

Suicide Prevention in North Central Arkansas

Executive Summary

I would like to thank Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Tester for the opportunity to submit this testimony in support of this important hearing. I applaud the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee and the U.S. Senate for the recent passage of the Commander John Scott Hannon Mental Health Improvement Act, S. 785. This critically important piece of legislation will provide the assistance to organizations and communities like mine in helping to reduce and prevent veteran suicide. Specially, Section 201 of the S. 785 authorizes the VA to provide financial assistance through a grant structure for organizations to conduct outreach and coordinate services and resources available to veterans either through the VA or the community. I strongly encourage the House Veterans Affairs Committee and the House of Representatives to pass this vitally important legislation before more veterans needlessly lose their life to suicide.

What We Did

Disabled American Veterans, (DAV) Chapter 30, Mountain Home, Arkansas has developed and is executing a Veterans suicide prevention outreach simple known locally as the Veteran Outreach Program. This effort is based on the best principles and practices of both Clinical and Community Psychology. In three years time this effort has reduced Veteran suicides in Baxter County, Arkansas by approximately 30%. Over the duration of the program I became the coordinating effort throughout the community for any and all Veteran related problems. This was achieved by serving as the Veteran Service Officer for both local DAV and VFW chapters putting myself in a position to contact Veterans at risk. Now, three years later, referrals come from a wide variety of sources including various types of support groups and word-of-mouth. Each at risk Veteran is closely followed with personal visits, phone calls, or email at least weekly. Veteran Outreach is currently expanding into neighboring counties. Personal contact at the grassroots level is what makes this work.

In 2016 Arkansas ranked #8 nationally in Veteran suicide and Baxter County was #1 in Arkansas at three times the national rate. Early in 2017, DAV Chapter 30 decided to move forward with a county wide prevention effort not in partnership with VA. A small grant from DAV National covered some of the gas mileage reimbursement and we raised a money from the community. Since this start, I have driven thousands of miles making hundreds of face to face, peer to peer contact with Veterans at risk and their families. This continues today in spite of COVID risk. It is this personal contact at the local level that has made the difference.

Prevention posters, books, and some other supplies were provided by the regional VA office and the Arkansas Department of Health (ADH) and have been especially helpful. These materials help with community awareness along with multiple presentations at civic organizations and area businesses. Hundreds of refrigerator magnets with the 800 suicide prevention number were handed out and people were encouraged to put the number in their phone in case they encounter someone at risk.

Fortuitously timed with COVID, the local VA Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) provided tiny bottles of alcohol hand wash, Chapstick, and other minor materials. Since the majority of Veterans who commit suicide are not engaged in the VA health-care system, these materials were distributed in hopes of encouraging Veterans to enroll in VA care.

Once a year, DAV Chapter 30 puts on an All Veterans and Family Cookout. Last year an estimated 750 attended. outgrowing the largest city park and was moved to the local Arkansas State University campus. Veteran and health related vendors participated offering their services. Funding for this event has come from Good Samaritan Nursing Home in our community when it was discovered that 70% plus of the men there were Veterans. Immediately following this cookout last year, 17 new people enrolled in VA health-care. With additional money through grants, we could hold these types of events more frequently, helping more veterans enroll with the VA and receive the care they need.

Results to Date

Since 2017 to date, the Veteran Outreach Program has reduced Veteran suicides in Baxter County, Arkansas by approximately 30%. The numbers are not in for 2020 yet, but it looks like the COVID enforced isolation may have negatively affected our recent positive trends in reducing suicides. Isolation is a major factor in suicides and when coupled with a rocky relationship and poverty issues that's may lead to suicide are enhanced. Under ordinary circumstances, our community outreach is expected to reduce Veteran suicides to less than half of the national rate.

Going Forward

A coordinating individual operating out of an upright institution. In Arkansas, I recommend UAMS, a reliable university, or perhaps an existing state agency. A central hub or clearinghouse for data, funds, ideas and solutions unique to each community, supported by financial assistance through grants and partnered with the local VA can ensure more veterans have access to care.

Over the last four years, I have averaged about 200 to 230 hours a month volunteering. At this rate volunteers ~~in this~~ will eventually fade away. A more dedicated support staff supported by additional funding through a grant program will enable greater outreach, not only throughout Baxter Country, but the rest of Arkansas. -As private community funding decreases, it became more important, especially because of COVID, for new funding streams to support the on-going Veteran Outreach Program. In order to continue to travel to meet veterans where they live in their communities, additional funding is critical and needed. Legislation recently passed out of the Senate is vital to providing the help we need to continue to engage with veterans in the community.

Qualitative Comments from Dr George Wolford

Meetings: COVID19 has very seriously impacted the function of this outreach. We have done our best to compensate by driving to individual homes and bringing a 'carry out' breakfast, but the fact is, F2F meetings are increasingly difficult and still poorly attended. These 'personal' meetings with veterans at risk are a cornerstone of this effort. Improving communication lines, the use of personal cell phones, ZOOM, (a computer based video conference calling software) and email have been the thrust during COVID and continue in addition to personal contact despite COVID risk.

I strongly urge support for S785 which will allow replication of this demonstrated, cost effective, successful outreach nationwide. This bill contains the essence of Senator Boozman's S. 1906 which was specifically designed for grassroots suicide prevention.

Thank you for your very valuable time and attention.

V/R,

George Wolford, PhD
DAV Vice Commander, Dept. of Arkansas
DAV Vice Commander, Chapter 30