

top- tier service

For eight years, PAServes has been building its reputation for effectively helping veterans find the practical assistance they need after returning to civilian life. Now, the well-regarded program is getting federal funding to expand its work — and help save lives.

By Mark Kramer

Michelle Shumate, research professor at Northwestern University and director of the Network for Nonprofit and Social Impact at the Evanston, Illinois-based school, studies government and nonprofit networks for a living. In recent years, she's examined PAServes, a Pittsburgh-based veterans assistance program that The Heinz Endowments and other foundations support.



Michelle Shumate

She found the care-coordination program to be “really smart,” “resilient,” “flexible” and “willing to go the extra mile.”

When PAServes is brought up to folks at the [U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs],” she said, “their eyes get really big because they haven’t seen a program that shows measurable outcomes in terms of their effectiveness and efficiency in the way that PAServes does.”

Since its inception in 2014, PAServes has worked as a hub, in a hub-and-spoke program model that connects veterans to services as they navigate a complex matrix of community and government programs that provide veterans with everything from housing assistance to transportation to mental health care. PAServes has assisted nearly 9,000 veterans, so far, according to PAServes team leader Aaron Melius.

Dr. Shumate found that during COVID-19 shutdowns, PAServes increased the number of veterans served while most programs, struggling with diminished staff and resources in uncertain circumstances, served fewer clients. PAServes reached out to veterans directly through weekly phone calls and targeted emails. It also advised service providers on how to pivot their programs to meet immediate needs.

“It’s really just this flexibility and willingness to go the extra mile that made a big difference,” Dr. Shumate said. “They think very carefully about building trust and relationships across organizations.”

The success of PAServes is revealing the importance of quality care coordination as veterans attempt to find programs that are supposed to provide important assistance but too often seem difficult to access. It’s also making evident just how crucial it is that government programs consider veterans’ holistic needs and then carefully measure how well their programs are — or are not — meeting those needs.

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs recently gave PAServes a vote of confidence in the form of a \$750,000 grant through the Staff Sergeant Parker Gordon Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program. This renewable grant supports community-based organizations that provide veterans with baseline mental health screenings, education and clinical care, among other services.

Ben Stahl, chief executive officer of the nonprofit Veterans Leadership Program, which houses PAServes, said this organizational “paradigm shift” toward federal funding will enable PAServes to add staff and further expand its footprint, while also strengthening its ability to coordinate suicide prevention programs.

PROVIDING NEEDED, HELPFUL — AND EFFICIENT — SERVICE

PAServes began under the leadership of The Heinz Endowments and Pittsburgh Mercy, a community health and wellness provider. In 2020, the Veterans Leadership Program, which had already been running programs directly related to veterans’ needs, took over and now has three full-time staff coordinating care through PAServes. The Department of Veterans Affairs is by far the program’s biggest partner, Mr. Melius said.

“I don’t know how bold and how large you can write the word ‘huge,’ but [PAServes] is a huge time saver,” said Army veteran Sean Tyler, a social worker with Veterans Affairs. With a caseload of about 30 veterans who have experienced or are at risk of homelessness, Mr. Tyler refers clients to PAServes at least five times each week who are in search of everything from housing vouchers to furniture to skills training, he said.

PAServes, through its network of providers and online tracking system, quickly locates resources that would require him to invest an entire day or two of work, he said. Meanwhile, he’s just one social worker among many at the VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System who collaborate with PAServes while supporting approximately 500 veterans, Mr. Tyler said.

“PAServes is really kind of like a catchall for just about anything that we need,” he added.

Endowments Senior Program Officer for Veterans Megan Andros said that when PAServes began its work, few federal staff members were discussing the kind of coordinated care offered by PAServes, which is one of 18 coordinated care locations under the umbrella of the AmericaServes program administered by the D’Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families at Syracuse University in upstate New York.

But Ms. Andros sees deep collaboration with the VA, the nation’s largest integrated health care system, and the Fox Suicide Prevention grant program as affirmation that “the VA needs to partner with communities and nonprofit organizations in its efforts to address the social determinants of health.”

“I believe PAServes is paving the way to a future where health and human services are delivered in a coordinated, accountable way,” she added, “making it possible to dramatically improve outcomes beyond what health and human services, when operating without connections to other agencies or organizations, can deliver.”

CRACKING THE CODE

In recent years, the National Institutes of Health and other research and public health bodies have come to recognize that certain conditions affecting people’s living environments, such as the quality of their education, economic stability, and the neighborhood or house they live in, can significantly influence their health outcomes — in some cases even more than the availability of health care.

Research has shown, in fact, that negative social circumstances are more predictive of suicidal ideation among veterans than depression or anxiety, Dr. Shumate said. Through the Fox Suicide Prevention Grant, the Veterans Leadership Program will focus on suicide prevention services for veterans living across Pennsylvania, while addressing those holistic needs.



MEETING THE needs:

PAServes has a solid record of providing significant assistance to veterans that is backed up by statistics reflecting its effectiveness and efficiency.

9,000 veterans

Since 2014, PAServes has assisted nearly 9,000 veterans through its hub-and-spoke program model that connects veterans to needed services.

PAServes data shows that the program has matched veterans to providers within an average of 4.23 days after referrals.

4.23 days

19 percent

During the last couple of years, requests for help with money management and financial support have topped the veterans' lists at 19 percent due to a spike in interest in one-time emergency assistance.

Veterans have reported that they must navigate an incredibly complicated web of social supports in order to meet these needs. Often government programs may not prove adequate, and spending doesn't always lead to significant impact. For example, the Washington Post reported in August that it found that a \$386 million VA education program had helped only 397 veterans secure jobs.

PAServes closely tracks the success of its own coordinated services. In fact, Gilly Cantor, director of evaluation and capacity-building at the D'Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families, said PAServes seems to have "cracked the code" in serving veterans, in part by tracking needs and measuring outcomes so well.

For example, Mr. Melius knows that since the program's inception, 17 percent of veterans' requests for support have focused on navigating government benefits, 14 percent have been for clothing and household goods, and 10 percent have been for employment and education support. Due to a spike in requests for one-time emergency assistance during the last couple of years, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, help with money management and financial support has topped the list at 19 percent.

This data informs how PAServes staff members direct their time and resources. Meanwhile, their data tracking shows that PAServes has matched veterans to providers within an average of 4.23 days after referrals.

Still, PAServes staff members know that at the end of the day, their outcome measurements and technology aren't enough to deliver care. They've met success by cultivating relationships with veterans and with a variety of other governmental programs and nonprofits in order to facilitate connections.

"[PAServes is] not relying too much on technology to do the work that really needs to be done by a human being," Dr. Shumate said.

Mr. Melius emphasized that agencies and their case managers know what value PAServes adds to their efforts.

"They know that they're going to get a veteran who's been vetted, who meets their qualifications and eligibility, and everything is in pristine order for their books, so that all they have to do is say, 'Yes, we want to support them.'" **h**

PAServes is located at 2934 Smallman Street, Pittsburgh, PA 15201. For more information, go to <https://ivmf.syracuse.edu/programs/communityservices/americaserves/locations/paserves/> or call 1-844-857-8387.