



ISSUE BRIEF: MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES AND SUICIDE PREVENTION

The Situation

- The Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) Veterans Health Administration (VHA) is a recognized leader in suicide prevention and has a full continuum of mental health services that are comprehensive and recovery-oriented and focused on issues common among veterans such as post-traumatic stress disorder, substance use disorders, traumatic brain injuries, depression, anxiety and conditions related to military sexual trauma.
- The VA also provides wrap-around supportive services that consider social determinants that can impact mental health, such as employment, stable housing and vocational training.
- According to the VA, veterans take their lives by suicide every day, and the annual suicide rate increase among veterans continues to exceed that of the general American population. The most current suicide data notes, there were over 6,300 veteran suicides, with staggering increases observed among female veterans and those 18-44 years old. Notably, firearms were involved in 73% of male and 51% of female veteran suicides.
- The 2024 National Veterans Suicide Prevention Annual Report highlights the complexity of suicide within the veteran population. It notes that between 2021 and 2022, there was an increase in male veteran suicides, a reduction in suicides among women veterans, and a significant decrease in suicides among the subpopulation of homeless veterans.
- To address this growing problem, Congress enacted legislation in January of 2023 that allows veterans in crisis to receive emergency mental health care at any facility at VA's expense. The VA also implemented a lethal means secure storage initiative to improve providers' skills for counseling at-risk veterans about safe storage practices for prescription medication and firearms.
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The Challenge

- High demand for mental health and readjustment services, access challenges in rural communities and staffing shortages for specialty mental health providers create barriers to timely care in some locations.
- Firearm suicide rates remain the leading cause of suicide among the veteran population. In 2022, over 74% of suicides among male veterans involved firearms, an increase from 73% in 2021. The firearm suicide rate among female veterans was more than 144% higher than that

of female non-veterans. Counseling veterans on safe firearm storage is a crucial part of suicide prevention. However, many veterans are hesitant to discuss this issue with their providers due to concerns about losing access to their firearms if they seek help for mental health challenges.

- Many veterans access care in the community. However, VA's community care network providers are not required to meet the same mental health clinical care standards as VA providers or to take the same specialized training in lethal means safety counseling to prevent suicide. VA serves an increasingly diverse patient population.
- Alarming, from 2005 to 2022, Veterans in Priority Group 5, which includes those eligible for care based on income, consistently had the highest suicide rates. In 2022, Veterans aged 75 years and older in Priority Group 5 had the highest suicide rate, at 77.1 per 100,000.
- Gaps exist in programing for some vulnerable populations such as women, minority and LGBTQ+ veterans.

The Solution

- Congress must ensure sufficient funding for veterans' mental health and readjustment services, the expansion of readily accessible crisis intervention services and support programs that strengthen and improve its suicide prevention efforts.
- VA must evaluate the effectiveness of suicide prevention efforts focused on non-clinical support and intervention services, including financial, occupational, legal and social domains, and partnerships with community providers focused on veteran suicide prevention.
- The VA must focus on recruiting and maintaining appropriate internal staffing levels for mental health services to meet demand for specialized care and ensure quality of such services for veterans who access services through its community care network.
- Congress and VA must require mandatory suicide prevention training for all of VA's community care partners to ensure proper screening, intervention counseling (for lethal means safety and substance-use disorders), and treatment for veterans in mental health crises.
- VA must improve tailoring its suicide prevention and intervention services to better serve the unique needs of veteran subpopulations such as women, minority and LGBTQ+ communities.