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Service Area: Veterans in the Arts

DVS Program Managers: Brandi Jancaitis, VVFS; Dr. Clay Mountcastle, VWM

At the outset, it is important to note that *Veterans in the Arts* does not exist as a dedicated program or service area; therefore, the program managers designated above seek to include the arts as resources through their respective service lines. The report that follows defines mission, objectives, highlights and initiatives, challenges, and strategic opportunities both from practices that have been reported or observed, but also in potential or proposed terms.

The **mission of the *Veterans in the Arts*** service area is to connect interested veterans and their families with arts programs, both in the public and private sector, in an effort to promote vitality and wellness. The term ‘arts’ can be considered here to apply to the visual arts (painting, sculpture, photography, graphic arts), the performing arts (music, dance, theater, comedy), film-making, video production and conceptual art, creative writing, fashion design, and the culinary arts. An extended definition of the mission is to engage public support and interest in the veteran community through dedicated arts events or events that include an arts component.

Veterans in the Arts serves all interested Virginia veterans and their families. As an outreach tool, it has the potential to serve the DVS as well as the Office of the Secretary of Veterans & Defense Affairs and the Office of the Governor.

The objectives of *Veterans in the Arts* are:

- To provide an alternative type of therapy for veterans in an effort to improve behavioral health and foster rehabilitation
- To provide DVS staff with a database of active arts opportunities for veterans, enabling them to connect the veterans to an appropriate program in a timely, meaningful way
- To foster community and connectivity between veterans and like-minded individuals
- To offer opportunities for individual expression
- To facilitate entrepreneurial or vocational possibilities for veterans in the arts field
- To use the arts as a communications tool to build the public image of DVS
- As outreach to inspire organizations, both public and private, to offer additional arts programs for veterans

Operational overview:

There are a number of programs offered by veteran-related organizations as well as dedicated arts programs at the regional, state and national levels that have benefited Virginia veterans during the past year. These include, but are not limited to:

The Virginia War Memorial; DVS Veteran Care Centers; The Hylton Center's Veterans and the Arts Initiative (at George Mason University); The Virginia Arts Commission; the Virginia Film Institute; Richmond Film Festival (RIFF); SWVA Together With Veterans; Brain Injury Services of SW Virginia; The Warrior's Canvas and & Veterans Art Center

Some **operational highlights of the past year** include:

- At the Virginia War Memorial (VWM): Art gallery exhibits featuring work created by Virginia veterans; Navy Band concert; Incorporation of recorded musical elements in the Who They Were: Lives Worth Living exhibit; The Mighty Pen Project (Creative writing workshops for veterans sponsored by the VWMF)
- Together With Veterans (a veteran-driven non-profit sponsored by the Veterans Health Administration and the Governor's Challenge to Prevent Suicide): The SW Virginia TWV program has provided very popular monthly art therapy and blacksmithing therapy events for veterans and their spouses.

Challenges facing *Veterans in the Arts*:

- VVFS staff in regional offices report that when they feel a veteran may benefit from participation in a particular kind of arts program – or veterans themselves request information - they would like to have more comprehensive, up-to-date information at hand to give them. They do not have a point of contact focused on the arts, so each individual staff member has to research and link veterans to their area of interest.
- There is a lack of personnel and funding available at the DVS regional level to develop dedicated opportunities in the arts for veterans.
- When veterans don't want to attend peer support groups, preferring instead to participate in an arts-type event, an opportunity is lost if there is not ready information to connect the veteran to his or her specified need.

Strategic opportunities and recommendations:

- Create a database listing ongoing arts opportunities for veterans that will be accessible to DVS staff statewide. (*Note: VVFS West Region has developed and maintains an updated resource directory for all staff to access when a resource is needed. This should be done on a statewide basis, for all to benefit from.*)
- Hire a full or part-time coordinator to collate information on arts resources for veterans and maintain the database (described above). The coordinator would be a point of contact for arts-related resources needed by VVFS, VETE, VWM, and Communications & Marketing, and could also conduct outreach to develop new arts opportunities.
- Much like the SWVA Together With Veterans program, which is veteran-driven, there is the potential for *Veterans in the Arts* to pilot a similar project. The scenario envisioned here – where veterans make their art to benefit other veterans and/or their communities – is a form of continued service that enriches the veteran artist, fosters self-reliance, and can inspire other veterans to do the same. With support for this kind of project from DVS, veterans themselves become a key resource and Virginia could lead the way.

Why is an arts program vital to Virginia veterans?

In their own words, here is what our VVFS staff have shared:

“Many veterans and their families separate from the service and lose their sense of belonging; this is especially true in SW Virginia, due to it being so rural. This often leads to isolation. These programs are beneficial because they give the participants something to look forward to, which also creates a sense of accomplishment. Veterans often say they have no friends or family. These programs give veterans the opportunity to develop relationships and camaraderie, which leads to communication among people in/from similar situations. I have been told on MANY occasions that ‘if it weren’t for programs like these I wouldn’t be here.’” - *Dan Judd, VVFS Senior Resources Specialist, West Region*

“VVFS’s main goal is to assist veterans in recovery with the understanding that recovery is different for each individual. The arts allow veterans to explore another pathway to resilience, bond with others, and grow in self-confidence.” - *Anthony Swann, VVFS Peer Services Director, Central Region*

Final Thoughts:

Art is made to be consumed. Put another way, it is designed to connect human beings. A painting needs someone to view it. A jazz concert needs an audience, no matter how small, to listen. A novelist needs someone to read his book. People are moved and often changed by experiencing the art that others create. The artist feels whole and inspired to continue creating. That is when the circle is complete. That sense of connectivity is what many service members lack after they transition to veteran status. With the arts, which are so often the last priority when decisions are made about allocating funds, there are many unexplored possibilities for enhancing the veteran experience, not the least of which is in rediscovering a sense of purpose and feeling connected again. The arts are important enough to be acknowledged as a resource for DVS – but if they are to be used to their full potential, there needs to be a real investment made.

Respectfully submitted,

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