

# Veteran



Arts

Initiative



**Heather Seymour, MSW, LISW**  
**Whole Health Director of Community Partnerships and Communications**  
**Creative Arts Coordinator**  
**Central Ohio VA Health Care System**  
**Heather.Seymour@va.gov**  
**P 614.381.2607**

## Veteran Arts Initiative (VAI)

Veteran Arts Initiative (VAI) is a diverse creative arts program that aims to facilitate mental wellness, increase social connectedness, and create a supportive context for Veterans to form positive connections with the VA, particularly those at risk for suicide.

### Mission

- Confidence through creativity
- Pride through accomplishment
- Healing through collaborative activity
- Understanding through expression

**Art making is a complementary integrative health practice that seeks to address the whole person. Participation in VAI art-making events increases positive engagement with the VA and facilitates connecting Veterans with beneficial VA and non-VA resources. Engagement of Veterans in VA care is a protective factor against suicide and can reduce costly hospitalizations through increased use of crisis prevention services. Increasing the ways in which Veterans can participate in positive, non-stigmatizing experiences with the VA through a variety of arts programming can help engage Veterans who may not have interacted the VA and its resources otherwise. This will meet our local and national strategic goals of increasing access and improving Veteran experience.**

## Veteran Arts Council (VAC)

VAI mission was developed by the Veteran Arts Council. The Veteran Arts Council is a self-governed group of Veterans that acts as an advisory board of VAI. VAC is part think-tank, part focus group developing innovative solutions to meet the needs of fellow Veterans.

### The Problem

The 2016 VA Suicide Prevention report found that 14 out of the 20 Veterans who die a by suicide haven't been seen for healthcare at the VA within the last year. Approximately 50% of returning service members who need treatment for mental health conditions do not seek it.

(<https://www.samhsa.gov/veterans-military-families>) Both active duty service members and veterans face barriers to treatment for mental health issues. Some of the barriers veterans face, as identified by the USGAO, include: personal embarrassment about service-related mental disabilities, shame and stigma about seeking mental health treatment, fear of being seen as weak, a lack of understanding or awareness about mental health problems and VA treatment options, and misperceptions or distrust about the VA generally or mental health treatment specifically, such as concern that providers will not understand or believe them or that VA services are for "someone else" (such as older vets, war vets, male vets, or vets with severe mental illness).

## The Solution

Suicide is a preventable social-cultural problem, caused in part by a sense of disconnection with others and lower engagement in beneficial treatment services. Through a network of community collaborations with local and national stakeholders, **VAI** offers multi-disciplinary creative arts programs for Veterans and family members to foster therapeutic expression, promote resilience, and create social connections with purpose. **VAI** programs include visual arts, theater, dance, music, writing, group-based contemporary art interpretation, discussion, and exhibition. Our solution to help address the problem of Veteran suicide is to engage Veterans in complementary wellness services to improve psychological, health, and social functioning and foster connections with behavioral health services when needed. Ongoing program assessment and measures of psychological and health variables such as depression and anxiety symptoms, quality of life, social connection, pain, and cortisol levels will offer empirical data on how much “art dose” is needed to positively impact lives and identify any differences in the impacts of various art modalities.

## Impact

### **Examination of the Psychological and Health Benefits of an Art-Making Program for Veterans: A Randomized Trial**

- In 2017 VAI conducted a randomized controlled study (n=60) of the psychological and health benefits of art making workshops. Interest was high; recruiting all 60 participants in 2 weeks. Retention was high: 77% completed a majority of the workshop sessions. Benefits of the art-making workshop were found to be statistically significant improvements on social connectedness, self-esteem, stress, quality of life, and depression symptoms. VAI also fostered important connections with behavioral health services. All veterans who were on the high-risk list for suicide (n=3) started psychotherapy to address their suicidality in order to participate in the art workshops. All stayed engaged with treatment. Even more importantly, one veteran approached study staff in need of psychiatric hospitalization in advance of a potential suicide attempt, and he said he would not have reached out for help had he not formed connections with the staff.

### **Examination of the Psychological and Health Benefits of an Art-Making Workshop for Veterans at Elevated Risk**

- In a 2018 study, VAI focused specifically on Veterans at elevated risk for suicide, who may benefit most from increased engagement with the VA. Veterans at elevated risk who participated in an art-making workshop (N=23) saw significant improvements in depression symptoms and perceived stress. We also discussed a median of two (range 0-4) requested resources for needs such as struggles with housing, substance use, employment, and relationship distress.



## Whole Health & VAI Community Collaboration Projects

### **Vets at the WEX, 2017-Present** (virtual or in person)

2022 will be our fifth year of collaboration between VAI and the Ohio State University's Wexner Center for the Art's *Art & Resilience* program. *Vets at the Wex* is a 6-week workshop series that fosters social connection through group-based contemporary art interpretation, discussion, and activities. Contemporary art reflects our humanity and guides us to contemplate how we engage with others in our society. The gallery and performance spaces provide a unique container to cultivate and hold deep conversation, intentional community building, and mindfulness skills. *Vets at the Wex* is designed to not only engage the arts in new and fresh ways but are also informed by facets of the field of positive psychology that teach us that resilience can be learned and strengthened.

### **Veteran Shakespeare Project, 2017-Present** (virtual or in person)

2022 will mark our fourth year of a dynamic collaboration between the Central Ohio VA Health Care System and the Ohio State University's Theater Department. 6-week Shakespeare workshops will be offered for military family members, caregivers, and active-duty personnel to foster social cohesion, creativity, and self-concept.

### **Columbus Veterans Film Festival, 2018**

<https://www.columbusunderground.com/veterans-film-festival-comes-to-gateway-hm1>

[2018 Veterans Film Festival - YouTube](#)

The Columbus Veterans Administration's Veterans Arts Initiative and the independent, nonprofit Gateway Film Center hosted the first annual Veterans Arts & Film Festival, November 10-11, 2018. Guests enjoyed films, art, and community engagement aimed at addressing the human experience of our active-duty military community, Veterans, and their families. The festival presented a curated program of carefully selected features, documentaries, live performances, director and artist talks, panel discussions, gallery exhibits, food, and fellowship.

In addition to in-theater programming, the Columbus VA provided state, federal, and civilian community resources; onsite VA enrollment and first medical evaluation appointment; benefits application assistance; and education for veterans and their family members, friends, advocates, and caretakers and civilians.



## **National Veterans Film Festival, 2020-Present** (virtual or in person)

[www.VeteransFilm.org](http://www.VeteransFilm.org)

A coalition of Columbus cultural institutions have joined forces to host a free virtual screening in the *National Veterans Film Festival Presents Series*. The 10-day event connects Americans through Veterans' voices and stories by celebrating the contributions and resiliency of our nation's Veterans.

The NVFF Screening Series is a partnership of some of Ohio's leading arts and culture organizations – the National Veterans Memorial and Museum, Gateway Film Center and the Ohio VA Health Care System, including Columbus, Chillicothe, and Cleveland Whole Health teams.

“Sitting at the intersection of art, education, technology and politics, film is the art form that has been most influenced by Americans and that has had the greatest impact on our culture,” said Chris Hamel, President of Gateway Film Center. “It is arguably our most enduring cultural connector.” Gateway Film Center will be leading the film festival's submissions and programming processes. “Columbus is developing a great collection of annual film festivals, and the National Veterans Film Festival is a needed addition.”

## **Columbus College of Art & Design (CCAD): Re-Story, 2020**

[VA-CCAD project website](#)

During the four-month long partnership, 28 CCAD students from four classes in documentary video, podcasting, and animation were paired with 21 VAI participants to share Veterans' stories and explore how their creative efforts as artists have helped them to process their individual military experiences. The overall project, dubbed “Re-story,” gave Veterans an opportunity to retell or “re-story” aspects of their lives both in and out of the military and reflect on how making art transforms these narratives. In addition, Veterans' poems from the VAI poetry workshops at the Franklin County Correction Center were used to create short animations. The Veterans were consulted throughout the project and received a copy of their stories.

The short films, excerpted podcasts and animations were combined and edited to make a 45-minute documentary film by a CCAD alum. *Re-Story: transforming Veterans Stories into Art* kicked off the National Veterans Film Festival Presents series on Nov. 13-15, 2020. Views around the country tuned in virtually to watch the film premiere. The film was awarded two Silver 2021 Telly Awards, which honor excellence in video and television across all screens.

## **Tandy Leathercrafting, 2017-Present** (virtual or in person)

VAI/Tandy partnership is in its fifth year of development. Our 6-12 week virtual leathercrafting workshops are designed to engage Veterans and caretakers through interactive workshops providing mindfulness and wellbeing practices, community building as a social prescription, and new leathercrafting skill to bridge disengaged, isolated Veterans into VA regardless of current VA enrollment status. The Virtual Tandy Leathermaking program was selected as Central Office's VA FY2021-2022 Innovation Ecosystem investments. VAI is coordinating the spread of the Tandy program to 5 pilot sites



across the VA nationally. All participants receive free Tandy Leathercrafting kits in the mail (including all tools and materials needed) and weekly 2-hour instruction by expert Tandy Veteran facilitators.

## **Challenge America Virtual Music Therapy, 2021-Present**

### [Eastern Oklahoma VA Health Care System introduces music therapy program to Veterans](#)

In a 2021-2022 pilot, the VA Office of Rural Health's Rural Veterans TeleRehabilitation Initiative (RVTRI) partnered with national Veteran nonprofit, Challenge America, and the VA Central Ohio Healthcare System's Veteran Arts Initiative to provide five virtual music therapy programs at five different VA sites around the country, including the VA Central Ohio Healthcare System, VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System, VA Southern Nevada Healthcare System, Eastern Oklahoma VA Healthcare System, and VA Maine Healthcare System.

The Challenge America music therapy program offers online and real-time instruction for at-risk Veterans with a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress and/or military sexual trauma. By leveraging best practices from trauma-informed therapy, this 3.5-week music therapy program offers group training from a board-certified music therapist, with a specific focus on mindfulness, guitar instruction, and songwriting. Participants also work one-on-one with a songwriter to express their story through song. The program culminates with a final concert, during which songwriters perform the songs developed during the program for the participants and invited guests. Program participants also receive follow-up appointments to receive additional instruction and advice for further therapeutic opportunities.

## **Warrior Beat Virtual Drumming, 2020-Present**

Veterans Drum from Home in an 8-week group program designed to connect Veterans with the healing power of drumming. Every Veteran that signs up receives a drum on loan for the duration of the 8-week program.

Over the course of 8 weeks, Veterans will learn a variety of drumming techniques and rhythms designed to help alleviate stress and depression, ease pain and raise energy levels, and reconnect Veterans with the joy of spontaneous self-expression. Every session concludes with meditation featuring a Tibetan singing bowl.

## **My Life My Story Collaboration with Medicine and the Arts Initiative at The Ohio State University College of Medicine, 2020-Present**

Life, My Story, a partnership between the Ohio State College of Medicine and the Veterans Administration Healthcare System in Central Ohio, pairs medical students with local military veterans. "The students practice their history taking, and improve their listening and compassion skills," Shaull says. "And the veterans are moved that someone wants to write their story and show they're more than their illness." Profile writing involves more than the history taking taught in school. Beth Weinstock, '95 MD, trains participants to listen closely and allow for pauses in the conversation, those times when the

veteran is collecting their thoughts, because that's often when important information is shared. "As physicians, when we meet a patient, we're trained to start with symptoms and follow the path of illness. This program trains students to consider an alternative path," Weinstock says. "We need to consider the social indicators of health, like family life, access to transportation and good food before we can adequately treat a patient." interview veterans and write a profile about their life, which becomes part of the vet's electronic patient record. The program was featured in the Winter 2022 issue of the College of Medicine Alumni Magazine which you can [read here](#).

## **Additional Virtual & In-person VAI Workshops/Projects:**

- **Modern/improve dance workshops**
- **Wood working**
- **Stone carving**
- **Plein Air art workshops**
- **Collage workshops**
- **Photography**
- **Drawing/painting**
- **Creative writing**
- **Poetry**
- **Veteran/VA Employee choir**



## THANK YOU TO OUR COMMUNITY PARTNERS

- Library of Congress Veterans History Project & American Folkloric Center
- National Veterans Memorial and Museum
- Gateway Film Center
- Retired United States Marine Corps General, Commander, U.S. Southern Command, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, General Wilhelm
- Battelle
- International Music Network
- Ohio State Fair
- Columbus Metropolitan Library
- Friends of the Columbus Metropolitan Library
- Columbus Downtown YMCA
- Greater Columbus Arts Council
- City of Columbus
- The Columbus Museum of Art
- The Ohio State University (OSU) Wexner Center for the Arts
- The Ohio State University Theater Department
- The Ohio State University Barnette Center for Innovation and Enterprise
- Veterans Service Commission
- Central Ohio Survivor Outreach Services
- Fallen 15
- Military One Source
- Ohio Veterans
- Vet Connect
- The State of Ohio Behavioral Health and Addiction Services
- The State of Ohio Behavioral Health Trauma Services
- Worthington Arts Council
- Decorative Arts Center of Ohio
- Urban Art Space
- Department of Veterans Services
- Veterans Service Commission
- Vanguard Veteran
- Home Depot
- Tandy Leather
- Mill Works Art Studios
- Cloud Haus Maker Space

