

# STRENGTHENING RESILIENCE FOR VETERANS IN ALABAMA



**Celebrating Alabama's Progress  
Certified Public Manager Program  
CPM Solutions Alabama 2024**



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*The research, findings, and recommendations presented in this white paper do not represent the views of any agency or organization, but rather the collective educational research and analysis from a diverse group of participants in the Certified Public Manager Training Program.*

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**Mark Bunting**, General Manager, WSFA 12 News.

Bunting has many years of experience and knowledge in broadcasting and media outlets. He answered our questions and provided valuable feedback.

**Brandon Miller**, Public Information Manager, Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs.

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The 1:1 Foundations is a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping first responders identify the stressors of the job and learning how to manage them. Gallups grew up in Birmingham Alabama and moved to Montgomery in 1985 to join the Montgomery Police Academy. He graduated class 85-A and was elected the class chaplain. He serves the men and women of the Wetumpka Police Department, Elmore County Sheriff's Department, United States Secret Service, and the Elmore County Fire fighters association.

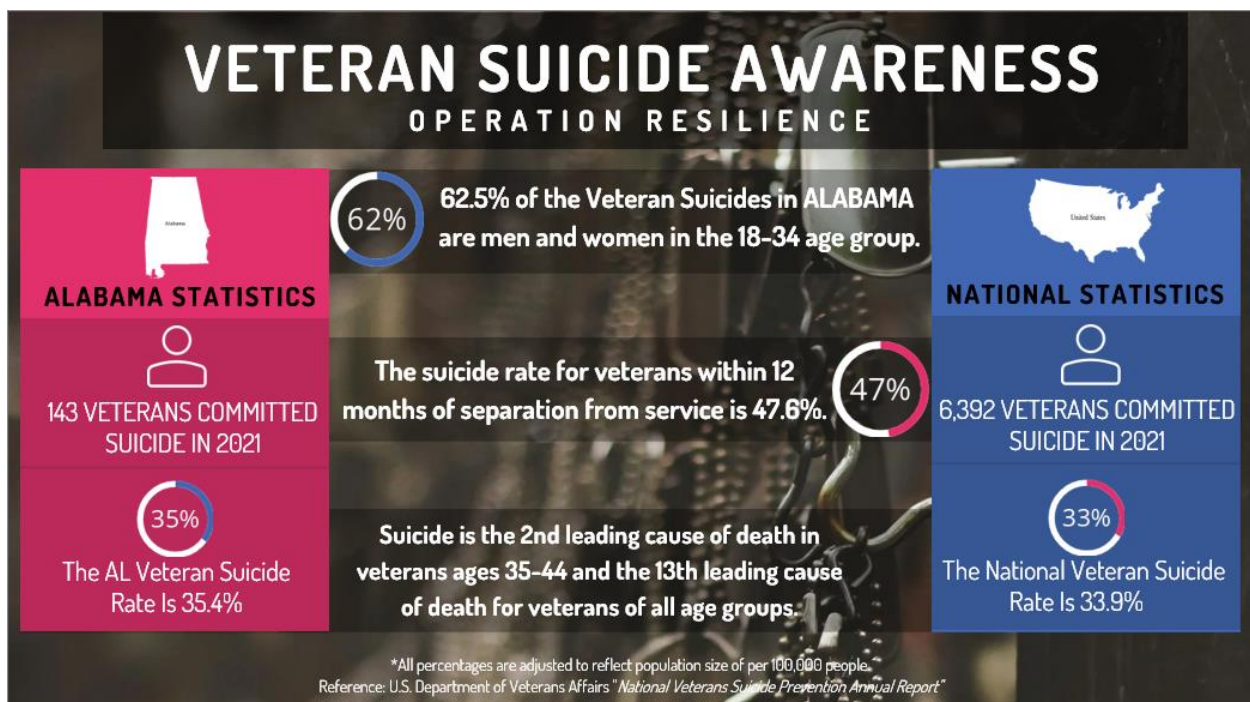
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# Introduction

Military veterans have risked their lives to defend our nation's freedoms and protect the rights of its citizens. After completing their service, they return home to be supported by their families and government. As a nation, we honor these heroes with numerous recognitions, such as medals, holidays, and discounts, acknowledging their sacrifices and achievements. Despite significant efforts by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and the Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs to meet veterans' basic needs, providing access to services that strengthen the mental health and well-being of veterans remains a challenge.

Information provided by the Alabama Department of Veteran Affairs (ADVA) shows that “in 2020, 152 Veterans in Alabama took their own lives, which represented 18% of the state’s suicides. The following year, the Veteran suicide total decreased to 143.” The ADVA also found that in the year 2021 the Veteran suicide rate in Alabama of 35.4 was significantly higher than the national general population suicide rate of 33.9. In contrast, the 2021 Alabama general population rate was 20.2, and the national general population rate was 18 (USDVA, November 2023). These tragic events urge the need to strengthen the mental well-being of our Veterans in Alabama.



In March of 2021, Alabama's Challenge was created through bill HJR 28. "Alabama's Challenge is an aligned effort between the legislative Task Force on Veterans Suicide and the Governor's Challenge to Prevent Suicide Among SMVF (service members, veterans, and their families), which share a significant overlap in goals and team membership." The Alabama Department of Veteran's Affairs has also launched an initiative called "Operation Resilience" to target and inform our military veterans and their families of resources to prevent suicide (va.alabama.gov).

The *Strengthening Resilience for Veterans* CPM Solutions Project Team will examine what the State of Alabama is currently doing to benefit our Veterans and offer recommendations on establishing a statewide campaign to educate veterans and their families on resilience training by:

- Identifying current programs and initiatives in the state of Alabama.
- Identifying challenges inhibiting the State of Alabama's ability to reach its full Veteran population.
- Examining programs offered by reputable agencies and organizations to prevent veteran suicide.
- Providing recommendations to the Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs and other stakeholders on measures to provide resilience training among the Veteran population in the State of Alabama.
- Providing marketing recommendations for a statewide awareness campaign to educate veterans on the value of resilience training.

## **Alabama Dept. of Veterans Affairs Initiatives**

The Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs has a history of developing and managing independent programs that service the SMVF community within the state. These initiatives can be relied upon to aid in creating a successful program to help prevent veteran suicide. Two of these programs are the Alabama G.I. Dependent Scholarship and the State Veterans Homes.

### **Alabama G.I. Dependent Scholarship**

The Alabama G.I. Dependent Scholarship is a nationally renowned program created by Act 633 and approved October 1947 by the Alabama Legislature. It is administered by the Alabama



Department of Veterans Affairs and is governed by the Code of Alabama 1975, Section 31-6-1(va.alabama.gov). The scholarship has various benefits and qualification criteria. To highlight the most impactful benefits, this scholarship provides funding to children and stepchildren of qualified veterans funding for five academic years (10 semesters) at any Alabama qualifying school for undergraduate courses of study. Spouses and un-remarried widow(er)s are also eligible for scholarship benefits (va.alabama.gov). For the fiscal year 2022, a total of \$34,429,405.76 was awarded to 5,672 recipients covering tuition, books and lab fees. To discover more about the benefits and qualifications of the Alabama G.I. Dependent Scholarship, you can explore va.alabama.gov.

## **Veterans Homes**

The state of Alabama has five Veterans homes and one long-term care facility. The homes are located throughout the state. Locations include the cities of Huntsville, Alexander City, Bay Minette, Pell City, and the Enterprise location which recently opened in 2024. The majority of these home house anywhere from 125 to 130 residents. The Enterprise location houses up to 175 residents. The homes are co-ed and provide assisted living. The Pell City location has received visitors from other states' Veterans Affairs departments to view the facility.



## **Act 2024-358**

On May 15<sup>th</sup> of 2024, Governor Kay Ivey signed Act 2024-358 requiring “the Alabama Department of Mental Health to work collaboratively with the Alabama Department of Veterans

Affairs to develop a comprehensive plan to address Alabama veterans' behavioral health needs and to provide funding of certain programs addressing specific behavioral health needs.” Act 2024-358 further outlines specific resources, procedures, techniques, and collaboratives that have been approved and requested to be utilized in the efforts of maintaining the mental wellness of our Alabama Veterans.

On August 6, 2024, our team had the privilege to meet with Commissioner Kim Boswell and other leaders representing the Alabama Department of Mental Health (ADMH). Our team learned of various initiatives offered by ADMH that are also available to Alabama Veterans. Currently ADMH focuses on a model of Prevention, Treatment, and Recovery for veterans facing mental distress. They provide treatment through their system of facilities, a network of over two-hundred certified community providers, and crisis care centers which are available for all citizens, including veterans, who are in immediate need of help. There are five ADMH run crisis centers located in Huntsville, Birmingham, Tuscaloosa, Montgomery, and Mobile that serve the surrounding counties. These centers are open 24/7 to receive patients for suicide prevention treatment. There is an additional facility opening in the fall of 2024 to service the wiregrass area. For those who need immediate help but cannot travel to one of the crisis care locations, there is a dedicated crisis line (988) that is available nationally and connects callers to the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline centers in each state. The ADMH is monitoring the use of the 988 crisis line in respect to how many veterans are utilizing the resource. Currently, 31% of the calls have been attributed to veterans. This line is advertised specifically to veterans through the ADVA page [vetsforhope.com](https://vetsforhope.com) and is being utilized by veterans according to the ADMH data (8/7/24 meeting with Comm. Kimberly Boswell et al).

## **Resilience Training**

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While the State of Alabama has undergone several initiatives to assist the Veteran population, studies have shown the need for more attention to be given to resiliency training. This section will discuss our team's findings related to the definition of resilience, the need for resiliency training, and the core competencies of resilience training.



## **What does it mean to be resilient?**

The U.S. Army defines “resilience as a process that requires adoption of productive behaviors, thoughts, and actions that can be learned. Resilience prepares you to deal with life’s challenges by giving you the ability to cope with adversity, adapt to change, and thrive under new conditions” (U.S. Army, n.d.).

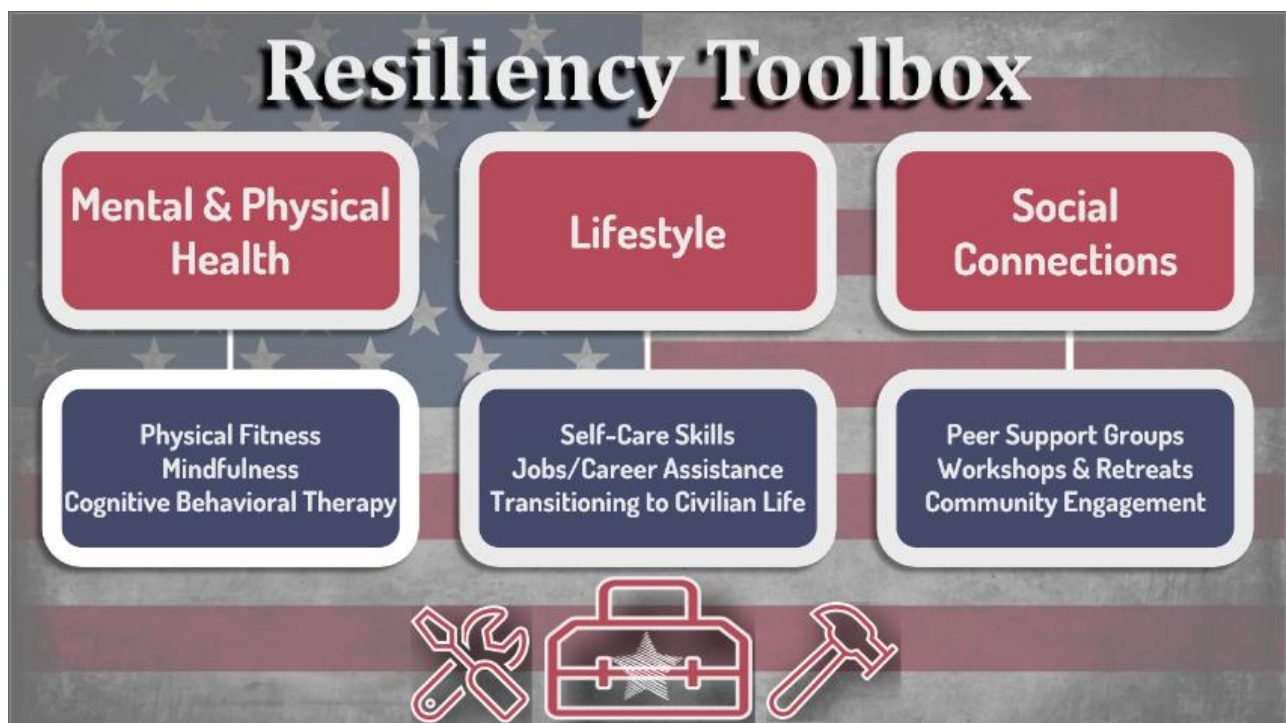
## **Why Resilience Training for Veterans is Necessary?**

Our research team asked Chaplain John Gallup with the 1:1 Foundation about the transition from Military service to civilian life. His foundation works with a number of military veterans, and he was able to share some insight on his experiences:

“Transitioning from military service to civilian life can be a challenging process for many veterans. One of the main challenges is adjusting to a completely different lifestyle. In the military, individuals are used to a structured environment with clear expectations and routines. Transitioning to civilian life can feel overwhelming as veterans navigate a more flexible and less structured way of living. Another challenge is finding a new sense of purpose and identity outside of the military. Many veterans have spent years dedicating their lives to their service, and transitioning. Mental health issues, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression, can also be significant challenges during this transition. Many veterans have experienced traumatic events during their service, and adjusting to civilian life can trigger or exacerbate mental health issues. Accessing mental health support and resources is crucial during this transition period” (Chaplain John Gallup, Founder of 1:1 Foundation).

## Core Competencies of Resiliency Training Programs

Each branch of the military offers unique resiliency training to its enlisted members. Our team explored military programs in an effort to offer findings that could apply when developing a resilience program for veterans. From our team's analysis of these programs, we deduced consistent competencies that provide a framework of three themes that deliver a strong foundation of tools needed by the veteran population. The three foundational themes of Mental and Physical Health, Lifestyle, and Social Connections provide veterans with the essential tools to build resilience and overcome life's challenges.



### Mental and Physical Health

Each military branch offers unique training focused on building emotional strength, mental toughness, and physical fitness. "Being physically resilient can build self-confidence and the ability to lead yourself and others through tough situations in life. In addition, there are ties between physical and mental health" (U.S. Army, n.d.). The U.S. Marine Corps' resiliency program is based around a holistic fitness approach. They provide training to enlisted members to promote physical, mental, social, and spiritual fitness (U.S. Marine Corp, n.d.). This is a

valuable and tested method for building resilience in the active-duty population and would be a valued method for veterans as well. Building mental resilience is a process, much like exercising to build muscle, requiring training and repetition. It also requires professionals to teach techniques and strategies specific to an individual and their needs (Palmiter, et. al., 2020).

Physical and mental health are intrinsically linked. When one is suffering, the other will as well. As we seek professional assistance from health care providers when we are injured or sick, we should also seek professional assistance when we are suffering from mental distress or need treatment to cope with stress (McNaughton M., 2021). The armed forces branches offer training that can be adapted to veterans. There are also many approaches proven to work with civilians. One effective approach is through cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT). CBT can help veterans develop coping mechanisms by identifying and challenging negative thought patterns and behaviors with talk therapy from a mental health counselor. CBT significantly reduced symptoms of PTSD and depression in veterans, highlighting its effectiveness in fostering mental resilience (Monson, et al., 2006). Being able to recognize the intrusive thoughts as they begin and have the knowledge of how to subdue them, can be the difference in the life of a veteran. Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) is also a powerful tool for enhancing mental resilience in veterans. MBSR practices, such as meditation and mindful breathing, help veterans manage stress and cultivate a sense of calm and focus. Veterans who participate in MBSR programs have significant reductions in PTSD symptoms and improved emotional regulation (Kearney et al., 2012). By practicing mindfulness techniques, veterans can develop greater emotional resilience and coping skills to navigate the challenges of transitioning to civilian life. These are just two examples of tools that can be utilized in the mental fitness training aspect of a comprehensive resilience training program.

## **Lifestyle**

“Transitioning from military service to civilian life can be a challenging process for many veterans. One of the main challenges is adjusting to a completely different lifestyle. In the military, individuals are used to a structured environment with clear expectations and routines. Transitioning to civilian life can feel overwhelming as veterans navigate a more flexible and less

structured way of living” (Chaplain John Gallup). This challenge is reflected in the adjusted veteran suicide rate within twelve months of separation, which is 47.6 (USDVA, November 2023). Veterans must learn how to apply for and receive their benefits, learn new skills to find a career, and adapt to function in everyday life. The ability to maintain a stable lifestyle plays an important role in decreasing the amount of stress experienced daily. The Air Force Spectrum of Resiliency places emphasis on resilience skills used to take care of self, such as financial literacy and education, before expanding to other aspects of their program (U. S. Air Force, n.d.).

Most veterans enlisted at an early age and spent most of their adult lives in the military, where structure and clear procedures are the culture. Veterans express frustration with not being equipped with skills needed to transition to life with less structure (Chaplain John Gallup). Providing veterans with training on how to properly transition to civilian life will build resiliency. “Learning brings us new information and knowledge that can be useful for solving near-term stressful problems; it also equips us with new skills and capabilities to address or even prevent future stressors” (Zhang, et. al., 2018). Currently, there are multiple non-profit organizations, community groups, and Veteran Service Offices assisting veterans through mentoring, assistance with obtaining veteran benefits, skills based training, and vocational skills. For example, The Alabama Veteran Organization employs a reverse bootcamp program where an experienced mentor is paired with a young veteran to guide them through the process of learning how to fill out the forms and obtaining the documentation needed to apply for their benefits (Alabama Veteran, n.d.). They have also recently entered a partnership with the City of Lincoln to build a facility, Dovetail Landing, to house recently separated veterans and to provide them with benefits education, career training, and to utilize the DoD Skillbridge program which provides them with the civilian work experience needed to be competitive on job applications. More information on the DoD Skill Bridge can be found by exploring [www.skillbridge.osd.mil](http://www.skillbridge.osd.mil).

An important aspect of a resilient lifestyle is maintaining career and financial stability. Career and financial uncertainty can be a significant source of stress and anxiety for veterans (Why do Workers Prioritize Stability?, n.d.). The military offers a high degree of stability for enlisted members. They are thoroughly trained, have a structured routine, and have a clearly defined path to advancement. When transitioning to civilian careers, veterans find it difficult to translate their

military training into what is needed to qualify for employment. They are challenged with finding a new sense of purpose and identity outside of the military (Chaplain John Gallup). Providing veterans with training during this transition period will set them up for career success and stability, leaving them more capable of overcoming the stress from their active service. Still Serving Veterans is an organization that assists veterans with their career transition from active service to civilian jobs (Still Serving Veterans, n.d.). They work with veterans to assign career counselors to guide them through how to resume building, locating positions, and how to pitch their military experience during job interviews. Helping veterans build a successful and stable civilian lifestyle is a valuable tool to add to their resiliency toolbox.

## **Social Connections**

A vital component of building mental resiliency is the establishment of strong social support networks. Social connections provide emotional support, reduce feelings of isolation, and enhance the sense of belonging. Research has shown that veterans with robust social support systems experience lower levels of psychological distress and better overall mental health

(Pietrzak et al., 2010). Programs like peer support groups and community engagement initiatives can help veterans form these essential connections, contributing to their



resilience. Trust creates the ability to connect quickly, and common experiences create strong bonds in those connections. This is why veterans are able to trust each other and regain that sense of comradery in group-based activities.

Research shows that all branches of the military focus on the social aspect of resilience through peer-to-peer programs. The United States Coast Guard emphasizes the importance of a peer support network as shown in their volunteer-based Shipmate Support Peer Program. The volunteers within each unit undergo Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST) and are trained in how to support their fellow soldiers in their most vulnerable times. The United States Air Force implements the Air Force Material Command (AFMC) which focuses on building and sustaining a thriving and resilient community. The U. S. Army relies on a buddy system with their soldiers. There is always back-up and support when doing any mission or daily work. “Our connection to other people is a critical component of remaining resilient throughout our lives. Even if you have only one close relationship in your life, you are significantly more likely to overcome challenges and setbacks than if you are alone” (U. S. Army, n.d.). With these types of programs, veterans are accustomed to having someone they can rely on. When transitioning out of military service this is an aspect that is lost to veterans.

The Coast Guard also increases the robustness of their social focus by hosting resiliency workshops and enrichment retreats to enhance the community, promote social connections, and offer group resiliency training (U. S. Coast Guard Foundation, n.d.). Many veteran service non-profits also promote community building through retreats where veterans have a place to meet other local veterans, participate in team building activities, and regain a sense of comradery. Alabama Veteran Organizations hosts Warrior Retreats throughout the year at Dovetail Landing and other centralized locations, where veterans have the opportunity to come together for a weekend to build relationships with one another and foster peer-to-peer relationships in the form of “Battle Buddies” (Alabama Veteran, n.d.). Veterans are receptive to these social activities, which contribute to their popularity and success. The Warrior Retreats offered reach capacity quickly and there are often waitlists (Alabama Veteran, n.d.).

Based on our discoveries from resilience programs among military branches, resilience training focuses on giving veterans the tools they need to build a strong foundation of resilience. With a comprehensive resiliency toolbox, veterans can strengthen their physical and emotional health, have the necessary skills to successfully navigate life’s challenges, and build a community of other veterans around them for their ongoing support.



# Program Development Recommendations

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When developing a resiliency training program for veterans, it is important to look to examples that relate to the target audience. Previously we discussed unique resiliency trainings offered by certain military branches to their enlisted members. While these training programs may not have been available while most of the current veteran population were still enlisted, veterans can likely benefit from resiliency competencies the military is currently teaching active members. Additionally, the team spoke with veterans and engaged with veterans' groups on social media to gain an understanding of their mentality, motivations, and what they respond to favorably. The team used the accepted competencies we analyzed from military branch resilience training, information from veteran non-profit organizations' websites, and insight from the 1:1 Foundation to offer recommendations on how to frame a program that would resonate specifically with the veteran population in Alabama.

In making recommendations for a framework and marketing campaign for a veteran's resilience program, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations veterans face. Geographically, it is difficult for veterans to find nearby access to healthcare and benefit assistance through the VA system. With VA hospitals located only in Tuscaloosa, Birmingham, Montgomery, and Tuskegee, a large portion of the state's veterans are left with access to one of the eleven outpatient VA clinics in Alabama (USDVA). Veterans located in North and South Alabama have been traveling to VA hospitals in neighboring states to get full spectrum care. Veterans can be approved to utilize Community Care, which allows them to seek treatment from facilities outside of the system if they are unable to get an appointment at a VA facility in a reasonable amount of time (ADVA). Due to travel limitations for some veterans, there is more access to Veterans Service Offices (VSO) throughout the state than to healthcare locations. The sixty-one VSOs in Alabama cover nearly every county with the exception of seven, offering convenience to veterans. VSOs assist veterans with benefit claims, help to acquire documentation for their service, and guidance for pension and indemnity compensation. Due to the VSOs crucial role in supporting veterans, the following recommendations incorporate strategies that best utilize their availability and expertise as ADVA expands Operation Resilience statewide.

## MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH – TRAIN THE TRAINER WORKSHOPS

Since the signing of Act 2024-358 requires the ADVA and the ADMH to work together to develop a comprehensive plan to address Alabama veterans' behavioral health needs, we recommend the ADVA and the ADMH to work together in utilizing shared resources to implement Operation Resilience for veterans throughout Alabama. We recommend the ADVA and the ADMH utilize the three core competencies of Mental and Physical Health, Lifestyle, and Social Connections as a framework for the statewide resilience program. Together these three competencies or tools will allow veterans throughout our state to overcome daily challenges and struggles to thrive while living a resilient lifestyle.

The team recommends that the ADVA implement a *Train the Trainer* approach to train local Veteran Service Officers, volunteers, and veteran service non-profit organizations to offer resilience training and counseling services to the veterans within their communities. Much like the Coast Guard and other military branch training programs, ADVA's program could rely on volunteers. Twenty five percent of the state population consists of SMVF who have a personal connection to veterans and can be utilized as volunteers (Brandon Miller, ADVA).

## LIFESTYLE - LOCALIZED TRAINING

The Team recommends that the ADVA work with their VSOs, existing non-profit organizations, and volunteers to host workshops offering localized assistance to rural veterans on navigating the benefit application process and help with career services. Trainings for VSOs can be offered at centralized locations where they can come and gain the skills needed to take back to their communities and train more volunteers.

We also recommend the ADVA work with local American Legion and VFWs to host townhall meetings in their communities. Veterans associated with these organizations could serve as guides, lead discussion groups, or volunteer as needed. They could also help sponsor social nights for local veterans. These veteran socials could be a time of not only fellowship, but of veterans helping one another transition back into civilian life.

We recommend the ADVA work with non-profits like the Alabama Veteran Organization and Still Serving Veterans. Following on the success of the Alabama Veteran Organization's reverse bootcamp mentoring program, the ADVA could recruit veterans to mentor younger veterans in navigating the adjustment back to civilian life. The mentors should have a good understanding of navigating the process to fill out forms for benefits and to obtain needed documentation. The ADVA could partner with Still Serving Veterans to find career counselors who will help new veterans with resume building, finding positions that are aligned with their military training, and how to describe their military experience as it relates to different positions during job interviews.

Social media can also be a resource used in providing resiliency training. Through team observation of veteran social media groups, we have learned that veterans are receptive to online content that can be consumed privately and at their convenience. This is evident by the amount of this content that is shared on social media and the number of views received. For example, the Marines host a resilience podcast called Zero to One Hundred, and there are many YouTube and social media content creators offering personal stories and experiences with mental health and resilience. We recommend that the ADVA partner with veteran non-profit organizations who are currently making content and have a large following, to make new content. The content will specifically promote Operation Resilience and offer online resiliency core competency training content to rural veterans.

### [SOCIAL CONNECTIONS - RETREATS](#)

Our research has found that the retreats hosted by veteran service non-profits within the state are popular, and that veterans are receptive to this type of support. Various military branches also host retreats providing further evidence of their efficacy. Veterans building a community to support one another is a proven method that works. Another community to be built is a community of resources. It is recommended that the ADVA provide one online location that references all veterans service organizations and their events. ADVA will help promote these events and assist in offering training on the resiliency core competencies.

## Statewide Awareness Campaign Recommendations

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Beyond offering recommendations for an Operation Resilience framework, our team will also offer recommendations for a statewide marketing campaign. The ADVA has currently been successful in offering resiliency town hall meetings around the state to bring the discussion about resiliency to the SMVF of Alabama. So far, most of these meetings have been held in centralized areas that are more densely populated. Traditional marketing and communication is easier in metropolitan areas, and attendance at events is higher due to the larger population within a short commuting distance. The ADVA has chosen to be more strategic with their meetings due to limited staffing and resources for the current program (Brandon Miller, Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs). According to the ADVA, as of end of year, 2023 the Veteran population consisted of approximately 351,132 veterans, and the number of ADVA employees statewide was 129.

As Operation Resilience seeks to expand across Alabama, our recommendations for a statewide campaign emerge from marketing best practices researched from private sector organizations and information gained from interviews with WSFA's Mark Bunting. The following recommendations focus on content creation, strategic branding, social media, and a centralized micro-site.



## Consistent Branding

Consistent branding is the cornerstone of a successful awareness campaign. It ensures that all materials and messages are immediately understood, recognizable, and associated with the organization or project. The branding strategy should include one name to be used by all partners, a memorable logo, a cohesive color scheme, typography, and an inspiring mission statement to solidify brand messaging. It is important to develop a consistent visual identity and



design elements that are used across all marketing materials and platforms. This consistency helps to create a recognizable and professional image, reinforcing identity and recognition in the minds of the target audience (Keller, et. Al. 2020).

We recommend the logo feature symbols that resonate with veterans, such as a toolbox and tools. And the color scheme could incorporate patriotic colors, such as blue, red, and white, which resonate with veteran communities. The mission statement will need to be succinct and impactful. For example, “Operation Resilience: Building a Resiliency Toolbox with Training and Community while Giving Veterans the Tools They Need to Combat Stress, Build Mental Resilience, and Continue to Fight” immediately communicates the campaign’s purpose. It will be imperative that all promotional materials, both print and digital, consistently use the same fonts, colors, and imagery to build brand recognition. This consistency helps to build trust and reliability, making it more likely that the target audience will engage with the campaign.

## Social Media Platforms

Social Media Platforms are powerful tools for raising awareness and engaging with the community. Most people have access to a smart phone and applications and have accounts on multiple social media platforms. We recommend the campaign to use a mix of platforms including Facebook, X, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube to reach a broad audience. Each platform could serve different functions and be used to target specific demographics (Keller, et. al, 2020).

Facebook can be used to create a community around Operation Resilience by setting up a dedicated page or group where veterans and their families can share stories, build local relationships, access resources, and receive updates. Regular posts should include information about the signs of suicide, testimonials from veterans who have benefited from resiliency training, and updates on local events. The page should feature posts and information from other veteran-focus organizations, further strengthening the sense of community. Facebook also has the added resource of targeted advertising. Ads can target specific demographics, people who visit specific locations, and people who have a viewing history for certain content on the platform. Targeting advertising allows the campaign to effectively reach those most likely to benefit or participate.

X (formerly known as Twitter) is ideal for real-time updates and engagement with the audience through hashtags such as #OperationResilience and the suicide crisis line #988. Posts can share quick tips on mental health, promote upcoming events, and engage with followers by reposting their message of support. Instagram, with its visual focus, can share impactful images and stories that highlight the campaign's success and the personal stories of veterans – as well as continuing to build on the hashtag. Instagram has been experiencing added interactions with short form reel content. Reels are a step up in engagement from static images and are often copied when a reel becomes a trend.

YouTube is the platform that would be the hosting location for highly produced long-form content. It should be set up with playlists of resiliency training, personal stories and experiences, training on accessing VA benefits, and other videos highlighting the champions of the campaign. Shortform content, “Shorts”, on YouTube, is gaining traction, and those videos can also be shared to the other platforms.

## **Content Creation**

Compelling content is crucial in capturing attention and conveying the campaign's message. Content should be varied and engaging, including articles, both long-form and short-form video content, infographics, and personal stories. Emotional laden content, whether positive or negative, is linked to virality (Berger, et. al., 2010). Each piece of content should be consistent



with the campaign's branding and express a clear message about the importance of veteran mental health and the benefits of resiliency training.

Videos are particularly powerful in storytelling. Short-form reel-style videos featuring veterans sharing their experiences with mental health challenges and how resiliency training helped them can be highly impactful. These videos can be shared on social media, the campaign's website, and YouTube to create an emotional connection with the audience (Berger et. al., 2010). The Coast Guard office of Work-Life offers a personal wellness video series titled, Wellness Wednesday. Topics in this video series cover a variety of topics ranging from VA Claims to Healthy Eating on a Budget, Time Management, and Suicide Prevention. There are also Health Promotion Resources that include: Personal Wellness, Physical Fitness, Coast Guard Athleticism Program, Stress Management, Tobacco Cessation, and Weight Management. The USMC offers a resiliency video podcast on YouTube called Zero to One Hundred that focuses on physical, mental, social, and spiritual fitness.



Infographics can provide quick, digestible information about veteran suicide statistics, signs to look out for, and resources available for help. Infographics also lend themselves to being shared easily by viewers. Short blog style posts can delve deeper into topics like the

psychology of resiliency training, interviews with mental health experts, and success stories from veterans who previously struggled with mental health difficulties. All content should be engaging, impactful, and encouraging people to share it on their personal pages.

## **Centralized Micro-Site**

Creating a centralized micro-site within the main ADVA website is essential for providing a single location where all information about Operation Resilience can be accessed. This micro-site should be easy to navigate and mobile-friendly, ensuring that users can find what they need

quickly and efficiently without getting frustrated. Distracting advertising should be kept to a minimum in order to not overly clutter the page and deter users. The page will serve as the home for Operation Resilience and it's branding rather than ADVA branding.

The homepage of the micro-site would feature the campaign's branding and an overview of its mission and goals. Beneficial key sections would include:

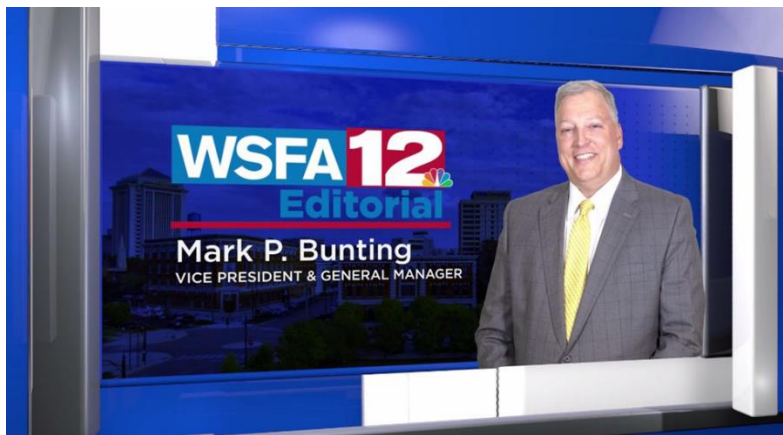
- **The Campaign:** Detailing the purpose, history, and objectives of Operation Resilience.
- **The Partners:** Add links to all the partners involved with the project and highlight the work that they do for veterans.
- **Resources:** This is an ideal location to cross-post the training videos and testimonials from the YouTube account. An interactive map can be placed in this section with filters for specific topics or information that veterans need in their local area.
- **Events:** A calendar of upcoming events, retreats, workshops, and in person training sessions.
- **Success Stories:** Sharing testimonials from veterans who have benefited from the program.
- **Get Involved:** Offering ways for individuals and organizations to support the campaign, whether through donations, volunteering, or content sharing. Regularly highlighting key champions of the programs will reward their work and increase buy-in.

These sections should be easily accessible from the homepage, set up with an intuitive user interface, and should include a search function to help users find specific information. Contact information and links to social media should be displayed in multiple locations to encourage users to follow those accounts and continue to engage regularly.

## **Broadcast Media**

The team recommends that the ADVA utilize broadcast media to raise awareness about veteran suicide, create brand recognition for "Operation Resilience", and release a call to action for volunteers. According to Mark Bunting, General Manager of WSFA12 News, the type of media that has been most effective in getting people engaged, as media has evolved, is broadcast and or digital media. Mr. Bunting stated that "With broadcast, the messaging is heard and seen and directs viewers to digital properties. The overall number of eyeballs on broadcast far outweighs

any other media. We have learned that combining broadcast and digital extends that reach.” Mr. Bunting believes that broadcast and digital media is the best way to reach rural Alabamians. Targeting specific audiences is important when you are trying to reach a certain group of people using media. We see this being done by news companies and other types of organizations. There are many ways to reach a targeted audience, but some ways are better than others. “When you start looking at targeting specific audiences, the most effective way is through digital. Through a host of many different digital platforms, we can put together a plan that can direct messages to a particular demographics such as veterans. We can focus on codes, personal traits, buying habits, etc. (Mark Bunting, General Manager, WSFA12 News.)”



According to Mr. Bunting, digital is also the best way to reach specific age groups as well. “If you are looking for younger audiences, television can work when the commercials are placed in programming that appeals to them such as live sports or live

events, but digital advertising would be the most effective way with this audience solely based on their understanding and connectivity to the digital world through Tik Tok, Instagram and Facebook. Targeting specific audiences works best in the digital sphere. If you are looking for audiences 40 years or older, broadcast television is still your best option and its’ effectiveness increases tremendously when coupled with digital elements (Mark Bunting, General Manager, WSFA12 News.)”.

When asked if there were any additional avenues that would help, Mr. Bunting offered some words of wisdom. He stated that when organizing a campaign, to be able to push the information to the highest number of people possible, the three types of media to target are Broadcast Television, Digital Marketing and Local Radio. For nonprofits, broadcast television and radio are the most effective “Print media no longer has the impact that it once did. A PSA campaign would be the most cost-effective campaign possible for a nonprofit” (Mark Bunting, General Manager, WSFA12 News.).

Mr. Bunting also stated that if you want to reach the highest number of people for the least amount of money, that broadcast television would be the best option. He expressed that “all advertising comes with a cost. Some broadcast companies have programs that offer reduced broadcasting rates and services to non-profits, and many stations will run public service announcements (PSA’s) at no charge to the nonprofit even though it costs the media companies money.” According to Mr. Bunting, WSFA does this a lot. Budget restrictions do not necessarily change the answer because cost is always a factor. “If you are looking for a digital campaign that specifically targets audiences, there are set costs. Broadcast media, both tv and radio have the ability to price their own inventory. But they are a for-profit business, and it would need to make good business sense to lower their prices” (Mark Bunting, General Manager, WSFA12 News.).

From our research of marketing best practices, we conclude that a multi-faceted digital strategy including consistent branding, strategic social media use, compelling content creation, and the establishment of a centralized microsite, will enable an effective statewide marketing campaign to positively impact veterans through Operation Resilience.

*“For our Alabama veterans, teaching and helping each other is particularly important. Many veterans face unique challenges upon returning home, and by coming together as a community, we can provide the support and resources they need to thrive.”*

*-Chaplain John Gallups, Founder of the 1:1 Foundation*

## Conclusion

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The United States has made substantial progress in acknowledging and rewarding the sacrifices of its military veterans. Despite these advancements, the challenge of maintaining veterans' mental health remains pressing, particularly in Alabama, where statistics highlight the urgent need for enhanced support and intervention. We applaud the leadership and efforts of the Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs and many other agency and organizational stakeholders who are providing programs and services to strengthen veteran well-being. As Operation Resilience seeks to positively impact veterans across the State of Alabama, it is our hope that the research and recommendations provided in this paper offer a competency framework for Operation Resilience as well as strategies for an effective marketing campaign. By leveraging these strategies and fostering strong collaborations, the ADVA can create a robust system that meets the immediate needs of veterans and empowers them with the tools necessary to build resilience and thrive in civilian life.

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