

Written Testimony of
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Oversight and Legislative Hearing

***“Bridging the Gap: Enhancing Outreach to
Support Veterans Mental Health”***

Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and esteemed members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee. Today, you are considering four important pieces of legislation. My remarks will focus primarily on the HOPE Act and the BRAVE Act since the other proposed bills are interconnected and rely on the continued authorization of the SSG Parker Gordon Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program (SSG Fox Grant).

At America's Warrior Partnership (AWP), we approach suicide prevention not as a standalone effort but as the outcome of enhancing veterans' quality of life and restoring their sense of hope. Our model is grounded in relationship-building and trust, essential elements in connecting veterans to the right support at the right time.

Since the inception of the Fox Grant in October 2022, of the 545 veterans who screened positive for suicidal risk within 30 days of engaging with AWP, 94% were initially seeking help for non-mental health-related challenges. These included economic distress, difficulty navigating VA systems, and the breakdown of personal relationships. While behavioral health remains a crucial component, it is not the sole factor in preventing suicide.

The SSG Fox Grant has been instrumental to AWP's success. It allows us to connect meaningfully with veterans and their families, often before a crisis occurs, and to work collaboratively with local partners to build individualized, community-based solutions. AWP's strength as a grant recipient stems from this broad, holistic, relationship-based approach to outreach, not one focused narrowly on clinical mental health services. We aim to maintain a trusted relationship with individual veterans and their families on their journey to an improved quality of life. In the last year, we have continued this relationship with the majority of veterans who screened positive to ensure they do not take their own life.

Both the HOPE and the BRAVE Act, as well as the bill proposed by Senators Boozman and Warner to reauthorize the SSG Fox Grant, are a terrific start. AWP is grateful for your efforts to continue the success of the SSG Fox Grant. To optimize the SSG Fox Grant program, we offer a few observations and suggestions:

Program Overview

As one of 91 SSG Fox Grant recipients, we have done significant outreach with the program since its inception.

This grant year alone, AWP produced results:

- 1,325 warriors screened for suicidal ideation using the Columbia-Suicide Severity Rating Scale
- 10.8% disclosed some level (low, moderate, high) of suicide risk (144)

In the less than three years since the inception of the grant, AWP has produced results:

- 2,137 warriors screened for suicidal ideation using the Columbia-Suicide Severity Rating Scale
- 25% disclosed some level (low, moderate, high) of suicide risk (545)

The SSG Fox Grant Program is working. Veterans outside the VA and VSO system who need assistance are being identified. Relationships are being built, and connections with resources are being made. As noted earlier, since the Fox Grant Inception, 545 veterans entrusted AWP with their thoughts of suicide. Only 6% of those warriors were seeking assistance for a mental health-related issue based upon the initial screening. This is a success story, and asking “the question” works. AWP, the VA, and Congress have all played an integral part in saving these veterans, but more can be done.

Coordination:

AWP appreciates the inclusive language that directs briefings for VA employees about the SSG Fox Grant program. Organizations in the community and the VA must coordinate. We hope grant recipients will be invited to these briefings and work together to improve communication and “warm hand-offs” of individual cases as they arise. Many VA staff members were not aware of the SSG Fox Grant or why grantees were calling asking for assistance with a “Fox Participant.” Ensuring a solid working relationship with local Suicide Prevention Coordinators

and VA staff is essential, as there is more education for frontline staff on the SSG Fox Grant.

Screening Questionnaires:

The inclusive language in the HOPE Act reduces the redundancy and bureaucracy of screening processes. As AWP stated in previous testimony, veterans rarely complete all the questionnaires, and the Columbia Protocol (C-SSRS) has proven to be the most inclusive and comprehensive set of questions necessary to ensure that those at risk are identified quickly and easily.

Legislation mandates C-SSRS as the only required screening protocol, however, AWP recommends including language to make the six follow-up assessments optional. The emphasis should be on ensuring veterans have access to resources rather than answering redundant questions.

Crisis Intervention:

The section on “Emergent Suicide Care” is a substantial addition to the HOPE Act. In many instances, AWP has used the 988-emergency crisis line to help veterans identified through Fox Grant outreach. This language helps codify support and resources available to those unable to obtain services in the crucial 72-hour window after first contact.

Clearly Defined Pathway for Eligible Individuals:

The addition of the Emergent Care section in the HOPE Act is invaluable. To further its impact, AWP recommends adding a section that lays out the expectations for the program itself and identifies boundaries for the VA and organizations. While AWP does all it can to provide connections to referrals and resources, it is not a direct service provider. This is clearly outlined in the scope of the grant proposal. However, the line has become muddled, and expectations are often unclear.

Adding a section that requires a specific program “on-ramp” for veterans identified by grant recipients who need VA care would amend this issue by making the process less complex or burdensome. Since grant recipients have already asked the required questions and processed the information, passing along the information to the VA without burdening the veterans themselves again with tiring, frustrating, redundant questions (which sometimes involve discussing traumatic experiences) would dramatically increase the success rate of the program as well as assist the veteran more efficiently.

This can be done in several ways. For example, requiring that after grantees go through the required screening procedures, eligible veterans must be connected with the 988-crisis line or their local VAMC for expedited care when necessary. Congress could also mandate that the VA create a dedicated phone line for intakes from grantees that would offer expedited care.

Accountability:

The SSG Parker Gordon Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program has been effective. For its continued success, we must ensure all organizations receiving grants are held accountable. The \$750,000-plus of grant funds come from the trust Congress and the American taxpayers have in our organization, and AWP holds that trust in the highest regard by conducting regular audits and reviews. Work hard to ensure these funds are maximized efficiently to find veterans in the community and serve them.

At AWP, we hope all other grantees hold themselves accountable with the same high standards. To ensure this, Congress and the VA must be responsible for holding organizations accountable through verifiable metrics. This grant's limited Title 38 (Veteran) funds must be used solely for Title 38 beneficiaries. Other departments can develop a mirror program for their beneficiaries. AWP recommends adding a section requiring the VA to develop accountability metrics that report outreach, referrals, status, etc., and then require regular reports to Congress. It is the only way to identify organizations not fulfilling their responsibility under the program.

Accountability and metrics are vital to the success of this program. Previously, AWP reported concerns surrounding the Data Collection Tool and its implementation, which required participants' social security numbers and date of birth. The VA has been able to modify the tool to honor the spirit of anonymity promised by grantees requesting data from our veterans. The current version of the Data Collection Tool allows grantees to enter data more efficiently and accurately when veterans are willing to participate. These changes have also increased VA's program oversight and ability to track grantees' progress.

Measuring Success:

If the Secretary is going to establish performance metrics for the SSG Fox Grant, the success goals need to be agreed upon because success is defined differently depending on whether you're in Congress, the VA, or an SSG Fox Grant grantee.

America's Warrior Partnership views SSG Fox Grant's success as outreach with veterans in the community at large, with a focus on upstream prevention for veterans at risk for suicide and those not currently utilizing VA services to provide holistic support that improves their quality of life and hopefulness.

We believe broad outreach leads to intake, intake leads to screening, screenings lead to assessment, assessment leads to service, service leads to improved quality of life. We believe success starts with outreach.

However, in response to our testimony before the House VA Committee on October 31, 2024, regarding the SSG Fox Grant, the VA Suicide Prevention Office wrote a rebuttal letter to America's Warrior Partnership and stated, ***“Outreach was never intended as a singular focus. It is one of many allowable services per the Hannon Act. The only service required by all grantees is baseline mental health screening. Beyond that, grantees develop their program concept for delivering services in their local communities based on that community's assessed need.”***

We feel Congress needs more legislative clarity on expected outcomes for the SSG Fox Grant.

Every State Counts Act:

We support ensuring that the SSG Fox Grant is awarded to programs in states currently without a grant program. While this is resolved, America's Warrior Partnership's Network, a central call center where any veteran or community can request assistance and advocacy, stands ready to assist communities without the resources to serve at-risk veterans.

Transportation:

We strongly support the initiative under the HOPE Act that would allow SSG Fox Grantees the ability to fund transportation and ride-share services to use for appointments. America's Warrior Partnership's Annual Community Integration Survey has found the lack of reliable transportation one of the greatest needs among the most hopeless of veterans. When a veteran is hopeless to the point of ending their life, being unable to obtain transportation to receive life-saving services is compounding the problem.

Grantee Funding:

The only limitation to AWP's success with the program is funding. If the ceiling on the grants were doubled overnight, so would AWP's outreach efforts.

Accordingly, while the proposed limit on SSG Fox Grants is \$1.5M with performance achievements, organizations, like AWP, have successfully utilized the grant and could do more with more. While not for all organizations, raising the ceiling could be beneficial if done correctly. Again, it would require metrics and reporting, which should be measured by metrics beyond the number of hours spent serving veterans. We would recommend considering the number of clients and a pre- and post-quality of life or hope measurement to demonstrate, combined with the absence of suicidal ideation.

Members of the committee, thank you again for the opportunity to testify today. We look forward to our continued work together and thank each of you for all your hard work and dedication to those who served in our nation's armed forces.
