

# Washington State Veterans Peer Corps Report to the Legislature





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# Executive Summary

The Washington State Veterans Peer Corps (VPC) was created by the Washington State Legislature during the 2017 Legislative Session. The legislation amended [RCW 43.60A.100](#) to require the Washington State Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA) to “offer training and support for volunteers interested in providing peer-to-peer support to other veterans.”

WDVA began developing the Veterans Peer Corps with the following goals in mind:

- Build community-based programs that connect veterans from a variety of eras and backgrounds to each other.
- Create opportunities for veterans to gather and participate in activities.
- Provide training for veteran peer mentors and equip them with information about veterans’ resources in their communities.
- Empower veteran peer mentors to facilitate group and individual mentoring sessions.
- Build camaraderie and trust through ongoing coaching, training opportunities, and support forums.

Veterans Peer Corps Mentors will work with veterans both in groups and individually to:

- Create opportunities to give back and be involved with their communities.
- Create a safe local group setting where veterans can share military stories and experiences.
- Participate in activities together and find common interests.
- Assist with transition from the military to civilian life.
- Provide referrals to local, state, and federal benefits and resources.

The peer mentor concept has been a successful component of WDVA’s Vet Corps program, which places 50 peer navigators on college campuses across the state.

Vet Corps is funded through an AmeriCorps grant and is focused on helping veterans achieve success in their higher education goals. WDVA’s experience with Vet Corps demonstrated how powerful peer mentoring can be, especially when working with the veterans community as veterans often identify strongly with others who have served our country. Having a shared military background allows veterans to establish a connection and level of trust with each other, making the peer mentor relationship even stronger and more beneficial.

As WDVA began developing the new Veterans Peer Corps, we were keenly aware that Washington State's geography and number of highly rural populations would create both challenges and opportunities.

In addition, there are several veteran organizations who currently utilize peer-to-peer support as a part of their programs. Development of the Veterans Peer Corps focused on how this new program could augment existing programs and offer the opportunity to create a standard for peer-to-peer support.

Locations for Peer Mentor Trainings are determined by the service organizations and partners that request a training. Once a location is identified, WDVA connects with an existing organization within the community who acts as the VPC host for the training event. Each local organization helps to recruit veterans and family members in the community who are interested in serving as Veteran Peer Corps members. This collaboration is used to engage, certify, and support the network of existing veteran service organizations serving over 550,000 veterans statewide.

Looking to 2019 program will begin to focus on rural areas of the state that have few existing veteran resources, and a relatively high concentration of veterans. Communities that have a higher need in conjunction with higher veterans' concentration, are expected to have more veterans interested in becoming Veterans Peer Corps mentors.

*“Keep this going. Great Program. It would be great to have a trained peer mentor in every VFW, and American Legion post.”*

*- July 20<sup>th</sup>, Bellingham Attendee*

*“This training needs to be put in every college for veterans to transition!”*

*- Dec 14<sup>th</sup>, Wenatchee Attendee*

# Program Design

To develop the VPC Program, WDVA staff worked with the Military Veteran Peer Network (MVPN) in Texas, as well as the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) veterans peer mentoring technical assistance lead, on best practices and program curriculum. In addition, the Veterans Peer Corps staff collaborated with the WDVA's Vet Corps Program to fine tune the program application, training curriculum, and conduct a test-run of the training program itself.

Through the analysis of the MVPN and SAMHSA programs, and review of peer-to-peer support programs used by other non-profits in Washington State, eight best practices were identified, and six have been implemented by the WDVA VPC Program.

## **Best practices implemented by VPC:**

- Develop strong learning objective based on VPC goals
- Work with local community leaders to gain program support
- Give a certificate of completion to each new Veterans Peer Corps Mentor
- Provide food and networking atmosphere at the training as a training incentive
- Purchase apparel (shirts and hats) develop ownership of mission
- Modifying training for different affinity groups

## **Best practices not implemented by VPC:**

- Extensive multi day training
- Having local support be paid interns/contractors in different regions of the state

The VPC chose not to rely on an extensive multi-day training, used by other peer-to-peer support programs because this form of training is not only time consuming and expensive for the mentor, but also expensive and time consuming for the sponsoring organization. VPC has implemented a one day, eight hour training which makes it easier to attend and more accessible for volunteer mentors.

With the one-day format, the training is offered to veterans typically through host organizations such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars, American Legion, Vietnam Veterans of America, higher education institutions, and other organizations focused on veteran services.

At this time, the VPC budget does not allow for local paid interns in different parts of the state; however, this option as well as the longer training option are best practices that will be revisited as the VPC grows in participation and gains more feedback, data, and experience.

# Curriculum

In developing the curriculum, current training tools and manuals were shared with MVPN, and SAMHSA. The outcome is a unique peer mentor curriculum that is informed in evidence based practices and designed to give veterans the tools they need to be effective VPC mentors in their communities.

Because portions of each training are conducted by local community experts who will become the new VPC mentors local points of contact, the curriculum was developed so that it could be transportable to a number of trainers and still provide the audience with the same baseline information.

## **Three components guided the development of the VPC curriculum.**

- 1) **Transportable**  
Representatives from other organizations present curriculum and guidelines to represent their own communities.
- 2) **Building a Peer Relationship**  
VPC identified the shared experience as serving or having been a close family member of someone who served in the armed forces. This training focuses on skills needed to build a meaningful relationship, regardless of one's military experience or diagnosis. This is different than other peer mentor programs that require a shared diagnosis (PTSD, Suicide Attempt, Cancer, etc.) in order to serve as a peer mentor.
- 3) **Resources and Local Focus,**  
A portion of each training will be tailored to the specific community the peer mentors live in. These local resources will be available and highlighted to guide and support veteran mentors. This is particularly important for rural or underserved communities.

*“I did not expect a class on peer mentorship to evolve into actual peer mentorship while here. We each shared things with classmates that will be exactly like mentoring peers.”*

*- July 20<sup>th</sup> Bellingham Attendee*

*“I feel better prepared to engage veterans in need with at least the resources available. This is a fear of sharing, of expressing weakness. This class made me realize that I/we have the power to really help our brothers, and sisters.”*

*- July 20<sup>th</sup> Bellingham Attendee*

*“It was great to have so many trainers with different perspectives and expertise.”*

*- Sep 19<sup>th</sup>, Bothell Attendee*

**An 8 hour curriculum was created with specific outcomes for each standardized topic.**

**Intro to the Veterans Peer Corps**

- a) Lay groundwork for VPC programming, and day's objectives.
- b) Share funding source and intent of legislation/ WDVA intentions for program deployment.
- c) Share accountability tools and data collection methods.

**Invisible Wounds**

- a) Overview of Veterans Cultural Competency.
- b) In depth overview of Post-Traumatic Stress, Traumatic Brain Injury, Military Sexual Trauma.
- c) Introduction of mental health and Traumatic Brain Injury resources available in all communities.

**Lunch/Resource Sharing**

- a) In conjunction with lunch a space for sharing local resources.
- b) Regional team building and strengthen local (sometimes new) connections in support of veterans.

**Building a Peer Relationship & Respecting Others**

- a) Further military culture, and shared trauma or barriers to transition.
- b) Understanding differences in military services.
- c) Increased understanding of cross branch, era, or experience, understanding used to create a relationship.
- d) Discussion based introductions to peer mentor type interventions.

**Peer Mentor Skill Building**

- a) Active listening.
- b) Conflict resolution.
- c) Motivational interviewing.

**Suicide Prevention**

- a) Gate keeper training, building tools for mentors to provide specific interventions that save a life then refer to mental health professional.
- b) De-stigmatize direct communication around suicide  
"do you plan on killing yourself"

**Peer Mentor Certification and Closing Remarks**

- a) Reconnect to resources, and specific services they now have more access to in WDVA.
- b) Certification, honoring them as program graduates.
- c) Call to action and celebration to go make change.
- d) Awarding of VPC gear, VPC uniform for service.

# Outcomes

Nine Veterans Peer Corps trainings in eight communities

**Bothell-** University of Washington Bothell Campus

**Spokane-** Vet Center

**Ellensburg-** Central Washington University

**Bellingham-** Department of Revenue

**Wenatchee-** Chelan County Veteran Services

**Seattle-** VFW Post#3063

**Longview-** Lower Columbia College

**Federal Way-** Dumas Bay Event Center



Trained **112** Veteran Peer Corps mentors.



Currently mentors are averaging just under **2** mentees, post training.



Veteran Peer Corps mentors are now able to share information about their activities using an online portal. This feature was added in December, 2018 so minimal data is currently available; however, mentors are beginning to log into the system and share information about the type and number of events held, the number of participants, and any success measures or comments provided by veterans in their community. Veterans Peer Corps mentors are added to the WDVA email distribution list so they have access to regular information from the agency and have the ability to post their events to the WDVA website and social media sites to increase community participation.

All mentors have direct access to the VPC Program manager and are asked to check in when a veteran they are mentoring needs additional support in the community.



**Training evaluations are included with all trainings and evaluations were broken into two sections.**

**Section A**

Questions were ranked on a scale of 1(Not at all) to 5 (Strongly Agree)

Before VPC training I was familiar with the topics covered.  
average ranking **3.4**

Opening explained the goals of the training.  
average ranking **4.5**

The intro to the VPC was useful and will inform my time as a Veteran Peer Corps mentor. average ranking **4.5**

Invisible wounds was useful and will inform my time as a Veteran Peer Corps mentor. average ranking **4.8**

Building a Peer Relationship will inform my time as a Veterans Peer Corps mentor. average ranking **4.7**

Peer Mentor Skill Building was useful and will inform my time as a Veteran Peer Corps Mentor. average ranking **4.6**

Suicide Prevention was useful and will inform my time as a Veteran Peer Corps mentor. average ranking **4.4**

After VPC training I am familiar with the topics covered.  
average ranking **4.4**

**Respondents reported a 52 point or 75% increase in familiarity with the topic, a marked change in knowledge**

### Change in Knowledge



## Section B

Questions that were asked with narrative responses:

What are the three most important concepts or ideas you learned during training?

The highest reported concepts are **Suicide, PTSD, and Traumatic Brain injury** with a large emphasis on **Active Listening**.

What actions will you take based on your training?

Themes were around **Volunteer, Continue to help veterans and mentor or provide resources**.

What additional training topics would be useful?

Themes were **more training**, and **resources** specifically for **MST, homelessness, and suicide prevention**.

What was the training lacking or could be improved on?

Themes were around needing both **longer and shorter training**, more **skill building**

*“I didn't feel there was anything lacking or needed improvement. Very thorough, organized and well researched presentation. I liked the personal deliveries of each speaker/facilitator/presenter.*

*- Aug 11th, Spokane Attendee*

*“Outgrow and resolve personal bad habit, which I now think may have developed from a TBI.”*

*- May 12<sup>th</sup> Longview*

*“Here in Wenatchee we might be limited to the resources for the veterans but having peer mentors in the area is another tool for the community to get the veterans the help they need.”*

*- Dec 12th, Wenatchee Attendee*

# Next Steps

The Veteran Peer Corps will conduct continuous process improvement and implementation of sustainable programming.

### **Current success measures are:**

- 1) Development of Washington specific peer mentor manual and accompanying curriculum.
- 2) Training of 112 new certified peer mentors at 9 individual trainings.
- 3) Partnership with 8 existing veterans service organizations.
- 4) Training of 7 peer mentor trainers.

Over the coming year, the VPC will begin integrating recommendations from subject matter experts, veterans, and those trained to improve the application and training process for VPC mentors.

### **Goals for coming year include:**

- 1) Facilitate VPC trainings that meet curriculum and include a WDVA representative, but are self-supported by partner organizations.
- 2) Increase infrastructure around data collection and communications with existing 112 peer mentors across the state.
- 3) Focus on underserved communities in targeted rural regions of the state with high concentrations of veterans and few existing veteran resources.
- 4) Update manual with two separate focus groups, aimed at taking recommendations from peer mentors providing direct services.
- 5) Solidify VPC as a leader in peer mentor support and training in an environment that is heavily supported and recognized for making lasting changes for those enlisted and served.
- 6) Conduct 9 VPC trainings and engage with 100 additional mentors.

Veterans Peer Corps will approach the coming year with an overall goal of sustainability. It is recognized that the state supported Peer mentoring program, has a role of shoring up and keeping in place the programming that has become crucial to the states veterans and family members. The VPC program will continue to support the expanding network of veterans and family members that want to give back and make lasting impacts in the communities they call home.

*“I will concisely apply some motivational interviewing elements and goals”*

*- May 11th Longview Attendee*

*“I’m starting a veteran’s support group here on the campus with help from the counseling center.”*

*- Nov 3<sup>rd</sup> Bothell Attendee*

## A Day of Healing and Learning

On Thursday August 16, 2018, I had the pleasure of attending the Veterans Peer Mentorship training hosted by the Department of Veteran Affairs. I was skeptical at first wondering, "What would I learn?" I had all sorts of emotions running through my head. Having a service connected 100% disability, I felt inadequate and was concerned about trust issues. I thought to myself about all the fears and doubts I had when I finished my enlistment. To my surprise I was greeted at the door in Seattle at the VFW by the keynote speakers, welcomed with breakfast, and started to feel relaxed. They even saved the first hour for everyone to get to know everyone. Tables were spaced out to allow room for veterans to form small groups and give each other breathing room. Some brought their service animals.

Throughout the day we got information and materials on leadership, TBI, MST, PTSD, as well as available resources like housing vouchers, stand down events and compensation. To my surprise, many of the attendees were employees that service veterans in their careers. What started out for me as information session soon became a day of healing, personal growth, and a mentorship. At one point, I broke down and cried because the first time in many years I felt like I was at home. Peter Schmidt, Director of Behavioral Health for the Department of Veterans Affairs, took me aside and spent time with me listening to my concerns and points me in a direction that reminded me of who I was and my greatest strength as a United States Marine, perseverance. Jason Alves, program manager of the Veterans Conservation Corps, who happens to be my boss's boss, gave me a hug and reminded me, "You are not alone. Welcome brother."

As the day went on, I met people from all branches of service who reminded me of what family is. We shared many similar interests and had the opportunity to open up and share some of our deepest fears. Some of us cried, some of us laughed, but as we finished off the day with a closing ceremony, I felt empowered by my certificate, challenge coin, materials, t-shirt, water bottle I received. This training stirred up a new passion I never knew was there. I am and now will always be a Life-Long learner and Veteran advocate.



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## **Veterans Peer Corps: New WDVA Peer-to-Peer Program Making an Impact**

### **Observations from the May Veterans Peer Corps Program – Peer Mentor Training session at Lower Columbia College.**

I was proud to be a part of this impactful training done for a group of volunteers that choose to hang out in a classroom for eight hours on a beautiful Saturday.

The stories of the participants were all very powerful, but one veteran shared his personal story with me. He is an older veteran that just recently went through a divorce, and has been living on disability and retirement with his sister in the Longview area. He stated he hasn't held a sense of community, any purpose, or direction for a long time. The Veterans Peer Corps is the first thing that made him feel he can do something again. He was interested in taking his new Peer Mentor status and working with a Veterans Court and working with fellow Employment Security Department employees in his class to mentor other veterans going through the VPC program.

18 individuals received a transformative experience that empowered them to go serve Vets, their families, and the community they have chosen to serve. Congratulations to the Veterans Peer Corps Team and everyone else who was affiliated with this training. History was made last Saturday and a long lasting legacy will continue into the future. I hope to participate and witness a training at some point in time in the future. Thank you all for your collective influence, leadership and expertise.

Learn more about the Veterans Peer Corps by visiting  
<http://www.dva.wa.gov/program/veterans-peer-corps>

