



## Legislative Fiscal Bureau

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Joint Committee on Finance

Paper #832

### Veterans Outreach and Recovery Program (Veterans Affairs)

[LFB 2023-25 Budget Summary: Page 678, #10]

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#### CURRENT LAW

The veterans outreach and recovery program (VORP) provides outreach, mental health services, and support to veterans that may have mental health or substance use conditions. VORP is primarily a case management program that works with participants to identify issues and barriers that may prevent them from achieving their goals. VORP field staff work with community partners and professionals to assist participants with accessing mental health services, substance use treatment, financial assistance, housing and utilities, claims and benefits assistance, and employment and education. VORP has 14.75 authorized SEG positions and base funding of \$1,609,500 SEG, from the veterans trust fund.

#### DISCUSSION POINTS

1. The veterans outreach and recovery program currently has 11 outreach and recovery regional coordinators, three clinical coordinators, who are licensed clinical social workers, and two program supervisors. (Of the three clinical social workers, one is split-funded, with 0.75 SEG and 0.25 FED.) All of the programs positions are currently filled.

2. The program's outreach and recovery regional coordinators work with county and tribal veterans service offices and nonprofit organizations to identify veterans who may have mental health and substance abuse disorders that are not adequately addressed through existing resources. In addition, outreach specialists conduct "street outreach" to locate veterans who do not have permanent housing. Once the veterans are identified, the outreach coordinators provide case management and referral services, connecting the veterans to services that meet their individual needs, such as emergency shelter, utility assistance, rental assistance, transportation, food or household needs, employment or education programs, and health services. The clinical coordinators provide assessment

and diagnosis, review individual treatment plans, provide direct treatment for some veterans who need behavioral health services, and coordinate with residential treatment or detoxification services, VA health care providers, and other providers to arrange ongoing treatment and supportive services.

3. In 2021-22, the program provided direct or referral services to 1,329 individuals, an increase from 1,046 in 2020-21.

4. In February of 2022, the Governor signed Executive Order #157, creating the Blue Ribbon Commission on Veteran Opportunity to study issues facing veterans in Wisconsin, including employment, education, housing, and healthcare. The Commission, which was composed of veterans representing various organizations, representatives of several state agencies, and members of the Legislature, released its report in September, containing findings and recommendations. To address unmet needs for veterans facing mental health and substance use issues, the report recommended that more funding be provided for the veterans outreach and recovery program.

5. The Commission's report asserts that the 11 outreach coordinators and two clinical social workers that the program currently has is not sufficient to adequately cover all areas of the state. In particular, the report notes that since many behavioral health clinics and other social service providers are currently unable to provide prompt services, due in part to staffing shortages, this places greater pressure on VORP staff to ensure that their veteran clients' needs are addressed while waiting for appointments. Thus, the Commission recommended that the state provide "additional funding to significantly expand VORP staffing for the purposes of decreasing geographic barriers to access, increasing outreach capacity, building additional partnerships, improving capacity for direct response, and providing staff recovery time needed to continue providing high-quality services."

6. Following the release of the Blue Ribbon Commission report, the Governor announced an allocation of \$10.0 million of state and local fiscal recovery funds, provided under the American Rescue Act, for various initiatives to assist veterans. Among these initiatives is an allocation of \$1.5 million for an additional 7.0 project positions for VORP. The additional positions would consist of 5.0 outreach specialists and 2.0 clinical social workers. The Department has filled some of these positions and is in the process of filling the others.

7. The Department indicates that the additional outreach specialist project positions will allow the program to reduce the geographic area that each outreach specialist covers. This is expected to reduce travel times and allow staff to respond more rapidly to veterans in need. In addition, outreach specialists will be able to conduct more outreach to locate veterans who are not served by existing resources. The two additional clinical social workers will also reduce the geographic area of responsibility for the clinical coordinator positions, allowing the program to provide more timely treatment and connections with mental health and substance abuse providers.

8. AB 43/SB 70 would provide an additional 7.0 SEG positions, and associated funding of \$272,300 SEG in 2023-24 and \$684,900 SEG in 2024-25, for the veterans outreach and recovery program. If approved, this would increase the total number of authorized permanent positions for VORP to 22.0. The positions would include 5.0 outreach and recovery regional coordinators and 2.0 clinical coordinators, who are licensed clinical social workers.

9. The Administration indicates that the intent of the budget proposal would be to provide ongoing state funding for the VORP expansion and to convert the federally-funded project positions to permanent positions when those project positions expire. Since the project positions expire on December 31, 2024, with six months remaining in the biennium, the Administration's intent could be accomplished with a smaller funding increase than the amount included in the bill. Specifically, the positions could be created in 2024-25, supported with funding of \$342,500 SEG in that year. [Alternative 1]

10. If the additional positions are not approved, the project positions would expire at the end of 2024 and the program would return to previous staffing and service levels. The Committee could determine that the project positions will have met an objective of temporarily increasing outreach and treatment capacity, but that the ongoing needs can adequately be served with the current permanent positions. In this case, the Committee could decide that additional VORP positions are not warranted. [Alternative 2]

11. Since the segregated veterans trust fund (VTF) is funded primarily by a GPR sum sufficient appropriation that supplements other VTF segregated revenues, any increase in SEG spending from the veterans trust fund will increase the amount expended from the GPR supplemental appropriation by a corresponding amount. Consequently, Alternative 1, which would provide additional funding for VORP would increase estimates of the amount of these supplements to reflect these spending increases from the VTF. [No total is shown in the funding box for this alternative to avoid presenting the funding change as a double-counted total.]

## ALTERNATIVES

1. Provide 7.0 SEG positions, beginning in 2024-25, and a funding increase of \$342,500 SEG in 2024-25 to support the conversion of federally-funded project positions to permanent positions for the veterans outreach and recovery program. Increase the GPR appropriation that transfers funding to the veterans trust fund by \$342,500 in 2024-25 to reflect this SEG spending increase.

ALT 1	Change to Base	
	Funding	Positions
GPR	\$342,500	0.00
SEG	342,500	7.00

2. Take no action.

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