

# 2025 CAV Conference

Best Practices for Supporting Military-Connected People

**September 22-23, 2025**

Denny Sanford Premier Center  
1021 N. West Ave., Sioux Falls

## **VA 1-on-1: Veterans Assistance Expo will be held in Meeting Rooms 11-14**

September 22: 9:00 am - 4:00 pm | September 23: 9:00 am - 12:30 pm

<b>Monday Morning, September 22, 2025</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Duration</b>
<b>Registration and Networking</b>	Grand Ballroom B	7:30 am	1 hour
<b>Welcome and Opening Remarks</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Jill Baker, MSA, MSW, CSW, Executive Director, CAV</li></ul>	Grand Ballroom B	8:30 am	30 minutes
<b>Leading with Heart Plenary Session</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Michele Anderson, SDANG</li><li>Dr. Ronald Place, Avera McKennan</li></ul>	Grand Ballroom B	9:00 am	2.5 hours
<b>Lunch and Networking</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Don't forget to check out the Expo!</li></ul>	Grand Ballroom B	11:30 am	1 hour

## **LEARNING TRACKS**

**MH: Mental Health**

**RC: Rural Challenges**

**MFC: Military Families and Caregiving**

<b>Monday Afternoon, September 22, 2025</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Duration</b>
<b>(MH) Dr. Nancy Thum-Thomas and Grant Dorothy</b> <i>The Aftermath of War</i>	Meeting Room 3	12:45 pm - 2:00 pm	1.25 hours
<b>(RC) Dr. Melissa Dittberner (Dr. Mo)</b> <i>Peer Power in Rural and Military Communities</i>	Meeting Room 6	12:45 pm - 2:00 pm	1.25 hours
<b>(MFC) Dr. Carla Miller</b> <i>Supporting Military Families of Children with Disabilities</i>	Meeting Room 8	12:45 pm - 2:00 pm	1.25 hours

**15 MINUTE BREAK**

**Thank you to our Sponsors!**



Monday Afternoon, September 22, 2025	Location	Time	Duration
<b>(MH) Autumnne Good, MA, LPC-MH, NCC</b> <i>Incorporating Faith in Trauma Treatment for Veterans</i>	Meeting Room 3	2:15 pm - 3:30 pm	1.25 hours
<b>(RC) Jade Ronk, MSW, CSW</b> <i>Meeting Rural Veterans in the Moments That Matter</i>	Meeting Room 6	2:15 pm - 3:30 pm	1.25 hours
<b>(MFC) Richard Felix, BS, MBA (in progress)</b> <i>Expanding Resiliency Support for SMVF</i>	Meeting Room 8	2:15 pm - 3:30 pm	1.25 hours

**15 MINUTE BREAK**

Monday Afternoon, September 22, 2025	Location	Time	Duration
<b>(MH) Abby Lawrence, MBA, MSW, LCSW, QMHP</b> <i>Regulate to Elevate</i>	Meeting Room 3	3:45 pm - 5:00 pm	1.25 hours
<b>(RC) Dr. Mary Bell</b> <i>From Service to High Tech: Co-Learning Spaces in Rural Communities</i>	Meeting Room 6	3:45 pm - 5:00 pm	1.25 hours
<b>(MFC) Dr. Melissa Dittberner (Dr. Mo)</b> <i>Recovery is a Team Sport</i>	Meeting Room 8	3:45 pm - 5:00 pm	1.25 hours

**Register for Continuing Education Credits**

<https://avera.cloud-cme.com/default.aspx>



Tuesday Morning, September 23, 2025	Location	Time	Duration
<b>Registration and Networking</b>	Grand Ballroom B	7:30 am	30 minutes
<b>Kelley Moore, CPBA, CPDFA, CPEQA</b> <i>Heart of a Warrior</i>	Grand Ballroom B	8:00 am - 12:00 pm	4 hours
<b>Closing Remarks</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Jill Baker, MSA, MSW, CSW, Executive Director, CAV</li> </ul>	Grand Ballroom B	12:00 pm	15 minutes

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## Speaker Information

### **PRESENTER: MICHELE ANDERSON**

#### **Session: Caught Between Two Worlds: National Guard and Reserve Families**

**Abstract:** National Guard and Reserve Families navigate a unique existence, constantly shifting between civilian life and Military Service with often limited access to the robust support systems afforded to active-duty Families. National Guard and Reserve Families demonstrate remarkable adaptability as they balance civilian life with Military commitments. Focused resources and community support are key to empowering these Families, particularly during transitions like activation, deployment, and reintegration, and ensuring thriving outcomes even in rural areas or for those with complex needs. This keynote will illuminate the specific challenges faced by these families, including systemic gaps and limited awareness amongst civilian providers, highlighting opportunities for our community to better support their needs. Participants will learn practical strategies for outreach, education, and care coordination, modeled after the successful approach of the South Dakota Army National Guard's Service Member & Family Support program, to effectively address these challenges in their own communities. Participants will gain valuable insights and real-world examples to enhance their ability to effectively support the well-being of National Guard and Reserve Families within their own communities

**About:** Michele Anderson brings a unique perspective to supporting South Dakota Army National Guard Families, informed by a lifetime of connection to the military. As a daughter, granddaughter, Soldier, and parent, she understands the challenges and triumphs inherent in military life. For the past 28 years, Michele has dedicated her professional career to serving military families, with extensive experience in recruiting, education, family assistance, and casualty support. She is a recognized expert in military benefits and entitlements. Driven by a mission to be a force multiplier for the South Dakota Army National Guard and increase readiness by positively influencing Service Members and enhancing the holistic lives of Military Families, Michele is committed to empowering those who serve.

### **PRESENTER: DR. MARY BELL**

#### **Session: From Service to High Tech: Upskilling Veterans and Military Family Members**

**Abstract:** Transitioning from military life to the civilian workforce is a significant challenge for veterans and their families. Dakota State University (DSU), a national leader in cybersecurity and technology education, is uniquely positioned to support this transition. This workshop presents a focused initiative to empower veterans and their families through DSU's specialized academic and professional programs in cyber operations, artificial intelligence, computer science, and quantum computing.

The session will also highlight the work of the Chimney Trail Foundation, which repurposes the underutilized Veteran Service Organization infrastructure to provide local, accessible support for veterans and spouses. These spaces serve as hubs for workforce development, benefits navigation, and community engagement, creating a seamless bridge between military service, education, and civilian employment.

**About:** Dr. Mary S. Bell is the Dean of the Beacom College of Computer and Cyber Sciences at Dakota State University (DSU), where she leads one of the nation's foremost academic programs in cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, and computer science. A retired U.S. Army officer with 20 years of active-duty service in Aviation and Intelligence, Dr. Bell brings over 30 years of leadership experience and a deep commitment to national security and workforce development.

Mary was previously a Full Professor and Faculty Chair at the National Defense University, where she taught and developed curriculum on cyber operations, intelligence, and joint warfighter development. Her academic and government experience includes service as a Treaty Negotiator and Branch Chief for the Open Skies Treaty, as well as extensive work in strategic studies and military leadership education.

Mary is a lifelong advocate for veterans and military families, drawing from her own military background and her family's multi-generational service legacy. At DSU, she has championed initiatives to create accessible, high-impact educational pathways for military-connected learners - including the launch of new graduate programs in Cyber

Operations and Artificial Intelligence, certificates in Quantum Computing and Cybersecurity, and flexible online delivery models.

Mary is a frequent presenter and moderator at national and international security, education, and technology conferences. She holds lifetime memberships in the Army Aviation Association of America and the Veterans of Foreign Wars and is a member of the Board of Directors for the Chimney Trail Foundation – an organization created to empower veteran workforce development and promote a legacy of leadership and service. Mary remains actively engaged with veteran-focused initiatives, including mentoring and post-service transition support.

**PRESENTER: MELISSA DITTBERNER (“DR. MO”), PHD, CPS, PS, LMT**

**Session 1: Stigma to Support: Peer Power in Rural & Military Communities**

**Abstract 1:** Addiction and mental health challenges don’t discriminate by geography or uniform—and yet, many military families living in rural areas face unique barriers to care, including stigma, isolation, and limited access to services. In this session, Dr. Melissa “Mo” Dittberner—an addiction researcher, peer support innovator, and military spouse—shares real-world strategies for expanding access to behavioral health care through peer-led models and telehealth.

Drawing from lived experience and current research, Dr. Mo will explore how peer support can be a game-changer in rural and military-connected communities, how telehealth is bridging critical gaps in access, and why stigma remains one of the most urgent challenges to tackle. Participants will leave with insights into practical models of care, lessons from the field, and ideas for how military systems can better support service members, veterans, and their families—especially in under-resourced areas.

This talk is for military professionals, behavioral health providers, peer specialists, and anyone committed to strengthening community-based mental health solutions for those who serve and support.

**Session 2: Recovery is a Team Sport**

**Abstract 2:** Individuals at alarming rates—yet stigma, disconnection, and trauma often keep people from seeking help. This session explores how lived experience can be a powerful driver of change in both prevention and recovery. Drawing from personal recovery and professional practice, Dr. Melissa “Mo” Dittberner outlines how peer support, storytelling, and trauma-informed approaches can reduce stigma, strengthen community response, and improve outcomes for military families and veterans facing addiction and mental health challenges. Participants will learn how to integrate their lived experiences into their organizations, build inclusive and supportive community ecosystems, and respond to trauma with care rather than judgment. Whether you're a clinician, military leader, peer, or family member, this talk will offer tools to humanize recovery and reframe addiction as a health issue—not a moral failing.

**About:** Dr. Mo is an award-winning educator, TEDx speaker, and nationally recognized leader in addiction prevention and recovery. She is a professor in the Addiction Counseling and Prevention Department at the University of South Dakota, where she brings together research, lived experience, and innovative pedagogy to inspire the next generation of practitioners.

Dr. Mo holds a Ph.D. in Counseling and Psychology in Education, a Master’s in Addiction Studies, and a Bachelor’s in Health Sciences. She is also a Certified Prevention Specialist, Peer Specialist, and Licensed Massage Therapist.

In addition to her work in higher education, Dr. Mo is the CEO of Straight Up Care, a telehealth platform that connects individuals with peer support specialists, and the Executive Director of Midwest Street Medicine, a community-based initiative focused on accessible care. She is the co-author of *The Alcohol Reset* and regularly presents on topics such as trauma, harm reduction, body brokering, and the role of tattoos in healing.

A person in long-term recovery, Dr. Mo blends academic expertise with personal experience to empower others on their paths to wellness. Her mission is simple and powerful: to help people discover their own capacity for healing, connection, and transformation.

**PRESENTER: RICHARD FELIX****Session: Expanding Resiliency Support for Service Members, Veterans, and Families**

**Abstract:** The American Red Cross Service to the Armed Forces Resiliency Program offers free workshops that help military members, veterans, and their families build skills to manage stress, communicate effectively, and navigate change. The program includes five core categories: Reconnection Workshops for adults and youth, Mind-Body Workshops, Coping with Deployments, Coping with Change, and Psychological First Aid for military families.

This session provides an overview of the Resiliency Program and its potential to strengthen support for military-connected individuals across different systems of care. Participants will learn how the program can be implemented in healthcare, education, and community settings and explore strategies to partner with the Red Cross to expand access.

It is designed for professionals in healthcare, education, social services, and nonprofit leadership who are seeking practical tools to better support military and veteran families.

**About:** Richard Felix serves as the Regional Program Manager for the American Red Cross Service to the Armed Forces, covering Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota. The Department of Defense charters this position to support service members and their families during times of emergency.

Richard is a member of the Black Hills VA Veteran Support Coalition and serves as a volunteer Deputy on the Center for Development and Civic Engagement committees at all three VA hospitals in the region.

He served nine years in the U.S. Air Force as a Munitions Specialist, concluding his service with the Ellsworth AFB Honor Guard. After separating in 2021, he briefly worked as a Deputy and Critical Incident Specialist with the Pennington County Sheriff's Office.

Richard holds a Community College of the Air Force degree in Munitions Systems Technology and a bachelor's degree in Homeland Security from the University of Maryland Global Campus. He is currently pursuing a Master of Business Administration. Originally from San Diego, he now lives in South Dakota with his wife Elisabeth, a student of Industrial Engineering at the South Dakota School of Mines.

**PRESENTER: AUTUMNE GOOD, MA, LPC-MH, NCC****Session: Incorporating Faith in Trauma Treatment for Veterans**

**Abstract:** In 2019, the Congressional Research Service and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (2015) reported that 73% of active-duty military personnel and 90% of military veterans identify as people of faith. With this data in mind, we can infer that it is highly likely that active-duty and/or retired veterans seeking counseling would desire to incorporate faith into their treatment plan. This session explores how faith can be incorporated into evidence-based trauma therapies, including Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), and Internal Family Systems (IFS). Clinicians will learn how to align treatment with client beliefs while also navigating the complexities of moral injury and past spiritual harm.

**About:** Autumnne Good grew up in rural East River South Dakota, and started her journey serving in the mental health field in 2005. Graduating from USD with a master's in Counseling & Psychology in Education in 2011, she first started working with military service members in Colorado Springs in 2012 through intensive, in-home treatment for adolescents and their family members. Autumnne currently serves as a supervisor for counselors in Colorado and South Dakota, supporting them on their mental health service journeys while providing traditional and intensive faith-based therapy to her own military and civilian clients.

**PRESENTER: ABBY LAWRENCE, MBA, MSW, LCSW, QMHP****Session: Regulate to Elevate**

**Abstract:** This session will explore nervous system regulation and provide vital tools for those supporting military-connected people. Attendees will gain a deeper understanding of the Window of Tolerance model, which describes the optimal zone of arousal for emotional and physiological balance, and how to recognize signs of dysregulation and arousal within themselves and others. The presentation will cover various types of dysregulation, such as hypoarousal and hyperarousal, and offer practical strategies for returning to the Window of Tolerance. Emphasis will be placed on

both self-regulation techniques and co-regulation practices—tools designed to help caregivers create a safe, grounded space for themselves and others.

Drawing from trauma-informed yoga, evidence-based approaches, and polyvagal theory, attendees will leave equipped with actionable skills for teaching self-regulation to others, fostering resilience, and expanding the Window of Tolerance, thereby enhancing emotional well-being in both personal and professional settings. Special focus will be placed on the unique needs of veterans in rural communities, addressing the importance of trauma-informed care.

**About:** Abby Lawrence is a licensed therapist, trauma-informed yoga instructor, and the founder of Two Pines Therapy and Connection Center. With training in evidence-based trauma treatment protocols, including EMDR, Polyvagal Theory, and nervous system regulation, Abby blends clinical expertise with a deep understanding of the mind-body connection. Her work is grounded in the belief that healing occurs not only through talk therapy, but also through integrated approaches that harness the wisdom of the body.

Abby's therapeutic style is person-centered and has roots in somatic practices and polyvagal-informed care, allowing her clients to reconnect with their nervous systems in safe, embodied ways. She teaches that the path to regulation and resilience is often found not in resistance, but in connection—a philosophy reflected in her approach to healing trauma. As she often says, "The opposite of what ails us isn't always its mirror image. For example, the opposite of addiction isn't sobriety—it's connection."

A sought-after presenter and established mental health professional, Abby is known for her warm, engaging teaching style and her ability to make complex nervous system science accessible and applicable. Her passion for helping others regulate and expand their Window of Tolerance is especially impactful for those working with trauma survivors, including veterans and caregivers in rural communities. Through her trainings, Abby equips professionals with the tools they need to co-regulate, educate, and foster meaningful healing through connection.

**PRESENTER: DR. CARLA MILLER, ED.D.**

**Session: Supporting Military Families of Children with Disabilities**

**Abstract:** Military families raising children with disabilities often face disruptions in care due to frequent relocations, system complexity, and limited coordination between military and civilian services. While programs like EFMP, STOMP, and School Liaison Officers offer essential support, families often rely on civilian providers to help maintain continuity and access to services.

This session explores how providers can collaborate across systems to better support these families. In many civilian settings, military affiliation goes unrecognized—either because families don't self-identify or providers don't ask—creating missed opportunities for connection, coordination, and care.

Participants will learn about provisions under the Individuals with Disabilities Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act that are available no matter where a family may be located across the United States, how to access these services if they have a concern, and/or understand the processes school may use to address concerns they may have about their child.

**About:** Carla Miller, Ed.D. serves as the Executive Director of South Dakota Parent Connection, a position she has held since 2016. She holds a Doctorate in Educational Leadership and Curriculum and Instruction from the University of South Dakota, with a focus on Special Education. Her career spans roles as a university instructor teaching advanced coursework in assessment, learning disabilities, classroom management, and behavior, as well as experience as an early childhood administrator, outreach educator, and member of multidisciplinary evaluation teams.

Dr. Miller currently serves on South Dakota's Part B Interagency Coordinating Council and the South Dakota Board of Services to the Blind and Visually Impaired. Nationally, she represents Parent Training Centers on the Family Engagement Resource Team and the Stakeholder and Family Engagement Team through the National Center for Systemic Improvement. She is also the parent of two adult sons, one of whom lives with ADHD and an anxiety disorder, grounding her professional work in lived experience.

**PRESENTER: KELLEY MOORE, CPBA, CPDFA, CPEQA**

**Session: Heart of a Warrior**

**Abstract:** This 4-hour interactive session is designed to be the capstone experience of the CAV Conference, bringing together the themes of the three learning tracks (mental health, rural challenges, caregiving/family life) and tying them back to one core truth: every single person in the room is a warrior. Whether you wore the uniform or held the home together, whether you fought in combat or fought for care, you have the heart of a warrior.

We'll engage participants through Combat Brain Training (CBT)<sup>™</sup> techniques to build focus and mental resilience and anchor the experience with a soul-level framework that brings power, clarity, and courage into daily life. This session isn't just theory, it's transformation.

Attendees will leave reconnected to their purpose, re-energized in their work, and equipped with practical science-based tools to carry forward. It's not a closing session. It's a call to action.

**About:** Kelley Moore is a United States Marine Corps veteran, leadership coach, and founder of See Your Possibilities. Trained at the FBI Academy and State Department in behavioral analysis and resilience under pressure, she now works with cities, first responders, and veteran communities to operationalize core values and rewire the brain for success. Kelley's WARRIOR framework and Combat Brain Training<sup>™</sup> integration bring neuroscience, soul, and systems together for real transformation.

**PRESENTER: DR. RONALD PLACE**

**Session: System-Level Solutions for Whole-Person Care in Veteran and Rural Communities**

**Abstract:** Veterans, caregivers, and rural populations often face fragmented care, workforce shortages, and limited access to services that support physical, mental, and social well-being. Meeting these challenges requires leadership that understands how healthcare systems operate and how they can evolve to meet the full scope of patient needs.

In this keynote, Ronald J. Place, MD, President and CEO of Avera McKennan Hospital and retired Lieutenant General in the United States Army, shares lessons from a career as a practicing military physician and executive healthcare leader. He will discuss how systems are critical to access and coordination and ultimately produce trust by adopting whole-person care approaches consistent with the realities faced by military families and rural communities.

Participants will examine practical strategies to align services, strengthen care teams, and foster collaboration across sectors, creating more effective and sustainable support systems.

**About:** Ronald J. Place, MD is the Regional President & CEO of Avera McKennan and a retired U.S. Army Lieutenant General with nearly 37 years of service. A South Dakota native, he earned his chemistry degree from the University of South Dakota as a Phi Beta Kappa scholar and ROTC graduate, followed by a medical degree from Creighton University as a member of Alpha Omega Alpha. He completed general surgery training at Madigan Army Medical Center, fellowship training in colon and rectal surgery at the University of Texas Southwestern, and went on to serve as a combat surgeon in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Kosovo.

Over the course of his military career, Dr. Place advanced from surgical department chief to Chief Medical Officer, Chief Operating Officer, CEO of two community hospitals, CEO of two regional systems, and ultimately the 3rd Director of the Defense Health Agency—overseeing all non-combat military medical facilities, public health, medical research, education, and the TRICARE Health Plan. He is board certified in general and colorectal surgery, has authored over 40 peer-reviewed publications, and holds faculty appointments at the Uniformed Services University of Health Sciences, the USD Sanford School of Medicine, and Mt. Marty University.

In Sioux Falls, Dr. Place serves on the boards of The Link Community Triage Center, the Avera Heart Hospital, and the Greater Sioux Falls Chamber of Commerce, as well as the Patriot Support Board for Universal Health Services and the Dean's Advisory Board for the USD Beacom School of Business.



**PRESENTER: JADE RONK, MSW, CSW**

**Session: Meeting Rural Veterans in the Moments That Matter**

**Abstract:** Veterans and military families in rural areas face real challenges during key points in life, such as leaving the military, changing jobs, managing health issues, caregiving, and aging. These are the moments that matter. In rural areas, these transitions are more challenging to navigate due to limited services, long distances, and a shortage of providers who understand military culture. This session breaks down what those moments are, what makes them more difficult in rural settings, and how to respond when they happen. Participants will also be introduced to the Journeys of Veterans Map, a resource created by the VA that outlines everyday life stages and identifies critical points where support can make the most difference.

**About:** Jade Ronk is a U.S. Air Force veteran, licensed social worker, and holistic practitioner with over 20 years of experience supporting veterans, individuals, and families. She holds a Master of Social Work from the University of South Dakota and is a Certified Social Worker with specialized training in neuropsychotherapy, EMDR, solution-focused therapy, and trauma and addiction.

As a Healthcare Navigator and Case Manager with the Supportive Services for Veteran Families program in South Dakota, Jade supports veterans experiencing homelessness, co-occurring disorders, and systemic barriers. Her work emphasizes trauma recovery, resource access, and personal transformation.

Jade's background includes military service, nonprofit leadership, consulting, and service on VA advisory boards for suicide prevention. She serves on the Board of Directors for Community Action for Veterans, co-chairs the Veterans Mental Health Advisory Board, and is a member of NASW, AASECT, DAV, and the American Legion.

**PRESENTERS: DR. NANCY THUM-THOMAS & GRANT DOROTHY**

**Session: The Aftermath of War**

**Abstract:** As the study of post-traumatic stress conditions continues to evolve, the expectation and hope is that our understanding and treatment will improve as well. The problem is that as we wait for a breakthrough in treatment, those who are struggling resign themselves to a life where their primary goal is to make it from one day to the next. And sadly, instead of identifying the trauma as a serious life event and learning how to move beyond it, many will allow that event to define who they are - and a moment in time, a traumatic, and abnormal one to be sure, now becomes the lens through which every action, thought, and relationship is filtered, often with devastating effect. It is no mystery that suicide is the 2nd leading cause of death in Veterans under age 45, and why divorce and substance abuse rates among those who have served are so high.

The objective of this presentation is to learn how to support individuals, their families, and communities that are impacted by the trauma of war. Acknowledging the reality is a first step from despair to a healing journey. This presentation is based on compelling stories of trauma, over thirty-five years of research and personal healing.

**About: Nancy Thum-Thomas** is a registered nurse, consultant, life coach, and researcher. She holds a PhD from the University of Utah College of Nursing with a focus on the integration of patient care and technology. Her professional career has spanned clinical care, administration, consulting, and research. She currently offers coaching, consultation, and education through Nancy Thum-Thomas Life Coaching, LLC, with a focus on holistic growth and development, discovering one's purpose, and establishing goals to enhance the life experience. In addition to her life coaching practice, she has served as a registered nurse at the Department of Veterans Affairs in a variety of capacities, most recently in research. She has completed research on Military Sexual Trauma as the principal investigator and worked with Veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress challenges.

**About: Grant Dorothy** is the CEO of PTSD Insights, a nonprofit organization offering veterans, active-duty personnel, and their families a quiet, confidential space to share and process the lasting effects of trauma. Raised in Philip, South Dakota, Grant graduated Magna Cum Laude from Black Hills State College in 1968 with a degree in Business Administration. Later that year, he was drafted and inducted into the U.S. Army and served as a combat soldier in Vietnam, where he was wounded twice and witnessed the devastating toll of war. In 2025, he published *The Aftermath of War*, a reflection on trauma, healing, and the long-term impact of military service. Through his writing and nonprofit work, Grant continues to support fellow veterans on their path to recovery.