



# Growing Veterans Proviso Report

## REPORT TO THE LEGISLATURE

As required in:  
Engrossed Second Substitute Senate Bill 5693  
Chapter 297, Laws of 2022,  
67th Legislature  
2022 Regular Session

July 2023



*"Serving Those Who Served"*

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## Background

Sec 221 (3)(e) of ESSB 5693 provided that:

“\$57,000 of the general fund—state appropriation for fiscal year 2022 and \$200,000 of the general fund—state appropriation for fiscal year 2023 are provided solely for the department to contract with an entity that provides accredited peer support training for both veterans and community service members. The funding provided in this subsection is in addition to the department's existing appropriation for its in-house peer support program. No later than June 30, 2023, the department must report to the legislature regarding the number of peer supporters trained pursuant to the contract under this subsection.”

On June 29, 2022, WDVA contracted with Growing Veterans, a registered 501 (c) 3 nonprofit, to provide the accredited peer support training.

## Introduction

Growing Veterans was founded by a combat wounded U.S. Marine Corps veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan, Christopher Brown, and a former mental health counselor turned farmer, Christina Wolf.

They achieve their mission of empowering military veterans to create purpose and belonging by growing food, community, and each other throughout Washington State. Growing Veterans decreases the isolation leading to suicide by providing a landing space for veterans and the community while igniting a sense of purpose and belonging. Through ‘Dirt Therapy’ and formal “Peer Support Training,” Growing Veterans creates a culture of peer support.

To combat the distance to attend barrier to entry, Growing Veterans offers Peer Support Training sessions virtually for anyone that is unable to attend in-person trainings. This has significantly increased the number of participants. It also offers participants the chance to attend our training from the comfort of their own homes, which many attendees prefer as it allows them to feel safe and secure at their residence while simultaneously becoming vulnerable and sharing their stories of trauma.

Peer Support Training is important to suicide prevention because it teaches participants the skills needed to facilitate healthy conversations and outcomes and enabling participants to reduce peer isolation and develop the tools to create a network of peer support. Peer Support Training has been described by participants as, “having largely positive impacts and has reported using learned skills both with veterans and non-veterans across their personal and professional lives.” Participants reported learning tools through this training that increased their patience, mindfulness, awareness, empathy, and confidence, resulting in improved interpersonal relationships and communications across multiple domains.

As of September 2020, Washington State is home to 520,226 veterans, making up 8.9% of our state’s population and ranks Washington 11th of 50 states with the largest veteran population.

## Activities & Results

With funding provided in ESSB 5693, Growing Veterans and WDVA hoped to increase the Culture of Peer Support on a statewide scale.

Growing Veterans provided accredited Peer Support Training to 320 Veterans in the community with a goal of creating a positive impact on Veteran mental health access, job retention, and mental health field interest.

Upon completion of the training, the new Peer Supporters had the potential to support over 7,800 Veterans and civilians. Peer Supporters reduce isolation and disconnection in the community which are major risk factors for suicide.

Growing Veteran's Peer Support Training has been accredited by the Washington State Mental Health Counselors Association and is eligible for 20.5 CEUs.

In 2022, there were a total of 39 Peer Support Training graduates. Table 1.1 shows the number of trainees during the months that training was being facilitated. In the months of July, August, and October, Growing Veterans operated on marketing, coordinating, registering, and all the back-end side of things to make sure that the Peer Support Training (PST) were happening.

Table 1.1: Overall PST Participants (2022)

Month	# of Participants
June	6
September	6
November	15
December	12
<b>Total</b>	<b>39</b>

As of June 2023, Growing Veterans has hosted 6 Peer Support Training sessions in the months of February, March, April, and May. A June session is also scheduled for 6/23-6/25.

During these months, there was marketing done for the training at tabling events such as the Seattle Seahawks Task Force 12 Veterans Resource Fair at Lumen Field, as well as SuperFeet Giving Fair. During those events, Growing Veterans staff communicated with dozens of veterans and non-veterans which resulted in new attendance participants joining our training sessions.

Growing Veterans has produced 50 Peer Support Training graduates in 2023 with

another 7 anticipated to attend a training in June. Table 1.2 shows the location of training events across the state.

Table 1.2: Overall PST Participants (June 2023)

Month	# of Participants	Location
February	15	Vancouver, WA
March	12	Virtual
April	15	Virtual
May	8	Olympia, WA
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	

\*Does not include 7 anticipated attendees for June 2023

## Conclusion

Growing Veterans Peer Support Training serves as a critical tool in reducing isolation and disconnection among Veterans and the larger community, thereby serving as a crucial element in mitigating suicide risk. With legislative support and community participation, Growing Veterans is making significant strides towards establishing a culture of peer support within Washington State. Community members are currently and will continue to benefit from this training by serving their second purpose in peer support.

*“During both my military and civilian careers, I experienced and participated in a myriad of seminars, institutes, classes, etc., covering many subjects ranging from organizational leadership to complex systems operations and many more. The Growing Veterans’ Peer Training program is among the best I have ever attended. Immediately impactful, it provided tools and techniques to enhance the value and effectiveness of mentoring opportunities.” – Steve Pennington, Edmonds College Vet Center*