



**Testimony**  
**House Committee on Veterans Affairs**  
**Health Sub Committee**  
**SSG Fox Suicide Prevention Grants:**  
**Saving Veterans' Lives Through Community Connection**

**Introduction**

I would like to begin by thanking the Committee for its transformational work on behalf of our nation's Veterans and their families. I applaud Chairwoman Miller-Meeks and Ranking Member Brownley for their leadership, and I greatly appreciate the opportunity to speak to the Subcommittee regarding the Staff Sergeant Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program.

My name is Joyce King, and I serve as director of the SSG Fox Suicide Prevention Grant program at Sheppard Pratt. I am a Board-certified mental health therapist and substance abuse counselor, as well as a military Veteran with more than 25 years of mental health, substance use, and social services experience.

Sheppard Pratt is the nation's largest private, nonprofit provider of mental health, substance use, developmental disability, special education, and social services in the country. We provide specialized services for Veterans including Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF), Homeless Veteran Reintegration Program (HVRP), and clinically intensive Grant Per Diem (GPD) transitional housing. Many of these programs are funded by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

Collectively, Sheppard Pratt's Veterans services assist approximately 1,250 homeless veterans every year in urban, rural, and suburban communities across Maryland and in selected West Virginia counties. Many of our staff are Veterans, including some staff who were previously clients. The dedication and commitment of our team drives our impact: We have helped over 5,235 homeless Veteran and Veteran family members to obtain permanent housing. Our HVRP program helps homeless Veterans to obtain employment with an average wage of just under \$20 per hour.

**Joining the SSG Fox Program**

In 2022, the VA released the SSG Fox Grant Notice of Funding Opportunity. Its deep focus on community connection, well-being, and suicide prevention responded to a clear gap in community-based

services for Veterans. Accordingly, we jumped at the opportunity to better serve our Veteran community.

The application process was well-organized and transparent, with significant flexibility in approach provided by the VA. The staff at the VA deserve credit for designing and implementing a disciplined, efficient application process.

Sheppard Pratt was honored to be awarded a SSG Fox Grant on September 19, 2022. Our implementation strategy combines comprehensive and holistic strategies selected based on the best available evidence for the greatest potential to prevent suicide among veterans across Maryland. We leverage current programming and relationships with veterans that are at high-risk yet disengaged with VA and mental health care.

Peer support is a critical component of our SSG Fox implementation strategy. Through this new funding, we have trained Veterans with lived experiences related to suicide and mental health. Our peer support specialists work directly with Veterans and their family members to promote connectedness, provide holistic case management, and reduce risk factors for suicide. In addition, case managers help Veterans with a range of health, housing, employment, and other needs.

As the SSG Fox Grant program was only recently launched, our data are preliminary but suggestive. During enrollment, 95% of Veteran clients indicated need for mental health services; 75% required reconnection to the VA for services and supports; 65% reported benefits challenges; 60% requested peer support and connection; and 60% reported health, housing, employment, or other challenges best addressed through case management.

The need, therefore, is clear.

## **The Impact of the SSG Fox Program**

The impact of the SSG Fox Grant program is best demonstrated through stories. I would like to share the story of one participant: I'll call her Alice. Alice's story illustrates the power of the SSG Fox Grant program, as well as the way in which community-based Veterans services – including SSVF and HVRP – combine to prevent suicide and promote well-being more generally.

Alice is a 48-year-old single female Navy Veteran, with a history of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI).<sup>1</sup>

Alice recently experienced two traumatic events. In 2022, she was laid off. To make ends meet, she moved in with her sister. In 2023, her sister passed away unexpectedly. With the loss of both her job and her sister, she fell behind on her rent. Alice had to choose between paying for her rent or buying food.

In September 2023, she called Sheppard Pratt. Our SSG Fox program team collaborated with SSVF to help Alice find a more affordable housing option. To help Alice gain employment, our SSG Fox and

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<sup>1</sup> Some details have been altered to protect confidentiality.

HVRP teams worked together to provide Alice with both a computer and technology training. And Alice dedicated herself to her job search. Within a month of her calling Sheppard Pratt, she had a new job in the IT field.

While Alice was working to obtain a new job and housing, she was simultaneously grieving her sister's death. The SSG Fox peer support specialist was instrumental in modeling healthy and effective coping strategies.

Today, Alice is working and living stably in a safe, healthy home. She shared the impact of SSG Fox in her exit survey: "I can say for sure that the program and ALL of the team went above and beyond my expectations. I honestly never felt like I was alone during the process. In fact, the opposite almost, I literally felt like a team was assigned to me for different stages and aspects. I couldn't be more (sic) grateful."

Alice's comments about the SSG Fox program are echoed by other participants.

John Woodard, a former Marine, similarly was struggling with PTSD, a job loss, and eviction when he connected with the SSG Fox program.

John tells his story better than I could. He said, "Sheppard's Veterans Services got me and my family out of a situation that I was in before where I was not appreciated, and I was not being supported for my mental illness. Now I am in a better location with my family with a peaceful mind, instead of in a crime-infested area where I could hardly sleep because of fear and hypervigilance. I would like to thank the Veterans Services programs for coming to my rescue. I've been using this time to heal and get help with my PTSD, and I've been going back to school. Veterans Services made that possible."

Mr. Woodard adds, "I would like to say thank you for keeping your word and coming through in my time of need. I wasn't getting any support from anywhere and they came in and saved me, saved my whole year. I was depressed, I was upset, I was thinking about suicide. And I just want to say thank you."

John has advice for Veterans across the nation: "To other vets who are where I was, I would say you can't get discouraged. You can find a way. Reach out for help when you need it. It takes a team, just like in the military. [Sheppard Pratt's] Veterans Services was part of my team."

John is better able to articulate the value of the SSG Fox Grant program than perhaps anyone.

### **Enhancing the Impact and Scale of the SSG Fox Program**

As both our qualitative and quantitative data illustrate, the strengths of the SSG Fox Grant program are undeniable: our team is reaching Veterans who are at high-risk of suicide; the program is connecting Veterans with critical resources that are both community-based and VA-based; and this intervention is helping Veterans to improve their well-being and strengthen protective factors against suicide. Moreover, the VA has been responsive to community feedback and supported the evolution of the program based on both the community feedback and data analysis.

Like every new initiative, SSG Fox will need to evolve to achieve greater impact – and further contribute to the end of Veteran suicides.

How, then, can we enhance the impact of SSG Fox? What lessons have we learned thus far?

First, we must expand access to life-saving clinical behavioral health services for SSG Fox participants. There are two primary challenges that SSG Fox participants face when we connect them to mental health and substance use treatment services.

While 95% of Veterans enrolled in our SSG Fox program have requested mental health and other behavioral health services, we have experienced delays in connecting Veterans to outpatient services at the VA. We appreciate that the VA is working diligently to reduce wait times and recognize that significant progress has been made. In the meantime, we respectfully request a clear and direct path for high-risk SSG Fox clients to VA mental health services.

Further, we respectfully request an improvement in rates for community behavioral health service providers serving Veterans.

Sheppard Pratt is committed to providing behavioral health services to Veterans, but current rates for both Tricare and Community Care Network providers do not cover the cost of care. Raising rates to reflect provider costs is critical to expanding community-based mental health and substance use treatment services for Veterans across the nation.

Finally, I would like to recommend that we continue to invest in the SSG Fox Grant Program, expanding its scale and reach over time. Current funding restrictions limit our ability as providers to serve Veterans in every community. Additional resources will allow us to better engage Veterans across the nation, particularly Veterans who are reluctant to seek support.

As John Woodard reminded us, “it takes a team, just like in the military.” The SSG Fox Grant Program is an essential part of the team working to prevent Veteran suicide across our nation.

## **Conclusion**

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak to the Subcommittee regarding the Staff Sergeant Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program. As a veteran and a clinician, my gratitude is both professional and personal.

## **About Sheppard Pratt**

Sheppard Pratt is the nation's largest private, nonprofit provider of mental health, substance use, developmental disability, special education, and social services in the country. A nationwide resource, Sheppard Pratt provides services across a comprehensive continuum of care, spanning both hospital- and community-based resources. Since its founding in 1853, Sheppard Pratt has been innovating the field through research, best practice implementation, and a focus on improving the quality of mental health care on a global level. Sheppard Pratt has been consistently recognized as a top national psychiatric hospital by U.S. News & World Report for nearly 30 years. Thanks to support from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and the U.S. Department of Labor, Sheppard Pratt provides Supportive Services for Veteran Families, Homeless Veteran Reintegration Program, Grant Per Diem Clinically Intensive Transitional Housing, and SSG Fox Suicide Prevention Services to veterans in Maryland and, for some services, in West Virginia.