

WASHINGTON STATE
DEPARTMENT OF

**VETERANS
AFFAIRS**



"Serving Those Who Served"

LGBTQ+ Veterans Program

Report to the Legislature

SUBMITTED BY: WDVA LGBTQ+ VETERANS OUTREACH COORDINATOR: LANG,
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STATE OF WASHINGTON

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

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DATE: December 14, 2021

TO: The Honorable Jay Inslee, Governor of Washington
Joint Committee on Veterans' and Military Affairs

FROM: Lourdes E. Alvarado-Ramos, Director, WDVA 

SUBJECT: 2021 LGBTQ+ Veterans Outreach Program Report

Your Washington Department of Veterans Affairs is pleased to submit this report on the implementation and status of the LGBTQ Program.

Many LGBTQ Veterans have experienced discrimination and have not felt part of Washington's Veterans Community. The creation of the LGBTQ Program within WDVA not only shows that our state is committed to serving *all* veterans, but also will ensure that a community of professionals with appropriate cultural competency training is available to assist in accessing their earned benefits.

In June 2021, WDVA hired the LGBTQ+ Coordinator and she has been hard at work building a program to meet the needs of the unique needs of the LGBTQ+ veteran population. The coordinator position will be especially vital as we develop strategies to assist those impacted by the lingering effects of the Don't Ask Don't Tell (DADT) policy.

We appreciate the significant investments the Legislature and Governor have made to ensure that veterans are able to access and receive the benefits they earned in service to our country, without regard to sexual orientation or gender identity. We look forward the continued support of the Governor and Legislature as the program matures, and we identify areas for opportunity.

Executive Summary

The Washington Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA) is committed to a diverse workforce, and an inclusive workspace and understands that diversity and inclusion are essential for delivering the best service to Washington State’s veterans. The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer+ (LGBTQ+) community is a vital facet of our veteran population.

To best serve this population, the Washington State Department of Veterans Affairs, LGBTQ+ Coordinator position was created by the Washington State Legislature during the 2020 Legislative Session. The legislation added a new section to chapter 43.60A RCW in order to connect “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer veterans to their earned and related benefits and services, and to programs, resources, and information about such benefits and services...” in order to promote the economic security and financial stability of veterans, and their spouses and dependents.

This report describes historical context for the program as well as a description of the rationale used for the creation of the program from the ground up.

The legislation requires the following four items of information. While succinct responses are provided below, there are detailed explanations provided in the report:

(a) The number of veterans served - 173

(b) The type of assistance provided – The most common assistance was providing general program information and information related to WDVA programs and services. There were some requests for claim issues and benefit information, housing assistance, and counseling information specific to LGBTQ+ Veterans. Additionally, there were LGBTQ+ cultural competency inquiries.

(c) Recommendations for the improvement and expansion of the services provided by the coordinator – the program is brand new and has only been active for a few months. We recommend continuing to build partnerships, conducting outreach, and marketing to continue to build awareness within the LGBTQ+ veteran community.

(d) Recommendations for legislative changes – there are no additional legislative recommendations at this time.

Background

According to the Department of Veterans Affairs VETPOP2021 report, there are 546,892 veterans in the state of Washington. The latest 2021 Gallup update on LGBT identification finds that 5.6% of the US population identifies as LGBT (Jones, 2021). In general, those identifying as LGBTQ+ tend to experience higher levels of isolation, depression and anxiety, fear of being outed, fear of physical harm, and a lack of trust with others. Studies have also shown that LGBTQ+ veterans are at an elevated risk for stress, and certain mental and health conditions such as substance use disorders, anxiety, and depression. LGBTQ+ veterans may have difficulty accessing resources due to bad paper discharges, or because they are dealing with the stigma of how LGBTQ+ identity has been historically equated with mental illness. Studies have found that 15 percent of LGB veterans attempt suicide, compared with less than one percent of the entire veteran population (Cochran and Balsam et al 2013). In addition, the National

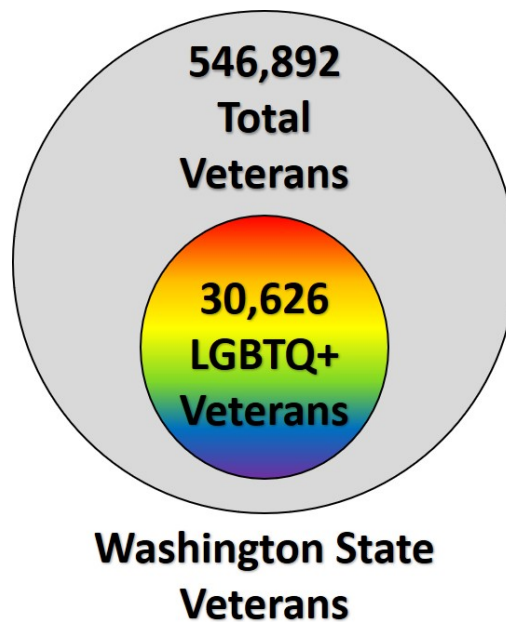
Transgender Discrimination Survey found that 41% of transgender and gender non-conforming veterans reported attempting suicide compared to 1.6% of the general population (Grant and Mottet et al, 2106).

Based on the 5.6% LGBT identification rate, it is estimated there are nearly 31,000 LGBTQ+ veterans in the state of Washington.

The LGBTQ+ Veterans Outreach coordinator was created to establish a process to educate local governments, veterans, and those still serving in the armed forces, national guard, or armed forces reserve of the benefits available to the LGBTQ+ community. The position would also:

- conduct outreach,
- provide assistance to veterans applying for discharge upgrades,
- provide assistance to veterans appealing previously denied claims,
- assist veterans applying for initial VA claims for disability benefits,
- connect LGBTQ+ veterans to any other benefits available,
- develop and distribute informational materials.

The type of discharge that a veteran receives directly impacts their ability to access VA benefits. In the past, Department of Defense policies meant that LGBTQ+ soldiers were not discharged with Honorable Discharges, but rather a discharge that did not allow access to VA benefits and services. Generally, in order to receive VA benefits and services, the Veteran's character of discharge or service must be under other than dishonorable conditions. Since World War II, as many as 100,000 gay members of the United States military were discharged with dishonorable, or less-than-honorable discharges due to sexual orientation" (Phillips, 2015).



While policy has changed over time it was in 1982 that the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) released a policy stating that “homosexuality is incompatible with military service.” Between 1980 and 1990, an average of 1,500 military service members were discharged annually on the basis of sexual orientation. In 1993, President Bill Clinton signed the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy, which permitted gay Americans to serve in the military and would “not be asked or required to reveal whether they are heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual.” They would “not be asked or required to reveal whether they have engaged in homosexual conduct, unless independent evidence is received indicating that an applicant engaged in such conduct...”. In 2011, President Obama repealed the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy, but more than 14,000 gay and lesbian service men and women were discharged under “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” (Williams, 2021).

On the 10th anniversary of the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”, the VA recognized that “the trauma caused by the military’s decades-long policy of discrimination against LGBTQ+ people cannot be undone in a few short months, the Biden administration and Secretary McDonough are taking the steps necessary to begin addressing the pain that such policies have created. LGBTQ+ Veterans are not any less worthy of the care and services that all Veterans earn through their service, and VA is committed to making sure that they have equal access to those services.” WDVA is also committed to ensuring that LGBTQ+ Veterans have access to those benefits and services, and the legislatively mandated LGBTQ+ Coordinator is a resource to ensure that becomes a reality.

Activities

This is a new program, and is being built from the ground up. In June, we onboarded the LGBTQ+ Outreach Coordinator and she began building the program. To develop the program, we focused on the following areas:



- ***Veteran Service Officer (VSO) Training and Accreditation:*** The LGBTQ+ Veterans Outreach Coordinator is to assist LGBTQ+ Veterans in applying for Veterans Administration (VA) benefits, as well as an upgrade to the character of a discharge from service or a change in the narrative reason for a discharge from service.

A Veterans Service Officer assists veterans and families with accessing benefits once they complete the appropriate training. The LGBTQ+ Veterans Outreach Coordinator completed VA Training Responsibility Involvement in Preparation of Claims (VA-TRIP) as well as National Veterans Legal Services Program (NVLSP) training and earned accreditation as a Veteran Service Officer. When the Washington Veterans Service Center reopens for public facing activities, the LGBTQ+ Veterans Outreach Coordinator will job shadow and then be fully prepared to assist LGBTQ+ Veterans and family members with discharge upgrades, as well as accessing benefits.

While the LGBTQ+ Veterans Outreach Coordinator has not yet individually assisted a veteran with a claim, she has partnered to provide 4 LGBTQ+ veterans access to unique LGBTQ+ resources.

- ***Partnership Development:*** Partnership development is the process of identifying and meeting with resources that have a connection to the LGBTQ+ Community. The LGBTQ+ Veterans Outreach Coordinator meets with the organization and forms a relationship which will act as a pipeline for those resources to channel LGBTQ+ Veterans to WDVA. This network will also be leveraged to maintain a broad insight into the LGBTQ+ community while learning of challenges, or areas that are not currently meeting the needs of LGBTQ+ veterans. This is an ongoing process with new resources being identified monthly. The LGBTQ+ Veterans Outreach Coordinator meets with at least one new organization per month. Current resources include: The Rainbow and Inclusion Network (RAIN), the LGBTQ+ Commission, Tacoma Older LGBT, Joint American Indian Veterans Advisory Council, Washington Department of Social and Health Services, Washington Employment Services Division, and the Federal VA.
- ***Outreach Events:*** Outreach events are geared toward providing individuals information about the WDVA LGBTQ+ Veterans Outreach Program directly in the places or organizations where they visit or get together. The LGBTQ+ Veterans Outreach Coordinator conducts at least 6 outreach events per quarter. Those venues vary, and are always expanding to ensure wide coverage. The current venues include Tacoma Older LGBT, South Sound Lesbians. Emerald City Social Club (ECSC), Seattle Trans Life (STL), The Washington State Fair, The National Guard, and Walla Walla Pride
- ***Training Material:*** We are often asked for ways to help others understand and best interact with the LGBTQ+ veteran population. The ability to understand and interact effectively with different cultures is known as cultural competence. We have created LGBTQ+ Cultural Competency Training that can be tailored to organizations that serve veterans, healthcare settings, state agencies, or the general population. We are working to distribute this training to the community and our partners in order to improve knowledge, skills, and strategies when interacting with the LGBTQ+ veteran population.

- **Social Media:** We have created a feature video highlighting the LGBTQ+ Veterans Outreach program and an introduction to the LGBTQ+ Veterans Outreach Coordinator, which is available on YouTube and posted to WDVA social media.

Recommendations

Recommendations for the improvement and expansion of the services provided by the coordinator:

This is a newly implemented program and has only been active since mid-June of 2021. The initial work has been focused on training the coordinator and building a plan to connect with partners, the community, and individuals. As it is so early in the life of the program, we recommend continuing to build partnerships, conducting outreach, and marketing to continue to build awareness within the veterans community that assistance is available to LGBTQ+ veterans. While we have made connections for building partnerships and connecting with the community and individuals, we have really just begun to scratch the surface and there are still considerable opportunities to make connections over the coming year.

Recommendations for legislative changes:

We do not have any request for legislative changes at this time. As previously mentioned, this is a newly implemented program and has only been active since mid-June of 2021. Training and laying the groundwork for the program were the focus. Over the coming year we will be able to network with partners, the community, and individuals through outreach and partnership events to collect feedback and then make recommendations for future changes.

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