

Fort Carson earns high marks from Army secretary

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The Army's top civilian leader visited Fort Carson on Tuesday, where he praised the base's leadership as innovators in providing mental-health resources to combat-weary troops.

Seven years of war - the longest conflict sustained by an all-volunteer Army - has taken a toll on troops, he said, and it's shown in the number of suicides, homicides, cases of post-traumatic stress disorder and family problems.

The Army is attacking the problem, said soft-spoken Army Secretary Pete Geren.

"Progress, we have made some," Geren said. "Are we where we want to be? Absolutely not."

Half of soldiers surveyed still say they're afraid that seeking mental-health help will hurt their careers, Geren said, but that's down from two years ago, as the Army attempts to change attitudes and policies.

"The Army has a corner on being strong and being able to drive on, no matter what happens, and that makes it harder (to accept help)," Geren said.

There are 36 Warrior Transition Units nationwide, he said, with one of the largest at Fort Carson.

Geren knows the stigma surrounding mental-health issues has ebbed because soldiers at every base he has visited talk to him about PTSD and other struggles, whereas they were mum when he took the job two years ago.

Geren said the mountain post has been a pioneer in suicide-prevention programs and with its mobile behavioral-health teams of civilian health professionals who are going to soldiers to offer help.

Maj. Gen. Mark Graham, Fort Carson's commander, and a father who lost one son to a bomb in [Iraq](#) and another son to suicide while at college, has been a strong leader in suicide-prevention efforts, Geren said.

Colorado Springs was also rocked by a series of homicides linked to Fort Carson soldiers returning from war.

After Spc. Robert Hull Marko was accused of the rape and murder of a 19-year-old woman in October, former Colorado Sen. Ken Salazar asked Geren to investigate the rash of violent crimes.

Geren said Tuesday that a report is due in the next few weeks.

Right now, it's being reviewed by leaders at the Pentagon who are deciding how to use the information, Geren said.

He wouldn't reveal any details.

In December, Geren said the military hadn't yet found common threads in the murders that would

provide them with a strategy to prevent future crimes.

Meanwhile, there are signs that the Army's efforts to treat mental-health problems are paying off. Colorado Springs has enjoyed a six-month respite from homicides linked to Fort Carson soldiers. And after suicides by soldiers at Fort Carson crested in 2008 - with nine deaths, according to an Army spokeswoman - there's only one confirmed suicide so far this year.

This is a critical time for the 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, said Lt. Col. Nicholas Piantanida, deputy commander for clinical services at Evans Army Community Hospital. Those soldiers are nearing the 90-day mark since their return from Iraq, he said, and that's when the honeymoon is over and the transition home has succeeded or failed.

He's assigned one 11-member mobile behavioral health team to that brigade; a second team to the 4th Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, as they prepare to deploy; and plans to employ a third team to the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division when they return home.

His teams include one psychiatrist, two psychologists, four social workers, two behavioral-health technicians, one nurse case manager and one administrator.

Piantanida said Fort Carson leaders spent an hour with Geren on Tuesday talking about resiliency in the face of multiple deployments. The new watchwords are education, understanding and empowering soldiers to talk about their problems.

"This has gained attention across the senior leadership," he said.

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