

Tuesday 11MAR2025 1300

**Public Testimony for Expanding State-Funded Veteran Healthcare in Oregon
Presented by Amy Almond-Schmid, Veteran and Executive Director
On Behalf of Returning Veterans Project**

Good afternoon, Chair Tran, Vice-Chairs Grayber and Lewis, and Members of the Committee.

For the record, I am Amy Almond-Schmid. I am an active-duty Veteran, and a currently serving member of the Oregon Air National Guard. Today I'm here in my capacity as the Executive Director of Returning Veterans Project, an Oregon-based 501(c)3 nonprofit that's been dedicated to supporting our state's Veterans and Service Members through free, confidential, mental and physical health services for 20 years.

As you weigh both current and potential policies impacting Veterans' access to care, I submit for your consideration the criticality of options and how options play a factor in suicide prevention.

Nonprofits like RVP were founded to fill gaps. The RVP model serves as an option for thousands of Veterans living in Oregon, untethered from, ineligible for, or underserved by existing care systems in place.

Expanding healthcare options is not just suicide prevention or an investment in Veteran well-being—it is a moral obligation. We owe it to ourselves, to our communities and to our brothers and sisters who have served. Public resources and community-driven solutions in partnership ensure our comrades receive the care they need, when and where they need it.

RVP Testimonials D and A.

D's story: After serving in Iraq, I returned home considering divorce, feeling displaced and always on edge with little patience for my wife and children. I enrolled at the VA for counseling and went for 3 years, until I experienced a serious mental health breakdown, where I had both suicidal and homicidal thoughts and feelings. It was at that time, that a male therapist at the VA referred me to RVP. My first RVP therapist did neuro-feedback work, which helped immensely in relieving my symptoms. After that work, I began seeing a new therapist once a week. I also tried acupuncture from an RVP Provider. I'm still married today and parenting my children. I hold a full-time management job. The biggest thing I received from RVP is my life. Because of their help I am no longer a danger to myself or my family.

A's story: After surviving two tours in Iraq, as a convoy commander, I started to realize that although my anger had finally subsided enough, I was still suffering from horrible neck pain, nightmares, flashbacks and panic attacks. I thought these were symptoms I would just have to live with for the rest of my life. I attended an RVP event and thought well maybe I should start to tackle some of the emotional pain I'm feeling. I thought I wouldn't have time to meet

with a therapist or confront the trauma in my life. I work full time and I take classes, and have two children. I had told myself that therapy was just going to have to wait. But RVP gave me flexible options. I meet once a month with my chiropractor, which has made huge improvements on my posture and my extreme headaches. In addition, I met weekly with my therapist. RVP has provided me with a tremendous amount of personal insight and understanding. Working with my therapist through RVP has made me a better person, a better employee, a better student and most of all a better veteran in my community.

Thank you for your continued commitment to Veterans, Service Members and those who love them. Together we can reduce Veteran suicide by ensuring they have access to options—both within and beyond the walls of the current systems available. Thank you for your time and for your pledge to voting yes on HB2537 in support of Veterans like D and A who call Oregon home.

In calendar year 2024, Returning Veterans Project:

Served 544 Clients

391 Veterans

96 Active Service Members and

57 Family Members

RVP provided options through 135 Providers and 9 clinics, all of which, are committed to offering their services at no cost to RVP clients. Our impact goes beyond headcounts. For every dollar donated to RVP, we provide nearly five dollars in services, funneling community support into direct care for Veterans. Providers in the RVP Directory volunteered 2,928 hours of care equating to \$438,000+ in donated services in-kind.

Over the course of the year we recruited 25 new Providers and to ensure new and sustaining Providers are equipped to care for Veterans we offered 36.5 Continuing Education Units over 16 Educational Sessions.

RVP cultivates our continuants across the region. We go wherever Veterans, Service Members and their families gather. Last year we attended 56 outreach events and made direct interactions with 3000 community members.

At Returning Veterans Project, confidentiality is our cornerstone. Many Veterans—especially those still serving in the Guard and Reserves—do not seek care because they fear it will impact their careers. Others hesitate because they worry about stigma or lack of privacy. We provide a critical alternative: free, confidential care with trained providers who understand military culture and trauma.

It's in our community engagement interactions that, despite maintaining our promise to confidentiality we witness the widening gaps in Veteran care, we hear the needs, and we are flooded by testimonials similar to those share above.

We know RVP saves lives. We know if it were not for the options we provide, there would be Veterans in our community no longer with us today. *We know because they tell us, even when they don't have to.* They share their frustrations with the current system and the urgent need for expanded healthcare options. While the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) serves a critical role, many Veterans face barriers to accessing care, whether it's wait times, eligibility restrictions, mistrust, institutional betrayal, physical accessibility or even the simple reality that some Veterans need support the VA doesn't provide.

The sobering reality is that suicide prevention is not a one-size-fits-all effort—it's a one-size-fits-one approach. Each Veteran's journey is unique, and so are the interventions that will save their life. Some Veterans need culturally competent therapy from a civilian provider. Others seek holistic care—acupuncture, massage therapy, or naturopathic medicine—to heal from trauma in ways that traditional services may not offer. Some simply

need a confidential space where they feel safe, without fear of repercussions for seeking help.

Oregon has an opportunity to do better, to improve our statistics. To grow up and beyond number 53 of 54 states and territories in the nation on Veteran suicide rates, prevention and healthcare efforts. We can start by ensuring that those who have served our country have options on how and where they receive care. A Veteran who is ready to ask for help should never have to wait or navigate an overwhelming behemoth of a system to receive it. By funding additional options to care within the community, we open doors, neutralize barriers, increase access, and save lives.

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