Psychology Externship Program
VA Medical Center
Northport, New York

Michael F. Marino, Ph.D., Chief of Psychology

Amy I. Tal, Ph.D., Director of Training

Amy E. Scott, Psy.D., Assistant Director of Training

Updated June 2019

(this document is updated at least annually)
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Introduction

The Northport VAMC is located in Suffolk County, approximately 40 miles from midtown Manhattan. Opened in 1928 as a psychiatric hospital, the VA Medical Center at Northport was converted to a full service Medical Center in 1971. The Northport VAMC provides inpatient medical, surgical, and psychiatric treatment. There is also nursing home care and residential treatment for substance abuse and PTSD. Over 600,000 medical and psychiatric outpatient visits were made last year to the Medical Center and to its Community Based Outpatient Clinics throughout Long Island. The Northport VAMC is accredited by The Joint Commission and is a clinical campus of the School of Medicine at Stony Brook University. Several programs are accredited by The Commission on Accreditation for Rehabilitation Facilities.

Active duty service members and veterans who received an Honorable Discharge from the military are eligible to utilize the VA for their mental and physical health needs. There are approximately 79,000 veterans living in Suffolk County alone, and the Northport VAMC attracts many more veterans from throughout the New York metropolitan area. Over 29,000 veterans sought care at Northport VAMC within the last year. The veteran population reflects the demographics of the area and represents military service periods from WW II to today’s Global War on Terror. The population is therefore diverse in age, ethnic background, disability status, clinical presentation, and range of functioning. Since veterans often present with medical, psychiatric, and psychosocial needs the VA takes an integrated approach to care.

The Psychology Service at the Northport VA Medical Center is an autonomous service headed by a Chief, and includes 23 full-time and two part-time psychologists. The range of professional activities conducted is exceptionally wide. Generally, psychologists are members of multidisciplinary treatment teams and, in some cases, are directors of treatment programs. Staff members conduct psychological and neuropsychological assessments and provide psychotherapy and behavioral treatments. Psychologists also provide consultation to other health care providers.

Overview of the Externship

The Northport VA psychology service is committed to the professional development of its externs. Our mission is to provide clinical training that focuses on the advancement of skill in the delivery of psychotherapy and assessment, greater comfort in a multidisciplinary medical setting, and an increased confidence in the role of a culturally sensitive and ethically responsible psychologist. The externship program emphasizes service delivery in a nurturing atmosphere. Training is developmental in nature such that we consider each extern’s current level of mastery and ability to work autonomously in specific competency areas. For example, an extern who initially co-leads a group may later facilitate independently. Supervision likewise begins with direct observation and may culminate in a more consultative role.

Externs model the functions of a psychologist in the setting in which he/she is assigned. Depending on the track this may include participation in interdisciplinary meetings, the delivery of therapy, conducting intakes, the provision of evidence based treatments, assessment, crisis intervention, safety planning, consultation with other providers, and/ or documentation in the computerized medical record. Opportunities for therapeutic intervention may include neuropsychological assessment, short-term and long-term individual therapy, couples therapy, and process-oriented and psychoeducational group treatment. Attention to diversity and individual differences is integral to all training experiences.
Our psychologists are trained in a broad range of orientations including psychodynamic therapy, CBT, and third-wave models. The integration of science and practice is emphasized in all supervisory approaches. Training in evidence based protocols (EBPs) and skills, including Prolonged Exposure, CBT-Insomnia, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, Cognitive Processing Therapy, CBT-Depression, Motivational Interviewing, CBT-Pain, and Psychodynamic Psychotherapy, are offered at the beginning of the year. An extern may choose to participate in as many of these trainings as he/she wishes for didactic and/or clinical purposes. Externs may also elect to participate in the didactic seminars and/or our Multicultural Diversity Committee. Seminars cover material such as Psychopharmacology, Moral Injury, Violence Assessment, Military Culture, Early Career, and Couples Therapy.

We offer a range of tracks to choose from. A description of these opportunities is provided on the pages that follow. Externs have the option of supplementary clinical experiences. This may include an individual psychotherapy case from the outpatient mental health clinic (which is available to veterans of all service eras) or a psychotherapy group in a setting outside of your track.

We are happy to accept applications to our APA accredited internship program from our current and past externs. Information on our internship is available at http://www.northport.va.gov/docs/psychologyinternship.pdf.

Requirements

The training year begins the first week of August and ends the last week of May. A commitment of 16 hours per week is required. Typically the day begins at 8am and ends at 4:30pm. Specific days are individualized based on the extern's availability and the program's needs. Externs have off all Federal holidays and may take leave (not to exceed 8 days) with appropriate notice. Externs are expected to adhere to VA policy. An orientation to the VA and psychology service will occur the first week of externship. Externships are not funded positions.

Tracks

The following tracks are available. Please choose one or two tracks for consideration. Each track is a 2 day commitment. As noted above there are opportunities for supplementary clinical and didactic experiences.

1) Acute Units and Psychological Assessment

Acute Units

The Northport VA maintains two inpatient units which support the full range of acute psychological presenting problems. The program utilizes a combination of medication, psychotherapy, and a variety of recreational and psycho-educational activities to create a therapeutic program focused on stabilization and treatment planning for veterans in acute distress. The psychology program focuses on group psychotherapy and safety planning. Psychological therapies utilized are based on evidence-based therapies from a wide range of psychological orientations. The focus of psychotherapy on the units includes: helping to develop
veteran’s insight into own mental health diagnoses and/or patterns of functioning, enhancing motivation for mental health treatment, psycho-education about mental illness for both veterans and their families, safety planning for suicide, homicide, and substance use risks, and treatment planning for full range of psychological concerns. There is a substantial focus on substance use disorder recovery and suicide prevention. Each unit has a bed capacity for up to 21 residents and provides treatment to male and female veterans who are culturally and ethnically diverse with a wide range of ages. Veterans of all wars are eligible for treatment but the population is generally comprised of veterans who served during Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), and the Vietnam War.

Possible Clinical Activities: Externs have the opportunity to participate in staff meetings, co-lead both psychotherapy and psycho-education groups with supervising psychologist, provide brief individual psychotherapy, and learn to develop high quality assessments of and safety plans for suicide/homicide/domestic violence. Current psychotherapy groups focus on the treatment of substance abuse, posttraumatic symptoms, and mood disturbance. A large part of this rotational experience includes learning how to be a contributing part of a larger interdisciplinary team comprised of psychiatrists, nurses, social workers, nursing aids, peer support specialists, and recreational therapists.

Recommended year of training or experience: flexible

Days: Tuesdays or Fridays

Supervisor: Louis E. Mora, PhD

Psychological Assessment

Externs learn to develop skills in providing consultation to other health care providers around issues of differential diagnosis and in designing and administering an assessment battery that addresses a specific referral question. The majority of the referrals are for neuropsychological assessment, but externs may also conduct psychodiagnostic assessments. They will develop skills in selecting and administering assessment measures, and will learn to use findings to clarify an understanding of veterans’ mental functioning to aid in diagnostic determination, patient education and treatment planning. Externs are supervised in all aspects of the evaluation, including the clinical interview, administration and interpretation of appropriate test batteries, report writing and in providing meaningful feedback.

Possible clinical activities: Administration, interpretation, consultation, and report writing. Possible presenting problems include differential diagnosis, complaints of memory issues, and assessment of Traumatic Brain Injury. The assessment clinic receives consults from outpatient, residential, and inpatient settings.

Recommended year of training or experience: Externs need to have some basic assessment experience to participate in this rotation, including administration of intelligence measures (e.g., Wechsler instruments), as well as cognitive and personality measures. Externs should also have basic report writing experience. This rotation is a particularly good fit for those with a professional interest in this area.

Days: flexible, Mon or Fri work best

Supervisors: Mark Sandberg, PhD
2) **Community Living Center**

The Community Living Center (CLC) rotation will provide externs with the opportunity to work with older adults, mostly male, but some female veterans, residing at the Northport VA Medical Center. This population includes veterans of World War II, Korea, and increasingly, the Vietnam era. Residents present with varied psychiatric diagnoses, including PTSD, depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, personality disorders, substance use histories, and a wide variety of neurocognitive disorders, such as Alzheimer’s, vascular, Lewy Body, Frontotemporal, Creutzfeld-Jacobs, and Korsakoff’s syndrome. These residents often face significant comorbid medical problems, such as cardiac and respiratory conditions, diabetes, neurological disorders, and cancer.

Externs will serve as integral members of the interdisciplinary team working with physicians, nurse practitioners, nursing staff, social workers, chaplains, occupational and physical therapists, nutritionists, and recreation therapists. Externs will attend weekly behavior rounds, during which time the treatment team reviews and discusses residents’ challenging behaviors or mental health concerns. In addition to individual and group therapy, externs will have the opportunity to engage in behavioral management interventions, including creation and implementation of a Behavioral Treatment Plan, which involves an interdisciplinary approach to creating behavioral plans tailored to individual resident needs and goals.

Externs may also participate in STAR-VA (Staff Training in Assisted Living Residences) educational trainings offered to the CLC staff. STAR-VA is a nationwide, research based approach to addressing challenging behaviors of residents with dementia diagnoses. It involves teaching CLC staff effective, non-pharmacological methods to manage behaviors that interfere with the residents’ quality of life or the overall smooth functioning of the CLCs. The goal of STAR-VA interventions is to reduce the use of pharmacological interventions in treating challenging behaviors and improve the quality of life for residents and staff.

**Recommended year of training or experience:** flexible

**Days:** Must include a Tuesday and/or Wednesday to ensure participation in behavior rounds

**Supervisors:** Maureen Welsh, PhD; Amy Scott, PsyD; Lauren Fitzgerald, PsyD

3) **Dual Diagnosis Recovery Center**

The Dual Diagnosis Recovery Center is an evidence-based interdisciplinary outpatient treatment program that aims to improve the quality of life for veterans with co-occurring severe and persistent mental illness and active substance use disorders by integrating substance abuse services with traditional mental health care. The core philosophy of the DDRC rests on the principles of bio-psychosocial rehabilitation, combining pharmacological, psychological, educational, and social interventions to assist the veteran to stabilize his/her illness and when possible, to establish a meaningful role in the community. Interventions will be culturally sensitive, dignifying, and respectful of individuality. DDRC therapists endeavor to establish
therapeutic relationships with veterans that are free of power struggles, collaborative, draw upon existing strengths, and are focused on instilling hope.

**Possible clinical activities:** Externs participating in the DDRC rotation will be involved, under appropriate supervision, in the provision of group psychotherapy, group psychoeducation as well as individual psychotherapy cases when more intensive work is needed. Primary population treated will be OIF/OEF combat trauma with active substance use, some of whom will be legally mandated to treatment. Students will also have the opportunity to work with a wider cross section of clients in DDRC in the psychoeducation classes. Psychoeducation may include opportunities such as Relapse Prevention, Anger Management, Pain Management, STAIR, Seeking Safety, and Dialectical Behavior Therapy. Crisis intervention skills will also be developed as frequent risk assessments will be conducted on clients to determine if a higher level of care is warranted given veteran’s fast changing presentations that can accompany active substance use. Possible opportunities depending on the needs of the client may involve accompanying veteran to emergency room if inpatient admission is appropriate, consulting and collaborating with inpatient and outpatient IDT teams to facilitate treatment, and providing informal support to family members regarding veteran’s current struggles. Telephone assessment and crisis support when needed will also be done. In these calls the focus will be placed on assessment of safety, and when appropriate contacting police if a wellness check is deemed necessary. Externs will also be involved in chart review, screening, intakes, and treatment planning as appropriate.

**Recommended year of training or experience by start of externship:** 3rd year and above

**Days:** Flexible Schedule: Monday, Tuesday, Thursday are primary group days (Minimum of 2 days required)

**Supervisor:** Tracy French, PsyD

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4) **Iraq and Afghanistan Wars Readjustment Program**

This program is geared to addressing the mental health needs of those who have served in the Iraq and Afghanistan war zones. It emphasizes making mental health services accessible to active duty military personnel and to veterans. In this year-long training experience, externs do initial interviews and provide individual psychoanalytic psychotherapy consistent with the evidence-based practice of psychotherapy. The therapy model is based on principles of psychotherapy that can guide the practice of therapy for the range of DSM diagnoses. PTSD is a frequent presenting problem in this clinic. However, since about 80% of PTSD cases involve co-morbidity with such other diagnoses as substance use disorders, depression, generalized anxiety disorder, and personality disorders, our focus is on preparing externs to address such co-morbidity in their practice of psychotherapy for trauma-related conditions. Weekly individual supervision is provided. Externs also participate in supervision in a group format, which includes interns and post-doctoral fellows in addition to externs, on a weekly basis. The open-dialogue model of supervision is intended to encourage open, mutual, detailed discussion of participants’ psychotherapy cases with a focus on their use of core elements of effective psychotherapy. This model allows participants the opportunity to benefit from, in addition to discussion of their own
work, the discussion of the work of their fellow participants. It also allows for participants’ furthering their supervisory skills, as they collaboratively facilitate the process of group members’ open dialogue about their work. The groups’ co-supervisors will provide readings on theory, research, and practice related to issues addressed in the course of supervision.

Case Load: 8-10 individuals

Group Supervision: 1.5 hours

Individual Supervision: 1 hour

Recommended year of training or experience: Preferably at least a year of supervised psychotherapy training

Days: Fridays are mandatory (for supervision); second day flexible

Supervisors: Stephen Long, PhD; Melody Millando-Wirtenson, PhD

5) Primary Care – Mental Health Integration (PC-MHI) and Mental Health Clinic (MHC)

PC-MHI staff and trainees work collaboratively with the medical teams in the Primary Care (PC) clinics. The medical teams in PC provide comprehensive outpatient medical services to over 16,000 veterans annually. The teams work in a medical home model, known in the VA as Patient Aligned Care Teams (PACTs). PC-MHI is considered an extension of the PACT. Social workers, nutritionists, and pharmacists also serve as extended team members. PC-MHI externs work in the PC clinics alongside the PACTs and other extended team members. Veterans present with a range of psychopathology such that interventions may be focused on treatment of a clinical condition or the behavioral intervention of a medical problem. Same day access to care and an active environment allows ample opportunity for consultation. Embedded in PC-MHI clinic and in collaboration with preventative medicine are the Stress Reduction Program that teaches veterans Mindfulness Meditation to better manage stress, pain and illness and the CBT for Chronic Pain program which teaches veterans better management of chronic pain.

The MHC is open to all veterans seeking mental health services. The population of patients presenting to MHC are therefore quite varied, including the full range of psychopathology and life cycle related issues.

Possible clinical activities: Externs spend 1.5 days in PC-MHI providing short-term focused individual psychotherapy utilizing evidence based approaches such as motivational interviewing and cognitive-behavioral approaches (e.g., CBT-I, CBT-pain). Training in EBPs will be provided at the start of the year.

Externs will also conduct initial and same day assessments in consultation with the PACTs. Externs may also participate in Mindfulness for Stress Reduction, the MOVE! weight management group, the Pain Management group, and/or the Smoking Cessation Program. Opportunities for participation in program evaluation are also available.
Externs spend .5 day in the MHC conducting intakes, delivering longer-term individual psychotherapy, and assisting with all aspects of treatment planning. Given the range of presentations, externs tailor the treatment to the needs of the individual. This may include psychodynamic, CBT, or third wave approaches. Referrals for complex personality cases and couples work may also be available.

**Recommended year of training or experience by start of externship:** 3rd year and above

**Days:** Thursdays are required to allow for participation in the PC-MHI interdisciplinary team (IDT) meeting, which includes all PC-MHI staff (psychologists, psychiatrist, care managers), psychology and psychiatry fellows, psychology interns, PC-MHI extern, and the Health Behavior Coordinator. The IDT meeting is used for case presentations, clinical discussions, and the disposition of cases for treatment. The second day is flexible, however Tuesdays are preferred so that externs might participate in the Stress Reduction clinic. Participation on other Health Promotion programs is also possible on other days and can include Tobacco Cessation, Weight management, Diabetes support, Pain management, and our Wellness Clinic.

**Supervisors:** Deirdra Frum- Vassallo, PsyD Nyasanu Barbee, PhD; Joanne Taylor, PhD; Mathew Williams, PhD

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6) **Psychosocial Rehabilitation Recovery Center and Mental Health Clinic**

The PRRC is an outpatient program for veterans who are diagnosed with a serious and persistent mental illness. This includes diagnoses such as MDD, Schizophrenia, PTSD, Bipolar Disorder, etc. Veterans who attend PRRC represent a broad range of functioning levels, from veterans who reside in supportive housing to veterans who are independent in all domains. The program is based upon the Recovery Model and is managed by a psychologist. The PRRC provides a structured, supportive environment within which veterans can develop the skills and confidence necessary to live satisfying lives and to function successfully in the community. It empowers veterans to take control of their lives by becoming actively involved in their recovery, in the program itself, and in the outside community. The multidisciplinary treatment team includes staff from Psychology, Social Work, Nursing, Recreation, and Vocational Rehabilitation. Peer support technicians are also on the staff and offer a unique perspective for our veterans. Therapeutic activities include intensive process oriented psychotherapy groups, psycho-educational/skills groups, recreation/socialization groups and self-help activities. Veterans are scheduled to attend the program from one to five days per week depending on their needs as determined collaboratively by the treatment team and veteran.

The MHC is open to all veterans seeking mental health services. The population of patients presenting to MHC are therefore quite varied, including the full range of psychopathology and life cycle related issues. evaluation are also available.
Possible clinical activities: In PRRC Externs may attend community and staff meetings, lead and co-lead groups, and participate fully in treatment planning and implementation. Group opportunities include mood disorder and PTSD process groups, Holistic Health, Coping with PTSD, Positive Thinking (CBT-D), ACT, CBT-I Cessation, Mindfulness Meditation, and Weight Management. We welcome extern initiative in the development of new groups. When requested by veterans there are opportunities to provide brief individual evidence based interventions.

Externs also have the option of gaining experience in an administrative role by assisting the director of PRRC and/or the director of training with the functioning of these programs.

Externs spend .5 day in the MHC delivering individual psychotherapy, and assisting with all aspects of treatment planning. Given the range of presentations, externs tailor the treatment to the needs of the individual. This may include psychodynamic, CBT, or third wave approaches. Referrals for complex personality cases and couples work may also be available.

Recommended year of training or experience: flexible

Days: T, W Th, F; T allows for process group

Supervisors: Margaret Rayne, PsyD; Amy Tal, PhD

7) Substance Abuse Residential Rehabilitation Treatment Program

The SARRTP is a residential treatment program for veterans with a substance use disorder who would benefit from a structured and therapeutic environment. In addition to substance dependence the residents typically receive treatment for co-occurring medical and/or psychiatric issues. The 30 residents participate in substance abuse treatment, vocational rehabilitation and self-help groups. Externs function as members of a multidisciplinary team, which includes staff from Psychology, Vocational Rehabilitation, Social Work, Nursing, and Recreation. Externs who participate in the SARRTP rotation gain experience in complex case conceptualization. Additionally, externs enhance skills through conducting a bio-psycho-social assessment and an individualized treatment plan for each assigned resident on the extern’s caseload.

Possible clinical activities: Externs participate in group therapy, individual therapy, community meetings and staff meetings. They lead (both independently and in co-therapy) psychoeducational groups including Anger Management, Money Management and possibly Relapse Prevention, Health and Wellness or Positive Relationship Skills. Externs also serve as primary therapists by providing individual psychotherapy to up to four SARRTP residents at any given time.

Recommended year of training or experience: flexible
**Days:** Of the two days for this rotation, Thursday is mandatory. For the second day, Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday are preferred.

**Supervisors:** Michelle Castellano, PhD; Janet Eschen, PhD; Erin Kode, PsyD; Marc Shulman, PhD

**Eligibility**
To be eligible for externship placement

- an extern must be in good standing at an APA or CPA accredited doctoral program in psychology
- Applicants must be US citizens
- The Federal Government requires that all male US citizens who are 18 through 25, register with Selective Service, or provide a Status Information Letter
- To comply with federal and VA rules and provide interns with liability protection, a current and valid Affiliation Agreement between VA and the sponsoring doctoral program must be on file before the intern can be appointed. Most APA-approved doctoral programs already have an agreement on file.
- VA training occurs in a health setting. The university will receive a Trainee Qualifications and Credentials Verification Letter which confirms interns are enrolled in the university, have met physical requirements of the university, and meet VA health requirements. For the purpose of VA health requirements, trainees are expected to provide verification to their university TDs of hepatitis B vaccination (or signed declination waiver), and tuberculosis screening. Maintaining a current flu vaccination, or taking preventative measure to limit patient exposure to the flu, will be required during the training year.

**Application Process**

Please email or mail:

a) a cover letter specifying **up to two tracks** of interest (if you express interest in two tracks you may be invited to interview for one or both)

b) a CV

c) two letters of recommendation

Mail:

Amy I. Tal, Ph.D.
Northport VAMC
116B
79 Middleville Rd.
Northport, NY 11768

Email: Amyllene.Tal@va.gov

Phone: (631) 261-4400 ext. 5805

*The Northport VAMC externship program adheres to the application guidelines outlined by PSYDNYS.*