

**LEGISLATIVE EDUCATION STUDY COMMITTEE
BILL ANALYSIS**

Bill Number: HB 278

51st Legislature, 2nd Session, 2014

Tracking Number: .195715.1

Short Title: Veteran Virtual Reality PTSD Treatment

Sponsor(s): Representative Dianne Miller Hamilton and Others

Analyst: James Ball

Date: February 10, 2014

Bill Summary:

HB 278 makes an appropriation to continue the Veterans Virtual Reality Treatment Pilot Project (VVRTPP) at Western New Mexico University (WNMU) to demonstrate that the therapy for veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD):

- is cost and therapeutically effective; and
- decreases long-term costs due to:
 - chronic care needs;
 - reduced productivity; and
 - suicide.

Among its provisions, HB 278:

- establishes a related curriculum development initiative in the Master's of Social Work program at WNMU to train social workers in the use of VVRTPP;
- requires WNMU to provide therapeutic services to rural veterans as close to their homes as possible through the use of mobile virtual reality therapy devices; and
- requires WNMU to provide interim and final reports to the Governor and the Legislative Health and Human Services Committee.

Fiscal Impact:

\$300,000 is appropriated from the General Fund to the Board of Regents of WNMU for expenditure in three \$100,000 increments annually for FY 15, FY 16, and FY 17. Unexpended or unencumbered funds revert to the General Fund at the end of FY 17.

Fiscal Issues:

According to the Fiscal Impact Report (FIR) from the Legislative Finance Committee, HB 278 requests that WNMU create and administer a Veterans Virtual Reality Treatment Grants Fund to receive deposits of public and private grants and donations. Revenues deposited to the fund are appropriated to WNMU to carry out the purposes of the VVRTPP. Unless otherwise specified by the terms of a grant or donation, money in the fund at the end of the pilot project shall revert to the General Fund.

The FIR also notes that the House Appropriations and Finance Committee's FY 15 budget request for the Veterans' Services Department includes \$80,000 in General Fund support for the same purposes outlined in HB 278.

Substantive Issues:

The Human Service Department (HSD) states in its analysis of HB 278 that researchers have recently focused on the use of virtual reality to deliver exposure therapy by creating simulations of trauma-relevant events through a computer viewer that allows a person to experience the trauma simulation under controlled conditions. The virtual reality prolonged exposure treatment is promising but still experimental and must be applied only by thoroughly trained clinicians.

Background:

According to HSD, the US Department of Veterans Affairs estimates that PTSD afflicts:

- 31 percent of Vietnam veterans;
- 10 percent of Gulf War (Desert Storm) veterans;
- 11 percent of Afghanistan veterans; and
- 20 percent of Iraqi war veterans.

HSD cautions, however, that many veterans do not self-identify when seeking services or do not seek services due to the stigma associated with a mental health diagnosis. It is estimated that as many as 75 percent of veterans could suffer from some level of PTSD.

According to HSD, PTSD is an anxiety disorder characterized by feelings of intense horror, fear, and helplessness as a result of exposure to a traumatic event such as when one experiences actual or threatened death or serious injury. PTSD can occur following a life-threatening event such as military combat, natural disasters, terrorist incidents, serious accidents, or violent personal assaults like rape. PTSD is marked by clear physical and psychological symptoms including:

- depression;
- substance abuse;
- problems of memory and cognition; and
- other physical and mental health problems, including difficulties in social or family life.

HSD states that, according to the Veterans Administration, the number of veterans in New Mexico was 179,497 as of the end of 2007. The state funds numerous behavioral health activities that work in collaboration with the New Mexico National Guard, Department of Defense, and the Veterans Administration to support veterans and their families. Often the state-funded public behavioral health system is the first point of contact for a veteran experiencing PTSD and a veteran's family.

Committee Referrals:

HEC/HAFC

Related Bills:

HB 176 *Treatment for PTSD Veterans*