
SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERAN AFFAIRS

TEXAS SENATE

INTERIM REPORT

A REPORT TO THE

TEXAS SENATE

88TH TEXAS LEGISLATURE

KELLY HANCOCK

CHAIRMAN



Senate Committee on Veteran Affairs

December 14, 2022

The Honorable Dan Patrick
Lieutenant Governor
Members of the Texas Senate
PO Box 12069
Austin, TX 78711

Dear Governor Patrick and Fellow Senators:

Thank you for the opportunity to address important issues facing Texas today through your charges for interim study. The Senate Committee on Veteran Affairs is pleased to submit its final report with recommendations for consideration by the 88th Texas Legislature.

Respectfully submitted,

Handwritten signature of Kelly Hancock in black ink.

Kelly Hancock, Chair

Handwritten signature of Bob Hall in black ink.

Bob Hall, Vice Chair

Handwritten signature of Roland Gutierrez in black ink.

Roland Gutierrez

Handwritten signature of Sarah Eckhardt in black ink.

Sarah Eckhardt

Handwritten signature of Kel Seliger in black ink.

Kel Seliger

Handwritten signature of Cesar Blanco in black ink.

Cesar Blanco

Handwritten signature of Larry Taylor in black ink.

Larry Taylor

Table of Contents

1. Evaluate the current oversight of the Texas State Veteran Cemeteries to ensure that these sacred and essential grounds are being maintained, repaired, and treated with respect. Ensure that the needs of our veterans are being met by reviewing the number, location, and funding of the cemeteries. Examine and make recommendations for the financing mechanism for the Texas State Veterans Cemeteries to ensure sustainability.

Background.....	3
Testimony	4
Recommendations.....	9

2. Explore and report on options to remove barriers for companies offering veteran benefits and consider policies that could leverage additional public-private-partnerships. Identify opportunities to connect veterans to existing business resources and available state services. Recommend ways to increase matching federal funding for veteran benefits. Review current law for consistency in eligibility for state veteran benefits and recommend any necessary changes.

Background.....	10
Testimony	10
Recommendations.....	15

3. Review the currently accepted forms of treatment for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and consider the creation of a program which would require completion of a multi-modality treatment plan including traditional talk therapy, limbic system therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), and emotionally focused individual therapy (EFIT).

Background.....	16
Testimony	16
Recommendations.....	21

4. Identify the training and resources available to urban and rural first responders when assisting veterans experiencing a mental health crisis. Make recommendations for how to best support first responders in these crisis situations.

Background.....	22
Testimony	22
Recommendations.....	25

INTERIM STUDY CHARGES BACKGROUND, FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Evaluate the current oversight of the Texas State Veteran Cemeteries to ensure that these sacred and essential grounds are being maintained, repaired, and treated with respect. Ensure that the needs of our veterans are being met by reviewing the number, location, and funding of the cemeteries. Examine and make recommendations for the financing mechanism for the Texas State Veterans Cemeteries to ensure sustainability.

Background

The Texas State Veteran Cemeteries are honorable resting places where family, friends, and Texans can remember their loved ones who dedicated their lives to serving our country. In 1964, the Texas Legislature created the Texas Veterans Land Board (VLB), whose purpose was to grant land to returning veterans in recognition for their military service. The VLB operates under the General Land Office (GLO), originally offering land, home, and improvement loans. Over the years, the VLB has expanded their programs and is now used to administer benefits for Texas veterans.

The VLB operates under a three-member board who oversee the administration of benefits. The board is composed of the Commissioner of the GLO, who serves as the Chairman, and two citizen members who are appointed by the Governor.

The VLB oversees six programs for veterans and their families: the Veterans Land Loan Program, the Veterans Housing Assistance Program, the Veterans Home Improvement Program, the Voices of Veterans Oral History Program, the Texas State Veteran Homes, and the Texas State Veterans Cemeteries.

Currently, 1.5 million veterans call Texas home. Because of the growing veteran population rate, there have been calls to create additional cemeteries that are reasonably accessible to every veteran in the State of Texas. During the October 29th, 2021 Texas State Veterans Cemetery

Committee hearing, former Chief Investment Officer stated that of the four existing cemeteries, each cost \$2.2 million on average to operate and at an average loss of \$1.34 million per year.¹

Testimony

The Senate Committee on Veteran Affairs heard in-person testimony on May 3, 2022 from the following participants:

Mark Havens, Chief Clerk, General Land Office

David Repp, Chief Financial Officer & Senior Deputy, General Land Office & Veterans Land Board

Laura Koerner, Chair, Texas Veterans Commission

George Dzuik, Budget Analyst, Legislative Budget Board

General Land Office & Veterans Land Board

The cemetery program started under the General Land Office (GLO) in 2006. Mark Havens testified that the Land and Housing Fund is used to support all nine state veteran homes and four state cemeteries.

The Land and Housing Fund is made up of revenue from the loan programs, the veteran nursing homes, and United States Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) reimbursements for cemetery burials. Historically, the loan and nursing home programs have brought in more revenue than they cost to operate, but recently concerns have been raised that increasing staff costs at nursing homes may put additional pressure on the fund. The cemetery program uses the same source of revenue but operates at a net deficit to the fund.

Burials at state veteran cemeteries come at no cost to the veteran or their family. Each burial costs the VLB roughly \$2,500-\$3,000, which includes the cost for operation and maintenance of the site for its lifetime.² The VA reimburses the VLB an estimated \$800 per burial which puts the operation of the cemeteries at an estimated \$1 million deficit per year.³ Currently, the income from the Land and Housing Fund is the only state funding source for the cemeteries.⁴

¹ Thayer, R. L. (2021, December 9). Call for more veterans cemeteries in Texas leads to fallout among state officials. Stars and Stripes.

² Written Testimony, Mark Havens, Chief Clerk, General Land Office, Response to Senate Committee on Veteran Affairs Request for Information, (July 29, 2022) (on file with committee)

³ Written Testimony, Mark Havens, Chief Clerk, General Land Office, Response to Senate Committee on Veteran Affairs Request for Information, (July 29, 2022) (on file with committee)

⁴ Written Testimony, Mark Havens, Chief Clerk, General Land Office, Response to Senate Committee on Veteran Affairs Request for Information, (July 29, 2022) (on file with committee)

The GLO's budget per fiscal year totals \$20 million, with a statutory maximum of \$7 million dedicated to the cemetery program. Of the allowable \$7 million, \$5.2 million is spent on program operation.⁵ According to Mr. Havens, the only available mechanism for the state to increase revenue for the cemeteries, at this time, would be to increase rates on loans or increase rates for veterans staying in the nursing homes.

Texas Veterans Commission

Chairwoman Laura Koerner stated that, in other states, agencies similar to the Texas Veterans Commission (TVC) are typically charged with overseeing and operating the state veteran cemeteries. According to a study conducted by the Veterans Commission, 45 states have state-run veteran cemeteries. Of those 45 states, 11 states charge their respective State Departments of Veteran Affairs with operating the cemeteries.⁶

According to Chairwoman Koerner, because of Texas' unique veteran cemetery funding structure, the TVC has no funding line to support the operation of the state veteran cemeteries should oversight be transferred. She further explained that, if oversight of the cemetery program was transferred from the GLO to the TVC, a funding mechanism would need to be established.

When asked about possible methods of funding, Chairwoman Koerner testified that it is common in other states for the state veteran cemeteries to be funded by profits from state veteran homes.

Legislative Budget Board

Chairman Hancock asked Mr. Dzuik if there were any alternative funding sources for the cemetery operations and about the possibility of using general revenue. In addition, Chairman Hancock asked if there was a way to transfer the obligation of operating and maintaining the cemeteries from the GLO to the TVC.

According to written testimony provided by the Legislative Budget Board, in order to transfer the obligation, both constitutional and statutory amendments would be needed for the TVC to have responsibility for the cemeteries. However, an interagency contract between the GLO and the TVC could be established under current law to allow the TVC to take obligation of the cemeteries using funding sources appropriated to GLO.⁷

⁵ Written Testimony, Mark Havens, Chief Clerk, General Land Office, Response to Senate Committee on Veteran Affairs Request for Information, (July 29, 2022) (on file with committee)

⁶ Written Testimony, Laura Koerner, Chair, Texas Veterans Commission, Response to Senate Committee on Veteran Affairs Request for Information (July 6, 2022) (on file with committee)

⁷ Written Testimony, Legislative Budget Board, Response to Senate Committee on Veteran Affairs Request for Information (July 29, 2022) (on file with committee)

In a request of information, the Senate Committee on Veteran Affairs received the response below from the Legislative Budget Board:

Responsibility Transfer Options

Both constitutional and statutory amendments would be necessary to transfer responsibility for state veteran cemeteries from GLO's Veteran's Land Board (VLB) to another agency. However, an interagency contract between GLO and the VC could be established under current law to allow the VC to operate and maintain the cemeteries using funding sources appropriated to GLO for this purpose.

Use of General Revenue

General Revenue Funds are eligible to support or replace appropriations from the Texas Veterans Homes Administration Fund No. 374 (Fund No. 374). This fund, an Other Fund, was established to receive bond proceeds, gifts, grants, and other sources to fund all veteran nursing home and cemetery programs which includes planning, designing, maintaining, and operating the state's veteran cemeteries. Fund No. 374 appropriations include statutorily authorized transfers from the Veterans Land and Housing Fund No. 571 (Fund No. 571), an Other Fund, of up to \$7.0 million each fiscal year which may be used to plan and design, operate, maintain, enlarge, or improve veteran cemeteries (See Natural Resources Code Sec 164.005 (h)). Using General Revenue in lieu of Fund No. 374 could result in an equivalent savings to Fund No. 571 depending on the total costs involved due to reduced transfers from Fund No. 571 to Fund No. 374. See the attached figure reflecting fund and cost impact scenarios.

State Veteran Cemetery Operating Costs

Operating cost funding for the four existing state veteran cemeteries includes Federal Funds and Fund No. 374 appropriations, which are estimated in GLO's bill pattern. GLO anticipates these costs to be \$6.5 million each fiscal year through 2027, including \$1.3 million in Federal Funds and \$5.2 million in Fund No. 374 from Fund No. 571 transferred funds. According to the agency, adding one new cemetery would result in overall costs increasing to \$8.1 million each fiscal year through 2027, including \$1.6 million in Federal Funds and \$6.5 million in Fund No. 374 funds (transferred from Fund No. 571). If two new cemeteries were to be added (bringing the total to six), anticipated operating costs would increase to \$9.8 million with anticipated Federal Funds paying for \$1.9 million of this cost. Fund No. 374 would be required to fund \$7.9 million, which would exceed the maximum transfer amount from Fund No. 571 by \$0.9 million. Absent of a General Revenue appropriation, this excess amount would have to be covered by revenues and available balances in Fund No. 374.

In addition to these outlined operating costs, GLO has indicated that it may seek to transfer additional Fund No. 571 funds to address an ongoing cash balance issue.

Federal Funding Requirements

Federal reimbursements pay for all construction costs to establish, expand, and improve state veteran cemeteries upon receiving prior approval from the VA. Using GLO appropriations, the state initially pays approximately 10.0 percent of the construction costs in an application process which is subsequently reimbursed following VA project approval. . Without approval, the VA considers any cemetery built with state funding to be a private cemetery that is not eligible for federal reimbursement. Federal reimbursements are not available for state veteran cemetery land purchases. According to GLO, all land currently used for the four existing state veteran cemeteries was donated to the state of Texas and held via deed by the VLB. State law prohibits the VLB from using Fund No. 571 to acquire land for cemeteries (See Natural Resources Code Sec 164.005 (h)).

Fund No. 374 Available Balances

Fund No. 374 also funds the veterans' homes program. GLO anticipates program costs will exceed available revenues and fund balances in Fund No. 374 sometime in 2027. GLO's projections include a seven percent increase in veterans home costs for each year from fiscal years 2023 to 2027; an increase of 31.5 percent in annual operating costs over a 5-year period. The agency primarily attributes this increase to the construction and future operating costs of a new Fort Worth veterans home anticipated to be built during fiscal years 2023 and 2024, an anticipated reduction in veteran home occupancy, and increased nursing costs for fiscal years 2023 to 2027. Increasing the number of state veteran cemeteries to six, the number at which costs exceed transfers from Fund No. 571 and available Federal Funds, would consume Fund No. 374 balances faster and would result in costs exceeding revenues and fund balances before fiscal year 2027.

Additional Revenue Options for Fund No. 374

Additional options to increase revenue for Fund No. 374 include the Legislature increasing the \$7.0 million statutory cap on the amount that can be transferred each fiscal year from Fund No. 571. The agency could also consider increasing revenues to Fund No. 374 by raising interest rates on VLB land loans and/or increasing nursing home fees. However, the revenue increasing options would have a direct negative impact on veterans that use these programs.

Additionally, the Legislative Budget Board provided data of potential options of funding for the Veteran Cemetery Sites. See Figure 1 below.

OPTIONS FOR FUNDING VETERAN CEMETERY SITES

FIGURE 1 FISCAL IMPACT OF OUTLINED OPTIONS

OPTION	DESCRIPTION	FEDERAL FUNDS (IN MILLIONS)	FISCAL IMPACT TO STATE FUNDS (IN MILLIONS)		
			PROBABLE SAVINGS/(COST) TO GENERAL REVENUE FUNDS	PROBABLE SAVINGS/(COST) TO FUND NO. 374	PROBABLE SAVINGS/(COST) TO FUND NO. 571
Four cemeteries (no change) = \$6.5 million in operational costs					
Option A: Current transfer of funding from Fund No. 571	Current practice transfers funding from Fund No. 571 to Fund No. 374, for operating costs	\$1.3	–	(\$5.2)	(\$5.2)
Option B: Using General Revenue Funds	Using General Revenue Funds to fully replace appropriations from Fund No. 374	\$1.3	(\$5.2)	\$5.2	\$5.2
Option C: Using General Revenue Funds for partial support (50.0 percent)	Using General Revenue Funds to partially support appropriations from Fund No. 374	\$1.3	(\$2.6)	(\$2.6)	(\$2.6)
Five cemeteries (one new cemetery) = \$8.1 million in operational costs					
Option A: Current transfer of funding from Fund No. 571	Current practice transfers funding from Fund No. 571 to Fund No. 374 for operating costs	\$1.6	–	(\$6.5)	(\$6.5)
Option B: Using General Revenue Funds	Using General Revenue Funds to fully replace appropriations from Fund No. 374	\$1.6	(\$6.5)	\$6.5	\$6.5
Option C: Using General Revenue Funds for partial support (50.0 percent)	Using General Revenue Funds to partially support appropriations from Fund No. 374	\$1.6	(\$3.3)	(\$3.3)	(\$3.3)
Six cemeteries (two new cemeteries) = \$9.8 million in operational costs					
Option A: Current transfer of funding from Fund No. 571	Current practice transfers funding from Fund No. 571 to Fund No. 374 for operating costs	\$1.9	–	(\$7.9)	(\$7.0)
Option B: Using General Revenue Funds	Using General Revenue Funds to fully replace appropriations from Fund No. 374	\$1.9	(\$7.9)	\$7.9	\$7.0
Option C: Using General Revenue Funds for partial support (50.0 percent)	Using General Revenue Funds to partially support appropriations from Fund No. 374	\$1.9	(\$4.0)	(\$3.9)	(\$3.9)

SOURCES: Legislative Budget Board; General Land Office and Veterans' Land Board. Note: Figure totals may not sum due to rounding.

Recommendation

The committee recommends that the Legislature continue to monitor the oversight and operations of the state veteran cemeteries to ensure our veterans and their families are served in a manner suitable for the sacrifices they have made for our country. The committee recommends that the Legislature ensure that ample resources are made available to continue to provide low cost and reliable services for our veterans.

2. Explore and report on options to remove barriers for companies offering veteran benefits and consider policies that could leverage additional public-private-partnerships. Identify opportunities to connect veterans to existing business resources and available state services. Recommend ways to increase matching federal funding for veteran benefits. Review current law for consistency in eligibility for state veteran benefits and recommend any necessary changes.

Background

Texas has the second largest veteran population in the nation that plays a vital role in the state's booming economy. When leaving military service, veterans often face many obstacles as they transition to civilian life. Between federal, state, and private services, there are many benefits and resources available to our veterans. However, these resources are not always easily accessible.

The Senate Committee on Veteran Affairs is committed to eliminating obstacles veterans may encounter as they return home from duty. By reviewing ways to remove barriers to private companies that offer employment benefits specifically for veterans, we can assist veterans in their transition and strengthen the connection between our veterans and business industries.

Testimony

The Senate Committee on Veteran Affairs heard in-person testimony on May 3, 2022 from the following participants:

Laura Koerner, Chair, Texas Veterans Commission

Shawn Deabay, Deputy Director, Texas Veterans Commission

Bob Gear, Director of the Texas Veterans Leadership Program, Texas Workforce Commission

Matt Foster, Director of External Affairs, AT&T

Tammy Sherman, HR Leader, Dow Chemical

Jason Ryan, Executive Vice President, CenterPoint Energy

J.D. Hale, Director of Government Affairs, Texas Association of Builders

Annie Spilman, Texas State Director, National Federation of Independent Businesses (NFIB)

Texas Veterans Commission

The Texas Veterans Commission (TVC) was established in 1927 as a state service office to assist veterans in accessing their benefits. The TVC created the Texas Veterans Network to establish

partnerships between state agencies and community-based organizations to connect veterans with services that assist with the transition to civilian workforce.

Texas is the first state in U.S. to offer veterans an interconnected network like the Texas Veterans Network. More than 185 organizations are a part of the Texas Veterans Network, including Combined Arms, Texas Serves, Texas A&M University, the TVC, and the Texas Workforce Commission.⁸

In addition to the services provided by the Texas Veterans Network, the TVC offers employment services that connect employers with veterans to assist them in obtaining long term, meaningful employment.

The final program mentioned in the TVC's testimony is the Texas Council for Veteran Services, which consists of 22 state agencies that work together to address barriers to resources by investigating gaps in veteran services.

In response to a question from Chairman Hancock about the agency's greatest need, Deputy Director Shawn Deabay testified that collecting the contact information for veterans as they leave service is crucial. He further explained that an internal system to store contact information once it has been collected is also needed so the agency can be proactive in reaching out to veterans.

Texas Workforce Commission

Bob Gear provided testimony on several programs within the TWC and highlighted the Texas Veterans Leadership Program. The Veterans Leadership Program is a resource and referral network that connects veterans with the resources and tools they need to transition to civilian life.

In addition to the Texas Veterans Leadership Program, TWC also hosts a statewide job fair for veterans alongside Workforce Solutions and TVC called Red, White, & You! The event aims to connect transitioning service members, veterans, and families to employers looking to hire in the area. Since 2012, this event has worked with more than 20,131 employers, connected more than 114,778 job seekers to meaningful job opportunities, and helped facilitate over 3,198 same-day hires.⁹

⁸ The Texas Veterans Commission joins the Texas Veterans Network. Texas Veterans Commission. (2020, September 12). Retrieved from <https://www.tvc.texas.gov/the-texas-veterans-commission-joins-the-texas-veterans-network/>

⁹ Hiring Red, White & You! Hiring Red, White & You! – Texas Workforce Commission. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.twc.texas.gov/hiring-red-white-you>

Mr. Gear also testified on the "We Hire Vets" employer recognition program that focuses on finding veterans employment and training opportunities for veterans. TWC has partnered with TVC on this campaign to recognize employers whose workforces are comprised of at least ten percent military veterans.

During the testimony, Chairman Hancock asked Mr. Gear about a list of services and their accessibility to veterans prior to filing for unemployment. Mr. Gear stated that while the Department of Veteran Affairs has a list of veterans exiting military service, it's still difficult to contact veterans and make them aware of those benefits. Mr. Gear suggested the federal government could take steps towards providing states with the information for veterans exiting military service in order to connect them with available resources before they file for unemployment.

AT&T

Matt Foster testified on AT&T's efforts to transition veterans into the corporate workforce through their hiring initiatives and the SkillBridge program.

Mr. Foster testified on AT&T's successful hiring initiative in 2015 that lead to the hiring of 10,000 veterans. Additionally, AT&T allows veteran employees to participate in peer mentorship programs through their veterans Employee Resource Group (ERGs). This program focuses on continuing to improve a veteran's skill sets even after they've been hired.

Testimony was provided on the SkillBridge program offered to companies by the Department of Defense which works to successfully propel service members into the workforce upon their discharge date. The program matches veterans to civilian careers using their military experience. This program gives veterans a workforce development opportunity similar to an internship during their last 180 days of service, allowing service members to work for a company while receiving military pay and benefits. AT&T recommends state agencies continue highlighting work programs like SkillBridge.

Dow Chemical

Dow is a global material science company that manufactures plastics, chemicals, and agricultural products. Dow operates over 100 manufacturing companies across the world and has more than 10,000 employees in Texas.

Tammy Sherman testified on the successes Dow has experienced with the veteran resource group they offer called VETNET. VETNET is an engagement program that provides mentorships for veterans to help them adjust to workplace culture. Ms. Sherman explained that Dow has an

average veteran hiring rate of eight percent, which is two and a half percent higher than the federal benchmark.

In addition to the engagement program, Dow launched their Military Degree Equivalency (MDE) program in 2016 to allow service members to seamlessly transition into the workforce using their relevant skills and experience. Initially, the program assumed associate's degrees to service members with four years of military experience. The program was expanded in 2020 to provide bachelor's degrees to service members with a ranking of E6 or higher.

Currently, Dow works with third-party vendors to find and connect veterans with employment opportunities within the company. In her testimony, Ms. Sherman discussed Dow's desire to work directly with military bases as this would provide them with direct hiring opportunities.

CenterPoint Energy

CenterPoint Energy is a Houston-based electric and gas utility service company that was recently named by U.S. Veteran's Magazine as one of their "Top Veteran Friendly Companies."¹⁰

CenterPoint Energy actively participates in career fairs on military bases and with veteran organizations and has increased their percentage of veteran employees from 6.1 to 6.6 percent. In addition to being proactive in their hiring practices, CenterPoint has also recently started an employee resource group specific to veterans.¹¹

CenterPoint works with external vendors to build a framework for and promote the Minority and Women Owned Business Enterprise (MWBE) program spending goals. These spending goals encourage CenterPoint and their investors to invest in diverse companies and has recently been expanded to include veteran owned businesses. Previously, the goal was to spend 10 percent per year on MWBE-certified businesses. The goal, as of May 2022, has increased to 12 percent with the addition of veteran-certified businesses.¹²

National Federation of Independent Business

National Federation of Independent Business (NFIB) is an organization that advocates for small and independent business owners nationwide.

¹⁰ U.S. Veterans Magazine Announces Its 2022 Best Of The Best Results Lists. (2021, August 11). *U.S. Veterans Magazine*.

¹¹ Written Testimony, Jason Ryan, Exec. Vice President, CenterPoint Energy, Response to Senate Committee on Veteran Affairs Request for Information (July 25, 2022) (on file with committee)

¹² Written Testimony, Jason Ryan, Exec. Vice President, CenterPoint Energy, Response to Senate Committee on Veteran Affairs Request for Information (July 25, 2022) (on file with committee)

According to NFIB's October 2022 Small Business Job Report, 61 percent of small business owners reported they were hiring or trying to hire, down three points from the September report. Of those hiring or trying to hire, 90 percent of owners reported few or no qualified applicants for the positions they were trying to fill.¹³ According to the Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey (JOLTS) produced by the Department of Labor, there were 10.7 million jobs available in September. The ratio of unemployed workers to available jobs remains lower than one worker to job, indicating that there are more open positions than people seeking work.¹⁴

Annie Spilman testified that the TWC's "We Hire Vets" campaign has been a helpful tool in connecting veterans with employment opportunities, but that the campaign and other similar job fairs are often aimed at larger corporations rather than small businesses who also have programs in place to attract employees and veterans. Additionally, the Small Business Administration offers a "Boots to Business" program that is available to support veterans looking to own their own business.

In her testimony, Ms. Spilman acknowledged that these programs and campaigns create a successfully match program, but recommended educating small business owners on the available programs and resources to better place veterans in the workforce.

Texas Association of Builders

Texas Association of Builders (TAB) is an affiliate of the National Association of Home Builders and has many local associations. They represent over 758,000 jobs and more than \$71.5 billion annually in the Texas economy.¹⁵

J.D. Hale testified that in the 1970s, TAB began to train and place veterans in employment opportunities within their communities upon exiting military service. In 2014, the Home Builders Institute began offering classes for skilled certificates on military bases, with 10 military bases participating today. Since then, nearly 250 veterans have graduated from Texas bases and 80 percent of those graduates were placed into jobs within the first three months of certification. The Home Builders curriculum does not require the use of any GI bill dollars, and if a service member inquires about one of these courses, the Home Builders will cover the costs.

¹³ NFIB. (n.d.). (rep.). *2022 October Jobs Report*.

¹⁴ Job Openings and Labor Turnover. (2022, November). *U.S. Bureau of Statistics*. Retrieved from <https://www.bls.gov/jlt/>.

¹⁵ *Tab: About Us*. TAB | About Us. (n.d.). Retrieved November 15, 2022, from <https://www.texasbuilders.org/about-us.html>

Recommendation

The committee recommends that the Legislature explore the creation of an interagency database to collect and disseminate the contact information of veterans exiting military service. This would allow veterans to receive information on existing business resources and state benefits prior to leaving military service, which would properly equip them to enter the workforce.

The committee also recommends that the Legislature explore the creation of a program that acts as a direct line of contact between private companies and military installations to provide awareness of existing resources and programs and promote collaboration between the two entities.

3. Review the currently accepted forms of treatment for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and consider the creation of a program which would require completion of a multi-modality treatment plan including traditional talk therapy, limbic system therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), and emotionally focused individual therapy (EFIT).

Background

On average, less than half of veterans needing mental health services receive treatment. Of those veterans that are receiving treatment for PTSD, less than one-third are receiving evidence-based care.¹⁶ Currently, there are many accepted forms of treatment for PTSD. In Texas, veterans have access to a wide variety of treatments that can be tailored to their needs. Treatment plans can include:

- Traditional talk therapy, also known as psychotherapy, is the most commonly used therapy treatment for most stress disorders.¹⁷
- Limbic system therapy, a type of therapy that assists the body's response to emotions of fear and anger.¹⁸
- Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), a type of psychotherapy in which negative patterns of thought about the self are challenged in order to alter unwanted behavior patterns or treat mood disorders.¹⁹
- Emotionally focused individual therapy (EFIT), a short-term, individual therapy that manages emotions in order to build skills to change the mind's responses to difficult emotions from trauma.²⁰

Testimony

The Senate Committee on Veteran Affairs heard in-person testimony on May 3, 2022 from the following participants:

Dr. Blake Harris, Director of Mental Health Department, Texas Veterans Commission
Tim Keesling, Director, Office of Veteran Services Coordination (HHSC)

¹⁶ Reisman M. PTSD Treatment for Veterans: What's Working, What's New, and What's Next. P T. 2016 Oct;41(10):623-634. PMID: 27757001; PMCID: PMC5047000.

¹⁷ National Institute of Mental Health (2021). Psychotherapies. Retrieved November 15, 2022, from <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/psychotherapies>

¹⁸ National Alliance for Mental Illness, The Treatment of Choice for Trauma, (<https://www.nami.org/Blogs/NAMI-Blog/April-2019/The-Treatment-of-Choice-for-Trauma>)

¹⁹ Clinical Practice Guideline for the Treatment of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in Adults (2017), (<https://www.apa.org/ptsd-guideline/patients-and-families/cognitive-behavioral>).

²⁰ See Emotionally Focused Therapy: 17 Tools for ETF Sessions, (<https://positivepsychology.com/emotionally-focused-therapy>).

Dr. Courtney Harvey, Director, Office of Mental Health Coordination (HHSC)
Christie Sprowls, PsyD, EMDR International Association
Eric Niedermayer, Chief Executive Officer, Recovery Resource Council
Damian Cook, Director of Policy & Government Affairs, K9s for Warriors
Dr. Gina Dunckel Smith, Licensed Psychologist

Texas Veterans Commission

Under the Texas Veterans Commission, the Veterans Mental Health Department (VMHD) provides assistance to service members, veterans and their families. The VMHD offers programs such as Justice Involved Veteran Program, Homeless Veteran Initiative, Community & Faith-Program, Military Veteran Peer Network, Veteran Provider Program, and Veteran Suicide Prevention.²¹

Dr. Blake Harris testified that military trauma-affected service members often have difficulty accessing mental health resources due to a variety of factors, including an individual's difficulty in recognition of their mental health needs. The VMHD provides military trauma-informed training and technical assistance to create greater awareness of and access to mental health resources for service members and their families.

The Military Veteran Peer Network (MVPN) provides services such as community support, training on suicide prevention, and direct connections to clinical counseling. MVPN also provides local resources based on the individual needs of the veteran and family. Within the MVPN, there are TVC certified Peer Service Coordinators (PSCs) across the state and over 100 peers. In 2021, MVPN provided 79,553 direct services to veterans and their families.²²

The Community & Faith-Based Partner Program is aimed at involving community and faith-based partners in developing strategies to support the wellbeing of veterans and their families. This goal is accomplished through the Faith Allegiance Initiative, founded by Retired Air Force Veteran John Wilson, which is intended to provide a more positive transition into civilian life and rekindle life purpose and mission.²³

²¹ Written Testimony, Dr. Blake Harris, Director of Mental Health Department, Texas Veterans Commission, Response to Senate Committee on Veteran Affairs Request for Information, (May 3, 2022) (on file with committee)

²² Written Testimony, Dr. Blake Harris, Director of Mental Health Department, Texas Veterans Commission, Response to Senate Committee on Veteran Affairs Request for Information, (May 3, 2022) (on file with committee)

²³ Texas Veterans Commission, Community & Faith Based Partnerships (<https://veteransmentalhealth.texas.gov/community-faith-based/>)

Additionally, because of the association between mental health needs and risk for homelessness, VMHD leads the Homeless Veterans Initiative which aims to prevent veterans from entering homelessness and provides directly to service members and their families.²⁴

Health & Human Services Commission

The Texas Health & Human Services Commission (HHSC) has a program specifically for veteran mental health treatment services. The Mental Health Program for Veterans oversees veteran mental health initiatives to support Texas veterans and their families through mental health treatments and services. HHSC uses funds appropriated by the Legislature to contract with TVC to provide these services.

Dr. Courtney Harvey testified that the Office of Veterans Services Coordination works with TVC and the United States Department of Veteran Affairs to identify unnecessary redundancies, create efficiencies, and eliminate barriers to needed services.

Additionally, HHSC offers the Texas Veterans + Family Alliance Grant Program (TV+FA) which is used by veterans and families to enhance delivery and increase access to mental health services treatments.

Services include interventions such as cognitive behavioral therapy, individual, group, family, and couples peer support services, suicide prevention services, treatment of substance use disorders, and individual and family counseling. Navigation services are also provided, which include case management and referral services. During the 2020-2021 biennium, 31,141 people were served under this grant.

In the fiscal year 2021:

- 78,675 peer services delivered;
- 1,732 peer service coordinators and volunteer peers trained;
- 12,127 interactions with justice-involved veterans;
- 833 clinical mental health sessions with a veteran counselor; and
- 247 service members, veterans, and family members trained in the veteran's module of Mental Health First Aid.²⁵

²⁴ Written Testimony, Dr. Blake Harris, Director of Mental Health Department, Texas Veterans Commission, Response to Senate Committee on Veteran Affairs Request for Information, (May 3, 2022) (on file with committee)

²⁵ Written Testimony, Dr. Courtney Harvey, Director of Office of Mental Health Coordination, Health & Human Services Commission, Response to Senate Committee on Veteran Affairs Request for Information, (May 3, 2022) (on file with committee)

EMDR International Association

EMDR International Association (EMDRIA) is a member organization of mental health professionals that are trained in Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) therapy. EMDR is a psychotherapy method that aims to help people recover from trauma and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms. In contrast with traditional therapies, EMDR does not require talking about the distressing issue but rather focusing on changing the emotional behaviors. EMDR is considered a natural process that involves communication between the amygdala (the alarm signal for stressful events), the hippocampus (which assists with learning, including memories about safety and danger), and the prefrontal cortex (which analyzes and controls behavior and emotion).²⁶

Dr. Christie Sprowls is a member of EMDRIA and has been a therapist in Texas since 1987 with experience working with veterans on military bases such as Fort Hood as well as police departments. Dr. Sprowls testified that research by the Department of Veteran Affairs and the Department of Defense have found EMDR to be a successful treatment option for PTSD and is used broadly across the State of Texas. She further explained that EMDR therapy exists in the intersection of neurobiology and psychotherapy and works by lowering the reactions of “fight, flight or freeze,” without altering memory or changing appropriate responses. She also testified that EMDR can be a very cost-effective treatment method as fewer sessions may be needed to reach desired results than other therapies. She recommended that treatment for PTSD include effective treatments such as EMDR in a coordinated system of care.

Dr. Gina Dunckel Smith

Dr. Gina Dunckel Smith is a licensed Psychologist specializing in PTSD treatment and suicide prevention. During her testimony, she testified that she currently operates a private practice serving veterans and first responders.

Dr. Smith testified that EMDR therapy is the most effective treatment for trauma when properly conducted and advocated for focus on evidence-based practices. She also testified that creating a limited standard of practice for the treatment of PTSD can be ineffective. Dr. Smith recommended using a network-of-providers approach so that veterans know where to find evidence-based practices and who can provide these services.

²⁶ *What is EMDR Therapy?* EMDR International Association. Retrieved November 15, 2022, from <https://www.emdria.org/about-emdr-therapy/>

Recovery Resource Council

Recovery Resource Council is a nonprofit organization that is based out of Fort Worth, TX. This organization promotes wellness from alcohol and substance use disorders and trauma to vulnerable North Texans. In August of 2013, they created a program that provides therapy and support services to returning military veterans and their families called "Enduring Families."²⁷

Eric Niedermayer expressed that creating a multi-modality treatment that is limited to certain therapies could limit its effectiveness for some veterans who may not feel comfortable using specific forms of therapy. Additionally, Mr. Niedermayer commented that it can be challenging to find therapists who are trained and comfortable practicing multiple types of therapy. He testified that a good treatment plan is one created between the client and the therapist.

K9s for Warriors

K9s for Warriors is the nation's largest service provider of trained service dogs for military veterans suffering from PTSD, traumatic brain injury, and military sexual trauma. K9s for Warriors has served 700 veterans since beginning in 2011.²⁸ The program provides service dogs and lifelong wrap-around services for veterans at no cost to the veteran. Psychological service dogs can be trained to detect a veteran's physical signs of anxiety and stress, serving to alert and interrupt anxiety and panic attacks during the day and interrupting nightmares at night.

Damian Cook testified that 92 percent of veterans served by K9s for Warriors reported a reduction in medication and 82 percent reported a reduction in suicidal ideations.²⁹

Senator Blanco asked Mr. Cook if there were any state programs that fund canine services for veterans in need. Mr. Cook stated that K9s for Warriors does not receive state funding. They are looking at partnering with other agencies to receive funding from the Texas Veteran & Families Grant. He further stated that it costs roughly \$30,000 to receive the canine services and the Department of Veteran Affairs does not cover any of these costs. K9s for Warriors is funded through private donations.

²⁷ Enduring families. Recovery Resource Council. (n.d.). Retrieved November 15, 2022, from <https://recoverycouncil.org/enduring-families/>

²⁸ Written Testimony, Damian Cook, Director of Office of Policy and Government Affairs, K9s for Warriors, Response to Senate Committee on Veteran Affairs Request for Information, (May 3, 2022) (on file with committee)

²⁹ Written Testimony, Damian Cook, Director of Office of Policy and Government Affairs, K9s for Warriors, Response to Senate Committee on Veteran Affairs Request for Information, (May 3, 2022) (on file with committee)

Recommendation

The committee recommends that the Legislature explore treatment options for PTSD and consider creating a multi-modality treatment program that could include, but would not be limited to, traditional talk therapy, limbic system therapy, CBT and emotionally focused therapy. The committee recommends that the Legislature ensure the program includes a variety of treatment options to better serve veterans' individual needs.

4. Identify the training and resources available to urban and rural first responders when assisting veterans experiencing a mental health crisis. Make recommendations for how to best support first responders in these crisis situations.

Background

The State of Texas is fortunate to have exceptional first responders who reliably respond to a wide range of calls and to assist fellow Texans in need. In addition to maintaining law and order, our first responders are often tasked with responding to calls where they must safely and efficiently de-escalate a mental health crisis situation.

When a veteran is experiencing a mental health crisis, often a first responder is called to the scene and charged with assisting the situation, which can require a more specialized response. In order to support first responders in these responses, the Committee is focused on how to best raise awareness to the training and resources available to urban and rural first responders when assisting veterans in a mental health crisis.

Testimony

The Senate Committee on Veteran Affairs heard in-person testimony on May 3, 2022 from the following participants:

Officer George Collin Craig, Houston Police Department

Cullen Grissom, Director of Education Services, Credentialing, and Field Services, Texas Commission on Law Enforcement

Bo Stallman, Brazoria County Sheriff, Sheriffs' Association of Texas

Ron Acierno, PhD, Vice Chair for Veterans Affairs & Executive Director of the UTHealth Trauma and Resilience Center, University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston

Jimmy Perdue, Chief of Police, North Richland Hills Police Department

Houston Police Department

Houston Police Department (HPD) is the largest police department in the State of Texas. Officer George Collin Craig testified that HPD has the advantage of the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) hospital that is located in Houston. Officers in Houston have the ability to quickly transport veterans experiencing crises to the VA hospital to receive necessary care.

Officer Craig further testified that HPD has several programs and resources they use to address veteran specific issues. One such resource is the homeless outreach team that is trained to visit

homeless encampments and identify veterans in order to connect them with benefits they may not be receiving. Additionally, when officers encounter homeless veterans, they are trained to connect them with the homeless outreach team for further assistance with benefits.

In addition to the veteran specific programs, HPD has several units that include a mental health clinician who respond with police officers to crisis calls. HPD is also rolling out 18 units that include two mental health technicians that will respond specifically to non-violent and non-criminal calls.

Officer Craig explained that there is a mental health division within HPD that provides courses on veteran specific crises. Also available to HPD is a three-day elective class taught by the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement (TCOLE) that instructs law enforcement officers on the appropriate response to trauma-affected veterans. Because of the burden of staffing issues, it is a challenge for HPD officers to participate in this elective training.

In his testimony, Officer Craig shared that while the mental health division of HPD believes veteran-specific training is beneficial, they have concerns with requiring additional mandatory classes or training that could take police officers off of the streets. HPD recommends that TCOLE include training specific to veterans in the 40-hour crisis intervention training that officers are already required to receive.

North Richland Hills Police Department

Chief Jimmy Purdue testified that one of the biggest challenges smaller police departments face when responding to mental health crises is the availability of resources. Chief Purdue explained that 65-70 percent of the police departments in the State of Texas have less than 10 officers.

Lack of resources for smaller police forces is a barrier to providing mental health specific responses. In most cases when responding to a call, smaller departments are unable to send a mental health professional out to assess the situation. Their current protocol is to send a mental health professional for a follow up check-in with the person after the initial call and police response.

Chief Purdue testified that the North Richland Hills Police Department (NRHPD) has started a mental health program in a partnership with other cities in order to combine resources. NRHPD utilizes a grant to hire mental health clinicians that are shared among other departments. Chief Purdue shared that this partnership is an effective way for smaller cities to operate mental health specific programs.

Chief Purdue requested that the veteran-specific training course provided by TCOLE remain an in-person, hands-on course because he believes it would be a difficult course to offer online.

UT Health Science Center at Houston

UTHealth Houston established the Trauma and Resilience Center (TRC), a multi-disciplinary research and education center focusing on PTSD and trauma-related behavioral health conditions. The TRC offers free trainings to first responders which includes specific training for responding to situations where a veteran may be experiencing a mental health crisis.³⁰

In his testimony, Dr. Ron Acierno shared information about several peer ride-along programs in Harris County. The goal of these types of programs is to assist first responders in responding to veterans in crisis by having someone participate in the response who can provide specialized assistance. Some programs utilize specially-trained peer support while others rely on communication devices to immediately connect veterans in crisis to a mental health professional.

To best support our first responders in these crisis situations, Dr. Acierno recommended effective de-escalation training and mental health symptom presentation training to identify veterans in crisis and ensure an appropriate response., Additionally, he recommends access to evidence-based psychotherapy for first responders repeatedly exposed to trauma.³¹

Sheriffs' Association of Texas

The Sheriffs' Association of Texas first met in 1878 and is one of the oldest law enforcement associations Texas.³² Each year, the Sheriffs' Association of Texas holds Annual Training Conferences to provide specialized training sessions for Texas Peace Officers. These conferences provide training on specialized topics, including responding to individuals in a mental health crisis.

Sheriff Bo Stallman testified that peace officers are often unaware that an individual in crisis is a veteran until they are in the booking process when departments are required to share the number of veterans in custody with the Department of Veteran Affairs.

³⁰ Written Testimony, Dr. Ron Acierno, Vice Chair for Veterans Affairs & Executive Director of the UTHealth Trauma and Resilience Center, University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston , Response to Senate Committee on Veteran Affairs Request for Information, (May 3, 2022) (on file with committee)

³¹ Written Testimony, Dr. Ron Acierno, Vice Chair for Veterans Affairs & Executive Director of the UTHealth Trauma and Resilience Center, University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston , Response to Senate Committee on Veteran Affairs Request for Information, (May 3, 2022) (on file with committee)

³² *About*. Sheriffs' Association of Texas. (n.d.). Retrieved November 15, 2022, from <https://www.sheriffstx.org/about>

Sheriff Stallman asked the committee to consider how many departments operate with limited resources as they consider the interim charge. He believes funding for resources like specialty veteran courts and mental health treatment facilities would be valuable for these departments.

Texas Commission on Law Enforcement

House Bill 1338 passed during the 84th Legislative Session, requiring the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement (TCOLE) to establish and maintain a training program for peace officers that provides information on veterans with combat-related trauma, post-traumatic stress, PTSD, or a traumatic brain injury. TCOLE established 2 courses: Traumatic and Acquired Brain Injury (Course 4066) and Trauma-Affected Veterans (Course 4067.)

Cullen Grissom testified that the elective course trains officers to appropriately respond to trauma affected veterans and educates first responders on basic diagnoses of common trauma that impacts veterans, as well as suicide assessment and specific de-escalation techniques. Since its inception, 1,365 licenses have completed the course, including peace officers, jail staff, and telecommunicators.

Mr. Grissom shared that all peace officers must receive at least 40 hours of crisis intervention training and an eight hour de-escalation course through TCOLE to maintain their license, but this training is not specific to veterans in crisis.

Recommendation

The committee recommends that the Legislature improve the current peace officer training requirements so officers are trained to respond effectively to veteran-specific crisis situations. The committee recommends that the agency work to increase awareness and outreach for existing training courses and resources on veteran-related trauma currently available to first responders.