



Depression and Bipolar  
Support Alliance

June 28, 2016

The Honorable Johnny Isakson  
Chair  
Senate Veterans Affairs Committee  
United States Senate  
412 Russell Senate Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Richard Blumenthal  
Ranking Member  
Senate Veterans Affairs Committee  
United States Senate  
825A Hart Senate Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Isakson and Ranking Member Blumenthal,

On behalf of the Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance (DBSA), it is with great honor that I submit comment for the United States Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs Hearing: Pending Legislation, held on June 29, 2016. Two pieces of legislation are of particular importance to improving the lives and mental health of our nation's Veterans: S. 2210 (Blumenthal) Veteran Partners' Efforts to Enhance Re-integration (PEER) Act and S. 2279 (Merkley/Brown/Murray/Rounds/Tester/Tillis) Veterans Health Care Staffing Improvement Act.

Studies have shown that 18.5% of all OEF/OIF veterans have post-traumatic stress disorder, Major Depression, or both PTSD and Major Depression.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, some studies indicate that up to 60% of mental health conditions are treated in the primary care setting.<sup>2</sup> These facts make it all the more important that Veterans' Affairs (VA) hospitals and facilities are staffed appropriately to support Veterans in receiving behavioral health care.

S. 2210 addresses a critically important gap within the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) that inhibits access to behavioral health services by locating peer specialists in the primary care setting. Peer specialists, individuals in recovery from mental health and/or substance use disorders who have been trained and certified to work as an integral part of behavioral health care treatment teams, help their fellow veterans gain hope and move forward in their own recovery by providing peer support services. They act as trusted and motivating role models, assisting veterans in navigating often confusing health care systems, getting the most out of treatment, developing recovery plans, building skills in daily living, identifying community resources and obtaining needed services.

The VA has successfully been using peer specialists in the mental health service areas for more than 10 years. Yet, a majority of veterans in need of behavioral health care enter the VA system through a primary care center. To help create the necessary connection from primary care to behavioral health services, the PEER Act will utilize behavioral health peer support specialists to assist veterans in various primary care settings.

Specifically, the bill will require the VA to establish a pilot program to assess the feasibility and advisability of establishing peer support specialists in Patient Aligned Care Teams within VA medical centers to promote the use and integration of mental health services into the primary care setting. DBSA strongly supports the requirement that VA medical centers give special consideration to the needs of female veterans when designing the pilot programs and ensure that female peer support specialists are available in each of the pilot locations. We also welcome the collection and reporting of data that will be provided to Congress every six months detailing results from the pilot. The VA is the largest employer of peer specialists in the nation. As such, this data will help improve the role of the peer specialists within the VA and throughout America's entire health care system.



Depression and Bipolar  
Support Alliance

S. 2279 the Veterans Health Care Staffing Improvement Act has the potential to support the initiative outlined in S 2210 with inclusion of trained and certified peer specialists as designated health care professionals. This bill allows the Secretary of Veterans Affairs at his/her discretion to identify health care professionals to be included in a program to increase efficiency in the recruitment and hiring by the VA of service personnel undergoing separation from the Armed Forces. This bill, which creates uniform credentialing standards for health care professionals, would make it easier for peer specialists to transition to the VA without requiring them to be retrained and certified.

As the leading peer-led organization supporting individuals with mood disorders and their families, DBSA understands the importance of peer support for individuals living with behavioral health conditions. We feel strongly that expanded use of peer specialists within the VA will increase veteran engagement in their care, and lead to better outcomes and sustained wellness.

Sincerely,

Allen Doederlein  
President  
Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance

<sup>1</sup> The National Council For Behavioral Health, Veterans Behavioral Health Needs Report, 2013

<sup>2</sup> Rick Hafer, Ph.D. clinical professor of psychiatry and vice-chairman of clinical services in the department of psychiatry at the University of Wisconsin, School of Medicine and Public Health