

RUTGERS

University Behavioral  
Health Care

# Vets4Warriors

## Peer Support by Veterans

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June 2015

1-855-838-8255

[www.vets4warriors.com](http://www.vets4warriors.com)



Vets4Warriors

# **VETS4WARRIORS**

## **Peer Support for Service Members, Veterans and their families**

Executive note: Many know of the powerful work Vets4Warriors peers provide around the world to service men and women, veterans and their families, however few know this program is slated to end on 15 August 2015. No program offers the trust and confidentiality provided by Vets4Warriors. We need your support to keep this incredible service available around the clock for those that serve around the globe.

### **Program Overview:**

Our veterans face many challenges in civilian life, some of which can escalate into serious threats to their well-being. Fortunately, there are many sources of help; however, the process of identifying and connecting to the appropriate supports can be daunting. For many, a call or live computer chat to Vets4Warriors provides the vital support they need to address issues they face and connect to existing services before they escalate into a crisis.

Vets4Warriors is staffed – 24 hours a day – by a team of highly-trained veteran “peers” who draw on their military backgrounds and knowledge of the supports available to those serving and veterans to solve callers’ problems in real time; both by providing an empathic and respectful ear and by directing the caller to the resources they need exactly when they need them. The call is toll free and available to all Service Members, Reservists, National Guardsmen and women, Veterans and their families. Calls are answered within 20 seconds by a veteran who provides non-stigmatizing, confidential, even anonymous, help.

Unlike many of the difficult-to-navigate veteran-oriented support services out there, Vets4Warriors employs a “no wrong door” approach, assuring the caller that they’ve called the right number, and working with them to determine the nature of the support they need. Our veteran peers stick with the caller until the problems are resolved. This may be one phone call or 30 over the course of months. And at all times, a senior, licensed mental health professional is immediately available for consultation and direct involvement.

**Goals:**

1. Curtail crisis escalation by providing effective, peer support and referral services to our nation's veterans, service members and their families.
2. Expand programmatic capacity to all veterans and service members by marketing and educating others about our services.
3. Provide support services equivalent to those available to suicidal veterans to their non-suicidal counterparts.
4. Ensure all know our peers are always available, especially during transitions; no one is ever alone.

**Outcomes:**

1. Improvement in the mental/physical health of service members, veterans and their families.
2. Increased and more effective use of on base/post, community and veteran-specific support services and programs nationwide.

**Brief history:**

Vets4Warriors is a peer support telephone service that began in 2011 to meet the underserved needs of the returning National Guard and Reserve members who were now serving their country at unprecedented rates. Services had not kept up with the needs or demands of these re-integrating service members or their families. Staff at Rutgers University Behavioral Health Care recognized the serious gap in services for our service members and drew on its 18 years of experience in delivering "best practice" peer support programs, including their nationally recognized "Cop2Cop" program.

In November of 2011, about 40 male and female veterans representing all service branches and conflicts from Vietnam to Iraq and Afghanistan began their 80 hours of initial training in delivering peer support. This training would be didactic and interactive along with a week of on-site practice with close supervision and guidance (a shadowing or left seat/right seat ride component). Most of this passionate, talented and caring group has stayed together, demonstrating our motto, "Still answering the Call."

In August of 2013 Vets4Warriors transitioned into the Defense Suicide Prevention Office (DSPO), a program of the Department of Defense (DoD) reporting to the Undersecretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness. Our

focus now became the men and women serving their country around the world and their family members.

### **Highlighted Program Elements:**

V4W is a 24/7 telephone, email, Facebook, and 'live' computer chat service. We offer easy access when the caller is in need. We employ those with "shared lived experiences" i.e. only those who have served or are currently serving. Although peer support has been shown to be effective in many settings, it continues to be confused with more traditional non-medical or even professional counseling and therapy.

Peer support has demonstrated the ability to enhance connections, trust, and constructive problem solving among our service men and women when given in a confidential environment. We are a stand-alone service when that is requested but we often recommend and complement other more traditional medical, financial, legal and mental health resources. Our peers have their own experiences accessing, using and seeking help upon returning home. Callers trust and value the peers honesty and willingness to share their stories, struggles and triumphs. What better advocate for help than someone who has used them and is now willing to attest to their value? This is the core of our service delivery and it has special value to those in need. We guide, support and lead callers to all kinds of care; some of the services will be new to the caller, some will re-engage with services they gave up on and others will learn to engage in a more useful active way after complaining to a veteran who has been there.

One size does not fit all. We do not think one kind of help is more valuable than another but we do believe that peer support should be available to all veterans, service members and their families; a special service from a grateful nation.

### **IMPACT:**

As of August 15, 2015, Vets4Warriors program support and funding from DoD will come to an end. In two months, we will no longer be "answering the call" from service men and women and their families unless we are able to find private funding. Without support, we will no longer be able to:

- Continue to talk with the young Marine who called in and asked for a "no b---s---" answer to his fear of his first deployment to Iraq.

- From the returning Army veteran who could not talk with his family and friends because they did not understand what he has gone through.
- Support the grandmother who got a terrifying email from her grandson serving overseas and couldn't reach him.
- Assist a victim of military sexual trauma who did not know how to talk with her therapist.

There are thousands of our dedicated, patriotic service members who could lead better lives with a little help from their peers. We ask for your support so that we may continue to assist them.

### **WAY AHEAD:**

Our service members, veterans and family members deserve the support they can get from Vets4Warriors. On 16 August, 2015 we will be answering every call just as we have been doing for the past four years. They never let us down and we will not let them down.

### **NEEDS:**

Our immediate need is \$500,000 to allow us to continue the Vets4Warriors peer support program for ninety days while we continue to secure funding to sustain and grow the program. All donations are fully tax deductible through the Rutgers University Foundation, a 501(c)3. Donations need to specify they are for the Vets4Warriors program. Additionally any support in fundraising and strategic marketing and outreach would be tremendously valuable.

# VETS4WARRIORS

★ ★ ★ 1-855-VET-TALK ★ ★ ★

## History:

The National Guard Bureau announced the initiation of a new and confidential veteran peer support helpline for all Guard and Reserve service members on December 13, 2011. This began in part to recognize the difficulties of returning military into civilian life, the rising number of suicides in that population and a recent New Jersey soldier who took his own life while waiting for services. The death of Sgt. Coleman Bean got the attention and advocacy of the late N.J. Senator Frank Lautenberg and the action of Congressman Rush Holt. Their services help establish the program at Rutgers University Behavioral Health Care, a center of excellence for 18 years in peer support. This telephone line was based on the principles of peer support: that someone who has shared lived experiences can quickly connect, understand and listen in highly effective ways. The peers also connected callers to resources, advocated for services and routinely called back with caring support. In August of 2014 the program transitioned to the Department of Defense, DSPO (Department of Suicide Prevention Office). Here our major focus was on the active duty service men and women around the world. We have worked closely with the VA's Crisis Line and not only reached out to service members in crisis but also continued with peer support when accepted. This contract ends August 15, 2015. We have been requested to refer current and new callers to Military One Source in the future.

## Statistics

Since December 2011, the Vets4Warriors program has had over 130,000 contacts with service members and their families. This includes incoming calls and follow up calls with the remaining contacts from live chat and email. The program employs forty veterans (which includes supervisors) and four licensed mental health clinicians. Ninety-five percent of the Vets4Warriors program peers are Veterans.

## PREVENTION

We offer peer support by phone and social media. Peer support is available based on each caller's needs. Continuous customer satisfaction survey tools and unidentified data collection help improve the quality of care.

## Rutgers Role :

Rutgers University Behavioral Health Care has been a Center of Excellence in peer support since the founding of our nationally recognized program Cop2Cop in 1998. This program also received the title of "Best Practice in Peer Support" from the Department of Defense DCOE (Defense Center of Excellence) in 2011. Today our RUBHC National Call Center administers 10 separate peer support telephone lines to vulnerable populations (e.g. mothers of disabled children, caregivers of elderly with dementia) and employs and supervises 111 staff.

## PROGRAM ELEMENTS

### ACCESS

Available when people need us, Vets4Warriors peer helpline offers easy access via our toll free number and "live chat." Provides information to a variety of continuously updated services, offers follow up calls with 24/7 LIVE Veteran staffing. All calls are answered by a Veteran peer within 20 seconds, utilizing sophisticated technology. This program is part of the Rutgers University Behavioral Health Care National Call Center, which is staffed by individuals with over 18 years of peer helpline experience who answer over 600,000 calls a year.

### STIGMA FREE ENVIRONMENT

Who better to understand the challenges of military life than someone who has lived it? Veterans provide respect, hope and support to service members and families. We engage them in a personal, non-threatening way, helping to mitigate stigma and concerns about confidentiality. We are here to help, not judge.

### FOLLOW UP

Veterans and their families are offered follow-up calls to assure continued support when needed. This capacity to provide follow-up calls, utilizing our proven peer support model, makes us unique from other programs.

**Confidential Peer Support by Veterans**  
Call Toll Free 24/7  
Live Chat 24/7 at [www.Vets4Warriors.com](http://www.Vets4Warriors.com)

You're Not Alone ● Anytime ● Anywhere

## **Vets4Warriors:**

### **Rutgers University Behavioral Health Care**

#### **Unique Features**

- We serve all military members including National Guard, Reservists and their families, without restrictions.
- Only program available 24/7 delivering “peer” support to military members (i.e. veterans and fellow service members answer all the calls, chats and contacts).
- All calls are confidential.
- All callers can be anonymous.
- No information is shared with military branches or units.
- We do not impose limits on the length of our peer support. Endings are determined by the needs of the callers.
- Calls are answered when the caller needs the help and within seconds of the call.
- Peers routinely outreach military service members.
- We are available to service members and their families who do not want to engage in mental health counseling as well as those who are currently receiving counseling but need additional support.
- All peers are trained in the Best Practice Model “Reciprocal Peer Support” developed at RUBHC 18 years ago.
- Initial 80 hours of training is supplemented by on-going continuing education.
- Military peers are supported in their work 24/7 by licensed mental health clinicians.
- We view peer support as complementary to other treatment and services.
- Our peers are strong advocates for mental health treatment and value both services.
- Customer surveys are 99% positive.