



California's Veteran Population

California is home to roughly 2 million veterans, approximately nine percent of the national veteran population.¹ Nearly 30,000 veterans return to California each year.

What the Military is Doing to Help

In recent years, the Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs have launched education campaigns to address the stigma of seeking help, initiated training at all levels, expanded services and supports, and increased surveillance to better understand the impact of suicide. This multi-level approach is based on the Air Force Suicide Prevention Program, which has led to a reduction in the incidence of suicide among Airmen since its inception in 1997.²

In 2008, SAMHSA and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (USDVA) teamed up to launch the **Veterans Suicide Prevention Lifeline** (1-800-273-TALK (8255) followed by 1). The Veterans Lifeline provides 24/7 phone-based services for veterans and their families. In 2009 over 11,000 Californians called the veterans Lifeline; in 2010 over 12,000 Californians called between January and July 2010.

In September 2010, the **National Suicide Prevention Action Alliance** was announced which introduced partnerships with the U.S. military leaders. The Alliance will update the 2001 National Strategy on Suicide Prevention and provide direction for national suicide prevention efforts.

What California Is Doing To Help

In 2010, **Operation Welcome Home**³ was launched, providing a statewide infrastructure to connect returning servicemembers and veterans to a range of benefits and services, including employment, education, health and mental health, and VA benefits. Through Operation Welcome Home veterans are

contacted at intervals from two weeks to 6 months after entering the system to ensure their needs are being met. In the first 7 months of the program over 17,000 reintegration forms were collected and nearly 14,000 veterans were contacted.

The California National Guard has also partnered with TriWest to implement an embedded behavioral health pilot project that offers services and supports around deployments.

The **Mental Health Services Act** is also expanding the capacity of the mental health system to serve veterans through local programs and state level partnerships. These partnerships enhance outreach and access to mental health services for veterans and families and provide military cultural competence training for mental health professionals. The **California Veterans Network of Care** web site provides information about local veterans' services throughout California.⁴

Military and Veteran Suicide

Historically the rate of suicide among servicemembers was lower than in the general population, however since 2005 the rates among servicemembers have exceeded that in the general population⁵.

- From 2005 to 2009, more than 1,100 members of the Armed Forces took their own lives – an average of one suicide every 36 hours¹.
- All branches of the active duty military are impacted by suicide, however the number of suicide among soldiers and Marines were significantly higher than among Airmen and Sailors: Army = 140; Marines = 42; Navy = 41; Air Force = 45.⁶ For every suicide death there are eight to nine attempts.

¹ USDVA VetPop 2007

² www.af.mil/suicideprevention.asp

³ <http://www.veterans.ca.gov/>

⁴ <http://networkofcare.org/index2.cfm?productid=17&stateid=6>

⁵ Final Report, *Dept. of Defense Task Force on the Prevention of Suicide By Members of the Armed Forces*, Aug. 2010.
http://www.health.mil/dhb/downloads/Suicide%20Prevention%20Task%20Force%20report%2008-21-10_V4_RLN.pdf

⁶ **Department of Defense Suicide Event Report via**
http://t2health.org/pdf/T2_2009_Annual_Report.pdf



- Patterns of suicide among servicemembers tend to be similar to those in the general population: rates are higher among males and among non-Hispanic whites and Native Americans than other racial/ethnic groups.⁷
- In 2009 65 Army National Guard Soldiers and 15 National Guard Airmen died by suicide.⁸ This is a rate of 19.2 and 13.85 per 100,000 soldiers and airmen respectively. Citizen soldiers often have less access to services and supports around deployments because they return to their communities as opposed to military bases.
- Recent studies suggest the rate of suicide among veterans may be as high as 88 per 100,000; this is eight times higher than the general population but similar to the rate among depressed individuals.⁹ According to the National Violent Death Reporting System, veterans who die by suicide tend to be males over the age of 45 and with firearms as the most common means.
- Suicide risk among men and women enrolled in VA services is as much as 66% higher than that in the general population.¹⁰
- As many as 20% of the 30,000 people who die by suicide in the US each year are veterans.¹¹

Additional specific factors that may elevate suicide risk include exposure to combat-related trauma, significant physical injuries, and multiple deployments. However significant numbers of suicide deaths occur among servicemembers who had never deployed. Communication with family and friends back home about negative situations that the deployed soldier cannot address may add stress that increases risk.¹

For more information about mental health services in California, including treatment for Traumatic Brain Injury, visit the Department of Mental Health's Veterans' page.
http://www.dmh.ca.gov/Services_and_Programs/VeteransResources/default.asp

For more information about suicide prevention in California, contact the Office of Suicide Prevention at suicideprevention@dmh.ca.gov or visit the web site at <http://www.dmh.ca.gov/PEIStatewideProjects/SuicidePrevention.asp>

Risk Factors among Military and Veterans

Similarly to trends found in the general population, factors such as prior suicide attempts, mental illness including PTSD, TBI, and comorbid conditions, and substance use are all related to elevated risk.³ Likewise, servicemembers and many veterans have ready access to firearms, which are used in the majority of suicide deaths.

⁷ RAND Center for Military Health Policy Research, Sept. 2010
<http://dcoe.health.mil/Content/Navigation/Documents/Ramchand%20September%202010%20Webinar.pdf>

⁸http://www.ng.mil/news/archives/2010/05/suicide_chart.pdf

⁹ CRS Report on Veteran Suicide Prevention, 2008.

<http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/RL34471.pdf>

¹⁰ McCarthy JF, Valenstein M, et al. (2009) Suicide Mortality Among Patients Receiving Care in the Veterans Health Administration Health System. *American Journal of Epidemiology*. 169(8): 1033-1038.

¹¹ Remarks by Sec. Shinseki, USDVA, Jan, 11, 2010.

http://www1.va.gov/opa/speeches/2010/10_0111hold.asp