



# **Mental Health Program for Veterans**

**As Required By  
H.B. 2392, 83<sup>rd</sup> Legislature, Regular Session, 2013  
and the 2014-15 General Appropriations Act, S.B. 1,  
83<sup>rd</sup> Legislature, Regular Session, 2013 (Article II, Department of  
State Health Services, Rider 86)**



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## **Executive Summary**

[The 2014-15 General Appropriations Act, S.B. 1, 83<sup>rd</sup> Legislature, Regular Session, 2013 \(Article II, Department of State Health Services, Rider 86\)](#) appropriated an additional \$2,000,000 each fiscal year of the biennium to provide specific services to veterans through a mental health program. [H.B. 2392, 83<sup>rd</sup> Legislature, Regular Session, 2013](#), outlined specific requirements for the Department of State Health Services (DSHS) related to the development of a mental health program for veterans.

In fiscal year 2014, the DSHS Mental Health Program for Veterans trained a total of 986 individuals in peer-to-peer counseling skills that were used to serve 33,629 veterans and family members.

The additional funds available in fiscal year 2014 were utilized to add 13 new volunteer coordinators, raising the total number of volunteer coordinators to 35. The volunteer coordinators, who are employed by 33 Local Mental Health Authorities (LMHAs), helped organize and manage peers in their area, as well as build relationships with the local veteran-serving entities. The volunteer coordinators also worked to enhance jail diversion and veteran treatment court services and implement a new veterans mental health grant program. An interagency agreement between DSHS and the Texas Veterans Commission (TVC) was utilized to administer the new veterans mental health grants program. The program awarded grants using DSHS funds (\$761,500 for the first round of grants) and the TVC Fund for Veterans Assistance (FVA) lottery initiative. The initial round of grant applications resulted in awards totaling \$1,550,000 shared by 11 local and regional mental health projects for veterans and family members.

DSHS contracted with Texas A&M University Health Science Center (TAMU HSC) for the maintenance of a web-based veteran-specific resource database and the management of the Military Veteran Peer Network (MVPN). Through a subcontract with Samaritan Centers for Counseling and Pastoral Care, MVPN managed training and technical assistance for peers and coordinators. A clinical services program was implemented as part of the MVPN that used field clinicians to provide clinical and peer support services to incarcerated veterans. The project was a pilot between DSHS and the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ).

## **Introduction**

The 2014-15 General Appropriations Act, S.B. 1, 83<sup>rd</sup> Legislature, Regular Session, 2013 (Article II, Department of State Health Services, Rider 86) appropriates \$2,000,000 in each fiscal year in General Revenue for the purpose of expanding the Mental Health Program for Veterans above the fiscal year 2012-13 allocation of \$3,000,000 per year for a total allocation of \$5,000,000 for each fiscal year of the 2014-15 biennium.

Rider 86 specifies that program funds may be used for, but are not limited to: peer-to-peer counseling; access to licensed mental health professionals for volunteer coordinators and peers; a list of approved training for peers; technical assistance for volunteer coordinators and peers; recruiting, retaining, and screening community-based therapists; suicide prevention training for volunteer coordinators and peers; and coordinating services with jail diversion programs, such as veterans courts. DSHS may contract with or provide grants to regional and local organizations and other outside entities to carry out the provisions of the rider.

Each fiscal year, DSHS is required to submit a report to the Legislature and the Governor's office that describes the activities of the program in the preceding year, including at a minimum: a description of how the program is operated; the number of veterans served; the number of peers and volunteer coordinators trained; a summary of contracts issued and services provided through those contracts; and recommendations for program improvements.

H.B. 2392, 83<sup>rd</sup> Legislature, Regular Session, 2013, requires DSHS to develop a mental health intervention program for veterans. The program must include peer-to-peer counseling; access to licensed mental health professionals for volunteer coordinators and peers; training approved by DSHS for peers; technical assistance for volunteer coordinators and peers; grants to regional and local organizations providing services; recruitment, retention, and screening of community-based therapists; suicide prevention training for volunteer coordinators and peers; and veteran jail diversion services, including veterans courts.

H.B. 2392 requires DSHS to solicit and ensure that specialized training is provided to persons who are peers and who want to provide peer-to-peer counseling or other peer-to-peer services under the program. DSHS is also required to establish a grant program through which DSHS may award grants to regional and local organizations for the delivery of programs or services. The grants must: emphasize direct services to veterans provided by peers; leverage additional local resources to provide funding for programs or services for veterans; and increase the capacity of the Mental Health Program for Veterans.

H.B. 2392 also requires DSHS to submit a report to the Governor and Legislature each fiscal year that includes the number of veterans who received services through the Mental Health Program for Veterans; the number of peers and volunteer coordinators trained; a summary of the grants awarded and services provided through those grants; an evaluation of the services provided; and recommendations for program improvements.

## **Background**

Texas is home to 1.67 million veterans, second only to California. Many veterans entered service in Texas or were discharged from 1 of the 14 active-duty military installations spread throughout the state. Many veterans remain in Texas because of a military friendly culture and the support they find from peers.

Every individual in Texas, including veterans, has access to mental health services including an accredited crisis hotline and mobile crisis outreach services through the LMHA in their community. However, recognizing the needs specific to veterans, the Legislature passed S.B. 1325, 81<sup>st</sup> Legislature, Regular Session, 2009, which required DSHS to develop a mental health program for veterans that provides peer-to-peer counseling. As a result of the legislation, DSHS implemented the Mental Health Program for Veterans.

## **Program Services**

### **Peer-to-Peer Counseling**

Trained volunteers enrolled by LMHAs provide peer-to-peer support for veterans and family members. LMHAs utilize volunteer coordinators to organize the trained peers in their area. During fiscal year 2014, DSHS funds were used to hire an additional 13 full-time coordinators, bringing the total to 35 coordinators at 33 LMHAs.

The volunteer coordinators provide a variety of peer-to-peer services including recruiting members for local chapters of the MVPN, organizing peers to provide services and organize social activities, outreaching to Veterans Affairs (VA) representatives, interacting with jail diversion programs, and collecting information on the number of individuals served and the services provided.

### **Access to Licensed Mental Health Professionals**

Many of the services added to the program during fiscal year 2014 were designed to reduce barriers to accessing appropriate mental health professionals. Through a contract with TAMU HSC and a subcontract with Samaritan Centers for Counseling and Pastoral Care, MVPN added two field clinicians (based in Austin and Killeen) to support trained peers and volunteer coordinators. The field clinicians provide a number of services: short-term counseling, organization for a network of military-informed care providers, military-informed care training for providers, direct counseling services, suicide prevention training, and provision of information about military-informed providers at VA offices.

One of the field clinicians, who also assumed clinical director duties, provided counseling and training to veterans as part of a new program to serve incarcerated veterans. This project is described in detail in the Jail Diversion section of this report.

## **Training for Peers**

Training was provided to a total of 986 peers during fiscal year 2014. A brief description of each DSHS approved training is provided below.

### *Basic Peer Training*

In fiscal year 2014, 569 peers were trained in basic peer training. This is an 8-hour interactive classroom-based training that focuses on assessing risk factors, developing listening skills, and accessing community resources.

### *Bringing Everyone in the Zone*

Sixty nine peers were trained in *Bringing Everyone in the Zone* during fiscal year 2014. This is a 40-hour classroom-based peer-to-peer group leadership training that includes information about post-traumatic stress, military sexual trauma, and traumatic brain injuries.

### *Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST)*

In fiscal year 2014, 138 peers were trained in ASIST, a two-day interactive training that includes role-play and discussion about assessing suicide risk, discussing risks with individuals that exhibit symptoms, and taking actions to reduce the risks.

### *Mental Health First Aid*

Mental Health First Aid is a short course in which participants learn to recognize risk factors and warning signs and strategies for helping an individual in crisis and non-crisis situations. Ninety five peers were trained in Mental Health First Aid during fiscal year 2014.

### *Table Talk*

During fiscal year 2014, 30 women veterans were trained in Table Talk, a classroom and online course that provides training in adapting to brain injuries, military sexual trauma, and life skills.

### *Training for Non-Peers*

Training was also provided to individuals that work closely with peers, but are not considered peers themselves, including educators, financial counselors, and criminal justice professionals. During fiscal year 2014, 85 non-peers were trained in basic peer training and Mental Health First Aid.

## **Technical Assistance for Volunteer Coordinators**

Through a contract with TAMU HSC, DSHS maintained an online directory of resources accessible to service members, veterans, and their families ([www.TexVet.org](http://www.TexVet.org)). TAMU HSC also provided a comprehensive consulting and training program for the 33 LMHA-based volunteer organizations through its subcontractor, Samaritan Centers for Counseling and Pastoral Care, and its MVPN staff. MVPN staff provided information related to recruiting, training, and retaining peer volunteers. During fiscal year 2014, MVPN staff members made 96 site visits to the LMHA community centers, held two statewide training events for the volunteer coordinators, developed and distributed volunteer coordinator handbooks and volunteer training guidelines, and conducted two web-based training sessions for coordinators and LMHA leadership teams.

The technical assistance was focused on helping community-based teams approach veterans in appropriate ways, recruit and retain trained peers, support veterans that are reluctant to seek help, and the important roles that family members play in supporting veterans. Training topics included building camaraderie; productive interactions with local law enforcement; organizing transportation support for veterans and families in need; and successful outreach to employers, community leaders, spiritual leaders, and community-based providers.

### **Community-Based Therapists**

LMHA-based volunteer coordinators worked to identify and screen accessible, military-informed providers in their communities. MVPN staff developed a roster of military-informed providers who identified themselves as accessible to veterans and their families.

Additionally, as part of the TexVet Program, a web-based tool was developed to help recruit MVPN members and identify community-based professionals who can provide military-informed care. The tool, was used to identify 58 professional counselors and 26 medical professionals.

### **Jail Diversion Services**

All LMHAs that contract with DSHS to provide services through the Mental Health Program for Veterans are required to support jail diversion initiatives in their communities. Volunteer coordinators are trained to provide support to veterans or family members who become involved in the criminal justice system. All 35 volunteer coordinators have been trained and authorized by TDCJ to work in prisons to provide peer support services to veteran offenders.

TDCJ and DSHS sponsored the implementation of a pilot project at Travis State Jail to prepare veterans for successful re-entry into their communities. The 24 veterans selected to participate in the program are housed in a separate dormitory to promote unit cohesion and reduce discipline problems. The program is intended to help the veterans when they return to their home communities by promoting peer support during re-entry and the use of skills learned during the program to avoid re-offending.

Jail diversion activities include involvement with specialty courts including drug courts, mental health courts, and veterans courts. The LMHAs with veterans treatment courts in their area are: San Antonio, Austin, Dallas, Edinburg, El Paso, Fort Worth, Galveston, Houston, Lubbock, San Marcos, Seguin, and Tyler.

LMHAs are directly involved in veteran treatment courts in nine of these communities through the Jail Diversion Trauma Recovery Project. The project, which was funded through a federal grant, began as a pilot in San Antonio in fiscal year 2010. In fiscal year 2014, the project expanded to include eight additional sites: Austin, Edinburg, El Paso, Houston, Lubbock, San Marcos, Seguin, and Tyler.

## **Grants to Regional and Local Organizations**

An interagency agreement between DSHS and TVC led to the implementation of a new Veterans Mental Health Grant program. TVC administers the program funded by DSHS and the TVC's Fund for Veterans Assistance (FVA) lottery initiative. This cooperative agreement maximizes funding for direct care services and minimizes review and oversight costs.

The initial round of grant applications resulted in awards totaling \$1,550,000 shared by 11 local and regional mental health projects for veterans and family members. The 11 grantees are projected to serve over 5,000 veterans in 94 counties. The following are brief descriptions of the services being provided by each grantee.

### **Abilene Area Military Veterans Partnership**

The Betty Hardwick Community Center (LMHA) in Abilene was awarded \$75,000 to serve at least 105 service members, veterans, or family members through a new peer network center. The networking center is located near the Taylor County Veterans Assistance Office; it offers space for peers to meet for counseling, structured peer support groups, and informal family and peer-to-peer gatherings. The program also offers professional counseling services and peer-to-peer counseling services for participants in Taylor County's jail diversion program for veterans.

### **Equest**

Equest, a horse therapy provider, was awarded \$425,000 to offer services to over 200 active duty service members, veterans, family members or their caregivers from 16 counties in North and East Texas. The Hooves for Heroes program is an alternative to traditional therapy; participants work with a licensed mental health professional, equine specialist, and an equine partner.

### **Family Support Services of Amarillo**

Family Support Services of Amarillo was awarded \$100,000 to serve 370 service members, veterans, and family members from 31 counties in the Texas Panhandle through its Armed Services Supportive Interventions, Skills, and Trainings project. The project will include a peer-networking center to provide a site where peers can meet with one another and access a wide range of professional counseling services, including equine therapy and peer-to-peer counseling services.

### **Heroes Night Out**

The Heroes Night Out peer-networking center was awarded \$75,000 to provide services to over 3,500 veterans and family members from seven counties in central Texas through the Operation Integration project. The project includes professional mental health services for individuals, couples, families, and groups. The objective is to fill gaps in services for individuals who are unable to access care elsewhere and to build collaboration between licensed mental health

providers, trained peers, families, and community partners to support those who are transitioning out of the military.

### **Triple H EquiTherapy Center**

The Triple H EquiTherapy Center was awarded \$75,000 to achieve its goal of providing therapy to at least 40 mentally or physically disabled veterans from Bexar County and five other counties in Southwest Texas through the Horse Power project. Participants will work with a psychotherapist, instructor, and an equine partner to promote self-esteem and self-awareness and to become more confident in interpersonal relationships.

### **Marriage Management Consultants**

Marriage Management Consultants was awarded \$75,000 to provide services to at least 400 veterans and family members from 14 counties across the state through its Military Veterans Marriage and Relationship Enrichment project. Participants meet for an 8-hour workshop to learn communication skills useful in conflict resolution and management of stress caused by military service, deployments, or returning from combat.

### **New Destinations**

New Destinations, a therapeutic services organization was awarded \$50,000 to serve 50 veterans from six East Texas counties who are learning to adapt to symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress injuries. The veterans participate in a nontraditional therapeutic approach called Drumbeat, a structured drumming curriculum. The objective is to relieve symptoms of depression and anxiety and promote self-esteem and a sense of belonging, camaraderie, and mastery of a skill.

### **Paws for Reflection Horse Ranch**

Paws for Reflection Horse Ranch was awarded \$75,000 to provide equine therapy to at least 100 veterans and family members from four North Texas counties through the Boots of Honor program. Participants receive equine or other animal assisted counseling, horsemanship, riding, play, or music therapy to address symptoms of post-traumatic stress injuries.

### **Tropical Texas Behavioral Health**

Tropical Texas Behavioral Health (an LMHA) in Edinburg was awarded \$200,000 to initiate a new peer networking center to serve over 100 veterans or family members in 3 lower Rio Grande Valley counties. Services include individual, family, and group support and counseling; educational workshops; and crisis intervention and case management will be provided to individuals who are transitioning out of military service and adapting to civilian life.

## **United State Veterans Initiative**

USVets, a residential treatment organization was awarded \$200,000 to serve at least 100 homeless veterans in Houston through the Midtown Mental Health Project. The project will provide around the clock resident assistance and onsite mental health services for veterans, many of whom have serious chronic mental health conditions.

## **Woman's Heart (Grace After Fire)**

Grace After Fire was awarded \$200,000 to serve at least 200 women veterans in Bexar County. Trained facilitators will provide peer-to-peer support for veterans experiencing grief and loss, mood disorders, and self-esteem issues.

## **Summary of Mental Health Program for Veterans Contracts**

### **Peer-to-Peer Counseling**

In fiscal year 2014, DSHS contracted with 33 LMHAs to provide peer-to-peer counseling services through a total of 35 volunteer coordinators.

- Contract total: \$3 million
- Contract term: fiscal year 2014

The contract was expanded to include 34 LMHAs in fiscal year 2015.

- Contract total: \$3 million
- Contract term: fiscal year 2015

### **Counseling and Reintegration Services**

DSHS had a contract with TAMU HSC in fiscal year 2014 to provide a number of counseling and reintegration services. As part of the contract, TAMU HSC implemented the TexVet program. TAMU HSC subcontracted with Samaritan Centers for Counseling and Pastoral Care to implement the MVPN and hire the field clinicians.

- Contract total: \$838,500
- Contract term: fiscal year 2014

Through the fiscal year 2015 contract, TAMU HSC will continue to implement the TexVet program and provide training to peers. TAMU HSC has subcontracted with TVC to implement the MVPN. TVC subcontracts with Samaritan Centers for Counseling and Pastoral Care to support the field clinicians.

- Contract total: \$1.2 million
- Contract term: fiscal year 2015

## **Program Evaluation**

DSHS has a contract with the University of Texas at Austin School of Social Work (UT) to perform a third-party evaluation of the Mental Health Program for Veterans. As part of the contract, UT will develop a framework to evaluate the program and conduct evaluation activities including collecting data during site visits with program providers, developing surveys and assessing the provision of technical assistance, and assessing jail diversion services.

- Contract total: \$156,000
- Contract term: 2014-15 biennium

## **Jail Diversion Trauma Recovery**

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) provided DSHS with a five year grant to implement the Jail Diversion Trauma Recovery Project. DSHS serves as the project manager and the LMHAs provide specific services to veterans involved in the criminal justice system. The project requires a dollar for dollar local cash match to receive the federal funds.

- Contract total: \$1,970,000
- Contract term: federal fiscal years 2010-15

## **Woman's Heart**

DSHS contracts with Harris County MHMRA, which subcontracts with Mental Health America of Houston to provide a peer-to-peer counseling project specifically geared toward female veterans. Woman's Heart works within Harris County to expand the network of trained female volunteers to assist female veterans access reintegration services.

- Contract total: \$140,000
- Contract term: 2014-15 biennium

## **Fiscal Year 2014 Numbers Served**

**Table 1. Fiscal Year 2014 Numbers Served**

<b><u>Program Service</u></b>	<b><u>Numbers Served</u></b>
Peer-to-Peer Counseling	33,629
Peer Training	986
Jail Diversion Pilot	24

## **Potential Program Improvements**

DSHS should expand the Mental Health Program for Veterans by continuing current efforts to recruit, train, and retain peers and military-informed clinicians to provide services and supports to veterans across the state. The program could be further enhanced by targeting specific groups of veterans that have specialized needs including women, those living in rural and frontier areas, and those with co-occurring physical health issues or substance use disorders. Additionally,

coordination across agencies that provide services to veterans could be strengthened to ensure efficient use of resources.

### **Conclusion**

The Mental Health Program for Veterans administered by DSHS has a number of program components that are focused on providing veterans with necessary services and supports through a network of trained peers as well as providing access to military-informed mental health professionals. The program has been implemented through partnerships with TAMU HSC, TVC, and LMHAs. This program continues to develop new activities geared to the needs of veterans while maintaining core elements to provide counseling, train peers, and build a network of licensed mental health professionals available to serve veterans. DSHS looks forward to continuing this important program providing support and services to veterans.