



Bridging the Deadly Gap with the ETS Sponsorship Program

The **Expiration Term of Service (ETS) Sponsorship Program** directly addresses the troubling and increasing suicide rates of Servicemembers as they transition into civilian life. Aligned with the VA’s public health strategy to implement tailored, local prevention plans while also focusing on evidence based clinical strategies for intervention, the ETS Sponsorship Program, built upon the familiar sponsorship programs in the military, connects the transitioning service member to the community through a certified sponsor. This connection, made before the Servicemember leaves the service, is critical to bridging the deadly gap for our transitioning Servicemembers.

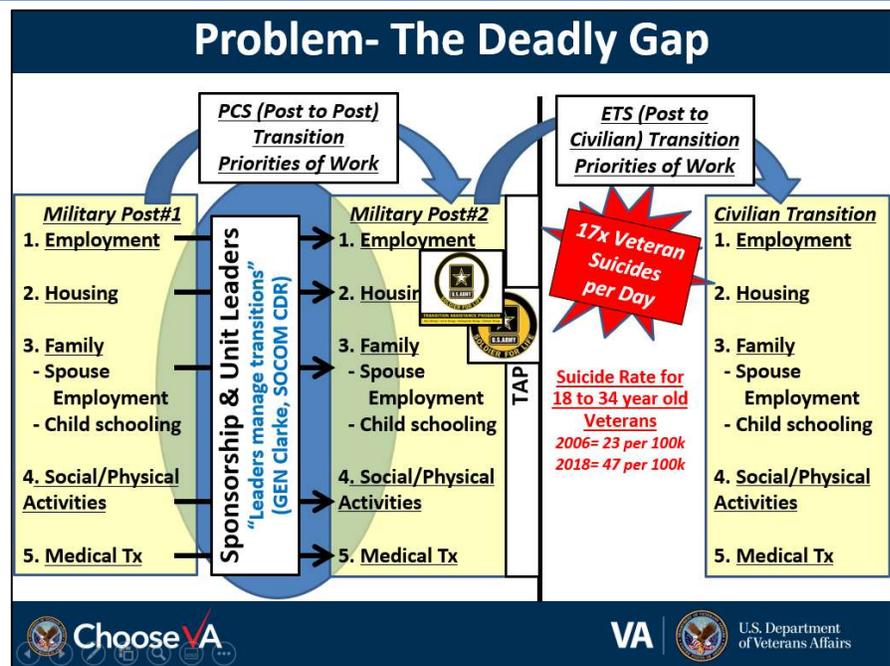
A Sponsorship Program for Transitioning Service Members

The United States is experiencing a **national epidemic of suicide for its youngest Servicemembers** still serving in the Department of Defense (DOD, 2019) and those who have already transitioned out of the military. The rate of suicide for Veterans aged 18-34 years old has **more than doubled** in the past decade. The period of significant risk for these young Veterans is in their first year after separating from the military.

In the VA National Strategy for Preventing Suicide, the VA acknowledged that it must **go beyond a focus on clinical treatment to include**

elements of prevention and reaching out to Servicemembers before they experience an acute crisis (VA, 2018). Consistent with this national and VA public health perspective to suicide prevention, VA Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) leadership in Texas made a significant commitment to the **ETS Sponsorship Program** aimed at:

- Engaging transitioning Servicemembers prior to them exiting the military
- Connecting them to certified sponsors in their post-military hometowns and community organizations to assist with their transition
- Enrolling them in needed VA and community services



Stepped Wedge Rollout of ETS Sponsorship

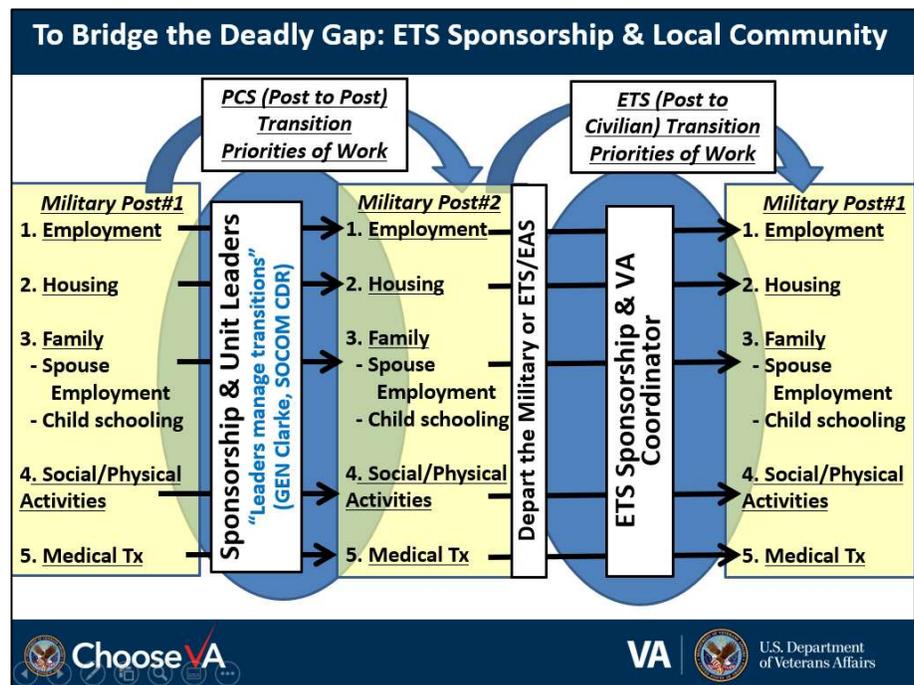
The ETS Sponsorship Program will be executed using a stepped wedge design (from 2021 to 2024), which relies on sequential roll-out to participating cities over time, while using other cities as controls until they begin implementation. The stepped-wedge design will allow for extended implementation support to the maximal number of cities and will enhance the formative evaluation (periodic reflections with key partners and Servicemember interviews) of our implementation process.

The Aims of Evaluation:

- Aim #1 will determine the effectiveness of the ETS sponsorship program (2021-2024), as evidenced by measures of transition stressors, social support, psychological distress, suicidal ideation and behaviors, and VA/non-VA service utilization.
- Aim #2 will determine the feasibility and potential utility of implementing the ETS Sponsorship program in six cities in Texas. Servicemembers that transition to cities without an established ETS Sponsorship program will experience their transition from military to civilian life as usual (i.e., services available from the U.S. Army Soldier for Life-Transition Assistance Program). After cities have implemented the ETS Sponsorship program, transitioning Servicemembers will have access to an ETS Sponsor in their city and connections to community services.

Evaluating the Effectiveness of ETS Sponsorship

Preliminary analysis was conducted for a recent randomized control trial with post-9/11 Veterans in New York City that received support from ETS sponsors; the results showed a moderate treatment effect for both reduced reintegration difficulties and improved social support (Geraci et al., in press).



For more information, check out:
<https://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn2/ContactInfo.asp>

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