

The Florida Senate
BILL ANALYSIS AND FISCAL IMPACT STATEMENT

(This document is based on the provisions contained in the legislation as of the latest date listed below.)

Prepared By: The Professional Staff of the Committee on Appropriations

BILL: SB 1712

INTRODUCER: Senators Burgess and Rodrigues

SUBJECT: Veteran Suicide Prevention Training Pilot Program

DATE: February 23, 2022

REVISED: _____

	ANALYST	STAFF DIRECTOR	REFERENCE	ACTION
1.	<u>Brown</u>	<u>Caldwell</u>	<u>MS</u>	Favorable
2.	<u>Gerbrandt</u>	<u>Money</u>	<u>AHS</u>	Recommend: Favorable
3.	<u>Gerbrandt</u>	<u>Sadberry</u>	<u>AP</u>	Favorable

I. Summary:

SB 1712 requires the Department of Veterans' Affairs (department) to establish and oversee the Veteran Suicide Prevention Training Pilot Program (program). The purpose of the program is to provide training and certification in preventing veteran suicide to department claims examiners and county and city veteran service officers. The bill requires the department to contract with an organization to develop the training curriculum.

The bill requires the department to adopt rules, and submit a report to the President of the Senate and the Speaker of the House of Representatives by June 30 of each year. The report must provide information on the pilot program and recommend whether changes should be made to increase its effectiveness. In the report to be submitted by June 30, 2026, the department must recommend whether the pilot program should be continued.

A non-recurring appropriation of \$500,000 is provided in the bill.

The bill takes effect on July 1, 2022.

II. Present Situation:

Veteran Population and Suicide

Veteran Population and Demographics

As of 2017, 20 million veterans live in the United States, of which nearly 2 million are women.¹ Only about half of veterans nationally receive or access at least one benefit from the U.S.

¹ U.S. Dep't of Veterans Affairs, *National Strategy for Preventing Veteran Suicide, 2018-2028*, available at https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide_prevention/docs/Office-of-Mental-Health-and-Suicide-Prevention-National-Strategy-for-Preventing-Veterans-Suicide.pdf (pg. 5).

Department of Veteran Affairs (VA).² Third in veteran population to California and Texas, Florida has more than 1.5 million veterans.³ Of these:

- 1.17 million are wartime veterans;
- 350,000 are peacetime veterans;
- 31,000 are World War II veterans;
- 105,000 are Korean War veterans;
- 498,000 are Vietnam-era veterans;
- 188,000 are Gulf War veterans; and
- 177,494 are Post-9/11 veterans.⁴

Mental Health of Veterans

Veterans are known to have higher levels of mental distress than non-veterans. In a 2014 study, almost 1 in 4 veterans showed symptoms of mental illness.⁵ Predominant mental health diagnoses among veterans are:

- Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) at a rate of 15 times that of the general population;
- Depression at a rate of 5 times that of the general population; and
- Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI).⁶

Veterans who have a diagnosed mental health illness or substance use disorder are at a much higher risk of suicide than veterans without these diagnoses.⁷

Substance Use Disorder by Veterans

Substance use is considered to constitute a substance use disorder if the recurrent use of alcohol and/or drugs causes clinically significant impairment, including health problems, disability, and failure to meet major responsibilities at work, school, or home.⁸

Substance use disorder is marked among veterans, the most prevalent being alcohol binge drinking by younger veterans and at a higher rate of misuse than by non-veterans.⁹ The rate of illegal drug use, primarily marijuana (marijuana use for recreational purposes is still illegal in most states) is about the same for veterans and the general population.¹⁰ Additionally,

² *Id.*

³ Florida Dep't of Veterans' Affairs, *Fast Facts*, available at <https://www.floridavets.org/our-veterans/profilefast-facts/> (last visited Jan. 13, 2022).

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ National Institute on Mental Illness (NAMI); *Veterans & Active Duty* (pg. 1), available at <https://www.nami.org/Your-Journey/Veterans-Active-Duty> (last visited Jan. 14, 2022).

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ The rate of suicide among VHA patients with a mental health illness or a substance use disorder was 57.2 patients per 100,000 population, more than double the rate amount those without these diagnoses. Ramchand, Rajeev, *Suicide Among Veterans: Veterans' Issues in Focus*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2021 available at: <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA1363-1.html> (last visited Feb. 8, 2022).

⁸ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, U.S. Dep't of Health and Human Services, *Mental Health and Substance Use Disorders*, available at <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disorders> (last visited Oct. 25, 2021).

⁹ National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI), U.S. National Library of Medicine, *Substance Use Disorders in Military Veterans: Prevalence and Treatment Challenges*, available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5587184/> (pg. 3).

¹⁰ *Id.* at 4.

prescription drugs, such as opioids are being prescribed to veterans at increasing rates. Despite efforts by the VA and other agencies in recent decades to reduce substance use disorder among veterans, rates continue to increase.¹¹ Veterans with substance use disorders often have co-occurring medical conditions, other psychiatric disorders, poorer quality relationships, lower overall quality of life, and increased rates of suicidal ideation, attempts, and completion.¹²

Military Sexual Trauma

Military sexual trauma is an occurrence or occurrences of sexual harassment or sexual assault that has taken place during military service. Researchers have found a clear association between military sexual trauma and suicide. Early data finds that 1 out of 4 survivors of military sexual trauma report non-suicidal self-injury. Relatedly, non-suicidal self-injury correlates to suicidal ideation, planning, and attempts.¹³

Suicide Rates Attributed to Service During Post 9/11 Conflicts

An estimated 30,177 active duty service members and veterans of the post 9/11 wars have died by suicide, significantly more than the 7,057 service members that died in the post 9/11 war operations.¹⁴ Identified causes vary.

There are clear contributors to suicidal ideation like high exposure to trauma [(mental, physical, moral, and sexual),] stress and burnout, the influence of the military's hegemonic masculine culture, continued access to guns, and the difficulty of reintegrating into civilian life. ... [W]e must also examine unique elements of the U.S. post-9/11 wars. ... [W]e have seen a tremendous rise of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in warfare, significantly increasing the number of traumatic brain injuries (TBIs), and polytrauma cases among service members.¹⁵

As many as 20 percent of post-9/11 service members have experienced a TBI, with many exposed to repetitive damage.¹⁶

Suicide Rates between Veterans and Non-Veterans

From the latest data reported for 2019, 553 veterans died by suicide in Florida, 524 men and 29 women, while nationally, 6,261 veterans died by suicide.¹⁷ Nationally, suicide rates are highest

¹¹ *Id.* at 2.

¹² *Id.* at 2.

¹³ U.S. Dep't of Veterans Affairs, *Military Sexual Trauma -- A Risk Factor for Suicide*, available at https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide_prevention/docs/Literature-Review-Military-Sexual-Trauma-CLEARED-3-5-19.pdf.

¹⁴ Thomas Howard Suitt, III, Watson Institute, International & Public Affairs, Brown University, *High Suicide Rates among United States Service Members and Veterans of the Post-9/11 Wars*, available at https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2021/Suitt_Suicides_Costs%20of%20War_June%2021%202021.pdf (June 21, 2021) (pgs. 1, 3).

¹⁵ *Id.* at 3-4.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 4.

¹⁷ U.S. Dep't of Veterans Affairs, *Florida Veteran Suicide Data Sheet, 2019*, available at <https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/2019/2019-State-Data-Sheet-Florida-508.pdf>.

among young veterans, aged 18-29 years of age.¹⁸ In comparing suicide death rates between the veteran and non-veteran population, in 2019 the rate of suicide by the general population in Florida was 19.6 per 100,000 persons while that for Florida veterans, was 35.7.¹⁹ A similar disparity exists at the national level, 18.0 suicide deaths per 100,000 for the general population and 31.6 for veterans.²⁰ More than 70 percent of the time, a firearm was used to die by suicide.²¹

It is well-documented that the Covid-19 pandemic has contributed to a significant increase in feelings of loss, anxiety, and depression.²² However, the impact of the pandemic on suicide is unknown. Also, unknown at this time is whether the disparity in suicide rates between veterans and non-veterans will trend differently in coming years.

Suicide Intervention Programs

Federal Programs

Suicide prevention is a top clinical priority of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). In 2018, the department implemented a 10-year strategy for preventing veteran suicide.²³ This approach to suicide prevention involves a veteran's family, peers, and community and includes specific outreach to veterans who do not access services of the VA.²⁴

VA suicide prevention initiatives include:

- Enhancing mental health services for veterans who are women.
- Broadening telehealth.
- Developing free-of-charge mobile applications for veterans and their families.
- Improving access to mental health care.
- Helping families of veterans by telephone.²⁵

In implementing its suicide prevention strategy, the VA partners with other government agencies and organizations at both the national and local level to share information and training on suicide prevention.²⁶ To impact suicide prevention at the state level, the VA along with the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration (SAMHSA), initiated the "Governor's

¹⁸ U.S. Dep't of Veterans Affairs, *National Strategy for Preventing Veteran Suicide, 2018-2028*, available at https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide_prevention/docs/Office-of-Mental-Health-and-Suicide-Prevention-National-Strategy-for-Preventing-Veterans-Suicide.pdf.

¹⁹ U.S. Dep't of Veterans Affairs, *Florida Veteran Suicide Data Sheet, 2019*, available at <https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/2019/2019-State-Data-Sheet-Florida-508.pdf>.

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ *Id.*

²² See KFF, *The Implications of COVID-19 for Mental Health and Substance Use* (Feb. 10, 2021), available at <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/the-implications-of-covid-19-for-mental-health-and-substance-use/> (last visited Nov. 3, 2021).

²³ U.S. Dep't of Veterans Affairs, *National Strategy for Preventing Veteran Suicide, 2018-2028*, available at https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide_prevention/docs/Office-of-Mental-Health-and-Suicide-Prevention-National-Strategy-for-Preventing-Veterans-Suicide.pdf.

²⁴ *Id.* at 1.

²⁵ *Id.* at 11.

²⁶ *Id.*

Challenge to Prevent Suicide Among Service Members, Veterans, and their Families.”²⁷ The goal of this initiative is to develop and implement a state-wide suicide prevention plan. To date, 35 states have joined the challenge, including Florida.^{28,29}

The Veterans COMPACT Act of 2020 (Act) enables the VA to implement programs, policies, and reports related to transition assistance, suicide care, mental health education and treatment, health care, and women veteran care. The Act also requires the VA to pay for providing veteran emergent suicide care at VA and non-VA facilities.³⁰

Most recently, in November 2021, the White House unveiled a plan to advance a comprehensive, cross-sector, evidence-based strategy for reducing suicide rates among service members and veterans.³¹ This plan has several priority goals:

- Improve lethal means safety by inserting time and distance between a person in crisis and access to lethal means, such as a firearm or medication.
- Enhance crisis care and facilitating care transitions, including stabilization services.
- Increase access to and delivery of evidence-based treatment.
- Address upstream risk (leading up to crisis) and protective factors in furthering prevention efforts.
- Bridge interagency coordination.³²

State Programs

The 2021 Legislature created the Florida Veterans’ Care Coordination Program (program), to be established by the Department of Veterans’ Affairs (department).³³ To provide services, the department is authorized to contract with a nonprofit, accredited entity to provide dedicated behavioral health care referral services, through the state’s 211 Network.³⁴ A key goal of the program is to prevent suicide by veterans.³⁵

County and City Veteran Service Officers and Department Claims Examiners

County and city veteran service officers are responsible for assisting Veterans and their dependents in securing all entitled benefits earned through honorable military service and to

²⁷ U.S. Dep’t of Veterans Affairs, *2021 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Report* (Sept. 2021) (pg. 13), available at <https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/2021/2021-National-Veteran-Suicide-Prevention-Annual-Report-FINAL-9-8-21.pdf>.

²⁸ *Id.* at 14.

²⁹ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), U.S. Dep’t of Health & Human Services, *Governor’s and Mayor’s Challenges to Prevent Suicide Among Service members, Veterans, and their Families*, available at <https://www.samhsa.gov/smfv-ta-center/mayors-governors-challenges> (last visited Jan. 14, 2022).

³⁰ Veterans COMPACT Act of 2020 (Pub. L. No. 116-214).

³¹ The White House, *Reducing Military and Veteran Suicide: Advancing a Comprehensive, Cross-sector, Evidence-informed Public Health Strategy*, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Military-and-Veteran-Suicide-Prevention-Strategy.pdf>

³² *Id.* at 8-9.

³³ Chapter 2021-198, Laws of Fla.; s. 394.9087, F.S.

³⁴ Section 394.9087(1), F.S. The Florida 211 network, established in s. 408.918, F.S., operates as the single point of coordination for information and referral of health and human services (s. 408.918(1), F.S.)

³⁵ Section 394.9087(2)(a), F.S.

advocate for Veteran's interest in their community.³⁶ Current law authorizes each board of county commissioners to employ a county veteran service officer.³⁷ Likewise, the governing body of a city may employ a city veteran service officer.³⁸

The department provides the training program for county and city veteran service officers.³⁹ Every county or city veteran service officer must attend the training and successfully complete a test administered by the department. The department is required to further establish periodic training refresher courses, which must be completed as a condition of continued employment.⁴⁰

Similarly, the department employs veteran claims examiners to assist with questions and connect veterans with their earned benefits. Veteran Claims Examiners are co-located at each VA Medical Center and many VA outpatient clinics. To date, the department has on staff 89 veteran claims examiners statewide.⁴¹

III. Effect of Proposed Changes:

The bill requires the Department of Veterans' Affairs (department) to establish and oversee the Veteran Suicide Prevention Training Pilot Program (program). The purpose of the program is to provide training and certification in preventing veteran suicide to agency claims examiners and county and city veteran service officers. To provide training curriculum, the bill requires the department to contract with an organization that has experience in developing and implementing veteran-relevant and evidence-based suicide prevention training.

Program participants must be trained in identifying indicators of elevated suicide risk and providing emergency crisis referrals for veterans in emotional or psychological distress.

The bill requires the department to adopt rules, and submit a report to the President of the Senate and the Speaker of the House of Representatives by June 30 of each year. The report will provide information on the pilot program and recommend whether changes should be made to increase its effectiveness. In the report to be submitted by June 30, 2026, the department must recommend whether the pilot program should be continued.

A non-recurring appropriation of \$500,000 is provided in the bill.

The bill takes effect on July 1, 2022.

³⁶ Leon County Government, Veterans Services, available at <https://cms.leoncountyfl.gov/Home/Departments/Office-of-Human-Services-and-Community-Partnership/Veterans-Services> (last visited Jan. 26, 2022).

³⁷ Section 292.11(1), F.S.

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ Section 292.11(4), F.S.

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ Dep't of Veterans Affairs, *2022 Agency Legislative Bill Analysis, SB 1712* (Jan. 14, 2022) (on file with the Senate Committee on Military and Veterans Affairs, Space, and Domestic Security). A veteran service officer at the city level may be found in a city such as Jacksonville, which is consolidated with Duval County. Email from Christian Cochran, Department of Veterans Affairs (Jan. 14, 2022) (on file with the Senate Committee on Military and Veterans Affairs, Space, and Domestic Security).

IV. Constitutional Issues:

A. Municipality/County Mandates Restrictions:

None.

B. Public Records/Open Meetings Issues:

None.

C. Trust Funds Restrictions:

None.

D. State Tax or Fee Increases:

None.

E. Other Constitutional Issues:

None identified.

V. Fiscal Impact Statement:

A. Tax/Fee Issues:

None.

B. Private Sector Impact:

None.

C. Government Sector Impact:

SB 1712 includes a non-recurring appropriation of \$500,000 from the General Revenue Fund to the Department of Veterans' Affairs.

VI. Technical Deficiencies:

None.

VII. Related Issues:

None.

VIII. Statutes Affected:

This bill creates section 394.9088 of the Florida Statutes.

IX. Additional Information:

- A. **Committee Substitute – Statement of Changes:**
(Summarizing differences between the Committee Substitute and the prior version of the bill.)

None.

- B. **Amendments:**

None.

This Senate Bill Analysis does not reflect the intent or official position of the bill's introducer or the Florida Senate.
