

Suicide Prevention Is Everyone's Business

Suicide Prevention Is Everyone's Business – that's the message the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is sending to veterans, their family members and friends, and the general public as part of its nationwide campaign to prevent suicides among veterans.

VA has launched a series of activities to increase public awareness of the warning signs of suicide. During National Suicide Prevention Awareness Week, which took place Sept. 7-13, VA released a nationwide Public Service Announcement featuring actor Gary Sinise, who portrayed a suicidal veteran in the movie *Forrest Gump* who was saved at the last minute. Another PSA featuring newswoman Deborah Norville, host of the television program *Inside Edition*, is being developed to target the family members of veterans.

"Preventing suicide among veterans is a top priority at VA," said Dr. Michael J. Kussman, Under Secretary for Health. "Each and every veteran suicide is a tragedy. We are committed to doing everything we can to prevent these sad events from occurring."

VA also recently began a pilot project involving an advertising campaign in the metropolitan Washington, D.C., area. Display ads on transit buses and in metro stations are designed to make veterans and their family members aware of the VA Suicide Prevention Hotline (1-800-273-TALK/8255), which makes trained mental health professionals available to speak with veterans in emotional crisis, or with their family members, around the clock.

More than 33,000 veterans, family members or friends of veterans have called the Hotline since July 2007 when it began operating. Of those, more than 1,600 have been considered rescues, and have prevented possible tragedies.

In addition, VA has sponsored two previous Suicide Prevention Awareness events and placed announcements about suicide prevention and the VA Lifeline on VA's website (www.va.gov).

VA also is distributing brochures, wallet cards, telephone stickers, bumper magnets, key chains and stress balls to veterans, their families and VA employees to promote awareness of the Hotline number and to educate its employees, the community and veterans about how to identify and help those who may be at risk.

Large posters providing the Hotline number and website are displayed at all medical facilities. They feature the slogan: **“IT TAKES THE COURAGE AND STRENGTH OF A WARRIOR TO ASK FOR HELP.”**

All VA medical centers have suicide prevention coordinators. Jan Kemp, VA’s Suicide Prevention Coordinator, said that new staff at each facility will bring the number of VA staff dedicated to the suicide prevention effort to more than 400. VA also has hired more than 3,900 new mental health employees since 2005 – bringing the total number of mental health employees to more than 17,000 mental health workers.

VA has also announced that by the end of 2009, the Department will add 61 new Vet Centers (bringing the total number of Vet Centers to 268) throughout the nation to provide more individual, group and family counseling to veterans of all wars.

The suicide prevention program includes two centers that conduct research and provide support to all locations of care. One is the Mental Health Center of Excellence in Canandaigua, NY, which focuses on developing and testing clinical and public health intervention related to suicide risk and prevention. The VA Hotline Call Center also is located in Canandaigua, and was developed in partnership with the Department of Health and Human Services’ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.

The other center for suicide research is the Mental Illness Research Education and Clinical Center in Denver, which focuses on researching the clinical and neurobiological conditions that can lead to increased suicide risk.

VA’s efforts to identify veterans who may be at risk for suicide have also increased. All new patients at VA centers are screened to determine if they are at risk for suicide.

To raise family and community awareness of the warning signs of suicide, VA suggests that if a love one is exhibiting any of the following behaviors, he or she should seek help immediately:

- Talking about wanting to hurt or kill oneself
- Trying to get pills, guns, or other ways to harm oneself
- Talking or writing about death, dying or suicide
- Hopelessness
- Rage, uncontrolled anger, seeking revenge
- Acting in a reckless or risky way
- Feeling trapped, like there is no way out
- Saying or feeling there's no reason for living.

Additional information is available at VA's web site at www.mentalhealth.va.gov