

Senate Bill 1325 Implementation of Peer to Peer Veterans Services

Texas has the third largest population of veterans in the United States and contributes a significant number of the military service members deployed as part of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). According to the RAND Corporation's *Invisible Wounds of War* (Tanielian and Jaycox [Eds.], 2008), nearly one-third of the service members returning from OEF or OIF are affected by post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), major depression, or traumatic brain injury (TBI). These conditions require ongoing behavioral health services and supports for veterans as well as their families.

Amongst veterans, there is a stigma of seeking assistance, particularly mental health services. In order to assist veterans in recognizing that the problems they are experiencing post-deployment are often very amenable to treatment, DSHS is creating a peer-to-peer program that involves veterans facilitating groups of their peers in a model that was created in Texas and has been supported by the Texas Veteran's Commission.

The provision of peer support services is an emerging evidence-based practice in mental health, based on the founding concept that peers who are successful in rehabilitation are excellent sources of knowledge and beacons of hope for those less far along in the process of rehabilitation. Individuals who are reluctant to access mental health services are much more likely to participate in peer counseling services because they more likely to trust one of their own who has successfully navigated complex service systems.

The program developed by the organization named Bring Everyone Into the Zone, more commonly referred to as "In the Zone", utilizes peer-to-peer assistance groups to provide comradeship, inspiration and support to veterans. These groups are not meant to replace therapy groups or counseling. The peer support group leadership roles are intended for non-medical professionals who are veterans who have experienced similar issues. The groups are meant to be self-sustaining and, in no way, are meant to replace professional medical assistance. In fact, interaction with fellow veterans with similar experiences is meant to remove the stigma that the veteran may mistakenly associate with PTSD or TBI, making the veteran more amenable to seeking professional medical assistance.

The "In the Zone" program has three components that emphasize: Preparing, Caring, and Sharing. The Preparing component consists of the Facilitator Training & Continuing Education course in which volunteer veterans will be trained to implement the program in their communities. The Caring component consists of assisting veterans with connecting to social services, financial, and other resources to successfully reintegrate into the family and community. The final component, Sharing, is the actual Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) Peer-to-Peer Support Workshops which provides veterans with peer counseling services to facilitate their recovery.

DSHS is in the process of sponsoring "In the Zone" training to communities who are ready and willing to support and implement the three components of "In the Zone." This includes having the ability to provide a facilitator, a neutral meeting space and promote participation but also to identify and connect veterans to needed resources to establish and maintain themselves in the community, e.g. deposit to secure an apartment, gas money to go to the doctor. As of the end of May 2010, there have been 73 facilitators trained from many parts of the state.

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