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 its 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.