Regardless of the tradeoffs of this new virtual reality, it can alleviate equity based challenges

WHY IS THIS RESEARCH IMPORTANT?

- The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on how researchers and professionals were able to work, collaborate, and engage in opportunities to deliver and participate in continuing education.
- The COVID 19 pandemic challenged researchers and providers to develop professional conferences where participants could adequately engage with the content and one another, while also acquiring needed continuing education.
- Offering virtual conferences reduced typical barriers and created opportunities for sustained engagement and learning, as recordings can be distributed after the fact, while also alleviating some of the equity-based challenges tied to attending in-person conferences.
- Academic and scientific conferences play an important role particularly for military and veteran-focused research and practice because there is a need for multisector collaboration.

WHO WAS INVOLVED AND HOW WAS THE RESEARCH CONDUCTED?

- In March 2020, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, local, state, and national officials announced new restrictions on large group gatherings. Despite initial plans to postpone a planned in-person event to later in the year, due to the uncertain nature of the outbreak and local restrictions, it was determined that a virtual conference was the most realistic, safe, and accessible option.
- Participants included 274 VA providers and researchers, 204 DoD providers and researchers, 53 students, and 269 community providers, academics and other stakeholders.
- Conference planners promoted cross sector and interdisciplinary dialogue, supported delivery of virtual poster sessions, and replicated networking opportunities typical in in-person conference settings.
- The pivot to a virtual conference led organizers to extend the conference by one day making it three days and incorporated breakout rooms, interactive polls, and Q&A sessions.
- 80 percent of conference attendees completed the post-conference surveys.

WHAT DID WE FIND?

- Virtual conferences have great value in expanding accessibility and inclusivity to professionals who may be unable to easily attend cost prohibitive in-person conferences.
- Survey respondents found the conference to be beneficial to their professional development (94%), gained new knowledge that could be used in their work (93%), and felt there were adequate engagement opportunities (81%).
- A majority of respondents would attend the conference again if offered virtually (88%) compared to those who would attend if offered in-person (80%).

ACTION STEPS

- Record presentations for more people to access over time.
- Give sufficient breaks and be mindful of the schedule length each day to avoid screen fatigue.
- Integrate creative virtual engagement tools, while also focusing on quality over quantity.