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Military suicide hotline hits record call amount

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Bruce Alpert, Times-Picayune

By

WASHINGTON -- The Pentagon's **crisis hotline**, designed to help former and current military members avoid suicide, received a record 14,000 calls in April.



Tony Dejak, The Associated Press

Eli Steinberg, 8, places flags in front of tombstones in observance of Memorial Day, at the burial site of veterans on Wednesday at Highland Park Cemetery in Highland Hills, Ohio. The military continues to be plagued by a large number of suicides; in some months the number of suicides exceeds the number of U. S. soldiers who die in combat.

Members of Congress couldn't decide Wednesday whether that is a good or bad development.

"While it is heartening to know that these calls for help are being answered, it is a sad sign of desperation and difficulties our veterans face that there are so many in need of a lifeline," Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., said as she presided over a hearing by the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee.

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Murray said the Pentagon and Department of Veterans Affairs, which takes over care after a soldier leaves the military, needs to do better job coordinating services, particularly mental health.

Retired Army soldier Steven Bohn, who suffered severe internal and spinal injuries in 2008 when a suicide bomber in Afghanistan detonated a dump truck packed with explosives, said he is having a hard time getting needed treatment or disability benefits more than seven months after retiring from the military.

"I'm not by nature a complainer," Bohn told Murray's committee.

"But I'm still living on my retirement pay of approximately \$699 a month, not even half the pay I earned as an Army specialist. All of that money goes to rent for my one-bedroom apartment. I still have other bills which I cannot pay. I know I'm not the only soldier going through all of this and that others must sometime wonder where their next meal will come from."

Bohn said he hasn't gotten the medical care he needs and still awaits being assigned a primary care doctor by the VA.

Department officials told Murray that they are now doing much better job coordinating services when injured soldiers are released from the Armed Services. And they are trying to help veterans deal with psychiatric issues that many have been

reluctant to address because of what they believe is the stigma of mental illness.

"To reduce the stigma of seeking care and to improve access, VA has integrated mental health into primary care settings to provide much of the care that is needed for those with the most common mental health conditions, when appropriate," said Antonette Zeiss, acting deputy chief officer of mental health services for the VA.

Friends of a 27-year old Gonzales woman, a member of the Louisiana National Guard who served in Iraq, said they wonder whether their friend might have found relief other than suicide if she didn't worry that seeking mental health help would make her look weak.

She took her own life last November, about eight months after her boyfriend, who served with her in the military, died from a brain aneurism.

In a memory book for her funeral, the 27-year-old National Guard veteran who served in Iraq was remembered for using her sense of humor to make everybody feel better about the difficult tasks they often confronted.

Pentagon officials say they are reemphasizing to all branches of the military that there should be no stigma attached for those who seek help.

All units are supposed to display information about the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline — 1.800.273.8255 — which is staffed 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Murray said the nation owes it to its military personnel and veterans to help them recover both physically and emotionally. Just a few days ago, she said, a Marine who served with a member of her staff lost much of his leg during a bombing in Afghanistan.

"I want him to receive care that is not just excellent but truly the best in the world," Murray said.

"I do not want him, or any service member or veteran who has sustained such injuries, to have to wait months or even years to have a claim adjudicated because we cannot make the bureaucracy efficient."

The National Institute for Mental Health said people should be on the lookout for signs a family member, friend, or colleague might be contemplating suicide. Among the signs: talking about feeling hopeless or having no purpose in life, talking about feeling trapped or in unbearable pain, suggesting that he/she is a burden to others, and or that he/she would be better off dead.

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