



Suicide Prevention

AMVETS acknowledges VA's relative success in improving access to mental health services for veterans, service members and military families. For instance, from 2005 through 2015 VA increased the number of outpatient mental health encounters or treatment visits by 103 percent; from 10.5 million to 21.5 million. The number of veterans receiving specialized mental health treatment from VA has also annually increased, from over 900,000 in (FY) fiscal year 2006 to more than 1.65 million in FY 2016. Yet, despite this progress AMVETS remains concerned about how VA plans to resolve its mental health staffing issues to meet ongoing increasing demand and provide timely and full access for the broad array of critical services the Department provides.

As of Nov. 3, 2017, the VA had 35,554 unfilled full-time positions and in 2017 had set a goal of hiring 1,000 mental health professionals. They succeeded in hiring 900, yet lost 945.

We learned in late February that VA has partnered with the Cohen Veterans Network (CVN) to provide more resources in an attempt to reduce veteran suicide. Currently only 6 of the estimated 20 veterans that take their lives each day are engaged in VA care.

As Secretary Shulkin said at a Suicide Prevention hearing in the U.S. Senate at the end of September, suicide prevention month:

“VA has developed the largest integrated suicide prevention program in the country. We have over 1,100 dedicated and passionate employees, including Suicide Prevention Coordinators, Mental Health providers, Veterans Crisis Line staff, epidemiologists, and researchers, who spend each and every day working on suicide prevention efforts and care for our Veterans. Screening and assessment processes have been set up throughout the system to assist in the identification of patients at risk for suicide. VA also has developed a chart “flagging” system to ensure continuity of care and provide awareness among providers about Veterans with known high risk of suicide. Patients who have been identified as being at high risk receive an enhanced level of care, including missed appointment follow ups, safety planning, weekly follow up visits, and care plans that directly address their suicidality.”

AMVETS agrees that VA has an unparalleled suicide program, and we advocate for increased outreach to veterans and appropriate staffing levels, within VA, so that veterans can benefit from the finely tuned expertise of a program that has proven effectiveness. We do not support partnerships which outsource any type of VA health care, unless VA is not equipped to provide the care in a timely manner.