



**Position Brief on
PFC Joseph P. Dwyer Peer Support Program Act (H.R. 1749)**

May 31, 2020

Background:

The "PFC Joseph P. Dwyer Peer Support Program Act" (H.R. 1749) authorizes the Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs to make grants to state and local entities to carry out peer-to-peer mental health programs. It includes \$25M of additional appropriations in order to carry out requirements of the legislation.

We support the aspiration to expand peer-to-peer mental health interventions. However, we have major concerns about the effort in this bill.

Problem:

The bill fundamentally duplicates – and unnecessarily privatizes -- existing VA services. VA already provides peer support that meets the criteria described in the Use of Funds section, with the exception of 24/7 coverage. However, the Veterans Crisis Line is in the process of creating a Peer Support Outreach Center (they're recruiting for the center's Director presently) that will be a 24/7 "warmline" staffed by peers that will complement the Crisis Line. Thus, the bill sets up a system that will replicate in the community what the VA is doing, although without the connection to interdisciplinary care. We also anticipate that the program would siphon off workload and, hence, money from the VA.

Recommendation:

Increasing peer support funding is a worthy goal, and we believe the \$25M would be better spent enhancing VA's peer support program. For example, although Congress wants more female peers to be hired to work with women Veterans, it has yet to appropriate money for such. Section 502 of S. 785 that is currently under Congressional consideration asks for a gap analysis and plan to hire more qualified women peer specialists. That's one effective way to spend the \$25M, and there are other VA peer support areas where the money could be well spent, too.

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