

Report to the Legislature, Suicide Prevention  
Washington State Department of Veterans Affairs  
December 2022



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## Executive Summary

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Sec. 221 of ESSB 5693 requested the Washington Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA) to report on how funds provided in the section were spent, including the numbers of individuals served and the types of services provided.

Starting July 1st, 2021, the Suicide Prevention team brought on four additional staff, to include one Lead Suicide Prevention Peer Specialist, and three Suicide Prevention Peer Specialists to operate out of three regions within the state. Regions were divided to include the Northwest region (King County and northern counties), Southwest Region (Pierce County and southern counties) and Eastern Region to include all counties East of the Cascades.

This Peer team has conducted efforts to promote best practices when working with the Service Member, Veteran and Family communities, to include education, outreach, and crisis support. Using curriculum designed in conjunction with the University of Washington—Forefront program, the LEARN training was provided to participants in various populations to include Volunteers working in academic settings, internal Washington Department of Veterans Affairs staff, Non-Profit organizations, and Veteran Centers throughout the state. Though slow to begin due to a staggered hiring process, the education has been well received, netting positive feedback from participants on the efficacy of the material provided. With a full Peer staff fully trained to provide the workshop, and awareness increasing through outreach events, the workshop has been in high demand for the current year, and we may expect continuous requests for training in the future.

An additional educational opportunity—the Veterans Cultural Engagement training, was also provided, which raises awareness of unique challenges that Veterans face during and after their transition from service. This workshop also highlights important considerations when working with Veteran populations, and brings awareness to the possible ramifications, i.e. suicidal ideation, of potential isolation, perceived burdensomeness and the maintained capability for suicide following their exit. This training is also now in extreme high demand, and the team is working to provide a more diverse means of distribution through the Washington State Learning Management System for inclusion in a number of organizations New Employee Orientation.

Outreach is a primary component of the Peer Team’s efforts to work within the community, and efforts have been made to embed them into numerous events. Twenty-eight events in total were attended by the Suicide Prevention team where Veteran Suicide was discussed, and awareness was generated of learning opportunities and crisis support. Outreach events included conferences hosted by external agencies as well as internal to the WDVA, county level meetings, private organization’s events and Federal meetings focused on Veteran Suicide specifically.

Finally, the Peer team has functioned to provide crisis support to those in need, in sum, ten instances of crisis were addressed between August of 2022 and June 2023, and warm hand-offs

to resources were conducted to aid said individuals. We may expect that as the program continues to generate awareness of services, the number of crises support requests will also increase.

## Background

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### Creation of the Program

Over the past ten years, Washington has been at the forefront of suicide prevention, passing various bills supporting training and programming for suicide prevention in several sectors. Recently, the suicide prevention efforts have focused more heavily on the military and Veteran communities. In 2019 HB 1648 was not passed but items were funded in the budget, which required the Washington State Department of Veterans Affairs to develop and implement a statewide plan to reduce suicide among our Service Members, Veterans and Families. It required the dissemination of the suicide awareness and prevention materials that were prepared by the Safer Homes, Suicide Aware task force, to firearms dealers and licensed pharmacies for distribution to firearms purchasers and pharmacy patients.

Since the program's inception, the activities conducted have grown considerably, emphasizing areas such as training and education on military and veteran culture, conducting outreach within Washington State communities, and crisis intervention with warm handoffs to resources. The suicide prevention peer team work on the frontlines of suicide prevention efforts for the Washington State Governors Challenge to End Veteran Suicide, embedding themselves into community events and raising awareness of the program and services offered.

### Governor's Challenge

In March 2019, the President signed Executive Order 13861 which supports a three-year effort to reduce suicide among Service Members, Veterans and their Families (SMVF's). In support of this executive order, the Federal VA has rolled out Mayor's and Governor's Challenges supporting state efforts to reduce suicide in their communities. In January 2020, Washington State was asked to participate in the second round of the Governor's Challenge to End Veteran Suicide. Following this, Governor Inslee accepted the Governor's Challenge, which includes interagency collaboration and assistance from the Federal VA and SAMHSA to create a plan for reducing suicide among the Military and Veteran community in Washington State. The WDVA Suicide Prevention Coordinator was chosen to lead this initiative. The Governor's Challenge group is comprised of various subject matter experts and policy leaders. This initiative resulted in the creation of an action plan, and ultimately the Washington State SMVF Suicide Prevention Strategic Plan 21-23.

### Proviso

In the 2021 legislative session several bills were introduced, and budget items passed to continue and expand SMVF suicide prevention work in Washington State. HB 1477 was passed and WDVA was funded to provide the program's current 4.0 FTE's, to include 1-Suicide

Prevention peer Lead Specialist, and 3-Regional Navigators to expand the Veteran Peer Corps program with an emphasis on suicide prevention.

## Plan Summary

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### Peer Specialist Positions Summaries and Locations

The Suicide Prevention Peer Lead Specialist, assigned to the central WDVA office located in Olympia, WA, is responsible supporting the expansion and enhancement of suicide prevention efforts via the provision of suicide prevention trainings statewide, collaboration with community organizations and resources targeted for Service Members, Veterans, and their Families, collecting, managing and reporting program evaluations and outcome data in accordance with the Washington State SMVF Suicide Prevention Strategic Plan 21-23.

This position collaborates with government and nongovernment agencies and organizations to establish promising best practices for suicide awareness and prevention materials, training, and outreach programs targeted to SMVFs. Supports the expansion and enhancement of suicide prevention within the WDVA Veteran's Peer Corps Program and cultivates peer-led organizations serving veterans in transition and recovery; This position champions statewide suicide awareness and prevention training programs with content specific to SMVFs; and promotes and supports safer homes activities.

The Suicide Prevention Peer Specialists are assigned various locations throughout the state, to include the central office in Olympia, King Co, and Ellensburg. These positions work directly under the supervision of the Lead Suicide Prevention Peer Specialist and work independently with SMVF and multiple stakeholders within their assigned region. These positions contribute to improve suicide prevention approaches for SMVF's by providing direct support to SMVF in their assigned region with the delivery of Suicide Prevention Training, and tasks related to the WDVA Peer support programs. Building and maintaining relationships with regional community resources and personnel serving SMVF promoting wellness and addressing crisis. Encouraging non-profit, for profit, city, county, state, and federal organizations to submit applications to be included in the resource database and disseminating information about and encouraging the use of the web-based application by SMVF in the community and those who serve SMVF.

### Fiscal Report

#### **Expanded Suicide Prevention Program – FTE 4.0 per Fiscal Year**

\$449,000 of the general fund—state appropriation for fiscal year 2022 and \$449,000 of the general fund—state appropriation for fiscal year 2023 are provided solely for supporting the statewide plan to **reduce suicide** among service members, veterans, and their families. No later than December 1, 2022, the department must submit to the appropriate fiscal committees of the legislature a report that describes how the funding provided in this subsection was spent, including the numbers of individuals served and the types of services provided.

### Explanation of Spending

A majority of funds have been focused on hiring our Suicide Prevention Peer team. In July 2021 the Suicide Prevention Lead Peer Specialist was hired, following this, the Lead position conducted hiring of two Peer Specialists in November 2021, and one additional in January 2022. Due to COVID the hiring of the positions were staggered throughout the year. As part of HB: 1181, the program also requested funding to hire a fourth Suicide Prevention Peer Specialist with a focus on Rural communities for Fiscal Year 23. The funding expenditures displayed in the table below shows spending details for the suicide prevention peer program. This table also includes funding allotted for 1.0 FTE (\$122,000) and \$30,000 in training funds which were part of an approved DOH decision package and subsequent contract to WDVA in July 2021.

<b>WDVA Suicide Prevention Program Funding Expenditures FY22</b>			
<b>Object Title</b>	<b>Allotment</b>	<b>Expenditure</b>	<b>Delta</b>
Salaries & Wages	339,876	240,591	99,285
Employee Benefits	125,455	87,378	38,077
Goods and Services	10,000	21,717	(11,717)
Travel	10,000	8,897	1,103
Capital Outlays		(1,951)	1,951
Grants, Benefits & Client Services	31,342	20,000	11,342
Interagency Reimbursements	(122,900)	(117,354)	(5,546)
Intra-Agency Reimbursements	55,227	48,190	7,037
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>449,000</b>	<b>307,468</b>	<b>141,532</b>

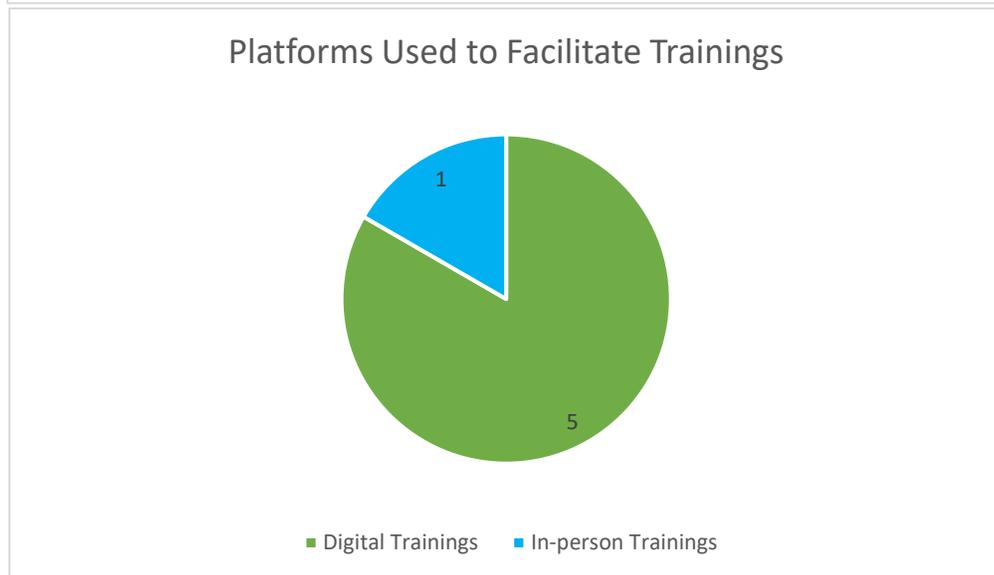
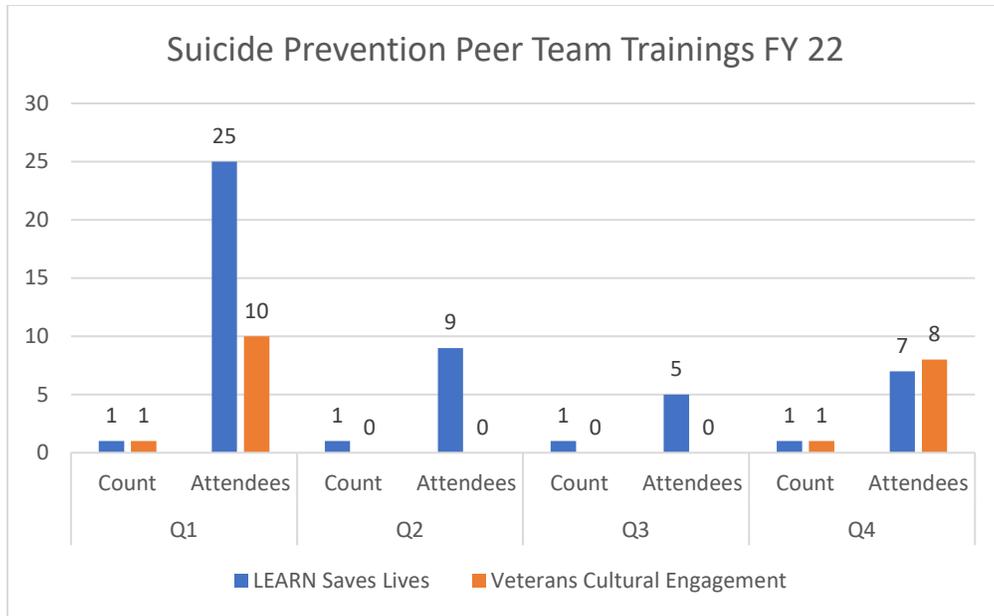
With staffing in place, funding can be focused on outreach to community providers, providing training, and identifying gaps in communities across the state.

### Activities Performed

#### Trainings

**LEARN Saves Lives:** The Suicide Prevention Peer team is responsible for providing the LEARN Saves Lives training in order to educate participants on intervention techniques when assisting SMVF in crisis. The LEARN SAVES LIVES training is a suicide prevention gatekeeper training created by UW Forefront Suicide Prevention. This training is specifically geared towards SMVF and emphasizes lethal means safety and SMVF specific culture and resources. Various members of the Counseling and Wellness team are certified to provide this training to individuals. This training is provided monthly and at request, often facilitated in partnership with Vet Corps members. This training is also embedded into the Vet Corps mentor training.

**Veteran Cultural Engagement:** Additionally, the Veteran staff of the Suicide Prevention Peer Team provide education on the unique culture of Service Members to assist organizations working with and for the SMVF community.



In sum, a total of four LEARN trainings, and two VCE trainings were conducted by the Suicide Prevention Peer team for FY 22. Primary reason for low count is due to limitations in staff capacity (hiring four new positions) and necessity to certify staff with UW Forefront to provide training. Primary platform used to facilitate trainings was digital due to COVID-19 protocols prohibiting in-person interactions.

Intended number of LEARN trainings for FY 22= 8 (2 per quarter). Achieved number of trainings= 4. Objective not met for this FY. Anticipate significant increase with staff hired and

certified, and through collaborative efforts with VTSC—with a goal to achieve two trainings per Peer Specialist (10 total) per quarter (4) for a total of 40 trainings.

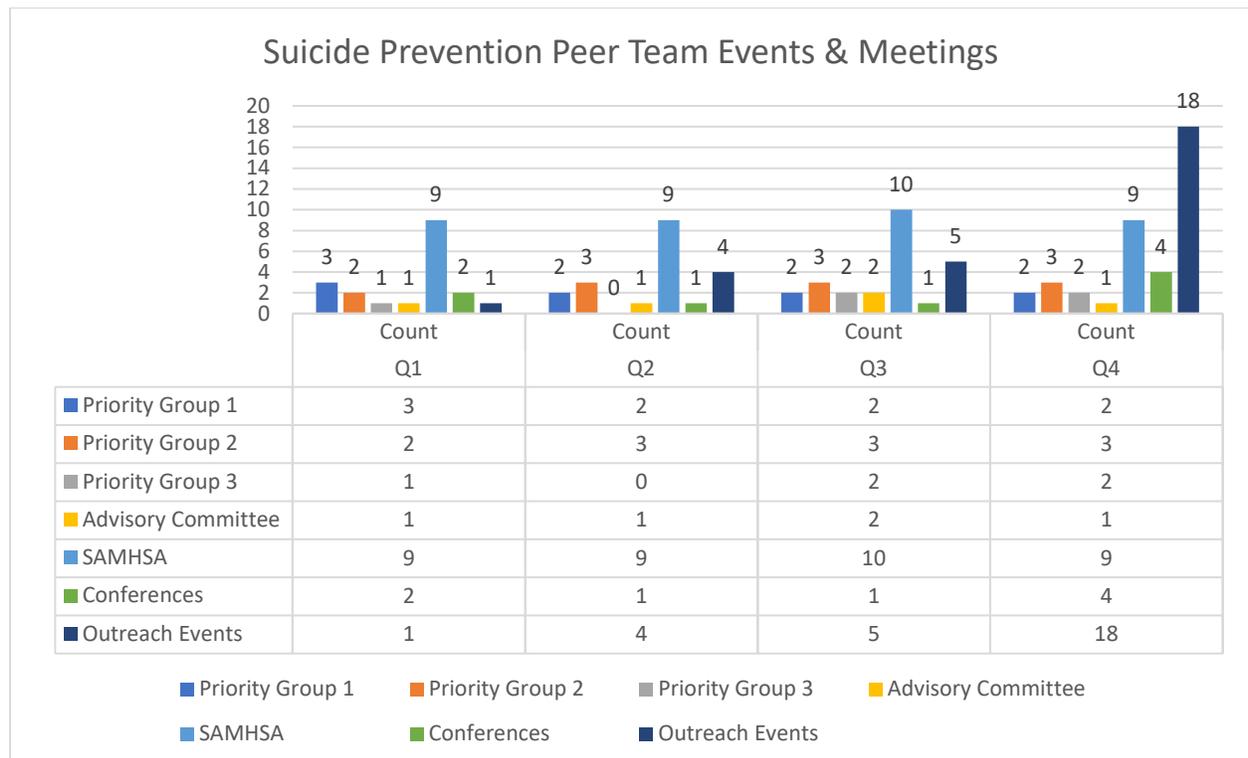
No criteria for VCE trainings have been established at this time, though with redesigned VCE curriculum and increase in veteran staff throughout the CWP, the estimated number of VCE trainings should increase for FY 23.

### Events & Outreach

An objective of the Suicide Prevention Peer Team is to foster connections and build trust in the community through collaboration. Additionally, acquisition of educational resources is necessary to provide continued support to the community. The following outlines the events and external meetings attended to achieve these objectives.

Primary events that are tracked include:

1. Governors Challenge Group 1 Meetings
2. Governors Challenge Group 2 Meetings
3. Governors Challenge Group 3 Meetings
4. Governors Challenge Advisory Committee Meetings
5. SAMHSA Communities of Practice Meetings
6. Conferences
7. Outreach Events



Data is representative of the entire Suicide Prevention Peer team, given that overlaps occur, duplicate event data was removed during analysis.

### **Priority Group 1 Meetings**

Intended total Priority Group 1 meetings for FY 22 = 8, total conducted = 9. Anticipate 12 for FY 23 now that reoccurring schedule is established.

***Priority Group 2 Meetings***

Intended total Priority Group 2 meetings for FY 22 = 8, total conducted = 11. Anticipate 12 for FY 23 due to reoccurring schedule.

***Priority Group 3 Meetings***

Total Priority Group 3 meetings for FY 22= 5. Anticipate 12 for FY 23 with new leadership and reoccurring schedule established.

***Advisory Committee Meetings***

Total Advisory Committee meetings for FY 22 = 5. This is lower than intended goal of 8. Anticipated number of Advisory Committee meetings for FY 23 = 4 as schedule shifts to quarterly meetings.

***SAMHSA VA Meetings & Academy***

Total SAMHSA VA Meetings & Academy events for FY = 37, exceeding intended goal by 208% (12). Anticipate similar total for FY 23 due to reoccurring schedule.

***Conferences***

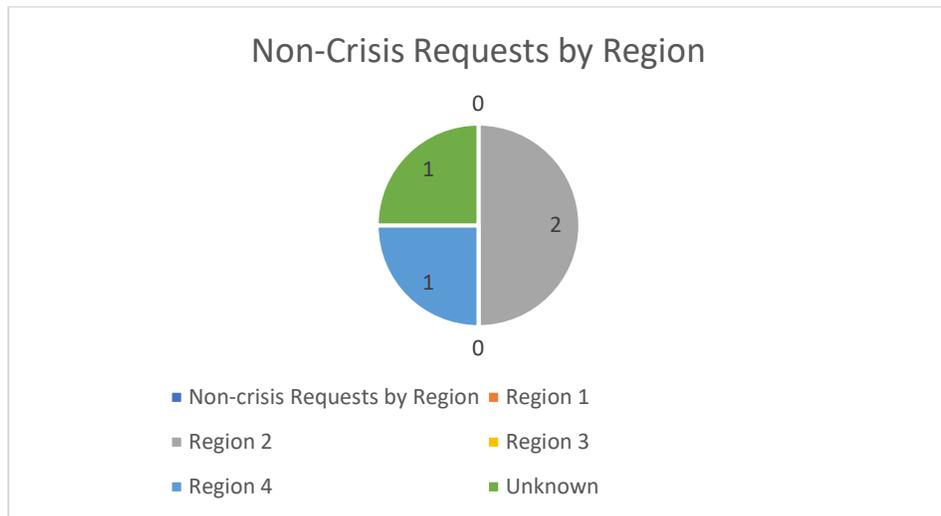
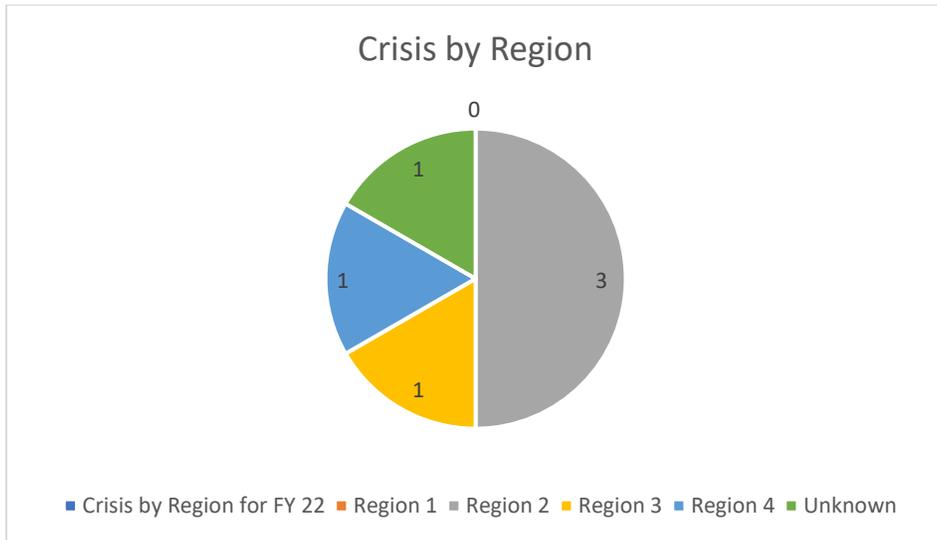
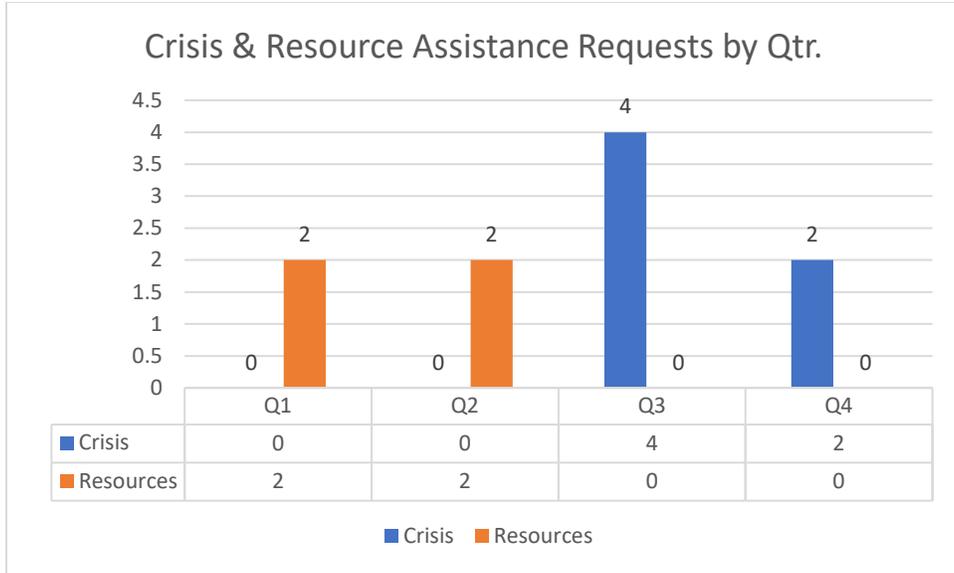
Total Conferences attended for FY 22 = 8. Conferences attended between all SP staff include:

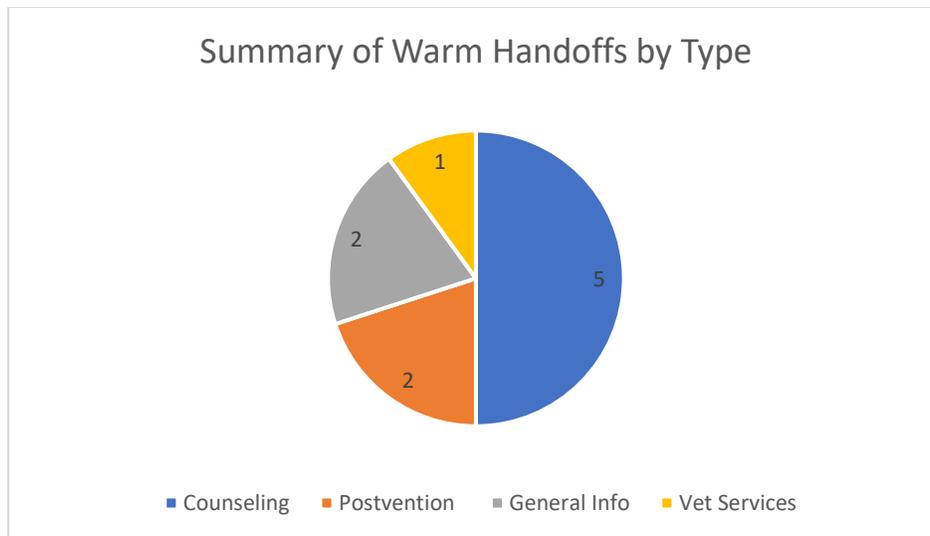
- Together Washington Summit
- Vet Corps Beginning of the Year Conference
- Vet Corps Mid-Year Conference
- WDVA Provider Conference
- American Association of Suicidology Conference
- Tribal Wellness and Resiliency Conference
- National State Legislature Conference
- Vet Corps End of Year Conference

Outreach conducted by the Suicide Prevention team shows significant increase from start of FY to end (1, 4, 5, 18 per quarter), this is due to restrictions being lifted on COVID-19 protocols, hiring staff, and certifying staff to provide trainings. Anticipate significant continuation of increase for FY 23.

***Crisis Interventions & Warm Handoffs***

The Suicide Prevention Peer team is responsible for providing intervention techniques for SMVF experiencing a crisis, and warm handoffs to resources. Below is the summative data of all interactions.





Summarized data indicates a total of ten responses to crisis or resource requests, with 60% of total inquiries regarding immediate crisis situations. Q3 indicates the highest count of crisis responses, though not enough data to infer any relationships. Speculation suggests the implementation of staff in areas promoted increase in requests through public awareness of services.

Highest count (5) of crisis response originated from region two, and the lowest count (0) originated from region one. Not enough unique data at this time to infer relationships. Anticipating increase in frequency for FY 23 due primarily to an increased awareness of the services the Suicide Prevention Team provides, and hopefully reliance & trust in the ability of the team.

Majority of resources SMVF are connected to during times of crisis are Counseling Services, with postvention resources and general information tied for the second highest count. Anticipating an increase in variety of resources over time, and continuation of counseling services remaining highest due to the nature and procedure of most crisis situations.

### Identified Barriers and Further Needs

A major barrier in the efforts of the Suicide Prevention team was the prevalence of COVID-19 and restrictions set in place limiting the team's ability to engage. While digital options were present and attended, the inability to connect in-person hindered efforts to foster new relationships. Additionally, due to the staggered approach needed when hiring, the ability of the Suicide Prevention team to conduct all activities was limited by the number of individuals readily available, trained, and capable to provide the services mentioned earlier. Finally, the ability to provide the LEARN training was postponed due to a need identified by Forefront to update the content. As Forefront is the sole owner of the content, and require fidelity review of interested trainers, the peer team was not equipped to provide the trainings until March 2022.

## Planning Adjustments

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With the restrictions lifted due to COVID we can expect a significant increase in engagement with the community, as indicated already by the trend in outreach activities attended as the fiscal year continued. Additionally, the Suicide Prevention Peer Team is fully staffed and trained, ready to provide the LEARN and Veteran Cultural Engagement trainings. We may expect increases across all activities and engagement in the current fiscal year and moving forward.

## Summary

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Overall, the Suicide Prevention Program is doing well, shortcomings in target goals were primarily due to limited staff based on the nature of hiring the lead, followed by the peer specialists, and logistical barriers. With the full staff, and removal of COVID restrictions, and more time to gather and interpret data, the program will have more information at their disposal to determine the effects of activities and relationships. Moving forward the program intends to establish pre and post data acquisition methods for both trainings provided, as well as with outreach activities where applicable to review and improve program effectiveness.