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May 11, 2022

United States House of Representative
117th Congress
Washington, D.C. 20510

SFR for Reducing Military and Veteran Suicide Strategy

U.S.VETS is the nation's largest nonprofit provider of comprehensive services to homeless and at-risk veterans. After 29 years of operation, U.S.VETS has gone from a single facility in Inglewood, California, serving five unsheltered Vietnam veterans, to 31 residential and service centers across five states – Arizona, California, Hawaii, Nevada, and Texas – as well as the District of Columbia.

U.S.VETS –Patriotic Hall, the 11th site for U.S.VETS established in 2013, has become a leader at cutting edge prevention and early intervention programs that not only prevent veteran homelessness but include a comprehensive suite of programs that have integrated suicide risk assessment and evidence-based treatment into three major programs. The programs are Women Vets on Point (WVoP), Outside the Wire (OTW), and the Career Development Initiative (CDI).

Women Vets on Point

In partnership with Education Development Center (EDC), U.S.VETS developed a digital platform to outreach and provide case management and mental health services for women veterans. U.S.VETS ability to provide free mental health support for women veterans is pivotal, as the gap between women veterans' needs and the services available to meet those needs, has continued to widen. A *Military Times* poll in 2020, showed that more than half of female respondents indicated needing mental health support, compared to 31% of male respondents. This was attributed to women veterans being more likely to have to simultaneously balance various responsibilities, including work, finance, and childcare. The impact of COVID-19 over the last two years has only exacerbated this, as social isolation, the economic downturn, and the constant threat of the virus and its variants, have increased levels of mental distress. Since 2019, we provided access to 1,170 mental health sessions for women veterans including via both individual and group sessions. Additionally, WVoP has engaged 643 women veterans through individual therapy, group therapy, case management, social programming, and/or outreach events.

Outside the Wire

Across Los Angeles and Orange Counties, U.S.VETS operates its Outside the Wire program to provide students veterans and their families a wide range of support. By integrating ourselves into the Veteran Resource Centers on community college campuses, we meet veterans where they are to assess and address the specific needs of each program beneficiary, as no two veterans' circumstances are the same. As experts in our individual fields, our joint offerings include access to mental health support, as well as connection to benefits assistance, housing, employment services, legal support, and more. Our team of



trained therapists and case managers are equipped with the tools to provide these services through methods that are tailored for veterans studying at community colleges and technical schools, and their family members.

According to the 2021 *CA Community College Veteran Mental Health and Transition Support* report, one-third of student veterans enter civilian life without receiving transitional supports and those who do express the want for additional, more hands-on support (The RP Group). Through Outside the Wire's "concierge-style," U.S.VETS team members seek out ways to assist individual veterans proactively and assume the burden of each stage of follow-up. This approach removes one major barrier to care: complexity of structure.

Additionally, a core component of Outside the Wire's prevention and early intervention approach is its integration within the college campus community. 80% of Veteran Resources Centers report that physical distance to external resources is a barrier to getting student veterans the support they need (The RP Group, 2021). By maintaining a physical presence on campuses, in which clinicians and case managers provide free mental health therapy and screenings for benefits on-site, Outside the Wire removes this barrier of access.

Additionally, throughout the global Covid-19 pandemic, our team has leveraged virtual platforms to stay connected with student veterans and their families, by utilizing tools available within the digital space, such as video-conferencing, phone calls, social media, and our website. In a 2020 Wounded Warrior Project study, 51% of veterans report they had a mental health session cancelled or postponed in the pandemic. By supporting our clients to navigate these virtual platforms, Outside the Wire helps alleviate the barrier to access services that Covid-19 pandemic has only exacerbated.

Through the Outside the Wire program, U.S.VETS achieves the following goals and objectives:

- 1) **Veteran student families will enjoy good mental health and healthier relationships within and beyond their families.**
 - a) **Whole-Family Care:** Veteran students and their families will receive support.
 - b) **Mental Health Treatment:** Veterans students will show improvement in mental health as measured by clinical assessments like the OQ45.
 - c) **Suicide Prevention:** 100% of veterans with warning signs of suicide will be assessed, screened, and referred for treatment.
 - d) **Outreach and Education:** Outside the Wire provides educational workshops and trainings on relevant mental health topics to veterans students, family members, faculty, and community partners across the state through CalTAP webinars and other local opportunities.

- 2) **Veteran students and family members will transition smoothly to civilian life, achieving stable living situations, sound finances, and academic success.**
 - a) **Benefits Acquisition:** U.S.VETS refers veterans to local County Services offices to receive local, state, and federal benefits to which they are entitled or achieve discharge upgrades that enable pursuit of these benefits.
 - b) **Veteran-Sensitive Justice:** Through pre-existing partnerships, Outside the Wire provides referrals to assist in resolving veterans' legal problems.



- c) **Field-Based Homeless Assistance:** Mental health clinicians will assess and refer veterans to case managers for housing assistance.

3) Mental health providers will have cultural and clinical competence with veterans.

- a) **Workforce Development:** U.S.VETS will train the next generation of mental health practitioners to gain cultural competence and experience with the veteran population under the supervision of highly skilled clinicians.

Striving for Zero: Veterans Suicide Prevention Summit

In addition, to these programs, U.S.VETS has supported the Mental Health Services Oversight and Accountability Commissions' *Striving for Zero, California's Strategic Plan for Suicide Prevention 2020-25*, through an annual summit highlighting the latest research and trends in veteran suicide prevention.

In 2020, 2021, and now 2022, U.S.VETS has partnered with CalVet to host this virtual summit, the theme of which was "Hope, Transformation, Wellbeing." Among our participants were USAF veteran Dave Weiner, who created the Veteran Mental Evaluation Unit being piloted nationwide by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs; Brian Malte, a nationally recognized leader in the gun violence prevention movement; and Tess Banko, MSW/MPA, a survivor and Marine veteran who formerly directed the UCLA/VA Veteran Family Wellness Center and has recently joined the U.S.VETS team as our Project Director for our West L.A. VA Housing project.

The framework is already developed and proven for a standalone virtual event, *Striving for Zero: Veterans Suicide Prevention Summit* which represents the whole of California's veteran population and is spearheaded by U.S.VETS in partnership with the Los Angeles Department of Mental Health, CalVet, and the V.A.

Peer Support and Outreach Program

During the height of the pandemic, U.S.VETS expanded its Outside the Wire services in Orange County to provide an innovative outreach program to provide social connection to isolated veterans. The program included suicide risk assessment, and connection to mental health and other needed resources, as well as technical support on virtual platforms, and virtual mental health webinars. The team worked together to create virtual resources for our veterans, such as virtual outreach sessions, connection to virtual mental health and or case management appointments, suicide risk assessment, and virtual mental health seminars which included topics, such as resilience training to combat the impact of social isolation, suicide prevention, emotional regulation, anger management, managing substance abuse issues, connection to virtual employment services, peer programs, and specific programming to meet the needs of women veterans. All of the virtual seminars provided technical assistance for veteran attendees on operational aspects of the platform. The key activities of this Peer program included:

- **Social Marketing and Website Development.** U.S.VETS used social marketing and website development to outreach to veterans regarding the program as well as offer a way for veterans to connect to additional resources and social support via an 800 number and a website link.
- **Social Engagement Sessions:** Through virtual or in-person sessions (with appropriate social distancing), the peer support specialist met with the veteran, or the veteran and their family, to form a connection and to assess the needs of the veteran and determine the appropriate referrals for mental health or case management services. Sessions were provided to strengthen

social engagement, support linkage to services, and address barriers by providing technical assistance.

- **Pre-Enrollment Contact Assessments.** Two peer support specialists worked with the program coordinator to respond to requests from phone line, other providers, and website referrals for services and assess the need for social support, mental health, or case management services.
- **Enrollment in the Program.** An individualized brief assessment was developed with the veteran and the peer support specialist to determine the need and schedule a visit.
- **Linkage to Services and Follow-Up.** Met with veterans for 1-3 sessions to link to resources, for employment, mental health, and women's programs and support the linkage through a warm handoff, and follow-up to assure needs are being met.
- **Suicide Risk Assessment:** A PHQ-9 was administered to determine the level of risk present for additional mental health services and connection to the Veteran Crisis Line, if necessary, for connection to suicide prevention services. Veteran peer advocates administered the assessment at enrollment or at a pre-contact session during request for service as clinically indicated.
- **Mental Health Webinars:** The program coordinator facilitated four mental health virtual webinars, to educate the veteran population on mental health issues, and provide additional resources to veterans for ongoing mental health support. In addition, technical assistance was provided to support connection through the virtual platforms.

Career Development Program

Because of the compounding nature of mental health and reintegration challenges that many veterans face upon returning home, U.S.VETS provides innovative employment support to help veterans in finding a viable long-term career path, as well as mental health counseling, housing, and other support services. Combined, these efforts have the potential to enhance the quality of life for our clients and their families, for generations to come.

The U.S.VETS Career Development Initiative is our innovative employment program that utilizes an individualized, multi-step approach to identify a veteran's interests and skill set, help them translate those skills into the civilian market, and match them to a prospective employer. This CDI program design has proven to be a successful model for veteran employment. Most veterans enrolled in CDI start their careers, often with high average salaries and long-term retention prospects, 2-3 months after their initial assessment. In greater detail, key activities of CDI include:

- **Veteran and Employer Outreach-** Collaborations include but are not limited to, educational organizations, VA hospitals and medical centers, colleges, nonprofits, military installations, and workforce one-stop centers.
- **Pre-Enrollment Assessments-** To assess and identify potential barriers to address them prior to employment services.
- **Enrollment in CDI-** An individualized service plan is developed by the veteran and their Veteran Talent Specialist.
- **Employment Placement Services-** Job readiness preparation; job training/certification assistance; employment placement.



- **Retention Services**- Follow-up with employers and veterans for at least 12-months post-placement to lend support and troubleshoot issues.
- **Employer Engagement**- Building support from employers to recruit veterans, including holding career fairs, employee groups, presentations, and HR trainings.

Conclusion

U.S.VETS is proud to be recognized as a national leader in providing comprehensive services to unhoused and at-risk veterans. As the largest nonprofit provider for this population, our organization has established a legacy of meeting and exceeding industry standards, and engaging in successful partnerships with both public and private entities. Our early innovation and prevention programs housed at U.S.VETS – Patriotic Hall are pivotal in not only the fight to end veteran homelessness but also in reducing military and veteran suicide. We stand in support of the Administration’s efforts to reduce and prevent suicide within the military and veteran population.

Sincerely,

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