



## Senate Bill 5358 Peer Support Services Report



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**STATE OF WASHINGTON**

**DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS**

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**DATE:** September 30, 2024

**TO:** Washington State Legislature

**FROM:** David Puente Jr., Director

**SUBJECT:** Rural Veterans Peer Support Program

Your Washington Department of Veterans Affairs is pleased to submit this report on the implementation and status of the Rural Veterans Peer Support Program.

Veteran peer services play a significant role in supporting veterans and their families. The WDVA peer support specialists are veterans or family members who have shared life experiences with the veterans they are serving. As a result, they can build trust with the veterans receiving peer support. Peer support services assist veterans with service-connected disability compensation, nonservice-connected pensions, employment benefits, education benefits, housing, mental health services, connecting with other veterans, and transitioning into civilian life.

Peer support specialists within the WDVA’s programs serve as models and demonstrate that overcoming significant life challenges is possible. They promote goal setting, problem-solving, management skills, and other tools to support veterans' well-being. They help veterans empower themselves by identifying strengths, supports, resources, and skills. Peer Specialists advocate for veterans with different systems they may be involved in and eliminate stigmas. Peer Specialists help the community they serve by providing education about veterans and their needs and expanding community resources.

We appreciate the significant investments the Governor and the Legislature have made to ensure veterans have access to peer support and mental health services. These services reduce homelessness and veterans dying by suicide. We look forward to the Governor's and the Legislature's continued support as the Veterans Service Officer Program expands to serve new veterans and their families in the years ahead.

## Executive Summary

The Washington Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA) provides Peer Support, Training, and Mental Health Services to veterans living in underserved rural counties in Washington. To best serve rural counties, WDVA incorporates Peer activities with elements of existing programs such as Vet Corps, Brain Injury and Recovery Program, Veterans Training Support Center (VTSC), Veterans Conservation Corps (VCC), and the Counseling Program to support the needs of veterans and their families living in rural communities.

## Background

### **Background on Rural Veterans**

Veterans are an underserved population, and some need support overcoming challenges that are a result of their services. Veterans living in rural communities have unique challenges that can make them more vulnerable to negative outcomes. When compared to veterans in metropolitan areas, veterans living in rural communities are more at risk for the following struggles.<sup>1,2,3</sup>

- Medical issues
- Suicidal ideation
- Isolation
- Not having access to proper medical care
- Not receiving or having access to mental health services
- Lack of access to transportation
- Poverty, housing, and unemployment
- Prone to having stigmas around receiving mental health services

These risk factors for veterans in rural communities increase detrimental outcomes such as homelessness and death by suicide. Veterans living in rural communities need additional support with accessing health care, mental health services, peer support, and other community resources.<sup>3,4</sup>

### **Background Peer Support**

Peer Support is based on the key principles of shared life experiences, respect, shared responsibility, and mutual agreement on what is helpful. It is dedicated to promoting veterans' empowerment and self-determination to improve their lives. The purpose of WDVA's Peer Support Programs is to encourage veterans to take control of their recovery, develop essential skills, wellness, and self-worth, and increase awareness of community resources and how to access them. Peer support specialists build trusting and respectful relationships with veterans.

Peer support specialists within WDVA's programs serve as models and demonstrate that overcoming significant life challenges is possible. They promote goal setting, problem-solving, management skills, and other tools to support veterans' well-being. They help veterans empower themselves by identifying strengths, supports, resources, and skills. Peer Specialists advocate on behalf of veterans with different systems they may be involved in and eliminate stigmas. Peer Specialists help the community they serve by educating about veterans and their needs and expanding community resources.<sup>5,6,7,8,9,10,11</sup>

Peer Support helps veterans in the following ways:

- Improve social functioning and quality of life
- Lessen the sense of loneliness and rejection
- Fosters independence
- Increase access to resources
- Improve skill development
- Improve employment opportunities
- Connect with other veterans and their communities
- Reduces hospitalizations
- Reduce stigmas with mental health
- Increase hope
- Work with other healthcare professionals on treatment teams to support Veterans' goals
- Inspire Veterans to successfully speak for themselves
- Guide Veterans to develop self-care skills to manage health conditions

The peer support model is the foundation of numerous WDVA programs. The first program to use this model was the Vet Corps Program in 2005. Other WDVA programs include case management services conducted in the Transitional Housing Program, Veterans Service Officer Program, VCC, Veterans Commercial Tobacco Cessation Program, Staff Sergeant Fox Suicide Prevention Program, the Orting Veterans Farm, and the Brain Injury and Recovery Program. The Veterans Training Support Center (VTSC) supports these programs with the latest best practices in peer support and mental health. Finally, the peer support programs enhance the effectiveness of the Counseling Program by breaking down stigmas around mental health and encouraging follow-through and disclosure. SB 5358's funding supports services to rural counties that previously had few or no services.

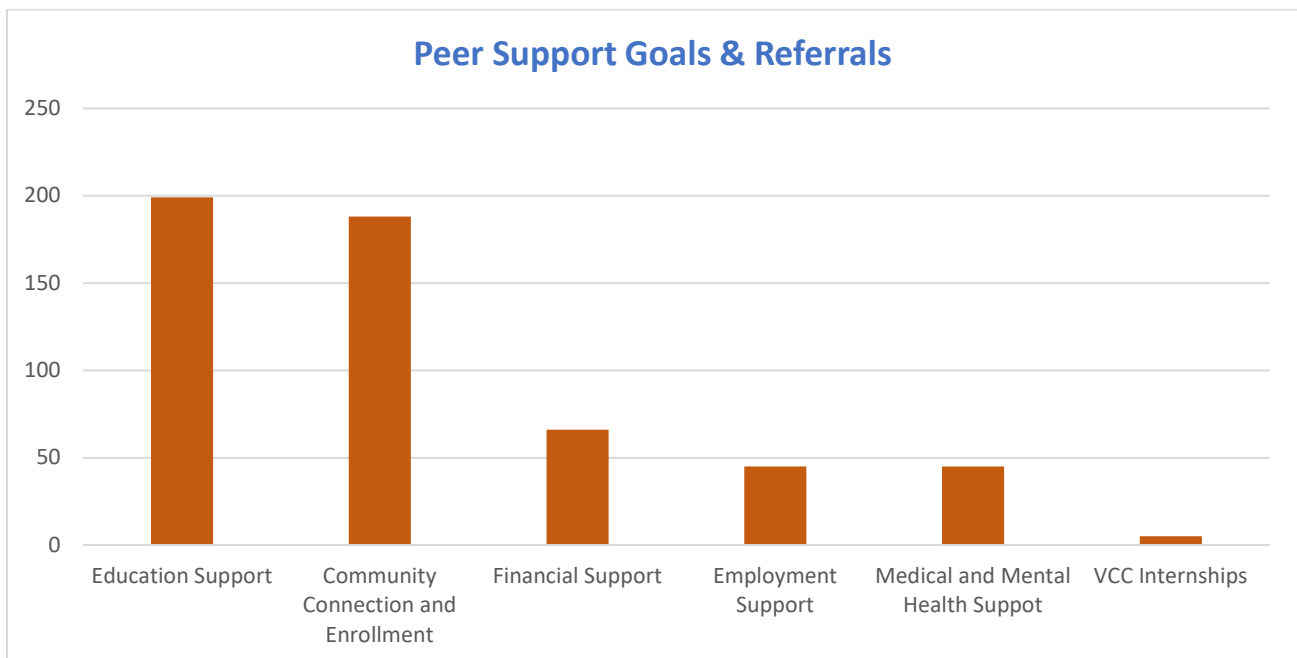
## Activities and Outcomes

Additional funds provided by SB 5358 were used for peer support, mental health services, and training for underserved veterans living in rural counties. These services help veterans successfully transition into civilian life, connect veterans to community resources and overcome barriers to those resources, increase access to quality mental health services, and provide needed training to improve overall service delivery.

WDVA established peer support programs and infrastructure to enhance its efforts to reach and provide needed support to veterans living in rural communities. The peer support programs used to support

these efforts were Vet Corps, Brain and Injury and Recovery, and Veterans Conservation Corps. Through these programs, 612 rural veterans received peer support services, and of these 612 veterans, 543 developed goals to improve their lives and received the needed referrals to accomplish these goals. The goal set includes:

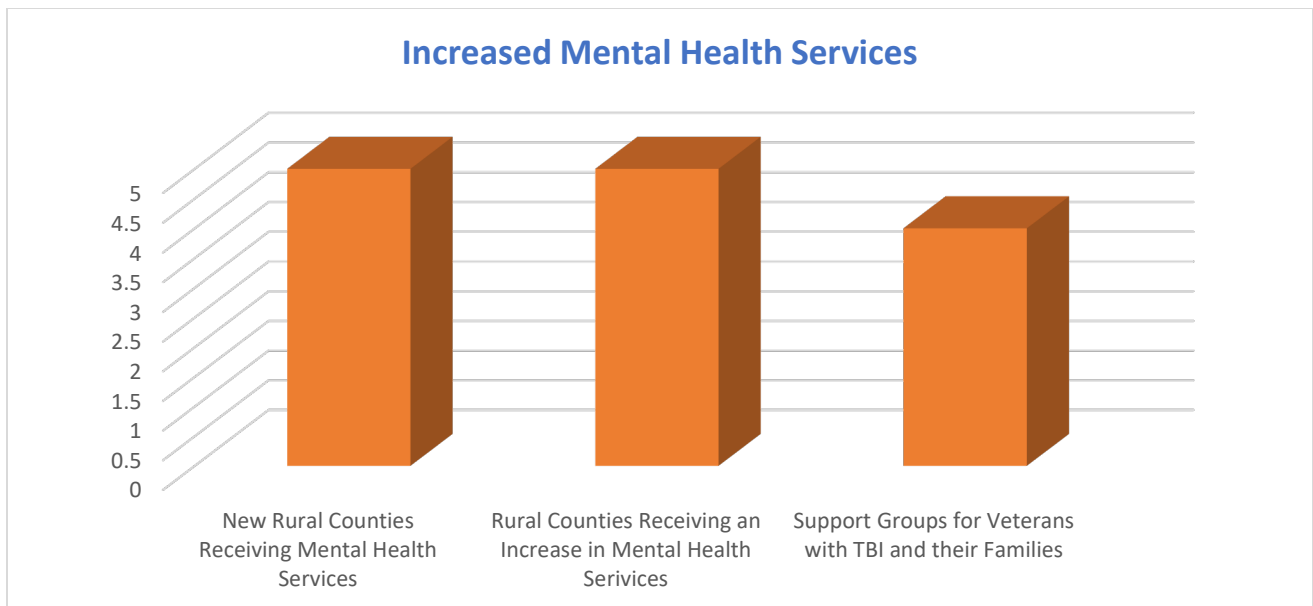
- **188 veterans** improved connections and program enrollment: 174 veterans were connected to other veterans, seven veterans were referred to other WDVA Programs, six were referred to the Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program, and one veteran was enrolled in King County Veteran Services.
- **199 Veterans** received education support: 72 veterans received support with their GI Bill, 49 veterans received academic counseling, 34 veterans received financial aid, 14 veterans received scholarships, 13 veterans received education accommodations, nine veterans received tutoring support, seven veterans received disability services, and one veteran enrolled in the VA Vocational Program.
- **45 veterans** received employment support: 16 veterans received assistance with finding and applying for jobs, 15 veterans received assistance with obtaining a job, nine veterans received assistance with preparing for job interviews, and five veterans received assistance with resume development.
- **45 veterans** received physical and mental health support: 27 veterans enrolled in VA Health Care, and 18 were referred to mental health services.
- **66 veterans** received financial support: 49 veterans received support with financial services, and 17 veterans enrolled in VA e-benefits.
- **5 veterans** received internships through the Veterans Conservation Corps Program.



## Activities Mental Health

Mental health services for veterans directly contribute to their successful working through crises, positive life outcomes, and improved well-being. As mentioned, WDVA has a statewide Counseling Program offering free mental health services to veterans and their families. This program provides individual therapy, marriage therapy, family therapy, case management, crisis services, consultation, education to the community, and group therapy. Some of the mental health conditions addressed by the Counseling Program are Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Depression, Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), Substance use, and referrals to community resources. Providers with this program often provide the diagnosis and documentation to assist veterans in receiving their VA benefits. They also provide the documentation to support veterans in maintaining their benefits. WDVA leverages funding from SB 5358 to provide counseling services in new rural regions of the state that didn't have mental health services, increase services in other areas, and provide new types of services. As a result:

- **157 veterans** received mental health services
- **5 new rural counties** received mental health services: Grant (19 veterans served), Island and San Juan (32 veterans served), Skamania (10 veterans served), and Asotin (4 veterans served).
- **5 rural counties** increased mental health services: Whatcom (43 veterans served), Clallam (19), Stevens, Ferry, and Pend Oreille (30 veterans served).
- **4 support groups** serving veterans with brain injuries and their families: Kitsap (2) Stevens (2) Counties. These support groups will be starting in the fall of 2024.



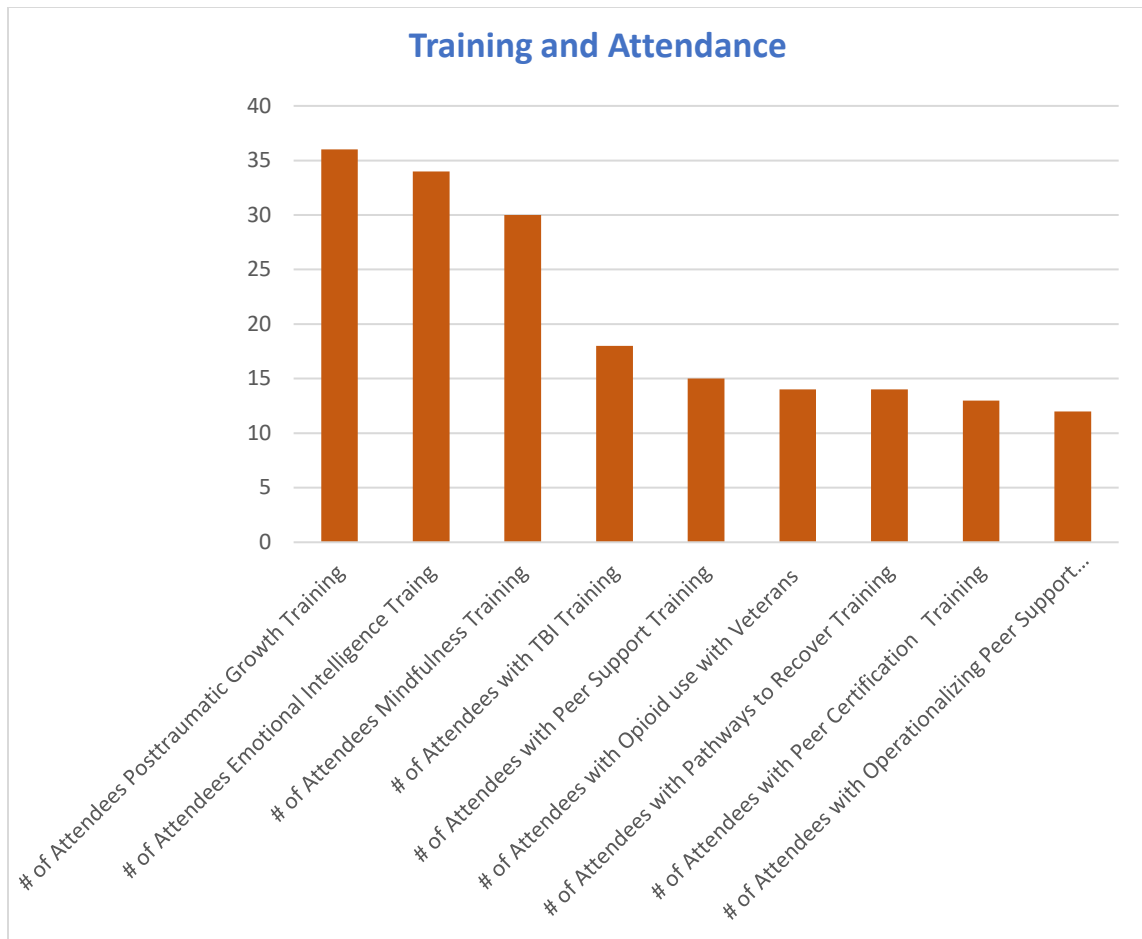
## **Activities Training**

Peer support specialists and mental health providers must receive essential training to provide effective services to veterans and their family members. Training provides the latest information on best practices, tools, techniques, and strategies to improve service quality. WDVA's Veterans Training Support Center (VTSC) provides this essential training.

The Veterans Training Support Center's essential function is advancing the understanding of veterans and their families. VTSC works to achieve this by offering workshops on topics that impact or support this community, including the often-unseen battles with Post Traumatic Stress, Traumatic Brain Injury, and Moral Injury. The program focuses on all areas that work with veterans, such as employers, service providers, and leaders across all public, private, and academic sectors to forge and implement innovative best practices. These practices are designed to uplift and empower veterans as they navigate their personal journeys', educational endeavors, and professional aspirations. VTSC actively works with subject matter experts to lead workshops, which are available both in person and online. The workshops share insights and strategies that support our veterans' growth and success. The American Psychological Association accredits VTSC. These training and workshops are free to attendees. WDVA used funds from SB 5358 to provide needed training to peer support specialists, mental health providers, veterans, and family members. These are training that were completed.

- **Opioid and Stimulant Impact on US Military Veterans:** 14 attendees
- **Operationalizing Peer Support (HCA):** 12 attendees
- **Posttraumatic Growth:** 36 attendees
- **Mindfulness for Less Stress and More Well-Being:** 30 attendees
- **Peer Support and Community Support:** 15 attendees
- **Pathways to Recovery:** 14 attendees
- **Brain Injury and Recovery:** 18 attendees
- **Emotional Intelligence:** 34 attendees
- **Peer Certification:** 13 participants





## Recommendation

Washington Department of Veterans Affairs recommends expanding the Rural Peer Support program and mental health services to rural communities. WDVA completed an analysis of rural counties based on resources available to veterans and family members. While we believe all counties are well-served by having additional peer support, a phased approach could focus on Adams, Kittitas, Pacific, Lincoln, Lewis, Clallam, Grant, Franklin, and Asotin. This expansion would allow WDVA to reach more veterans, make a positive difference, and save lives. Peer support for veterans is essential in supporting this community and getting veterans needed support. One of the critical components that makes peer support successful is having a shared life experience. This shared life experience builds trust between the peer support specialists and veterans. This trust makes referrals to community resources more successful and leads to more positive outcomes. These services directly support the efforts of reducing veterans dying by suicide and homelessness, and they increase veterans obtaining gainful employment, connecting to needed resources, and receiving VA benefits.

With additional funding, WDVA will be able to expand its current infrastructure to increase peer support and mental health services in rural counties and reach rural communities where these services don't exist. Each rural community has its unique culture, and providing successful services in these regions requires developing trusting and respectful relationships locally. WDVA has built these local quality partnerships, and as a result, the agency can expand services efficiently. In addition, rural veterans tend to be older, have limited access to the internet and technology, and would prefer to have services in person. WDVA has the infrastructure and partnerships to address these demographics as well.

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- <sup>3</sup>Steelesmith, D., Fontanella, C. A., Campo, J. V., Bridge, J. A., Warren, K. L., & Root, E. D. (2019). Contextual factors associated with county-level suicide rates in the United States, 1999 to 2016. *JAMA Network Open*, 2(9).
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- <sup>5</sup>Evidence for Peer Support, Mental Health America (2019)
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- <sup>7</sup>Value of Peers, SAMHSA (2017)
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