

## **September Is Suicide Awareness Month—What Can Be Changed? {Final 9-13-19}**

Each year, September is designated as Suicide Awareness Month. There has been a joining of governmental, non-governmental, private, public, and academic organizations to thwart this pernicious enemy. Alarming, veterans comprise less than 9% of the U.S. population; however, they account for about 18% of all suicides.

What can we, the American Legion, do to aid in suicide prevention? There are many things the American Legion, working with the VA and other organizations can do.

One of the primary goals we should commit to and endeavor to meet is to raise funds for support of awareness training about the warning signs of suicide. Furthermore, the Legion should put a strong emphasis on helping veterans by having compassion for them when they may be experiencing mental health feelings of distress, and most of all, have a sanctuary for them when they need one.

Can the American Legion explore the idea of having their building open and providing solitude to someone in need of suicide prevention and creating a private area for the trained counselor to meet with the veteran? Perhaps having a “safe house” type of place for them? The Legion should explore and discuss what it would take to create such a program and open facility. There are no easy answers for a safe house, open to veterans at all times, but perhaps it can be done. It is certainly worth exploring with the goal of making a veteran aware they have a place to go and get out from the umbra of gloom that hangs over them, meet with a certified mental health counselor, and start on a course leading to wellness.

Veterans train to be combat-ready and are exposed to a myriad of stressful and dangerous situations in the military. But there comes a time when the Veteran's service ends and he or she becomes a civilian. How do we prepare our veterans for civilian life? Without being disparaging to our armed forces, training to re-enter civilian life is almost non-existent. Perhaps the answer lies in Congress passing (and funding) a bill that would require all veterans to receive 40 hours of training for the transition to civilian life at least thirty days before their discharge, or under special situations, the training would be available six months after they are discharged. The training would be on subjects such as health care, GI Bill access, housing, turning military skills into civilian skills, VA benefits, mental health counseling, and many other subjects. We may be waiting for a problem rather than being pro-active and providing training on how to re-enter and adjust to civilian life, thereby perhaps preventing feelings of hopelessness that often leads to suicide.

Also, we as Legionnaires should be keenly aware of the warning signs of suicide. Some include having extreme feelings of hopelessness, despair, and self-doubt; making end of life plans, preparing wills, giving away valued possessions; discussing suicide methods, purchasing weapons or acquiring large quantities of medication;

drug or alcohol use which can cause impulsive behaviors; and isolation or the cutting off social connections with friends, family, and quitting a job.

More emphasis needs to be made by the American Legion and perhaps funds set-aside for a dedicated program that reaches out to the veteran population at all times. Yes, there is the Veteran Suicide Hotline number (713-970-7000). If a veteran is unaware of the number, doesn't know where or how to get help, and most of all, has a feeling that no one cares, that all-important call by a veteran to the suicide prevention hotline may not be made.

Our new National Commander, James W. Oxford, has made his theme "A Foundation for the Future." The rate of suicides by veterans must be changed through awareness of the theme and make the younger veterans a part of our future. Without a strong base being established to make all veterans aware, their future cannot be one of help when dealing with thoughts of suicide.

We as Legionnaires need to work on this paramount issue. If you would like to help, have suggestions or questions, please contact Anthony (Tony) Jones, The American Legion, Department of Colorado, Vice Commander, at [anthonysljones@yahoo.com](mailto:anthonysljones@yahoo.com) (720) 388-9101.