Prioritizing Art Therapy as a Mental Health Solution for Virginia’s Veterans

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Thesis
Virginia’s General Assembly should implement and subsidize art therapy programs to reduce veterans’ dependence on mental health services provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Background Analysis
United States military veterans have a long history with mental illness. Soldiers returning from deployment have high rates of depression, anxiety, and PTSD. Of more than 100,000 soldiers returning from Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) or Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), more than 25 percent received mental health diagnoses; of those, 56 percent received two or more distinct mental health diagnoses. However, beyond diagnosis, mental health services provided by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) are drastically underutilized. Long lines, a lack of funding, and more contribute to an environment that cannot care for veterans in need. According to a report from the White House, “the problems inherent within [the VA] are exacerbated by poor management and communication structures, distrust between employees and management, a history of retaliation toward employees raising issues, and a lack of accountability across all grade levels.” This results in only 9.5 percent of newly diagnosed veterans receiving the appropriate amount of mental health treatment through the VA. The importance of a rapid response to this problem cannot be understated. Although they represent only 8.5 percent of the US population, veterans account for 18 percent of all suicides in America, with 20 veterans committing suicide each day. Art therapy, defined as “psychological use of art media and the creative process, facilitated by an art therapist, to help foster self expression, create coping skills, and strengthen sense of self” offers an alternative to traditional counseling programs that has proven effective in treating myriad mental health disorders. By combining general psychological processes such as cognitive working-through and relaxation with nonverbal and creative processes, art therapy provides a solution to the unique mental health needs of veterans. In a 35-study meta-analysis, researchers at Marylhurst University found significant benefits from this approach for incarcerated men and veterans, both of whom face challenges to mental health treatment because of the masculine, therapy-resistant nature of their environments.

KEY FACTS

- Of the 1.7 million veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, 300,000 (20 percent) suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder or major depression.

- According to the Army, only 40 percent of veterans who screen positive for serious emotional problems seek help from a mental health professional.

- Art therapy has been clinically proven to reduce PTSD symptoms, and can be as much as 50 percent less costly than traditional counseling methods.

- Virginia has the seventh highest veteran population in the country at nearly 800,000, over a quarter of whom utilize VA health care services.
Talking Points

1. The Department of Veterans Affairs does not have the infrastructure necessary to handle the mental health needs of veterans.\(^8\)
2. Art therapy is an effective form of counseling for those with PTSD, anxiety, depression, and more.\(^9\)
3. If introduced in Virginia, art therapy can reach veterans where traditional therapy cannot by breaking down the hyper-masculine, therapy-resistant military culture surrounding mental health issues.\(^10\)

Policy Idea

The Virginia General Assembly should implement and subsidize art therapy programs for veterans. Art therapy programs should be offered as alternatives to the VA’s current mental health programs, for free or at a reduced charge. These programs should be offered in a group setting and designed as alternatives to traditional mental health care solutions that ignore the prevailing attitude of resistance and masculinity surrounding veterans’ mental health.

Policy Analysis

This policy would combat many of the issues surrounding mental health care for veterans. Art therapy has been clinically proven to treat a number of mental health disorders across a wide range of demographics. A study of 29 inpatient adolescents diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) found a significant reduction in trauma symptoms and “a trend in the reduction of behavioral incidents and seclusions.”\(^11\) Additionally, in a study of 85 children and adolescents, patients receiving the Chapman Art Therapy Treatment Intervention showed fewer PTSD symptoms after one month of treatment than did those receiving standard hospital care.\(^12\) Unlike many other mental health treatment options, art therapy provides an alternative approach to counseling that is effective in removing barriers to treatment faced by veterans. Although the therapy-resistant and strongly masculine culture within the military normally makes it difficult for counselors to develop therapeutic relations with veterans, such resistance can be overcome in the creative atmosphere of an art therapy group.\(^13\) Art therapy, unlike many other mental health solutions, is usually offered in a group setting and makes veterans more comfortable working through their mental health issues in the presence of other veterans.

Although not necessary for most states, licensing art therapists specifically as opposed to general professional counselors would increase the legitimacy and ease of access to art therapy for veterans. As most group therapy programs are on par with or cheaper than individual therapy, funding for these programs and their subsidization would be well within the scope of the almost $40 million General Fund of the Virginia Office of Veterans and Defense Affairs.\(^14,15\) Many veterans already qualify for free or low-cost VA health care services because of a service-connected condition or other factors. Veterans with health insurance can use it to supplement their VA benefits.\(^16\) As the VA already covers treatment for any number of service-related conditions, a simple expansion of treatment methods would not be an issue. With nearly 800,000 veterans living in Virginia, it is critical that the Virginia General Assembly explore effective, low-cost forms of mental health treatment for them.\(^17\)
Next Steps
Implementing this proposal would require support from the Virginia General Assembly in addition to veterans groups and associations of mental health specialists. Robert B. Bell in the Virginia House and R. Creigh Deeds in the state Senate are potential allies in the legislature as they are both vice-chairs of the Joint Subcommittee to Study Mental Health Services in the 21st Century. Furthermore, the VA would have to be convinced to give up some measure of control over the health services of veterans. Advocating for state-level change must include veterans groups in the area, such as the Virginia Veterans Services Foundation and the Northern Virginia Veterans Association. Additionally, the Virginia Art Therapy Association would be a key part of this coalition, because it has drafted a bill, created an advocacy campaign, and is already in talks with at least one senator to pass licensure legislation.

End Notes
8French, “Corrosive Culture”.
9Slayton, D’Archer, and Kaplan, “Outcome Studies”.
10Kopytin and Lebedev, “Group Art Therapy With War Veterans”.
11Slayton, D’Archer, and Kaplan, “Outcome Studies”.
12Ibid.
13Kopytin and Lebedev, “Group Art Therapy With War Veterans”


