

THE DURANGO HERALD

On Army post, teams nurture mental health of soldiers

by Kristin M. Hall
Associated Press Writer

Article Last Updated; Wednesday, December 02, 2009 12:00AM



Photo by JAKE LOWARY/AP

Soldiers march through tall grasses during a training mission at Fort Campbell, Ky., on Nov. 12. Fort Campbell has started a series of efforts to catch early signs of emotional or mental stress among the troops.

FORT CAMPBELL, Ky. - Army brigade leaders at Fort Campbell have begun monthly meetings of officers, doctors and counselors to catch early signs of emotional or mental stress among their troops and intervene before soldiers hurt themselves or others.

It's a unique effort at this sprawling base on the Tennessee-Kentucky line that fits with broader Army initiatives to deal with a rise in suicides among troops. The Army has bolstered suicide prevention since February after a record 140 cases in 2008, but this month said the number may rise again this year. It had recorded 140 suspected cases as of Nov. 11.

The brigade teams are part of Fort Campbell's plans that also include moving counselors and social workers out of hospitals and clinics and embedding them in the brigades to break down barriers and overcome the stigma of seeking help.

It's a decentralized approach to help soldiers become more resilient to stress after repeated deployments over eight years of war, said Capt. Sebastian Schnellbacher, the 101st Airborne Division's psychiatrist.

"Instead of making the soldiers come to us for care, we do whatever we can to bring ourselves closer to the soldiers," he said.

Fort Campbell has several behavioral health clinics for soldiers and family members, but psychiatrists and social workers are now also assigned to each brigade to foster a better relationship with commanders and soldiers.

Schnellbacher said other Army posts may track issues like suicides or stress, but Fort Campbell's initiative is different because it uses the teams to proactively help and treat soldiers.

Under the new structure, each brigade has a team of doctors, chaplains, legal officers and social workers who meet regularly to discuss individual soldiers who have shown signs of trouble, such as a messy divorce or a recent arrest. They also track problem trends in the brigades, such as rates of alcohol or substance abuse.

The military is looking carefully at risky behaviors like these that can be warning signs of more severe problems. Fort Campbell has had 18 confirmed or suspected suicides since the beginning of the year, while other installations are dealing with a rash of violent acts such as homicide.

Incidents like the mass shooting at Fort Hood, an attack where the motive remains unclear, emphasize the need to pay close attention to troubled soldiers.

Lt. Col. Michael Wirt, 2nd Brigade Combat Team's surgeon and coordinator of their Brigade Resiliency Team, said having different team members actively working within the brigade makes it easier to spot problems before they become serious.

"The command may not be aware that that soldier was having that problem and it provides the command an avenue to be more proactive with the soldier," Wirt said.

Most of the team members would also deploy with the brigades during tours to Iraq and Afghanistan, Wirt said.

Schnellbacher said in the Army, as in the civilian world, people are still resistant to seeking out behavioral health care, so they are looking for new ways to make it more informal and protect soldiers' privacy.

One member of the new team is called a military family life consultant, a licensed therapist who can talk to soldiers completely off the record. It's not considered treatment for a condition and it allows soldiers to be more honest, he said.

"They call it 'motorpool counseling,'" said Schnellbacher. "They will meet the soldier at the motorpool, or off post at the Starbucks."

The team can also help soldiers who are returning to a brigade after being treated for a behavioral health problem, such as post-traumatic stress disorder or depression. The team will be able to track recovery and help commanders learn how to care for that soldier, Wirt said.

"Since the institution of the program, the soldiers are more proactively seeking out help and

there's been more soldiers coming to see our behavioral health specialist," Wirt said.

Wirt said getting all the battalion leaders together once a month to discuss behavioral health issues in their units helps reduce fears among their soldiers that they will face criticism for admitting a problem.

"The command has really embraced this program and it's one of the priorities of our brigade commander," Wirt said.

Wirt said he's seeing more soldiers take part in programs provided by the chaplain, such as financial aid classes.

"The soldiers are really looking to participate when they need it and that's been a very encouraging sign," he said.

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