



Department of Veterans Affairs

Biomedical Laboratory Research & Development, Clinical Science Research & Development, Health Services Research & Development, and Rehabilitation Research and Development Services Program Announcement Priority Topics for Suicide Prevention Research October 2021

Introduction

This Program Announcement is intended to summarize important suicide prevention research priority areas for **Biomedical Laboratory Research and Development Service (BLR&D)**, **Clinical Science Research and Development Service (CSR&D)**, **Health Services Research and Development Service (HSR&D)**, and **Rehabilitation Research and Development Service (RR&D)**, all within the VA Office of Research and Development (ORD). We present this cross-service Program Announcement in response to public calls from US Presidents, Congress, and the Department of Veterans Affairs to address a growing public health problem that disproportionately affects Veterans. Approximately 45,861 individuals died by suicide in the United States in 2019, with approximately 6,261 of the suicide deaths reflecting the loss of a Veteran. Thus, Veterans accounted for 13.7% of all suicide deaths among U.S. adults and but comprised only 8.0% of the U.S. adult population. The 2019 the suicide rate for Veterans was 52.3% higher than the rate for non-Veteran adults, after adjusting for population differences in age and sex. . The impact of suicide and related behaviors on Veterans, family members, communities, and the nation is profound.

Executive Order 13861 (the *President's Roadmap to Empower Veterans and End a National Tragedy of Suicide*; [PREVENTS](#)) was established in 2019 to build upon and amplify existing suicide prevention efforts, including 2018's Executive Order 13822 (*Supporting Our Veterans During Their Transition From Uniformed Service to Civilian Life*). PREVENTS provides a comprehensive, holistic national public health roadmap to guide suicide prevention efforts, including research endeavors, with the aspirational goal of eliminating Veteran suicide. Also in 2019, Congress passed Public Law 116-171 (the *Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act of 2019*) focused on reducing suicide and improving mental health care for Veterans. This Program Announcement encourages research proposals aligned with key objectives of these initiatives, including (but not limited to):

- Conducting effectiveness, implementation, and health-policy research focused on lethal means safety;
- Improving suicide surveillance systems;

- Improving identification of individual Veterans and sub-populations of Veterans at greatest risk for suicide, taking into account unique combinations of genetic, biological, behavioral, social, and environmental factors;
- Identifying, developing, or adapting interventions to meet each Veteran's unique needs and circumstances;
- Improving the speed and quality of translation of research findings into clinical practice or further-refined investigation;
- Establishing or improving data curation and data-sharing practices to facilitate efficiency and reproducibility;
- Studying effective community-based suicide prevention models and tailoring existing frameworks and toolkits for Veterans;
- Improving implementation of evidence-based suicide prevention programs delivered by professionals who encounter Veterans in non-healthcare and non-VA community settings;
- Evaluating the feasibility and effectiveness of complementary and integrative health services (e.g., yoga, meditation, posttraumatic growth program, etc.); and
- Studying the impact of living at high altitude on Veteran's suicide risk.

CSR&D, BSR&D, HSR&D, and RR&D intend to prioritize suicide-prevention research when considering applications submitted for scientific peer review through standing funding mechanisms and cycles. In addition, HSR&D ([HX-22-005](#)) and CSR&D/BSR&D ([CX-22-027](#)/[BX-22-027](#)) have issued targeted suicide prevention solicitations. Although all of ORD is committed to supporting the most meritorious research to advance suicide prevention, the specific ORD Service purview defines where an application should be directed. **Brief description of each service's purview and specific priorities related to suicide prevention research are below, followed by contact information for each service. Of note, review cycles and proposal requirements differ across services and RFAs. Investigators must attend closely to the specific instructions provided in each RFA.**

BLR&D (BX): BLR&D supports preclinical biomedical and behavioral studies of disorders and diseases of importance to the health of Veterans. The BLR&D purview includes *in vitro* and *in vivo* studies using tissue cultures, animal models, or human biological samples collected using minimally invasive procedures (blood, urine, buccal swabs) or from tissues acquired without direct contact with subjects (e.g., from tissue banks or pathology material). BLR&D also funds discovery research involving omic data, including related phenotypic data in studies of genetic risk factors, pathophysiological pathways, treatment target identification and biomarker discovery. The VA will not fund studies of human fetal tissue. The BLR&D purview does not include proposals to administer surveys or questionnaires (e.g. new clinical data collection) or perform medical procedures and treatments (including biopsies), nor does BLR&D fund observational studies. **Specific to suicide prevention, BLR&D is interested in proposals focused on animal models of suicidality, biomarkers, genetic risk factors, and other aspects of the neurobiological underpinnings of suicidality.** Although BLR&D is interested in soliciting suicide prevention research across all funding mechanisms, a specific RFA inviting early-career researchers to apply for mentored projects focused on suicide prevention can be found

here: ([BX-22-027](#)) The opportunity to collaborate across scientific teams is also encouraged through the collaborative/linked Merit Program opportunity.

CONTACT for further information: VHABLR&D-CSR&D@va.gov

CSR&D: CSR&D funds clinical, behavioral, and epidemiological research on disorders and diseases — including suicide and related behaviors — of importance to the health of Veterans. Research supported by CSR&D includes interventional, experimental, and observational studies with human beings as the unit of examination. Applications that involve administration of survey instruments or questionnaires, the collection of medical histories from research subjects and/or performing medical procedures, psychosocial interventions, or treatment regimens with the intent of reducing the rate of suicide are of interest. **Although eligible applicants are encouraged to submit innovative or highly impactful clinical prevention and intervention proposals related to all aspects of suicide prevention that fall within its purview, CSR&D has identified two specific priority areas. First, proposals focused on approaches to reducing access to, or improving the safety around, lethal means used for suicide are encouraged. Second, CSR&D is interested in research focused on elucidating the impact of COVID-19 on suicide risk, as well as research that will inform and/or improve suicide prevention efforts in the context of the pandemic.** CSR&D released an RFA soliciting applications for mentored suicide prevention projects from early-career VA researchers ([CX-22-027](#)), although the service intends to prioritize suicide prevention research through all standing funding mechanisms and cycles. The opportunity to collaborate across scientific teams is also encouraged through the collaborative/linked Merit Program opportunity.

CONTACT for further information: VHABLR&D-CSR&D@va.gov

HSR&D: HSR&D's mission is to advance knowledge and promote innovations in quality, effectiveness, efficiency, cost, and accessibility of health services to improve the health and care of Veterans. A central component of this mission is supporting health services research with the potential to reduce Veteran suicides. **HSR&D is particularly interested in research focused on Veteran groups at high-risk for suicidal thoughts and behaviors (e.g., Veterans who made prior suicide attempts, older Veterans, OEF/OIF/OND Veterans, Veterans experiencing homelessness, etc.) and studies addressing Veteran suicide during the first year following discharge from military service.** For more information regarding HSR&D's suicide-related research priorities, please see the service's [Targeted Solicitation for Service Directed Research on Veteran Suicide Prevention](#) and [Suicide Prevention Roadmap](#). HSR&D also is accepting proposals for suicide prevention studies via the standard merit and pilot study funding mechanisms. HSR&D prioritizes the inclusion of patient, caregiver, provider, and/or manager perspectives, either by direct solicitation (as appropriate) or by leveraging relevant databases available for this purpose. HSR&D is interested in observational, effectiveness, implementation (including hybrid designs), population-based, community-level, and measurement-related studies for suicide prevention and treatments among Veterans.

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RR&D: RR&D supports clinical, preclinical, or applied rehabilitation research focused on restoring, replacing, or returning Veterans' function to improve their quality of life. **Accordingly, RR&D is interested in research examining suicide prevention interventions that improve functional outcomes of Veterans. Interventions of interest include, but are not limited to: 1) vocational rehabilitation and recreational interventions that focus on participation in life roles, and 2) Treatments such as, but not limited to, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation, that influence participation in life roles.** Interventions that use community partners such as Veteran Service Organizations and/or involve Veterans not currently receiving VA healthcare are encouraged. RR&D is soliciting proposals for suicide prevention for the Parent Merit RFA and SPiRE RFA.

CONTACT for further information: rrdreviews@va.gov