



VETERAN SPOUSE
NETWORK

Peer Support for Military and Veteran Spouses: Research and Practice with the Veteran Spouse Network

June 13, 2023

Military Social Work & Behavioral Health Conference

Elisa Borah, Director, Veteran Spouse Network
University of Texas at Austin
Institute for Military and Veteran Family Wellness

Learning Objectives

1. Understand the support needs of veteran spouses
2. Develop knowledge about the role of peer support in supporting veteran spouses' wellness
3. Learn about the topics covered in peer support and the role of volunteer peer leaders



VETERAN SPOUSE NETWORK

*Facilitating a network of support for
military and veteran spouses and families*



VETERAN SPOUSE NETWORK

- The Veteran Spouse Network provides a range of peer-support and educational programming for military and veteran families as they navigate active-duty life, transition to civilian life, and put down roots after military life.
- All programs are free to participants and are continuously evaluated and updated based on participant feedback to ensure they are effective and meet the needs of those they aim to serve.





AFFILIATION

The VSN is housed within The University of Texas at Austin's Institute for Military and Veteran Family Wellness. In line with the mission of the school, the Institute works to provide national leadership to promote social and economic justice, alleviate critical social problems, and enhance human well-being, especially as it relates to military and veteran families.

HISTORY

- The Veteran Spouse Network (VSN) began in **January 2016** as a forum for veteran spouses throughout Texas to become engaged in defining resources and programming for themselves and their families.
- Today, the VSN has grown to serve military and veteran spouses, partners, couples, caregivers, and family members throughout the state and across the country, with a growing network of over **3,000 participants**.
- As we grow, VSN continues to work hands-on with our community to fill gaps in services and develop opportunities for participants to connect, share resources and offer ongoing support and guidance to their peers.



FOCUS

Spouses / Partners



Couples



Family Members



- VSN supports military and veteran spouses, committed partners, caregivers, couples, and family members (including those widowed or divorced from an SM or veteran).
- When a service member serves, their family and loved ones serve alongside them, and when they leave service, the whole family benefits from tailored supports.
- At the VSN, we believe that military and veteran families thrive when they are a part of **strong supportive communities that offer peer-based support and guidance.**

“We all tend to think we are alone in our struggles, that no one gets it. It's crippling. But just to be able to talk to someone that is in the same place or has been in the same place once is such a tremendous relief and very freeing.”

– VSN Peer Leader

Veteran Spouses' Needs

- For spouses, perceived lack of support is associated with problematic health behaviors (Corry et al. 2022) and psychological distress.
- Service members' and veterans' psychological health also impact spouses' psychological health and their marriages (Green et al., 2013; Oudi et al. 2023).
- Veterans who are married and report greater satisfaction with social networks are less likely to be at risk for suicide, and social support buffers against suicidal behavior (Jakupak et al. 2010).
- Moreover, veterans benefit when their spouse has adequate social support, community, and coping skills (Lee et al. 2022).



PEER SUPPORT

- Peer support is a vehicle by which people derive health benefits from emotional and informational support from individuals with shared experiences who they innately relate to and trust.
 - This process facilitates the effective giving and receiving of help around life's challenges (Repper and Carter, 2011).
- Peer support programs not only increase social support, but also improve mental health functioning (Borah et al., 2022; Repper and Carter, 2011)



RESEARCH ON PEER SUPPORT AND MILITARY/VETERAN SPOUSES

- Prior research has found that increased social support was associated with higher resilience in spouses with children with special healthcare needs (Farrell et al., 2014).
- Wang et al. (2015) found that military spouses who received social support from friends and family led to a greater sense of community and increased feelings of psychological well-being.
- Military spouses prefer online support systems that provide informal social support from other military spouses because stigma around mental health injuries from military service can create barriers in finding support from civilian support networks (Schwartz et al., 2021).
- Spouses face similar 'transition' issues as veterans after leaving military life, including building or maintaining their careers, accessing healthcare, focusing on their well-being, and finding new communities of support for themselves and their families (Keeling et al., 2021).



Veteran Spouse Resiliency Group



The V-SRG program provides veteran spouses/partners with **peer-led, curriculum-driven, evidence-based support groups** offered in virtual and in-person formats. Participants discuss a variety of topics that are unique to the veteran spouse/partner experience, sharing their challenges, strategies, and successes, while both receiving and providing support and guidance to their peers.



Veteran Spouse Resiliency Group

 **HYBRID**
Option to join
virtually (national) or
in-person (Addison, TX)

**Veteran Spouse Resiliency Group**
Mini-Series

 Next Session
February 8th
PERIODIC WEDNESDAYS
7PM-9PM CST

**Tanya Mac**
VSN Leader
The Steven A. Cohen
Military Family Clinic
at Metrocare

[Learn more](#)

 **San Antonio, TX**
6333 De Zavala Rd.
San Antonio, TX 78249

**Veteran Spouse Resiliency Group**
12-week Series

JOIN VSN Leaders

Latashia Lealiiee
& Veteran Spouse
Julene Slora
Veteran Spouse

Start Date
 March 1st
WEDNESDAYS
6:30 PM-8:30 PM CST

In partnership with:
ENDEAVORS
Veteran Wellness Center

[Learn more](#)

AT A GLANCE



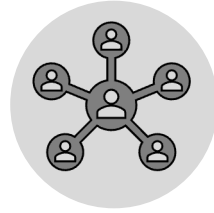
2,400+

Member listserv



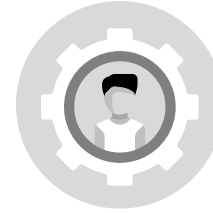
5,400+

Followers on
social media



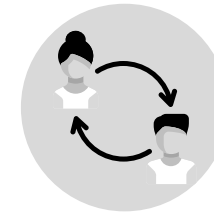
140+

Groups run
annually;
4-8 groups run
weekly



450+

Participants
served annually



40+

Active peer
leaders

EVALUATION

Based on pre-test and post-test program evaluation results collected in **2021-2022**, participants in the program consistently showed statistically significant improvements in the following:



*Depression &
Anxiety*



*Self-Care
Behavior*



*Perceived Social
Support*



Quality of Life

EVALUATION METHODS

Pre- and post-program assessments were administered to 32 veteran spouses using the online Qualtrics survey system and included:

- Quality of Life Enjoyment and Satisfaction Questionnaire (Q-LES-Q-SF; Stevanovic, 2011),
 - Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9; Cohen et al., 1985),
 - Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7; Spitzer et al., 2007),
 - self-care behaviors with the NAMI Self Care Inventory (SCI; Butler, 2008), and
 - The RAND Social Support Survey Instrument (SSSI; Sherbourne & Stewart, 1993).
- All metrics demonstrated good reliability for measuring the purported constructs in the sample.
 - Five paired-sample t-tests compared the difference scores from the pre-test to the post-test.

RESULTS

- Five analyses were conducted with SPSS 28 addressing missing data with listwise deletion ($\alpha = .05$).
- All program outcomes yielded statistically significant improvements in
 - quality of life, $M = -0.14$, $SD = 0.16$, $t(23) = -4.27$, $p < .001$,
 - depression symptoms, $M = 4.17$, $SD = 6.14$, $t(22) = 3.26$, $p = .004$,
 - anxiety, $M = 2.30$, $SD = 4.86$, $t(22) = 2.28$, $p = .033$,
 - self-care behaviors, $M = -16.46$, $SD = 23.89$, $t(20) = -3.16$, $p = .005$, and
 - perceived social support, $M = -10.07$, $SD = 20.84$, $t(20) = -2.22$, $p = .039$.

“VSN programs help with the loneliness we experience.”

– V-SRG Program Participant

The Military Spouse Resiliency Group (MSRG) Peer Support Program: Equipping Families for Resiliency with Tools (EFFRT)

- Underway at Fort Cavazos, 2023-2025
- Recruit Army spouses to be randomized to the Military Spouse Resiliency Group program or waitlist comparison group.
- Local spouses will be recruited and trained as peer leaders to facilitate peer support groups.
- Assess impact of the program on outcomes that include depression, anxiety, quality of life, self-care practices, social support and knowledge about and confidence in supporting service members' access to health care.

Funded by Congressionally Directed Medical Research Program (CDMRP) Traumatic Brain Injury and Psychological Health Research Program



VSN SOCIAL CLUB



The VSN Social Club program provides a variety of online and in-person **peer groups** to the larger military and veteran-connected community. Participants are provided a safe space to discuss topics that interest them and create opportunities to **connect, socialize, and provide and receive support**. Clubs are facilitated by peer leaders, covering topics generated by the interests and needs of our network.



VSN SOCIAL CLUB

UPCOMING
VIRTUAL &
INPERSON
OPPORTUNITIES



Led by:
Gretchen Davis
Veteran Spouse &
VSN Peer Leader

COFFEE CHAT

EVERY **FRIDAY** | **1PM**^C**2PM**^T

@veteranspousenetwork




Led by:
Kat Steigers
Veteran Spouse &
VSN Peer Leader


CRAFT ME CRAZY

Starting February 12th
EVERY **10AM**^C**SUNDAY** | **11AM**^T


@veteranspousenetwork



INSIDER'S PERSPECTIVE:



CLAIMS PROCESS



LED BY:
Richard Smith
Veteran Service Officer (VSO)

FEB 15TH | **12PM**^C**TUESDAY** | **1PM**^T



Led by:
Karla Kretchman
Veteran Spouse &
VSN Peer Leader

VIDA MILITAR: ¿En qué me metí?

MILITARY LIFE: WHAT DID I GET INTO?

FEB 22ND | **7PM**^C**WEDNESDAY** | **8PM**^T

@veteranspousenetwork



VSN SOCIAL CLUB

**UPCOMING
IN-PERSON
OPPORTUNITIES**



Led by:
Debbie Wilson
Veteran, Spouse &
VSN Peer Leader

CONROE, TX
2101 W Davis St,
Conroe, TX

**SPOUSES
Night Out**

**FEB 9TH | 6PM CST
THURSDAY | 8PM**

@veteranspousenetwork



**COUPLE UP
Date Night**

Led by:
Debbie Wilson
Veteran, Spouse &
VSN Peer Leader

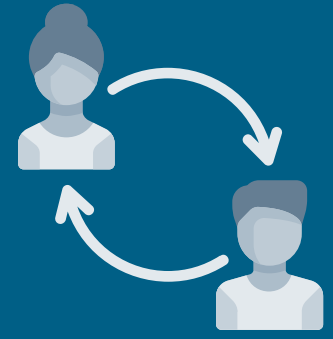
**MARCH 4TH | 6PM CST
SATURDAY | 8PM**

SHENANDOAH, TX
19075 I-45 Suite 600,
Shenandoah, TX 77385

@veteranspousenetwork

“You need the ones who have been there in your shoes. And our experiences are different than the SM or the civilian spouse and we need people to walk with us through the bad days”

– VSN Participant



PEER LEADERSHIP

MEET OUR LEADERS



Meet our leaders in GREATER DFW



Alise Ralston
VETERAN SPOUSE



Gretchen Davis
VETERAN SPOUSE



Denise Banks
VETERAN SPOUSE



Tanya Mac
VETERAN SPOUSE



Meet our leaders in GREATER HOUSTON



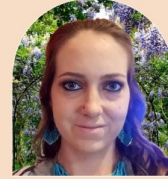
Shirley Uriostegui
VETERAN | SPOUSE



Debbie Wilson
VETERAN | SPOUSE



Ashley Ware
VETERAN SPOUSE



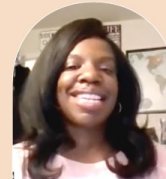
Marsha Tousha
VETERAN SPOUSE



Meet our leaders in ACROSS THE U.S.



NEW Christina Leonard
VETERAN SPOUSE
PENNSYLVANIA



NEW Stephanie
Casby-Williams
VETERAN SPOUSE
MARYLAND



NEW Mickia Freeman
VETERAN SPOUSE
FLORIDA



Karie Hare
VETERAN | SPOUSE
IMVFW | VSN INTERN
COLORADO



“VSN gave me a purpose again. Helping other Veteran Spouses/Partners helps me to stay connected to the core of who I am!”

– VSN Peer Leader



Partner with THE VSN

Email us at VSN@austin.utexas.edu

GET INVOLVED

Participants can stay up to date on all VSN opportunities, and register for the ones that interest them on our Events Calendar!

Veteranspousenetwork.org



Join our mailing list to receive our monthly VSN and IMVFW newsletters which share information on all program opportunities, and more!



The background features a teal color with a wavy, organic shape that frames the central text. The teal is a deep, rich blue-green.

QUESTIONS?