



WOUNDED WARRIOR PROJECT

Statement for the Record

U.S. House of Representatives House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Health

Oversight Hearing: “SSG Fox Suicide Prevention Grants: Saving Veterans’ Lives Through Community Connection”

December 12, 2023

Chairwoman Miller-Meeks, Ranking Member Brownley, and distinguished members of the Committee on Veterans’ Affairs Subcommittee on Health – thank you for inviting Wounded Warrior Project (WWP) to submit this written statement for the record of today’s hearing on the Staff Sergeant Parker Gordon Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program (SSG Fox SPGP). We share your commitment to easing the pain of veterans who are suffering from invisible wounds and appreciate the opportunity to offer our perspective on potential congressional action to improve how the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) serves veterans through innovative mental health programming like the SSG Fox SPGP.

For 20 years WWP has been committed to our mission to honor and empower wounded warriors. In addition to our advocacy before Congress, we offer more than a dozen direct service programs focused on connection, independence, and wellness in every spectrum of a warrior’s life. These programs span mental, physical, and financial domains to create a 360-degree model of care and support. This comprehensive approach empowers warriors to create a life worth living and helps them build resilience, coping skills, and peer connection. Our reach extends to more than 200,000 veterans who are being served in various ways across the United States.

In this context, assisting warriors with their mental health challenges has consistently been our largest programming investment over the past several years. In Fiscal Year 2022, WWP spent more than \$82 million in mental and brain health programs – an investment consistent with the fact that more than 7 in 10 respondents to our 2022 Annual Warrior Survey self-reported at least one mental health condition, and nearly the same amount (66.3%) reported visiting a professional in the past 12 months to help with issues such as stress, emotional, alcohol, drug, or family problems.¹ Four WWP programs – Warrior Care Network, WWP Talk, Project Odyssey, and Complex Case Coordination – focus specifically on mental health;

¹ WWP’s 2022 Annual Warrior Survey can be viewed at <https://www.woundedwarriorproject.org/mission/annual-warrior-survey>.



however, programs that focus on physical health, financial wellness, and social connection all play a critical role in improving quality of life and mitigating against mental health stressors like loneliness, financial insecurity, and chronic pain.

Wounded Warrior Project has proudly delivered these life-changing programs while also appreciating that a single organization cannot meet the needs of post-9/11 veterans and their families alone. Collaboration is at the core of all we do and serves as a critical driver of the innovation, efficiency, and excellence we strive to reach. Since 2012, WWP has supported 212 military and veteran-connected organizations through grants. These targeted investments help to expand our reach, diversify engagement opportunities, augment our programs and services, and ultimately improve outcomes for all veterans and their families. In FY 2021 alone, WWP grants to partner organizations extended our impact to more than 36,000 veterans, caregivers, family members, and military-connected children. These partnerships touched nearly every aspect of veteran well-being, targeting issues like social connection, support for the Special Operations community, brain health, family resiliency, emergency financial assistance, transitional housing, and many more.

This background in partnership and program delivery was critical to our advocacy in support of the historic *Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act* and its centerpiece now known as the Staff Sergeant Parker Gordon Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program (P.L. 116-171 § 201) (SSG Fox SPGP). The SSG Fox SPGP is a three-year pilot program that will provide up to \$174 million to community-based organizations and state, local, and tribal governments that provide suicide prevention services for veterans and their families. Suicide prevention services have been broadly defined to permit healthy interventions before veterans reach mental health crises and allow for spending on activities like outreach, case management services, peer support, and assistance in obtaining VA benefits. After two funding cycles, VA has awarded \$52.5 million in both 2023 and 2022 to 80 community-based organizations, with only three organizations changing from year to year.^{2,3}

While VA's metrics and impact for this program are in the earliest stages of review, our perspective on the SSG Fox SPGP implementation to date is largely anecdotal and based on our organizational experience. We agree that no one organization – and no single agency – can fully meet all veterans' needs. We recognize that empirically supported mental health treatment works when it is available and when it is pursued, but the best results will be found by embracing a public health approach focused on increasing resilience and psychological well-being and building an aggressive prevention strategy. WWP is not a SSG Fox SPGP grantee, but we support and encourage others to participate. In this context, we offer two important considerations for the Subcommittee.

First, organizations that WWP has worked with have expressed concern that the SSG Fox SPGP application and compliance requirements can be onerous. Although expectations were

² Fiscal Year 2022 SSG Fox SPGP Awards List, available at <https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/SSG-Fox-SPSG-FY-2022-Grant-Awards-List-508.pdf>.

³ Fiscal Year 2023 SSG Fox SPGP Awards List, available at <https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/ssgfox-grants/docs/FY23-SSG-Fox-SPGP-Awardee-List.pdf>.

clearly laid out by VA⁴, some participants have shared with WWP that aligning a veteran's eligibility with delivery of specific services can be challenging. A veteran must meet definitions set out in Section 201(q)(4) of the *Hannon Act*, which includes consideration of a myriad of health, environmental, and historical risk factors for suicide. While acknowledging these predispositions are important in early and direct conversations about suicide, approaching such considerations without a foundation of trust can sometimes discourage veterans from being honest with their responses or willing to accept and engage in services. Allowing some time to foster a relationship enables engagement in difficult conversations that stem from place of care and compassion, rather than obligation. Navigating discussions in such a way can foster more immediate connection to services that mitigate their risk for suicide and reduce emergent needs while also making the delivery of those services ineligible for grant purposes. Others have noted that the high volume of veteran assessments required can induce incentives (like providing small gifts) for completion that may skew the quality of data gathered and what practices are sound under the premises of the grant. We encourage more investigation into how administrative practices can better align with the intended purpose of connecting more veterans with support.

Second, the provision of clinical care under this grant program – generally not permitted beyond emergency treatment – should be more grounded in practical considerations for delivering veterans evidence-based mental health care. Currently, when grantees are treating eligible individuals at risk of suicide or other mental or behavioral health conditions, the grantee must refer that individual to VA for follow-on care. If they do not, any care given is at the expense of the grantee.⁵ However, some veterans are not comfortable receiving care at VA for a variety of reasons. This puts the grantee in a difficult situation where they are forced to stop providing care or provide care at their own expense, something many programs may be unable to afford. Additionally, if a grantee is a part of VA's Community Care Network, they are still required to get additional VA authorization to provide a veteran follow-up care. We would ask the Subcommittee to consider if there are ways this process can be improved so that more veterans at risk of suicide can be connected to care they know and trust as soon as possible.

As the Subcommittee continues its oversight of the SSG Fox SPGP, WWP remains supportive of this critical new asset to assist veterans and their families lead healthy and fulfilling lives. We appreciate the support that Congress has provided both in authorizing this program and continuing appropriations, and we are grateful for this opportunity to provide our perspective on how this program can be improved over the duration of the pilot period and beyond. WWP stands by as your partner in meeting the needs of all who served – and all who support them. We are thankful for the invitation to submit this statement for record and stand ready to assist when needed on these issues and any others that may arise.

⁴ Funding Opportunity: Staff Sergeant Parker Gordon Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program, 87 Fed. Reg. 22630 (Apr. 15, 2022).

⁵ *Id.*