

Recognizing problem biggest step in suicides

Recognizing problem biggest step toward fixing suicides

C. Todd Lopez, Army News Service

Dec. 23, 2009 -- In 2008, the Army experienced for the first time, suicide rates higher than the civilian population. In the same year, the Army entered an agreement with the National Institute of Mental Health to find out why.

While the NIMH study will take five years to complete, the institute recently met with Army leaders to provide some preliminary insights, said Brig. Gen. Colleen McGuire, director, Suicide Prevention Task Force.

One finding was that some 53 percent of the American population that replicated the Army population has had some level of mental or behavioral illness, McGuire said. That includes such things as alcohol problems, eating disorders, depression or anxiety.

"We can probably assume that's the same in our own population," she said.

Additionally, McGuire said, NIMH has said those with post traumatic stress disorder are six times more likely to commit suicide -- and those individuals, she said, often take as many as 12 years before seeking help.

"Unfortunately, in that period of time, before they finally recognize they have PTSD and seek treatment, there has probably been some attempts at self medication," she said.

In November, the Army experienced 12 potential suicides. That's two less than in October -- and while McGuire said the monthly suicide rate for the Army has trended down since the beginning of the year, 2009's number are expected to be even higher than 2008's numbers -- coming in at 156.

The exact causes of suicide in the Army are numerous and hard to pin down -- and it's not just Soldiers that have deployed. Some 30 percent of Army suicides are those that have never deployed, McGuire said. There's also relationship issues, financial issues, substance abuse issues and UCMJ problems.

"All of these things spiral to the point where they are trying to find some emotional relief," she said. "And that comes in the form of flawed thinking that results in their own death. It's hard to label any one variable as the cause."

McGuire said the Army isn't waiting for the results from NIMH or the 2009 suicide numbers to start attacking the problem.

"Probably the most important step the Army took this year was the recognition by the Army leadership that we did in fact have a problem," she said.

Getting leadership involved, from the top level down to NCOs at company level is also important McGuire said.

"The one thing we need to do is empower the noncommissioned officers and our young leaders, particularly at the company level, to really know their Soldiers, but then also to inform them of the resources available to them," McGuire said.

And there's a lot of resources, McGuire said, more than 400 programs Army-wide designed to help stressed Soldiers, family members and civilians. In fact, there may be so many it's overwhelming, and the Army is going to fix that.

"What they would like ideally is to have somebody with a laser pointer and point a direction -- you go this direction or you go to this office and this is what you need," she said. "Instead, what we have done in the Army and even with non-profit organizations, everybody else that wants to help -- is we provide a flood light. And they are blinded by the opportunities and resources available to them."

The Army has queried installations about their programs, asked about funding, effectiveness, etc. When installations meet the response deadline for the query, a report detailing the programs and their effectiveness will be generated, sometime in March 2010, to ensure effectiveness and eliminate redundancies, McGuire said.

Also standing in the way of preventing suicides in the Army -- convincing Soldiers that it's okay to say they need help.

"Soldiers learn best by what they see," McGuire said. "And until they see leadership seeking help, or if they see some of their peers seek help, and there appears not to be retribution or negative effect with that, then we will turn that corner."