



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

IN SERVICE OF THOSE WHO SERVE: UNDERSTANDING THE CAPACITIES OF VETERAN SUPPORT ACTORS IN UKRAINE

Report by Open Space Works Ukraine

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are deeply grateful to all the **veterans** who openly reflected on their experiences of returning to everyday life after service, as well as their **family members**, who shared how this process unfolded in their lives. Sharing these experiences requires openness and courage, and we are grateful for the time and trust people have chosen to give us.

We extend our heartfelt thanks to the **specialists who support veterans** and their families. Many of them carry significant responsibilities in their work—often while navigating their own recovery, family commitments, and the emotional demands of supporting others. Their dedication and resilience made this research possible.

The research team of Open Space Works Ukraine – Sasha Tselishcheva, Natalia Harasivka, and Oleh Ovcharenko – collected, analysed, and structured the material, with additional support from Maryana Zaviyiska, Taras Tymchuk, and Svitlana Zuieva.

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To read the full study in Ukrainian and English, as well as the Ukrainian-language versions of this summary and the journeys of veterans' support actors, please visit:
https://openspace.works/portfolio/veterans_support



CONTEXT AND PURPOSE

Since the beginning of the full-scale war, Ukraine has faced an unprecedented and rapidly growing need to support veterans, women veterans, and their family members. The veteran support ecosystem has expanded quickly, driven by the efforts of civil society organizations, local communities, state institutions, and international partners. While this growth has generated innovation and responsiveness, it has also resulted in fragmentation, uneven coordination, and significant variation in quality and sustainability across regions.

This study was commissioned to provide a system-level analysis of how psychosocial support and reintegration services for veterans are currently organised, coordinated, and delivered, and to identify practical pathways for strengthening the system in the medium and long term.

The purpose of this summary is to present key findings and recommendations in a concise and accessible format for policymakers, practitioners, donors, and potential partners.

METHODOLOGY

The study is based on a qualitative, participatory research design conducted in 2024–2025. It included:

-  Semi-structured interviews with veteran support specialists, civil society organizations, veteran initiatives, donors, and representatives of public authorities;
-  Focus group discussions with veterans and family members in selected regions;
-  Mapping of coordination practices, service pathways, and institutional arrangements;
-  A validation workshop bringing together key stakeholders to reflect on preliminary findings.

The research covered selected regions and actor groups and does not aim to provide a statistically representative picture. Rather, it identifies recurring systemic patterns, coordination challenges, and capacity gaps that are relevant for understanding the functioning of the veteran support ecosystem as a whole.



KEY FINDINGS

1. Coordination: progress without systemic anchoring

Coordination within the veteran support system largely depends on informal networks, personal relationships, and individual initiative. While this has enabled flexible and rapid responses, it also creates uneven access to services and places a disproportionate coordination burden on frontline specialists and veterans themselves.

A significant share of services, particularly those provided by civil society organizations, is not consistently integrated into formal referral systems. As a result, referrals often occur through ad hoc channels rather than through standardized pathways.

” *“When it comes to civil society organizations, it mostly works like this: I come across something on Facebook and then I just call.” — Veteran support specialist*

Interagency coordination mechanisms exist in fragmented form, but are rarely institutionalised across the entire veteran pathway — from military service and demobilisation to community-level reintegration. Data protection concerns, unclear mandates, and lack of agreed procedures often limit effective information exchange.

At the national level, veteran policy remains cross-cutting but insufficiently synchronised across sectors, while at the local level communities frequently develop solutions independently, without access to tested models or shared operational guidance.

2. Institutional capacity: strong initiatives and weak system integration

The study shows that institutional capacity within the veteran support system remains uneven and largely shaped by short-term, project-based interventions. While communities and organisations have demonstrated a strong ability to mobilise resources quickly, institutional arrangements often lack continuity, stable mandates, and long-term planning horizons. As a result, many initiatives remain dependent on individual projects and struggle to become embedded as permanent elements of the local or sectoral support infrastructure.

At the local level, institutional development is frequently guided by funding opportunities rather than by systematic needs assessment or strategic planning. This contributes to a focus on visible and easily reportable outputs—such as renovated premises or newly equipped spaces—while less tangible but critical elements, including governance functions, coordination roles, and sustainable service models, remain underdeveloped.

” *“Veteran spaces are created, but without a clear role in the system, sustainable teams, or long-term programming, they often exist on their own.” — Participant in the validation workshop*

In the absence of institutionalisation, valuable experience and tested practices are often lost once project funding ends, limiting the system’s ability to scale effective approaches and ensure equitable access to services across regions.

3. Professional capacity: high commitment and adaptive practice under emotionally demanding conditions and limited systemic support

The research highlights a high level of professional commitment among specialists working with veterans, including psychologists, social workers, veteran support specialists, and peer mentors. Many professionals operate in complex and emotionally demanding conditions and demonstrate strong personal motivation and adaptability.

At the same time, professional capacity is constrained by the lack of systemic support mechanisms. Access to supervision, intervision, and continuous professional development is uneven and frequently dependent on donor-funded projects rather than embedded in institutional practice. This creates risks for service quality, contributes to professional burnout, and undermines staff retention—particularly in psychosocial support and reintegration services.

”You can work for a long time on personal motivation alone, but without supervision and support, people eventually burn out.”
— Focus group participant, service providers

These findings point to a structural gap between the complexity of veterans’ needs and the level of professional support currently guaranteed within the system.

4. Key barriers and constraints in the veteran support system: the perspective of service providers

General barriers to service provision for veterans

Service providers identify fragmentation of the support system as one of the primary barriers to effective service provision. In the absence of clear coordination mechanisms, standardized referral pathways, and shared information systems, access to support often depends on informal networks, personal contacts, and the individual initiative of frontline specialists. This results in unequal access to services across regions and places a significant coordination burden on providers rather than on the system itself.

Administrative complexity and procedural barriers further complicate access to support, particularly at early stages of engagement. Registration processes, reporting requirements, and the lack of user-friendly entry points can discourage veterans and their family members from seeking help, especially when combined with low trust in institutions or previous negative experiences.

”They create complex forms for registration, and many people drop out already at the first step. So we end up contacting them directly just to make sure they don’t disappear.”
— Focus group participant, veterans’ families

Specific barriers to the provision of psychological support

Providers of psychological and psychosocial support emphasise the growing mismatch between the complexity of veterans’ needs and the capacity of existing services to respond. Demand for psychological support has increased significantly, while access to qualified specialists, supervision, and long-term therapeutic formats remains limited. Crisis situations, complex trauma, family conflict, and comorbid conditions often require coordinated, multi-disciplinary responses that are not consistently available.

At the same time, service providers highlight risks associated with the uncritical expansion of peer-to-peer approaches in the absence of clear role boundaries and professional oversight. While peer support plays an important role in building trust and engagement, it cannot replace professional psychological care in acute or complex cases.

”Sometimes peer-to-peer is done wrong... people don’t open up, and then there is a risk of harm.”
— Focus group participant, veterans’ families

These constraints underline the need for clearer referral pathways, professional support mechanisms, and systemic investment in the quality and sustainability of psychological services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for better coordination of the veterans' support system

System-wide and interagency level

- Establish clear interagency coordination mechanisms across the full veteran pathway based on agreed roles, interaction rules, and referral procedures, rather than new coordinating bodies.
- Introduce formalised referral pathways that prevent veterans and their families from having to coordinate services independently.
- Ensure proactive, accessible communication on support opportunities as a shared responsibility of the entire system.

Public authorities (national level)

- Ensure cross-sectoral coordination of veteran policy across key ministries, recognising its cross-cutting nature.
- Provide stable state funding for core functions (mental health, rehabilitation, case management) to reduce dependence on donor programmes.
- Develop national monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to inform policy adjustment and scaling.

Local self-government bodies (communities and local authorities)

- Develop clear local service roadmaps and operational algorithms for working with veterans and their families.
- Strengthen inter-municipal cooperation and mobile service formats, particularly for small and resource-constrained communities.
- Systematically involve veterans and their families in planning, feedback, and local decision-making.

Military units, territorial recruitment, and social support centres

- Ensure the systematic transfer of information at the point of discharge regarding available services and community-based support pathways.
- Establish a mandatory entry point after demobilisation linking service members to local case management.

Civil society organisations and veteran spaces

- Professionalise peer-to-peer models through training of veteran mentors and alignment with referral pathways.
- Strengthen networking and coalitions to facilitate joint learning, practice exchange, and coordination.

International organisations and donors

- Align veteran support programmes with national and local priorities, avoiding parallel systems.
- Support coordination among donors to reduce fragmentation and the proliferation of incompatible models.

Recommendations for strengthening the institutional and professional capacities of the support system actors

System-wide level

- Shift from short-term projects to long-term capacity development approaches, recognising reintegration as a prolonged process.
- Institutionalise effective practices through standards, training programmes, and policy decisions to ensure continuity.

Public authorities (national level)

- Establish unified professional competency frameworks for specialists working with veterans and their families.
- Ensure systematic access to supervision and continuous professional development as core elements of service quality.

Local self-government bodies (communities and local authorities)

- Invest in sustainable professional teams, local infrastructure, and long-term support programmes rather than one-off benefits.
- Treat veteran spaces, adaptive sports, and mobile services as core reintegration tools rather than add-ons.

Civil society organisations and veteran initiatives

- Strengthen organisational sustainability through investment in teams, management capacity, and institutional memory.
- Document and formalise successful practices for use in advocacy and system development.

Frontline professionals (psychologists, social workers, veteran support specialists)

- Support regular professional development focused on trauma, crisis situations, and family dynamics.
- Ensure access to regular supervision as a prerequisite for quality and professional resilience.

International organisations and donors

- Invest in long-term institutional and professional capacities of local actors, not only individual projects.
- Support the analytical and strategic capacity of local actors to articulate systemic needs and programme priorities.



Open Space Works Ukraine (OSWU) is a women-led social enterprise – ethically driven and purpose-oriented – that combines research and participatory facilitation. We operate with a clear social mission to advance inclusive and community-driven approaches in humanitarian and development practice and derive resources into scaling to strengthen local leadership and knowledge generation in Eastern Europe. We provide developmental, humanitarian, governmental, and civil society stakeholders with evidence-based research and participatory facilitation to enable action-oriented decisions and enhance program impact.

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