

**Department of
Veterans Affairs**

Memorandum

Date: JUL 18 2012

From: Principal Deputy Under Secretary for Health (10A)
Deputy Under Secretary for Health for Operations and Management (10N)

Subj: Participation in the Healthcare Equality Index

To: Veterans Integrated Service Network Directors
Facility Directors

1. **Background:** In fiscal year 2012, the Under Secretary for Health launched the Office of Health Equity (OHE) in the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) in recognition of the imperative for equity in health care delivery. The office is charged with championing the advancement of health equity and health care equality for all Veterans, regardless of age, race, ethnicity, religion, culture, language, physical or mental disability, socioeconomic status, sex, sexual orientation, and gender identity or expression.

The Principal Deputy Under Secretary for Health (PDUSH) established a workgroup to ensure VHA takes immediate, coordinated action to advance the health and well-being of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) Veterans. This workgroup met over 90 days to assess current activities in VHA, review external standards, identify gaps, and make recommendations for immediate action. The group made several recommendations that were approved by the VHA National Leadership Council in May 2012. One of the recommendations was that VHA endorse participation in the Healthcare Equality Index (HEI).

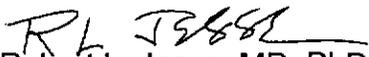
HEI is a quality improvement tool, administered since 2007 by the Human Rights Campaign in collaboration with the Gay and Lesbian Medical Association, which benchmarks best practice and policy ensuring equitable treatment of LGBT patients and families. HEI is an online self-reporting survey of health care facilities' policies and practices related to LGBT patients and families; it is marketed as an indicator of an LGBT-positive health care environment. HEI surveys compliance with the Core Four criteria:

- Sexual orientation and gender identity must be included in patient rights and nondiscrimination policies, and the organization must notify the public of those policies;
- Organizations must have visitation policies that explicitly give LGBT families equal access and the same rights as all other families;
- Organizations must provide employee training on LGBT patient-centered care (Note: HEI provides this training via Webinar to participating facilities);
- Organizations must include sexual orientation and gender identity in equal employment opportunity policies.

Facilities must pass the Core Four requirements to receive "Leader" status from HEI. Leadership status is posted on HEI's Web site and may be noted by facilities on their Web sites and in their marketing materials.

The HEI survey serves as a unique benchmarking tool for identifying emerging best practices in LGBT patient-centered care and provides evidence of the facility's interest in serving LGBT Veterans, families, and friends. Further, the HEI standards support the delivery of culturally competent, equitable health care where respect for and understanding of the individuality of patients is essential to effective healing. In 2012, HEI had 122 participants representing 407 facilities in 32 states, with 71 receiving "Leader" status. The Madison Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center participated in the 2012 survey.

2. The PDUSH and the Deputy Under Secretary for Health for Operations and Management are encouraging each facility to participate in HEI. Creating a welcoming environment that allows all Veterans to recognize themselves in the policies, practices, clinical expertise, and culture of the facility helps to remove barriers so that LGBT Veterans can be confident that they will receive the high quality care they deserve.
3. The next online HEI survey becomes available in mid-October 2012, with a participation deadline of January 31, 2013. The official report of results will be issued in June 2013, featuring all facilities that have participated, and giving special "Leader" recognition to those that meet the survey's Core Four criteria referenced above.
4. Facilities interested in learning more or taking the survey are encouraged to avail themselves of the resources below.
 - Sign up for a "Why the HEI?" Webinar to learn more about taking the survey and LGBT health in general. Webinar dates are scheduled for 1:30-3:00 ET on July 19, August 16, and September 13. Registration for the Webinar and additional information is available at:
<http://www.hrc.org/resources/entry/why-the-healthcare-equality-index-webinar-registration>.
 - Request an invitation to the next survey:
<http://www.hrc.org/resources/entry/healthcare-equality-index-request-survey-invitation>.
 - Visit the Healthcare Equality Index online at www.hrc.org/hei or email hei@hrc.org to learn more.
5. Questions regarding VHA participation in HEI should be directed to Lisa Red, OHE Director of Cultural Competency & Communication, at Lisa.Red@va.gov.


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