



SUICIDE PREVENTION & PEER SUPPORT

SUMMARY

- Veteran suicide remains a top priority for The American Legion (TAL) and is one of the most serious issues facing America today. On average, veterans are twice as likely to die by suicide than the general population, with an average of 17.5 veterans taking their life every day. Reducing the veteran suicide rate is imperative for TAL, exemplified through our Be the One campaign.
- The American Legion strongly believes in the power of peer support and encourages all veterans to “Be the One” who is willing, ready, and able to have a difficult conversation about suicide and other mental health issues. The stigma surrounding mental health affects everyone, and it will take all of us to address it. Furthermore, the large and growing network of community-based peer support groups represents a widely available, inexpensive, and effective means for many veterans to gain social support and engagement in the community.

ISSUE #1 – Lethality of Firearms

The lethality of firearms is imperative to examine, as 72% of veteran suicides were by firearm in 2021. Firearm suicide rate among Veteran women was 281.1% higher than non-veteran women in 2021, and there was a 14.7% increase in women veteran firearm suicide deaths from 2001–2021.

ISSUE #2 – Risk Factor for Suicide

Additional risk factors for suicide include age, homelessness, and gender. Suicide rates were highest among veterans between 18 and 34 years old. Additionally, the suicide rate among homeless veterans who received care from the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) was 186.5% higher than for those without indications of homelessness. For women veterans, suicide rates between 2020 and 2021 have increased 24.1%, while the rate for male veterans increased by 6.3% in comparison.

CURRENT LEGISLATION

- ***H.R.3722, Daniel J. Harvey, Jr. and Adam Lambert Improving Servicemember Transition to Reduce Veteran Suicide Act***
 - Requires establishment of a pilot program for transitioning service members with the goal of reducing veteran suicide.
- ***H.R. 1639, VA Zero Suicide Demonstration Act of 2023***
 - Establishes Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) pilot program, the Zero Suicide Initiative, to improve safety and suicide care.
- ***H.R.2768, PFC Joseph P. Dwyer Peer Support Program Act***
 - Establishes VA grants for nonprofits, veteran service organizations (VSOs), and other agencies to create peer-to-peer mental health programs.

SUPPORTING RESOLUTIONS

- No. 20: Suicide Prevention Program
- No. 11: Lethal Means and Suicide Prevention
- No. 14: Department of Veterans Affairs Suicide Prevention Programs
- No. 6: Stop Gap in Utilization of Mental Health Services
- No. 17: Continuum of Care and Mental Health Supports
- No. 364: Department of Veterans Affairs to Develop Outreach and Peer to Peer Program for Rehabilitation

WHAT CONGRESS CAN DO

Congress must address the alarming rates of veteran suicide, a top concern for The American Legion. With an average of 17.5 veterans taking their lives daily, the situation demands immediate intervention. The American Legion's "Be the One" campaign emphasizes the power of peer support, leveraging community-based groups as a cost-effective solution to combat the mental health challenges faced by our veterans.

We appreciate and ask Congress for continued support for the ongoing legislative efforts and initiatives, including H.R.3722, H.R.1639, and H.R.2768. We believe these critical measures, along with any additional actions addressing the multifaceted causes of veteran suicides, can make a substantial impact in saving lives.

