

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STAFF FINAL BILL ANALYSIS

BILL #: CS/HB 1315 Veteran Suicide Prevention Training

SPONSOR(S): Local Administration & Veterans Affairs Subcommittee, Diamond and others

TIED BILLS: **IDEN./SIM. BILLS:** SB 1712

FINAL HOUSE FLOOR ACTION: 113 Y's 0 N's **GOVERNOR'S ACTION:** Approved

SUMMARY ANALYSIS

CS/HB 1315 passed the House on March 8, 2022, as SB 1712.

The United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) partners with hundreds of organizations to raise awareness of the VA's suicide prevention resources and to educate people about how they may support veterans and servicemembers in their communities. The VA also partners with community mental health providers to expand the network of local treatment resources available to veterans. Although the VA emphasizes mental health care for veterans, many do not reach out to the VA but rely instead on local hospitals and health clinics. However, community health providers are not always prepared to address the needs of veterans. Studies have found that most are unfamiliar with deployment-related stressors and unsure how to refer patients to the VA.

Florida has taken numerous steps to combat veteran suicide including joining the "Governor's Challenge to Prevent Suicide Among Service Members, Veterans and their Families," launching the Florida Veterans Support Line, establishing the Florida Veterans Foundation, and establishing the Florida Veterans' Care Coordination Program.

The bill requires the Florida Department of Veterans Affairs (FDVA) to establish the Veteran Suicide Prevention Training Pilot Program (Program). The Program must offer each FDVA claims examiner and each county and city veteran service officer specialized training and certification in the prevention of veteran suicide.

The bill provides an appropriation of \$500,000 in nonrecurring funds from the General Revenue Fund to FDVA for the purpose of implementing the program.

The bill was approved by the Governor on April 6, 2022, ch. 2022-39, L.O.F., and will become effective on July 1, 2022.

I. SUBSTANTIVE INFORMATION

A. EFFECT OF CHANGES:

Present Situation

Veterans and Mental Health and Substance Abuse

There are approximately 19,100,000 veterans in the United States,¹ with more than 1.5 million veterans in Florida.² Veterans face unique challenges and some struggle with mental health and substance abuse.

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a psychiatric disorder that can occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event, including war or combat.³ The National Center for PTSD, within the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), lists the percentage of veterans with PTSD by service era:

- Between 11 and 20 percent of veterans who served in Operations Enduring Freedom⁴ and Iraqi Freedom⁵ were diagnosed with PTSD in a given year.
- About 12 percent of veterans who served in the Persian Gulf War⁶ were diagnosed with PTSD in a given year.
- About 15 percent of veterans of the Vietnam War⁷ were diagnosed with PTSD at the time of the most recent study in the late 1980s. However, the National Center for PTSD estimates that about 30 percent of veterans of the Vietnam War have had PTSD in their lifetimes.⁸

A strong association exists between PTSD and substance abuse disorders (SUD) among veterans. Statistics show:⁹

- More than two in 10 veterans with PTSD also have SUD.
- Almost one in three veterans seeking treatment for SUD also has PTSD.
- About one in 10 veterans returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan has a problem with alcohol or other drugs.

Veterans and Suicide

In 2016, the VA completed the largest analysis of veteran suicide to date and the work has continued every year since. The 2021 report examines mortality records for the period between 2001 and 2019 (the latest data available), and provides information regarding veteran suicide counts, averages per day, rates, and differences in rates of suicide.¹⁰

¹ United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), *National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics*, https://www.va.gov/vetdata/veteran_population.asp (last visited April 11, 2022).

² Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs, *Our Veterans, Fast Facts*, <https://floridavets.org/our-veterans/profilefast-facts/> (last visited April 11, 2022).

³ American Psychiatric Association, *What is Posttraumatic Stress Disorder?*, <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/ptsd/what-is-ptsd> (last visited April 11, 2022).

⁴ October 7, 2001, ending on the date prescribed by presidential proclamation or by law. See s. 1.01(14)(h), F.S.

⁵ March 19, 2003, ending on the date prescribed by presidential proclamation or by law. See s. 1.01(14)(i), F.S.

⁶ August 2, 1990, to January 2, 1992. See s. 1.01(14)(g), F.S.

⁷ February 28, 1961, to May 7, 1975. See s. 1.01(14)(f), F.S.

⁸ National Center for PTSD, VA, *How Common is PTSD in Veterans?*, https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/common/common_veterans.asp (last visited April 11, 2022).

⁹ National Center for PTSD, VA, *PTSD and Substance Abuse in Veterans*, https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/related/substance_abuse_vet.asp (last visited April 11, 2022).

¹⁰ VA, Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, 2021 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report, <https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/2021/2021-National-Veteran-Suicide-Prevention-Annual-Report-FINAL-9-8-21.pdf> (last visited April 11, 2022).

In 2019, 6,261 veterans died by suicide, which represented 13.7 percent of suicides among U.S. adults.¹¹ The average number of veteran suicide deaths per day rose from 16.4 in 2001 to 17.2 in 2019.¹² In 2019, of the average 17.2 veteran suicides per day, an estimated 6.8 suicides per day were among those with Veterans Health Administration (VHA) ¹³ encounters in 2018 or 2019, compared with 10.4 suicides per day for those veterans with no VHA encounter.¹⁴

In 2019, Florida had 553 veteran suicide deaths.¹⁵

Many risk factors may affect veteran suicide rates including the following:¹⁶

- Economic disparities
 - Some veterans report difficulty transitioning to civilian positions and difficulty translating military-related skills to higher-paying civilian jobs.
 - Veterans enrolled in VHA care are less likely to be employed and more likely to have lower income levels than veterans not receiving VHA care.
 - Unemployment and poverty are correlated with homelessness among veterans.
- Race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation
 - Racial and ethnic groups differ in experiences of discrimination and historical trauma and in access to culturally appropriate mental health treatment.
 - Veterans with LGBT or related identities may be at an elevated risk for suicide.
- Homelessness
 - In 2019, about 37,000 veterans were homeless and about 14,000 were living on the street or unsheltered.
- Service connection
 - VHA patients with military service-connected disability status may have lower risk of suicide than other VHA patients.
- Social connection and isolation
 - Among VHA patients, suicide rates are highest among those who are divorced, widowed, or never married.
 - Suicide rates are elevated among individuals living in rural areas.
- Health and well-being
 - VHA patients who died by suicide are more likely to have sleep disorders, traumatic brain injury, or a pain diagnosis than other VHA patients.

VA Strategy for Suicide Prevention

In 2007, the Joshua Omvig Veterans Suicide Prevention Act (Act) was signed into law.¹⁷ The Act directed the Secretary of the VA to develop and carry out a comprehensive program designed to reduce the incidence of suicide among veterans. The Act requires the program to include the following:

- Mandatory training for appropriate staff and contractors of the VA who interact with veterans;
- Mental health assessments of veterans;

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.* at 5.

¹³ The VHA is the largest integrated healthcare system and provides care at 1,255 healthcare facilities, including 170 medical centers and 1,074 outpatient clinics. See VA, *Veterans Health Administration*, <https://www.va.gov/health/> (last visited April 11, 2022).

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ VA, *Florida Veteran Suicide Data Sheet, 2019*, <https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/2019/2019-State-Data-Sheet-Florida-508.pdf> (last visited April 11, 2022).

¹⁶ VA, Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, 2020 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report, <https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/2020/2020-National-Veteran-Suicide-Prevention-Annual-Report-11-2020-508.pdf> (last visited April 11, 2022) at 9-11. The 2021 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report was shorter than previous reports due to the impact of COVID-19. The Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention in the VA is still going through data from the year 2020, therefore some information has been gathered from the 2020 Annual Report.

¹⁷ Joshua Omvig Veterans Suicide Prevention Act, Pub. L. No. 110-110, H.R. 327, 110th Cong. (Nov. 5, 2007).

- Designation of a suicide prevention counselor at each VA medical facility;
- Research on best practices for suicide prevention;
- Mental health care for veterans who have experienced sexual trauma while in military service;
- Twenty-four hour veterans' mental health care availability;
- A toll-free hotline; and
- Outreach and education for veterans and their families.¹⁸

Since the passage of the Act, the VA has worked to expand suicide prevention initiatives, including:

- Bolstering mental health services for women veterans;
- Broadening telehealth services;
- Developing free mobile apps to help veterans and their families;
- Improving access to care by providing mental health screening and treatment services through Vet Centers and readjustment counselors; and
- Using telephone coaching to assist families of veterans.¹⁹

In 2007, the VA also launched the Veterans Crisis Line. The program connects veterans and current servicemembers in crisis and their families and friends with information from qualified responders through a confidential toll-free hotline, online chat, and text messaging service.²⁰ The program has answered more than 5 million calls and initiated the dispatch of emergency services to callers in crisis more than 167,000 times.

The VA partners with hundreds of organizations to raise awareness of the VA's suicide prevention resources and to educate people about how they may support veterans and servicemembers in their communities. The VA also partners with community mental health providers to expand the network of local treatment resources available to veterans and with veterans service organizations because they help veterans find employment, manage claims and benefits, and stay socially connected.²¹

While the VA has focused on mental health care for veterans, many veterans do not reach out to the VA for help. Most use local hospitals and health clinics. However, community health providers are not always prepared to address the needs of veterans. Studies have found that most are unfamiliar with deployment-related stressors and unsure how to refer patients to the VA.²²

Florida Veterans

The Florida Department of Veterans Affairs (FDVA) employs claims examiners to assist with claims for all state and federal VA programs. Claims examiners are located within the VA regional office in Bay Pines, in each VA Medical Center, and in VA outpatient clinics throughout the state.²³

Boards of county commissioners and governing bodies of municipalities may employ veteran service officers and prescribe their duties, compensation, and terms of employment.²⁴ A veteran service officer

¹⁸ Congress.gov, *H.R. 327 Summary*, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/110th-congress/house-bill/327> (last visited April 11, 2022).

¹⁹ VA, *National Strategy for Preventing Veteran Suicide, 2018-2028*, p. 11, https://sprc.org/sites/default/files/resource-program/VA_National-Strategy-for-Preventing-Veterans-Suicide2018.pdf (last visited April 11, 2022).

²⁰ VA Veterans Crisis Line, *What to Expect*, <https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/about/what-to-expect> (last visited April 11, 2022).

²¹ *Supra* note 22.

²² RAND Review, *How Private Health Care Providers Could Better Service Veterans*, Nov. 7, 2018, <https://www.rand.org/blog/rand-review/2018/11/how-private-health-care-providers-could-better-serve-veterans.html> (last visited April 11, 2022).

²³ FDVA, *Claim Examiner Sites*, available at <https://floridavets.org/locations/claim-examiner-sites/> (last visited on April 11, 2022).

²⁴ S. 292.11, F.S.

must be a veteran who served as a member of the U.S. Armed Forces during a period of war,²⁵ served at least 18 months' active duty in the Armed Forces, and be separated from such service under honorable conditions.²⁶

Suicide Prevention in Florida

Florida has taken numerous steps to combat veteran suicide including, but not limited to:

- Joining the “Governor’s Challenge to Prevent Suicide Among Service Members, Veterans and their Families,” a national call to action asking state, military, and civil interagency teams to embark on a process of collaborating, planning, and implementing suicide prevention best practices and policies for servicemembers, veterans, and their families statewide;²⁷
- Launching the Florida Veterans Support Line, a peer-based service allowing veterans to speak to fellow veterans to receive assistance and support;²⁸
- Establishing the Florida Veterans Foundation, a statewide organization that provides direct services and partners with state and local governments, veteran service organizations, and education institutions to improve a veteran’s physical, mental, and emotional well-being;²⁹ and
- Establishing the Florida Veterans’ Care Coordination Program, providing behavioral care referral and coordination services for veterans and their families.³⁰

Effect of the Bill

The bill requires the FDVA to establish the Veteran Suicide Prevention Training Pilot Program (Program). The bill provides that the Program must offer each FDVA claims examiner and county and city veteran service officer specialized training and certification in the prevention of veteran suicide.

The bill provides that those who participate in the Program must be trained to identify indicators of elevated suicide risk and provide emergency crisis referral for veterans expressing or exhibiting symptoms of emotional or psychological distress. FDVA must contract with organizations specializing in veteran-related suicide prevention training in order to develop the curriculum of the Program. FDVA must establish and oversee the administration of training and the certification of the participants of the Program. The bill provides that FDVA may adopt rules as necessary in order to implement the Program.

The bill requires FDVA to submit a report to the President of the Senate and the Speaker of the House of Representatives by June 30 of each year. The report must include information concerning the Program and whether any changes should be made in order to increase the Program’s effectiveness. In addition, the report must include a recommendation of whether the Program should be continued.

II. FISCAL ANALYSIS & ECONOMIC IMPACT STATEMENT

A. FISCAL IMPACT ON STATE GOVERNMENT:

1. Revenues:

²⁵ Period of war is defined as the Spanish-American War, the Mexican border period, World War I, World War II, the Korean conflict, the Vietnam era, the Persian Gulf War, and the period beginning on the date of any declaration of war by the Congress and ending on the date prescribed by Presidential proclamation or concurrent resolution of the Congress.

38 U.S.C. s. 101(11).

²⁶ S. 292.11(1), F.S.

²⁷ Florida Department of Veterans’ Affairs, *Governor Signs Florida Veteran Suicide Prevention Month Proclamation*, <https://www.floridavets.org/governor-signs-florida-veteran-suicide-prevention-month-proclamation/> (last visited April 11, 2022).

²⁸ Florida Veterans Support Line, *About*, <https://www.myflvet.com/about-1>, (last visited April 11, 2022).

²⁹ Florida Veterans Foundation, *About FVF*, <https://helpflvets.org/about/> (last visited April 11, 2022).

³⁰ Ch. 2021-198, Laws of Fla., creating s. 394.9087, F.S.

None.

2. Expenditures:

The bill provides a nonrecurring appropriation of \$500,000 from the General Revenue Fund to FDVA to implement the Program.

B. FISCAL IMPACT ON LOCAL GOVERNMENTS:

1. Revenues:

None.

2. Expenditures:

None.

C. DIRECT ECONOMIC IMPACT ON PRIVATE SECTOR:

None.

D. FISCAL COMMENTS:

None.