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THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF PENNSYLVANIA

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SENATE BILL

No. 491 Session of  
2015

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INTRODUCED BY YUDICHAK, FONTANA, KITCHEN, TEPLITZ, SCAVELLO,  
BLAKE, GORDNER, SCHWANK, BREWSTER, SMITH, VULAKOVICH,  
TARTAGLIONE, HUGHES, COSTA, RAFFERTY, WILEY AND BOSCOLA,  
FEBRUARY 13, 2015

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REFERRED TO PUBLIC HEALTH AND WELFARE, FEBRUARY 13, 2015

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AN ACT

1 Providing for peer-to-peer support for veterans; and making an  
2 appropriation.

3 The General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania  
4 hereby enacts as follows:

5 Section 1. Short title.

6 This act shall be known and may be cited as the Peer-to-Peer  
7 Support for Veterans Act.

8 Section 2. Legislative findings.

9 The General Assembly finds and declares as follows:

10 (1) The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has a moral duty  
11 and responsibility to provide proper services to its military  
12 personnel and veterans, including the new class of veterans  
13 returning from deployment in United States military  
14 operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

15 (2) While many individuals will return with physical  
16 injuries and disabilities, a larger number will return with  
17 psychological injuries connected to the trauma and stress

1 associated with combat.

2 (3) Posttraumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain  
3 injury, military sexual trauma and alarming rates of suicide  
4 among active duty personnel and veterans require the  
5 Commonwealth to take immediate action to ensure that the  
6 proper mental health, addiction and other services are  
7 available to its military personnel.

8 (4) Statistics have shown that over 300,000 veterans, or  
9 approximately one in five, of Operation Iraqi Freedom and  
10 Operation Enduring Freedom were diagnosed with posttraumatic  
11 stress disorder by the end of 2012. Treatment costs for the  
12 veterans have been estimated to exceed \$2,000,000,000.

13 (5) In 2012, there were approximately 3,374 reported  
14 cases of military sexual trauma, which includes rape, sexual  
15 assault and sexual harassment. However, it is estimated that  
16 approximately 26,000 service members experienced unwanted  
17 sexual contact.

18 (6) In 2012, suicide rates among active duty personnel  
19 averaged one per day.

20 (7) Veterans now account for 20% of all United States  
21 suicides, with veterans under 24 years of age committing  
22 suicide at rates four times higher than other veterans  
23 groups.

24 (8) Posttraumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain  
25 injury, military sexual trauma and suicide among veterans are  
26 often linked with alcohol or substance abuse as veterans seek  
27 to find relief from the symptoms and feelings.

28 (9) Unfortunately, the stigma attached to receiving  
29 mental health treatment often causes military personnel and  
30 veterans to avoid seeking professional treatment for their

1 condition.

2 (10) Establishing a program where veterans can support  
3 one another through peer-to-peer counseling may assist in  
4 removing the stigma surrounding receipt of mental health or  
5 addiction services and allow veterans to receive needed care  
6 as the veterans recover from the psychological scars often  
7 associated with military service.

8 Section 3. Definitions.

9 The following words and phrases when used in this act shall  
10 have the meanings given to them in this section unless the  
11 context clearly indicates otherwise:

12 "Certified peer counselor." An individual who meets all of  
13 the following:

14 (1) Has personal experience as a mental health treatment  
15 recipient or who is in recovery from alcohol abuse, sexual  
16 abuse or trauma, substance abuse or chemical dependence.

17 (2) Has:

18 (i) served in the active military or naval service  
19 of the United States or the Pennsylvania National Guard  
20 and has been released from service other than by  
21 dishonorable discharge, as documented by the individual's  
22 discharge papers; or

23 (ii) been furloughed to the reserve components of  
24 the armed forces of the United States.

25 (3) Has the training, credentials or experience to  
26 provide counseling and is recognized by the department under  
27 this act.

28 "Department." The Department of Health of the Commonwealth.

29 "Peer support service." A service that meets all of the  
30 following:

1           (1) Is designated by the department and which is used in  
2 the treatment of and recovery from mental illness, sexual  
3 abuse trauma, alcohol abuse, substance abuse or chemical  
4 dependence.

5           (2) Is delivered by a certified peer counselor.

6 "Secretary." The Secretary of Health of the Commonwealth.

7 "Veteran." As defined in 51 Pa.C.S. § 9601 (relating to  
8 definitions).

9 Section 4. Duties of department.

10       (a) Establishment of programs.--Notwithstanding any other  
11 provision of law, the secretary, in conjunction with the  
12 Secretary of Drug and Alcohol Programs and the Adjutant General,  
13 or the Deputy Adjutant General for Veterans' Affairs if  
14 designated by the Adjutant General, shall develop and establish  
15 a minimum of four regional peer support service programs for  
16 veterans in this Commonwealth. The department shall, if  
17 possible, establish the programs in a manner that ensures access  
18 to a program by all veterans within this Commonwealth regardless  
19 of geographic location.

20       (b) Services.--Services provided by a peer support service  
21 program established under subsection (a) shall include peer-to-  
22 peer counseling for all of the following:

23           (1) Mental health issues, including treatment and  
24 recovery support for posttraumatic stress disorder, traumatic  
25 brain injury and depression.

26           (2) Alcohol, substance abuse or chemical dependence  
27 treatment and recovery support, including treatment planning,  
28 recovery coaching and relapse prevention.

29           (3) Military sexual trauma treatment and recovery  
30 support.

1           (4) Co-occurring disorders.

2           (5) Any other counseling service which the department  
3 believes will further the intent and goals of this act.

4 Section 5. Certified peer counselors.

5       The department, in conjunction with the Department of Human  
6 Services, the Department of Drug and Alcohol Programs and the  
7 Adjutant General, or the Deputy Adjutant General for Veterans'  
8 Affairs if designated by the Adjutant General, shall establish  
9 guidelines for the recruitment, training and development of  
10 individuals capable of providing the services under section  
11 4(b). The guidelines shall include the establishment of minimum  
12 qualifications to receive credentials as a certified peer  
13 counselor and procedures to suspend, revoke or annul the  
14 credentials.

15 Section 6. Nonprofit organization.

16       Nothing under this act shall prohibit the department from  
17 contracting with nonprofit organizations within this  
18 Commonwealth that provide services to veterans to offer peer-to-  
19 peer counseling in accordance with this act.

20 Section 7. Publication.

21       (a) Duty.--The department shall publish the contact  
22 information for an entity offering peer-to-peer counseling under  
23 this act in the Pennsylvania Bulletin.

24       (b) The department and the Department of Military and  
25 Veterans Affairs shall each post the contact information for an  
26 entity offering peer-to-peer counseling under this act on its  
27 publicly accessible Internet website.

28 Section 8. Appropriation.

29       The sum of \$1,000,000 is appropriated to the department to  
30 carry out the provisions of this act.

1 Section 9. Effective date.

2 This act shall take effect in 60 days.