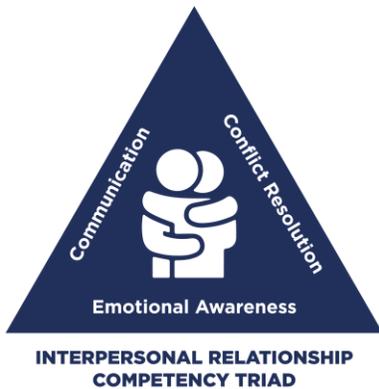


VA Chaplaincy's Warrior to Soul Mate Program White Paper

Executive Summary



The primary purpose of VA Chaplaincy's Warrior to Soul Mate ("W2SM") program is to rapidly enhance wellness by strengthening a Veteran's relationship with significant others through an intensive, evidence-based, group skills training, educational experience that advances the unique **competency triad** underlying healthy, happy, resilient interpersonal relationships.

By allowing and encouraging Veterans to include spouses, partners, caregivers, and children in Warrior to Soul Mate training, Veteran families are able to increase self-knowledge, develop their ability to maintain enjoyable intimate relationships, lower levels of anxiety and conflict, increase intimacy and affection, and improve relationship cohesion.¹

As a result, Veteran families are better able to disrupt remarkably common underlying contributors to Veteran suicide, homelessness, and opioid abuse through increased capacity to create and sustain relationships with family, friends and social supports.²

VA's decade-long piloting, investment and national licensing of Warrior to Soul Mate has evolved the program into a modernized, highly cost-effective, time saving, customer service driven approach that advances VA's most urgent priorities.

Customer Service reports have indicated greater than 99% of veterans who complete the 12-16 hour training recommend Warrior to Soul Mate.

An ROI analysis³ found that implementation of Warrior to Soul Mate had a significant, positive local budget impact, including a greater than 30% return on investment resulting from:

- Decreased emergency room days,
- Decreased psychological visits,
- Decreased chaplaincy visits,
- Decreased medication costs,
- Decreased inpatient psychiatric admits,
- Decreased suicide flags.

¹ "Measuring sustainability of a grassroots program in a large integrated health care delivery system: the Warrior to Soul Mate Program," Journal of Military, Veteran and Family Health, 2018.

² The Augusta VA Medical Center's Warrior to Soul Mate program was recognized as a VA Best Practice. San Diego VA Health Care's Warrior to Soul Mate program won national recognition from Planetree as a patient-centered approach to strengthening relationships with family, friends and social supports.

³ Richard Roudebush VA Medical Center Return on Investment Analysis, 2017.



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History

In 2008, a multi-disciplinary team of chaplains, psychologists and social workers from the Charlie Norwood VA Medical Center in Augusta, Georgia asked PAIRS Foundation to donate a relationship restoring 16-hour retreat for returning OEF/OIF combat Veterans and their spouses over Valentine's Day weekend. Participants and team members agreed the experience was extraordinary. Over the weeks and months that followed, some shared how real their thoughts of suicide had been prior to the event. Nearly a decade later, members of that class continue to offer gratitude for the healing and happiness that began with their weekend together.

That experience led hundreds of VA chaplains and behavioral health professionals to participate in PAIRS accreditation training to be able to facilitate similar experiences. From San Diego to Hampton, Indianapolis and many places in between, outcomes reported by professionals and, most importantly, the Veterans they've served, have been overwhelmingly positive and profoundly meaningful.

In Washington, DC, a second chaplain adopted the model for conducting PAIRS events (e.g., weekend retreats), developed a user's guide to implement these events, and managed the distribution of grant dollars. In 2012, San Diego's collaboration with PAIRS Foundation was recognized with the Spirit of Planetree Award for the program's impact on strengthening relationships between family, friends, and social supports as a central component of patient centered care. Subsequent national adoption of W2SM by individual VA facilities was facilitated through grants awarded by the Office of Patient Centered Care and Cultural Transformation.

In 2013, 23 VA facilities receiving OPCC&CT innovation grant funding held W2SM events. These medical centers were located in 14 of the 23 administrative regions of the Veterans Integrated Service Networks, located across the United States. A total of 67 W2SM programs were held, serving 826 couples and 12 individuals. The OPCC&CT funded a collaborative evaluation of the program's sustainability, including barriers to and facilitators of potential sustainability for the W2SM program. This evaluation was conducted by a multidisciplinary team from one of the VA Health Services Research & Development Centers of Innovation and the VA Mental Health and Chaplaincy program, in collaboration with representatives from the OPCC&CT, VA National Chaplain Center, national leadership of the W2SM program, and one of the VA Geriatric Research Education and Clinical Centers.

In 2019, the National Chaplain Center awarded PAIRS Foundation a fixed price contract for the unlimited use of the W2SM curriculum within the Veterans Administration. The program goal is to make W2SM available to every Veteran, at every VA facility. It is estimated that the need is to train 7,500 Facilitators and establish a training system to keep making W2SM available to every Veteran. Today, the W2SM program has graduated 806 facilitators from professional certification training, enabling provision of classes in locations throughout the VA enterprise. **At present, 327 Facilitators, 29 Trainers, and eight Train-the-Trainers are active in 53 VA facilities.**



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Supporting National Goals

Warrior to Soul Mate directly supports critical VA national goals and is direct evidence of the VA tackling issues head-on in a surprising and innovative way to equip the Veteran with skills to improve the quality of their key relationships in pursuit of higher levels of wellness.

CUSTOMER SERVICE

The Warrior to Soul Mate program is delivering excellent cross disciplinary programs and enhancing the patient experience. 99% of those individuals who participated in Warrior to Soul Mate recommended the training program for others. The high percentage of satisfied customers demonstrates W2SM's perceived value and the likelihood of continued success enrolling Veterans and their spouses, partners or caregivers. Word of mouth is the strongest form of enrollment, along with consult recommendations.

A robust schedule of Warrior to Soul Mate classes offers an attractive, inexpensive, high quality option for reducing wait times for Veterans accessing psychological, social work, or chaplain services. Warrior to Soul Mate graduates correspondingly require decreased levels of service for those services, as well as reduced need for emergency room visits/days, medicine refills and suicide assessments.⁴

The MISSION ACT

The Warrior to Soul Mate program empowers participants through psychoeducational skills training, enabling interpersonal relationships to be mobilized as an effective "front line defense" in achieving whole health wellness.

Warrior to Soul Mate provides the Veteran and his/her family the knowledge and skills to make informed choices, better decision-making, prioritization and means of communications to improve relationships, including those with their health care providers. Staff members who participate both as participants and/or facilitators are more highly motivated and satisfied by their work -- measurably supporting longer retention.

BUSINESS TRANSFORMATION

Warrior to Soul Mate is delivered by an interdisciplinary team supporting wellness, and provides Veterans with better skills to direct their health care. W2SM provides a high ROI and reduces demand for additional services through enhancing the Veteran's relationship skills capacity, competence, and confidence.

VA/DoD COLLABORATION

⁴ Richard Roudebush VA Medical Center Return on Investment Analysis, 2017.



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Warrior to Soul Mate promotes collaboration between VA and DoD personnel committed to the wellness of their respective members. Specifically, Warrior to Soul Mate Trainers are providing Facilitator training to DoD personnel. The program involves military Reserves and National Guard personnel in partnership with the VA. The program allows for the seamless integration of service members, VA employees, and Veterans.

Return on Investment

Richard L. Roudebush VAMC in Indianapolis, Indiana conducted a Return on Investment ("ROI") analysis on the Warrior to Soul Mate program as implemented for an 89-patient cohort and a 460-patient cohort. The conclusion was a cost savings result of up to \$104,153, a 32% return on investment. Statistically significant findings were found in the decrease of inpatient psychiatric admits for the 460-patient cohort (-50%, $p=.04723$) and the decrease in suicide flags set per patient for the 89-patient cohort (-25%, $p=.02375$). The Indianapolis Fiscal Service claims an average cost of an inpatient psychiatric admit is \$6,275 for a savings of \$31,375, while no cost was attached to a decrease of suicide flags.

This data collection for an 89-patient cohort showed a decrease of days in the emergency room from 155.10 days to 46.37 days (-70.1%) and a decrease in visits to the emergency department from 109 to 62 (-43.12%). The Indianapolis Fiscal Service attests each ER visit has an average cost of \$654.30, calculating a savings of \$30,752.10. **Positive suicide assessments went from three positive assessments pre-treatment to zero positive assessments (-100%) post treatment with no cost attachment.** Outpatient psychological visits at an average visit cost of \$153.25 per the Indianapolis Fiscal Service decreased from 343 to 215 (-37.32%), with a savings calculation of \$19,616. Outpatient chaplaincy visits at a \$120.11 per visit cost decreased from 29 to 23 (-20.7%) with a savings of \$720.66. Medication refills also decreased by 68 fills for a drug cost savings of \$578.73 (-23.29%).

For just the 89-patient cohort, the calculated total savings are at \$83,042, which translates to \$933 per patient with increased safety, mental health, and overall health in general. Extending these cost savings to the 460-patient cohort translates to \$429,208.

Currently, all materials needed for a class have been included in a 2018 contract with the VA. A class can be taught in a free available room at a VA facility or a donated space at a nearby religious center or local wellness center, such as a YMCA. The 2015 ROI study for a total of 25 couples and four VA staff, showed a total cost for an 89-patient cohort group equaled \$31,698. This included meals (\$7,690), materials and handbooks (\$2,848, now included in national contract), staff salary cost (\$8,900), staff travel cost (\$1,581), and event planning (\$10,680). Extending these costs to the 460-patient cohort, the total cost would be \$163,834, giving a final cost savings of \$265,374.

The 2015 ROI study also added the salary cost of training 40 VA personnel, the cost of a couples' retreat, where couples and staff stay at a hotel, and finally added the cost of a percentage of one-year salary for two W2SM personnel for the 89-patient cohort group (\$31,991, one-year salary portion) and respectively for a 460-patient cohort (\$95,972, 3-year



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salary portion). The final cost with those additions in this study equaled \$72,777 and \$325,055, respectively, giving a savings of \$104,153 (32% ROI) for the 460-patient cohort. **Currently, having already incurred training costs for 364 active VA Facilitators, no cost for required classroom materials, and an emphasis on using free available space, the savings from a similar cohort is estimated to be more than \$200,000.**

Promoting Wellness and Recovery

Warrior to Soul Mate's focus on improving key relationships has an important influence in three critical wellness areas: suicide prevention, family resiliency, and whole health.

SUICIDE PREVENTION

The National Strategy for Preventing Veteran Suicide provides a blueprint for how the nation can tackle the critical issue of Veteran suicide by implementing research informed behavioral change processes. Participation in Warrior to Soul Mate's brief, evidence-based relationship skills training can produce significant and perceived benefits in reducing the level of disturbance around issues of interpersonal relationships, symptom distress, and social role functioning, for both clinically distressed and non-clinically distressed Veterans alike. Healthy intimate relationships combat against the detrimental effects of mental illness and facilitates overall health and healthier lifestyles, despite mental health issues. Extensive research has shown that intimate partner relationship stress is a key suicide risk factor (LaCroix, 2018, Love, 2018), and conversely, that marriage is a protective factor for suicide-exposed Veterans (Weisenhorn, 2017). Additionally, psychotherapeutic interventions that address relationship satisfaction may help improve social functioning in treatment-seeking Veterans with PTSD (Tsai, 2012).

FAMILY RESILIENCY

Teaching couples skills to identify, express, and fulfill their mutual bonding needs enables them to create a climate in which love can thrive. When it is consistently safe to be emotionally open and physically close with a partner, lasting intimacy is more likely. W2SM's conceptual strength comes from an emphasis on bonding – the combination of emotional openness and physical closeness with another person. The program is based on the concept that our primary intimate relationships have a unique role in shaping our sense of self-esteem and way of responding to the world around us. The four primary goals of Warrior to Soul Mate are promoting effective communication, strengthening connection and confiding, effective decision-making and conflict resolution, and strengthening trust and commitment.

Research on marital satisfaction conducted since the early 1940s suggests benefits of a satisfying intimate marriage include better health, a more active sex life, higher income, better adjustment among offspring, and greater work incentive (Dawson, 1991; Kiecolt-Glaser, Fisher, Ogrocki, Stout, Speicher, & Glaser (1987); Lillard & Waite, 1995; Waite & Lillard, 1991). Concomitantly, research documents deleterious physical, emotional, financial, and social effects of divorce (Beach & O'Leary, 1986; Bloom, Asher & White, 1978; Copportelli & Orleans, 1985;



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Glenn & Kramer, 1987; Martin & Bumpass, 1989; O'Leary & Curley, 1986; Sotile, 1992). When one considers the potentially devastating, multi-generational effects of divorce and family break-up, as well as the fact that marital therapy is not every individual's preferred modality, it is clear that many paths up the mountain are required to sustain ever important family resilience.

Findings from a multi-year study of adult participants in this relationship skills training found the majority of participants (70% or more) rate either "Some Improvement" or "Much Improvement" in all of the critical areas of their relationship as a result of their participation in PAIRS. Adding participants who notice even a little improvement in their relationship boosts this to approximately 85-90% (DeMaria, 2014).

WHOLE HEALTH

The VA's approach to whole health *shifts the focus away* on what's the matter with patients, no longer zeroing in on their diseases and ailments. The VA is instead working to shift this focus by starting a conversation about *what matters most* to Veterans. Of the top ten responses Veterans gave when asked what matters most to them, being with family came in first at 66% of responses. The Warrior to Soul Mate curriculum aligns with the whole health approach by emphasizing personal responsibility for relationship health and resilience, thus empowering Veterans and their families. After learning about one's self and one's partner, participants shift towards strengthening positive feelings about the present and opportunities for continued growth, closeness and joy. With an overview and review of the W2SM tools built throughout the program, participants have an opportunity to celebrate the many concepts and skills acquired and achieve a very real chance to create a future in which cherished wishes, hopes and dreams can come true.

Conclusion

Offering W2SM to every Veteran has the potential of dramatically improving levels of wellness and participation in managing their own healthcare for the cost of an education class. Building on the extensive history of development and incremental learning on how to execute the finest possible relationship program can provide benefits throughout the VA, especially: suicide prevention, family resiliency, and whole health. Staff participating in delivery of the program are universally proud of the results and are deeply invested in the program. The costs are low, and the results are dramatic.



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**VA Chaplaincy's Warrior to Soul Mate Program
White Paper**

Director's Endorsement of Warrior to Soul Mate White Paper

I have reviewed this Warrior to Soul Mate Program White Paper and approve of the content, guidance and processes. I fully endorse the publishing of this document as a VHA standard guide for implementation of Warrior to Soul Mate in VA.

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