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Army blasted for letting drug abusers slide

By Gregg Zoroya, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — Army commanders are failing to punish or seek treatment for a growing number of soldiers who test positive for substance abuse, possibly because they don't want to lose any more combat troops, the Army's vice chief of staff has warned.

In a May 8 memo to commanders provided to USA TODAY, Gen. Peter Chiarelli said hundreds of soldiers involved in "substance abuse-related misconduct (including multiple positive urinalyses)" were not processed for possible discharge. He also noted that many are not referred to the Army Substance Abuse Program for help.

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What "worries me the most is that commanders feel a requirement to keep their numbers up" for combat deployments, Chiarelli said in a meeting with top staff officers Monday. He said non-commissioned officers told him this during visits to six Army installations recently to examine strain on soldiers and address the record number of suicides in the Army.

He says identifying and treating substance abuse will help improve the Army's mental health care and curb suicides, which reached a record 142 confirmed or suspected cases in 2008.

He found many cases where soldiers tested positive for substance more than once, Chiarelli wrote in the memo.

At one installation where about a thousand soldiers screened positive by urinalysis, 373 had failed the same drug test in the past, in some cases up to seven times, says Brig Gen. Colleen McGuire, head of the Army's Suicide Prevention Task Force. Other installations reported similar numbers, she says.

"I am asking you to ensure that soldiers are provided the help that they need when they need it," he told commanders in the memo, "and that regulatory requirements regarding the referral and initiation of separation processing of substance abusers are enforced."

In January, with 24 possible suicides, more soldiers killed themselves than died in combat. Since March, numbers appear to be declining, though Chiarelli cautioned against being overly optimistic.

Sen. Claire McCaskill, who introduced a bill to improve military substance abuse treatment, says she was encouraged by Chiarelli's action but cautioned against placing too much emphasis on punishment over treatment.

"Army leaders seem to have finally gotten the message," says McCaskill, D-Mo.

USA TODAY reported a 25% increase in five years among soldiers treated for substance abuse.

Military drug and alcohol counseling programs were created by Congress in 1971 after reports of widespread drug abuse among troops in Vietnam.

The military needs a greater understanding of substance abuse, says Terri Tanielian, co-author of a RAND Corp. study last year into war-related mental health and brain injury cases. "I just don't think we know enough," she says.

Army leaders have launched several efforts to stop the rising number of suicides, including suicide-awareness

training for soldiers and the suicide prevention task force.

Chiarelli, who oversees the efforts, is personally briefed each month on every new suicide. He assembles top Army commanders in a Pentagon briefing room where they receive details of each case by video-teleconference and discuss lessons learned and possible intervention strategies.

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