

Pandemic Peer Support: Adaptations to the Veteran Spouse Resiliency Group (V-SRG) Program (2022)

PUBLICATION BRIEF

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With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the V-SRG program pivoted to an entirely virtual platform and expanded from serving spouses in Texas to serving spouses across the nation.

BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

- Upon separation from military service, veteran families frequently relocate to be near family or for career or educational opportunities and often end up in locations where they do not have a “built-in” community like the one they may have had in the military. The **COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to further isolation and strain in the veteran spouse community.**
- The Veteran Spouse Network's V-SRG program is a **12-session peer based model** with two veteran spouses/partners leading groups of 6-8 participants lasting up to 2 hours weekly for 12 weeks. Due to the pandemic, the VSRG program was **forced to pivot and expand to a virtual platform.**
- In February 2020, the V-SRG program had just completed an in-person training of 17 new leaders in Texas who were excited to start leading in-person groups. In early March, two in-person groups had already begun, and six additional in-person groups were set to start later in the month. In mid-March, stay at home orders upended all plans for in-person interactions.
- In 2019, the V-SRG first adapted it's curriculum to offer virtual groups in order to reach individuals in rural areas. **This early adoption of virtual groups, positioned the program to successfully pivot to exclusively offering virtual groups.**
- The transition to all groups being offered virtually, included an adapted curriculum and supplemental leader trainings on virtual program implementation.
- **Community guidelines were updated,** folded into the curriculum, and firmly communicated to participants in order to address **privacy and safety concerns** inherent to virtual platforms, especially when discussing deeply personal, private matters.

WHAT DID WE FIND?

- Online groups and leader trainings **expanded program reach outside of Texas,** reducing attendance-based barriers presented by in-person groups.
- **Technical challenges were present for both leaders and participants.** Many participants and leaders were not familiar nor comfortable with the Zoom platform. As Zoom and Wi-Fi use increased, groups faced connectivity, bandwidth, and other technical issues.
- Leaders and participants reported the **benefit of finding a needed community of support** when the world was facing unprecedented levels of isolation.
- Leaders and participants reported that virtual group members were **able to bond and engage at similar levels to those in in-person groups,** and the majority of spouses were not only open to joining virtually, but **expressed a preference for the virtual setting.**

ACTION STEPS

- **Develop creative solutions to foster community** and connection in order to provide much needed social and peer support.
- **Staff must gain proficiency in virtual meeting platforms** to assist peer leaders and participants.
- If possible, offer options for both in-person and virtual trainings/groups.
- Meeting online requires staff and peer leaders to **have important conversations about privacy and safety, trainings, and program policies.**

