



## THE AMERICAN LEGION LEGISLATIVE POINT PAPERS

### **Suicide Prevention & Peer Support**

#### **Background**

In the military, servicemembers become a part of something larger than themselves. They find themselves surrounded by their peers who often function as a support network upon whom they can rely. When they transition from active service back to the civilian lifestyle, they may lose that support and feel isolated. Unfortunately, these transitional changes can bring about or exacerbate concerns related to emotional and environmental stress. Many of these issues can lead veterans to contemplate suicide. Peer support can aid in addressing this by providing veterans with access to others who are dealing with similar issues. Other important vehicles for suicide prevention include supporting the VA Suicide Prevention Hotline and continued funding of mental health initiatives.

The American Legion has taken a front-line role in these efforts by implementing an annual Buddy Check Week with Legionnaires and veterans. Buddy Check Week is a peer-to-peer outreach program which facilitates veterans having open and candid conversations with other veterans to share their experiences. There has been immense grassroots success with this initiative, and veterans have been connected with assistance they needed but did not know where to go or who to ask.

VA also works to provide a network of peer support for veterans during turbulent times as seen in Peer Support Programs at various facilities across the country. To this day, VA continues to hire peer specialists and technicians, provide a Peer Specialist Toolkit on its website and has instituted a Caregiver Peer Support Mentoring Program. All of these are amazing resources, but gaps remain to be filled. Developing effective partnerships with community mental health and addiction agencies to expand access to peer-support services, and ensuring VA has a recovery model tailored to meet the specialized needs of veterans through peer support, can help to bridge these gaps

#### **Key Points**

- Since 2007, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services have identified peer support as an evidence-based practice with Medicaid having reimbursed these services across 20 states.
- Studies have shown peer-support providers are better able to empathize with veterans in an accepting, adaptable and calm manner.
- In 2017, The American Legion established a suicide-prevention program to encourage conversations on the review of methods, programs and strategies that can best address and reduce veteran suicide.



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### What Can Congress Do?

- Ensure passage of legislation implementing a VA National Buddy Check Week.
- Support the expansion of the Peer Support Program, particularly in rural areas.
- Expand the provision of VA peer-support services on virtual platforms.
- Assure VA is providing culturally competent peer-support services to minority veterans.
- Pass legislation creating a pilot program that would provide grants to eligible entities for peer-to-peer mental health programs for veterans.

### Relevant Resolutions:

- Resolution No. 364 (2016): Department of Veterans Affairs to Develop Outreach and Peer to Peer Program for Rehabilitation.<sup>1</sup>
- Resolution No. 20 (2018): Suicide Prevention Program.<sup>2</sup>
- Resolution No. 142 (2016): Department of Veterans Affairs Mental Health Services.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The American Legion Resolution No. 364 (2016): [\*Department of Veterans Affairs to Develop Outreach and Peer to Peer Program for Rehabilitation.\*](#)

<sup>2</sup> The American Legion Resolution No. 20 (2018): [\*Suicide Prevention Program.\*](#)

<sup>3</sup> The American Legion Resolution No. 142 (2016): [\*Department of Veterans Affairs Mental Health Services.\*](#)