



February 23, 2021

Senate Bill 550/House Bill 872 - Sheila E. Hixson Behavioral Health Services Matching Grant Program for Service Members and Veterans – Establishment – SUPPORT

On behalf of Melwood, a service provider and employer of people with disabilities and veterans in Maryland, we wish to express support for the establishment of the Sheila E. Hixson Behavioral Health Services Matching Grant Program. Melwood Horticultural Training Center, Inc. (Melwood) was founded in 1963 when a small group of parents and community supporters decided to teach plant care to young adults with disabilities who were considered by most to be untrainable, and unemployable.

Since our establishment over 57 years ago, Melwood's services have grown to include professional development training, job placement assistance, vocational/job retention support, day services, case management, summer camps, respite care for adults with disabilities, as well as targeted services to meet injured veterans' needs. Melwood now serves nearly 2600 individuals with disabilities, including injured veterans, each year through these programs and services.

Over the years, Melwood has supported hundreds of veterans and wounded warriors in their efforts to overcome the physical, behavioral, and emotional challenges associated with post-traumatic stress, mild traumatic brain injury, and other service-related traumas such as military sexual trauma and moral injury. With more than half a century of history of innovative service and advocacy for people with disabilities, growing numbers of veterans began coming to Melwood for assistance. In response, Melwood developed Operation Tohidu, a short-duration, high impact, transformative retreat for veterans, service members, partners, and caregivers. This experiential retreat is built around activities designed to enable participants to gain mastery of their post-deployment situation: education, exercise, experiential learning, peer support, group intervention, and other non-medical and non-pharmacologic therapies and interventions. Operation Tohidu is designed to facilitate post-traumatic growth and to drive or initiate progress on a participant's post-trauma journey.

Two of our Operation Tohidu retreats in early 2017 served groups of women veterans and we noted that more than half of the women in each group cited military sexual trauma as the source of their traumatic experience during military service. Operation Tohidu participants – both men and women – often reflect that they feel under-served with reference to their MST experience and cite struggles in effectively moving forward from the trauma. With these data points, together with the Veteran Administration's finding that 1 in 4 women veterans experience MST, Melwood decided to address this trauma in the programs we offer to veterans.

While most experts agree that the number of men and women who experience unwanted sexual acts in the military is much higher than the US Department of Defense estimate of about 23,000, there are still very few resources for those seeking help. Notes from a significant number of pre- and post-9/11 veterans, especially women, who attended Operation Tohidu in past years clearly demonstrated their frustration and difficulty in finding organizations that welcome them and make their services available to them. Given the number of veterans coming to Melwood for support and whose experiences of MST



continue to affect their mental and physical health, work, relationships, and everyday life; our experts at Melwood clearly believe that there is an incredible need for programs to address MST and help veterans heal and recover from their MST experiences.

To date, Operation Tohidu has served over 1,200 veterans and the program has been shown to offer the same outcomes in days as compared to six months of one-to-one therapy. It is these outcomes that have led to such a large demand from those in need. Currently, the waitlist for Operation Tohidu, which also offers non-MST based retreats for couples, men, and women with PTSD and other service-related traumas, has nearly 300 individuals who are seeking services.

Programs like Operation Tohidu rely on opportunities to apply for grants and the generous donations of our donors. Given the persistent need for programs serving the veteran community, we thank Senators Biedle, Augustine, Eckardt, Feldman, Kelley, King, Klausmeier, Waldstreicher, and Salling and Delegate Charles for their leadership to expand and enhance services provided by nonprofits across Maryland. We urge all members of the committee to support SB 550/HB 872 and, on behalf of the community of disabled veterans we serve and those we hope to, we thank you for dedicating resources towards these critical initiatives.

Thank you.

Larysa Kautz
President and CEO
Melwood