

## **20 Years: A History of the VA Psychology Leadership Conference<sup>1</sup>**

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### Commemorating the VA Psychology Leadership Conferences

Before I give you my prepared comments on the 20 years of history of the VA Psychology Leadership Conferences, I also would like to add my welcome to this 20<sup>th</sup> conference. I will later add more information on what I believe is the historical significant of these annual meetings but can initially say that these conferences have created a sense of community within VA psychology that took us from a demoralized low point in VA psychology history to the current energized and focused group of psychology leaders that is represented in today's audience.

To commemorate this special occasion, we have also invited many past VA psychology leaders to celebrate with us, many of whom are retired, and who are invested in helping us recognize the role that the conferences have played in helping to create this community. Those with us today include 16 past presidents of either the Association of VA Chief Psychologists or its successor, the Association of VA Psychologist Leaders. I will also note that these past presidents have agreed to meet with conference attendees in a conversation hour later this morning and again this afternoon in one of the four optional breakout sessions scheduled in today's program, and their names and years as president are listed in a special handout in your registration packet. We additionally have two psychology leaders present who were chairs of the VA Section of Division 18 and served on prior conference planning committees.

It is also appropriate that these leaders are here today to celebrate this 20<sup>th</sup> birthday with us in that these leaders are also beginning to anticipate their own anniversaries this fall. With the

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upcoming APA meeting, the chief's association and the association of psychology leaders will be commemorating 40 years of service to VA leaders, and the VA Section of Division 18 became the third section formed within Division 18 in 1977 and will similarly be celebrating 40 years of leadership for VA psychology within APA. I will also note that APA, who has co-sponsored all of the conferences with the association, is celebrating its 125<sup>th</sup> birthday this year.

### Introduction to Conference History

As we begin our celebration of 20 years of VA Psychology Leadership Conferences, this history will briefly describe what led up to the need and planning for the first conference, note what happened in the first conferences, outline the planning strategies leading to the conference successes, and provide a sampling of highlights of past conferences through 2016. I will additionally offer some historian comments about the value of the conferences in my summary.

Many will credit the need for the first leadership conference, fondly referred to as Dallas I, to the events that led to the loss of psychology staff and the chief of psychology position at many medical centers starting in 1995. History notes, however, that the 10-year period prior to those re-organization years set the stage for those post 1995 events. In 1985, the country was experiencing a fiscal crisis that led to many proposals to cut government costs by decreasing the number of GS-11 to 15 grade management positions in government programs, including the VA. And in 1994, just prior to the proliferation of product lines, VA psychology was also faced with one proposal to downsize psychology service staff up to 50% by contracting out psychology services.

From 1984 to 1987, 8% of VA psychology doctoral positions were lost. But VA psychology successfully argued that psychological services would be much more costly if contracted out, and the proposed 50% cut in psychology staffing in 1994 died a well-deserved death.

In 1995, however, support was given to medical center directors to experiment with new organizational models to improve efficiency and reduce costs. In mental health, one favorite model was that of creating product or service lines. In mental health, service lines could combine psychology and psychiatry services into one unit with a single leader, more often than not a psychiatrist. Over half of the medical center directors chose to use that model with the loss of many independent psychology services and chief of psychology positions. New supervisory positions replaced a chief of psychology position with titles ranging from lead psychologist to supervisory psychologist to senior psychologist. Those new positions still had discipline-specific responsibilities such as evaluating candidates for psychology positions, administering the psychology training program, and recommending psychologists' medical center privileges, but the morale of VA psychologists at the time was not very good, especially following the loss of grades and staffing cuts from 1985 to 1994.

From January 1995 to March 1997, VA psychology lost another 145 doctoral psychology staff positions. A survey of doctoral staff in 1997 by the National Organization of VA Psychologists indicated that 81% of its members noted a worsening of morale among psychology staff with re-organizations affecting the practice of psychology at all but a minority of medical centers. Prior to 1995, virtually all medical centers employing psychologists had an independent service headed by a chief of psychology. During the next several years, that number had dropped to 38%.

It was also at this time of loss of psychology chief positions and the impact of the reorganizations that Russell Lemle, chief of psychology at the San Francisco VA, saw the need for psychology to become more proactive in responding to these issues. He wanted to find a way to bring psychology leaders together across the country to create a new vision for the future of VA psychology. In 1997, Lemle contacted Christine LaGana, a former president of the chief's association and, at the time,

acting deputy director of mental health in VA Central Office. LaGana agreed with Lemle's assessment and goals. She suggested that they meet with incoming AVAPL president Bob Gresen during the APA convention in Chicago. They decided to seek the partnership of Randy Phelps in the APA Practice Directorate. Phelps readily agreed to help, and they began planning a VA psychology leadership conference to be jointly sponsored by both the association and APA. Lemle, Phelps, and Gresen agreed to serve as the planning committee for the conference.

Also in 1997, the Association of VA Chief Psychologists proposed, and membership approved, a reorganization to expand its membership to all psychology leaders, regardless of title, and to rename itself the Association of VA Psychologist Leaders or AVAPL. Its leaders saw the proposed leadership conference as an excellent idea to energize former and new members, and a letter of invitation for VA psychology leaders to attend a January 1998 leadership conference and become proactive in shaping the future of psychology was included in the November 1997 AVAPL newsletter. The invitation letter was signed by both Russ Newman of the APA Practice Directorate and Bob Gresen as president of AVAPL.

#### The Role of the Conferences in Shaping the Future of VA Psychology

Ninety (90) VA psychology leaders from some 50 medical centers and VA Central Office attended that first two-day conference with presentations and panel discussions held on the first day focusing on problems and recommendations for psychology leadership. Formal and informal discussions by attendees that first day, however, frequently included widespread complaints about their inability to fill vacant positions and not having a voice in psychology activities at their medical centers, and a number of attendees were those who had already lost their psychology chief positions. The first day could have been called, and was so described by some, more of a wake for the demise of VA psychology than a leadership conference.

In their planning sessions for the conference, however, Lemle, Phelps, and Gresen insisted that the second day be devoted to brain-storming ideas and developing action plans to promote psychologists as leaders and value-added providers in the new VA. Seven task groups were established during the second day of the conference to develop the most promising ideas. These included work groups on pursuing management credentials, identifying specific competencies that psychology leaders needed, and promoting advanced training opportunities for psychology leaders interested in management careers.

The successes and activities of the first leadership conference were remarkable and deserve a special comment in this history. Universal reports describing the low morale of attendees on the first day were replaced by the end of day two with a sense of cautious optimism. The discussions and beginning work of the seven task groups formed on day two are arguably described in this history as the most critical point of the first conference. The task groups gave participants the opportunity to focus their energy on solutions rather than problems.

Planning for a second leadership conference in 1999 began almost immediately after the first conference with Russell Lemle again serving as chair of the planning committee with an expanded planning committee membership that also included Randy Phelps continuing to represent APA and the Practice Directorate. The planners were highly motivated to repeat the successes of the first conference—and they did. In his closing remarks for the second conference, Bob Gresen noted how VA psychology had overcome a lack of confidence with a “can-do” attitude.

With the second successful conference, most understood that the first conference was not a fluke, and the third conference was now being awaited by many who wanted to learn from, get involved, and help shape their future. The third conference featured the formation and beginning

functioning of special interest groups ranging from psychology training to research to administrative leadership to advocacy.

The success of the leadership conferences was in part due to involving top APA leadership and key Central Office officials as keynote speakers. The first and second conferences had immediate past APA president Norman Abeles giving keynote presentations. In the first conference, Abeles' keynote address was titled "APA and VA Psychology: A Critical Partnership." His presence at both conferences demonstrated APA's interest in what was happening in the VA and the value in what VA psychology leaders were trying to accomplish. As APA president-elect, Norine Johnson presented a keynote address at the third conference and did so again for the fourth conference in her APA president's role. Ray Fowler, the CEO of APA, spoke at the fifth conference, and succeeding planning committees were able to have an APA president-elect, president, or past president as a keynote speaker at all following conferences. That link with APA will be met tomorrow when Anthony Puente addresses the group in his role as APA president for 2017.

Emboldened by its success in involving top APA leaders in the conference as keynote speakers, the planning committee decided to invite Kenneth Kizer, the under secretary for health in the VA, to give a keynote address at the second conference. Many considered Kizer a nemesis for VA psychology in that it was his responsibility for designing a new healthcare reform role for the VA that permitted the product line re-organizations that resulted in the loss of independent psychology services, and there was some doubt he would accept the invitation.

To the surprise of the planning committee, however, Kizer accepted the keynote speaker invitation and, in addition to his prepared remarks, had a lengthy open question and answer session with attendees that frankly laid out his thoughts about the changes being made in the VA.

He addressed all questions given him on a wide range of topics that included long-term care, reductions in force, the possibility of facility closures, and training affiliations. The highlight of his presence at the conference, however, was his distribution of a directive he had signed the day before he came to the conference. That directive established VA policy to hire the most qualified individuals for key integrated mental health leadership positions regardless of professional discipline. The attendees applauded the directive that would help insure that psychologists would be included for product and service line recruitment in the field.

Kizer's replacement, Thomas Garthwaite, gave a keynote presentation at the third conference, and Anthony Principi, the VA secretary, gave a keynote address at the fourth conference. With few exceptions, a high ranking VA official has been a keynote speaker for succeeding conferences.

Another formula for success adopted by all six conference chairs and planning committees was the establishment of a theme for each conference with keynote speakers and other presenters or panel presentations addressing the theme. The themes clearly announced what issues the conference would address and the themes were selected to help attendees understand and respond to current issues facing them and their medical centers. Over the years, these themes ranged from improving outcomes, new models of health care, expanding partnerships to enhance veterans' health care, the evolving veterans' health care system, new directions and technologies for care, and timely access for new veterans seeking care in the VA. The theme of this year's conference is engaging partners in shaping the future of VA integrated care.

It can parenthetically be noted that the theme focus would also be an issue of special interest to key Central Office officials who saw the conference dealing with topics worthy of their attention—and input—and likely increased an acceptance response from those who were invited.

Many VACO officials who accepted keynote invitations were impressed with the conferences in the way psychology leaders were dealing with the top issues of the day for the organization.

A noted example of the impression that the conferences made on VACO keynote speakers was the eighth conference in 2005, now with June Malone as conference planning chair. VA Deputy Under Secretary Gordon Mansfield not only made his keynote address but asked to be provided with the recommendations that came out of the conference. Seven topics and 10 recommendations were forwarded to him by the three co-sponsors of the conference represented by AVAPL president Terence Keane, Russ Newman for the APA Practice Directorate, and Robert Goldberg, president of Division 18. Mansfield thanked them for their response in a return letter and added a fact sheet describing the VA's position and progress regarding each of the 10 recommendations sent him.

The conference steadily grew in attendance over the years and, with Lisa Kearney as the third conference planning chair, attendance for the 2011 conference topped 200 for the first time. By 2011, the fortunes for VA psychology had begun a reversal with an impressive growth of mental health staffing and programs.

From 1995 to 2000, there were virtually no psychologists being hired in the VA. In 2005, there were 1500 VA psychologists providing clinical services to veterans. Today there are around 5300, more than a three-fold increase in the past 11 years. That turn-around could easily be laid at the feet of the leadership conferences and what psychology leaders were doing after 2005.

It can also be noted that with 200 participants, the conference had by 2011 established its importance and had become the largest annual assembly of VA psychologists. Conference

attendance figures, in fact, exceeded VA psychologist attendance at the AVAPL and VACO mental health meetings at virtually every annual APA meeting since 1998.

Another remarkable feature of the conferences was the large number of presentations made by AVAPL members and VA psychology leaders in the field themselves who shared ideas and best practices with attendees. Typical of the latter conferences was that of the 2013 leadership conference with Manny Garcia as the fourth conference planning chair. Again with 200 attendees, the conference featured a theme of welcoming veterans home from the OEF and OIF conflict in the middle east with a focus on reintegration and recovery, and 25 presenters contributed to the learning objectives.

Still another important feature of later conferences was the efficient use of optional break-out sessions giving attendees choices of different learning sessions to attend. The report by Sam Wan, the fifth conference planning chair for the 2015 leadership conference noted that over 200 participants heard presentations from 40 speakers addressing the conference theme of advancing high quality health care and timely access for veterans. Concurrent training sessions at that conference, often by a panel of speakers, allowed attendees to choose from sessions on resilience in the face of rapid change, women in leadership, technology and access, and lethal means safety to reduce suicide risk.

The conferences were also used to offer optional CE workshops for attendees, usually after the formal conference ended. The 2015 conference won the APA Board of Education Affairs (BEA) Award in Support of Conferences and Workshops in Graduate and Postgraduate Education and Training in Psychology. Based on a competitive process, the award recognized the importance that VA psychology placed on excellence in education and training at the conference.

The sixth conference planning chair, Ameer Patel, noted in her report that there were 180 attendees and 30 speakers focusing on the 2016 conference theme “VA Psychology: Strengthening Partnerships, Building the Future.” A highlight of that conference was a presentation on the changing

national policy environment which alerted attendees to the need to pay attention to attempts to privatize the VA system, the latest challenge facing the VA and VA psychology leaders. This 2017 conference will feature presentations and updates on that challenge.

### Summary Comments

In beginning my summary comments, I would expect that the worth of the conferences was evident in describing its beginning with a sampling of subsequent conference highlights, but I would argue that the true value of the conferences was established with the first conference in re-discovering and developing a model of working together to shape the future of VA psychology. VA psychology and its leaders would—and will—still be faced with problems in the future, but the seed for discovery of ways to respond to those problems had been planted in the early conferences and was nourished and sustained in succeeding conferences.

Equally important was that the conferences created a re-energized sense of community within VA psychology. Pride replaced disillusionment and disappointment—and advocacy for the profession and the care of veterans replaced inadequacy in responding to the forces interfering with the mission and values of VA psychologists.

My summary comments must also acknowledge that the history of the contribution of events such as the conferences is underwritten by the actions and attention of people who deserve recognition. For the leadership conferences, I would begin with those early leaders of the Association for VA Chief Psychologists who in fact established the association 40 years ago based on the principle that we could do more by working together on problems and finding ways to better meet the needs of the profession and the veterans we serve. In their decision to sponsor the leadership conferences, the leaders of AVAPL gave renewal to and a sense of importance to that principle. The leadership of APA and the Practice Directorate need to be added to the list in their recognition of the importance of the conference and their decision to step forward in co-

sponsoring the conferences. They provided financial and logistic support as well as critical planning leadership represented by Randy Phelps from the Practice Directorate. Phelps served on over half of the conference planning committees with Heather O'Beirne Kelly assuming that planning role when Randy's responsibilities at APA changed. The decision by the leadership of the VA Section of Division 18 in 2005 to join the conference as a co-sponsor was important not only for planning support but also for additionally extending the VA psychology community involvement and investment in the conference.

Also deserving of recognition are the six conference planning chairs noted in this presentation, together with their planning committees, who volunteered and invested countless hours and creativity in numerous meetings and conference calls in developing the conferences. In addition, an estimated 200 different speakers at the 20 conferences from psychology leaders and Central Office were willing to share new ideas and best practices with attendees, many of these speakers with multiple presentations at future conferences. Of special note was Patrick DeLeon, a former VA trainee, a past APA president, a long-time supporter of VA psychology, and the inspiration for the conference advocacy award named after him as first recipient. Pat DeLeon was a speaker at conference programs more times than any other person before his retirement.

In concluding my celebratory history comments, there is yet another group not to be overlooked that added to the success of the conference, and that includes the hundreds of psychology leaders, early career psychologists, interns and post-docs who attended the conferences. Without their investment of time, energy, and for many their personal funding to attend the conference, there would be no audience. Without their interest, willingness to learn and seek new ways to expand their ability to serve our veterans and the profession, there would

be no purpose to the conference. And as conference attendees today, you are supporting that purpose—and I congratulate you.

Finally, the success and even the existence of the conference might not have been possible without the vision, leadership, and passion of Russell Lemle who has served on all 20 of the conference planning committees. I include our thanks to his family for lending him to us for the countless hours and effort he has devoted to making these conferences a success. Thank you, Russell.