



## VOA|ReST 4 First Responders Frequently Asked Questions

### What is VOA|ReST 4 First Responders?

VOA|ReST 4 First Responders is a one-hour, online, confidential, small group support session designed to help First Responders process experiences of moral distress, build and maintain resilience, and remain committed to their work. Groups are facilitated by peer specialists who receive training in understanding these concepts and effectively moderate groups of up to 10 participants. VOA|ReST 4 First Responders uses strategies with therapeutic dimensions, but it is not a treatment program and is not therapy.

**VOA | ReST**

Resilience Strength Time

- Evidence-based approach using VOA's Resilience Strength Training™ developed for U.S. military veterans
- Prompted by the debilitating effects of COVID-19 on frontline care workers across the country
- Peer-facilitated groups for greater trust, greater understanding and better outcomes
- Fulfilling experience for peers to be trained and certified as facilitators
- Flexible and scalable scheduling to meet staffing needs
- Supplemental Moral Distress & Resiliency programs, in-person or virtual
- Industry-leading peer support technology from HeyPeers!
- User surveys and facilitator feedback for quality improvement and program development
- Customizable for populations with shared experiences, such as seniors, first responders, students, veterans and faith leaders



Survey results indicate **82% of participants felt calmer and more peaceful** after group sessions

### Who is this program for?

This program is designed for First Responders including Fire Fighters, Law Enforcement Officers, Emergency Medical Technicians & Paramedics, Dispatchers, and Emergency Room medical personnel who want to build resiliency and/or process moral distress.

## **How much does a VOA|ReST session cost?**

VOA|ReST 4 First Responders sessions are FREE to First Responders

## **How is this different from therapy?**

Therapists and counselors are licensed through the state and often undergo years of higher education and licensing requirements. Peer Supporters draw on lived experience (meaning they have been through it themselves), while also completing training specific to the VOA|ReST 4 First Responders model. While you will likely see some overlapping themes between therapy and peer support (caring people, healing through discussion, etc.) Peer Supporters center the person as the expert in their own lives. Peer Supporters do not diagnose, prescribe, or even tell a person what to do. Instead, Peer Supporters walk alongside people as they share about what is weighing on their mind at that time.

**VOA | ReST**

**Peer Support Model**

### **Limits of Mental Health Model**

- Moral distress happens to empathetic people and is not pathological
- Therapy requires a diagnosis of “disorder” to treat and bill for services
- Therapeutic relationship is inherently asymmetrical
- Therapy is separate from enduring relationships
- Transactional relationship cannot continue beyond time of treatment
- Perception exists that therapy is for the “weak”

### **Benefits of VOA|ReST Peer Support**

- Peers share work culture and experiences that facilitate trust and honesty
- Peer Facilitators are members of the group and model vulnerability and openness
- Mindfulness breathing prepares people to share and listen deeply
- Moral distress feelings are received without judgment, allowing for processing and understanding.
- Listening to others restores empathy and compassion
- Congruence of feelings in a group mitigates isolation and alienation
- Process evokes positive emotions, not just pain
- Relationships beyond the group sessions are fine
- Repeat use is encouraged, PRN

## **What is unique about this program vs. other peer support programs?**

VOA|ReST 4 First Responders is a virtual program easily accessible online. It does not require that you travel to a particular location, commit to a regular time of day, or multiple meetings. It offers participants flexibility to schedule in advance or up to 15 minutes before a session begins. Participants can attend as often as they like at a frequency that feels right for them. VOA|ReST 4 First Responders allows participants to share about what is on top of their minds and provides support from facilitators and peers who have similar lived experiences. No advice is given. Rather, trained First Responder facilitators and First Responder peers support participants while sharing in small groups and participating in breathing exercises designed to help process distress and build resilience.

## **How is this different from the peer support programs already offered by First Responder organizations?**

VOA|ReST 4 First Responders is a group format facilitated online and available to help build resilience and address day-to-day moral distress that can occur over time in First Responders. Many current First Responder peer support programs pair individuals with one peer who is available to talk with the interested participant. In addition, current programs are usually set up to assist First Responders in processing extreme crises in which they may have been very recently involved. VOA|ReST 4 First Responders is different because it is available on an ongoing basis when participants want to process and build resiliency that can slowly diminish over time, and it is not necessary for a First Responder to have experienced a recent crisis in order to participate. Finally, this program operates outside of First Responder organizations. Many First Responder organizations offer their own internal peer support programs, and yet First Responders do not access them because there are concerned others in their organization will know they have asked for support. Because this program exists externally, participants need not worry that others in their organization will know they participated in VOA|ReST 4 First Responders.



## **Is this program legitimate? Is it based in research?**

Volunteers of America (VOA) and its Shay Moral Injury Center, under the direction of Dr. Rita Nakashima Brock, have been studying Moral Injury and resiliency since 2017. This in addition to the over 125 years that Volunteers of America has been providing behavioral health, addiction treatment and housing to military veterans gave us a solid foundation to build upon. Prior to the pandemic, through its evidence-based Resilience Strength Training™ (RST) program, VOA provided intensive, in-person, peer specialist support to veterans experiencing Moral Injury or distress. Evidence-based research of that program indicates that immediately upon completion, and 6 months after the training, the majority of RST participants significantly improved their reported post-traumatic growth, perceived meaning in life, propensity to trust, dispositional optimism, positive attitudes toward themselves, personal self-esteem, and sleep quality, while decreasing their dependence on both alcohol and sleep medications. First Responder personnel such as fire, law enforcement, Paramedics/EMTs, dispatchers, and ER medical personnel face extraordinary, high-pressure circumstances similar to those of military service members. The pace and load of work and life demands are relentlessly fatiguing and disheartening, and their resilience can be seriously depleted.

### **Why was this program created?**

First Responders do high stakes work, but rarely access the available resources to navigate how they feel if things go wrong or if stress is overwhelming. Stigma around mental health treatment and diagnoses as well as fear that seeking assistance will affect their career in the long run are big reasons why they may not reach out for help. COVID-19 has further imposed extraordinary pressures on this invaluable workforce so that frontline care work has become relentlessly exhausting and demoralizing, and the resilience of workers is seriously depleted. In 2020, as it became abundantly clear that First Responders and frontline healthcare staff were experiencing similar stressors, VOA adapted the original program (Resilience Strength Training™) for this new population to be online, accessible and transformative.

### **When do sessions occur and how often do they happen?**

Sessions occur several times per week at different times of day in order to create a variety of options for attendance across multiple time zones. When new programs like this launch, we start with 2 or 3 sessions per week. As demand for sessions grows, we adjust the amount of sessions offered each week in order to ensure all interested participants are able to join as many sessions as they would like.

### **How many can join a group at a time?**

The ideal group size is 10 participants or less. Sessions are limited to 10 participants and once 10 participants have registered, we offer a waiting list. In the event that a registered participant cancels their registration, we then offer that spot to the first person on the waiting list. As the open spots are accepted or declined, we move down the waiting list and continue to offer openings to people interested in that particular session.

### **Is this program local or national?**

Yes! This program is both localized to Dallas, Denver, Miami, *AND* it is open to any interested First Responders from around the country. Because the program is online, and the format is the same no matter where you are from it is not dependent on your location.

### **Where do sessions occur?**

VOA|ReST 4 First Responder sessions occur online in a peer support platform called HeyPeers! The HeyPeers! platform functions similarly to other online meeting platforms like Microsoft Teams, Zoom, or Google Meet. As a peer support platform, HeyPeers offers personalized features so that each registrant can customize their settings to best meet their preferences. Participants can join sessions from anywhere that offers them a well-lit, private, quiet, and distraction free environment with a solid internet connection.

### **How can I join a session?**

Currently you can access general VOA|ReST sessions by registering at this link:

[https://heypeers.com/members/sign\\_up?org=Volunteers%2520of%2520America](https://heypeers.com/members/sign_up?org=Volunteers%2520of%2520America)

You can join a general session at any time to experience our VOA|ReST program for front line workers and get an overall feel for the process. Beginning July 1, 2022 sessions customized specifically for First Responders will be available for First Responder peers only.

### **Can the groups be done in person at my organization?**

We can facilitate groups in person under special circumstances; however, we believe that the program is most effective in an online setting where participants do not know each other. We have found that people are much more willing to share what is on their mind if they feel their confidentiality, safety, and anonymity are protected. One of the ways that we protect these things is by offering sessions to participants from a variety of departments, locations, and First Responder duties. We have also found that it can be very important to ensure that participants are not in sessions where another participant has actual or perceived power over them, i.e. supervisors, administrative leadership, partners, etc.

### **How do you protect confidentiality?**

We protect confidentiality in a variety of ways. Sessions are offered in an online format where participants can be from anywhere in the country. This helps to ensure participants are not in a session with others that they know unless they are comfortable with that scenario. As participants log in to the session, they are asked to type a first name so that the facilitators can speak to them directly. The name provided does not need to be the person's real name. They can use an alias or a screen name that would protect their identity if they desire. If an individual discovers they are in a session with someone else that they know and they are not comfortable they can work with the facilitators to have the higher-ranking individual log off and join a different session. Volunteers of America administers the program and while a local department may support it, the department does not have access to any participant information or session activity including what is shared in a session. This set up is intentional in order to provide a safe environment for First Responders to share what is on their mind and build their resilience.

### **How can we help VOA with this program?**

We are looking for Co-Branders, Champions, Promoters, and Connectors to help us build visibility and amplify our message. You can help us by:

- Sharing the program information with your networks of First Responders and First Responder organizations
- Posting information about the program in visible areas within your organization
- Distributing informational materials at First Responder Events you already take part in
- Attending local First Responder events as a representative of the program
- Encouraging First Responders to attend sessions
- Volunteering to become a peer facilitator and/or encouraging others to become peer facilitators
- Connecting VOA to other people and organizations who may be interested in helping
- Speaking or recommending a speaker for a local round-table event or our national event series

You can assist with all of these things or one of these things, whichever makes the most sense for you and/or your organization. If you have other ideas of ways that you could help VOA with this project please let us know.

### **Can we co-brand with Volunteers of America?**

Absolutely, we are looking to collaborate with organizations that want to be IN on the action! We are interested in relationships that add credibility and awareness to our program and help deepen the market penetration. We need strong co-branding organizations who want to put their logos on marketing materials, co-sponsor our local roundtable series, make appearances and provide quotes in media, as well as be part of our tactical collaboration.

### **What other activities is VOA planning related to this initiative?**

Volunteers of America plans to host a nationwide virtual event series kicking off in September 2022 and continuing with 3-5 additional virtual events throughout 2023.

In addition, we expect that there will be several local roundtable events in Dallas, Denver, and Miami in 2023 where VOA affiliates and local partner organizations can dialogue in person about VOA|ReST 4 First Responders and how it can best serve the community.

### **Who should I contact if I have an idea, question, or want to become involved with this program?**

<p><b><u>Learn More</u></b></p> <p> <b>Volunteers of America®</b> COLORADO</p> <p><b>Phone:</b> (720)264-3387 <b>Email:</b> <a href="mailto:VOAReSTcolorado@voacolorado.org">VOAReSTcolorado@voacolorado.org</a> <a href="http://www.voa.org/rest">www.voa.org/rest</a></p>	<p><b><u>Learn More</u></b></p> <p> <b>Volunteers of America®</b> FLORIDA</p> <p><b>Phone:</b> (786) 369-1859 <b>Email:</b> <a href="mailto:info@voa-fla.org">info@voa-fla.org</a> <a href="http://www.voa.org/rest">www.voa.org/rest</a></p>
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