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REDUCE SUICIDE AMONG OLDER VETERANS

A Presentation to
Wake Up Call!!! Suicide is a National Crisis

Sponsored by the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW)

Hosted by
The Women Veterans United Committee, Inc. (WVUCI) And CTLDom Group, Inc.

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- Thank you for inviting me to speak this morning at your conference about the crisis of suicide in America and about suicide among older veterans.
- According to CDC, the suicide rate of Americans has increased by over 30% in this century.¹ This is particularly striking because the suicide rate declined at the end of the 20th century.
- During the pandemic the suicide rate declined a bit (1-2% overall), especially for veterans (about 10%).² But it appears to be headed back up again.³ **The crisis of suicide is still with us.**
- It is well-known, of course, that veterans have a much higher suicide rate than people who have not served in the armed forces. According to RAND, it's nearly double. (32 per 100,000 vs. 17.2 per 100,000 in 2018).⁴
- But most attention has focused on younger veterans who served during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.
- Sadly, like most older adults in this country, veterans from the Vietnam era and earlier do not get the attention they deserve.
- According to the VA, there are about 8.3 million veterans 65 or older in the U.S. today. That's roughly 43% of all veterans. And there are about 11.8 million veterans 55 or older, roughly 63% of all veterans.⁵

- According to [RAND](#), “the largest *number* of veterans who die by suicide are between 55 and 74 years old. In 2018, 2587 veterans ages 55-74 died by suicide, a rate of 30.4 per 100,000 (compared with 17.0 per 100,000 among nonveterans in the same age bracket).” Additionally, according to the VA, roughly 1400 veterans 75 or older died by suicide for a total of about 4000 suicides of veterans 55 or older.
- That is about 11 suicides per day of older veterans. One probably took place while we were here this morning.
- Why is there so much suicide among veterans and older veterans? What can be done about it?
- Here’s the obvious: Service in the military can be highly stressful. This includes the stress of entrance into the military, the stress of military life, the stress of discipline, the stress of danger, the stress of battle, and the stress of re-entry into civilian life—of recovering family, finding work, adjusting to living without enforced discipline, and creating a place of belonging in the open community.
- For many older adults, there are additional sources of stress, especially growing loneliness as the people they care about and who care about them become disabled or die as well as disappointment about lives that never became what they had hoped for.
- For those who are gifted with resilience—most veterans—these pressures are manageable. For others, they translate into PTSD, depression, anxiety disorders, substance use disorders, or prolonged psychosis. These are the drivers of suicide.
- All this takes place in a culture of courage that makes the military effective but also discourages asking for help. It is a powerful culture that often persists after military service is over, and it is one reason why veterans are more vulnerable to death by suicide than non-veterans.
- In addition, it is difficult to get access to help. There’s a shortage of mental health and substance use services.
- And there is another critical factor. Guns! According to the VA, guns are the primary means for the completion of suicide by veterans of all ages. Veterans are more likely to own, and know how to use, guns than non-veterans. And in 2019 nearly 70% of veterans’ suicides were with guns vs. about 50% for non-veterans.⁶

- Reducing the rate of suicide among veterans is very complex. Identification and treatment of mental and substance use disorders are critical, as is greater access to mental health and substance use services. Overcoming the stigma of mental illness and the reluctance to seek help that is reinforced by the culture of courage are also necessary. Help to reconnect with the civilian community—to work, family, houses of worship, etc.—is also very important. And for older veterans, addressing isolation and a growing sense of being a burden are critical.
- In addition, it is also very important to reduce access to guns, both through stricter gun control and through gun safety measures among gun owners who are at high risk of suicide.
- The good news is that the VA has been taking aggressive steps to reduce the incidence of suicide.⁷
- The additional good news is that the Biden administration is pursuing a plan to address the American mental health crisis. This includes specific steps to address the mental health and substance use problems of veterans, by increasing access to behavioral health services, including expanded use of telehealth. Biden’s plans also include increased suicide prevention efforts including improved gun safety measures.⁸
- The not-so-good news is that the Biden plans do not pay much attention to the specific needs of **older adults**.
- Sadly, the United States today is beset by social and political divisions that, I’m afraid, jeopardize all efforts to join together to address mental health and substance use problems⁹ and to support the survival and well-being of the men and women who have sacrificed so much to protect our nation.¹⁰ Hopefully, today’s conference will help to build the needed unity.

¹ [Fatal Injury and Violence Data | WISQARS | Injury Center | CDC](#)

² [2021 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report \(va.gov\)](#)

³ [Quarterly Provisional Estimates for Mortality Dashboard \(cdc.gov\)](#)

⁴ [Suicide Among Veterans: Veterans' Issues in Focus | RAND](#)

⁵ [Veteran Population - National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics \(va.gov\)](#)

⁶ [2021 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report \(va.gov\)](#)

⁷ [2021 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report \(va.gov\)](#)

⁸ [FACT SHEET: In State of the Union, President Biden to Outline Vision to Advance Progress on Unity Agenda in Year Ahead - The White House](#)

⁹ [Put Ideological Differences Aside Final.pdf \(michaelbfriedman.com\)](#)

¹⁰ [Veterans Mental Health.pdf \(michaelbfriedman.com\)](#)