

# DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS



## **Congressionally Mandated Report: Assessment of the Capacity of Peer Specialists of the Department of Veterans Affairs Who are Women**

**March 2022**

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## **I. Introduction**

Section 5206(b) of the Deborah Sampson Act of 2020 (the "Act"), which is Title V of the Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020 (P.L. 116-315) that was enacted into law on January 5, 2021, requires the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to submit a report to Congress detailing the findings of a capacity assessment that addresses four specific factors related to VA's capacity and use of women peer specialists. The four factors are: (1) the geographical distribution of VA women peer specialists; (2) the distribution of women Veterans; (3) the number and proportion of women peer specialists who specialize in peer counseling on mental health or suicide prevention; and (4) the number and proportion of women peer specialists who specialize in peer counseling on non-mental health related matters. This report is due not later than 1 year after VA began this capacity assessment (i.e., by April 5, 2022).

## **II. Background**

### **Brief Description: Capacity Assessment**

The above-mentioned capacity assessment was conducted by the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention (OMHSP). This is the only office with VA that hires peer specialists. Within VHA, OMHSP has oversight of the peer specialist profession. The assessment focused on women Veterans' geographical distribution in relation to women Veterans' use of VA mental health services in each Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) during fiscal year (FY) 2019 and FY 2020. Both fiscal years were included to capture the impact of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic on women Veterans' access to, and use of, VA mental health services. As to methodology, OMHSP pulled coded encounter data of women Veterans' appointments with peer specialists from VHA administrative databases. That data, along with staffing reports provided by VHA's Office of Workforce Management and Consulting, provided the required information about the number of women peer specialists and their geographical distribution by VISN. Coded encounter data also provided the required information about the geographical distribution of women Veterans who use VA mental health services.

### **Qualifications and Role of Peer Specialists within VHA**

Consistent with VA's Congressional authority for appointing peer specialists to VHA, VA can hire only peer specialists who are (1) Veterans, (2) have recovered or are recovering from a mental health condition and (3) have completed training, certification and/or met state-level requirements per public law and national VHA policy. See 38 U.S.C. § 7402(b)(13); VA Handbook 5005, Part II, Chapter 2 – Title 5 Appointments, Section D and Part II, Appendix F3 – Qualification Standards.

Peer specialists are trained to effectively use their personal lived experience with recovery to inspire hope and serve as relatable role models of recovery for other Veterans. They assist Veterans with identifying their personal strengths, needed resources and desirable skills that support their personal goals. Peer specialists use a host of recovery tools to help Veterans enhance healthy coping strategies and improve

self-management skills over their mental health conditions. VHA peer specialists are not clinical staff and do not provide clinical counseling or psychotherapy to Veterans. Correspondingly, VHA does not refer to peer specialist work as “peer counseling.” Nonetheless, peer specialist work offers significant therapeutic value as they support Veterans to empower themselves to address self-care, advocate for themselves, access available resources within and outside VA, reconnect with others and find a sense of belonging in their communities.

### **Peer Specialist Placement within VHA**

Peer specialist program assignments are determined by the local VA health care system that hires them. They are assigned to work in a variety of different health care settings, including outpatient, residential and inpatient mental health programs, homelessness programs, primary care Patient-Aligned Care Teams and the Veterans Crisis Line Peer Support Outreach Center. Within most of these programs, peer specialists provide both individual and group-based peer support services. Regardless of their program location, all VHA peer specialists specialize in mental health.

## **III. Discussion**

### **Detailed Findings of the Capacity Assessment**

First, the geographical distribution of VA peer specialists who are women was assessed. Appendix 1 below, Table 1 lists all of the VA health care systems and their locations within each VISN. As discussed above, these data include the number of women peer specialists who worked in each VISN's VA health care systems in both FY 2019 and FY 2020.

In FY 2019, the 214 women peer specialists working in VHA were 19% percent of the total workforce of 1,127 peer specialists. In FY 2020, 234 VHA women peer specialists comprised 19.8% of the total workforce of 1,172 peer specialists. While women peer specialists worked in all 18 VISNs in both FY 2019 and FY 2020, the total number of women peer specialists in each VISN varied. As seen in Table 1, in both FY 2019 and FY 2020, VISNs 7, 16 and 22 employed the highest total number of women peer specialists, and VISNs 15, 20 and 23 employed the lowest total number of women peer specialists.

Within each VISN, most VA health care systems employed five or fewer women peer specialists in both FY 2019 and FY 2020, with most VA health care systems employing one to two women peer specialists. There were 27 VA health care systems across 14 VISNs, listed below, that did not employ any women peer specialists in FY 2019 or in FY 2020.

- VISN 1: Togus, Maine
- VISN 2: Hudson Valley, New York
- VISN 4: Wilmington, Delaware; Butler, Pennsylvania; Erie, PA
- VISN 5: Beckley, West Virginia; Clarksburg, West Virginia; Huntington, West Virginia
- VISN 6: Salem, Virginia

- VISN 8: San Juan, Puerto Rico
- VISN 12: Danville, Illinois
- VISN 15: Kansas City, Missouri; Eastern Kansas; Marion, Illinois; Poplar Bluff, Missouri
- VISN 16: Alexandria, Louisiana
- VISN 17: Big Spring, Texas; El Paso, Texas
- VISN 19: Salt Lake City, Utah
- VISN 20: Anchorage, Alaska; Boise, Idaho; Portland, Oregon; Walla Walla, Washington
- VISN 21: Palo Alto, California
- VISN 23: Sioux Falls, South Dakota; Black Hills, South Dakota; St. Cloud, Minnesota

In summary, in FY 2019 and FY 2020, less than 20% of the total VHA peer specialist workforce were women peer specialists. Within each of the 18 VHA VISNs, most VA health care systems employed one to two women peer specialists.

Second, the geographical distribution of women Veterans was assessed. As noted above, peer specialists mainly work within mental health care settings; the assessment thus focused on women Veterans' geographical distribution in relation to their use of VA mental health services in each VISN in both FY 2019 and FY 2020.

In Appendix 1 below, Table 2 provides the information about the geographical distribution of women Veterans who received mental health services in each VISN in FY 2019 and FY 2020. This table also includes the total number of peer support service visits that women Veterans in each VISN received from women peer specialists or peer specialists who are men. For simplicity, the reported total number of women Veteran visits with peer specialists and/or other mental health professionals in each VISN includes the total number of the Veterans' in-person visits as well as their telehealth visits with these mental health professionals.

In Table 2, the total number of unique women Veterans who received mental health services in each VISN is reported under the "Total # of Women Veterans Receiving MH Visits" column. The following four VISNs provided mental health services to the highest number of unique women Veterans in FY 2019 and FY 2020, with each VISN serving over 20,000 unique women Veterans:

- VISN 6: 21,853 women Veterans in FY 2019 and 20,696 in FY 2020.
- VISN 7: 26,917 women Veterans in FY 2019 and 25,109 in FY 2020.
- VISN 8: 22,467 women Veterans in FY 2019 and 21,882 in FY 2020.
- VISN 17: 21,914 women Veterans in FY 2019 and 21,178 in FY 2020.

By contrast, the following VISNs all provided mental health services to the fewest number of unique women Veterans in FY 2019 and FY 2020, with each VISN serving fewer than 10,000 women Veterans:

- VISN 1: 7,294 women Veterans in FY 2019 and 6,775 in FY 2020.
- VISN 2: 8,918 women Veterans in FY 2019 and 8,182 in FY 2020.
- VISN 4: 8,714 women Veterans in FY 2019 and 8,031 in FY 2020.
- VISN 5: 9,414 women Veterans in FY 2019 and 8,809 in FY 2020.
- VISN 23: 7,746 women Veterans in FY 2019 and 7,109 in FY 2020.

In Table 2, the “Total # Peer Support Visits Provided by Women PS to Women Veterans” column includes the total number of all individual and group-based peer support service visits that were delivered in-person or via telehealth by women peer specialists to women Veterans within the VISN. Similarly, the “Total # Peer Support Visits Provided by Men PS to Women Veterans” column includes the total number of all individual and group-based peer support service visits that were delivered to women Veterans in-person or via telehealth in the VISN by peer specialists who were men. VISNs 6, 7, 8 and 17 served the highest number of unique women Veterans in FY 2019 and FY 2020. These four VISNs also provided the highest total number of peer support service visits to women Veterans (regardless of the peer specialist’s gender). See below:

- VISN 6: 8,249 total peer support service visits for women Veterans in FY 2019 and 7,995 total peer support visits in FY 2020.
- VISN 7: 12,639 total peer support service visits for women Veterans in FY 2019 and 9,717 total peer support visits in FY 2020.
- VISN 8: 11,209 total peer support service visits for women Veterans in FY 2019 and 11,821 total peer support visits in FY 2020.
- VISN 17: 9,767 total peer support service visits for women Veterans in FY 2019 and 8,330 total peer support visits in FY 2020.

As seen in Table 2, women Veterans were also provided peer support services by peer specialists who were men. As an example, VISN 7, which provided mental health services to the highest number of unique women, had a total of 7,732 peer support service visits in FY 2019 that were provided by 53 male peer specialists. In FY 2020, 6,341 peer support service visits were provided by 59 peer specialists who were men. This pattern held for all other VISNs.

VISNs employing a higher number of women peer specialists did not always translate to having a higher total number of peer support service visits delivered to women Veterans by women peer specialists. For example, VISN 16 and VISN 22 each employed more women peer specialists than most other VISNs. VISN 16 provided mental health services to 18,787 unique women Veterans and employed 19 women peer specialists but only had a total of 2,443 peer support service visits delivered to women Veterans by women peer specialists in FY 2019. In FY 2020, VISN 16 provided mental health services to 17,483 unique women Veterans and employed 25 women peer specialists but only had a total of 2,447 peer support service visits delivered to women Veterans by women peer specialists. Similarly, VISN 22 provided mental health services to 19,497 unique women Veterans and employed 25 women peer specialists but only had a total

of 2,790 peer support service visits delivered to women Veterans by women peer specialists in FY 2019. In FY 2020, VISN 22 provided mental health services to 18,931 unique women Veterans and employed 26 women peer specialists but only had a total of 2,969 peer support service visits delivered to women Veterans by women peer specialists.

By contrast, VISN 6, which provided mental health services to 21,853 unique women Veterans in FY 2019 only employed 12 women peer specialists that year but had a total of 4,148 peer support service visits provided to women Veterans by women peer specialists. In FY 2020, VISN 6 provided mental health services to 20,696 unique women Veterans and only employed 14 women peer specialists. However, a total of 4,673 peer support service visits were delivered in VISN 6 to women Veterans by women peer specialists that year.

Data from all VISNs that had higher total numbers of peer support service visits between peer specialists and women Veterans were reviewed. The results showed that most of the peer support service visits with women Veterans took place in outpatient mental health clinics. Psychosocial Rehabilitation Recovery Centers (PRRC) were the second most common type of program where peer support service visits occurred, and mental health Residential Rehabilitation Treatment Programs (RRTP) were the third most common type of program where women Veterans received peer support services.

Third, the number and proportion of women peer specialists who specialize in peer counseling on mental health or suicide prevention was assessed. The findings reflect that 100% of all VA women peer specialists in FY 2019 (214) and in FY 2020 (234) specialized in providing peer support services related to both mental health and suicide prevention.

Fourth, the number and proportion of women peer specialists who specialize in peer counseling on non-mental health related matters were assessed. Based on the assessment, no women peer specialists specialized in non-mental health related matters. Please refer back to the Background section where the legal and VHA criteria for appointment to VHA are discussed, as it explains this occupation's exclusive focus on mental health.

### **Conclusions Based on Findings**

The results of the capacity assessment establish that women peer specialists worked in all 18 VISNs in FY 2019 and FY 2020, but less than 20% of the total peer specialist workforce were women. The total number of women peer specialists working in each VISN varied, but most VA health care systems that employed women peer specialists had only one to two women peer specialists on staff. Across 14 of the 18 VISNs, 27 VA health care systems did not employ any women peer specialists in FY 2019 or FY 2020. Further evaluation may inform peer specialist staffing plans and projects related to the hiring and assignment of women peer specialists.

Most peer support services delivered to women Veterans in FY 2019 and FY 2020 occurred in outpatient mental health clinics. The second most common setting was PRRCs, and the third most common setting was mental health RRTPs. These results reflect current practices, in which VHA peer specialists are hired and assigned to programs at the local level, where they focus on providing peer support services to Veterans within the programs where they work. Future peer specialist staffing plans and projects may include recommendations to continue to allow for local flexibility with regard to program assignments for women peer specialists. This will enable facilities to assign the women peer specialists to work in programs where their peer support services will be accessible to women Veterans who are using other health care services in the programs.

**Department of Veterans Affairs**  
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**Appendix 1: Table 1 – VISN and VA Health Care System (HCS) Geographical Distributions of Women Peer Specialists in FY 2019 and FY 2020**

VISN	Location of VA HCS in VISN	Total # of Women Peer Specialists in HCS within VISN (FY 2019)	Total # of Women Peer Specialists in HCS within VISN (FY 2020)
<b>1</b>	Togus, ME HCS	0	0
	White River Junction, VT HCS	2	1
	Bedford, MA HCS	4	7
	Boston, MA HCS	2	2
	Manchester, NH HCS	1	1
	Central Western Massachusetts HCS	2	2
	Providence, RI HCS	1	1
	Connecticut HCS	2	5
	<b>VISN 1 Total</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>2</b>	Bronx, NY HCS	1	1
	Upstate NY Integrated HCS	2	1
	New Jersey HCS	3	2
	Hudson Valley NY HCS	0	0
	New York Harbor HCS	1	1
	Northport, NY HCS	1	1
	<b>VISN 2 Total</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>4</b>	Wilmington, DE HCS	0	0
	Altoona, PA HCS	1	1
	Butler, PA HCS	0	0
	Coatesville, PA HCS	1	1
	Erie, PA HCS	0	0
	Lebanon, PA HCS	1	1
	Philadelphia, PA HCS	2	1
	Pittsburgh, PA HCS	2	2
	Wilkes-Barre, PA, HCS	1	0
<b>VISN 4 Total</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>6</b>	
<b>5</b>	Baltimore, MD HCS	4	3
	Beckley, WV HCS	0	0
	Clarksburg, WV HCS	0	0
	Huntington, WV HCS	0	0
	Martinsburg, WV HCS	2	2
	<b>VISN 5 Total</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>6</b>	Durham, NC HCS	2	3
	Fayetteville, NC HCS	2	3
	Hampton, VA HCS	5	5
	Asheville, NC HCS	1	1
	Richmond, VA HCS	1	1
	Salem, VA HCS	0	0

VISN	Location of VA HCS in VISN	Total # of Women Peer Specialists in HCS within VISN (FY 2019)	Total # of Women Peer Specialists in HCS within VISN (FY 2020)
	Salisbury, NC HCS	1	1
	<b>VISN 6 Total</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>7</b>	Atlanta, GA HCS	8	8
	Augusta, GA HCS	0	4
	Birmingham, AL HCS	3	2
	Charleston, SC HCS	2	2
	Columbia, SC HCS	2	2
	Dublin, GA HCS	1	1
	Central Alabama HCS	4	2
	Tuscaloosa, AL HCS	1	2
	<b>VISN 7 Total</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>8</b>	Bay Pines, FL HCS	3	5
	Miami, FL HCS	1	2
	West Palm Beach, FL HCS	2	2
	Gainesville, FL HCS	2	2
	San Juan, PR HCS	0	0
	Tampa, FL HCS	1	1
	Orlando, FL HCS	3	3
	<b>VISN 8 Total</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>9</b>	Lexington, KY HCS	1	1
	Louisville, KY HCS	2	2
	Memphis, TN HCS	5	2
	Mountain Home, TN HCS	2	2
	Middle Tennessee HCS	2	2
	<b>VISN 9 Total</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>10</b>	Ann Arbor, MI HCS	2	4
	Battle Creek, MI HCS	1	3
	Chillicothe, OH HCS	1	2
	Cincinnati, OH HCS	3	2
	Cleveland, OH HCS	1	2
	Dayton, OH HCS	0	1
	Detroit, OH HCS	2	2
	Indianapolis, IN HCS	0	1
	Northern Indiana HCS	1	1
	Saginaw, MI HCS	1	1
	Columbus, OH HCS	2	2
	<b>VISN 10 Total</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>12</b>	Chicago, IL HCS	1	2
	Danville, IL HCS	0	0
	North Chicago, IL HCS	1	2
	Hines, IL HCS	4	4

VISN	Location of VA HCS in VISN	Total # of Women Peer Specialists in HCS within VISN (FY 2019)	Total # of Women Peer Specialists in HCS within VISN (FY 2020)
	Iron Mountain, MI HCS	1	0
	Madison, WI HCS	1	1
	Tomah, WI HCS	1	2
	Milwaukee, WI HCS	3	2
	<b>VISN 12 Total</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>15</b>	Kansas City, MO HCS	0	0
	Columbia, MO HCS	1	0
	Eastern Kansas HCS	0	0
	Wichita, KS HCS	1	0
	St. Louis, MO HCS	3	3
	Marion, IL HCS	0	0
	Poplar Bluff, MO HCS	0	0
	<b>VISN 15 Total</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>16</b>	Alexandria, LA HCS	0	0
	Gulf Coast, MS HCS	2	4
	Fayetteville, AR HCS	2	2
	Houston, TX HCS	4	7
	Jackson, MS HCS	2	2
	Little Rock, AR HCS	5	4
	New Orleans, LA HCS	3	4
	Shreveport, LA HCS	1	2
	<b>VISN 16 Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>17</b>	Amarillo, TX HCS	0	1
	Big Spring, TX HCS	0	0
	Dallas, TX HCS	6	6
	San Antonio, TX HCS	2	4
	Temple, TX HCS	4	3
	Texas Valley Coastal Bend HCS	1	0
	El Paso, TX HCS	0	0
	<b>VISN 17 Total</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>19</b>	Montana HCS	1	2
	Cheyenne, WY HCS	0	1
	Denver, CO HCS	4	4
	Grand Junction, CO HCS	1	0
	Muskogee, OK HCS	1	1
	Oklahoma City, OK	1	1
	Salt Lake City, UT	0	0
	Sheridan, WY HCS	0	1
	<b>VISN 19 Total</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>20</b>	Anchorage, AK HCS	0	0
	Boise, ID HCS	0	0

VISN	Location of VA HCS in VISN	Total # of Women Peer Specialists in HCS within VISN (FY 2019)	Total # of Women Peer Specialists in HCS within VISN (FY 2020)
	Portland, OR HCS	0	0
	Roseburg, OR HCS	1	1
	Puget Sound, WA HCS	0	2
	Spokane, WA HCS	2	2
	Walla Walla, WA HCS	0	0
	White City, OR HCS	1	1
	<b>VISN 20 Total</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>21</b>	Honolulu, HI HCS	3	2
	Fresno, CA HCS	1	2
	Las Vegas, NV HCS	3	3
	Palo Alto, CA HCS	0	0
	Reno, NV HCS	2	0
	San Francisco, CA HCS	5	1
	Northern California HCS	0	2
<b>VISN 21 Total</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>10</b>	
<b>22</b>	New Mexico HCS	1	2
	Long Beach, CA HCS	3	4
	Loma Linda, CA HCS	4	2
	Phoenix, AZ HCS	4	5
	Northern Arizona HCS	1	1
	San Diego, CA HCS	1	1
	Southern Arizona HCS	1	2
	Greater Los Angeles, CA HCS	10	9
<b>VISN 22 Total</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>26</b>	
<b>23</b>	Fargo, ND HCS	1	1
	Sioux Falls, SD HCS	0	0
	Black Hills, SD HCS	0	0
	Minneapolis, MN HCS	1	2
	Iowa-Nebraska Integrated HCS	2	2
	St. Cloud, MN HCS	0	0
<b>VISN 23 Total</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	
<b>Total Number of Women Peer Specialists from All VA Health Care Systems:</b>		<b>214</b>	<b>234</b>
<b>Percentage of Total Peer Specialist Workforce Who are Women Peer Specialists:</b>		<b>18.99%</b>	<b>19.8%</b>

**Appendix 1: Table 2 – VISN Geographical Distributions of Women Veterans Receiving Peer Support Services from Peer Specialists in FY 2019 and FY 2020**

VISN	Fiscal Year 2019							Fiscal Year 2020						
	Total # of Women Veterans Receiving MH Visits	Total # Overall MH Visits for Women Veterans	Total # Women PS	Total # Peer Support Visits Provided by Women PS to Women Veterans	Total # Men PS	Total # Peer Support Visits Provided by Men PS to Women Veterans	Total # Peer Support Visits Provided to Women Veterans Where PS Gender Unknown	Total # of Women Veterans Receiving MH Visits	Total # Overall MH Visits for Women Veterans	Total # Women PS	Total # Peer Support Visits Provided by Women PS to Women Veterans	Total # Men PS	Total # Peer Support Visits Provided by Men PS to Women Veterans	Total # Peer Support Visits Provided to Women Veterans Where PS Gender Unknown
1	7,294	101,552	14	1,541	61	1,919	575	6,775	106,605	19	1,741	63	1,850	148
2	8,918	118,708	8	1,840	38	2,078	1,716	8,182	120,330	6	1,280	35	2,254	1,068
4	8,714	91,677	8	1,399	29	1,315	351	8,031	99,304	6	1,179	27	966	297
5	9,414	71,509	9	900	37	1,452	976	8,809	77,266	8	594	35	1,519	657
6	21,853	196,098	12	4,148	39	4,101	36	20,696	200,211	14	4,673	45	3,322	10
7	26,917	207,282	21	4,907	53	7,732	326	25,109	232,874	23	3,376	59	6,341	247
8	22,467	229,046	12	2,705	82	8,504	400	21,882	241,085	15	4,204	86	7,617	466
9	10,033	97,782	12	1,761	30	1,584	118	9,412	104,174	9	994	34	1,128	291
10	14,616	155,273	14	2,811	79	6,815	1,360	13,776	161,478	21	3,667	86	5,951	1,388
12	8,567	121,329	12	1,591	41	2,781	77	8,001	129,208	13	1,814	45	1,867	22
15	7,650	82,175	5	321	28	1,430	597	7,178	85,608	4	443	30	1,382	448
16	18,787	148,033	19	2,443	59	4,081	427	17,483	152,471	25	2,447	63	3,501	394
17	21,914	182,066	13	2,951	46	6,816	350	21,178	183,472	14	3,510	42	4,820	84
19	11,523	108,670	8	2,060	36	2,140	1,169	10,474	116,349	10	2,102	37	2,154	808
20	10,552	100,354	4	862	40	2,262	452	9,698	102,944	6	446	46	1,535	428
21	11,737	107,552	14	1,331	80	2,606	342	11,043	125,245	10	1,481	98	4,557	396
22	19,497	198,555	25	2,790	96	3,895	424	18,931	213,513	26	2,969	111	4,202	323
23	7,746	98,205	4	874	22	2,448	214	7,109	99,582	5	936	24	1,757	168

MH Visits=Mental health service visits  
PS=Peer specialists