

Written Testimony of
Melissa "Missy" Meyer
Director of Community Integration
America's Warrior Partnership (AWP)

U.S. House Committee on Veterans Affairs
Subcommittee on Health

September 11, 2024

10:00 am, Cannon House Office Bldg., Room 360

Legislative Hearing

Chairwoman Miller-Meeks, Ranking Member Brownley, and other honorable members of the Subcommittee

Thank you for the honor to testify before the House Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Health. There are many bills up for discussion today, but my testimony will primarily focus on one: The No Wrong Door for Veterans Act, which reauthorizes the SSG Parker Gordon Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program.

However, before I discuss the bill, I wanted to mention America's Warrior Partnership's support for another bill being discussed today, H.R. 9427, introduced by Chairman Bost, to carry out a pilot program to provide grants to outpatient mental health facilities for the provision of culturally competent, evidence-based mental health care for veterans.

At AWP, one of the most common requests for health care services is related to mental health. The more our nation can expand access to mental health care for veterans, the better. But it must be done with a holistic approach. Counseling is a great tool, but every veteran is unique. Offering additional choices, such as outpatient facilities for mental health, access to Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) treatment (since it is often concurrent with mental health crisis), and Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG) training (both pre- and post-crisis) can expand the resources available.

That being said, AWP is focused on outreach to all veterans. Since I was last before the Subcommittee to discuss the SSG Fox Grant last December, much has changed and much has been accomplished. AWP is one of the most successful recipients of funding from the SSG Parker Gordon Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program (aka SSG Fox Grant).

As we told the Committee last year, the original idea of the SSG Fox Grant had a singular goal: find veterans in the community that are in need and help them.

However, as the program was implemented by the VA and put into practice by organizations across the country, part of this goal has been diluted and lost. To reach that goal, Congress needs to implement reforms that specifically bring back

outreach as the singular focus, streamline the intake into the VA for eligible Fox veterans, and hold organizations accountable.

We are very thankful for all your hard work on this program, Chairwoman Miller-Meeks, Ranking Member Brownley. The introduced legislation, H.R. 9438, to reauthorize the SSG Fox Grant, is a terrific start, and AWP is grateful for your efforts to continue this successful program. To help improve the SSG Fox Grant program, we offer a few observations and suggestions:

Program Overview

As one of 80 SSG Fox Grant recipients, we have done a significant amount of outreach with the program since its inception. From October 2023 to July 2024, AWP produced results:

- 1,818 warriors screened for suicidal ideation using the Columbia-Suicide Severity Rating Scale
- 13% disclosed some level (low, moderate, high) of suicide risk (235)

This rate of outreach, screening, and eligibility is consistent with past years.

The SSG Fox Grant Program is working. Veterans who are both inside and outside the VA and VSO system and in need of assistance are being identified. Relationships are being built and connections with resources made. Since Fox Grant Inception, 370 veterans have trusted AWP with their thoughts of suicide while only 6% of those warriors were seeking assistance for a mental health related issue to begin with. This is a success story and asking “the question” works. AWP, the VA, and Congress have all played an integral part in saving these veterans, but there is more that can be done.

Coordination:

AWP is thankful for the inclusion of language that directs briefings for VA employees about the SSG Fox Grant program. It’s important for organizations in the community and the VA to all coordinate together. It is our hope that grant recipients will be invited to these briefings and work together to improve

communication and “warm hand-offs” of individual cases as they arise. Previously, many VA staff members had no idea what the Fox Grant is or why grantees were calling asking for assistance with a “Fox Participant.” Ensuring a bi-direction, solid working relationship with local Suicide Prevention Coordinators and VA staff is essential, as is more education to frontline staff on the SSG Fox Grant. Accordingly, as an advocate for veterans who trust us, it is essential for the VA to communicate back to grantees their plan and status of that veteran.

Screening Questionnaires:

Next, AWP is very grateful for the inclusion of language in H.R. 9438 that eliminates some of the redundancies and bureaucracy of the screening questions. As AWP mentioned in previous testimony in December 2023, rarely did veterans make it through all the questionnaires, and the Columbia Protocol (C-SSRS) has proven to be the most inclusive and comprehensive set of questions needed to ensure those at risk are identified quickly and easily.

While the legislation mandates C-SSRS as the only required screening protocol, AWP recommends adding language that would make the five follow-on assessments optional. Rarely do veterans make it through all five of the VA-mandated assessment questionnaires, and it has become burdensome on staff as well. Instead, the focus should be on ensuring the veterans have access to resources and not focusing on answering redundant questions.

Crisis Intervention:

In H.R. 9438, the section on “Emergent Suicide Care” is a strong addition. In many instances, AWP has used the 988-emergency crisis line to help veterans identified through Fox Grant outreach. This language helps codify support and resources available to those who are unable to obtain services in the crucial 72-hr window after first contact.

Clearly Defined Pathway for Eligible Individuals:

The addition of the Emergent Care section in H.R. 9438 is very helpful. However, AWP recommends adding a section that clearly lays out the expectations for the program itself and identifies boundaries for the VA and organizations. While AWP does all it can to provide connections to referrals and resources, AWP is not a direct service provider. It is clearly outlined in the scope of the grant proposal. However, the line has become muddled and expectations are often unclear.

To fix this, it would be helpful to add a section that requires a specific program “on-ramp” for veterans identified by grant recipients that need VA care. The process does not need to be complex or burdensome. Since grant recipients have already asked the required questions and processed the information, passing along the information to the VA without burdening the veterans themselves again with tiring, frustrating, redundant questions (which sometimes involve discussing traumatic experiences) would dramatically increase the success rate of the program as well as assist the veteran more efficiently.

This can be done in several ways. For example, requiring that after grantees go through the required screening procedures, eligible veterans must be connected with the 988-crisis line or their local VAMC for expedited care when necessary. In addition, Congress could also mandate that the VA create a dedicated phone line for intakes from grantees that would offer expedited care.

Accountability:

The SSG Parker Gordon Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program is working. To keep the program successful, we need to ensure all organizations that are receiving grants in the program are held to account. The \$750,000 grants come from the trust Congress and the American taxpayers have in our organizations, and AWP holds that trust in the highest regard. Accordingly, AWP holds itself to account regularly with audits and reviews, and we work hard to ensure these funds are maximized efficiently to find veterans in the community and serve them.

At AWP, we hope all other grantees are holding themselves accountable with the same high standards. However, Congress and the VA must also hold organizations accountable with verifiable metrics. AWP recommends adding a section requiring the VA develop accountability metrics that report outreach, referrals, etc - and then require regular reports to Congress. It is the only way to find if some organizations are not fulfilling their responsibility under the program.

For the metrics themselves, it's hard to identify specific keys to success. However, AWP believes the best way to look at program success is to measure the number of screened individuals and the number of eligible veterans, in addition to outreach completed to document efforts towards identifying those in need.

While accountability and metrics are vital, the Data Collection Tool (DCT) implemented by the VA at the end of 2023 has had the opposite of its intended effect. While developed to streamline data submission previously completed in thousands of pdf documents, the result has been a standstill in reporting for many grantees. The SSG Fox Grant Program assessments are meant to be anonymous. The DCT now requires a participant's Date of Birth and Social Security Number to enter any data shared in the DCT. AWP has gone from reporting nearly all data to less than 5%. Previously, the program was hindered by the redundancy of assessments and lack of incentive to complete them multiple times. Now that is compounded by the obvious lack of anonymity that comes with providing your PHI to the VA for an "anonymous program." AWP hoped the DCT would save both AWP staff and clients from repetitive and exhausting data reporting, but unfortunately it has only diminished any data collection the VA hoped to gain through this grant.

In February 2024, the VA asked for suggestions on how to remedy this issue. AWP has suggested returning to participant identification numbers that were previously used to report data (created and tracked only by the reporting agency) rather than PHI of participants. This issue remains despite repeated acknowledgements by VA staff that data is not being adequately captured with the DCT as it is.

Grantee Funding:

For AWP, the only limitation in being more successful with the program is funding. If the ceiling on the grants was doubled overnight, so would AWP's outreach efforts.

Accordingly, while \$750,000 has been the limit on SSG Fox Grants to date, there are organizations, like AWP, who have successfully utilized the grant and could do more with more. While not for all organizations, raising the ceiling could be beneficial if done correctly. Again, it would require metrics and reporting.

Members of the Subcommittee, thank you again for the opportunity to testify today. We look forward to our continued work together and would like to thank each of you for all your hard work and dedication to those who served in our nation's armed forces.
