



**Compiled by Blue Star Families  
Department of Research and Policy**

## **Suicide and the Military Community Fact Sheet**

### **Military Suicides - Background**

- A 2011 RAND study showed that, in 2008, the Marine Corps had the highest suicide rate (19.5), the Army had the second highest rate (18.5), the Air Force had the third (12.1), and the Navy had the lowest rate (11.6).
- The suicide rate across the Department of Defense (DoD) rose from 10.3 in 2001 to 15.8 in 2008, representing about a 50% increase. Increases in Army suicides accounts for much of this increase.
- Comparing military suicide rates to civilian suicide rates is difficult because the populations are not easily comparable in terms of age, sex, and racial makeup. Additionally, the reporting procedures vary. However, RAND's 2011 study on suicide within the military showed that adjusted civilian suicide rates are consistently higher than the rate within the DoD though the gap is closing because of the stable increase in military suicides.
- In 2008, approximately one in ten active-component service members reported thoughts about killing themselves since joining the military. Many fewer will actually die by suicide, but this prevalence highlights the need to increase awareness and foster communication about suicide and suicide prevention in the military.
- For every death by suicide, at least five members of the armed forces are hospitalized for attempting suicide. According to *The Navy Times*, 2% of Army; 2.3% of Marines and 3% of Navy respondents to the military's own survey of 28,536 members from all branches reported they had attempted suicide at some point.
- One third of suicides in the military occur among those who have not deployed to a war zone. One third occur in a war zone. And one third occur after returning home from deployment to a war zone.

### **What is being done to prevent suicide:**

- Since 2002, the DoD has hosted a suicide-prevention conference. Beginning in 2009, the conference is jointly presented by the DoD and the Department of Veterans Affairs.
- In 2008, the services adopted a common surveillance system called DoDSER, which was developed by a workgroup consisting of representatives from each service.
- To prevent suicide, the military is actively engaging in a cultural shift - these changes will have impacts throughout the services and will take time to put in place. Talking about suicide is something that is not easy. It is often taboo to talk about suicide in our culture. It will take a community of care - including the military, military families, and mental health providers - to make a difference on this issue.

- Everyone should be aware of the warning signs of suicide and know what to do if someone they know is in danger. The resources listed at the bottom of this info sheet provide warning signs and how to help someone suffering from suicidal thoughts.
- The Defense Center of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury (DCoE) created the Real Warriors campaign in 2008 as a public education initiative aimed at reducing the stigma of seeking psychological care and treatment.
- Each branch has different strategies and themes in their prevention campaigns.
  - The Army's is based on the buddy system ( “soldiers taking care of soldiers” ) and an increase of focus on holistic views of mental health preparedness.
  - The Navy considers stress a key factor and promotes prevention readiness through training.
  - The Marine Corps uses a community approach and relies on gatekeeper programs.

**Active duty service members and their families can call 1-800-273-TALK (8255), the national suicide prevention lifeline to get help for their selves or someone they care about. This is available 24/7.**

#### **Additional context and resources utilized to help prepare this fact sheet**

- Background info: <http://www.bluestarfam.org/blog/view/deborah-mullen-suicide>
- Blue Star Families member, Alison Buckholtz's article: <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/oct/13/opinion/la-oe-buckholtz-military-suicides-20101013>
- RAND's *The War Within: Preventing Suicide in the US Military*: <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG953.html>
- Defense Centers of Excellence Resource Page/Suicide Prevention Resource: <http://www.dcoe.health.mil/ForNewsMedia.aspx#Info>
- USAA Education Foundation's Suicide Prevention PDF: [www.usaaedfoundation.org/pdf/581.pdf](http://www.usaaedfoundation.org/pdf/581.pdf)
- **Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (T.A.P.S.): <http://www.taps.org>**