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## General stresses mental health needs

By John Ramsey  
Staff writer

The Army needs more mental health professionals as it tries to reduce its high suicide rate, the Army's vice chief of staff said Wednesday at Fort Bragg.

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But that alone won't fix the problem affecting a "tired and stretched" force, Gen. Peter W. Chiarelli said.

[Video](#)

by David Ivey

"Probably the area we need to work the hardest is to continue to find ways to bring on mental health care providers and get them down to a level where soldiers have easier access to them," Chiarelli said. "It's not just mental health care providers, it's Army substance abuse counselors, it's marriage counselors, it's chaplains."

Chiarelli told Congress last week that the Army tallied 133 confirmed suicides last year. The suicide rate has reached an all-time high, and surpassed the civilian rate. Every branch of the military has seen increased suicides.

Chiarelli and members of the new suicide prevention task force spent most of the day at Fort Bragg, including a 90-minute meeting with soldiers' spouses. Wednesday marked the second stop of his tour of seven installations in eight days to see where soldiers can turn for help.

More than 70 percent of suicides involve some type of relationship problem, which is usually compounded by another factor like financial problems or substance abuse.

"Relationships are definitely stressed when you leave home for a year and you do that repeatedly," Chiarelli said. "The soldiers I've met here at Fort Bragg, we've got those that have done it three, four, five, six times, and that can't help but put a strain on a relationship."

He said the Army must work on programs to help mend relationships.

Suicides have been evenly split among deployed soldiers, soldiers who had been deployed before and those who never deployed, he said. Chiarelli said he plans to study every suicide in 2009 to try to gain insight that will help reduce the problem. He heard details of the first 15 cases of the year about two weeks ago, and said it was 2 intense hours he would never forget.

The stigma attached to seeking mental help also must be overcome. The upper levels of the Army seem to have grasped that message, but it still needs to be clear down to the lowest enlisted soldiers, he said.

"We're working right now to see if there are innovative ways that we can provide that initial mental health care that will over time break down that stigma," he said.

Working through spouses will be one key, he said. Another alternative the Army is considering is online treatment, he said. An E-7 who doesn't want his men to see him walk into the mental health office may be more willing to chat with a professional through the Internet, Chiarelli said.

The Army in February ordered a month-long training stand-down to help soldiers identify suicidal behavior.

One of the best new ways the Army is training its soldiers to handle suicide is through an interactive video called "Beyond the Front."

A soldier chooses how to react to a colleague who may be suicidal. If he takes the right path, the video ends with the colleague receiving help. If he makes the wrong choices, the video ends at the colleague's funeral.

Chiarelli's first stop was Tuesday at Fort Jackson, S.C. He is scheduled to visit Fort Campbell, Ky., today. He also plans to visit Fort Hood, Texas; Fort Carson, Colo.; Fort Lewis, Wash., and Fort Drum, N.Y.

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