



VETERANS MENTAL HEALTH TRAINING INITIATIVE: Enhancing the Capacity of Community Mental Health Providers & Primary Care Physicians & Providers in NYS to Meet the Mental Health Needs of Veterans

The New York State Psychiatric Association (NYSPA), the Medical Society of the State of New York (MSSNY), and the New York State Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW-NYS) **are seeking funding in the 2025-2026 New York State budget** for the continuation and expansion of the comprehensive statewide training program, known as the Veterans Mental Health Training Initiative (VMHTI). The program educates both community mental healthcare providers and primary care healthcare providers on veterans-specific mental health issues including combat and service-related post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, suicide in veterans, substance use, military culture, women veterans' mental health conditions including the impact of military sexual trauma and counseling on lethal means safety to reduce suicide risk. The funding requests for each organization are as follows:

NYSPA	\$100,000
MSSNY	\$100,000
NASW-NYS	\$150,000

The VMHTI has two pathways: one led by the NASW-NYS, providing an accredited education and training program for community mental health workers, and one led by NYSPA and MSSNY training primary care physicians and health practitioners from across the primary care specialties, including internal medicine, family practice, emergency medicine and OB-GYN. The trainings are also of benefit to psychiatrists whose practices have seen a dramatic influx of combat and service-related mental health problems. The program educates both community mental healthcare providers and primary care healthcare providers on veterans-specific mental health issues including service-related post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, substance use disorders, suicide and suicide prevention, as well as enhancing competency on military culture.

The VMHTI is equipping New York's healthcare workforce in the community to meet the challenges of combat veteran specific mental health and related problems, which is critical as the data indicates more than half of all military veterans will seek care from a health care provider in his or her community upon return from combat. Prior funding for the VMHTI has allowed the VMHTI to successfully train over 5,900 primary care physicians and practitioners through the NYSPA & MSSNY programs, and over 15,000 social workers and community mental health providers, including LMFTs, LMHCs, and licensed psychologists through the NASW-NYS program.

The need for continued support is more critical than ever in light of COVID-19 pandemic's impact on veterans and their families, including the exacerbation of mental health and substance use disorder symptomology, isolation, and loneliness as well as economic stress that burdens veterans. The New York Health Foundation's Data Snapshot: Veteran Suicide in New York State 2022 Update released in January 2025 finds veterans in New York State die by suicide at a rate nearly twice as high compared to civilians. Alarming, the use of firearms in veteran suicides rose from 50% in 2021 to 56% in 2022. The data report states, "Nationally, firearm usage in suicides among veterans increased by 1.3% between 2021 and 2022. By contrast, New York had a significant increase -- 12.4% -- in firearm modality among veterans." ¹ The trainings offered by the organizations continue to evolve based on the identified needs and established faculty curriculum advisory committees. NYSPA launched a new one-hour training titled, Counseling on Lethal Means Safety to Reduce Suicide Risk in 2023 with growing demand.

In addition to serving veterans, the initiative is expanding this year to also include training community mental healthcare providers and primary care healthcare providers on the mental health challenges faced by our first responders. There is tremendous overlap in the types of mental health challenges and conditions first responders face as a result and nature of their jobs and exposure to emergencies and traumatic events. In May 2024, the New York State Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Services released the results of a survey conducted as part of New York's inaugural [first responder mental health needs assessment](https://nyhealthfoundation.org/resource/data-snapshot-veteran-suicide-in-new-york-state-2022/).

¹ <https://nyhealthfoundation.org/resource/data-snapshot-veteran-suicide-in-new-york-state-2022/>

The survey found 80 percent had negative impacts to home life from work their work as first responder with 16 percent reporting suicidal thoughts at a rate higher than the general population according to Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).² In addition, 38% percent of survey respondents exhibited symptoms of PTSD, while many suffer from depression and anxiety.

The VMHTI has pursued linkages with veteran peers including the Joseph P. Dwyer Peer to Peer Program (Dwyer Program). The Dwyer Program has a specific charge of peer support for veterans and their families. Peer support covers many areas including connection to concrete services, peer-based group and individual support as well as service activities. The Dwyer Program does not provide medical or mental health clinical services. The VMHTI seeks to close the gap between Dwyer Programs and clinical services by working together to create a referral system for veterans seeking medical and mental health care. This expansion of VMHTI will provide wrap around support for veterans by providing a direct connection to trained clinicians.

Continued support of the VMHTI in the FY 2025-26 state budget remains essential as the US Department of Veterans Affairs launched a new initiative to allow veterans in crisis to obtain care in practices and facilities outside of the VA. While this initiative will increase access to services, it will place an even greater reliance on private practices and community mental health practitioners for services not provided by the VA or when the VA is unable to meet the demand. ***For the above reasons, NYSPA, MSSNY and NASW-NYS urge the final budget for 2025-26 include the \$350,000 appropriation for the VMHTI.***

² <https://www.news10.com/news/nys-survey-first-responders-facing-mental-health-challenges/>