

116TH CONGRESS
2D SESSION

H. R. 7964

To direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to carry out education programs and peer support programs for family members and caregivers of veterans with mental health disorders.

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

AUGUST 7, 2020

Ms. FINKENAUER (for herself, Mr. CURTIS, and Mr. MCKINLEY) introduced the following bill; which was referred to the Committee on Veterans' Affairs

A BILL

To direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to carry out education programs and peer support programs for family members and caregivers of veterans with mental health disorders.

1 *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-*
2 *tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

3 **SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.**

4 This Act may be cited as the “Peer Support for Vet-
5 eran Families Act”.

1 **SEC. 2. EDUCATION PROGRAM AND PEER SUPPORT PRO-**
2 **GRAM FOR FAMILY MEMBERS AND CARE-**
3 **GIVERS OF VETERANS WITH MENTAL**
4 **HEALTH DISORDERS.**

5 (a) PROGRAMS.—Not later than 270 days after the
6 date of the enactment of this Act, the Secretary of Vet-
7 erans Affairs shall establish an education program (in this
8 section referred to as the “education program”) and a
9 peer support program (in this section referred to as the
10 “peer support program”) for the education and training
11 of family members and caregivers of eligible veterans with
12 mental health disorders.

13 (b) EDUCATION PROGRAM.—

14 (1) IN GENERAL.—Under the education pro-
15 gram, the Secretary shall provide a course of edu-
16 cation to family members and caregivers of eligible
17 veterans on matters relating to coping with mental
18 health disorders in veterans.

19 (2) DURATION.—

20 (A) IN GENERAL.—The education program
21 shall be carried out during the four-year period
22 beginning on the date of the commencement of
23 the education program.

24 (B) AUTHORITY FOR EXTENSION.—The
25 Secretary may extend the duration of the edu-
26 cation program for an additional four years.

1 (3) LOCATIONS.—

2 (A) IN GENERAL.—Except as required by
3 subparagraph (D), the Secretary shall carry out
4 the education program at the following facilities
5 of the Department of Veterans Affairs:

6 (i) Not less than 10 medical centers of
7 the Department.

8 (ii) Not less than 10 clinics of the De-
9 partment.

10 (iii) Not less than 10 Vet Centers (as
11 defined in section 1712A(h) of title 38,
12 United States Code).

13 (B) SOLICITATION OF APPLICATIONS.—In
14 selecting locations for the education program,
15 the Secretary shall solicit applications from eli-
16 gible facilities of the Department that are inter-
17 ested in carrying out the education program.

18 (C) CONSIDERATIONS.—In selecting loca-
19 tions for the education program, the Secretary
20 shall consider the feasibility and advisability of
21 selecting locations in the following areas:

22 (i) Rural areas.

23 (ii) Areas that are not in close prox-
24 imity to an active duty installation.

1 (iii) Areas in different geographic lo-
2 cations.

3 (D) EXPANSION OF LOCATIONS.—Not later
4 than two years after the date of the commence-
5 ment of the education program, the Secretary
6 shall expand the number of facilities at which
7 the Secretary is carrying out the education pro-
8 gram to include the following:

9 (i) Not less than 10 additional med-
10 ical centers of the Department.

11 (ii) Not less than 10 additional clinics
12 of the Department.

13 (iii) Not less than 10 additional Vet
14 Centers.

15 (4) CONTRACTS.—

16 (A) IN GENERAL.—In carrying out the
17 education program, the Secretary shall enter
18 into contracts with qualified entities described
19 in subparagraph (B) to offer the course of edu-
20 cation described in paragraph (5) to family
21 members and caregivers of eligible veterans and
22 covered veterans.

23 (B) QUALIFIED ENTITY DESCRIBED.—A
24 qualified entity described in this subparagraph
25 is a non-profit entity with experience in mental

1 health education and outreach, including work
2 with children, teens, and young adults, that—

3 (i) uses high quality, relevant, and
4 age-appropriate information in educational
5 programming, materials, and coursework,
6 including such programming, materials,
7 and coursework for children, teens, and
8 young adults; and

9 (ii) works with agencies, departments,
10 nonprofit mental health organizations,
11 early childhood educators, and mental
12 health providers to develop educational
13 programming, materials, and coursework.

14 (C) PRIORITY.—In entering into contracts
15 under this paragraph, the Secretary shall give
16 priority to qualified entities that have dem-
17 onstrated cultural competence in serving mili-
18 tary and veteran populations, and, to the extent
19 practicable, use internet technology for the de-
20 livery of course content in an effort to expand
21 the availability of support services, especially in
22 rural areas.

23 (5) ELEMENTS.—The course of education de-
24 scribed in this paragraph shall consist of not less

1 than 10 weeks of education and shall include the fol-
2 lowing:

3 (A) General education on different mental
4 health disorders, including information to im-
5 prove understanding of the experiences of indi-
6 viduals suffering from those disorders.

7 (B) Techniques for handling crisis situa-
8 tions and administering mental health first aid
9 to individuals suffering from mental health dis-
10 orders.

11 (C) Techniques for coping with the stress
12 of living with someone with a mental health dis-
13 order.

14 (D) Information on additional services
15 available for family members and caregivers
16 through the Department or community organi-
17 zations and providers related to mental health
18 disorders.

19 (E) Such other matters as the Secretary
20 considers appropriate.

21 (6) INSTRUCTORS.—

22 (A) TRAINING.—Each instructor of the
23 course of education described in paragraph (5)
24 shall maintain a level of proficiency in the
25 course of education as determined by the Sec-

1 retary, and shall submit proof of that level of
2 proficiency to the Secretary at such time and in
3 such manner as the Secretary determines ap-
4 propriate.

5 (B) INDIVIDUALS WHO HAVE COMPLETED
6 THE COURSE AS INSTRUCTORS.—Commencing
7 as of the date that is two years after the date
8 of the commencement of the education pro-
9 gram, any individual who has successfully com-
10 pleted the course of education described in
11 paragraph (5) and has successfully completed
12 such additional training as is required for in-
13 structors pursuant to subparagraph (A) may
14 act as an instructor in the course of education.

15 (c) PEER SUPPORT PROGRAM.—

16 (1) IN GENERAL.—Under the peer support pro-
17 gram, the Secretary shall provide peer support to
18 family members and caregivers of eligible veterans
19 on matters relating to coping with mental health dis-
20 orders in veterans.

21 (2) LOCATIONS.—The Secretary shall provide
22 peer support under the peer support program at
23 each location at which the Secretary provides edu-
24 cation under the education program.

1 (3) ELEMENTS.—Peer support under the peer
2 support program shall consist of meetings in group
3 settings between a peer support coordinator under
4 paragraph (4) and family members and caregivers of
5 eligible veterans on matters relating to coping with
6 mental health disorders in veterans. At each loca-
7 tion, those meetings shall be conducted not less
8 often than twice each calendar quarter.

9 (4) PEER SUPPORT COORDINATOR.—

10 (A) IN GENERAL.—The Secretary, acting
11 through the director of each participating facil-
12 ity, may select an individual who has success-
13 fully completed the course of education de-
14 scribed in subsection (b)(5) to serve as a peer
15 support coordinator for each such facility to
16 carry out the peer support program.

17 (B) PROFICIENCY OF INSTRUCTORS.—

18 Each peer support coordinator shall maintain a
19 level of proficiency in peer support as deter-
20 mined by the Secretary, and shall submit proof
21 of that level of proficiency to the Secretary at
22 such time and in such manner as the Secretary
23 determines appropriate.

24 (d) SURVEYS.—

1 (1) IN GENERAL.—The Secretary shall conduct
2 a comprehensive survey of the satisfaction of individ-
3 uals that have participated in the course of edu-
4 cation described in subsection (b)(5) and individuals
5 that have participated in the peer support program
6 that includes the following:

7 (A) The general satisfaction of those indi-
8 viduals with the education and assistance pro-
9 vided in the education program and the peer
10 support program.

11 (B) The perceived effectiveness of the edu-
12 cation program and the peer support program
13 in providing education and assistance that is
14 useful for those individuals.

15 (C) The applicability of the education pro-
16 gram and the peer support program to the
17 issues faced by those individuals.

18 (D) Such other matters as the Secretary
19 considers appropriate.

20 (E) A representative sample of the infor-
21 mation required by subparagraphs (A) through
22 (D) from each Veterans Integrated Service Net-
23 work that is participating in the education pro-
24 gram and the peer support program.

1 (2) COMPILATION OF INFORMATION.—The in-
2 formation compiled as a result of the surveys re-
3 quired by paragraph (1) shall be included in the an-
4 nual report required by subsection (e)(1).

5 (e) REPORTS.—

6 (1) ANNUAL REPORT.—

7 (A) IN GENERAL.—Not later than one year
8 after the date of the commencement of the edu-
9 cation program and not later than September
10 30 each year thereafter until 2024, the Sec-
11 retary shall submit to the Committee on Vet-
12 erans' Affairs of the Senate and the Committee
13 on Veterans' Affairs of the House of Represent-
14 atives a report on the education program and
15 the peer support program.

16 (B) ELEMENTS.—Each report submitted
17 under subparagraph (A) shall include the fol-
18 lowing:

19 (i) The number of individuals that
20 participated in the course of education de-
21 scribed in subsection (b)(5) during the
22 year preceding the submission of the re-
23 port.

24 (ii) The number of individuals that
25 participated in the peer support program

1 during the year preceding the submission
2 of the report.

3 (iii) A detailed analysis of the surveys
4 conducted under subsection (d) with re-
5 spect to the individuals described in clause
6 (i) and (ii).

7 (iv) The degree to which veterans and
8 family members and caregivers of veterans
9 are aware of the eligibility requirements
10 for enrollment in the education program
11 and the peer support program.

12 (v) Any plans for expansion of the
13 education program and the peer support
14 program.

15 (vi) The interim findings and conclu-
16 sions of the Secretary with respect to the
17 success of the education program and the
18 peer support program.

19 (2) FINAL REPORT.—

20 (A) IN GENERAL.—Not later than one year
21 after the completion of the education program,
22 the Secretary shall submit to the Committee on
23 Veterans' Affairs of the Senate and the Com-
24 mittee on Veterans' Affairs of the House of
25 Representatives a report on the feasibility and

1 advisability of continuing the education pro-
2 gram and the peer support program.

3 (B) ELEMENTS.—The report submitted
4 under subparagraph (A) shall include the fol-
5 lowing:

6 (i) A detailed analysis of the surveys
7 conducted under subsection (d).

8 (ii) The feasibility and advisability of
9 continuing the education program without
10 entering into contracts for the course of
11 education described in subsection (b)(5)
12 and instead using peer support coordina-
13 tors selected under subsection (c)(4) as in-
14 structors of the course of education.

15 (iii) The feasibility and advisability of
16 expanding the education program and the
17 peer support program.

18 (f) PERMISSION REQUIRED.—A caregiver or family
19 caregiver may not participate in the education program
20 or the peer support program without the permission of the
21 eligible veteran for whom the caregiver or family caregiver
22 provides care.

23 (g) MONITORING OF PROGRAM.—The Secretary shall
24 select mental health care providers of the Department to
25 monitor the progress of the instruction provided under the

1 education program and to monitor the progress of the peer
2 support program. Such mental health care providers shall
3 carry out such monitoring by meeting not less than quar-
4 terly with—

5 (1) instructors of the course of education de-
6 scribed in subsection (b)(5); and

7 (2) peer support coordinators under subsection
8 (c)(4).

9 (h) DEFINITIONS.—In this section:

10 (1) The term “eligible veteran” means a vet-
11 eran who is enrolled in the health care system estab-
12 lished under section 1705(a) of title 38, United
13 States Code.

14 (2) The terms “caregiver” and “family mem-
15 ber” have the meaning given those terms in section
16 1720G(d) of title 38, United States Code.

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