

Integrating a Holistic Health Approach into Agriculture Education: An Innovative Model for Navigating the Transition from Military to Civilian Life

Introduction/Need for the Project

Farmer veterans are military veterans who have transitioned from active military service to farming as their occupation, combining a population at high risk of suicide with a high-stress occupation. Farmer veterans may be vulnerable to risk factors associated with each group.

Risks for suicide among military veterans include factors such as:

- Homelessness
- Relationship strain
- Grief
- First 12 months of transition seem to be a particularly difficult (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2022)

Farmers and farm family members experience stress, anxiety, and depression among farm family members as it relates to farming:

- Production (e.g., extreme weather events, market volatility, and government regulations)relationship strain
- Isolation
- Physical health issues

(Marcom, 2018; Miller & Rudolphi, 2022)

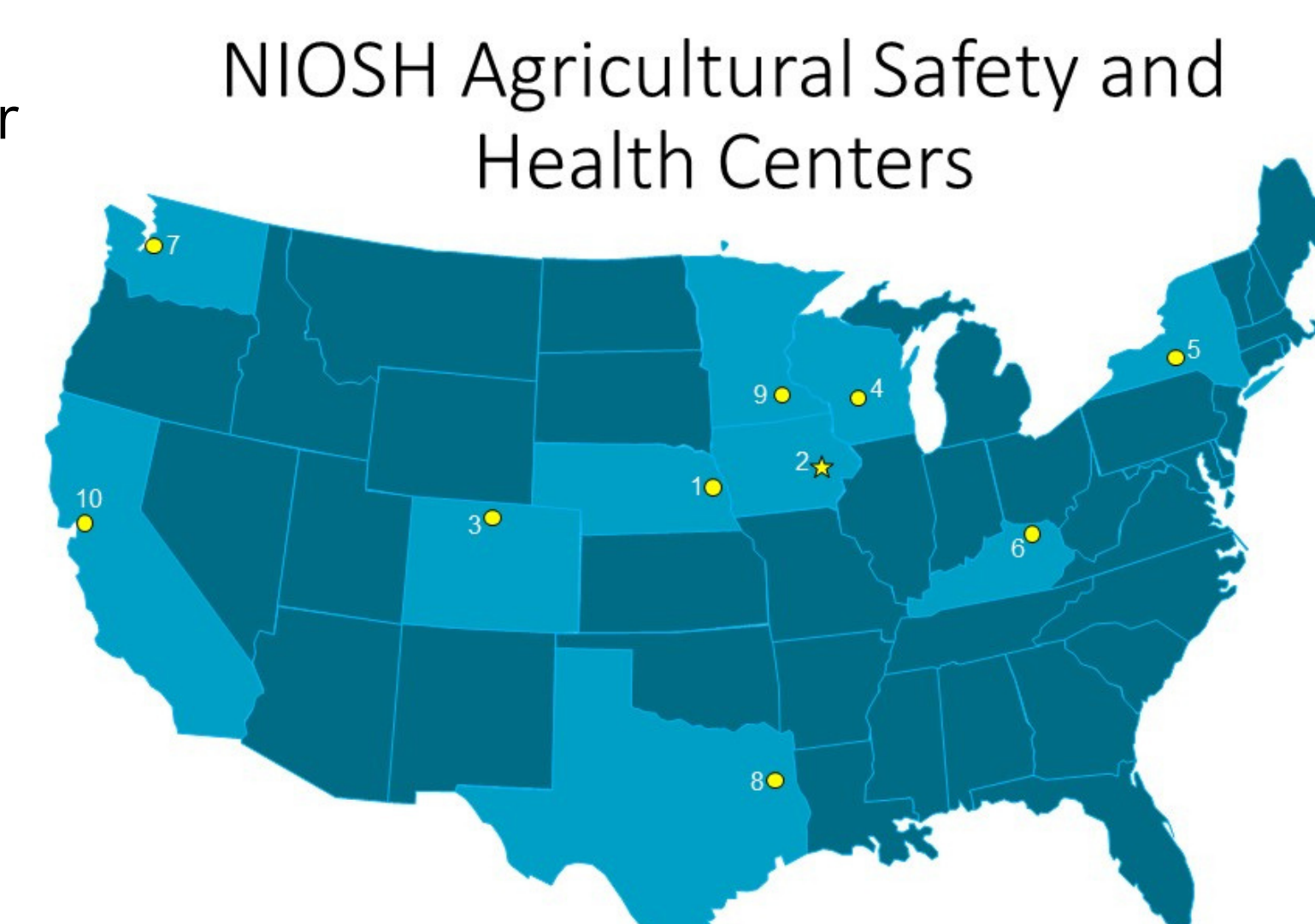
“Soldier to Ag” programs (SAP) are agriculture education programs specifically designed to meet the needs of farmer veterans

- "Beginning" farmer and rancher program
- Integrate military culture
- Help veterans navigate the transition to civilian life
- Primary goal of helping prevent veteran deaths by suicide.

Costs and Resources

The Veteran’s Farm of NC is a grant-funded, fully operational farm that focuses on sustainable livestock production and organic vegetable production using farmland, barn, greenhouse, and aquaponic facilities and equipment. The farm also has a classroom building on site.

- \$50,000 in USDA-NIFA grant funds to the VFNC for the development of innovative behavioral health interventions and resources that would be integrated into VATEP.
- NC Agromedicine Institute provided virtual learning materials, instructor-led classes, and the expertise of farm safety and behavioral health specialists.



1. University of Nebraska Medical Center, Omaha
2. University of Iowa, Iowa City
3. Colorado State University, Ft. Collins
4. National Farm Medicine Center, Marshfield, WI
5. Bassett Healthcare, Cooperstown, NY
6. University of Kentucky, Lexington
7. University of Washington, Seattle
8. University of Texas Health Science Center, Tyler
9. University of Minnesota, Minneapolis
10. University of California, Davis

Similar organizations may choose to partner with one of the 11 US Agricultural Safety and Health Centers funded by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) to deliver a similar program.

What is VFNC?

The Veteran's Farm of NC (VFNC) is funded in partnership with NIFA as a USDA-funded site for the Veteran Agriculture Training and Education Program (VATEP). The target audience includes military personnel who are preparing to transition from active military duty to farming as their next occupation. The program provides hands-on training and opportunities to learn about:

- Agricultural networks
- Resources
- Production methods
- Best farm business management practices.

The VFNC engages participants in VATEP through two, four-hour sessions, each week for six months.

How it Works

SAP combine a population with a high risk of suicide with a high-stress occupation creating an urgent need to create an SAP model that integrates multifaceted, culturally competent behavioral health interventions into the agriculture education program. The VFNC partnered with the NC Agromedicine Institute to develop a program model that integrates a holistic health approach geared toward preventing veteran suicide.

The program focuses on 4 educational outcomes:

1. Build a support system through peer and network connections;
2. Identify the link between family wellness and whole-farm health
3. understand mental-physical wellness needs as they relate to the occupation of farming
4. implement sustainable business practices that are safe, savvy, and meet state and federal regulations.

Future Plans

Rigorous evaluation is needed to measure the outcomes and impacts of the SAP. Future research should use mixed methodologies to:

- Evaluate the SAP model
- Measure long-term health outcomes
- Measure the impacts of combining a population with a high risk of suicide into a field with high occupational stress

There is limited research examining the mental health implications of veterans becoming farm operators. Some research in agricultural education suggests that caring for plants and animals is therapeutic for veterans (Kyle, 2018), but the literature also identifies farming as a significant source of stress (Marcom, 2018). Research is needed to determine the point at which farming transforms from a source of relief to a source of stress.



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Results to Date

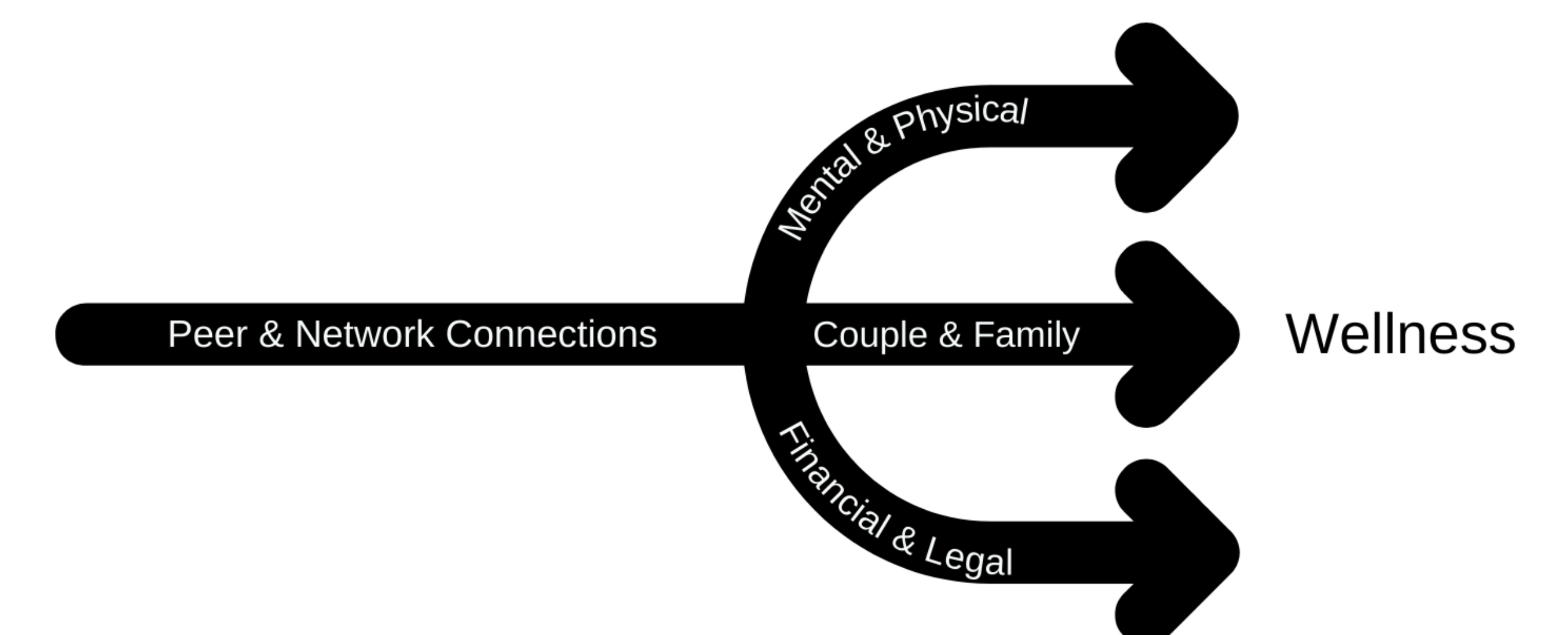
After synthesizing the literature, participants’ experiences, and anecdotal evidence from other farmer veterans, the team developed a model to summarize VFNC’s behavioral health program. Figure 1 displays the VFNC Holistic Health Approach: Model for Navigating the Transition from Military to Civilian Life. The model is depicted as a trident-shaped diagram, highlighting the program’s three major areas of wellness development:

1. Mental-Physical
2. Couple-Family
3. Financial-Legal

The trident displays the model as a three-prong approach but actually identifies four essential program components. The three prongs, or the areas of “wellness”, are built upon the trident’s handle, the foundational component of "peer and network connections" that welds the areas of wellness together and connects them at the base of the trident. The SAP model is a working guide for the VFNC's efforts toward preventing veteran suicide through agricultural education.

Figure 1

The VFNC Holistic Health Approach: Model for Navigating the Transition from Military to Civilian Life.



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