

# Make the Connection

## FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The materials designed to raise awareness of the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA's) Make the Connection (MTC) campaign constitute one of four federally funded mental health public awareness campaigns that RAND is evaluating as part of a cross-agency evaluation (funded by the Department of Defense Psychological Health Center of Excellence) aimed at improving the mental health of service members and veterans. A cross-agency evaluation report describes the campaigns' overlapping and unique scope and content, as well as cross-campaign dissemination efforts. Based on the cross-agency evaluation report, this brief about MTC awareness materials is one in a series examining the individual campaigns' messages, the consistency of messaging in their materials, and the tools they use to deliver content to their audiences. Because the results presented here are from an evaluation of the four campaigns' collective reach and impact, they are not intended to serve as a full and comprehensive evaluation of MTC. It should also be noted that this evaluation focuses on the materials designed to raise awareness of MTC and not on the functioning or operations of the campaign itself.

### FINDINGS

The following are some key findings about MTC from the RAND research team's content analysis of campaign materials, an analysis of campaign-collected communication metrics, and a panel of experts who assessed the extent to which MTC's content and design align with best practices for mental health public awareness campaigns.

#### MAKE THE CONNECTION CONTENT REFLECTS THE TARGET AUDIENCE

Of the 745 pieces of MTC content reviewed, 77 percent was aimed at veterans, and 11 percent was aimed at families of veterans. MTC's materials portrayed more veterans from pre-2001 eras than most other campaigns in the evaluation.

#### ABOUT MAKE THE CONNECTION

MTC is a VA public awareness campaign designed to promote mental health to veterans and their support networks through education and outreach and to motivate veterans with mental health needs to seek help. Launched in 2011, MTC focuses on personal testimonials from veterans that describe their help-seeking experiences, emphasizing recovery and conveying positive treatment outcomes. MTC's key messages involve leveraging peer-to-peer influence among veterans to normalize seeking treatment and conveying that recovery is possible and treatment works. Its website offers more than 600 videos of veterans and loved ones describing recovery, as well as e-books, mental health self-assessment tools, links to a mobile app for mental health, and search tools to locate local mental health resources. The campaign also gets its message out through television and radio advertisements, social media, national conference participation, and health care organizations.

## THE CAMPAIGN'S CONTENT FOLLOWS BEST PRACTICES

MTC's materials generally adhered to best practices for mental health public awareness campaign design and dissemination. The panel of experts also indicated that MTC used credible messengers in pictures and videos and portrayed people with mental health challenges as positive role models.

## MAKE THE CONNECTION GENERALLY STAYS ON MESSAGE

Almost 60 percent of MTC's materials supported its campaign messages, and its materials aligned closely with the messaging of the three other public awareness campaigns we reviewed—particularly with the Real Warriors Campaign, which also creates video testimonials about recovery. MTC content spoke mostly about mental health issues (79 percent) and substance use issues (28 percent). A small amount of content explicitly targeted its secondary audiences: 11 percent of materials were aimed at veterans' families, and less than 1 percent were aimed at health professionals.

## MAKE THE CONNECTION MATERIALS DO NOT IDENTIFY INFORMATION SOURCES

None of MTC's content clearly identified the source of the information. MTC reports that omitting citations is intended to make materials more accessible and appealing, but this design choice could make it difficult for users to judge credibility or seek out more information.

## THE CAMPAIGN RELIES HEAVILY ON VIDEO TESTIMONIALS

Because of MTC's emphasis on tailored video testimonials, 81 percent of veteran-targeted campaign content was video.

## MAKE THE CONNECTION HAD BY FAR THE MOST WEBSITE SESSIONS

The website played host to nearly 3 million sessions in 2014 and 2015, compared with 1.3 million for the other three

campaigns combined. In addition, the number of website sessions increased 59 percent from 2012 to 2015.

## ITS MATERIALS OFFER INDIRECT LINKS TO MENTAL HEALTH CARE

MTC's materials provide links to care locator services. As a way to build trust and protect anonymity, the campaign does not collect users' information. However, only 8 percent of its materials provide a direct connection to care (e.g., phone line, live chat line, direct connection to a medical center).

## MAKE THE CONNECTION HAS SIGNIFICANT SOCIAL MEDIA INTERACTION

MTC averaged 17 Facebook posts per month—the least of the three campaigns that use social media—but generated the most interactions (9.5 million likes, comments, and shares) in 2015. MTC's YouTube videos have been viewed 2.6 million times, and MTC provided more than 95 percent of the campaigns' collective Facebook fans and YouTube views. MTC does not maintain a dedicated Twitter handle.



**9.5 MILLION**

LIKES, COMMENTS, AND SHARES WERE GENERATED BY FACEBOOK POSTS IN 2015

## ITS PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENTS REACH A RELATIVELY SMALL AUDIENCE

MTC aired 11,725 radio and 39,135 television public service announcements in 2015, for a combined 422 million impressions (the number of audience members who might have been exposed to the announcement). That is a fraction of the 42.9 billion impressions for the four campaigns combined.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The experts recommended several approaches to improve the MTC campaign. See the full report (available at [www.rand.org/t/RR1612](http://www.rand.org/t/RR1612)) for a complete list of recommendations based on the cross-campaign analysis.

- **CONSIDER** coordinating dissemination strategies with the Real Warriors Campaign.
- **DEVELOP** more content for secondary audiences, or consider whether to serve fewer audiences and develop richer content for the main target audience of service members and veterans.
- **DETERMINE** whether more materials should cite the source of information.
- **CONSIDER** developing a Twitter presence to further engage on social media.
- **SPECIFY** the level of anonymity or confidentiality guaranteed by self-assessment and direct connections to mental health care.

This brief describes work done in the RAND National Defense Research Institute and documented in *Cross-Agency Evaluation of DoD, VA, and HHS Mental Health Public Awareness Campaigns: Analysis of Campaign Scope, Content, and Reach*, by Joie D. Acosta, Jennifer L. Cerully, Eunice C. Wong, Elizabeth L. Petrun Sayers, Mikhail Zaydman, Lisa S. Meredith, Ilana Blum, Nupur Nanda, Terri Tanielian, Rachel Ross, and Asa Wilks, RR-1612-OSD, 2020 (available at [www.rand.org/t/RR1612](http://www.rand.org/t/RR1612)). To view this brief online, visit [www.rand.org/t/RB10007z2](http://www.rand.org/t/RB10007z2). The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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