit national association representing more than 2,500 individual members and more than 700 master's and baccalaureate programs of professional social work education. Social work education prepares students for leadership and professional interdisciplinary practice with individuals, families, groups, and communities in a wide array of service sectors, including veterans' care. Social workers are particularly known for strengths-based, holistic practice and the ability to connect individuals to community and family resources.

Social workers have extensive experience working with veterans, and the VA is currently the largest employer of social workers. Social workers have a long history of working with veterans and their families, with the first military-focused coursework dating back to 1918 to prepare social work students to work with veterans returning from WWI who were suffering from what was called "shell shock"; the first military social work concentration was formed following WWII. Our programs recognize that with the growing number of veterans returning home, every social worker needs to be ready to work effectively with veterans and their families.

As our programs have worked to improve their curriculum and field placement offerings, CSWE has offered support through the development of resources. A central resource is *Advanced Social Work Practice in Military Social Work*, which connects competencies for practice with military service members, veterans, and their families with the CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards. We also began connecting social work with other veterans' initiatives, like Give an Hour where we are a mental health partner, and helped to create the Alliance of Military and Veteran Family Behavioral Health Providers, an interdisciplinary group to educate and support practitioners who work with service members, veterans, and their families. There are now 24 graduate social work programs offering a full specialization in military social work, 7 offer a certificate in military social work, and there were over 1,000 baccalaureate and master's students in military-related field education placements in fall 2013. Our programs are committed to continuing efforts to prepare their students to work effectively with service members, veterans, and their families.

As you begin your tenure and look for best practices in treating the nation's veteran population, CSWE would like to offer our Hartford Partnership Program for Aging Education (HPPAE) as a model that has proven extremely successful in geriatric field education and could be easily scaled and modified to address the needs of all veterans. HPPAE is a national initiative to recruit and train the next generation of social workers by transforming

how geriatric field education is taught, engaging in partnerships between universities and community agencies, and championing the rotational field education model that exposes students to the full spectrum of aging issues. This rotational model works especially well in large complex systems like the VA where students can be exposed to a variety of settings and populations within the same agency, which allows the student to experience the full spectrum of care. HPPAE also helps students gain a more sophisticated understanding of the healthcare system, while learning to be flexible in responding to different roles and different supervisors. We are pleased to report that beginning in 2012, 9 Geriatric Research Education and Clinical Centers (GRECCs) sites and 2 VA hospitals joined the HPPAE initiative and 4 more VA sites will be joining this year. This has been a highly effective model and one we believe could be expanded to include many more VA sites and expanded beyond the geriatric focus to include all veterans. The VA is a complex system; rotational field placements through partnerships with programs will better prepare social work students to be prepared to work in that system on the day of graduation.

Properly trained medical personnel continue to remain the focal point in treating the unique set of challenges that returning veterans face, and CSWE would like to offer our support in helping to develop a program whereby healthcare professionals receive veterans-specific education. Simply adding the number of available healthcare professionals will not resolve the long-term problems facing our veterans; we must invest in training to ensure that future medical personnel can prevent, identify, and adequately treat service-related medical problems.

CSWE would be honored to continue working with the VA in ensuring that our veterans get the best care available. While we plan to continue to proactively engage with the VA, please do not hesitate to let me know if CSWE can be a resource to you.

Sincerely,



Darla Spence Coffey, PhD, MSW
President and Chief Executive Officer, Council on Social Work Education