

ISSUE BRIEF: SUICIDE PREVENTION

The Situation

- There is no systemic tracking of service members after they leave the military; however, VA reports that 20 veterans take their lives each day, which equates to over 7,000 veteran suicides per year, and veterans who are 50 or older account for nearly 65 percent of all veteran suicides.
- Since 2007, VA's 24/7 Veterans Crisis Line has answered nearly 2.3 million calls and initiated the dispatch of emergency services to callers in crisis over 61,000 times. Its anonymous online chat service, added in 2009, has engaged in more than 289,000 chats; and in 2011, a text-messaging service was established and has responded to more than 55,000 texts.
- A VA study published in 2015 shows that veterans commit suicide at a 50 percent higher rate than those who never served. Enlisted veterans commit suicide at nearly twice the rate of former officers. Veterans who did not deploy had a 16 percent higher suicide rate than those who did.

The Challenge

- Suicide is a special concern in the military and veteran population. Current research and analysis of suicide data indicates the complexity of creating effective suicide prevention programs.
- Despite targeted suicide prevention efforts within VA and DOD, increased outreach initiatives focused on decreasing stigma and encouraging those who are struggling to ask for help, suicide rates among veterans remains relatively unchanged.

The Solution

- Research indicates that veterans who are fully engaged in VA care are at lower risk of suicide than those who are not, and that strong social support is among the most important predictors of positive health outcomes.
- VA and DOD must continue research of suicide prevention, improve outreach efforts, continue anti-stigma campaigns, and identify and deploy the best, evidence-based treatment strategies for those at risk. Integration of mental health services into primary care is essential to addressing and overcoming stigma frequently associated with seeking mental health care within DOD and VA.
- VA must focus on veteran and family-centered mental health care services, including family therapy and marriage counseling as relationship problems are often noted as a core reason that people decide to end their lives. These services should be available at all VA health care facilities.
- VA must continue to focus on creative and innovative technology, and other measures that allow early intervention. The use of Predictive Analytics to determine which veterans may be at the highest risk of suicide will allow providers to intervene before a crisis occurs.