

Senate Veterans Affairs Committee Hearing, 5/10/2016
Introductory comments: Veterans Healing Veterans from the Inside Out
Mary Donovan

Veterans Healing Veterans from the Inside Out is a trauma recovery program for incarcerated veterans, founded in 2012 by a Marine incarcerated at San Quentin. He had experienced significant personal growth and healing in some of the other programs there, but felt, even in those settings, that he couldn't share the full, harrowing details of his combat experience the way he might be able to in a group of fellow veterans.

Around this same time reports were circulating of military and veteran suicide outpacing combat deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan; this alarming news spurred him to bring together a group of fellow vets to help each other heal and to provide each other with a safety net. He started a peer support group centered on a series of writing prompts which explore the ramifications of military life trauma.

The program has grown steadily since then. We currently have 4 groups running inside San Quentin. Alongside this, we run periodic trainings in group facilitation and one-on-one mentorship; and we partner with aligned organizations to offer complementary practices including yoga and mindfulness with Prison Yoga Project, and theater with Marin Shakespeare Company. We also collaborate with organizations outside to support reentry for our members upon their release.

We are grateful for an Innovative Programming Grant from the CDCR to expand this program to another prison and we are about to launch our first group at Deuel Vocational Institution in Tracy. We are also poised to start a peer support group outside the prison, both to provide support and community to our veterans who are being released, and for veterans who might be at risk for criminal justice involvement.

Our central purpose is to fill the service gap that otherwise exists beyond the reach of the great work being done to keep incarcerated veterans informed and connected with their benefits. Peer support is recognized as a powerful modality in many contexts, but veterans bring an extraordinary depth of passion and commitment to serving—even saving—each other. By providing opportunities for them to do so in correctional settings, we empower them to serve themselves, each other, and the wider prison community as a force for positive change.