

VA



U.S. Department  
of Veterans Affairs



CENTER OF EXCELLENCE  
FOR SUICIDE PREVENTION

# Partnering with Family & Friends to Strengthen Suicide Prevention

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# Acknowledgments & Conflicts



- **Acknowledgments**
  - VA Rehabilitation Research & Development (IK2-RX-003823)
  - Study specific funding listed throughout...
- **Conflicts of Interest:** None
- **Disclaimer:** Views or opinions expressed in this talk do not represent those of the VA or the US Government.
- **Content:** In addition to addressing suicide themes common to TX-SPS, discussion addresses intimate partner violence

# Two Sides of My Training

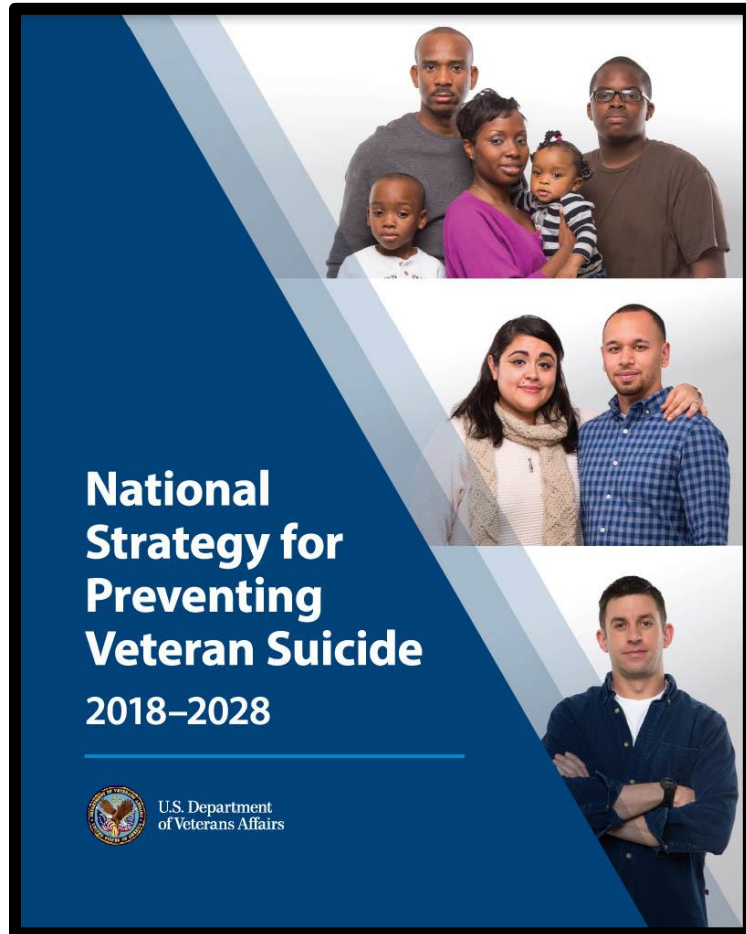
## **Clinical Training: Treating SMI & Inpatient**



## **Research Training: Healthy Relationship Tools**



# VA Commitment to Involving Concerned Significant Others (CSOs)



## Objective 9.2:

*“... effectively engage families and other concerned individuals, when appropriate, throughout entire episodes of care for Veterans with suicide risk.”*

# Start Point: SAFER Pilot

# Safe Actions for Families to Encourage Recovery (SAFER)

- Treatment:
  - Conjoint safety planning
  - 4 sessions long
- Trial Run in Bronx VA
  - SAFER vs. Individual Safety Plans
  - **PI:** Marianne Goodman
  - **Funder:** VA RR&D



# Individual Safety Plan Intervention



<b>STEP</b>	<b>Veteran Safety Plan</b>	
<b>1</b>	Warning Signs	
<b>2</b>	Internal Coping Strategy	
<b>3</b>	Social Contacts who Distract	
<b>4</b>	Social Supports who Help	
<b>5</b>	Professionals & Agencies	
<b>6</b>	Making the Environment Safe	



# SAFER Makes Parallel Plans



STEP	Veteran Safety Plan	CSO's Support Plan
1	Warning Signs	Raising Concerns with Veteran
2	Internal Coping Strategy	Coaching Veteran on Use of Strategies
3	Social Contacts who Distract	Facilitating Use of Social Contacts
4	Social Supports who Help	Providing Direct Support
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6	Making the Environment Safe	Making the Environment Safe



# Importance of Wide Net of CSOs



- Requirement for SAFER CSOs at least 2 of the following:
  - Have more frequent contact than others in the support network
  - Help provide financial support
  - Listed as emergency contact
  - Have been involved in patient's care before
- Final CSOs in Study
  - 36% Romantic Partners
  - 33% Family Members
  - 31% **Friends**

# The Headlines



## SAFER

- Veterans SI reduced over time
- CSOs maintained confidence they could support Veteran:
  - “... several things I could do to help my loved one through a suicidal crisis”
  - “... able to put aside my own fears and focus on taking appropriate actions”

## Individual Safety Planning Intervention

- Veterans SI stayed stable
- CSOs lost confidence in their ability to support over time

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### No Differences in...

- Veteran's own Coping with SI
- Veteran's sense they are a burden
- Caregiver's sense of being burdened

# Maximizing Support of Coping...

STEP	Veteran Safety Plan	CSO's Support Plan
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# Best Place to Put our Focus...

STEP	Veteran Safety Plan
1	Warning Signs
2	Internal Coping Strategy
3	Social Contacts who Distract
4	Social Supports who Help
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- MI-SI Post-Hospitalization:
  - **PI:** Britton
  - **Funder:** VA CSR&D
- Secondary Analysis: Safety Plans
  - Completeness of Records
  - Quality of Suggestions
- What predicts attempt over 6mo?
  - Overall Safety Plan Quality
  - Especially Steps 1, 4, & 6

# Turning Concerns into Action: Coaching into Care

# Turn CSOs Concerns into Action



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# Cost of Separation between Family & Suicide Treatment



Suicide Warning Signs in Month Before Death...	Observed By	
	Health Care Professionals	Next of Kin
Psychiatric Diagnosis	80%	64%
Statements of Hopelessness	32%	72%

From Draper et al. (2017), Table 4

# Cost of Separation between Family & Suicide Treatment



Suicide Warning Signs in Month Before Death...	Observed By	
	Health Care Professionals	Next of Kin
Psychiatric Diagnosis	80%	64%
Statements of Hopelessness	32%	72%
Changing Will	3%	18%
Giving Away Possessions	1%	16%
Stockpiling Pills	3%	28%

From Draper et al. (2017), Table 4

# Coaching into Care



- The Treatment:
  - Non-crisis phone coaching for CSOs calling about Veterans reluctant to seek treatment
  - 2017-2023: Received >3,000 calls/year
  - Since 2024: Switched to internal referrals (from VCL and Inpatient Teams)
- The Study:
  - Focusing on CSOs worried about risk
  - **PI:** Steven Sayers
  - **Funder:** VA SPRINT



<https://www.mirecc.va.gov/coaching/>

# CSOs Worried about Suicide



## Knowledge

- Past Mo Suicide Intent
  - 25% Yes
  - 16% Unsure
  - 16% No
- Current Access to Means
  - 36% Yes
  - 5% Unsure
  - 11% No

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## Knowledge

- Past Mo Suicide Intent
  - 25% Yes
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- Current Access to Means
  - 36% Yes
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  - 11% No

## Interventions Sought

- Had 1-15 contacts (avg. ~3)
- Interventions Given:
  - 53% Psychoeducation
  - 40% communication skills
  - 13% lethal means safety
  - 11% safety planning

Creating Supportive  
Partnerships:  
Relationship Checkups (RC)

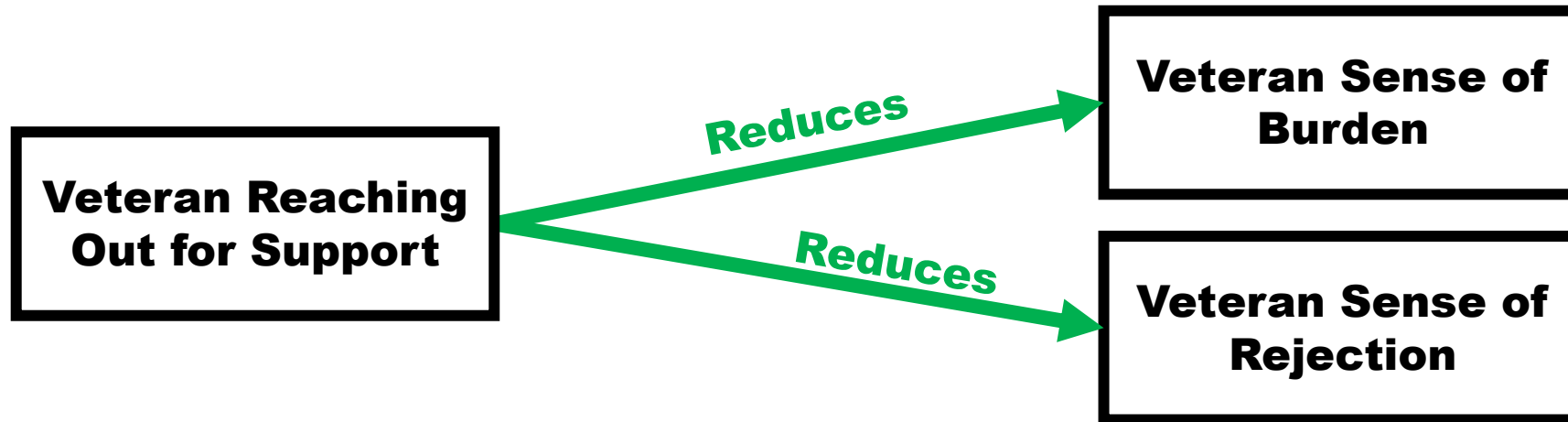
# Need for Supportive Partnerships



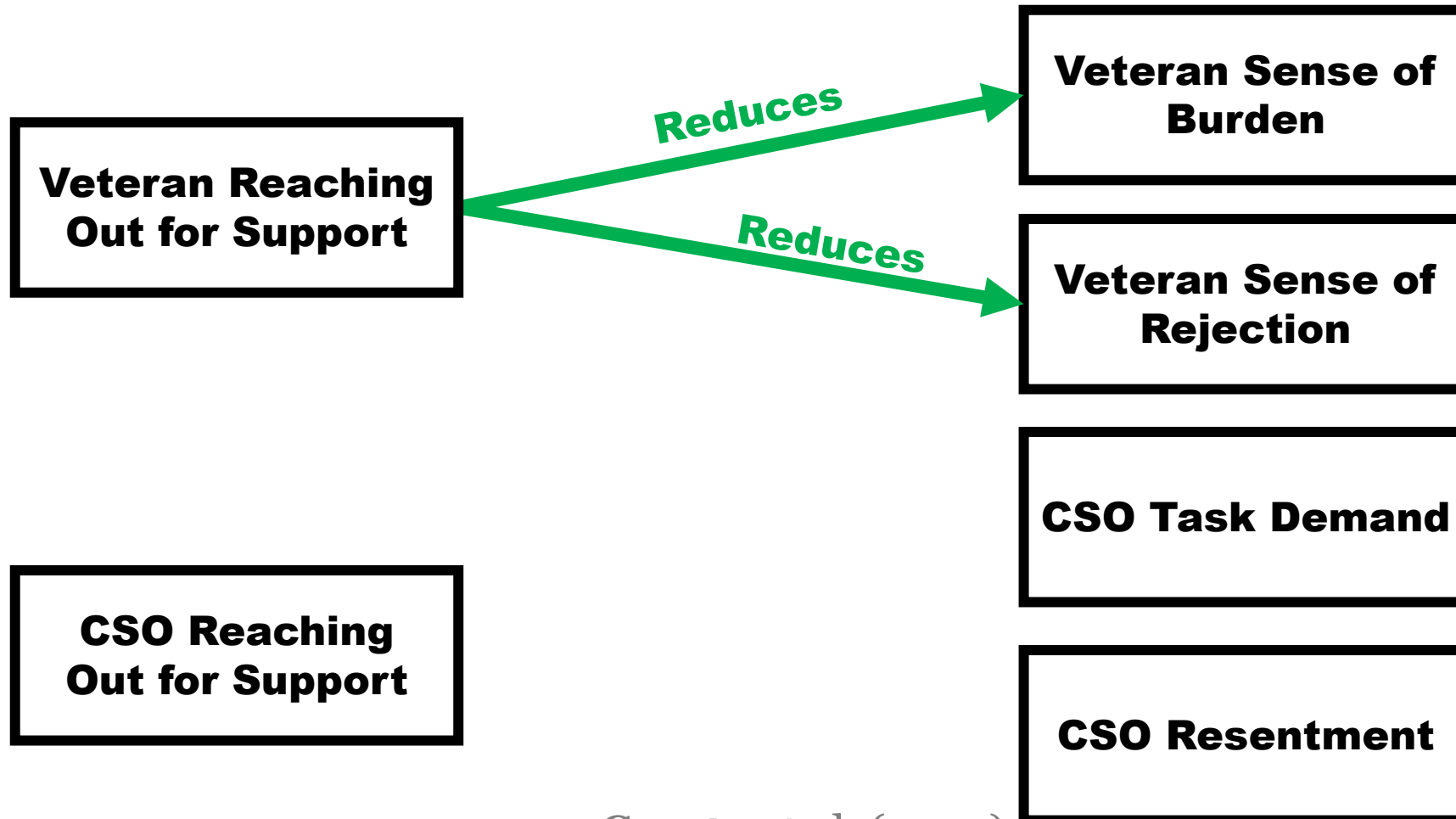
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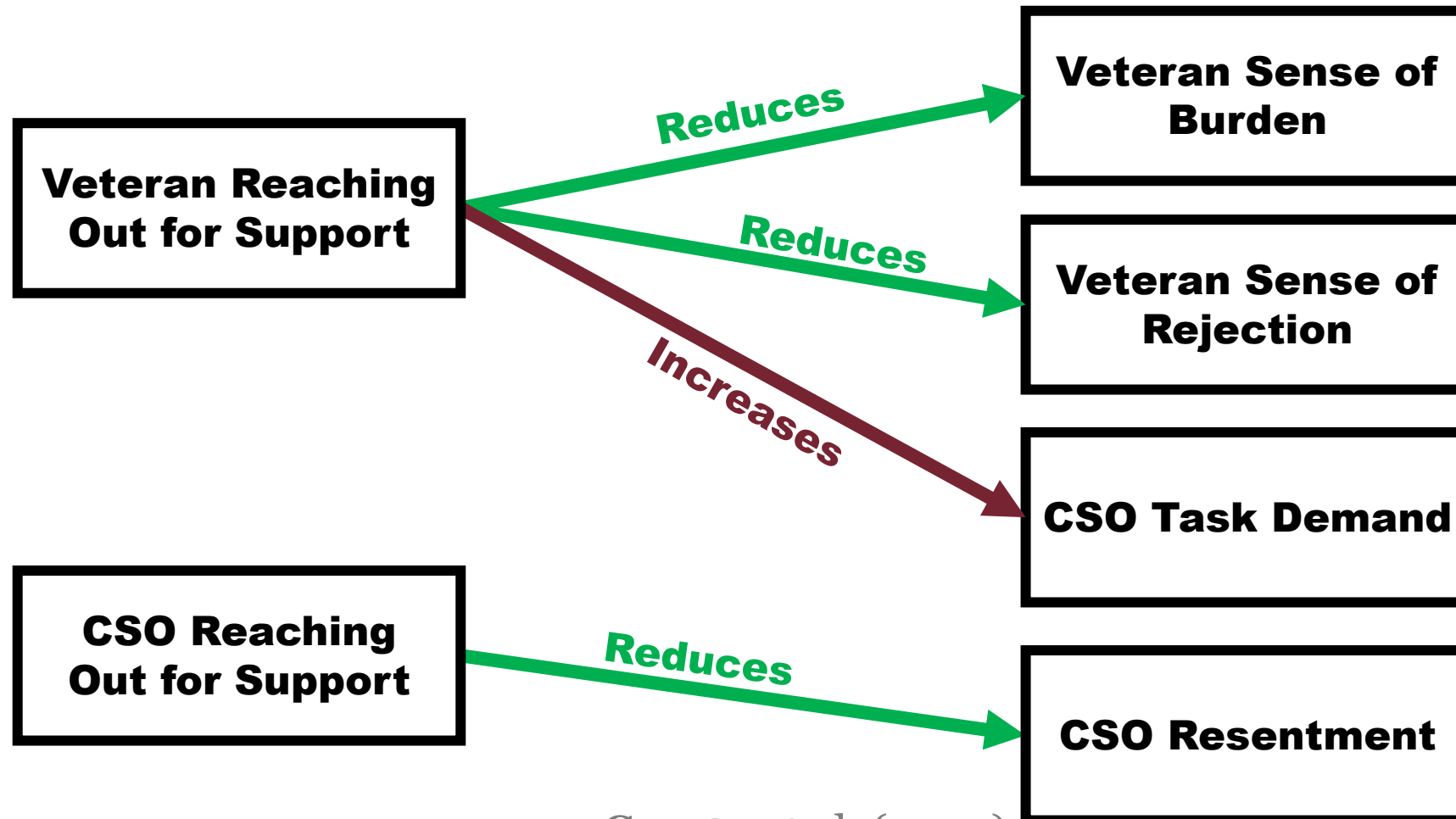
# Coping → Connection in SAFER



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Crasta et al. (2022)

# Romantic Partners in SAFER Trial



## Vets Participating with a Romantic Partner

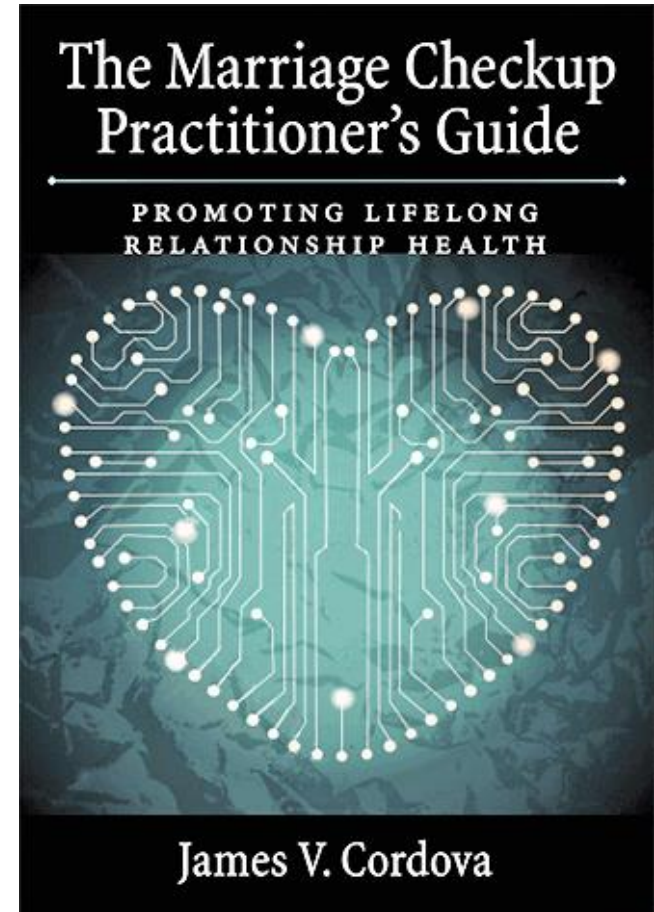
- Coping reduced over time
- Sample Feedback:  
*I told her to be more physically affectionate in times of stress, what is actually happening now is less physical affection. [...]  
Maybe it would have been more effective for me to do this individually.*

## Romantic Partners' Experiences

- Started with higher burden
- Sample Feedback:  
*Obviously, this makes the future less optimistic this makes my confidence in our marriage less high. This makes my willingness to start a family much less. I don't know [...]*

# Relationship Checkups

- Treatment:
  - 3-Session Relationship Program
  - Commit to steps to improve romantic relationship
- Trials Run in Finger Lakes, NY
  - Pilot N=20 couples
  - Ongoing Trial N=36 couples
  - **PI:** Dev Crasta
  - **Funder:** VA RR&D  
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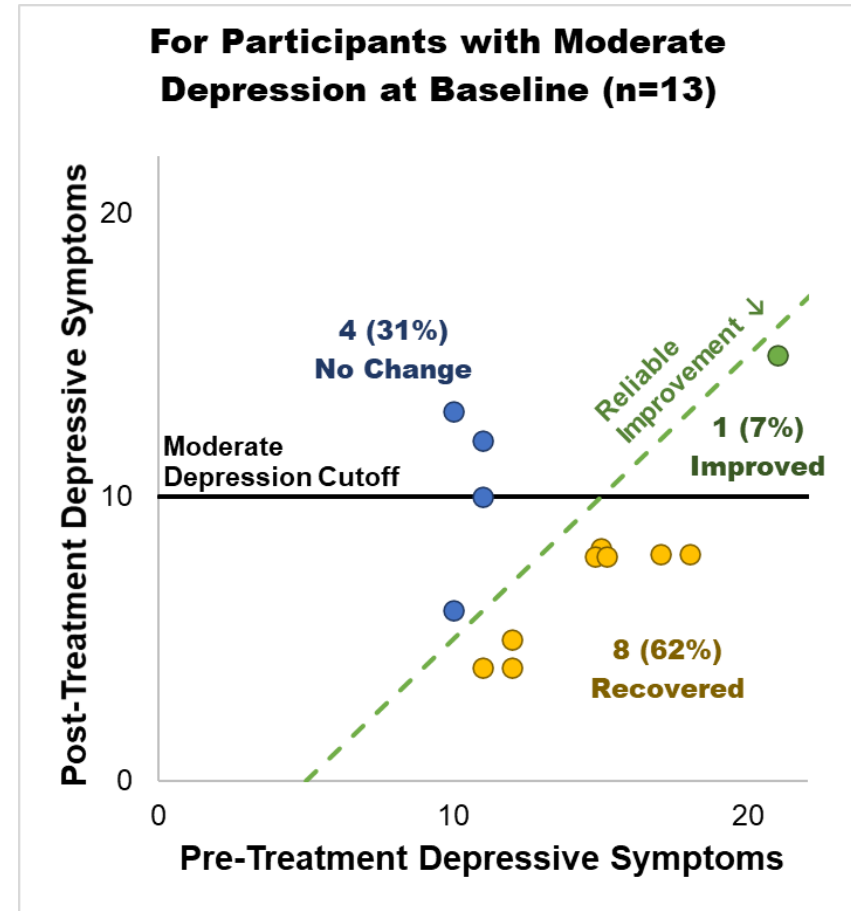
# Piloting RC in Elevated Risk Veterans



- Still Improves Relationship
  - Greater satisfaction
  - More understood/validated

# Piloting RC in Elevated Risk Veterans

- Still Improves Relationship
  - Greater satisfaction
  - More understood/validated
- Suicide Risk
  - Fewer depressive symptoms
  - Lower burdensomeness
  - Greater sense of belonging





# Lethal Means Work: Worried About a Veteran (WAV)

# Need for Supportive Partnerships



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# CSO Education Needs Around Lethal Means Safety



## **Provider Trainings...**

- Use stats & figures to make a case to clinicians
- Rely on baseline skills & knowledge of the audience
- Assumes relationship starts & ends with the consultation

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## **But Families...**

- Don't want stats, they want stories that show relevance
- May need explicit guidance on how to talk through things
- Have ongoing, complicated relationships with multiple levels of care

# WORRIEDABOUTAVETERAN.ORG



Click [HERE](#) to watch the video.

Our Mission:

**WAV empowers loved ones to  
prevent veteran firearm suicide**



## WAV HAS SOMETHING FOR EVERY STEP OF A LOVED ONE'S JOURNEY

---

Normalizing each stage → Help loved one feel less alone

---

Education on how to bring up firearm storage

---

Building trust around a topic close to a Veteran's identity

---

Strategies for hope and collaboration

---

Range of firearm storage options and legal advice



# WAV IS EXPANDING FROM A STATE PROGRAM TO A NATIONAL INITIATIVE

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Received funding from Face the Fight, a USAA-led coalition organized to support Veteran suicide prevention

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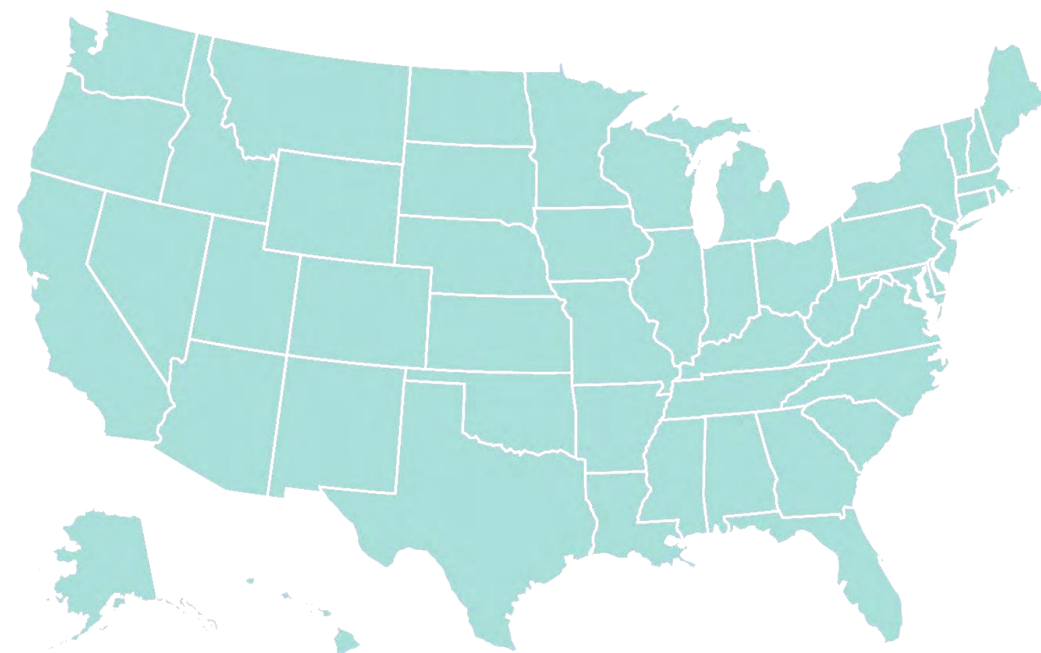
Collected storage laws from all 50 states and hosting them in one place for the first time

---

Producing new content to reach a more diverse range of families and friends

---

Engaging partner organizations nationally!



# Takeaways

# Lessons for Organizations Hoping to Involve Family & Friends in Care...



- Remember to include CSOs beyond the nuclear family
  - But remember romantic partners might have different needs
- Educate CSOs on warning signs for SI; collaborate in assessing
  - Recognize this could take multiple contacts
- Family services still work for those at elevated risk
  - And could reduce suicide risk on its own!
- Lethal means safety can be treated as a collaborative endeavor

# Questions?

E-mail: [Dev.Crasta@va.gov](mailto:Dev.Crasta@va.gov)

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# Other Great Work in this Area!



- Treatment for Relationships & Safety Together (TR&ST)
  - **PI:** Chandra Khalifian
  - **Location:** San Diego, CA
- Collaborative CSO & Veteran Firearm Storage Plans
  - **PI:** Bryann DeBeer
  - **Location:** Colorado VAMC