



2024 Sheila E. Hixson Behavioral Health Services Matching Grant Program for Service Members, Veterans, and their Families

Health-General § 7.5-210(i)

SB 550/Ch. 786, 2021

HB 872/Ch. 785, 2021

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Executive Summary

The Sheila E. Hixson Behavioral Health Services Matching Grant Program (Hixson), established in 2021 under Health General Article § 7.5-210, is an initiative of the Maryland Department of Health (MDH) designed to address the behavioral health needs of service members, veterans, and their families (SMVF). With an annual appropriation of up to \$2.5 million, the program funds local nonprofit organizations to develop and expand community-based behavioral health services tailored to the unique needs of the military-connected population.

In Fiscal Year 2024, MDH awarded grants to four organizations serving 410 SMVF individuals across Maryland. These organizations included Chesapeake Therapeutic Riding, For All Seasons, Lifeline Horse Rescue and Rehabilitation, and Warrior Music Foundation. These organizations provide a variety of services, including equine therapy, mental health counseling, art therapy, music therapy, and support for sexual assault survivors. These initiatives effectively reduced depression, stress, isolation, and anxiety while fostering a greater sense of connection and well-being among participants.

MDH will be establishing a statewide system of outcome measurement to assess the effectiveness and adequacy of services provided by each grantee. Currently, notable outcomes from the program include:

- Chesapeake Therapeutic Riding delivered equine therapy to 71 veterans, conducted 165 therapy sessions, and organized 20 staff/volunteer training sessions on military culture and suicide prevention.
- For All Seasons provided mental health services to 198 individuals, including 675 individual therapy sessions and 22 community outreach events.
- Lifeline Horse Rescue and Rehabilitation offered equine-assisted psychotherapy to 118 individuals, conducted 121 therapy sessions, and provided comprehensive staff training.
- Warrior Music Foundation delivered 198 music therapy sessions to 23 SMVF individuals, focusing on issues such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), military sexual trauma, and suicide prevention.
- In the upcoming fiscal year, MDH plans to expand the program to fund up to 24 nonprofits with a projected budget of \$2.5 million.

The Hixson Grant Program reflects MDH's commitment to improving the behavioral health and well-being of Maryland's service members, veterans, and their families, with continued support from the Maryland Legislature. Through this initiative, MDH aims to build a sustainable, community-driven network of services that effectively addresses the behavioral health challenges faced by the military population.

Background

Sheila E. Hixson Behavioral Health Services Matching Grant Program for Service Members and Veterans was established in 2021 under Health General Article § 7.5-210(i). MDH administers the Hixson Grant Program.

This program funds local nonprofit organizations, allowing them to develop and expand community behavioral health programs that address the unique needs of service members, veterans, and their families. (MGALEG, n.d.).

This initiative reflects MDH's commitment to supporting the behavioral health needs of service members, veterans, and their families (SMVF). According to Health General Article § 7.5-210, the Governor may include an annual appropriation of up to \$2.5 million for the program in the operating budget. For State Fiscal Year 2024, the Governor has appropriated \$2.4 million for this program.

The Maryland Commitment to Veterans (MCV) unit within MDH's Behavioral Health Administration (BHA) oversees the Hixson Grant Program on behalf of MDH. MCV was established in 2008 as part of Maryland Senate Bill 210 and focused on Maryland Veterans' Behavioral Health.

FY 2024 Hixson Grant Program

In FY 2024, MDH awarded grants to four organizations that served 410 SMVF across Maryland for six months.

These organizations focused on programs that enhance self-esteem, physical health, and self-awareness while promoting a sense of connection between individuals and animals. They also provided valuable information about complementary and alternative community services.

Additionally, the program made significant strides in reducing depression, isolation, stress, and anxiety among SMVF. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, these positive outcomes create protective conditions that help mitigate the risk of suicide (Risk and Protective Factors for Suicide | Suicide Prevention, 2024).

Program Awardees Accomplishments

Expanding Capacity for Veteran Equine Therapy Programs

Implementing Organization: Chesapeake Therapeutic Riding (CTR)

Project Overview: The program provided equine therapy for Maryland service members and veterans enrolled for services at the Veterans Affairs Maryland Health Care System.

The program offered a range of services and activities, including:

1. Mounted Programming activities, which included
 - a. Adaptive Riding Lessons
 - b. Equine Therapy sessions.

2. Unmounted Programming activities, which included
 - a. Basic Horsemanship
 - b. Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy.
3. Training for Staff and volunteers on topics of military, cultural competency, and suicide prevention for the veteran population.

CTR conducted the training through the VA S.A.V.E. program. The involvement of Veterans Administration staff was invaluable in transporting, supporting, and recruiting veterans for equine therapy programs.

Service Area:

1. Baltimore County
2. Cecil County
3. Harford County
4. Baltimore City

Target Audience: Veterans and service members age 20+ with disabilities and diagnoses

Performance Measures:

- Total veterans served: 71
- Equine Therapy sessions held: 165
- Staff and volunteers trained on military culture and suicide prevention: 20

Eastern Shore SMVF Rapid Mental Health Access Program

Implementing organization: For All Seasons

Project Overview

The program provided mental health and sexual assault services to the Maryland Eastern Shore military community.

These services included:

1. Evidence-based individual and family therapy
2. Mental health screenings
3. Alternative therapies such as art therapy, Trauma Play, and neurofeedback
4. Peer support groups
5. Case management
6. Community outreach to the military-connected community
7. Initial psychiatry appointments
8. Psychiatry medication management
9. Treatment planning
10. Family therapy
11. Initial mental health assessments
12. Rape crisis center services
13. Detention center-based services

Service Area:

1. Caroline,
2. Dorchester,
3. Kent,
4. Queen Anne's,
5. Talbot County

Target Audience: Service members, veterans, and their families (spouses and children) in need of mental health and sexual assault support services

Performance Measures:

- Total number of Service Members, Veterans, and Families (SMVF) served: 198
- Screenings completed: 38
- Individual therapy sessions conducted: 675
- Alternative therapy sessions conducted: 11
- Community outreach events held: 22
- Initial Psychiatry Appointments: 19
- Psychiatry Medication Management: 161
- Treatment Planning: 56
- Family Therapy sessions: 45
- Initial Mental Health Assessments: 38
- Rape Crisis Center Services: 10
- Detention Center-Based Services: 12

Expand Equine Assisted Psychotherapy Services to Include Military Family Members

Implementing organization: Lifeline Horse Rescue and Rehabilitation

Project Overview

Lifeline Horse Rescue and Rehabilitation (LHRR) implemented their Lifeline Equine Therapy Services (LETS) program to offer both individual and group Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy sessions through the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA). This initiative focuses on providing support to the military-connected community.

Staff at LHRR received specialized training in military culture and Internal Family Systems (IFS) Therapy Immersion and led trauma-informed yoga sessions. Additionally, they underwent training to attain Life Coaching and EAGALA certifications and completed necessary recertification.

Service Area:

1. Statewide, with a primary focus on
2. Anne Arundel,
3. Howard,
4. Montgomery,
5. Prince Georges,
6. Washington Counties

Target Audience: Service members, veterans, and their families (spouses and children) who have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), military sexual trauma (MST), and other mental health conditions putting them at risk for suicide.

Performance Measures:

- Total SMVF served: 118
- Individual and group equine-assisted psychotherapy sessions held: 121
- Community outreach events held: 13
- Individual EAP sessions held: 110
- Group EAP sessions held: 10
- Staff trained in IFS Therapy Immersion: 1
- Staff completing Trauma-Informed Yoga training: 1
- Staff completing Military Cultural and Clinical training: 1
- Staff completing Life coaching certification: 1
- Staff completing EAGALA certification/recertification: 4

Expand Music Therapy Program to Reduce the Number of "High Risk for Suicide" Military Individuals on the Waitlist for Services

Implementing organization: Warrior Music Foundation

Project Overview

The Warrior Music Foundation offered music therapy sessions that included initial assessments, treatment plan reviews, and discharge plan reviews. Music therapy's therapeutic goals and objectives focus on enhancing participants' communication and cognitive skills, facilitating trauma processing, reducing social isolation and symptoms of anxiety, improving sleep patterns, and regulating mood.

Service Area:

1. Statewide, but primarily
2. Anne Arundel,
3. Baltimore,
4. Howard, and
5. Prince George's Counties and
6. Baltimore City

Target Audience: Service members, veterans, and their families (spouses and children) who have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), military sexual trauma (MST), and other mental health conditions putting them at risk for suicide.

Performance Measures:

- Total SMVF served: 23
- Initial assessments completed: 12
- Treatment plan reviews held: 4
- Discharge plan reviews held: 2
- Music therapy sessions completed: 198

Future Endeavors

With a robust program and marketing plan framework in FY2025, we are poised to make significant strides in growing this program in the coming years. As we move forward, MDH remains dedicated to adapting and innovating to meet the evolving needs of our esteemed veterans. As of FY25, BHA has issued Hixson awards totaling \$1.6M to four organizations.

The program is working closely with these partners to provide guidance and monitor deliverables and outcomes.

Conclusion

The activities mentioned above demonstrate MDH's strong commitment to improving the well-being of Maryland's service members, veterans, and their families. As we move forward, MDH remains dedicated to adapting and innovating to meet the changing needs of our esteemed veterans.

References

1. MGALEG. (n.d.). *Health General Article § 7.5-210*. Maryland General Assembly. https://docs.google.com/document/d/1F0DH_hMHWa3nIXO9aWUyrAE3EOjZBwsW/edit
2. *Risk and Protective Factors for Suicide | Suicide Prevention*. (2024, April 25). CDC. Retrieved November 18, 2024, from <https://www.cdc.gov/suicide/risk-factors/index.html>