

Durham researcher discusses caregiver support at NIEHS Veterans Day ceremony

By Ian Thomas

NIEHS welcomed Courtney Van Houtven, Ph.D., to Rodbell Auditorium Nov. 10 as part of the institute's first annual Veterans Day ceremony. Van Houtven's talk, "Supporting Informal Caregivers of Veterans: A Critical Component of Veteran-Centered Health Care," highlighted the value of informal care to veterans' health.

"At present, there are an estimated 20-65 million informal caregivers in America, and roughly 5.5 million of those are helping veterans," said [Van Houtven](http://medicine.duke.edu/faculty/details/0147016), (http://medicine.duke.edu/faculty/details/0147016) a research scientist with the Durham Veterans Affairs Medical Center and associate professor of medicine at the Duke University School of Medicine in North Carolina.

Van Houtven's research interests encompass how family caregiving affects health care utilization and expenditures, as well as health and work outcomes of care recipients and caregivers.

Linked Video

[Watch a video interview with Van Houtven about the economics of informal care \(08:45\)](#)

A legion of support

An informal caregiver is typically a relative, friend, spouse, or neighbor who provides daily assistance to someone with a disability who couldn't otherwise perform those tasks independently.

"About half of all informal caregivers report having no medical training to provide in-home care," Van Houtven said. "They help with things like paperwork or money management, though in some instances they do aid with tasks like administering meds or bed transference."

Van Houtven also noted that the vast majority of informal caregivers are unpaid.

"Studies show that if informal caregivers were paid a competitive wage, their estimated value as a field would be somewhere near \$450 billion per year," she said. "That's a figure just shy of our nation's entire annual Medicare budget."

A legacy of service

"Veterans comprise roughly eight percent of our workforce here at NIEHS," said Joellen Austin, NIEHS associate director of management, host of the talk, and, at one time, an informal caregiver herself. "Every day, they share with us things like leadership, character, or teamwork, and we can't thank them enough for their service."

(Ian Thomas is a public affairs specialist with the NIEHS Office of Communications and Public Liaison, and a regular contributor to the Environmental Factor.)



Austin, left, presented Van Houtven with a framed copy of the day's event poster. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



During her talk, Van Houtven stated that only three percent of U.S. caregiver services are reached through direct programs. The rest are provided by family and friends. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



From left, Mark Miller, Ph.D., Leroy Worth, Ph.D., and Michelle Owens discuss the ceremony, during a reception in the building 101 main lobby. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



Originally designated as Armistice Day in 1919 by President Woodrow Wilson as a means of honoring those who fought in World War I, it was later renamed Veterans Day in 1954 to honor all American veterans. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



The Veterans Day National Ceremony is held each year on Nov. 11 at Arlington National Cemetery. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)

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Members of NIEHS leadership turned out to show their support for the institute's many veterans. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)

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