

## **The Conceptual Framework to Guide the Implementation of Best and Next Practice in Services and Supports for Veterans and their Families – A plain-language synopsis**

Veterans and their families can experience unique challenges to their mental health and well-being. A vision for an effective and ever-evolving system of services and supports, intended to better meet the needs of Veterans and their families, has been co-created by Phoenix Australia – Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health and Atlas Institute for Veterans and Families in Canada.

*The Conceptual Framework to Guide the Implementation of Best and Next Practice in Services and Supports for Veterans and their Families (Conceptual Framework)* will be helpful to a wide range of stakeholders – from Veterans themselves to policy makers, service providers, support organizations, and others.

Many Veterans, during their active service, were exposed to highly stressful and potentially traumatic events that posed unique risks to their mental well-being.

The response of the Veteran to those events may be further impacted by additional factors specific to each individual, such as family context and socio-economic factors. All of these factors contribute to the well-being outcomes for each Veteran, as an individual.

Taken as a group, we know that mental health challenges are relatively common in Veterans, affecting up to 25% of the Veteran population. It is common to find a combination of factors contributing to a lack of well-being, not just exposure to stress and trauma during active service.

Our aim is to support and promote well-being throughout the life cycle of military personnel and Veterans. This requires a focus on prevention and early intervention, in addition to treatment. We also need to recognize that many Veterans may see mental health concerns emerge during the transition from military to post-military life.

Family well-being is critical for Veteran well-being. Supporting Veteran families and responding to their needs is vital if we are to properly support Veterans.

Currently, Veterans and their families can face a complicated maze of services and supports that are often disconnected from one another. Some of the services provided are useful and of high quality, but taken as a whole, the existing systems of care don't meet their needs.

Some of the key issues that are not currently being addressed adequately are:

- Services that could be offered to Veterans who prefer to manage their own wellness,
- The stigma associated with PTSD and the related reluctance to seek treatment,
- Barriers to access to services, or lack of adequate services,

- Gaps in our understanding of what is an effective treatment,
- Variable responses to evidence-based treatments,
- Lack of involvement of families and peers.

The Conceptual Framework examines the current system of services and supports, and argues that there are social and economic benefits for investing in improving the service system.

Unfortunately, Veterans and their families carry the burden of inadequate care and support. The burden is also carried by society as a whole - directly through increased healthcare costs, and indirectly through the loss of individuals who can contribute productively to our communities.

An effective and efficient posttraumatic mental health system for Veterans has the potential to reduce:

- Domestic violence
- Family breakdown
- Suicide rates
- Unemployment
- Homelessness
- Years lost to disability
- Health and psychosocial care costs

The Conceptual Framework presents a vision for a future system of services and support for Veterans and their families, where they stand at the centre of the system. All services and supports are accessible and acceptable to them. The diversity of the Veteran population is recognized.

The system is based on seven principles:

1. Respect and dignity
2. Engagement and involvement
3. Equity of access
4. Breadth of support
5. High quality of treatment and care
6. Holistic outcomes
7. Economic responsibility

Although there is no single organizing body, the Conceptual Framework uses the term “system” because, for the user, the range of available services and supports constitutes a system.

Key features of the system include:

- Universal mental health literacy,
- Involvement of peers and lived-experience advocates,
- A stepped/matched model of care with effective intake assessment, where an individual is matched to the right level of care at the right time,
- Service navigation and care coordination functions, where the Veteran has a guide or function that can assist them in navigating the system, and care providers, Veterans and their families are communicating effectively,
- Ongoing evaluation and data collection for quality assurance and continuous improvement.

No single organization can deliver this new system on its own. The active involvement of many stakeholders will be needed to ensure positive impacts and outcomes for Veterans and their families. These stakeholders include:

- Veterans and families themselves
- Peer supporters (i.e., a supporter with similar lived experience)
- Mental health professionals
- Providers of broader well-being services (e.g., social services)
- Funding bodies, regulators, and policy makers

This new system aims to create personalized and flexible care for the evolving needs of Veterans and their families. The focus is on well-being rather than illness. It will:

- Integrate services for Veterans with related services for their families,
- Support the Veteran in entering the system at a level that reflects the specific needs of the moment,
- Offer face-to-face as well as digital resources,
- Commit to measurement-based care, in which the care plan is regularly updated based on how the client is responding.

The system includes six tiers of services and supports:

- Population health (e.g., health promotion and prevention),
- Informal community supports to promote resilience and social connectedness (e.g., health promotion and prevention specific to Veterans and their families)
- Formal community supports and services (including primary care),
- Formal post-traumatic mental health supports and services,
- Specialist post-traumatic mental health services,
- Highly-intensive post-traumatic mental health services.

Two key challenges exist in implementing the new system – ensuring that supports and services for Veterans and their families reflect up-to-date knowledge and evidence, and bringing about change in large, complex institutions and systems.

Six building blocks have been identified to ensure effective information-sharing and implementation of the new system:

1. Nurturing leadership
2. Maximizing collaboration
3. Building capacity and capability
4. Addressing inequity in all its forms
5. Integrating adaptability
6. Ensuring sustainability

We are committed to improving the well-being of Veterans and their families. Our goal is that the Conceptual Framework will provide a rationale for and guidance in the design and delivery of services, ensure a clear understanding of the roles of all players in the system of supports and services, and enhance the coordination of care with Veterans and their families always as the central focus of our work.

These goals are what we aspire to achieve and we believe that they are attainable. A comprehensive, holistic, and effective care and support system would be a fitting way to honour the service and sacrifices that Veterans and their families have made on our behalf.