



Veteran Resilience Project

Annual Legislative Report

January 2024

HF 1353

SF 1509



Legislative Report of Veteran Resilience Project’s (VRP) budget, explanation of expenditures, number of Veterans and service members served, and services provided.

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Subject: Veteran Resilience Project Annual Legislative Report

To:

Commissioner of Veterans Affairs: Honorable Brad Lindsay

Senate Committee: State and Local Government and Veterans Committee

Committee Chair: The Honorable Senator Erin Murphy

Vice Chair: The Honorable Senator Nicole L. Mitchell

Ranking Minority Leader: The Honorable Senator Bruce D. Anderson

House of Representatives Committee: Veterans and Military Affairs Finance and Policy

Committee Chair: The Honorable Representative Jerry Newton

Vice Chair: The Honorable Representative Steve Elkins

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Executive Summary:

Proactive mental health care within our Minnesota Military community is imperative and Veteran Resilience Project (VRP) would like to start by expressing our gratitude to the Minnesota Legislature for your collective recognition of this need. As we join forces to combat the concerning rise in Veteran suicides and foster the overall health and well-being of our military community, we acknowledge that there is still much work ahead. "Suicide is a complex problem requiring a full public health approach involving community prevention and clinical intervention. Yet, in order to address the complex interweaving of individual, relational, community and societal risks, VA must continue to fully engage with other federal agencies; public-private partnerships; government at the local, state and national levels; VSOs; and local communities to reach all Veterans to support the implementation of a full public health approach, as outlined in the White House Strategy Reducing Military and Veteran Suicide (2021) 33 and VA's National Strategy for Preventing Veteran Suicide (2018)."¹ In 2023, the proactive stance taken by the Minnesota Legislature endorsed the recommendations presented in the Department of Veterans Affairs' report. Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) Therapy remains accessible to all Minnesota Veterans and Service Members through VRP.

Demonstrating foresight and a systemic approach to addressing the complexities of PTSD, Trauma, and Secondary Trauma, the Legislature made a significant decision in 2023 by extending these healing opportunities to spouses. This acknowledgment reflects an understanding of the sacrifices that military spouses have made. Recognizing that more than a third of war veterans' wives meet the criteria for secondary traumatic stress, the importance of addressing the traumatization of the family is emphasized.² It is crucial to note that spouses lack access to the VA Healthcare system, and services like Military One Source, acting as an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), cannot provide Trauma or PTSD treatment or offer EMDR Therapy. Insurance plans such as Tricare pose barriers to care, requiring a provider referral and limiting approval to only 5 sessions at a time. Additionally, many providers hesitate to accept this insurance due to the challenges associated with becoming an in-network provider and the reimbursement model.

In the past year, VRP strategically focused on fortifying our foundation and extending our impact. A significant milestone was reached in February 2023 when we welcomed Zachary Binsfeld, a former sergeant in the MN Army National Guard and Iraq War Veteran (OIF 2006-2007), as our first full-time Outreach Coordinator. This marked a pivotal step in enhancing our outreach capabilities. Concurrently, our commitment to broadening our reach was further demonstrated through successful grant applications, allowing us to fund an additional Outreach position for Northern Minnesota. In November, we were pleased to bring Jenna Graen on board, a retiree from the Air National Guard with 21 years of service, boasting expertise in community outreach and healthcare.

To bolster our leadership and operational expertise, Susan Marschalk, our Interim Executive Director, provided stability and extensive knowledge in effective policies and procedures. Under her guidance, we welcomed four new Board Members, each bringing specialized expertise in policy, EMDR, human relations, and communications. This infusion of diverse skills has enriched our organizational capabilities. In November, both the Board and staff convened for a strategic planning retreat, charting both short-term and long-term goals.

A significant highlight was the MDVA monitoring visit in May 2023, providing an opportunity for constructive discussions on barriers. An audit of the Therapy Program was conducted, resulting in successful outcomes. The visit not only reinforced our partnership but also streamlined processes and reduced barriers, ensuring that Veterans, Service Members, and now Spouses receive quality care seamlessly. Maintaining an open communication relationship with MDVA has been instrumental, contributing to a strengthened collaboration that embodies a team effort. As a capstone to the year, the VRP Board appointed Jonna Phillips as the Executive Director at the end of 2023. Her extensive background as a clinician, trainer, supervisor, director, and ongoing military service with the MN National Guard positions her ideally for this role. Jonna will continue overseeing the Therapy Program alongside her executive obligations.

Looking ahead, VRP is excited to announce the appointment of a Care Coordinator at the beginning of 2024. This position will ensure continuity of care as our contacts and outreach efforts expand, resulting in a consistent increase in referrals. The holistic approach to strengthening leadership, expanding outreach, and enhancing care continuity positions VRP for continued success in serving our military community.

MDVA Grant and Appropriations:

In September 2023, VRP and MDVA signed the Amended Grant to include spouses and VRP was able to start drawing down their second year of appropriations of \$400,000. The first appropriation ended in June at the end of the fiscal year. Per the grant agreement, VRP receives funding for the following categories: Executive Director, Advanced EMDR Training, EMDR Certified Therapy, and Case Management. Below we will breakout each category and the funding being used and drawn down to support the programs for this fiscal year:

MDVA Grant: Initiated Sep 2023 and ends June 31st, 2024			
Budget Categories	MDVA funded	Amount reimbursed	Remaining
Executive Director	\$50,000	\$15,725.00	\$63,975
Advanced EMDR Training	\$30,000	(Trainings scheduled)	\$30,000
EMDR Certified Therapy	\$153,000	\$8,561.26	144,438.74
Case Management Payroll	\$167,000	\$53,750.74	113,249.26
TOTAL	\$400,000	\$78,037.00	\$321,963.00

Executive Director: VRP dedicated resources to an interim Executive Director to have an intentional hiring process to manage the continual growth and health of the organization. By the end of the year the Board was able to do exactly that through the hiring of Jonna Phillips. She has had 2 years of experience as the Therapy Program Director and the manager of the MDVA grant. Jonna is now a part of the Propel Non-profit Executive Director Leadership cohort and is currently enrolled in Air Staff and Command College to simultaneously advance her military career, both allowing her to collaborate with other leaders and deepen her skillset.

Advanced EMDR Therapy Training: In 2023, VRP hosted an Advanced EMDR Military Training in Duluth, Minnesota allowing 12 additional Therapists to join our network, bringing us to a total of 50 EMDR Therapists located throughout the state. In addition, in 2023 VRP began transitioning this training to have an on-Demand Option. Much like Veterans located throughout the state of Minnesota, EMDR Therapists are as well, and VRP identified needing to offer this training throughout the year to allow easier access. In addition to this training therapist will be required to attend a VRP orientation to deepen our relationships with the clinicians and to understand VRP's requirements. Our goal is to increase the VRP EMDR Network to 80 providers by the end 2024.

EMDR Certified Therapy: Therapists who have been trained in EMDR and are in the VRP Network, will offer free services for Veterans. Through the grant, Veteran Resilience Project initially established a reimbursement request of up to 12 hourly sessions per client at the rate of \$125.00 per session hour. However, per the grant agreement, clients are asked to use their insurance when possible and then VRP reimburses any copays or deductibles in these cases. In 2022, we found this limitation of sessions to be a barrier for both potential clients and therapists due to concerns regarding Complex PTSD and the need for additional sessions. Additional sessions have now been approved on a case-by-case basis and sessions for spouses seeking EMDR Therapy are now covered.

Case Management Payroll: For 2023 this funding category covered the following staff salaries: Therapy Program Director, Metro/Central Minnesota Outreach Coordinator, and additional contracted support to help maintain the program functionality. In 2024 this funding will see a transition to supporting the funding of a .6 FTE Care Coordinator.

Overview of VRP Outreach Program

In 2023, Veteran Resilience Project (VRP) experienced significant growth in establishing robust referral networks and laying the groundwork for strategic initiatives aimed at expanding our client base. VRP Outreach Coordinators and key volunteers actively participated in more than 50 in-person events (Appendix A). Our participation offered direct outreach to prospective clients and fostered networking relationships with various stakeholders and collaborative organizations. These events collectively drew the participation of over 4,500 individuals.

In a deliberate effort to extend our reach, VRP initiated targeted outreach campaigns on social media platforms, specifically Facebook and Instagram. These campaigns took the form of event

promotions, fundraising initiatives, and direct marketing to potential Servicemember clients, their spouses, or family members. While the results of these advertising strategies are undergoing analysis, initial metrics indicate reaching over 35,000 accounts, with more than 350 accounts actively engaged.

Beyond establishing brand recognition through both in-person and online exposure, VRP undertook initiatives to enhance its promotional materials, expand its network of supporters, collaborate with over 20 Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFWs) and American Legion locations, appoint an Outreach Coordinator for Northern MN, and secure funding for website updates. Furthermore, VRP successfully secured funding for the creation of an online platform designed to train EMDR Therapists to join our network.

Looking ahead to 2024, VRP is conducting a comprehensive analysis of its 2023 outreach efforts to identify the most effective strategies contributing to the achievement of goals related to event attendance, donations, and enrollment in VRP's Therapy Network. The organization plans to build upon the foundations established in the previous years by refining engagement with current stakeholders, expanding across different regions in Minnesota, actively participating in events frequented by the military community, and cultivating additional relationships with referral organizations.

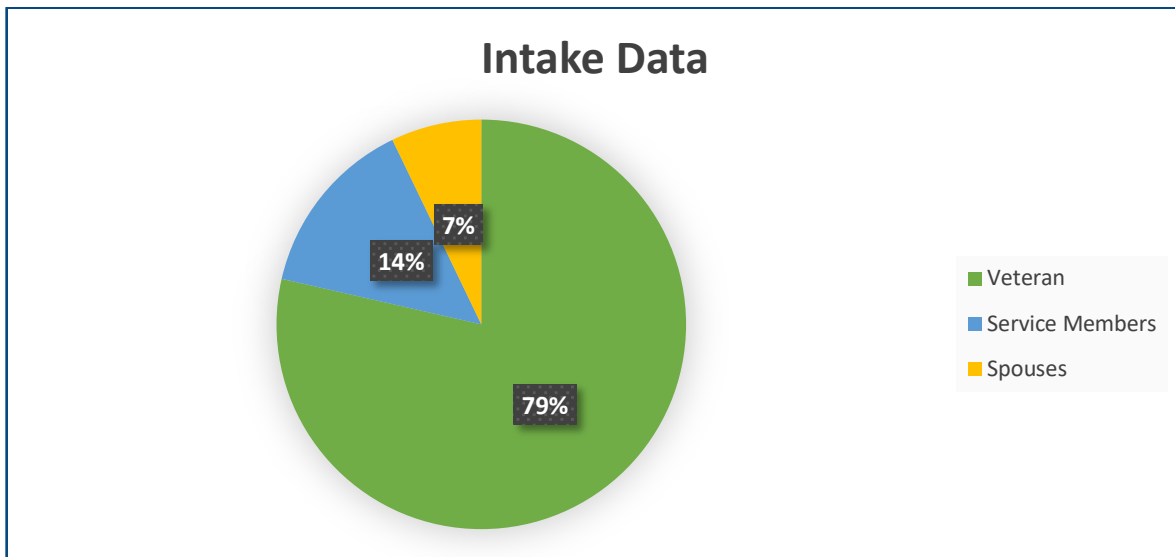
New outreach strategies for 2024 include the establishment of a mailing list for a quarterly newsletter, increased event hosting, and the development and dissemination of educational content focused on EMDR Therapy, PTS, and PTSD, as well as mental health in general. VRP will also pilot a Wellness Training for Veteran employees and build our partnership with MN businesses/employers.

Overview of Therapy Program 2023

In 2023 the Department of Veteran Affairs VA/DOD Veteran published the "Management of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Acute Stress Disorder 2023".³ The guideline delineates crucial decision junctures in the management of posttraumatic stress disorder and Acute Stress Disorder. It furnishes explicit and evidence-based recommendations that integrate current information and practices. The recommendations for the 3 primary modalities of Therapy were Cognitive Behavioral, EMDR, and Prolonged Exposure. The guideline also identifies that of these modalities EMDR is not consistently or readily available at most VA's. The reports states that this is partly due the training requirements to become an EMDR trained therapist. VRP believes it is critical that clinicians working with PTSD, Trauma, and MST have additional training beyond that of their licensure to be expert Traumatologists. We feel strongly that EMDR can resolve symptoms in a more timely and less invasive way then the other modalities identified and have attached an extensive list of research that overall demonstrates this as well (See Appendix B for research list). VRP's vision is to respect individuals' autonomy in making their own health care decisions and therefore we continue to be passionate about offering this evidenced-based care throughout the state of Minnesota giving them the option to receive care outside the VA and an additional modality that is not easily accessible from within the VA.

Veteran Resilience Project continues to both educate and provide EMDR Therapy throughout the state of Minnesota. As a refresher, Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) is a therapeutic approach used to address and alleviate the effects of traumatic experiences. It involves an eight-phase protocol where individuals identify distressing memories, only sharing what they are comfortable with, while simultaneously undergoing bilateral stimulation, often in the form of side-to-side eye movements guided by a therapist. For Veterans, EMDR is considered effective due to its ability to help process and reframe traumatic memories that may contribute to conditions like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The repetitive bilateral stimulation during EMDR sessions is believed to aid the brain in reorganizing and integrating these distressing memories, making them less emotionally charged.

In 2023 we had over 70 Veterans, Service Members, and Spouses begin the intake process. Of these 70 intakes VRP was able to have 50 Veterans, Service Members, and Spouses in EMDR Therapy, making our conversion rate 71%. Through the MDVA grant the state of Minnesota has provided 250 EMDR Therapy sessions and supported 50 Veterans, Service Members and Spouses to receive EMDR Therapy.



Testimonies

“I gained a greater understanding of how the brain processes events with her assistance.”

“I appreciate being a part of the Veterans Resilience Project and most importantly, thank you for caring for our service members.”

“Feeling relief over things that have been haunting me for a long time. Feel more connected to others, feel more in control over my emotions.”

“Less anger, patience, improve anxiety.”

“To stop rethinking of my past.”

Besides our continued support to clients, we offer ongoing support to the therapists in our program. VRP provides monthly consultations and shares resources to therapists on additional support in the military community for clients. In, 2024, VRP will expand our support and education to clinicians throughout the state of Minnesota, not just those in our Network. We believe that it is pertinent that therapists embedded in our communities are consistently updated with information about the current military population as well as deepening their own skills. On April 3rd, 2024 VRP will be offering their first training open to all clinicians, “Expanding Our Understanding of Military Sexual Trauma.” The training is in partnership with the VA Military Sexual Trauma Program and the Minnesota National Guard Sexual Assault Response Program.

Lastly, VRP staff and select Board Members will explore opportunities to engage in or contribute to research at the intersection of Trauma Therapy, EMDR, and Veterans/Military Members. This initiative reinforces VRP's position as an expert in the field, ensuring credibility, visibility, and continued exposure for the organization.

Conclusion

Veteran Resilience Project, having experienced significant growth, is now well-equipped to dedicate resources that were previously unavailable. This strategic expansion aims to ensure that Veterans, Service Members, and Spouses receive not only comprehensive but also high-quality, evidence-based care. In response to this transformative phase, our dedicated staff and Board have meticulously identified and formulated 14 strategic initiatives to guide our purposeful direction. Below are 4 major priorities for the VRP staff to focus on that are directly aligned with the strategic initiatives outlined by the VRP’s Board:

1. **Client Management:** Implementing a Care Coordinator to assist clients who have expressed interest but have not completed necessary paperwork or taken the next steps to initiate EMDR Therapy.
2. **Education:** Offering additional resources to the Minnesota community, particularly focusing on the challenge military communities face in seeking help. Planning and hosting community events to provide further education about EMDR and our therapeutic process. Collaborating with Minnesota businesses employing Veterans to offer health and wellness trainings, fostering relationships and trust.
3. **Trainings:** Continuing to provide Advanced EMDR Military Training and additional Continuing Education Unit (CEU) trainings for clinicians throughout Minnesota, deepening their awareness of working with military families and available community resources.
4. **Marketing:** Sustaining participation in in-person events and expanding to health organization conferences and trainings. Relaunching our website with comprehensive resources on EMDR, additional community resources, and a schedule of events.

While VRP has made significant strides, your support is crucial for our continued success. Specifically, we seek ongoing support from the Minnesota Legislature, whose bipartisan efforts have been greatly appreciated. As we emphasized earlier, it requires the collective commitment of our entire mental health community to fully support Veterans as they reintegrate into civilian life. Concretely, we seek:

1. **Voice:** Your ongoing endorsement of Veteran Resilience Project is a powerful catalyst in raising awareness and accessibility to our critical services. As we extend our reach to serve more Veterans, Service Members, and their Spouses, we humbly request your continued advocacy within your constituencies. Beyond official channels, we also encourage you to share information about VRP with your personal network, including friends and family who have served or are currently serving. By amplifying our message through your voice, we can ensure that those in need are informed about the valuable resources we offer and the support available to them.
2. **Funding:** The financial support provided by the Minnesota Legislature has been instrumental in propelling our mission forward. As we strive to offer free Trauma Therapy to those who have served our nation, your continued financial support remains indispensable. We express our sincere gratitude for the past support and continued support.
3. **Partnership:** VRP highly values the collaborative spirit that underpins effective organizational growth. We are keen to receive your feedback and insights on our current strategies and welcome any input you may have on opportunities for expansion. Your unique perspective and experience can serve as valuable guidance as we navigate the evolving landscape of mental health care for Veterans. Additionally, we invite you to explore potential collaborative initiatives that align with our mission. Whether through joint events, community outreach efforts, or innovative partnerships, your active engagement will contribute to the deepening and broadening of our impact throughout Minnesota. Your partnership is not only valued but essential in our ongoing journey towards providing exemplary care to our military community.

References:

¹ <https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/2023/2023-National-Veteran-Suicide-Prevention-Annual-Report-FINAL-508.pdf>

² Francisković T, Stevanović A, Jelusić I, Roganović B, Klarić M, Grković J. Secondary traumatization of wives of war veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder. *Croat Med J.* 2007 Apr;48(2):177-84. PMID: 17436382; PMCID: PMC2080512.

³ VA/DoD Clinical Practice Guideline. (2023). Management of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Acute Stress Disorder Work Group. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Appendix A

2023 VRP Outreach Events, Metro and State - Zachary Binsfeld		
Date	Event/Organization	Type
Jan 12th, 2023	Policy and Procedure Committee Meeting	Committee Meeting
Jan 19th, 2023	VERG (Veteran Employee Resource Group)	Collaborate, Network Building
Jan 19th, 2023	Testimony Senate Veteran Committee	Veteran Committee
January 26th, 2023	Twin City Military & Veteran Exchange	Collaborate, Network Building
Feb 7th, 2023	Legionnaire Interview	Interviews
Feb 22nd, 2023	MACV & VRP Program Overview	Presentation
Feb 23rd, 2023	Regions Hero Care	Presenting
Feb 27th, 2023	USDVA Vet Center - Anoka County	Collaborate, Network Building
March 3rd, 2023	MPLS CRRC Healthcare	Collaborate, Network Building
March 19th, 2023	Plymouth congregational church MENTAL HEALTH SUNDAY	Booth
March 30th, 2023	Veteran Day on the Hill	Participants
April 4th, 2023	Twin Cities Auto Show Military Appreciation Night	Booth
April 24th, 2023	Meet with 23rd Veteran group (and Daniel) post work out	collaboration/outreach
May 3, 2023	Deed Career Fair	Booth
May 4th, 2023	Meeting with CHUM	Site Visit
May 4th	Duluth Veterans Center	Site Visit
May 4th	Duluth MACV	Site Visit
May 4th-5th, 2023	Advanced EMDR Military Training	Host
May 17th	148th Fighter Wing Air Base in Duluth, Minnesota.	Presenting
May 18th, 2023	VERG In-Person Meeting	Info Share
June 15th (3-4pm)	Twin Cities Military and Veteran Exchange - 2Q 2023 Gathering & Happy Hour	Collaborate, Network Building
June 20th	Salute To Servicewomen Golf Classic	Event
July 13-15	MN American Legion Convention	Board Member Outreach
July 20-24	N. MN Outreach (Walker, Brainerd, Duluth) trip	Outreach trip
August 15th, 2023	Shoot for the Troops Event	Booth
August 17th, 2023	medica Veteran Resource Fair	Booth
August 22, 2023	MACV Summer Salute	Booth
August 28th	State Fair - Mental Health Awareness	Booth
August 29th	State Fair - Military Appreciation Day	Booth
Sept 11th, 2023	Ridgedale Chipotle Fundraiser & Board meeting	Fundraiser Collaboration
Sept 12th, 2023	Shoot for the Troops Event	Booth
Sept 12th, 2023	Uptown VFW proposal	Presentation
Sept 19th, 2023	Bayport Post 491	Presentation
September 20, 2023	Twin Cities Radio Network interview - vets & mental health	Radio Interview
October 5th, 2023	Hopkins VFW proposal	Presentation
October 6th, 2023	CVSO training: secondary trauma/burnout	Presentation
October 18th, 2023	Waseca Outreach Trip	Collaborate, Network Building
Oct 26th, 2023	St Cloud Stand Down - Resource and Job Fair	Booth
October 28th, 2023	Trunk or Treat at Magnus Wellness	Board Member Outreach
November 10th	VRP Veterans Night Out @ BUCH Fermentary & Taproom	VRP hosted Event
Nov 16th	Give to the Max Day	Email Campaign
Dec 5, 2pm	Meet Paul at St Paul Vet Center	Collaborate, Network Building
Dec 13th, 2023	Winter Salute at Target Field, hosted by MACV	Booth
Northern Project Outreach Program - Launched 1 Nov 2023 - Jenna Graen		
Nov 11th, 2023	Bent Paddle Brewery-Veterans Day Event	Outreach VRP Hosted Event
Nov 16th, 2023	Duluth Chambers of Commerce -Women's Leadership Conference.	Networking Outreach-Booth at event
Dec 1st, 2023	148th Air National Guard Leadership	Outreach Presentation
Dec 5th, 2023	Duluth Chambers of Commerce After Hours Community Event	Outreach Booth
Dec 14th, 2023	Duluth Vets Center	Outreach/Networking

Appendix B

Compiled in 2022, a list of EMDR meta-analyses and systematic reviews. Meta-analyses analyze evidence-based research and are often used for data in treatment guidelines for standardized care. Systematic reviews summarize research on a specific question or topic. In medical or health care fields, they often assess the strength of evidence present in a treatment in the field. This list is an ongoing work in progress and is directly taken from the EMDRIA website: <https://www.emdria.org/about-emdr-therapy/recent-research-about-emdr/> and then scroll down to “Download the Meta-Analysis and Systemic Review List”.