



POLICY ISSUE BRIEF

Veterans and Military Families PFC Joseph P. Dwyer Veteran Peer Support Program

Launched in 2012 as a pilot project the PFC Joseph P. Dwyer Veteran Peer Support Program takes a confidential, one-on-one, peer-to-peer approach to overcoming barriers to veterans' accessing traditional mental health treatment programs. The mission of the Dwyer Project is to assist veterans, service members, and their families to achieve and sustain personal health, wellness, and purpose in their post-service lives through the support of trained veteran peers. The Dwyer Project was initially launched in the counties of Suffolk, Jefferson, Saratoga and Rensselaer at the initiative of then-New York State Senator, now U.S. Congressman, Lee Zeldin, and former Senator Roy McDonald. The program has since expanded to a total of 23 projects across New York State.

Peer-to-peer interventions have been found to be a promising strategy for service members who are experiencing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Support services provided by peers can be particularly effective for those who have served in combat, binding individuals together and fostering the initial trust and credibility necessary for developing relationships in which individuals are willing to open up and discuss their problems. Peer services for veterans also represent a potentially rich source of outreach strategies for connecting with more difficult to reach veterans as well as an opportunity to use a preventive focus with regard to potential suicides.

According to the RAND Center for Military Health Policy Research 20 percent of the vets who served in either Iraq or Afghanistan suffer from either major depression or post-traumatic stress disorder. Nearly 20 percent of vets in these two categories have experienced a traumatic brain injury. These three service-related disorders alone have an enormous impact on the demand for veteran mental health treatment. Unfortunately, veterans with mental health needs are often reluctant to get help for a variety of reasons including stigma, shame, embarrassment and fear of being perceived as weak. The peer to peer (i.e., vet-to-vet) approach of the program helps to overcome these barriers. The program allows for complete anonymity without fear of reprisal. The program's goal is to link veterans together for socialization and friendship and ultimately, if needed, a greater willingness to seek and receive mental health care.

Recommendation

MHANYS supports the addition of \$8 million in the Budget for the Dwyer Project proposed by Governor Hochul. We urge the Legislature to continue their vital role in supporting the Dwyer Project by expanding the program to every county in New York State. We also advocate for greater involvement of families within the funding model.