

# **Texas Coordinating Council for Veterans Services**



**Fifth Report  
October 1, 2020**

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# Introductory Letter

## Thomas P. Palladino, Chair

Dear State Leaders,

It is my honor and privilege to submit to you the Fifth Report of the Texas Coordinating Council for Veterans Services (TCCVS).

This report identifies veteran needs, identifies services currently provided by the State, and makes recommendations to address those needs. This report represents countless hours of research, discussion, and ultimately consensus, by the members of TCCVS.

TCCVS was established by the 82nd Legislature to:

coordinate the activities of state agencies that assist veterans, servicemembers, and their families; coordinate outreach efforts that ensure veterans, servicemembers, and their families are made aware of services; and facilitate collaborative relationships among state, federal, and local agencies and private organizations to identify and address issues affecting veterans, servicemembers, and their families.

Veterans of the United States military have demonstrated a continuous desire to settle in or relocate to Texas. Despite the dedicated efforts of those working to assist veterans, there remains a persistent need and demand for veteran services. The continued influx of veterans into the state coupled with the increasing demand of an aging population of WWII, Korea, Vietnam, and Gulf War I era veterans validates the need for continued coordination and support of Texas agencies that provide services to veterans.

Texas continues to lead the nation in its support of veterans. The public support of veterans and the Texas Legislature's historical response to it, has become generally known as "The Texas Model." Currently, State leaders have an opportunity to continue this by boldly addressing the veteran issues and challenges highlighted in this report.

Thank you for giving the members of TCCVS the opportunity to engage in this important work. We appreciate your serious attention to these issues and look forward to working with you to make TCCVS's recommendations a reality for Texas veterans.

Sincerely,



Thomas P. Palladino, Chair  
Texas Coordinating Council for Veterans Service

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# Executive Summary

In 2011, the Texas Legislature established the Texas Coordinating Council for Veterans Services (Council) by enacting Senate Bill 1796. The Bill was intended to accomplish three primary tasks:

1. Coordinate the activities of state agencies that assist veterans, servicemembers, and their families;
2. Coordinate outreach efforts that ensure that veterans, servicemembers, and their families are made aware of services; and
3. Facilitate collaborative relationships among state, federal, and local agencies and private organizations to identify and address issues affecting veterans, servicemembers, and their families.

The Council, originally comprised of five state agencies, currently includes the following twenty-two state agencies:

- Department of Aging and Disability Services
- Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services
- Department of Family and Protective Services
- Department of State Health Services
- Health and Human Services Commission
- Office of Acquired Brain Injury
- Office of Public Utility Counsel
- State Bar of Texas
- Texas Commission on Jail Standards
- Texas Commission on Law Enforcement
- Texas Department of Criminal Justice
- Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs
- Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation
- Texas Department of Motor Vehicles
- Texas Department of Public Safety
- Texas Department of Transportation
- Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board
- Texas Military Department
- Texas Workforce Commission
- Texas Workforce Investment Council
- Texas Veterans Commission
- Texas Veterans Land Board

To accomplish its goals of identifying problems faced by Texas veterans and their beneficiaries and proposing legislative solutions to those issues, the Council created the following nine workgroups to focus on specific policy areas:

- Health
- Mental Health
- Employment
- Higher Education
- Criminal Justice
- Housing
- Transportation
- Women Veterans
- Pro Bono Legal Services
- Communications and Outreach

The following reflects the Council's final policy discussions, relevant background information, and the legislative recommendations for each workgroup:

# Health Workgroup



# Health Workgroup

## Unmet Veteran Need #1

Veterans and their families in rural areas do not have adequate access to healthcare and related services.

**Recommendation:** Direct state agencies and county governments to provide information and resources to veterans in rural areas to increase their access to healthcare and other related veteran supportive services.

**Background:** The majority of VHA Medical Centers (United States Department of Veterans Affairs Hospitals and United States Department of Veterans Affairs Outpatient Clinics) are in metropolitan areas. The VHA has established Community Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOC) in smaller cities throughout Texas. Through the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Choice program, the VHA has provided contracted medical services for those areas not served by the VA medical facilities and to reduce the patient appointment wait time. Therefore, there are many veterans who live in rural areas who find it difficult to access VA medical care. The VA is improving its telehealth services to provide better access. However, being in rural areas presents specific challenges to implement (connectivity, bandwidth, maintenance, etc.). The VA is addressing these challenges by providing telehealth/telemedicine access to veterans via cellular phone technology. Rural veterans find it difficult to travel to their appointments because of the long distances. The VHA's Veterans Transportation Service (VTS) has established a network of transportation options for veterans through joint efforts with VHA's Office of Rural Health, Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs), community transportation providers, federal, state, and local government transportation agencies, non-profits, and Veterans Transportation Community Living Initiative (VTCLI) grantees. The VTS is currently in place in the El Paso, Dallas, Amarillo, Big Spring, and Harlingen facilities. Through the VA Highly Rural Transportation Grants, The Texas Veterans Commission Fund for Veterans' Assistance (FVA) provides transportation funds for highly rural counties to transport veterans to their medical appointments. It was reported that both Austin Public Health and Central Health (Travis County Health Care Division) are actively interested in exploring how to best implement and provide VA Telehealth resources within their Medical Access Program (MAP) to increase veteran awareness of VA Telehealth and VHA. State Agencies, local governments and the Texas Association of Counties should collaborate to increase the outreach to veterans on available healthcare services.

# **Mental Health Workgroup**

# Mental Health Workgroup

## Unmet Veteran Need #1:

Increase Access to Military Culturally Competent Mental Health Services.

### **Recommendations:**

- Texas licensing boards for mental health professionals should require continuing education specific to military cultural competency for all Licensed Mental Health Professionals (LMHP) in the state who serve veteran clientele.
- Promote efforts and strategies to raise awareness among all LMHPs of the need to ask “Did you serve in the military” upon intake and screening.
- Promote the inclusion of specific military related trauma and military culture coursework in public higher learning institutions for those pursuing mental health related degrees and certifications.
- Military cultural competency training should be required for all grantees of state agencies who offer mental health services specifically to Service Members, Veterans, and their Families (SMVF).
- Develop a plan to generate a standard for organizations to achieve and maintain certification in military cultural competency. This can include demonstrating that a certain percentage of employees have successfully completed a military cultural competency training and/or certification course. This standard, once codified, could also be referred to as a standard to be met for an organization or entity to be considered eligible to apply for certain grants meant to support SMVF in Texas, as well as to enter into contracts with the state to provide mental health services.
- Encourage/require all state agencies and institutions likely to interact with SMVF to implement a military cultural competency training requirement for staff.
- Enhance and promote access to resources that provide in-person and online military cultural competency training at no cost.

**Background:** A thorough working knowledge of military culture and its influences on mental health is needed by LMHPs to guide treatment planning, evidence-based intervention, and progress monitoring. The Uniformed Services University’s Center for Deployment Psychology describes military cultural competency as:

“The ability to understand and appreciate the military culture and to tailor clinical practices based on that understanding and appreciation is imperative for clinicians working with Service members. Just as any individual receiving care, Service members, Veterans, and their family members should feel understood and respected as well as have their problems readily identified and addressed in an effective, safe, and timely manner.”

In their article The Importance of Military Cultural Competence, Myer, Writer, and Brim note:

“...national experts from a variety of fields have unanimously declared that military cultural competence is a critical part of providing care to military patients. To some extent, historically poor treatment outcomes have even been attributed to the inadequate cultural competence of providers and non-culturally informed approaches to the care of military personnel, veterans, and their families.”

As evidenced by exposure to military-related trauma, high rates of suicide, and involvement in the justice system, service members, veterans, and their families (SMVF) have unique mental health needs. As is true for any special population with shared experiences/values/mores/needs, the SMVF have a unique culture. While Licensed Mental Health Professionals (LMHPs) receive extensive mental health training in their educational career to include focus on cultural competency, generally, little if any coursework is specific to SMVF.

Particularly relevant to traditional mental health settings, LMHPs may be in the practice of providing clinical services to veterans and their families without knowledge that their clients are of the SMVF community. As such, it is highly important to raise awareness among LMHPs of the need to ask “Did you serve in the military” upon intake and screening. Further, the research on military trauma continues to evolve, placing a unique challenge on uniformed LMHPs and mental health organizations to maintain military cultural competency once achieved. Luckily, comprehensive training in military cultural competency is available at no cost, such as that provided by Texas Veterans Commission’s Veteran Mental Health Department.

The state should also consider establishing a standard for mental health organizations to achieve “military cultural competency,” possibly by demonstrating a certain percentage of employees have successfully completed a military cultural competency training and/or certification course. This standard, once codified, could also be referred to as a standard to be met for an organization or entity to be considered eligible to apply for certain grants meant to support SMVF in Texas, as well as enter into contracts with the state to provide mental health services. The state may go as far as to require that any entity which receives state funding and which may reasonably come into contact with an SMVF in a mental health setting, have a certain percentage of its staff maintain a proficiency in military cultural competency, to include ancillary staff.

### **Unmet Veteran Need #2:**

Reduction of Suicide Among Service Members and Veterans Across Texas.

### **Recommendations:**

- Promote strategies aligned with the recommendations put forth by HHSC in the 2019 Report on Short-Term Action Plan to Prevent Veteran Suicides prepared as a requirement of SB 578 from the 85<sup>th</sup> Legislature. Additionally, develop strategies to encompass HHSC’s forthcoming Report on Long-Term Action Plan to Prevent Veteran Suicides in Texas when published in September of 2021, as per SB 578, 85<sup>th</sup> Legislature.

- Develop strategies that encompass the efforts of the forthcoming implementation plan for the Governors Challenge to Prevent Suicide among Service Members, Veterans and their Families and with the suicide prevention initiative of the Statewide Behavioral Health Coordinating Council (SBHCC).
- Develop strategies to also align with federal efforts under the President's Roadmap to Empower Veterans and End a National Tragedy of Suicide (PREVENTS).
- Encourage/require state agencies and state grantees to conduct universal suicide screening with an evidence-based tool (e.g., CSSR-S) with all SMVF clients in efforts to reduce suicides without placing an undue burden on the clients or the agencies/grantees.
- Encourage/require state agencies and state grantees who directly work with SMVF clients to develop an internal suicide prevention/intervention plan.
- Encourage/require suicide prevention classes in all state agencies for all employees within six months of hire and on an annual basis to improve suicide prevention awareness and potentially reach over 300,000 veterans and their families. This can include plans to promote more agency access to suicide prevention train-the-trainer training (e.g., have one trainer per 500 staff), and/or providing yearly suicide prevention training online.
- Encourage all state agency veteran liaisons to undergo suicide prevention training to include knowledge of signs and indicators of suicidality, and the necessary steps to refer to resources, information, and services. This training should be completed within 90 days of hire and then on an on-going annual basis.
- Develop strategies to enhance partnerships with the VA, using agreements including Memorandums of Agreement/Understanding (MOAs, MOUs), to assess implementation of evidence-based interventions to prevent suicide, to promote the dissemination of suicide prevention resources, and to improve continuity of care for veterans.
- Encourage/require all Texas healthcare providers, including physicians and Licensed Mental Health Professionals, to receive suicide prevention and intervention training as part of their continuing education and licensure requirements.

**Background:** According to 2019 data from HHSC, the veteran suicide rate in Texas is 31.3 lives lost for every 100,000 individuals as compared to the civilian suicide rate of 17.2 lives per 100,000 individuals. This highlights that continued need to reduce the suicide rate among the SMVF population in Texas. This need has been similarly identified with accompanying recommendations from S.B. 578 from the 85<sup>th</sup> Legislature.

At the federal level, the President's Roadmap to Empower Veterans and End a National Tragedy of Suicide (PREVENTS) has been established to "focus on a holistic public health approach to suicide prevention. PREVENTS seeks to change the culture surrounding mental health and suicide prevention through enhanced community integration, prioritized research activities, and implementation strategies that emphasize improved overall health and well-being." At the state level, the Governors Challenge to Prevent Suicide among Service Members, Veterans and their Families team is preparing to present its final implementation plan for approval later this year. Additionally, the Statewide Behavioral Health Coordinating Council (SBHCC) made up of

stakeholders from various state agencies is actively preparing recommendations to reduce suicide across Texas. It is important that suicide prevention efforts be aligned across these initiatives, as possible, to maximize strategy and resource sharing while also reducing duplicative efforts.

Studies have shown that universal screening for suicidal ideation and providing suicide prevention awareness training are effective in reducing suicide. The Columbia Suicide Severity Rating Scale (C-SSRS) screening tool is easy to use, evidence-based, and requires no formal training; however, free training is available and can take as little as 20 minutes using web-based programming. Training and Screener Card Templates are available on the Columbia Lighthouse Project Website (<https://cssrs.columbia.edu/training/training-options/>). Collectively, HHSC and TVC have distributed over \$40 million dollars to grantees who provide services to SMVF in Texas. The organizations who execute these grants frequently interact with SMVF who have high risk factors for suicide and insufficient protective factors. Requiring all state grantees to conduct universal suicide screening (e.g., C-SSRS) with all clients would likely reduce SMVF suicides without placing an undue burden on the clients or the grantees.

### **Unmet Veteran Need #3:**

Law Enforcement Officers (LEO) Need Training on Veteran and Military Trauma to Increase Positive Outcomes in Police Interactions, to Assist in De-Escalating Situations, and to Divert Veterans from the Criminal Justice System.

### **Recommendations:**

- Encourage/require that Texas Commission on Law Enforcement (TCOLE) 4067, Trauma Affected Veterans, become a mandatory class for all TCOLE certified LEOs with four or more years of service to create a safer environment for both veterans and LEO in Texas.
- The passing of the Sandra Bland Act (2017) requires all Texas LEOs to be trained in 40 hours of Crisis Intervention Training (CIT) as part of their basic peace officer course. To compliment this training, it is recommended that TCOLE 4067 become mandatory for all TCOLE certified officers with more than 4 years of experience.

**Background:** Texas has the second largest number of veterans in the country, the largest number of female veterans, and approximately 10% of veterans end up incarcerated, with more than 10% having some contact with law enforcement. As more veterans return from duty with Post-Traumatic Stress, Traumatic Brain Injury, and Military Sexual Trauma, law enforcement officers (LEOs) need to be well-informed on veteran and military trauma, the symptoms that may present in the community, and effective de-escalation techniques. Additionally, during the Spring and Summer of 2020, there has been a national acknowledgment of the need for greater emphasis on de-escalation efforts from LEOs related to the use of force alternatives.

Currently there is no national standard for training LEOs on the unique challenges that face trauma affected veterans. However, the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement (TCOLE) has generated a course to specifically address this need, TCOLE 4067 (Trauma Affected Veterans). This class emphasizes de-escalation, understanding of military trauma and possible LEO trauma, as well as resources for access to care. The Lubbock Police Department has added the TCOLE 4067 training to their basic officer course and the Midland Police Department and Harris County Sheriff Offices are training all their officers. There are about 80,000 law enforcement officers in Texas, and for those who have received the TCOLE 4067 training, the response has been positive.

A survey was sent to all officers that had taken the course in 2017-18 to respond to two questions: 1) Do you think the TCOLE 4067 should be a mandatory course? 2) If yes, should it be added to the basic officers' course or mandatory within two years of obtaining TCOLE certification. Of the respondents to this survey: 91% of those who have taken the TCOLE 4067 training think the TCOLE 4067 Training should be mandatory. 9% of those who have taken the class do not think it should be mandatory. 23% of Respondents think the training should be attached to basic officer training and 35% think it should be required within two years of becoming a TCOLE certified officer.

#### **Unmet Veteran Need #4:**

Increase Access to Local Mental Health Options for Veterans Across Texas.

#### **Recommendations:**

- Develop strategies to maximize the use of the VA Maintaining Internal Systems and Strengthening Integrated Outside Networks (MISSION) Act of 2018 to increase access and support to mental health services. Particularly, develop strategies in collaboration with the Veterans Administration (VA) to promote provider enrollment, especially in rural areas where direct access to the VA may be limited. This can include sharing application information at major professional conferences, including those sponsored by the Texas Council of Community Centers, which serves as the association of Local Mental Health Centers.
- Promote the use of agreements such as Memorandum of Understandings between the local VA Health Care System, the Local Mental Health Authority, and with other local community providers to ensure continuity of care. These agreements could be useful for those Local Mental Health Authority (LMHA)s and Behavioral Health Authorities (BHAs) that are not funded to care for veterans who are eligible for VA healthcare.
- Develop a system for tracking and updating a roster of all registered providers under the VA MISSION Act.
- Develop strategies to promote and enhance the Veteran Counselor pilot program as it aims to increase access to local mental health resources specific to SMVF across Texas.

**Background:** Each year about 200,000 service members separate from active duty and about 10,000 of these will be ineligible to receive VA Healthcare. Even when eligible, some veterans still do not use VA healthcare for varied reasons and some fail to enroll in VA health care until they are in crisis. When crisis comes, the immediate care requirements often fall on local emergency rooms or community providers.

Under the VA Maintaining Internal Systems and Strengthening Integrated Outside Networks (MISSION) Act of 2018, Congress required the VA to establish community care networks as well as to provide training for all community providers. This training is an online, no-cost, continuing education curriculum for community providers. It provides community providers direct access to curriculum established under the MISSION Act. The VA has also established payment rates for community care at, to the extent practicable, the Medicare rate. To encourage the use of community providers in rural areas, the VA is authorized to pay higher rates in highly rural areas. This is especially helpful in Texas where VA has facilities in only 50 of the state's 254 counties. To improve the continuity of care for veterans as they transition from military service, the VA has begun building partnerships with community providers.

Texas Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) currently contracts with six LMHAs for a pilot program to hire or contract for Veteran Counselors, who are licensed mental health providers, and are funded to provide direct mental health services to Service Members, Veterans, and their Families free of charge. These Veterans Counselors, like the Peer Service Coordinators within the Military Veteran Peer Network (MVPN) receive training, certification, and technical assistance from TVC's Veterans Mental Health Department.

### **Unmet Veteran Need #5:**

Increase Access to Veteran Peer Support in Metropolitan and Rural Areas Across Texas.

### **Recommendations:**

- Develop strategies to promote and enhance the Military Veteran Peer Network, including ways to expand the presence of TVC-certified peer service coordinators across Texas to better serve SMVF in their local communities. The need for more certified peer service coordination is particularly relevant in rural and frontier parts of the state.
- Develop strategies for enhancing the use of peer support services under the VA MISSION Act, especially in those 200 counties that have no VA presence.
- Develop strategies to expand veteran treatment courts to specifically include utilization of peer support as an effective component to strengthen reentry efforts and reduce recidivism.
- Develop strategies to increase access to veteran peer support within jails and prison across Texas by increasing the number of veteran pods. These efforts could strengthen successful community reentry efforts and ultimately aid in reducing recidivism.



**Background:** Both quantitative and qualitative evidence indicates that veteran peer support lowers the overall cost of mental health services by reducing re-hospitalization rates and days spent in inpatient services, increasing the use of outpatient services. Veteran peer support improves overall quality of life and improves engagement with other needed services. Peer support services are not intended to replace other mental health services, but to compliment them. Peer support can help increase the engagement in more traditional mental health services while also reducing the overall use of emergency services. A reduction in the use of emergency services when an individual is supported by a peer, often results in lower costs and better outcomes. When peer support services are included within the continuum of community care, the mental health system expands quantitatively by reaching more people, and qualitatively by helping people become more independent.

Since 2009, the Military Veteran Peer Network (MVPN), has grown from seven to 37 Peer Service Coordinators (PSCs), six part-time Peer Service Coordinators across Texas. A key role of the PSCs is to recruit and train volunteer peer specialists in their local areas. Even with this expansion of PSCs, there are still wide areas of Texas that experience shortages of trained peer specialists. For example, one PSC covers 21 counties with a veteran population of about 22,000. Additionally, there are seven counties in northeast Texas that do not have a PSC, even though there are almost 47,000 veterans living there. This issue is exacerbated by the fact that of the 254 counties in Texas, 82 are metropolitan while 172 are rural/frontier.

The Veterans Health Administration values veteran peer support providers and has expanded their numbers in both hospital and clinic settings. It would be beneficial Texas developed a pool of certified veteran peer support specialists who might be used and reimbursed under the MISSION Act, especially in those 200 counties that have no VA presence.

Texas has also realized the value added of veteran peer support within the justice system. In 2015, the State Legislature added Veteran Jail Diversion services and Veterans Courts as part of the MVPN peer support responsibilities. Currently, there are 48 Veteran Treatment Courts in Texas, a growth of 13 courts over the past five years. This increase and the proliferation of veteran pods in prisons and jails across Texas, more access to peer support can be valuable in assist veterans in successful community reentry and in reducing recidivism rates.

# **Employment Workgroup**

# Employment Workgroup

## Unmet Veteran Need #1

Texas Veterans who have a U. S. Department of Veteran Affairs Individual Unemployability rating with a U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs disability rating between 70% to 100% should be allowed to transfer their state Veterans Hiring Preference to their spouse.

### **Recommendation:**

An online certification and consent form would allow the veteran to transfer Veterans Hiring Preference benefits to the spouse or dependent; and inform agencies of the benefit transfer. The form would be signed by the veteran and presented with the spouse's employment application. This process would emulate the Hazlewood Act Exemption benefit transfer process for veterans.

**Background:** In 2015, Governor Greg Abbott signed the Military Veterans Full Employment Act. The Act applied the Veteran Preference to state agencies and institutions of higher education. The enactment of this closely aligned the eligibility of Veterans Hiring Preference with Federal Regulations and eligibility for preference. The derived preference was established for the Federal program through the Veterans Employment Opportunity Act of 1998. According to the Texas Workforce Investment Council's 2019 Veterans in Texas Report, over 34% of Veterans in Texas have a VA disability rating between 70% to 100%. From Department of Veteran Affairs reports we estimate that 12% to 14% of these veterans have an Individual Unemployability rating. The spouse of these Veterans with an unemployability rating in most situations is going to be the primary income for the veteran's family. Affording the spouse with the Veterans Hiring Preference will provide greater opportunities for sustainable income and a better quality of life for the veterans and their family.

1. Under the derived Veterans Hiring Preference rule, spouse, widow/widower, children or parents of a veteran may be able to claim the preference if the veteran is unable to use the preference. **The interview selection for eligible spouses/dependents should mirror the requirements outlined in Senate Bill 805.** This benefit would align with the Gold Star Fathers Act of 2015, which extended the hiring preferences for federal civil positions to fathers with the same.
2. Aligning the state Veteran Preference with the federal program will assist in alleviating confusion between the two levels of government and the benefits derived from military service.

The workgroup agrees that in order to ensure the best interest of the veteran that the Veterans Hiring Preference should have transfer ability if the veteran is deemed unemployable by the Veterans Administration (VA).

3. The priority in which the state's Veterans Hiring Preference would be applied would be in the following order:
  - a. a veteran, including a veteran with a disability
  - b. veteran's surviving spouse who has not remarried
  - c. an orphan of a veteran if the veteran was killed while on active duty
  - d. spouse of a veteran with a unemployability rating with a total disability rating between 70% to 100% from the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs.

### **Unmet Veteran Need #2**

Texas is home to 11 active duty military installations, 2 Joint Reserve Bases and multiple National facilities. Active Duty military spouses experience far higher unemployment rates than their civilian counterparts, oftentimes as high as 24%. Those spouses that are employed are often underemployed.

### **Recommendation:**

Providing military spouses with a hiring preference for state government jobs will lower the unemployment rate of military spouses and will provide sustainable income and a better quality of life for military family members.

**Background:** Before the COVID Pandemic, there was a National focus on military spouse unemployment.

For 2019, the average unemployment rate for military spouses was 22% while the Veteran unemployment rate was at 3.4%. Some active duty military often rely on income from a spouse. Retention rates of active duty military can be related by military spouse employment issues.

Reasons for the higher unemployment rates among military spouses as compared to their civilian counterparts include: multiple moves related to the active duty service member's career, not meeting licensing requirements and lengthy procedures from state-to-state, lack of employment opportunities that provide flexible work schedules, and reluctance of employers to hire military spouses due to the frequent relocation among military families.

Military spouses are educated, talented and hard working. The military family often counts on the income of a civilian spouse for the military family to make ends meet. Military spouses that are career driven often must sacrifice their careers for the service member to remain in the military. In many situations, if the spouse does not find gainful fulfilling employment, this leads to the service member exiting the service hurting retention. Several years ago, the federal government developed a military spouse hiring preference to support retention and sustainable income for the family.

The workgroup agrees that adding a Military Spouse Hiring Preference, to the existing Veterans Hiring Preference is in the best interest of the military family and demonstrates how the State of Texas is working to solve unemployment for military spouses residing on or near military installations in Texas.

1. To qualify for the hiring preference, the spouse's service member must be on active duty.
2. The priority in which the State's Veterans Hiring preference would be applied would be in the following order:
  - a. a veteran, including a veteran with a disability
  - b. veteran's surviving spouse who has not remarried
  - c. an orphan of a veteran if the veteran was killed while on active duty
  - d. spouse of a veteran with a unemployability rating with a total disability rating between 70 to 100 from the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs.
  - e. Military spouses of an active duty veteran including National Guard and Reserve Service Members on active duty.

### **Unmet Veteran Need #3**

A dedicated webpage on the Governors Veterans Portal for military service members, military spouses and veterans that list all the State of Texas Licensing Bodies with the occupations they are responsible for licensing is needed. The webpage would provide direct links the state agency webpage that outlines the licensing process for their specific license.

### **Recommendation:**

The workgroup agrees that an Occupational Licensing Page should be established on the Governor's Veterans Web Portal. The page should list all the state's occupational licensing authorities and what they license. The licensing agencies or regulatory bodies would provide a link on their webpage that would direct the military service member, military spouses and veterans to the agency's specific Military Licensing page that would inform the military service members, military spouses and veterans how to apply for and obtain the Texas license in that occupational field. Each agency would provide a detailed process of how to apply for the specific occupational license.

**Background:** Texas is second in the nation for veteran population, combined with the population aboard it's numerous military installations. Over the past several Texas Legislative sessions numerous bills were passed related to occupation licensing for military service members, military spouses and veterans.

- 86<sup>th</sup> R SB 1200: Relating to the authority of certain military spouses to engage in a business or occupation in this state.

- 86<sup>th</sup> R HB 971: Relating to proficiency certification of law enforcement officers with military service.
- 83<sup>Rd</sup> R SB 61: The bill amends the Occupations Code relating to the licensing and regulation of military physicians who provide voluntary charity health care.
- 83<sup>rd</sup>(R) SB 242: Relating to the eligibility requirements for certain occupational licenses issued to applicants with military experience,
- 83<sup>rd</sup> (R) SB 162: Relating to the occupational licensing of spouses of members of the military and the eligibility requirements for certain occupational licenses issued to applicants with military experience.
- 83<sup>rd</sup> (R)HB 1960: Relating to reciprocity for emergency medical services personnel certification for certain United States military personnel.
- 83<sup>rd</sup> (R) HB 2254: Relating to apprenticeship requirements for occupational licenses issued to applicants with military experience.
- 83<sup>rd</sup> (R) HB 2135: Relating to waivers and grants of credit for the requirements to obtain certain private security licenses to individuals who hold security credentials from the United States armed forces.
- 83<sup>rd</sup> (R)HB 2028: Relating to the eligibility requirements for plumbing licenses issued to applicants with military service.
- 83<sup>rd</sup> (R) HB 2029: Relating to the eligibility requirements for electrician licenses issued to applicants with military experience.
- 83<sup>rd</sup> (R)SB 229: Relating to an exception to the domicile requirement for issuance of a commercial driver's license for certain military personnel. SB229 can be used as the precedent for the Texas Legislature to enact further legislation regarding the occupational licensing or certifications of service members, veterans and spouses who meet the eligibility requirements across state lines.
- 84<sup>th</sup> R SB 389: Which requires state agencies to place corresponding military occupation specialty codes on each of their job postings.
- 84<sup>th</sup> R SB 807: Waives the state license application and examination fees for military members, Veterans, and their spouses.
- 84<sup>th</sup> R SB 1307: Ensures that every military spouse, Veteran, and servicemember gets credit for their skills and have their occupational licenses expedited.

Texas has done its part in passing the legislation to address the occupational licensing for military service members, military spouses and veterans. The main issue is the difficulty in finding the information, it is disjointed and fragmented.

#### **Unmet Veteran Need #4**

Training certification programs for Texas veterans including apprenticeship programs is needed to ensure Texas veterans are qualified for certain positions within the workforce.

## **Recommendation:**

The workgroup agrees that portions of existing federal and state funding shall be used to target veteran populations who require training for certifications in high growth and high demand occupations based off unemployment data for each Workforce Development Board Area.

**Background:** In recent years, Texas employers have been moving toward hiring their workforce with individuals that have earned certifications in the skill sets that employers require. The U.S. Military has been redesigning their educational and transition programs to meet the military's technical needs while providing a certification for their service members that is consistent with industries in the civilian marketplace. In 2019, the U.S. Army launched the Army Credentialed Program and for several years have been training transitioning service members in high growth and high demand occupations through their Career Skills Program. The Department of Defense has also created the Skills Bridge Program which allows companies to provide job skills training to transitioning service members during their last six months of their military service.

The Texas Workforce Commission has conducted two Veteran training programs over the past six years, the Veterans in Industry Partnership and the Skills for Transition Program. Both Programs have shown success in multiple areas across the state.

Before the COVID-19 crisis, 2018 DOL data regarding veteran unemployment suggests there is a growing need to develop a program that provides training to veterans who have been separated from the military 4 years and more. According to 2018 DOL statistics, of the 326,000 unemployed veterans across the nation, nearly 60% were age 45 and over, 35% were between 25-44 and 6% for ages 18-24.

According to 2019 DOL statistics, of the 284,000 unemployed veterans, 56% were between 25 to 54, 39% were 55 and older, and 5% were between 18 to 24 years old.

These numbers will more than likely increase due to the COVID -19 crisis. There will be a larger number of older veterans who will require training to retool themselves to be competitive in the workforce.

## **Unmet Veteran Need #5**

A core intent of [SB 805](#) of the 84th Texas legislature is to have each state agency to include Texas higher education with 500 or more full time employees to have a veteran workforce of at least 20% of U.S. Military Veterans. Section 657.0046 (a) and Section 657.0046 (b) designate the requirement or opportunity to designate an individual from the state agency to serve in the capacity as a veteran's liaison. To increase the focus for hiring more veterans and to advocate for the veteran within the state agency the veteran liaison shall be a Veteran with recruiting, human resource and leadership experience dedicating at least 1/3 of annual full time hours to the core purpose of SB 805 of the 84th Texas legislature.

**Recommendation:**

The workgroup agrees to increase the focus for hiring more veterans and to advocate for the veteran within the state agency the veteran liaison shall be a Veteran with recruiting, human resource and leadership experience dedicating at least 1/3 of annual full time hours to the core purpose of SB 805 of the 84th Texas legislature.

**Background:** The 84<sup>th</sup> Texas Legislature passed SB 805 establishing the state agencies to have a goal of 20% of their workforce comprised of U.S. Military Veterans. SB 389 also was passed by the 84<sup>th</sup> Texas Legislature that listed military occupational specialty codes on certain state agency employment openings. State agencies have made limited progress in reaching the 20% goal set forth by the Texas Legislature. According to the 2020 2<sup>nd</sup> Quarter Veteran Workforce Summary report, only five Texas State agencies had met the goal of 20%. In many circumstances, state agency Human Resources Departments do not have military veterans on their staff.

A great number of private employers across the country have hired military veterans as Veteran Recruiters for their companies. The Veteran recruiter can translate veteran's knowledge, skills and abilities to other human resources staff members and to hiring managers. Veteran Recruiters work one on one with veterans to help them understand how to apply for the company's positions by explaining the resume, application, interview and hiring process.

As an example, the Texas Workforce Commission has a several veterans on their HR staff. One veteran is the Veteran Recruiter who attends veteran job fairs throughout Central Texas to include Fort Hood. The Veteran recruit works with the Veteran, human resources staff and hiring manager throughout the hiring process. On the Veteran Workforce Summary report, for first quarter 2020, the Texas Workforce Commissions percentage of Veteran Preference New Hires was 15.67%. For second quarter 2020, the Texas Workforce Commissions percentage of Veteran Preference New Hires was 16.66%. The Texas Workforce Commission's Veterans Recruiter works directly with Texas Veterans Commission and Texas Veterans Leadership Program staff in the field who are identifying transitioning service members and veterans who meet the qualifications for the agency's positions. Of the large state agencies, only the Department of Public Safety has a hiring percentage of Veterans hired using the Veterans Preference.



# **Higher Education Workgroup**

# Higher Education Workgroup

## Unmet Veteran Need #1

Student veterans and other eligible persons do not have knowledge of the grievance and adjudication processes available regarding the awarding of the Hazlewood tuition exemption.

### **Recommendation:**

To assist applicants, this workgroup is recommending that all Institutes of Higher Education (IHEs) inform all applications seeking tuition exemption under the Hazlewood Act of the grievance and adjudication processes available should the exemption be denied. It is recommended that IHEs provide a fact sheet to each applicant identifying the roles and responsibilities of each party identified in the process; procedures for submitting a grievance; timeline for the grievance process; and authority of the IHE to adjudicate the grievance.

This workgroup recommends that rule-making authority be granted to the appropriate state agency to develop administrative rules to support this recommendation, and that no matter which agency is granted that authority that TVC and THECB consult with each other in developing the rules. The identified agency would prescribe the form and manner in which the notification is to be provided to an applicant and will prescribe the criteria and elements of the notification. This notification

**Background:** The Texas Education Code defines eligibility criteria for tuition exemption for Veterans and Other Military Personnel and Dependents. (Tx. Ed. Code § 54.341) and allows for specific rule-making authority to address application procedures and requirements for those individuals seeking a tuition exemption under the Hazlewood Act.

- The education code prescribes eligibility criteria for the exemption, and which is to be applied equitably and consistently within public institutions of higher education (Tx. Ed. Cod § 54.341(d)).
- The code further provides rule-making authority to the Texas Veterans Commission for establishing application processes; requirements for supporting documentation; waiver, transfer, and assignment of hours to eligible persons. (§ 54.341(i)).
- Participants of this workgroup recognize that each IHE has independent discretion to award or deny the tuition exemption as provided for in statute, and that each IHE has the accompanying responsibility to determine eligibility of an applicant and to address any grievances that may be filed by or on behalf of the applicant.

The Texas Administrative Code states that an IHE will consult with the Texas Veterans Commission should it require any assistance in determining eligibility (40 TAC § 460.30(l)). However, the code does not include any statutory language nor provide rule-making authority to a state agency that would require public institutions of higher education(IHE) to inform each

applicant of the institutional grievance and adjudication policies and procedures available to an applicant should the exemption be denied in part or in whole. Applicants frequently contact the Texas Veterans Commission (TVC) and/or the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) for assistance in adjudicating or otherwise directing an IHE to award an exemption that has been denied; neither agency has that authority and which creates confusion for the applicant as to where the final decision-making authority resides.

### **Unmet Veteran Need #2**

Veterans and family member ability to use federal education benefits, and programs to support that use and awareness of those benefits, may not be adequately supported due to the naming convention of the “Higher Education” workgroup.

#### **Recommendation:**

This workgroup recommends a change in the Texas Government Code allowing for a more appropriate naming of the Higher Education (Tx Gov Code § 434.153 (a)(4)) workgroup to a more representative name such as the “Education and Training” workgroup. This renaming would encourage broader participation across state agencies and stakeholders on how education benefits may be used, as well as identify partnerships between traditional education and workplace environments.

**Background:** The Texas Coordinating Council on Veteran Services (TCCVS) was established to support and address a variety of veteran and military community concerns and needs. The “higher education” workgroup has traditionally focused on the use of education benefits – both state and federal – within the academic environment. However, education benefits earned through military service, may also support a veteran or other eligible individual in the employment sector as well (e.g., apprenticeships, on-the-job training, and vocational/technical training).

This workgroup has held discussion on how it can better awareness and understanding for the use of benefits outside the collegiate and academic environment and within non-traditional work and learning environments. However, the workgroup has not always had representation for employers, college/vocational schools, licensing bodies, or similar to discuss how education benefits may be used by eligible persons. This lack of broader representation and participation may lay in the tilting of the workgroup: “higher education” implies academia and no other environment for which benefits may be discussed.

# **Criminal Justice Workgroup**

# Criminal Justice Workgroup

## Unmet Veteran Need #1:

Increased access to veterans' status for justice involved veterans.

### **Recommendation:**

Revise HB875 to be revised to indicate the information from the VA identification system shall be requested daily and be provided to the Veterans County service officer and the magistrate or governing court at law daily.

**Background:** Veterans are not being identified in a timely manner as required by HB 875. To improve outcomes, the Department of Public Safety(DPS) Texas Law Enforcement Telecommunication System (TLETS), and the Veterans Affairs Veterans Reentry Service System (VRSS) or other approved Veterans Affairs identification program should be connected and able to provide veterans information to county jails for the purposes of continuity of care and veterans benefits. Additionally, the verbiage in HB 875 could be revised to indicate the veteran's information shall be requested at intake,

## Unmet Veteran Need #2:

Currently there is no standard recidivism rate definition in Veterans Treatment Courts (VTC). Effectiveness for courts is generally based on recidivism and having a standard, uniform definition would make a stronger case for increasing funding.

### **Recommendation:**

Texas should add a standard definition of recidivism in the Veterans Treatment Court Statute. The Texas Judicial Council (Council) should direct the Texas Office of Court Administration (OCA) to develop guidelines to establish a uniform recidivism rate definition for veteran's treatment courts for adoption by the Council; and, require OCA to compile the recidivism data for a 10-year period.

**Background:** Office of Court Administration (OCA) creation of guidelines on a definition and collection of rates for a 10-year period would assist in providing training and technical assistance for courts that will be based in evidence-based practices.

Having multiple definitions of recidivism and not having a central collection spot may create confusion about how courts are performing and may affect the ability of state and local grantors to assess the effectiveness of the programs. Standard definitions and collections will give grantors a better ability to determine effectiveness of programs, give Court Evaluators a specific standard for comparison and give the State of Texas concrete evidence for increasing funding and support of Veterans Treatment Courts.

### **Unmet Veteran Need #3:**

Incarcerated veterans need access to veteran specific mental health, substance use and peer support programming and services while in jail and upon release to the community.

### **Recommendation:**

Recommend increased collaboration amongst state agencies and local veterans support organizations, including volunteer and faith-based organizations, to provide support and funding for veterans PODS/Dorms and county jails.

**Background:** Veterans Treatment Courts (VTC) offer veterans programming and treatment for veterans that qualify. Veterans that do not qualify for VTC may still need programming for substance abuse and or mental health issues. Emerging practices across the country indicate having access to either veteran specific programming or veteran specific pods/dorms in jails with programming can make veterans more successful with reentry. Facilities that have access to the programming and pods/dorms reportedly have fewer behavioral problems and incidents of violence by incarcerated veterans. This may contribute to a less stressful, safer environment for correctional staff and promote community involvement with the veterans and their families. (<https://info.nicic.gov/jiv/sites/info.nicic.gov/jiv/files/Barracks-Behind-Bars-508.pdf>).

Additionally, connecting veterans to services while incarcerated ensures a veteran has immediate access to services upon reentry and there is no interruption in care and support. There are a few exemplary jail programs that could be used as models including the VALOR program in Colin County, the Fort Bend Veterans program and Montgomery County Veterans Pod.

### **Unmet Veteran Need #4:**

Jailers may not be well trained in veteran's needs.

### **Recommendation:**

Have TCOLE 3917 revised to an online class and require for jailers with more than one year of experience.

**Background:** Jailers have a lack of training in veteran's trauma, needs, benefits and services. A four-hour online class could be required for advanced certificate holders and Jail Administrators. Texas jailers are required to complete:

1. Basic County Corrections
2. Mental Health Training for Jailers
3. About 9% of Veterans and service members who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan have been arrested since returning home. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23025247/>
4. Veterans have distinct military cultural and mental health characteristics that are different from those who have not served. It is important for jailers to understand these characteristics to avoid the risk of non-compliant behavior and reduce the risk of injury to both jailers and Veterans.
5. According to the Veterans Administration, more than half of justice-involved Veterans have either mental health problems—namely PTSD, depression, or high anxiety—or substance-abuse disorders, most notably alcohol or cocaine addiction. Plus, Veterans who collide with the criminal justice system may be at higher risk for suicide. <https://www.research.va.gov/currents/0918-VA-researcher-examines-Vets-who-collide-with-criminal-justice-system.cfm>

# **Housing Workgroup**



# Housing Workgroup

## **Unmet Veteran Need #1:**

Texas Tax Code 11.22(b) which provides a property tax exemption to disabled veterans, has not been revised since 2001 to account for economic inflation, the increase in cost of living and housing costs.

## **Recommendation:**

Modify Texas Tax Code 11.22 (b) to adjust for inflation.

**Background:** Many Texas veterans, on fixed incomes, cite the swift rise in home values as a cause for concern due to the associated increase in property taxes.

Disabled veterans who are currently living in Texas and have a VA disability rating may meet the eligibility requirements for property tax reduction. Disabled veterans who meet the qualifications outlined in the Texas Tax Code 11.22 may receive an exemption of up to \$12,000 off the value of one piece of property they own for tax purposes. The following schedule, as outlined in Tax Code 11.22(b), is used to determine a disabled veteran's exemption:

\$5,000 of the assessed value	10%	30%
\$7,500	30%	50%
\$10,000	50%	70%
\$12,000	70% and over	

Therefore, a disabled veteran living in Texas who owns a home and is rated by the VA at 60% service-connected disability would be eligible to receive a \$10,000 reduction off the value of their home for property tax purposes. The dollar amounts used in the above schedule were set by HB 2812 (77th Legislature, 2001) and have not been adjusted since then. Currently, Texas Tax Code 11.131 provides full property relief for Texas veterans, who have a 100% VA disability rating due to a service-connected disability.

## **Unmet Veteran Need #2**

Veterans and their families who are experiencing or are at-risk for homelessness would benefit from a statewide risk mitigation collaborative program preventing homelessness.

**Recommendation:**

The creation of a statewide risk mitigation fund by local governments, similar to those used in other states such as Florida, could be used by private property owners who wish to serve “at-risk” and low-income veterans and their families. Funds would be available to offset financial losses encountered by property owners who participate in the program and serve eligible veterans.

**Background:** Risk mitigation funds can be an effective tool for encouraging landlords to rent to tenants they consider to be high-risk, like Veterans transitioning out of homelessness. In 2016, the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) conducted a study of successful risk mitigation funds established in four major metropolitan areas. Their findings are available at: <https://www.usich.gov/tools-for-action/engaging-landlords-risk-mitigation-funds-communityprofiles>. A risk mitigation fund will provide housing for tenants with low-income, evictions, poor credit, those experiencing chronic homelessness and criminal records for Texas veterans and their families to have suitable housing.

Within Texas, households spend more than 30% of their income on housing with those earning less than \$50,000 are more likely to be cost burdened. The constricted rental markets create greater competition for individuals and families seeking a limited number of affordable units. This is a greater challenge for those families with low rental capital, homelessness, joblessness, substance abuse and mental illness. Landlord risk mitigation funds are strategic in providing financial guarantees for landlords who rent to individuals with additional housing barriers. Local governments would work with the Chamber of Commerce to establish and manage the mitigation program and input from local apartment associations. Monitoring would be conducted by a state entity or local agency that provides statewide housing oversight. The methods of funding can be generated through donations, city government, code enforcement revenue, a regional mayors’ caucus, private donors, local property management firms; and the county, city and the United Way. A landlord/tenant liaison office would be established to manage landlord, agency, and tenant participation; outreach and claims processing. This landlord/tenant liaison office would be staffed by a local non-profit specialized in homelessness, with logistical support from the city government and financial support from the city and Chamber of Commerce. Agency participation is established through coordinated intake systems or signed agreements with its landlord liaison staff. The funds would cover deposits and administration fees, property damage (after deposit is applied), unpaid rent, damages for breach of a lease and unit holding fees. The payouts would assist in covering a half of monthly rent (up to \$600) to hold a unit, an established minimum amount for property damage with minimal verification, with \$2,000 (± \$1,000) additional on a case-by-case basis. These funds would be available to Department of Housing and Urban Development - Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) participants, veterans and their families with barriers to suitable housing.

### **Unmet Veteran Need #3:**

Affordable Housing solution that would assist homeless veteran, justice involved or “Hard to place Veterans” and seniors.

#### **Recommendation:**

Several communities nationwide have reutilized surplus government property and buildings to permanently house Veterans and low-income families with great success. Texas is fortunate to have similar untapped resources and facilities to meet this growing need now, and in the foreseeable future. This workgroup recommends reutilizing surplus government property and buildings to permanently house Veterans and low-income families.

**Background:** Unfortunately, major cities housing stock is deficient regarding low income affordable housing for Veterans and their families and individual Veterans with barriers such as criminal records, disabilities, little or no income, and those who require intensive case management to sustain their housing.

Several buildings could be listed on the National Historic Landmarks record making them eligible for preservation funds, grants, and federal tax incentives. Additional funding sources: City, State, County (ESG and CDBG), HUD, VA, Corporate, Private, Internal program development (Janitorial and Landscaping businesses) & Rents. Federal Grants such as Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF), HVRP & IVTP can also provide funds for clients.

The burden and challenge for non-profit services providers has always been to identify housing options for those who only qualify for 16% of the available market. Most apartment complexes require three times the rental amount in income which prevents those on disability or social security from acquiring customary affordable housing. For example, a Senior Citizen on a fixed income would only qualify for an apartment rental rate of \$400 a month if their retirement benefit is just \$1200. Outside of traditional senior housing which has a long wait list, the options are extremely limited for single seniors especially those who are transitioning from owning a home to an apartment for the first time.

While the homeless Veteran population has stabilized to some extent, a need is still there for low income housing options. The average age for homeless Veterans is 55 years old with an income at or below \$1000 a month from VA or Social Security benefits. Again, housing options remain limited due to income or the inability to qualify for additional VA and Social Security Benefits. While the recidivism rate remains low, those returning to homelessness expressed their desire to living among fellow Veterans who understand their needs and can provide peer support. This is understandable when you consider that the most effective programs in the United States for homeless and at-risk Veterans are community-based, nonprofit, “Veterans helping Veterans” organizations. Programs that do work best, feature permanent housing with the camaraderie of

living in structured, substance-free environments, with fellow veterans who are succeeding at bettering themselves.

Recently a new demographic has emerged as more Community Colleges have requested assistance with housing or sheltering some of their students. Since community colleges do not offer dormitories, those students who cannot afford an apartment are forced to stay with friends or family for short durations or live on the streets or in shelters. This unseen homeless population has been overlooked for years and is rarely reported outside of anonymous surveys and is exceptionally hard to identify these individuals during the annual Point in Time (PIT) Count of the homeless population. Unfortunately, these students would not qualify for most housing programs, and shelters are not an ideal or suitable long-term housing option for college students.

There is a clear and identifiable need for an alternative housing solution that will meet the social, economic, and environmental needs of Senior Citizens, Veterans, College Students, and individuals who require permanent supportive housing on a limited income. Regrettably there are no alternative housing options currently available to support this population but a possible solution.

Some buildings were designed as the Bachelor Officer Quarters (BOQ) and Officers Club. These buildings are quite adequate to be reutilized as Permanent and Transitional Housing with office space available to offer supportive services not only to the residents, but the community in whole.

It would be possible to assign floors and wings to designate groups like Seniors, Veterans, or Students. Most of the rooms offer a living space with individual bathroom, kitchenette, refrigerator, microwave, and furniture. Also located on each residential floor are domestic kitchens and several laundry rooms for the residents.

The acreage surrounding the area can be appealing to all the fore mentioned groups. Veterans will instantly recognize the area as former military and find it not only familiar and peaceful, but also like returning home. Seniors would enjoy the tranquility of the vast open spaces, the security and privacy of the facilities, and abundant community activities. College students would quickly identify the area as a major college campus and its appeal as a stress-free lifestyle complete with ample indoor and outdoor recreational facilities.

By utilizing the upper level floors in a building as residential apartments, the first floor would be available for supportive services. Individual agencies would be able to provide additional housing programs, medical clinics, financial support, case management, mental health counseling, transportation, and other supportive care. Like similar facilities across the country, a VA Community Based Outpatient Clinic could be located on site as well as benefits enrollment. The larger spaces in both buildings could also be used for satellite college classrooms, senior activities, vocational rehabilitation, or rented out for community events.

The potential for these two buildings is unlimited in terms of permanent or transitional housing. It meets or exceeds the current demand for low income individual housing units and bridges the gap between residents and access to social services by consolidating resources on site. The benefit of such a master planned community is immeasurable to the residents and reduces the

overall economic impact on taxpayers and limited community resources as seen in similar projects.

Several communities nationwide have reutilized surplus government property and buildings to permanently house Veterans and low-income families with great success. Texas is fortunate to have similar untapped resources and facilities to meet this growing need now, and in the foreseeable future. Organizations and agencies will be briefed on this project and will be encouraged by its potential and the concept of a consolidated resource center that encompasses alternative permanent housing for such a wide demographic.

# **Transportation Workgroup**

# Transportation Workgroup

## Unmet Veteran Need #1

Veterans should be recognized for their military service throughout the state and not just in selected communities. Lack of standardization results in confusion for veterans and excess of charges. They may believe they are being exempted and they're not.

### **Recommendation:**

Standardize toll road exemptions for veterans statewide.

- Recommend reexamining the toll exemption program for veterans to standardize eligibility and consider ways to provide funding to toll entities including but not limited to:
  - Voluntary donation options on toll road billing statements to support exemptions for disabled veterans;
  - Toll entities that do not exempt disabled veterans toll fees should display road markers designating non-exempt toll roads; and
  - Toll authorities should provide exemption information to veterans when applying for a tag.

State agencies may increase outreach efforts to veterans in order to clarify various exemption programs. These efforts can include easily readable maps and listings of exempt and nonexempt tolls.

**Background:** In 2009 the Texas Legislature passed HB 3139 (81st Regular Session) by Rep. Herrero and Sen. Van de Putte, authorizing toll entities in Texas to establish a discount program for qualified disabled veterans. In late 2012, the Texas Transportation Commission passed Minute Order 113247, establishing the Veteran Toll Waiver Program on Texas Department of Transportation (TXDOT) toll roads.

Currently, Transportation Code §372.053 authorizes a toll project entity, including TXDOT, to establish a discount program for electronic toll collection customers that, if established, must include free or discounted use of toll projects by an electronic toll collection customer whose account relates to a vehicle registered (1) under Transportation Code, §504.202 (disabled veterans), (2) under Transportation Code, §504.315(g) (Purple Heart recipients), or (3) by a person who has received the Medal of Honor.

To receive the exemption, a vehicle must be actively registered with the State of Texas and display a disabled veteran, Purple Heart, or Legion of Valor specialty license plate. Veterans can apply for the qualified specialty license plate with the Texas Department of Motor Vehicles (TXDMV). TXDOT's program applies only to TXDOT toll roads.

- In central Texas, eligible veterans may drive without charge on TXDOT toll roads:
- State Highway 45 Southeast; and
- State Highway 130 (Segments 1-4) from I-35, north of Georgetown to US 183 south of Austin (Central Texas Turnpike System).

TXDOT toll roads in other regions of the state that eligible veterans may travel free of charge are:

- the Camino Colombia toll road, State Highway 255 near Laredo;
- DFW Connector; and
- certain segments of the Grand Parkway near Houston.

Most private toll authorities in Texas did not include provisions to exempt certain veterans from toll fees in their original bond covenants. Article I, Section 16 of the Texas Constitution presents legal barriers for requiring private toll authorities to do so ex post facto. While it is possible for private toll authorities to exempt certain veterans from toll charges (ex. North Texas Tollway Authority exemption of Legion of Valor recipients through a partnership with Volvo of Dallas), of the six major toll authorities in Texas, about half still charge disabled veterans. Toll authorities that charge disabled veterans include the North Texas Tollway Authority, the Camino Real Regional Mobility Authority, and the Central Texas Regional Mobility Authority (CTRMA) in Austin.

House Bill 894 by Rick Miller (84th Legislature, 2015) attempted to address the current patchwork system by requiring rather than authorizing a toll project entity to establish a waiver program that provides free use of the entity's toll project by an Eligible Veteran. The bill was left pending in the House Committee on Defense and Veterans' Affairs.

### **Veteran Unmet Need #2:**

Disabled veterans need reliable transportation options for accessing VA medical services.

### **Recommendations:**

- The VA and VA medical facilities and regional transit providers should establish formal relationships for communication and coordination to increase access to transportation, promote public/veteran awareness of existing transportation resources available within their community.
- As a component of that effort, encourage public transit providers involved to provide a reduced or free fare to veterans by transit providers throughout the state.
- Address gaps in mental health services to veterans, including rural veterans, through further development and improvement in state telemedicine programs.



- Encourage public transit providers to create more services that include Veterans Health Administration facilities.
- Encourage ride sharing companies to offer discounted fares to disabled veterans who are traveling to medical and employment appointments.

**Background:** With federal and state funds, the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) funds 24 lead planning agencies to develop and maintain regionally coordinated public transit-human services transportation plans for the state's rural and urban public transit providers. These plans identify the transit resources and needs of their respective communities via the participation of stakeholders such as transit providers, workforce commissions, representatives of low-income populations, seniors, individuals with disabilities, and others. Veterans are called out specifically as a group to be represented on the stakeholder committees for these planning efforts. Plans cover a span of five years and the next update begins in 2021. Participation of representatives from the regional Veterans Integrated Service Network, VA Healthcare Systems, VA Medical Centers, Outpatient Clinics, and Community Based Outpatient Centers in discussion of unmet needs would better inform the stakeholder committees and encourage the plans to include more veteran specific gaps such as transportation to Veterans Health Administration facilities.

### **Veteran Unmet Need #3:**

Local governments, communities, and service organizations that provide transportation services to veterans need access to funding and resources to ensure the sustainability of their programs.

### **Recommendations:**

- Increase awareness of funding options, specifically with local government and community organizations that provide critical transportation services to veterans in order to make these services more sustainable.
- Recommend TVC Fund for Veterans' Assistance program provide-grant writing assistance to organizations interested in applying for transportation grants

**Background:** Currently, the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) provides financial, technical and coordination assistance to the state's rural and urban public transit providers. Annually, TxDOT provides about \$100 million in federal and state financial assistance to public transportation funding to the state's 29 small urban and 36 rural transit providers. Approximately \$7 million of this funding is specifically for the enhanced mobility of seniors and individuals with disabilities, including veterans.

**Texas Department of Transportation Information requested from the Texas Coordinating Council for Veterans Services and the Texas Veterans Council for their 2020 report on unmet veteran's needs. TxDOT does not take up a position for or against these items.**

# **Women Veterans Workgroup**

# Women Veterans Workgroup

## Unmet Veteran Need #1

Homeless and low-income women veterans, especially those with children, would benefit from affordable housing.

### **Recommendations:**

- Entities of the state which provide services to women veterans seeking housing should be required to ask during intake, “Did you serve in the armed forces?” to better identify available options.
- State agencies providing housing services to veterans should provide ADA-compliant and eligibility criteria to women veterans and their families.
- All homeless veterans' information available should be offered in a manner which empowers veterans to oversee their situations.

**Background:** In the VA’s report, *The Past, Present and Future of Women Veterans*, released February 2017, a GAO study found limited housing for women veterans with children as a barrier when accessing and finding housing. In a recent issue of *Task & Purpose*, it was reported that women veterans face a greater risk of becoming homeless — 2.4% — compared to male veterans and there is an inadequate supply of affordable housing. In a VA report, *Housing Instability Among Women Veterans Accessing Care through the Veterans Health Administration*, released in February 2018, it is documented that “there has been a surge in the number of women Veterans...experiencing housing instability.” Additionally, the VA recognizes that, “many women Veterans face challenges when returning to civilian life, including raising children on their own or dealing with the aftereffects of military sexual trauma. Without intervention, these and other issues can put women Veterans at greater risk of homelessness.”

There is a lack of public awareness about homeless women veterans. Two contributing factors to homeless women veterans are the failure of women veterans to 1) self-identify as veteran, and 2) ask for help. Additionally, homeless women veterans are more likely to live with friends or in their vehicles for fear of being in proximity to men (especially if they have suffered some form of sexual trauma), or if they have children, fear of losing them. These women do not get counted in the yearly Point-in-Time count conducted by the Department of Labor. If women do not request housing assistance, it is understandable that there are few shelters or housing for women and women with children. For those women who do step forward, the amount of safe shelter or housing available to them is limited or non-existent.

Access to shelter and housing is hindered by a lack of the unknown: What types of services are available? Where are the services? What are the eligibility criteria? Will women veterans lose custody of their children to agencies such as Child Protective Services if they seek help for

housing? While we openly market the host of services available to veterans from claims counseling to employment, there is not much marketing for shelter or housing.

Currently, homeless and low-income women veterans have a few options through federal programs to obtain assistance for homelessness. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and VA Supportive Housing Program (HUD-VASH) partner to provide permanent, supportive housing and treatment services for homeless veterans. One of the focuses of the HUD-VASH Program is to provide special services for women Veterans. The Department of Veterans Affairs' Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) program VA awards grants to private non-profit organizations and consumer cooperatives who can provide supportive services to very low-income veteran families living in or transitioning to permanent housing.

The Department of Veterans Affairs Health Care for Homeless Veterans (HCHV) Programs additionally offers a Homeless Providers Grant and Per Diem Program annually (as funding permits) to fund community agencies providing services to homeless Veterans. The program promotes the development and provision of supportive housing and/or supportive services with the goal of helping homeless veterans achieve residential stability, increase their skill levels and/or income, and obtain greater self-determination. Only programs with supportive housing (up to 24 months) or service centers (offering services such as case management, education, crisis intervention, counseling, services targeted towards specialized populations including homeless women veterans, etc.) are eligible for these funds.

Moving forward, marketing the available services while answering questions that may hinder women veterans from seeking services may increase the use of services. We should seek to change the language when marketing services to women veterans. Instead of asking “Are you a veteran?” we should be asking “Did you serve in the armed forces?” Lastly, we need to change the current vision of the hopeless-homeless veteran seeking a handout to a resilient-warrior seeking support. A new public awareness campaign about what a veteran looks like, female, fierce, and with children, will not only engage veterans, but the public.

### **Unmet Veteran Need #2**

Veterans in Texas would benefit from information on how to obtain affordable and accessible childcare.

#### **Recommendations:**

- State agencies and public institutions of higher learning that provide services to veterans should make readily available in an easily accessible format childcare information and options to veterans and their families.
- Establish more childcare facilities for veterans with incentives.

**Background:** In the 2016, TVC Veteran Needs Assessment report prepared by Texas State University, the lack of childcare was cited as an unmet need of women veterans. The nonprofit advocacy group, Child Care Aware of America, reported that Texas has 20 to 29 childcare centers for every 1000 children, ranking among the lowest in the country. In the same report, rural and poorer communities are identified as “childcare deserts.” Veterans, especially low-income, single parent, and millennials—an increasing population among the veteran community—have the greatest need, but have the least access to affordable, quality childcare.

The Foundation for Women Warriors, a unique support organization created exclusively for the women veteran community of Southern California, has developed a specific childcare program focused on serving women seeking employment or in school. Identifying this same type of program in Texas has been unsuccessful.

Childcare assistance websites associated with the various workforce solution centers across the state provide eligibility requirements and on-line applications, but some websites are difficult to find, difficult to navigate, and lack consistency in appearance across the state.

The VA piloted a childcare drop-in service for veterans with medical appointments and the Dallas VA, one of the pilot sites, continues to provide this service. Replicating this model in all VA facilities, especially those that have women’s clinics would be beneficial to veterans. Lack of access to affordable childcare can be self-imposed because a veteran does not ask about childcare. When veterans seek to further their education, or begin to look for work, they take on the challenge of finding childcare on their own, not asking the person filing their benefits claim or helping them with their resume about childcare options. Eligibility criteria is another barrier to access. Veterans who are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder/military sexual trauma (PTSD/MST) and may not have a VA diagnosis for a disability rating.

### **Unmet Veteran Need #3**

Women veterans would benefit from being able to participate in groups comprised of their peers.

### **Recommendation:**

Recommend further funding support for additional nonprofits and veterans service organizations that currently operate or are capable of creating effective women veteran peer groups that will expand services by the number of peer groups available and increase the connection among women veterans.

**Background:** Texas has the largest women veteran population in the country with an estimated 185,000 women veterans and growing. Women veterans continue to settle their families across the state in vastly populated areas as well as rural areas. Women veterans typically miss the

camaraderie they experienced during their military service, so they seek that camaraderie by connecting with women veteran peer groups.

According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, joining a peer support group can help veterans feel better in a number of ways, such as: knowing that others are going through something similar; learning tips on how to handle day-to-day challenges; meeting new friends or connecting to others who understand; learning how to talk about things that bother them or how to ask for help; learning to trust other people; and hearing about helpful new perspectives from others.

Texas women veterans have benefitted from participating in peer groups offered by the Women Veterans Network (WoVeN). WoVeN is a national, peer support network led by women veterans, for women veterans; it's a foundational 8-week program is designed to enhance wellness, quality of life, family relationships, and career satisfaction by building strong connections among women Veterans. Texas women veterans that participated in WoVeN peer groups went on to become peer leaders to help more women veterans connect. In the past, Texas Veterans Commission Women Veterans Program supported WoVeN by recruiting and sponsoring 8 rural Texas women veterans to participate in the 2-day peer leader training. The peer leader training resulted in increasing the number of peer groups available in rural areas as well as increasing the opportunities for women veterans to connect with their peers.

Additionally, local organizations and Texas Veterans Commission Fund for Veterans' Assistance grantees like Grace After Fire have provided peer-to-peer support groups to women veterans through their Table Talk: Color Me Camo peer support system. Grace After Fire is a nonprofit that provide the means for women veterans to gain self-knowledge and self-renewal. The purpose of their Table Talk: Color Me Camo program is for peers to help peers with the objective to get veterans well by talking to each other and to establish a bond amongst the veterans in their local areas. The overall goal should result in healthy women, healthy families, and healthy communities.

# **Pro Bono Legal Services Workgroup**



## **Pro Bono Legal Services Workgroup**

The State of Texas has continued to show support for basic civil legal services for veterans. The Supreme Court of Texas grants funds to the Texas Access to Justice Foundation (TAJF), which is the leading funder of legal aid in Texas. TAJF funds nonprofit organizations which offer free civil legal services to low-income Texans.

TAJF supports 14 grantees for work with veteran legal services with funding from the Legislature, proceeds from the annual fundraising gala and other donations. TAJF funds 5 bar association veteran pro bono programs and 3 law school veteran clinical programs which all utilize pro bono attorneys. In fiscal year 2018-2019, 8,977 veterans were served by legal aid programs in Texas, and 951 clinics and workshops assisted more than 33,000 veterans. Civil legal aid and pro bono programs across Texas provide much needed legal services to veterans ranging from VA disability, health/mental health, family law, probate issues, consumer debt to income maintenance/public benefits.

Additionally, TAJF sponsors Equal Justice Works Fellows annually and has sponsored fellows who have partnered with legal aid to work exclusively on veteran's issues. One of the Fellows, Brady Granger at the Legal Aid of North West Texas, Lubbock office, has designed and implemented a robust and comprehensive program of legal clinics, outreach, and community education sessions serving the community of veterans in West Texas.

For the current biennium, Governor Greg Abbott supported an increase of the level of funding to \$6 million for basic civil legal services for veterans to meet Texas' growing veteran population needs. Nearly 20 percent of Texans qualify for legal aid, but less than 10 percent of the civil legal needs of working Texans are being met due to funding constraints.

Although there are successful programs to assist veterans with their legal needs, veteran will benefit from additional legal services. The Pro Bono Legal Services Veterans Workgroup has identified the following unmet veteran's legal needs:

### **Unmet Veteran Need #1:**

Veterans will benefit from deferred adjudication agreements in Veterans Treatment Courts (VTCs), and increased funding and pro bono focus on facilitating civil expunctions.

### **Recommendation:**

Veteran Treatment Courts should adopt uniform policies and procedures. Veterans who successfully complete VTC programs should have their charges automatically dismissed and expunged. Veterans should not be required to plead guilty or no contest to qualify for VTC programs.

The workgroup also recommends a mechanism for the waiver of fees and costs associated for veterans who file for expunction of their criminal and arrest records. There should be increased funding to VTCs and other non-profit entities that assist veterans in determining whether they are entitled to expunctions, properly drafting and filing the necessary paperwork to initiate and complete their expunction cases and providing representation in expunction cases.

**Background:** VTCs are specialized courts established to specifically address the needs of veterans facing criminal charges, diverting them from incarceration into treatment. VTCs rely on the cooperation and collaboration between the criminal justice system, Veterans Courts, Veteran's Affairs, community agencies and veterans. VTCs require the judge, prosecutor and defense counsel to collaboratively pursue a path that will help solve the issues the veteran may be experiencing.

According to the Office of the Governor, as of July 2019, there were 30 VTCs in Texas. Within each VTC there are different eligibility and procedural requirements, which include the following:

1. the veteran must be a resident of the county in which the VTC operates or have a pending eligible offense in that county (some VTCs handle only misdemeanor cases, while others handle both misdemeanor and felony cases), and
2. the veteran must have a traumatic brain injury, post-traumatic stress disorder, or other mental illness or disorder that resulted from military service and materially affected the veteran's criminal conduct at issue.

The veteran's participation in a VTC program should likely achieve the objective of ensuring public safety through rehabilitation of the veteran. VTC applications are reviewed on a case by case basis and many factors are considered, including prior convictions.

Veterans who participate in VTC programs receive substance abuse and mental health treatment, counseling services, housing assistance, and needed resources to become productive citizens. Veterans also build supportive, healthy relationships with other veterans in the program. However, some VTCs require veterans to plead guilty to the offense and veterans are convicted of the offense, even if they successfully complete the program. Also, not all VTC programs have a streamlined process to allow veterans to file for expunctions after successfully completing the program.

VTCs best serve veterans when the goal is to divert veterans from incarceration into treatment. Therefore, if a veteran successfully completes a VTC program, the charges should be automatically dismissed and expunged. Veterans should not be required to plead guilty or no contest to qualify for VTC programs.

The Travis County Veterans Treatment Court Track 1 Dismissal Program is an example of a successful VTC program. The Travis County VTC program is a 12 to 24-month program and has 3 levels. Each participant is required to successfully promote through each of the 3 levels. The Travis County VTC has a two-track system; Track 1 Dismissal and Track 2 Adjudicated. For Track 1, a plea is not required, and the bond conditions are changed to reflect participation in the Veterans

Court program. When the dismissal is signed, the VTC defense counsel files the expungement which the Judge signs. The expungement process is streamlined so it is easily taken care of immediately following the graduating veteran's final court proceeding. On the other hand, track 2, involves probated cases and veterans are required to successfully complete probation along with the Veterans Court.

Additionally, in certain cases, Texas citizens may petition to have their criminal record expunged or they may petition for their record (including juvenile records) to be sealed through a nondisclosure order. Under Texas Code of Criminal Procedure Chapter 55, an individual may request the expunction of criminal records, and under Chapter 411 of the Texas Government Code, certain citizens may seek a nondisclosure order of his or her criminal and arrest records. Veterans may qualify for an expunction or a nondisclosure order depending on the crime the veteran is charged with.

A properly drafted and filed expunction case can be difficult to navigate for a pro se veteran. This past legislative session, a law was passed that waives dismissal or expungement fees for veterans who successfully complete a VTC program. Nonetheless, there is a dismissal or expungement fee, which could be as high as \$5,000, for veterans who do not participate in VTCs. Expunctions are very expensive due to the required service fees and process of notifying various law enforcement agencies, courts and third parties to remove records from their data base.

Veterans can suffer increased housing insecurity and joblessness due to criminal and arrest records that the veteran is qualified to expunge.

### **Unmet Veteran Need #2:**

Veterans would benefit from legislation that protects their housing rights and specifically prevents credit-score reporting upon the mere filing of an eviction suit.

### **Recommendation:**

Eviction information against veterans should be confidential in situations where:

1. an eviction is never ordered,
2. the eviction is due to a foreclosure through no fault of the tenant, or
3. after a set amount of time, it is in the interest of justice (e.g. a veteran was a victim of domestic violence and flees the premises without notifying the landlord, who subsequently files for eviction not knowing the veteran was a victim of domestic violence).

**Background:** An eviction almost always has a negative impact on an individual's ability to secure housing in the future because most landlords perform credit checks on prospective tenants. Unfortunately, an eviction can show up on a veteran's record even if the veteran won the case or even if the landlord simply filed the case, but a judge never ordered an eviction. An eviction will

also appear on a veteran's record, even if they are current on their rent, if the landlord defaults on the rental property's mortgage and the bank evicts the veteran to take possession of the rental property.

If a veteran's credit report contains any mention of an eviction, regardless of its disposition or whether the eviction was based on rent or other fees owed (such as a violation of a no-pet provision in the lease), the prospective landlord will likely consider other applicants over the veteran with an eviction record. This practice places veterans at a greater risk of housing insecurity and homelessness. Eviction reporting will similarly affect veterans' future credit card applications, access to housing, and decrease the likelihood that the veteran would be approved for a mortgage or personal loan for seven years after the eviction is reported—even if the veteran was not ultimately evicted through the lawsuit.

### **Unmet Veteran Need #3:**

Veterans would benefit from pro bono representation in child support cases.

### **Recommendation:**

The HEROES program should be expanded so that more veterans can benefit from the program.

The workgroup is also recommending funding for pro bono programs specifically targeted towards assisting veterans in child support cases. With appropriate training and mentoring, pro bono attorneys could help bridge this justice gap.

**Background:** Veterans and military personnel are often referred to the Texas Attorney General's Help Establishing Responsive Orders and Ensuring Support (HEROES) for Children in Military Families program for case-specific child support assistance. The HEROES program was designed to provide family-centered child support services to veteran and military parents whose paternity or child support matters have been complicated by the realities of military service (e.g. deployments, income fluctuations and combat injuries). Through the HEROES program, veterans are partnered with a dedicated HEROES child support attorney. They receive: 1) specialized case review and management; 2) personalized assistance with paternity establishment and child support; 3) help in cases where military-related injuries have made the veteran unable to follow a court order; 4) resources to learn how to best parent together in unique circumstances.

The program requirements are: (1) an active child support case with Office of the Attorney General (OAG), (2) at least one party is a resident of Texas, and (3) the person must be a veteran or active service member. The program does not consider characterization of service and there is no time limit to apply for the program. Additionally, substantiating documentation to confirm an applicant's status is not required.

Although the HEROES program is a great resource and provides a beneficial service to veterans, HEROES Assistant Attorneys General represent the State of Texas. The program cannot and does not represent child support customers, because the OAG is the opposing party in enforcement actions. Veterans are required to contact a private attorney or Legal Assistance through the Judge Advocate General (JAG), if they need an attorney to represent them. Also, the program does not assist veterans with custody and placement issues.

Additionally, the HEROES program is an amazing resource for veterans when veterans can participate in the program. There have been reports about Region 6 which includes Harris County, the second highest county in the nation with a veteran population, that veterans in OAG cases are unaware of the HEROES program and are not readily identified as veterans when part of the OAG system. In addition, OAG staff, attorneys, and the judiciary are not readily familiar with the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act (SCRA) protections, veteran benefit protections, and how military pay changes with discharge or duty station orders. More publicity and education about the HEROES Program is needed among veterans and the legal community so that more veterans can benefit from this program. There have also been complaints from veterans and attorneys about unanswered calls, delayed or no response from the HEROES program staff after the initial contact, and lack of communication with attorneys attempting to assist veterans. There are more veterans in need of the HEROES program but not enough HEROES staff to assist veterans in these cases.

Further, due to limited resources, civil legal aid programs must place priorities on certain case types. Unless a case involves domestic violence, or other extenuating circumstances, legal aid is not usually able to provide representation in child support cases. Additionally, some veterans do not qualify for legal aid assistance under the income guidelines, which stipulates 200% of the federal poverty line and below. Veterans who do not qualify for legal aid assistance with their child support cases potentially face arrearages, child support orders that don't take into account their changed circumstances (e.g. unemployment, disability, etc.), contempt charges for not complying with child support orders and not getting the child support their entitled to.

#### **Unmet Veteran Need #4:**

Veterans would benefit from pro bono representation and assistance in VA Disability cases.

#### **Recommendation:**

The workgroup is recommending funding for pro bono programs that assist veterans in and encourage pro bono attorneys to represent veterans in VA Disability cases.

**Background:** Due to the highly technical and lengthy nature of VA disability cases, few Texas attorneys make these cases a regular part of their practice. VA disability cases require extensive paperwork and are challenging for veterans to navigate on their own. Veterans will benefit from

pro bono representation in initial VA disability claims, VA disability appeals, connected disability compensation applications, and disability ratings.

Baylor Law operates several legal clinics including the Baylor Law Veterans Clinic which is funded by TAJF and assists veterans with free civil litigation services and legal advice. As part of Baylor's commitment to pro bono public service, students step outside the classroom and into the community, meeting and working with veterans with real needs, under the supervision of volunteer attorneys and Baylor Law professors. Since 2012, the monthly clinics serve a veteran population of over 16,000 in McLennan County and the surrounding communities, and over 900 veterans and their families have received legal assistance through the clinics, many of whom cannot afford to hire an attorney.

Baylor Law has one legal advice clinic volunteer attorney, a former VA Disability Benefits Staff Attorney, who gives excellent advice and counsel, but does not take cases for further representation. Veterans with initial VA Disability Claims are often referred to the McLennan County Veteran's Service Officer, who is housed where Baylor provides legal advice clinics. Given the Veteran's Service Officer's familiarity with developing claims, he is often best suited to assist and determine whether the claim has much merit. For VA Disability Appeals, veterans are referred to a Central Texas attorney.

#### **Unmet Veteran Need #5:**

Veterans would benefit from pro bono representation and assistance in discharge upgrade cases.

#### **Recommendation:**

The workgroup is recommending funding for pro bono programs that assist veterans in and encourage pro bono attorneys to represent veterans in discharge upgrade cases.

**Background:** More than 1.6 million veterans call Texas home. Many of these veterans face uncertain futures as they attempt to navigate the civilian world with discharge characterizations that negatively impact them economically, socially, and psychologically. A significant number of these veterans would benefit from assistance petitioning the Department of Defense review boards for discharge upgrades because of the complex application process.

Since World War II, more than two million veterans have received less than fully honorable discharges. Since the beginning of the Gulf War in the early 90's, approximately 8% of service members have received less than fully honorable discharges. The less than fully honorable discharge characterizations result in ineligibility for veteran benefits (including monthly disability compensation, health care, housing, and educational assistance). The lack of access to these benefits is devastating to veterans, specifically combat era veterans whose discharge

characterizations resulted from actions related to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or other related conditions.

The Department of Defense recognizes the relationship between combat deployment, subsequent mental health diagnoses, and less than fully honorable discharges. The recognition has resulted in several memorandums that provide guidance to the review boards and veterans on how these upgrade cases should be reviewed. While this guidance is favorable to veterans, many veterans are unaware or unable to fashion comprehensive discharge upgrade applications that adequately present the evidence necessary to affect a discharge upgrade.

Some legal aid attorneys have partnered with large law firms to assist veterans in discharge upgrade cases. This is a specialized area where the pro bono attorneys and non-attorney advocates can be of great assistance.

Texas Legal Services Center (TLSC), a statewide nonprofit organization working towards civil justice for all Texans, began a coordinated Pro Bono Program in late summer 2019 and provides multi-practice area pro bono opportunities to large firms across the state. Additionally, TLSC began offering discharge upgrade training and opportunities in the fall of 2019. TLSC reached out to Pro Bono Coordinators at multiple firms, garnered interest from two large law firms, Kirkland & Ellis and Vinson & Elkins, and subsequently partnered with two attorneys from Vinson & Elkins on a discharge upgrade case. The one-hour CLE entitled "Discharge Upgrades and Correction of Military Records" by Julian Honor, Managing Attorney of TLSC's Veterans Legal Assistance Program, is also available in an online webinar format for the general public.

This type of partnership has not only opened doors to serving more clients for TLSC, it is also establishing long-term relationships with firms who have the resources to provide meaningful support to TLSC. Although the program is still in its first year, TLSC is already realizing substantial benefits for their clients and looks forward to growing their partnerships and offerings over time.

# **Communications and Outreach Workgroup**



# Communications & Outreach Workgroup

## **Unmet Veteran Need #1**

The state of Texas does not have one centralized Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system for (1) Service Members, Veterans and their Families (SMVF) to request benefits and services; and (2) for state agencies to access SMVF data to understand what benefits and services are being requested and provided by Veteran Service Organizations.

### **Recommendation:**

Direct the Department of Information Resources (DIR) to assess if CRMs in use by Texas Veteran Organizations can interface with the Veteran Open Data Portal at DIR and recommend best practices for the collection of data for state agencies.

Texas.gov created the Texas Open Veteran Data Portal to promote government transparency, encourage citizen participation, and enable the efficient use of public resources. This data is provided by Texas state agencies and is available for everyone to use, explore, and share. The portal has tools to easily search, filter, map, and visualize specific data sets for research, collaboration, and innovation.

**Background:** A customer relationship management (CRM) is a technology for managing relationships and interactions with Service Members, Veterans and their Families (SMVF). Currently, there are a few CRM systems in use collecting data on Texas Veterans by organizations that provide benefits and services to them. As such, state agencies of the TCCVS have a need for this data to understand what benefits and services are being accessed by Service Members, Veterans and their Families (SMVF). The need for these systems to share their data with TVC/DIR is essential to learning the needs and services that Texas Veterans are using. Not all CRMs use the same programming for them to work. Therefore, the TCCVS needs to find out if these systems can share data with TVC/DIR.

## **Unmet Veteran Need #2**

Texas veterans are not aware of statewide veteran services available including:

1. The Veterans Call Center: 1-800-252-VETS (8387);
2. 2-1-1: Health and Human Services Commission;
3. TexVet: Texas A&M University System Health Science Center;
4. The Veterans Portal: Department of Information Resources;
5. The Texas Veterans App: Health and Human Services Commission; and
6. The Texas Veterans Network

**Recommendation:**

Direct the TCCVS agencies to 1) collaboratively utilize funding following the guidelines provided in the Budget Rider Section 17.04 of the 85<sup>th</sup> Legislature; and encourage TCCVS agencies to 2) join the Texas Veterans Network platform.

Budget Rider 17.04 in the General Appropriations Act states, participating state agencies will collectively outreach to veterans using funds appropriated to each agency, based on availability. This would include the promotion of the Texas Veterans App and Texas Veterans Portal as initial point state resources with a list of resources available to Texas Veterans and their family.

The Texas Veterans Network provides an excellent opportunity to connect community service, veteran service and faith-based organizations as well as federal, state, and local governments agencies to effectively serve more military transitioning service members, veterans, and their families in 92 counties across the state.

**Background:** The state has made significant investments in the resources listed below and veterans should have greater awareness of their existence. In addition to agency websites, information about services and programs for Texas veterans is available through the following state funded mechanisms:

1. Veterans Call Center: 1-800-252-VETS (8387)
2. 2-1-1: Health and Human Services Commission
3. TexVet: Texas A&M University System Health Science Center
4. The Veterans Portal: Department of Information Resources
5. The Texas Veterans App: Health and Human Services Commission
6. The Texas Veterans Network

Lastly, state agencies in Texas strive to maintain a “no wrong door” philosophy to ensure veterans and their family members are efficiently connected to the benefits and services earned through military service. The following information provided discusses the various state funded resources that are listed through the Texas Veterans App and Texas Veterans Portal. Therefore, the App and Portal should serve as the initial point for state resources available to Texas Veterans and their family.

**Veterans Call Center: 1-800-252-VETS (8387)**

The Veterans Call Center (1-800-252-VETS (8387)) works closely with the Texas Veterans Commission to provide veterans with benefits information and assistance services through a statewide call service center. The call center is currently promoted by the Veterans Land Board (VLB) and the Texas Veterans Commission (TVC) in the media, social media, and on promotional items through the VLB and TVC.

## **2-1-1 (Health and Human Services Commission)**

The Texas Information and Referral Network (2-1-1 or TIRN) is the single point of coordination for statewide health and human services information in Texas. Following its inception in 1997, the Texas Legislature has periodically expanded the scope of 2-1-1. Senate Bill 1058 (80th Session, 2007) required 2-1-1 to provide information and referrals for reintegration services to military service members and their families. Since 2008, 2-1-1 has participated in several initiatives to benefit military members and their families, including “Partners Across Texas” which aims to enhance support for Texas Army and Air National Guard Service and family members.

2-1-1 is now connected to the Texas Veterans App middle button “Connect with Texas Veterans”. This allows the caller to speak directly to a Veteran Specialist with 2-1-1 that can assist with referring to caller to benefits and/or services within their local community. Once the caller is directed to a service, benefit or provider, 2-1-1 conducts a follow up call to ensure the caller’s issue, service or benefit was resolved. Additionally, 2-1-1 has a Customer Relation Management System that provides case management of the caller and tracks the results and follows up. The information that is given by 2-1-1 is provided through TexVet and the Office of Veteran Services at HHSC.

Recent changes to the 2-1-1 website have improved accessibility for veterans, military service members and their families, and revised call center procedures have improved identification veterans and military members. However, there is still more that should be done to better serve to veterans and their families.

2-1-1s that receive state funding are required by law or Health and Human Services Commission regulation to collect data and pre-qualify people for certain social services; a lengthy process that can take precious time some veterans may not have, especially if using a pre-paid cellphone. By studying the call center and analyzing the operating procedures, improvements can be made to ensure Veterans in need are able to access resources in a timely fashion.

## **TexVet: Texas A&M University System Health Science Center**

TexVet is an online information and referral website that compiles and indexes community organizations, resources, and events pertinent to Texas military members, veterans, and family members. The TexVet Initiative originated as a collaborative effort between the United States Department of Defense, Veterans Health Administration, Texas Military Forces, Texas A&M University System Health Science Center (TAMHSC), and the Texas 2-1-1 Information and Referral Network.

## **Veterans Portal: Department of Information Resources**

Responding to actions by the 78<sup>th</sup> Texas Legislature, the Texas Department of Information Resources (DIR) created a web portal designed specifically for veterans. The Veterans Portal

was located on the TexasOnline portal but has since moved to Texas.gov. The contract expanded services to customers, incorporated the use of new Web 2.0 tools, and significantly increased revenue to the state.

Throughout 2010 and 2011, numerous state partners combined efforts to:

1. Provide easy access to relevant resources and information for Texas veterans;
2. Identify and define content of the portal; and
3. Develop input and feedback mechanisms to ensure the content is accurate and current.

The Veterans Portal is promoted by all state agencies and is featured on the Texas Veterans App, which was discussed in the previous section.

### **Texas Veterans App (Texas Health and Human Services Commission)**

In April of 2014, the Texas Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) launched a mobile phone app to give Texas veterans quick access to crisis hotlines and provides information about local, state and national resources available to Texas military Veterans and their families.

The App, which can be downloaded from both Google Play Store and the Apple iTunes Store, works on most iPhones and Android mobile phones. By using the application, veterans can:

- Get direct access to the national Veterans Crisis Line, the Hotline for Women Veterans and the VLB call center;
- Connect with other veterans in their area; and
- Quickly find services available to military veterans.
- The “Connect with Texas Veterans” connects the caller directly to a Veteran Specialist with 211Texas 24/7. This feature allows the Veteran Specialist to connect the service member/family member to services and benefits within their local community. They can also connect with a member of the Texas Military Veteran Peer Network (MVPN), an affiliation of Texas servicemembers, veterans and their families. The network provides veterans with peer support and trusted information about community resources available to them.

This new “Connect with Texas Veterans” button on the App tracks the veteran/family member with a case management CRM system to track the request and follow up to ensure the request was fulfilled and/or resolved. The state has made significant investments in the above resources and veterans should have greater awareness of their existence. Additionally, no matter how veterans access information on state services, the information should be consistent, accurate, and current across all resource platforms. Finally, state agencies in Texas should strive to maintain a “no wrong door” philosophy to ensure veterans and their family members are efficiently connected to the benefits and services earned through military service.

## **The Texas Veterans Network**

The Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) issued a Request for Applications (RFA) to Community Based Organizations to develop regional networks comprised of organizations whose missions include providing services and support to veterans (e.g., Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs), other CBOs, Local Workforce Development Boards (LWDBs), Texas Veterans Commission (TVC), and other entities) and create opportunities to share referral and service information that will allow for coordination of services in 92 counties across the state.

The RFA requires the grantee or grantees to create an automated veteran service coordination referral system that captures services received, referrals made, and services available through an integrated network that can increase a veteran's opportunity to receive all services needed to transition successfully into civilian life. In addition, a shared veteran service coordination referral system among veteran service providers reduces the impediments to comprehensive and coordinated service provision, thereby, reducing barriers to employment.

The RFA required the grantee or grantees to provide a 25% match to the grant. The total grant amount is \$4 million dollars with each grantee receiving \$2 million. The grant is active from April 13th, 2020 until March 31st, 2023.

In April 2020, two grantees were selected to establish the Texas Veterans Network:

- Alamo Area Development Corporation
- Combined Arms

# **Appendix A: Actions Taken from Fourth Report**

## Health Workgroup

### Unmet Veteran Need #1

Medical / CHOICE Program billing issues cause problems for Veterans and their family members.

**Recommendation:** The Department of Information Resources (DIR) should provide more information the current portal to build a unified Veteran-centered online information system with contacts and Veteran resources statewide. The Texas Health and Human Services Commission, Texas Hospital Association & Texas Medical Association, and Association of Community Care Clinics should create CME credit courses for VA Choice private healthcare providers to increase their ability to serve veterans.

**86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session Update:** The need is currently being met by the VA.

### Unmet Veteran Need #2

Rural health care and telehealth / telemedicine options create challenges for rurally located Veterans and their family members.

**Recommendation:** Direct state agencies and county governments to provide information and resources to veterans in rural areas to increase their access to healthcare and other related veteran supportive services.

**86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session Update:** No action taken during the 86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session.

# Mental Health Workgroup

## Unmet Veteran Need #1

Access to culturally competent mental health services

### **Recommendations:**

- Licensing Boards for mental health and social work professionals should require continuing education in military cultural competency training for all Licensed Mental Health Professionals (LMHPs) in the state who specifically serve veteran clientele
- Military cultural competency training should be required for grantees of state agencies who offer mental health grants for veteran-serving organizations

**86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session Update:** No action taken during the 86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session.

## Unmet Veteran Need #2

Although steps have been taken to introduce telemed-delivered mental health services, veterans still experience a gap in services among rural parts of the state.

### **Recommendations:**

- State agencies which offer veteran mental health grant opportunities should continue to focus on prioritizing telemed-delivered services.
- Enhance opportunities for community-based telemed-delivered services.
- Continue and enhance State and Local partnerships with the Veteran Health Administration Suicide Prevention staff to implement the telemed-delivered services.

**86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session Update:** No action taken during the 86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session.

## Unmet Veteran Need #3

Statewide veteran suicide prevention efforts are currently being developed, but immediate steps can be taken, with little cost, to address this issue



**Recommendations:**

- Continue to support the development and implementation of the Statewide Veteran Suicide Prevention Action Plan (SB 578, 85th Legislative Session)
- Training should be provided to all veteran-focused, state-funded programs on the use of the Columbia Suicide Severity Rating Scale (CSSRS)
- Continue and enhance State and Local partnerships with the Veteran Health Administration Suicide Prevention staff to implement the Clay Hunt Act

**86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session Update:** No action taken during the 86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session.

## Employment Workgroup

### Unmet Veteran Need #1

Spouses of 100% Disabled Veterans deemed unemployable by the Veterans Affairs (VA) are unable to use the veteran preference eligibility.

**Recommendation:** Amend through Legislation the authority for 100% Disabled Veterans deemed unemployable by the Veterans Affairs (VA) to transfer veteran preference eligibility to a spouse.

**86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session Update:** No action taken during the 86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session

### Unmet Veteran Need #2

Licensing and certification acceptance for service members/veterans/spouses who obtain their professional certification across state lines. Cross state certifications.

**Recommendation:** Allow state licensing agencies rule-making authority to issue temporary licenses to military service members, veterans and their spouses who possess out of state professional licenses.

**86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session Update:** The Texas Legislature passed SB 1200 and it became effective on 9/1/2019. This bill recognized the out of state licenses of military spouses.

# Higher Education Workgroup

## Unmet Veteran Need #1

Texas veterans would benefit from sustainment of the Hazlewood Exemption Act.

**Recommendation:** Workgroup members concurred that Texas veterans and their families continue to benefit from the sustainment of the Hazlewood Exemption Act, and that the act should be continued.

**86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session Update:** No legislative action was necessary.

## Unmet Veteran Need #2

Student veterans and the State of Texas would benefit from the collection and evaluation of additional data on veterans enrolled at institutions of higher education in the state.

**Recommendation:** The Texas Legislature should provide clear and consistent instructions through legislation identifying what data institutions of higher education shall collect and report on students utilizing veteran benefits.

**86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session Update:** No action taken during the 86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session

# Criminal Justice Workgroup

## Unmet Veteran Need #1

All law enforcement officers in Texas would benefit from mandatory training in TCOLE 4067, Trauma Affected Veterans. There about 80,000 law enforcement officers in Texas and the overwhelming response to the TCOLE 4067 training has been positive. Increasing law enforcement officer's knowledge of trauma as it affects veterans can increase positive outcomes in police confrontations.

**Recommendations:** All law enforcement officers in Texas should be required to take TCOLE 4067, Trauma Affected Veterans.

**86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session Update:** No action taken during the 86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session.

## Housing Workgroup

### Unmet Veteran Need #1

Revising the disabled veteran tax exemption to reflect a veteran's annual income would benefit disabled veterans in Texas. An income-based adjustment would enable financial relief to veterans with fixed incomes by offsetting the cost of living such as economic inflation and housing costs and reduces property tax revenue loss for local municipalities.

**Recommendation:** Veterans would benefit from a change in Tax Code 11.22(b) to allow a tax exemption for disabled veterans living in Texas by transitioning the current exemption schedule from a fixed dollar amount to a percentage of the home's appraised value.

**86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session Update:** No action taken during the 86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session.

### Unmet Veteran Need #2

Veterans and their families who are experiencing or at-risk of homelessness would benefit from a statewide risk mitigation collaborative program preventing homelessness.

**Recommendation:** The workgroup recommends the implementation of a statewide risk mitigation pools or landlord guarantee fund for private property owners who wish to serve "at-risk" veterans and low-income veterans and their families. Fund would be available to offset certain financial losses encountered by property owners who participate in the program and serve eligible veterans. As well as the creation a new program similar to the Texas Veterans + Family Alliance program (SB 55, 84<sup>th</sup> Regular Session) to create public-private partnerships in order to provide supportive housing solutions to at-risk veterans and those who need assistance due to income not meeting rental criteria.

**86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session Update:** No action taken during the 86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session

# Transportation Workgroup

## Unmet Veteran Need #1

The Texas Legislature should standardize eligibility and provide equitable relief for veterans from toll road fees across the state.

### **Recommendations:**

- Recommend reexamining the toll exemption program for veterans to standardize eligibility and consider ways to provide funding to toll entities including but not limited to:
- Voluntary donation options on toll road billing statements to support exemptions for disabled veterans;
- Utilizing proceeds from the sale of excess/surplus property from state agencies;
- Toll entities that do not exempt disabled veterans toll fees should display road markers designating non-exempt toll roads
- Toll authorities should provide exemption information to veterans when applying for a tag;
- State agencies may increase outreach efforts to veterans in order to clarify various exemption programs. These efforts can include easily readable maps and listings of exempt and nonexempt tolls.

**86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session Update:** No Action taken during the 86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session.

## Unmet Veteran Need #2

Veterans, specifically disabled veterans, need reliable transportation options for accessing VA medical services.

### **Recommendations:**

- The VA and VA medical facilities and regional transit providers should establish formal relationships for communication and coordination to increase access to transportation, promote public/veteran awareness of existing transportation resources available within their community.
- As a component of that effort, encourage public transit providers involved to provide a reduced or free fare to veterans by transit providers throughout the state.

- Address gaps in mental health services to veterans, including rural veterans, through further development and improvement in state telemedicine programs. (Cross workgroups – Mental Health)
- Encourage public transit providers to create more services that include Veterans Health Administration facilities.
- Encourage ride sharing companies to offer discounted fares to disabled veterans who are traveling to medical and employment appointments.

**86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session Update:** No action taken during the 86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session.

### **Unmet Veteran Need #3**

Local governments, communities, and service organizations that provide transportation services to veterans need access to funding and resources to ensure the sustainability of their programs.

#### **Recommendations:**

- Increase awareness of funding options, specifically with local government and community organizations that provide critical transportation services to veterans in order to make these services more sustainable.
- Provide grant writing assistance to organizations interested in applying for transportation grants.

**86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session Update:** No action taken during the 86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session.

### **Unmet Veteran Need #4**

The state should better assess the transportation barriers faced by veterans.

**Recommendation:** The Texas Veterans Commission (TVC), with support from TXDOT, should include the study of transportation needs of veterans within its larger statewide needs assessment. TXDOT will provide \$50,000 to enable TVC to conduct a statewide needs assessment to include public transportation for Veterans.

**86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session Update:** TVC and TXDOT are currently in the process of completing this needs assessment.

**Unmet Veteran Need #5**

The state should standardize public parking exemptions for Veterans

**Recommendation:** Standardized statewide guidelines

**86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session Update:** Parking exemptions still vary by locality and may not necessarily be able to be addressed at the state level.



# Woman Veterans Workgroup

## Unmet Veteran Need #1

Homeless and low-income veterans, especially those with children, would benefit from affordable housing.

### **Recommendations:**

- It is recommended that all public entities providing services to veterans be required to change the language used to identify said veterans from “Are you a veteran?” to “Did you serve in the armed forces?”
- It is recommended that general housing information be compiled in a format that is easily accessible to veterans and their families and this information be provided as a supplement to other veteran benefits and services information.
- It is recommended that the FVA housing grant criteria include a requirement that 11% (equal to the percent of women veterans in Texas) of funds go to support housing for women veterans (with and without children).

**86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session Update:** No action taken during the 86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session.

## Unmet Veteran Need #2

Veterans in Texas would benefit from affordable and accessible childcare.

### **Recommendations:**

- It is recommended that FVA grantees who declare childcare as a service, provide a document outlining the program and the criteria for eligibility.
- It is recommended that childcare information be compiled in a format that is easily accessible to veterans and their families and this information be provided as a supplement to other veteran benefits and services information.

**86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session Update:** No action taken during the 86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session.

### **Unmet Veteran Need #3**

Equitable access to federal and state veterans' benefits and services is needed for the 177,000 women veterans that live in Texas. Additionally, there is a need to educate and inform women veterans of their benefits and services and advocate on their behalf.

**Recommendation:** Recommend Legislative support for TVC to fund four additional staff to further the goal of connecting women veterans to federal, state, and local services within four different regions of the state. The TVC has requested additional funding and staff for the Women Veterans Program in their 2020-2021 Legislative Appropriation Request (LAR).

**86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session Update:** HB 1 granted TVC an additional three staff for the Women's Veterans Program

## **Pro Bono Legal Services Workgroup**

The Pro Bono Legal services Workgroup is a newly enacted workgroup mandated by Senate Bill 2047 86 (R).

## Communication and Outreach Workgroup

### Unmet Veteran Need #1

Texas Veterans and their families would benefit from a Customer Relationship Management Software (CRMS) to coordinate, track and evaluate state services and benefits received.

**Recommendation:** The report provided, is not simply to identify CRMS packages, but to find a practical and sustainable CRMS that is robust enough in performance, broad enough in functionality, and viable to support the needs of the Texas veteran community.

**86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session Update:** No action taken during the 86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session

### Unmet Veteran Need #2

Texas veterans would benefit from coordinated efforts to increase public awareness of veteran related services provided by the state.

**Recommendation:** State-funded call centers, websites, and technology should be studied so that operating procedures and best practices can be analyzed and standardized for veterans and their families

**86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session Update:** No action taken during the 86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session

# **Appendix B: TCCVS Agency Information and Services**

### **Department of Aging and Disability Services**

The Department of Aging and Disability Services, Aging and Disability Resource Centers (ADRCs) are a key point of access for person-centered long-term services and supports (LTSS) specialized information, referral, and assistance. ADRCs promote linkages to existing military and veteran services programs and benefits, as well as other local and state level LTSS.

Programs and services available vary by region and may include transportation, benefits and system navigation assistance, care coordination, benefits application assistance, and veteran-directed home and community-based services. The local ADRC may be contacted by calling 855-YES-ADRC (855-937-2372). For more information, visit: <http://www.dads.state.tx.us/>.

### **Department of Family and Protective Services**

The Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) works with communities to protect children, the elderly, and people with disabilities from abuse, neglect, and exploitation. It also works to protect the health and safety of children in daycare, foster care and other types of 24-hour care. We do this through investigations, services and referrals, regulation, and prevention programs. <http://www.dfps.state.tx.us>

### **Department of State Health Services**

DSHS is responsible for oversight and implementation of public health services in Texas. DSHS promotes optimal health for individuals and communities by preventing, detecting and responding to infectious diseases; promoting healthy lifestyles through by disease and injury prevention; reducing health risks and threats through consumer protection; developing evidence-based public health interventions through data analysis and science; and providing medical response during disasters and emergencies. <http://www.dshs.state.tx.us>

### **Health and Human Services Commission**

The Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) mission is to maintain and improve the health and human services system in Texas and to administer its programs in accordance with the highest standards of customer service and accountability for the effective use of funds. HHSC oversees the operations of the health and human services system, provides administrative oversight of Texas health and human services programs, and provides direct administration of some programs.

HHSC's Veterans Service Division initiative is responsible for reviewing programs and benefits available for Veterans and recommends ways to improve and better coordinate those services. The initiative will work with staff at all five health and human services agencies as well as other state agencies and community-based organizations that serve Veterans. [hhsc.state.tx.us](http://hhsc.state.tx.us)

The Health and Human Services Commission, **Aging and Disability Resource Centers (ADRCs)** are a key point of access for person-centered long-term services and supports (LTSS) specialized information, referral, and assistance. ADRCs promote linkages to existing military and veteran services programs and benefits, as well as other local and state level LTSS. Programs and services available vary by region and may include transportation, benefits and

system navigation assistance, care coordination, benefits application assistance, and veteran-directed home and community-based services. The local ADRC may be contacted by calling 855-YES-ADRC (855-937-2372). For more information, visit:

[hhs.texas.gov/services/health/clinics-health-organizations-and-resource-centers/aging-and-disability-resource-center](https://hhs.texas.gov/services/health/clinics-health-organizations-and-resource-centers/aging-and-disability-resource-center)

### **Office of Public Utility Counsel**

The Office of Public Utility Counsel (OPUC) was created in 1983 in response to legislative and consumer groups concerns that residential and small commercial utility consumers were not adequately represented in utility proceedings. OPUC is charged with representing residential and small commercial consumers, as a class, in proceedings affecting utility rates and services. OPUC represents consumers' interests before the Public Utility Commission (PUC), the Texas Reliability Entity, the Electric Reliability Council of Texas (ERCOT), and state and federal courts.

The agency also provides information to servicemembers, veterans and their families and provides presentations, upon request, to military groups and organizations representing servicemembers and their families. <http://www.opuc.texas.gov>

### **State Bar of Texas**

The State Bar of Texas administers the Texas Lawyers for Texas Veterans program to develop and assist pro bono legal clinics throughout the state for military Veterans who otherwise cannot afford or do not have access to the legal services they need. <http://www.texasbar.com>

### **Texas Commission on Jail Standards**

The Texas Commission on Jail Standards is the regulatory agency over Texas county jails. While the agency does not provide direct services to Veterans, the agency actively engages with sheriffs, county officials, and jail administrators about available resources for justice-involved Veterans.

Our activities include disseminating technical assistance memos to counties about Veterans' services found at the local, state, and federal level, writing articles on Veterans' resources in our agency newsletter, and inviting Veterans groups to speak during our agency presentations at training conferences.

As part of its regulatory requirements, the Commission mandates county jails utilize the Department of Veteran Affairs' Veteran Reentry Search Service (VRSS) to identify veterans. The VRSS provides real-time identification of veterans to county corrections officers. After justice-involved Veterans are identified, our goal is that counties can link Veterans to available services and resources. <http://www.tcjs.state.tx.us>

## **Texas Commission on Law Enforcement**

The Texas Commission on Law Enforcement has been committed for several years now to assist and expedite the ability of Veterans to re-enter the Texas workplace in the field of law enforcement. We have had in place since 2009 a process through which Veterans with military law enforcement experience can become Texas peace officers without having to participate in redundant training. <http://www.tcole.texas.gov/>

## **Texas Department of Criminal Justice**

The Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) manages offenders in state prisons, state jails and private correctional facilities that contract with TDCJ. TDCJ honors and supports Veterans by granting them employment preferences, and fully recognizes, honors, and enforces the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act, a law which protects the civilian job rights and benefits of United States military service personnel.

TDCJ has a history of successful recruiting at military bases and continues to actively recruit personnel who are about to be honorably discharged. Military Veterans and staff have a great number of skills and quality training, along with experience handling a variety of responsibilities. <http://www.tdcj.state.tx.us>

## **Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs**

The Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs (TDHCA) is the state agency responsible for promoting and preserving affordable home ownership, financing the development of affordable rental housing, ensuring long-term stability and habitability of housing for low-income households, [supporting community and](#) energy assistance programs, and providing housing activities in the colonies. TDHCA is also responsible for the regulation of the state's manufactured housing industry. <http://www.tdhca.state.tx.us>

## **Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation**

The Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation (TDLR) is committed to providing expedited services to Veterans and military spouses and is proud to be a member of the Texas Coordinating Council for Veterans Services. <http://www.tdlr.texas.gov>

- TDLR provides expedited licensing for military spouses and veterans transitioning to civilian occupations regulated by TDLR.
- Veterans are allowed to credit verified military experience, training, or education toward fulfilling licensing requirements. Currently, six TDLR programs have a corresponding MOS allowing for this credit.
- TDLR license application fees are waived for veterans if the applicant's military service, training, or education substantially meets all of the requirements of the license.



## **Texas Department of Motor Vehicles**

The Texas Department of Motor Vehicles (TxDMV) offers a number of license plates specifically for military Veterans and military medal honorees at no fee and/or reduced fee. There are three categories of military license plates: Meritorious Service, Recognition Award, and Military Service.

Meritorious Service category license plates are issued at no fee (plate or registration) for the first set. Recognition Award category license plates require the payment of a \$3 plate fee; however, there is no requirement for the payment of annual registration fees. Military Service category license plates require the payment of the annual registration fee; however, there no plate fee. This applies to first and additional sets. <http://www.txdmv.gov>

## **Texas Department of Public Safety**

The Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) proactively protects the citizens of Texas in an ever- changing threat environment while always remaining faithful to the U.S. and State Constitution.

DPS offers a designation of “VETERAN” on driver’s licenses issued to Texas Veterans so they can easily prove their eligibility when applying for various benefits in addition to free and discounted licenses. <http://www.txdps.state.tx.us>

## **Texas Department of Transportation**

The Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) is organized by administration, districts, divisions and offices. Four regional support centers provide operational and project delivery support for the agency’s 24 geographical districts. TxDOT’s workforce is made up of engineers, administrators, financial experts, designers, architects, sign makers, accountants, purchasers, maintenance workers, travel counselors and many other professions. All of our employees work together to realize the TxDOT mission: providing safe and reliable transportation solutions for Texas.

TxDOT provides funding and assistance for transportation services and programs that can be used to serve and support Veterans. <http://www.txdot.gov>

## **Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board**

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board provides leadership and coordination for the Texas higher education system. Since being created by the Texas Legislature in 1965, the Board has worked to achieve excellence for the college education of Texas students. The Board meets four times a year.

Meetings occur in Austin but are usually also broadcast on the Web. <http://www.theccb.state.tx.us/>

## **Texas Military Department**

The Texas Military Department (TMD) is the executive portion of the Texas Military and consists of all staff directorates and component headquarters exercising control of military forces, facilities, installations, activities and functions under the supervision of The Adjutant General. The Adjutant General is the governing officer, policy maker, head of the department and Commander of the Texas Military Forces.

TMD is the state agency charged with administrative activities in support of the Texas Military Forces. The Texas Military Forces consist of the Texas Army National Guard, Texas Air National Guard, the Texas State Guard, the Domestic Operations Task Force, and any other military force organized under state law.

Through the Family Support Services Office, the TMD has a number of programs and partnerships with services available to Texas Service Members, Veterans, and families such as: Family Assistance, Transition Assistance, Mental Health & Counseling Services, Employment and Financial Assistance, Retirement Services, and TRICARE Services. [tmd.texas.gov/](http://tmd.texas.gov/)

## **Texas Workforce Commission**

TWC oversees a service delivery system comprising 28 Local Workforce Development Boards (Boards) that administer services in more than 186 Texas Workforce Solutions Offices across the state. TWC provides employment assistance and education and training to individuals who are seeking employment. TWC collaborates with community and technical colleges and trains providers across the state to train veterans and other eligible individuals in target and in-demand occupations. Although services are available to the public, TWC has specific statutory direction to provide priority of service to veterans. This priority of service requirement is established in both federal and state law. TWC has a long tradition of supporting Texas Veterans because we believe Veterans are equipped with the technical skills, education, professionalism, and leadership experience sought by Texas employers.

The Texas Workforce Commission's Vocational Rehabilitation Division is engaged in a memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs- Veterans Rehabilitation and Employment (VA-VRE) to expand employment and rehabilitation services to Veterans with disabilities statewide and beyond the reach of VA-VRE. TWC – VR counselors work directly with the veterans to address potential barriers that prevent successful employment due to their disability in each of our 6 regions. In collaboration with our local business services units, TWC's VR cultivates business partnerships with major employers to create employment opportunities for Veterans with disabilities.

TWC Veteran programs Include:

2. Texas Veterans Leadership Program
3. College Credit for Heroes
4. Hiring Red, White, and You Statewide Veteran Job Fair
5. Veterans Workforce Outreach Initiative
6. Apprenticeship Programs

7. Texas Operation Welcome Home
8. Skills for Transition Program
9. We Hire Vets
10. Military Family Support Program
11. Texas Veterans Network
12. Work Opportunity Tax Credits

### **Texas Workforce Investment Council**

The Texas Workforce Investment Council assists the Governor and the legislature with strategic planning for and evaluation of the Texas workforce system, which is comprised of eight state agencies, their local program providers, and over 20 diverse and dynamic programs. The Council assists with the coordination of determining employer workforce needs and satisfaction with programs and services.

The Council's partner agencies, including TVC, gather data from employer customers at appropriate intervals to determine employer needs and satisfaction.

TVC's efforts to determine and respond to employer needs, thereby enhancing employment opportunities for Veterans, was initiated under the previous system strategic plan and continues under the recently approved Texas Workforce System Strategic Plan FY 2016–FY 2023. TVC's work to gather information and data by surveying employer continues, and results demonstrate a high response rate and a very high satisfaction level among employers who used the agency's employment services. <http://governor.state.tx.us/twic>

### **Texas Veterans Land Board**

Since 1946, the Texas Veterans Land Board (VLB) has provided benefits and services for Texas Veterans, military members and their families. Today, they include: low interest land, home, and home improvement loans; long term skilled nursing home care in eight state Veterans homes; burial and interment services in four state Veterans cemeteries; Voices of Veterans Oral History Program; and Veterans benefit information and assistance services through the joint VLB/ TVC, and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Statewide Veterans Call Service Center.

[www.glo.texas.gov/vlb](http://www.glo.texas.gov/vlb)

### **Texas Veterans Commission**

The Texas Veterans Commission (TVC) provides claims representation and counseling for Veterans, their dependents and survivors, employment services to Texas Veterans and helps employers find qualified Veteran job applicants, assists Veterans in utilizing their higher education benefits, and offers grants to eligible charitable organizations, local government agencies, and Veterans Service Organizations that provide direct services to Texas Veterans and their families. [www.tvc.texas.gov](http://www.tvc.texas.gov)

### **Texas Veterans Mobile App**

The Texas Veterans Mobile App gives Texas Veterans quick access to the Veterans Crisis Line, the Hotline for Women Veterans, the Military Veteran Peer Network, and the Texas Veterans Portal.

The app, which can be downloaded from both Google Play and the App Store, works on most iPhones and Android mobile phones.

### **Texas Online: Texas Veterans Portal**

The Texas Veterans Portal provides information from federal and state agencies in a comprehensive collection of links about Veteran's benefit information. The website contains information to assist you and your family in buying a home or land, receiving education benefits, finding a job, health care resources and more. [veterans.portal.texas.gov](http://veterans.portal.texas.gov)

### **Veteran Treatment Court Programs in Texas**

<b>County</b>	<b>Judicial Circuit</b>	<b>State, City Zip</b>
Bell	County Court at Law #3	Belton, Texas 76513
Bexar	437 <sup>th</sup> District Court	San Antonio, Texas 78205
Bexar	County Court #6	San Antonio, Texas 78205
Brazoria	149 <sup>th</sup> District Court	Angleton, TX 77515
Cameron	444 <sup>th</sup> District Court of Cameron County	Brownsville, Texas 78521
Collin	296 <sup>th</sup> District Court	McKinney, Texas 75071
Comal	County Court at Law #2	New Braunfels, Texas 78130
Dallas	Criminal District Court #4(K)	Dallas, Texas 75207
Denton	Denton County Criminal Court #3	Denton, Texas 76209
El Paso	County Court at Law #1	El Paso, Texas 79901
El Paso	346 <sup>th</sup> Judicial District	El Paso, Texas 79901
Fannin	296 <sup>th</sup> District Court	Bonham, Texas 75418
Ft. Bend	County Court at Law #2	Richmond, Texas 77469
Galveston	Galveston County	Galveston, Texas 77550

Grayson	296th District Court	Sherman, Texas 75090
Guadalupe	County Court at Law	Seguin, Texas 78155
Harris	228th District Court	Houston, Texas 77002
Harris	County Criminal Court at Law No. 2	Houston, Texas 77002
Hays	County Court at Law #2	San Marcos, Texas 78666
Hidalgo	430th District Court	Edinburg, Texas 78539
Jefferson	58 <sup>th</sup> District Court	Beaumont, Texas 77701
Kaufman	296th District Court	Kaufman, Texas 75142
Midland	County Court #2	Midland, TX 79701
Montgomery	359th District Court	Conroe, Texas 77301
Nueces	148th District Court	Corpus Christi, Texas 78401
Rockwall	296th District Court	Rockwall, Texas 75087
Smith	County Court at Law #2	Tyler, Texas 75702
Starr	229th and 381 <sup>st</sup> District Court	Rio Grande City, Texas 78582
<b>County</b>	<b>Judicial Circuit</b>	<b>State, City Zip</b>
Tarrant	Tarrant County Criminal Court #9	Fort Worth, Texas 76196
Travis	County Court at Law #4	Austin, Texas 78701
Webb	406 <sup>th</sup> and 341 <sup>st</sup> District Court	Laredo, Texas 78040
Williamson	County Court at Law #2	Georgetown, Texas 78626
Zapata	49 <sup>th</sup> District Court	Zapata, TX 78076
Starr Webb Zapata	South Texas Regional Veterans Court	Varying Locations
Fannin Collin Grayson Rockwall Kaufman	North Texas Regional Veterans Court	Varying Locations





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