

DoD, VA host Suicide Prevention Conference

Michael Tolzmann, Special to American Forces Press Service

Defense Department, VA host Suicide Prevention Conference

SAN ANTONIO, Jan. 13, 2009 – More than 750 people from the departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs and private enterprise -- including social workers, chaplains, researchers, and family members – are gathered here this week for a suicide-prevention conference.

Scientists, clinicians and specialists are working to eliminate the stigma that's often tied to seeking mental health care in the military, Army Brig. Gen. (Dr.) Loree K. Sutton, the Army's highest ranking psychiatrist, said during remarks on the conference's opening day yesterday.

"The secretary of defense and chairman of the Joint Chiefs have both emphasized [that] seeking help is a sign of profound courage and strength," Sutton said. "Truly, psychological and spiritual health are just as important for readiness as one's physical health."

Sutton, special assistant to the assistant secretary of defense for health affairs and director of the [Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury](#), said the soldier ethos of never leaving a fallen comrade behind applies to those with wounds that aren't visible. She stressed the importance of reaching out and intervening early for those who seem to need help.

The four-day conference features workshops and training that focus on suicide-related topics that include crisis negotiation of a suicide in progress, resilience in suicide prevention, overall suicide-prevention strategies and mental health strategic initiatives.

Yesterday's keynote address drew a large, attentive audience who listened to a soldier, husband and father who has experienced the effects of suicide through the loss of his own son.

Army Maj. Gen. Mark Graham, commander of Division West at Fort Carson, Colo., has spoken openly about mental health, particularly post-traumatic stress disorder. In 2003, his 21-year old son, Kevin, a top ROTC cadet, hanged himself after battling depression. Graham told the audience his son feared the repercussions disclosing his mental health issues might have for his Army career. Graham's eldest son, Jeff, was killed by a roadside bomb in Iraq in 2004. He said he and his wife have chosen to

continue to serve "in memory of our sons."

"Both of my sons died fighting different battles," he said.

"I can think of few subjects more important than this one," the general said, stressing the need to talk about the challenges and stigma associated with mental health and thoughts of suicide.

"Leaders, be compassionate," he said. "Soldiers, it's OK to get help. Untreated depression, PTSD or TBI deserve attention. Encourage those who are afflicted to seek help with no embarrassment."

Suicide can afflict anyone, regardless of rank, stature or wealth, Graham noted.

He emphasized the "ACE" program for soldiers – Ask your buddy, Care for your buddy, Escort your buddy – and said the Defense Department and VA have a national, toll-free suicide hotline at 800-273-TALK (8255).

"Don't be afraid to intervene and save a life," he said. "Just being with someone can make a difference."

Related Sites:

[Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury](#)

[Warrior Care Web Portal](#)

[Warrior Care News](#)

[National Resource Directory for Wounded Warriors](#)

[Military OneSource](#)

[Department of Veterans Affairs](#)