

Defense.gov News Article: Defense Department Joins Suicide Prevention Alliance

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By Army Sgt. 1st Class Michael J. Carden
American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, Sept. 10, 2010 – Taking care of servicemembers is among Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates' top concerns, he said today, and that includes preventing military suicides.

"It is always a horrible tragedy to see a servicemember safely off the battlefield only to lose them to this scourge," Gates said. "It is the ongoing duty of this department to do everything possible to care for those who protect our nation."

Speaking at the launch of the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention at the National Press Club here, Gates underscored the importance of a nationwide approach to suicide prevention. The alliance's strategy pools federal and private-sector research and resources in hopes of better addressing the national suicide rate.

Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric K. Shinseki and Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius are part of the alliance and represent the public sector on the board. Army Secretary John M. McHugh represents the public sector as co-chair.

The military suicide rate has increased steadily over the past five years, exceeding the national average of 11.1 suicides per 100,000 people. The military last year averaged 12.5, according to a Defense Department task force.

Suicide claimed 309 military members last year, and 267 troops committed suicide in 2008, the task force said. From 2005 to 2009, more than 1,100 servicemembers took their own lives, an average of one suicide every 36 hours, the task force said.

"We must and we will do better," Gates said.

Gates outlined some of the challenges the military faces in suicide prevention, citing nearly a decade of war and advancements in protection and battlefield medicine. While more troops are surviving physical injuries, psychological war wounds have taken a toll on the military, he explained.

The stigma associated with seeking help for post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injuries also is a challenge in suicide prevention, he said, noting that such conditions can increase the risk of suicide.

"We are also confronting a historical stigma attached to these kinds of wounds -- a lack of understanding that they, too, are an inevitable consequence of combat, that those fighting to recover deserve respect for their sacrifice, as well as the best state-of-the-art care," Gates said.

The Defense Department has taken several measures to reduce stress on the force and help troops and their families in need, he said.

Gates noted that the Army and Marine Corps are growing the size of their forces to increase time at home between deployments. Also, the Pentagon is working to improve access to care by adding more 2,000 mental health providers at military health care facilities. Initiatives are also under way to improve care for reserve-component troops and

their families, many of whom don't have the same access to support as active-duty troops, he said.

The Pentagon's most notable -- and perhaps most difficult -- challenge is working to change the reluctance within the military culture to seek mental health care. Gates said troops who seek psychological care are not at risk of damaging their careers. In fact, he added, he praises their willingness to come forward.

"As with almost every issue in our military, progress on this front comes down to leadership among those in command and leadership positions," he said. "They need to aggressively encourage those under them to seek help if needed, and also set an example by doing the same."

Tackling the military's suicide issue will translate to success in the civilian world, he added.

"In everything we do, we must remember that every soldier, sailor, airman or Marine is part not just of the military, but also of a larger community," the secretary said. "Their families, their hometowns, their civilian employers, their places of worship all must be involved in the solution."

McHugh agreed. The Army's efforts to better understand what it takes to prevent suicide among its force have determined that many of the issues are not related just to the Army and military, he said.

"Many [psychological issues] are the shared challenges that every citizen in every community in this country and indeed in every corner of this world faces -- things like drug and alcohol abuse, financial hardships [and] relationship challenges," he said.

Getting people to seek help and reducing the nation's suicide rate must be a team effort, McHugh said.

"As proud as we are of what we can accomplish, we neither can nor wish to go it alone," McHugh said. "This is such an exciting opportunity and an honor for us to partner with some of the most illustrative organizations and minds, some of the most leading scholars and groups involved in this critical challenge.

"I look forward to the work ahead," he continued. "I look forward to learning and to taking those lessons back to the department."