

HB23-1088 Veterans Mental Health Session Reimbursement Program

Key Points:

- The Department of Veterans Affairs, by policy, is limiting Veterans to 3 mental health visits a year, unless they are in a crisis situation.
 - Crisis situation is vague and does not include substance abuse
- Veterans who have been seeking regular mental health treatment can have their treatment paused if they are deemed stable by their assigned counselor
- Due to the above listed, some Veterans may go up to eight months without vital mental health treatment.
- HB23-1088 will allow qualified Veterans up to ten (10) mental health visits a year to bridge the gap between the Department of Veterans Affairs.

There are an estimated 314,000 Veterans in Colorado who are potentially benefits eligible. Additionally, there are 33,000 Veterans in Colorado who are benefits eligible and utilize mental health benefits. Lastly, 3,000 Veterans in Colorado that would be eligible for the program.

HB23-1088 uses a hybrid of the I Matter program and the former VA Choice Program to get Veterans connected to mental health treatment. Qualified Veterans can go to the provider of their choice, and those providers will get reimbursed by the State of Colorado. Providers will be reimbursed an estimated cost of \$180 per session.

The fiscal note on this bill is \$5.8 million for FY23-24 and \$5.3 million for FY24-25. This amount will not be paid at once, but over the period of the year as Veterans utilize this benefit. There will be additional costs to include a public awareness campaign, online directory and 1.0 FTE to implement the program.

The VA Choice program was extremely successful in Rural Colorado as it allowed Veterans to select their provider and not have to either wait months for an appointment or drive three to four hours for an appointment. This program was phased out and is no longer in use.

If passed, this bill will help Veterans avoid a crisis situation and fill the gap in services from the Department of Veterans Affairs. This will also help Colorado reduce the twenty two Veterans every day that commit suicide in the nation. Lastly, this bill shows that Colorado truly cares about our Veterans and their mental health.