



VETERANS HEALING VETERANS
FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Program Description

Our Mission

Veterans Healing Veterans from the Inside Out (VHV) works where the military meets the criminal justice system to heal wounds that can result in suicide and incarceration among our nation's warriors.

Our History

VHV was founded in 2012 by Ron Self, a Marine incarcerated at San Quentin State Prison, in response to reports of veteran and military suicide outpacing war deaths in Afghanistan. Inspired by the healing power in the simple act of telling one's story, but knowing that veterans often feel safest in each other's company, he launched a pilot program: a peer support group centered on a series of writing prompts which explore the ramifications of military and life trauma.

Since then, the program has grown to comprise multiple peer support groups at San Quentin and Deuel Vocational Institution, training in group facilitation and one-on-one mentorship, and, through partnerships with aligned organizations, trauma-sensitive yoga and theater practice for our incarcerated members; and information and connections to critical resources for veterans reentering the community. To date we have served over 130 incarcerated veterans.

The Need We Fill

According to California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) data, there are around 6,800 veterans incarcerated in the state system. Many suffer from the effects of untreated trauma. While each individual's story is different, among our participants certain

"I was a man who was hiding some horrible past pains deep inside my soul. Today, the ability of my trauma to hold me down and destroy my life, and the lives around me, is gone."

Hawkeye, US Marines

themes emerge. Early-life trauma is rife, with many having entered service to escape dysfunctional or disenfranchised backgrounds. Combat, military sexual trauma, and other experiences of service may compound this initial trauma. Self-medication and addiction followed for some. For others, the skills and adaptations that made them lethal and efficient warriors left them ill-equipped to function in the civilian world. All of this may be further compounded by the acute traumas and chronic stresses of incarceration.

Veterans entering the CDCR system lose access to veteran-specific mental health care. They need opportunities to heal that take into account the particular nature of military trauma—but which also leverage the strengths instilled by their training and experience. This program supports veterans to explore the path they took into the military, and from the military to prison, through writing prompts, exercises, informative readings, peer support, and complementary practices.

What We Do

Peer-support Groups and Narration Therapy

Military training and experience has instilled in many veterans a deep commitment to caring for each other. For this reason, peer support is a powerful modality for veterans. This is noted in a report on best practices from the Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury:

“Due to the stressful nature of the work of service members, particularly those who have seen combat, the military has created a culture in which service members take care of each other. This mentality easily lends itself to an environment where service members rely on the natural support of their colleagues to cope with stress.... Service members and veterans are more willing to share their feelings and concerns with someone who has had similar experiences.”¹

Peer support provides the safe container for work based on principles of narration therapy. Participants write in response to a series of prompts which probe life-defining experiences and relationships. Key concepts are explored through readings and discussion; and self-care practices are introduced to support this personal work.

Members report that the program has been effective in allowing them to process feelings of shame and guilt—a necessary step which allows for exploration of one’s life circumstances and choices. Improvements are also reported in decreased nightmares and sounder sleep; less reactivity and/or more reasoned response to negative stimuli; the establishment of healthy relationships, communication, and friendships; and reduced anxiety.

“The narrative process wasn’t easy, but it opened up a means to express my troubled thoughts. The group gave me a safe environment to confront traumatic issues.”

Jerome, US Navy

Mentorship and Facilitator Training

Members have the opportunity to learn the skills of one-on-one mentorship and group facilitation. Apart from providing individuals with a skill-set that is personally and professionally useful, this training helps ensure the growth and sustainability of the program over time as trained facilitators go on to lead groups at San Quentin or upon transfer to other institutions.

Key Collaborations

Trauma-sensitive Yoga and Mindfulness Practice with Prison Yoga Project

Members have the opportunity to practice yoga in weekly classes specifically geared for trauma survivors. This is offered through a long-time partnership with Prison Yoga Project.

Somatic Therapy through Theater with Marin Shakespeare Company

VHV members work with Marin Shakespeare Company to craft performance pieces based on their stories of military trauma.

Opportunity and Goals

We have an extraordinary opportunity to grow at this time. California's State Senate and Department of Veterans Affairs are paying unprecedented attention to the plight of incarcerated veterans. The CDCR is actively promoting rehabilitative programming in response to the need to reduce prison overcrowding. Awareness of the effects of trauma, especially among our service men and women, has entered the mainstream.

*"This year has been one of the most poignant and meaningful experiences of my life. We are Veterans Healing Veterans from the Inside Out. From inside of the soul, reaching out to others sharing similar pain. From inside San Quentin to veterans in all walks of life."
AI, US Navy*

Sentencing reforms in California mean veterans are being released from our state prisons at a higher rate than ever before. They deserve the best chance at success that we can give them. Founded by an incarcerated veteran, and developed inside San Quentin, VHV is uniquely positioned to offer this support.

In 2017, we will continue to establish essential organizational infrastructure to support the quality, consistency and growth of the program over time. Other goals for the coming year are to continue to develop our curriculum and facilitator training; establish a process for data collection and program evaluation; and launch a VHV group outside prison

walls for veterans re-entering the community from prison and those at risk for involvement with the criminal justice system.

-
1. Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury. (2011). Best Practices Identified for Peer Support Programs [White Paper]. Retrieved from http://www.dcoe.mil/content/Navigation/Documents/Best_Practices_Identified_for_Peer_Support_Programs_Jan_2011.pdf