



# Whole Warrior, Whole Health: Holistic Approaches to Veteran Well-Being

ROUNDTABLE

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## ABSTRACT

The engaging roundtable focused on holistic approaches that support United States veterans' well-being. This discussion explored complex and diverse perspectives to encourage collaborative problem solving, mutual learning, and implications for future research. The moderator and three panelists actively discussed integrating holistic practices with conventional medical treatments, emphasizing the importance of coordination, community engagement, and working alongside veterans throughout the process. They highlighted the need for personalized and veteran-driven approaches, addressing physical and psychological challenges, and the role of peer mentoring and community partnerships. Specific examples of holistic approaches included canine therapy, beekeeping, photovoice methods, and storytelling. The challenges to implementing and engaging of these holistic approaches were identified as stigma, active engagement, physical limitations, and funding. Nonetheless, the importance of ongoing training, internships, and customized support are paramount to enhance veterans' resilience and overall well-being.

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## VETERAN WELL-BEING

Veteran well-being is important as it ensures and supports their success and happiness as they transition back into civilian society, strengthening families, communities, and the broader society. Actively supporting and assisting veterans yields powerful returns across generations as they bring leadership abilities that can transform corporate industries, higher education, governmental, and community settings, and provide agency for veterans to drive change and innovations as they take on their next mission (Duel et al., 2019).

During the process of transition into the civilian sector, veterans often experience mental health and suicide issues, homelessness and lack of housing stability, moral injury, and transition stressors (Mobbs & Bonnano, 2018). Unfortunately, stigma and system navigation issues persist and can prevent some veterans from seeking and receiving the help they could benefit from to be successful in their transition to the civilian sector (Clary et al., 2023). Holistic care can coordinate physical, mental, and social support, leading to better health outcomes and overall quality of life (Myers et al., 2000). Compared to standardized medical interventions/treatments, holistic approaches can address issues like unemployment, family stress, social isolation, career challenges, lack of purpose, and spiritual distress, not only medical conditions.

### HOLISTIC APPROACHES

In honor of the *Journal of Veterans Studies* 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, the goal for the participants of this roundtable was to frame and emphasize how holistic approaches, alongside complementary to conventional medical and mental health treatments, can better address the complex needs of veterans. We discussed comprehensive frameworks and practices that address the multidimensional needs of veterans, which emphasized treating and working alongside veterans as “whole individuals” rather than focusing solely on specific or artificially isolated challenges. We concluded that holistic approaches to support the well-being of veterans are critically important because they address the full spectrum of what it means to heal and thrive, not just physically, but mentally, emotionally, socially, and spiritually. Collectively, we believe there are six reasons why a holistic, comprehensive perspective matters so deeply. These are highlighted below.

#### Veterans Face Complex and Often Interconnected Challenges

Veterans often experience multiple, layered issues that may create or exacerbate other problems. Some of these issues included but are not limited to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), moral injury, chronic pain,

substance use, social isolation, unemployment, role and transition challenges, traumatic brain injuries (TBI), health complications, sleep troubles such as insomnia, and more (Olenick et al., 2015). These challenges are not siloed; they interact and can amplify or complicate one another. A holistic approach recognizes that treating only one issue (e.g., depression with medication or substance use with 12-step meetings) without addressing others (e.g., identity loss, transition challenges, or loneliness) leaves healing incomplete and insufficient.

#### Traditional Approaches Can and May Miss the Bigger Picture

Conventional medical and mental health models tend to focus primarily on a limited subset of outwardly facing symptoms, medical diagnoses, or mental health diagnoses through the DSM-5, and standardized treatment modalities. While these are essential and have proven benefits, these models may overlook other important factors like purpose/mission, transition role and identity, relationships, and spiritual health. Holistic approaches and care, or complementary and alternative medicine, seek to integrate these often-neglected dimensions/areas, which are especially relevant for veterans navigating civilian life after their time in the service (Kroesen et al., 2002).

#### Healing Requires More Than Clinical/Medical Intervention

Most people, including veterans, need more than therapy or prescriptions to address their health or mental health challenges. They need meaningful connections, creative outlets, community belonging, and opportunities for post-service growth. Holistic approaches, such as peer support, art therapy, canine support (i.e., service animals), acupuncture, yoga, meditation, photography, storytelling, nature-based interventions, or spiritual care, can offer pathways to healing that align with how humans, especially veterans, actually experience and cope with some of their unique and complex challenges (Taylor et al., 2023).

#### Veteran Identity, Purpose, and Missions Must Be Rebuilt

Military service forges a veteran's identity, values, and purpose. The loss or shift in that identity after discharge and during their transition back into civilian life can be deeply disorienting, challenging, and overwhelming (Meca et al., 2021). Holistic models can help support veterans reconstruct meaning, find new purpose, and establish bonds in new communities. Holistic approaches often take advantage of avenues, such as service, storytelling, spirituality, family, education, relationship building, reconnecting with nature, or community engagement, to assist in a kind of identity reconstruction.

### Resilience is Built Through Wholeness

Well-being should not be defined by the absence of illness or mental health disorders, but by the presence and volume of connection, self-worth, confidence, well-being, wellness, agency, hope, and purpose. Traditional deficit-based models often focus on diagnosing problems and treating isolated symptoms. In contrast, holistic and strength-based approaches recognize the veteran as a complex and interconnected whole-person on a lifelong journey of growth, healing, and purpose. These approaches foster resilience by emphasizing potential rather than pathology, and, by partnering with the veteran, they act as an active agent in their own well-being and wellness journey (Thieme et al., 2015).

### They Honor Veterans Lived Experiences

Holistic support is inherently person-centered. Through authentic presence, intentional dialogue, and deep listening, holistic approaches honor each veteran's voice, respect their lived experiences, and actively engage them in co-creating meaningful solutions along their healing journey. This intentional collaboration empowers veterans and is essential for restoring autonomy and trust, particularly among those who have felt overlooked, misunderstood, or let down by larger institutions or systems. In conclusion, holistic approaches are not just helpful; but necessary for veterans. These approaches reflect the reality that veterans are more than their wounds and challenges. Veterans are complex, resilient individuals who deserve care that not only sees and embodies the full picture of their lives but also fully supports their journey of growth, healing, and well-being on every level and across all domains, such as physical, spiritual, emotional, financial, social, occupational, intellectual, and environmental. Again, holistic approaches are not just helpful; they are essential in supporting whole-veteran care. Recognizing that growth is a continuous and deeply personal process throughout a veteran's life journey.

## ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

### ROUNDTABLE PARTICIPANTS

On June 10, 2025, Kelly Clary, led the three-panelists roundtable discussion, which lasted 120 minutes. The agenda, transcript, summary of notes, and the manuscript were sent to all authors for feedback and revisions. Information about those involved in the interactive and engaging roundtable are listed in alphabetical order by last name include.

#### Kelly Clary (Moderator)

Assistant Professor in the School of Social Work at Texas State University and veteran family member has led

numerous internally and externally funded research projects, understanding and supporting the well-being of military members and veterans. Most of her research has used qualitative methodology to understand substance use behaviors, mental health, and well-being among veterans, specifically in Texas and Illinois. Notably, she led an internal grant supporting the well-being of student veterans via the use of photovoice methods, an innovative qualitative methodology used to encourage participants to share their stories and lived experiences via images, photos, videos, and storytelling (see Clary et al., 2024).

#### David Hibler (Panelist)

Army combat medic, veteran, and PhD candidate at The Ohio State University (OSU) specializes in complex systems and problems in evolutionary biology and public health. His veteran-focused research spans veterans/military engagement, PCORI-funded initiatives, human-animal-interactive research, and innovative community partnerships. He leads research and engagement efforts with the Central Ohio Beekeepers Association's Veterans Beekeeping School, developing holistic, evidence-based interventions for Veteran well-being. He actively collaborates with the Canines-Providing Assistance to Wounded Warriors (C-P.A.W.W.) research group, which focuses on patient-centered outcomes research and comparative effectiveness research projects. David was also selected as OSU's 10<sup>th</sup>-ever Tillman Scholar and has led the development of OSU's military-connected student mentoring programs through his service as a Military Community Advocate. David's interdisciplinary background drives his commitment to advancing systems that address the complex, interconnected needs of veterans as whole individuals.

#### Laurie Martinez (Panelist)

Assistant Professor of Nursing at Florida Atlantic University, and a board-certified Advanced Holistic Nurse and Nurse Coach. She is an associate investigator with Canines-Providing Assistance to Wounded Warriors (C-P.A.W.W) where her research bridges science and compassion to advance whole-person care. Dr. Martinez's work centers on complementary and integrative health approaches to enhance health outcomes, particularly among veterans, military families, and young adults. Her research explores the biological, psychological, social, and cultural influences on well-being with a focus on developing personalized and sustainable models of care. Through innovative, evidence-based strategies, including canine-assisted interventions, her work addresses various dimensions of health, fostering resilience, connection, growth, and long-term wellness.

### Katherine Selber (Panelist)

Full Professor in the School of Social Work at Texas State University. Her research focuses on veterans' well-being needs, veterans in transition, health and behavioral health issues, storytelling and photography (i.e., photovoice methods), and building capacity in veteran service organizations. She has been the recipient of grants from state and federal entities and foundations from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources Services Administration grants, and Chase Foundation for providing training stipends to MSW students--many of them veterans and military family members--to work with veterans upon graduation. She is a military family member with her son having deployed six times for over 1,500 days in Iraq and Afghanistan. She personally understands issues of military service and sacrifices.

## ROUNDTABLE QUESTIONS

These five questions were posed to panelists via email before the panel took place include:

1. How do you integrate, or do you envision the integration of holistic practices with conventional medical treatments?
2. In your experience, have holistic therapies shown results for veterans dealing with both physical and psychological challenges?
3. What unique challenges do you encounter when introducing holistic wellness practices to veterans?
4. How do you adapt your approach to address each veteran's specific needs?
5. What evidence-based outcomes have you documented from these alternative therapies, and how has this data helped expand acceptance within the broader veterans' healthcare community? What success stories can you share about their transformation through these programs?

To acknowledge and more fully understand each panelist's expertise on a deeper level, an additional question was included for each panelist related to their holistic area of expertise approach. These were:

1. **Photovoice Methods/Photography** (Selber): Can you explain how photography programs help veterans process and express their experiences, and what unique benefits have you observed compared to traditional talk therapy?

2. **Canine** (Martinez): What criteria do you use when matching veterans with service or therapy dogs, and how do you structure the training process to address both physical assistance and emotional support needs?
3. **Beekeeping** (Hibler): How does beekeeping therapy specifically help veterans with focus, mindfulness, and stress management, and what adaptations do you make to ensure its accessible for veterans with different abilities?

Lastly, to summarize the roundtable, a concluding question was posed to the group:

1. Looking back at your journey working alongside veterans utilizing alternative therapies, what has been the most unexpected or profound insight you've gained about healing and recovery?

## OVERARCHING ROUNDTABLE TOPICS

As mentioned above, holistic approaches are imperative to truly support the well-being of veterans. These approaches aim to honor and address the full spectrum of each veteran's life, focusing on areas veteran's personally identify as most meaningful, rather than imposing externally defined priorities.

### CHALLENGES WITH INTEGRATION AND UTILIZATION

While it is evident that holistic approaches are valuable and beneficial to veterans, their family members, and friends, there are still challenges of these approaches being accepted widespread or mainstream. Some of these challenges include stigma, lack of awareness, low engagement or participation, and physical limitations/challenges, or other related ability status needs. Hibler mentioned the challenges of logistics, funding, and accessibility in implementing holistic wellness practices. He shared:

...[u]nfortunately, there is not as much research into how to develop adaptive tools [particularly for beekeeping therapy] as there should be. There's some, but not an excessive amount. Additionally, novel holistic therapeutic practices often develop momentum in small, underfunded groups, before becoming mainstream. [For example], from our veterans' beekeeping school, we had a participant that is an amputee in our second cohort (we've only just started our third, so this is still a very

new program). They were able to participate with crutches or their wheelchair, but they did self-eliminate because they found their health issues and resulting changes weren't able to be adequately adapted for. Though, the beekeeping program did try to make allowances for them [e.g.] changes were made to some of the physical infrastructure at the apiary to allow them easier access, and we instituted peer-participants [or] buddies that were available to help when physicality might have been an issue. However, the participant felt strongly about being able to do the course on their own, and this proved to be too difficult for them... [u]nfortunately, funding is oftentimes a huge limiting factor, that a lot of organizations run into when trying to implement these holistic wellness practices. Limits on funding and the resulting limitations on the capabilities of these groups are often barriers that smaller organizations encounter. Additionally, logistics can be a very difficult hurdle for a lot of our veterans, especially when they're suffering from brain injuries, mental health, or mobility issues. It can be difficult enough to plan ahead, find the time and transportation, and make the other arrangements necessary to participate in these limited options for holistic treatment. Add a TBI, PTSD, or just agoraphobia into the mix and logistical difficulties can rapidly evolve into near-insurmountable barriers.

Martinez then went on to share more about stigma and the importance of including Veterans in the process to ensure researchers and clinicians are aligning their approaches with veterans' actual needs and values. She shared:

My answer to that is twofold. First and foremost, veteran participation is essential. We've found that some veterans are initially hesitant when they hear verbiage related to holistic approaches. For example, 'mindfulness', 'meditation', or 'yoga'. I've been told such verbiage feels "fluffy" or irrelevant to them, which reflects a broader stigma that still exists around holistic care. That's why we prioritize community engagement and have real conversations with veterans, listening deeply, and involving them directly in shaping priorities and interventions. When veterans help co-create the interventions, [they] become more meaningful, relevant, and effective.

### **Adapting Approaches to Veterans' Needs**

For holistic approaches to be successful, there must be intentional actions, planning, time, and effort to support

veterans' needs. For example, Selber mentioned that, working in a university setting, there is a need for training faculty and staff to understand veterans' needs, military culture, and resources they could benefit from. Selber shared more about the support opportunities for student veterans on her campus, stating:

We've seen enhanced academic progress based on engaging veterans in holistic approaches and in addition the approaches that are deeply supportive to their overall wellbeing, such as making sure that they are going to their VA appointments, that they understand policies that can support them in terms of taking time off class to do that. Because often, a veteran might be at the VA a whole day and that means they are missing classes and may not know how to negotiate that when they first get into the university with their professors. So, we've seen academic progress correlated with engaging veterans in a variety of holistic approaches. Also, at our university, we do have a social component to our work with veterans. For example, we have academic guides and tutors who are veterans. We also have practiced hiring student veterans in different departments as peer support veterans so that they can be the warm handoffs when people refer veterans to the department. They can show the veteran how to be successful. We also have a big outreach to community organizations on our campus, and we bring them in regularly to address certain information and issues such as adventure therapy, the benefits of exercise, and meditation. These can include informational sessions, basic core services, such as how you use your VA loan when you get out. So those have all been looked at in terms of higher rates of engaging veterans on campus and getting them to engage because what we know, especially in the first two years, is if a veteran is engaged on campus, and are committed, they will stay and be retained and not leave the campus.

Martinez also explained how her approach to tailoring canine therapy to individual veterans' needs includes extensive, deep, and personal conversations, assessments, and customized plans. She discussed,

Each Veteran, or each person, is going to have different past and current experiences, so each veteran is going to define what matters most to them differently than what matters most to somebody else. The most important thing we can do when working with veterans is to ask them, 'What

does wellness mean to you?,' 'What matters most to you?,' [and] 'What does healthy mean to you?' It's so important to learn what matters most to them without making assumptions from broad definitions. This same principle applies for fostering resilience within the many domains of life and growth. We must first understand how they define resilience, what matters most to them within the context of their personal well-being, and how they perceive their own growth. What strengths do they draw upon to remain resilient? What barriers stand in the way of their growth? By centering the veteran's own voice, values, and lived experiences, we can ensure that both the veteran and canine are a good fit and that both will benefit."

It is evident that these efforts require a large amount of time, resources, and intentional activities. Clary also explained how it is important to consistently gather feedback; formative and summative, to truly understand the ongoing needs and engagement levels and to respond appropriately and in a timely manner. Clary summarized this part of the conversation by sharing:

In order for us to truly optimize those positive health outcomes, we need to work alongside and with our communities to determine what their needs are and how we can support them. As a researcher, like I mentioned before, this emphasis on *research with and alongside our veterans*, not *on or just about our veterans* is important. While we all are experts and scholars in a specific area, that doesn't mean that every single veteran is going to benefit or need what we have to offer. So, hearing and providing those opportunities for veteran communities to share what they need, how they conceptualize well-being is imperative.

### Community Engagement, Program Development, and Education

Community engagement ensures that the priorities are addressed promptly and that long-term support for veterans is fostered through continuity and longevity in programs. Hibler shared his experience with the collaboration between higher education, community partnerships, and the importance of local engagement and education, stating about his university:

We recently developed a Military and Veteran Services Office in which we have VA coordinators embedded, along with counselors from the university. This has helped to bridge the

engagement gap between veteran/military students and the university. It has not solved all the issues, but it has definitely helped. One of the biggest impacts this office has had was empowering the veterans' voice by developing scholarship positions called Military Community Advocates (MCAs). These MCAs are individuals who are in the process of getting their education and are military-connected; mostly veterans, or other members of the military community. They serve as educational and informational points of contact for the university and for military-connected students in their associated areas. They are liaisons between the military and academic worlds and truly give power to the veterans' voice in a way that didn't exist before the Military and Veterans Services Office. OSU currently has over 30 MCAs embedded across the university in different schools, departments, and offices, all serving in unique ways but all working together to provide avenues to engage military-connected students and ensure that their voices are incorporated into university decision-making; including health and wellness options. Veteran well-being is always going to be maximized when holistic and conventional care are integrated and not separated into non-communicative silos. Recognition and engagement of veterans' views in decision-making across the university allows for holistic and conventional approaches to be integrated in university actions that impact veterans' well-being. This has helped OSU bridge the military-to-academia transition gap that veterans traditionally had to navigate on their own.

Related to education and training is the need for peer mentoring. As mentioned, numerous times, veteran-driven/centered approaches ensure that veteran voices are paramount to the work that is being completed. Selber discussed the importance of training social work students in holistic approaches and case management for veterans. Her sentiments include:

One factor that I think is really key in any programmatic effort is to emphasize coordination across those different modalities of working and supporting the veteran...that the veteran experiences the holistic elements, instead of just the individual elements at many different locations and settings. It's that coordination—if you can implement "one-stop shop" approaches or use a mechanism such as a case management approach, especially for involving community veteran service



organizations, that's more effective. The case management approach, if possible, [is] a mentor or one person that helps coordinate for the veteran is ideal. That would be one person that they know that they trust, that they have an established relationship with, that doesn't change and reduce the turnovers of those. These programmatic efforts that need to happen within the systems and the bureaucracies of the university in terms of infrastructure and policies that are inevitably involved, are very important in terms of supporting an interdisciplinary, holistic approach across the organization.

Clary went on to highlight the role of student veterans in research projects and the importance of their engagement and feedback. She shared:

In our veteran research projects, we make sure that any project that we have alongside veterans/ student veterans are engaged in that entire process. So, for our VA grant, we have 12 student veterans who we've been able to hire and are meeting with them to understand their challenges. It is really eye-opening to us and I think being able to employ them and work alongside them gives another avenue for student veterans to share those experiences, and for us to support them, and for us to communicate that, as well as to share resources for other community providers. In addition, I think, also hiring student veterans and having them part of research projects helps give them some of that identity and that purpose, especially when they're doing veteran-related research projects. Also, I think we also emphasize with our student veteran teams are the resources that are available through that community capacity. So, our student veterans, by working with us, might learn about other agencies or service providers that they might not have come into contact with if they hadn't worked with our project. I just want to really emphasize that key piece, because it might not be that the main role of hiring student veterans is to holistically support them, but I think we're able to do that informally by having them as part of our team and being involved in the research process.

Martinez shared a case example of how she was able to support student veterans at her university without even knowing it at first, stating:

I taught undergraduate students and had the privilege of teaching a select few veterans who had recently transitioned out of military service. Initially,

I didn't even know they were veterans, but I noticed some students were struggling academically. As their professor, I reached out and asked how I could support them. What followed was a series of deeply meaningful conversations. Through that dialogue, what they shared was both eye-opening and humbling as their challenges weren't what I had expected. Many of them struggled with seemingly simple things. For example, how to talk with classmates, how to create folders on a computer, or how to save and organize PDFs. They shared how challenging it was to transition from a rigid, structured environment into a college classroom. One particular veteran told me that talking to classmates was awkward saying, 'I know I'm making people uncomfortable, but I just don't know how to talk about anything other than my time in the service.' These may sound like small issues but they're foundational to academic success. That experience taught me so much, not just about potential challenges veterans may face, but about the importance of being present, listening deeply, and understanding their world through their lens. It reinforced for me how important it is to create spaces of belonging, not just support.

### Photovoice Methods and Storytelling

Selber explained Photovoice methodology, where veterans take photos to reflect on a certain prompt. She specifically shared about her and Clary's student veteran well-being study (see [Clary et al., 2024](#)). This methodology allows veterans to express their emotions and experiences through photos, fostering a sense of control and self-exploration and self-reflection and awareness through storytelling of the images they took. The study on well-being involved student veterans taking photos of food and pets, which symbolized freedom and personal connections. The numerous canine pictures garnered from this photovoice study lead to discussing the importance of canine therapy among veterans through Martinez's work. Selber's explanation of photovoice included:

Photovoice methodology is participatory research where Veterans engage in the research process. Veterans take pictures with their iPhones and portable devices, and this helps tell their stories via photos. Then either individually or as a group, they are asked to reflect on those images that they took and you ask them to reflect on different aspects such as in the study that Dr. Clary and I did. You ask them to reflect on their well-being across different communities, here at the university, in the

family, and in the larger community context. This method can be used to really explore their views and emotions on many different topics. Well-being was the topic that we used...[s]o it's easy to explore very differing perspectives and to also use with individuals or in groups. Photovoice methodology also helps reduce the threatening manner of traditional therapies, because they are participating actively in the research and taking the images that have meaning to them. These hands-on techniques are helpful in engaging veterans because we know that veterans often are used to applied, very hands-on activities/tasks. Ultimately, you're engaging with them through prompts and questions throughout their discussion. For example, several veterans in our well-being study took photos of food, and, at first, I wondered why so many photos of food?... [t]hen when we discussed the meaning of their photos, I realized that they would tell us, that those pictures of food, meant freedom to them. It was very poignant to listen to the things in their lives that they took pictures of and expressed their feelings about. But again, full circle, back to freedom, and how they could not eat what they wanted to in the military, that their weight was also controlled by the military. Also, there was a lot about pets. They took lots of pictures of their pets, and of course, many of them could not have pets in the military. These were very poignant discussions. I must say that after I closed out several of the individual interviews, I would have to go to my office and reflect on how unique their different perspectives were. It was amazing how much they shared using the photos as prompts to guide their discussions. So, just to be able to understand their meaning, it's obvious that they had a different opportunity to tell their own story using photovoice methodology. In photovoice methods, they could control their own story. They also were able to understand and explore their own voice, which they had not been able to do while they were in the military. This tool also creates a common experience which they can share across individuals and groups, and it really helps cement for them; the power of storytelling. It's a unique way to teach them the skills of storytelling and then to identify different hurdles and challenges that they are experiencing. Because we asked them to talk about the plusses in their well-being and the negatives in their well-being across these communities. It clarifies for them the purpose of the research and increases their participation. Probably one of the biggest advantages to this technique is that it is

much easier to help them make the connections with the stories that we want them to be able to tell, not just about their past and their present, but about their future, because we've found that, as veterans, those stories can help guide them and shine a light for them to the future.

### Canine Therapy

Martinez discussed the impact of training shelter dogs for veterans, measuring PTSD symptoms and stress levels. The program uses various canine-assisted therapies, including companion dogs, therapy dogs, and service dogs. The criteria for matching veterans with dogs include physical attributes and the veteran's specific needs and outcomes. She emphasized how veterans are active partners in the process, with the program focusing on holistic and culturally relevant approaches. She explained a specific positive outcome story related to canines, stating:

There's one story that has stayed with me. I spoke with a veteran who was married for 39 years. He was a combat veteran who had served on active duty for 26 years and struggled with sleep, nightmares, and reliving traumatic experiences. It wasn't until three years ago he went to a shelter, got a dog, and said he wished he knew what a difference the dog would make sooner. Before the dog, he slept with pillows between him and his wife to protect his wife from episodes at night. Now, the dog responds to any distress from the veteran at night by nudging the veteran, laying on him, sensing the change. If the veteran doesn't start to come out of it, the dog then nudges the wife to wake her up. What stuck with me the most is how this simple intervention--a rescue dog--transformed, not just his quality of sleep, but his marriage and daily life. It's a powerful example that healing doesn't always mean replacing one thing with another but rather complementing with approaches that address the whole-person, and in this case, the whole family.

Furthermore, the program has shown significant improvements in PTSD symptoms, anxiety, depression, insomnia, and daily functioning, underscoring the importance of considering and integrating holistic approaches into a veteran's healing journey. Martinez also shared:

C-P.A.W.W. has explored canines and veterans, measuring a range of outcomes including PTSD symptom severity, stress biomarkers, and overall psychological well-being. The research has



consistently shown improved PTSD, anxiety, and depression. Specifically, reductions in insomnia and improved sleep quality when compared to control groups. Veteran participants have also shown decreased suicidal ideation and normalized cortisol awakening responses, an important indicator of stress regulation and overall well-being. These findings underscore just how important holistic, veteran-engaged approaches can be when integrated into a comprehensive care model.

### Beekeeping

Hibler shared how the combination of mindfulness practices (e.g., meditation, yoga) with beekeeping activities is highlighted for its emotional and physical benefits. Moreso, beekeeping practices are noted for their calming effects, reducing stress and anxiety, and providing a structured outdoor activity. He also acknowledged accessibility challenges, which included issues related to PTSD, mobility difficulties, and homelessness. In doing so, he proposed solutions for mobility and physical challenges, including equipment modifications, flexible scheduling, and peer-led programs to foster community support. Hibler shared more about the positive effects of beekeeping, stating:

A lot of the results suggest that there is a very strong mindfulness and flow aspect to beekeeping. Handling these bees, of course, requires you to be calm, be alert, and present in the moment; similar to other mindfulness activities like meditation or yoga. This can help lower anxiety by focusing the veteran's attention on being present there at the hive, and focusing on what they are doing. Pairing this with other mindfulness practices, like we've seen through the HIVES Initiative through the VA and some other programs, seems to only enhance these qualities. Pairing beekeeping with other mindfulness activities has the added benefit of providing alternative avenues for building community, partial participation, and gaining benefits for individuals, which may not be able to or wish to participate fully in beekeeping. Additionally, beekeeping practices can increase emotional calmness (Ciraulo et al., 2024). There is anecdotal evidence that the sound of the buzzing has rhythmic soothing quality that may trigger relaxing responses akin to natural sound therapy. Whether or not it is due to the bees' buzzing or other factors that have yet to be identified, at our apiary, veterans are telling us that simply engaging with bees and being outdoors and in structured activities, consistently reduces self-reports of stress.

## DISCUSSION

Based on this insightful conversation, it is imperative to consider engaging in the following activities to ensure that veterans' needs are prioritized and supported by best practices and holistic care. This can only be successful if veterans are involved in all parts of the engagement, creation, and implementation of holistic approaches/care. Considerations for supporting the well-being of veterans, which was discussed and encouraged, include:

- Conduct regular needs assessments to understand the changing demographics and needs of the veteran population.
- Develop internship, mentorship, and research opportunities to support veterans' transitions from academia to the civilian workforce.
- Explore ways to make holistic wellness programs more accessible, such as providing transportation, adapting physical requirements, and engaging veterans' communities.
- Continue collaborating with various veteran community service organizations to build trust, rapport, credibility, and to increase awareness of holistic wellness offerings.
- Collaborate with others in academic and community agencies on grant applications and research projects evaluating holistic approaches for veteran well-being.
- Advocate for positive change to reduce stigma around mental health and holistic care, supporting veterans and student veterans.
- Actively work alongside practitioners and community partners to emphasize the need for whole health care that addresses all domains of veterans' lives.

## CONCLUSION

Holistic approaches are not just helpful, they are necessary. They are complementary and supportive, rather than replacements. Supporting Veterans' well-being requires more than services; it requires community, active listening and understanding, nonjudgmental attitudes, open communication, and a holistic, collaborative, community-based, Veteran-centered approach. From this roundtable discussion, we truly hope to continue to carry this momentum forward as we, those who actively support Veterans, continue to listen, learn, and advocate with and alongside Veterans for holistic care, which truly honors the whole Veteran. This work must be done with Veterans, Veteran groups, military-connected students, friends, and family members to foster purpose, connection, and space to unconditionally support veterans' well-being.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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