

# Student Veteran

POLICY BRIEF



## SUICIDE PREVENTION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

December 2022

### THE ISSUE

On average 20 Veterans die by suicide each day nationwide compared to 96 non-veterans. Student Veterans are at high risk of suicide during their transition from military life to civilian academic life. They are twice as likely to experience suicidal ideation than their non-veteran student counterparts.<sup>1</sup> The aim of this policy brief is to increase higher education understanding of Veteran suicide, its impact on student Veterans, and to highlight how VA partnerships with educational settings can collectively work towards a national goal of zero suicides. **Together we will, and we can, save Veteran's lives.**

**Suicide can be prevented.** There is no single cause of suicide and deaths reflect a complex interaction of risk and protective factors at the individual, community, and societal levels.<sup>1</sup>

Rates of suicide are the highest among younger Veterans (18-39) and lowest among older Veterans (60 and older). The burden of suicide resulting from firearms is very high (67% of deaths). Among female Veterans who die by suicide 41% die by firearm injury. Veterans pride themselves on being able to care for themselves and protect their loved ones and communities. They are unlikely to seek behavioral health care due to stigma and misconceptions about mental health, substance use disorders, and suicidal behavior-related services.<sup>1,2,3</sup>

### ISSUE OVERVIEW

There are both traditional and Veteran-specific factors that increase risk of suicide. Because Veteran populations are not all the same and their military service story can be very different, factors can simultaneously increase risk for some groups while reducing it for others.<sup>1,3</sup> For example, the traditionally protective feeling connected to other people—which can increase one's sense of belonging—can also increase suicide risk for marginalized groups of people, such as LGBTQ, female Veterans, and racial/ethnic minorities.<sup>2</sup>

National Strategy for Preventing Veteran Suicide  
2018–2028



Collaborative community prevention strategies in educational settings can prevent suicide and or suicidal behaviors in student Veterans and include:

 **Improve Suicide Awareness in Higher Education**

 **Educate Faculty on Military Culture**

 **Increase On Campus Student Veteran Programs**

 **Work with VA Partners to Access Behavioral Health**

Student Veteran Belonging is KEY to promoting hope, strengthening resiliency, and help-seeking while working through the National Strategy for Preventing Veteran Suicide.

# CALL TO ACTION

## Higher Education-Community Partnership within the National Strategy for Preventing Veteran Suicide

2018-2028 U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (p9)

Recent testimony to US Committees on Veterans Affairs by Student Veterans America 2022<sup>3</sup>, highlights Student Veterans as 'post-traditional students'. "Ninety percent are over the age of twenty-five, half are married, half with children with seventeen percent as single parents. Forty eight percent of student Veterans work while enrolled and eighteen percent of those work multiple jobs... Twenty-three percent of GI-Bill recipient graduates are women". Debt for these student Veterans is 2.5 times higher than those without dependents and financial pressures rapidly compound when trying to complete education without loss in academic progression.<sup>3</sup>

These socioeconomic and contextual factors add to suicide risk when transitioning out of the military. More can be done by higher education institutions to facilitate thriving rather than surviving their academic journey while protecting against suicide risk.<sup>1,2,3</sup>

### PREVENTION



#### **Improve Suicide Awareness In Higher Education**

Student Veterans may feel a loss of their warrior identity, dislocation from their military family, invisible and visible wounds from military service including combat as well as financial, employment, relationship, and health-related challenges. Transitioning out of the military can increase anxiety and depression, while unfamiliar academic environments can trigger PTSD from trauma. These traumas experienced by Veterans can cause existential pain such as from military sexual trauma or multiple combat deployments to Iraq or Afghanistan during the 20 year war.<sup>1,2,3</sup>

Reserve Component and active duty military service members are also part of these educational settings and may bring many of the same risk factors including unfamiliar hierarchical, structured communication patterns.<sup>3</sup>

### **Protective Factors For Suicide**

- Positive coping skills
- Having a sense of purpose in life
- Feeling connected to other people and belonging to a unit
- Access to mental health care

### **Risk Factors For Suicide**

- Prior suicide attempt
- Mental Health Conditions
- Stressful Life Events (E.g. Divorce, job loss, loss of a loved one)
- Access to Lethal Means

### **Military Service Risk Factors For Suicide**

- Posttraumatic stress (PTSD/ Traumatic Brain Injury / Military Sexual Trauma
- Depression, Anxiety, insomnia
- Loss of identity, military culture/unit
- Access to Lethal Means with Familiarity of Weapons

## PREVENTION (CONTINUED)

### ***Early Recognition of Student Veteran Distress***

Mental health first aid programs for faculty, staff and students along with S.A.V.E training or a 'Vet Net' can facilitate early recognition of Student Veteran significant distress or suicidal crisis. It can increase the early identification of self-directed violence, timely interventions, and better monitoring of people at high-risk.<sup>1,3</sup>

### ***Reduce Access to Lethal Means And Safety Planning***

Student Veterans are likely to possess weapons.<sup>1,2,3</sup> Creating a pause between contemplation and action can save lives. Campus Police partnerships can facilitate education and support with firearm bridge barriers distribution and reduced access to lethal means support in a crisis. DoD and VA distribute bridges on Veterans Day.<sup>1</sup> Trained outreach teams can help support Veteran and education communities who are bereaved by suicide.<sup>1,3</sup>

### ***Educate Faculty on Military Culture***

The GI Bill provides robust education benefits for military service so many Veterans choose to pursue higher education towards new careers post-separation.<sup>3</sup> Higher learning is a KEY partner and MUST work collaboratively to prevent Veteran suicide.<sup>1</sup> Faculty and staff need to be educated that military service should not negatively impact academic pursuits and military servicemembers and Student Veterans have these rights protected through legislation.<sup>3</sup>

The stigma surrounding mental health conditions can sometimes be stronger in military culture.<sup>1,4,5</sup> A cultural shift is needed for more Veterans to view help-seeking and treatment as natural and acceptable behavior and not as a sign of weakness.<sup>1</sup> Educational settings and faculty also need to be educated about military culture to recognize signs of distress. All degree-granting undergraduate, graduate and continuing education of health professions should have core education and training on military culture and suicide prevention for Veterans.<sup>1,3</sup>

Empowering higher learning communities to better understand military service and partnerships with national VA initiatives for Veteran suicide prevention can move the aspirational goal of zero suicides one step closer.<sup>1</sup>

### **S.A.V.E Training**

S.A.V.E Training to help anyone who interacts with Veterans learn to identify **Signs** of suicide, **Ask** questions, **Validate** the Veteran's experience, **Escort** the Veteran to care, and **Expedite** treatment

#### **Website**

[www.VeteranCrisisLine.net/ResourceLocator](http://www.VeteranCrisisLine.net/ResourceLocator)

### **Lethal Means**

Suicide Prevention Resource Centre's Counselling on Access to Lethal Means (CALM) is a free online course.

#### **Website**

[www.sprc.org/resources/programs/calm-counselling-access-lethal-means](http://www.sprc.org/resources/programs/calm-counselling-access-lethal-means)

### **Military Culture School Training**

Online free education and support for all Americans to engage with Veterans is provided by PsychArmor, an accredited nonprofit.

#### **Website**

<https://psycharmor.org/military-culture-school>



## PREVENTION (CONTINUED)

### Increase On Campus Student Veteran Programs

Peer norm programs try to make protective factors more normal and common by encouraging help-seeking and peer connectedness.<sup>1</sup> To enhance Student Veterans' sense of Belonging they need programs to support their recent transitions from the military and physical spaces for connection (Vet Lounge), social interaction, and peer support.<sup>1,3</sup>

In addition to the Office of Veteran & Military Student Services, Veteran Services Offices can educate on Veteran Benefits Administration combined with VetSuccess On Campus and School Certifying Officials on campus that can also advise on housing assistance.<sup>1</sup> The VA Veterans Integration to Academic Leadership (VITAL) provides veteran student services, and access to affordable childcare. Food banks, work-study employment opportunities, and financial aid support offices that understand the GI Bill provisions are essential.<sup>3</sup>

### Work with VA Partners to Access Behavioral Health

To advance the goal of eliminating Veteran suicide, VA and its partners must reduce the burden of suicide among all Veterans whether or not they are receiving benefits or services from the VA.<sup>3</sup> Only 30 percent of Veterans receive VA health care and fewer than 50 percent use any VA benefits or services at all.<sup>3</sup> US Legislation ensures military service members and Veterans can receive health care outside of the VA.<sup>3</sup> Many risk factors related to suicide are influenced by community and societal factors beyond VA's reach.<sup>1,4,5</sup>

The VA VITAL program provides education and training but also telehealth and access to healthcare (virtual or remote) from the academic campus.<sup>1</sup> Recent testimony for Student Veterans of America<sup>3</sup> confirmed that student Veterans want to be able to access health care from campus, through campus health but also to be able to connect with the VA service at a distance through telehealth or virtual consultation. This expedites timely access to care and activates help-seeking by reducing the time to contact behavioral health needs.<sup>3,4,5</sup>

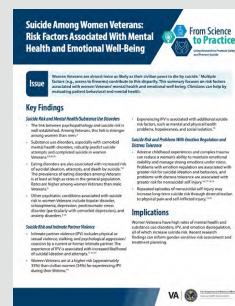
**Student Veteran suicide prevention is complex and involves everyone in educational settings to play a part.<sup>1</sup>**

### Make The Connection Vet Stories

Online resource featuring hundreds of Veterans telling their stories about overcoming health challenges.

#### Website

<https://maketheconnection.net/conditions/suicide>



Monthly fact sheets are available from the VA.

[https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide\\_prevention/resources.asp](https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide_prevention/resources.asp)

### References

1. US Dept of Veterans Affairs National Strategy for preventing Veteran Suicide 2018-2028 Office of Mental Health. [Mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide\\_prevention](https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide_prevention)
2. US Dept. of Veterans Affairs, 2021 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report September, [https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide\\_prevention/data.asp](https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide_prevention/data.asp)
3. Student Veterans of America Testimony March 8, 2022 Committee on Veterans Affairs US Senate, US House of Representatives [www.studentveterans.org](http://www.studentveterans.org)
4. Clancy C, 2019 Creating World-Class Care and service for our nations finest: How Veterans Health Administration diffusion of excellence initiative is innovating and transforming Veterans Affairs health care, *Permanente J* 23; 18, 301
5. US Dept Veterans Affairs 2019 Veteran Community Care Eligibility Fact Sheet 1B-10-1188 Community Care
- CDC Office of the Associate Director for Policy, Rural Health Template [www.cdc.gov/ruralhealth](http://www.cdc.gov/ruralhealth)