



Six Strategies to Reduce Service Member, Veteran, and Military Family Suicide

The veteran suicide epidemic is persistent and growing. Suicide is not only a veteran problem, it's a national problem; it's also a public health crisis. Like other public health crises...motor vehicle accidents, heart disease, food safety, pandemics...it can often be prevented if we take a public health approach to address the crisis. That means that the responsibility for "solving the problem of veteran suicide" does not belong to any one organization or any single group of people. It means that the responsibility belongs to our community.

Ending suicide in the military affiliated population takes political will, leadership, collaboration, and coordination among multiple federal, state, and local programs. As a community, we can establish sustainable systems to reduce the service member, veteran, and military family member suicide deaths in our community.

1. **Start at the Top: Get State and Local Leaders to Publicly Commit to and Coordinate Efforts on Ending Service Member, Veteran, and Military Family Suicide**

Public support from state and local leaders is essential to securing and aligning resources that our community needs to reduce suicide in the military and veteran population. Working with the Governor's Challenge to Prevent Veteran Suicide and supporting the use of resources from the Suicide Prevention Resource Center, for example, is a great way to support collaborative efforts and ensure accountability among partners in the community

Tools:

- [Governor's and Mayor's Challenges to Prevent Suicide Among Service Members, Veterans, and their Families](#)
- [National Strategy for Preventing Veteran Suicide](#)
- [Preventing Suicide: A Technical Package of Policy, Programs, and Practices](#)

2. **Identify Local Circumstances of Service Member, Veteran and Military Family Suicide**

Colorado is recognized as a national leader in their ability to gather and communicate data related to suicide in general and SMVF suicide in particular. The state's Suicide Data Dashboard, which is populated with data received from various sources, provides a comprehensive overview of the impact of suicide in our community. Unfortunately, the data is often outdated and does not provide the specificity needed to develop meaningful interventions to reduce suicide. The data that is available often provides an understanding about the facts of suicide, such as demographics, circumstances, and toxicology, but do not help us understand why the deaths occurred.

Supporting the El Paso County Coroner's office by increasing funding to contract for psychological autopsies, or partner with organizations who are trained and able to conduct follow-up suicide death investigations, will provide an opportunity to answer why a service member or veteran died by suicide, why it happened at the time it occurred, and why a

particular method was used. This can also provide suicide loss survivors the chance to tell their loved ones' stories, relieving guilt and finding peace, but also contribute to reducing the chance of future suicide deaths.

- [Colorado Suicide Data Dashboard](#)
- [Suicide Mortality Data Considerations](#)
- [Colorado Suicide Death Investigation Form](#)

3. Increase and Promote Suicide Prevention Collaboration Among Military and Veteran Serving Organizations

El Paso County has a wide array of organizations serving the military and veteran population in our community. Many of them are addressing different aspects of social determinants of health: financial stability, housing stability, physical health, psychological health, social connectedness, and more. These are all aspects of social health that can contribute, to a greater or lesser degree, to someone experiencing a suicidal crisis.

Establishing a common understanding of suicide prevention methods and the role that any single group or organization has towards addressing suicide in a collaborative manner is critical to successful suicide prevention efforts. This includes increasing protective factors that keeps someone from experiencing a crisis and reducing risk factors so that a crisis isn't fatal, and ensuring that the service member, veteran, or military family member gets the right support they need, at the right time, in the right way.

- [Applications of the Public Health Approach to Suicide Prevention for the Military Affiliated Population](#)
- [Suicide Prevention Collaborative of El Paso County](#)
- [Colorado Office of Suicide Prevention](#)

4. Support widespread Suicide Prevention Training for All Military and Veteran Serving Organizations

There is a need for those who are frequently in contact with high-risk populations to have specific training in suicide awareness and prevention. Someone who is experiencing a suicidal crisis is likely to come in contact with someone who may not have training or understanding about suicide prevention: family and friends, law enforcement, clergy, or other community members. By providing suicide prevention training to organizations that are serving the military affiliated population, we can ensure that those who are most likely to engage with someone in crisis are prepared to react in order to refer to help and reduce the likelihood of suicide.

- [Pikes Peak Suicide Prevention Partnership Training Opportunities](#)
- [NAMI Colorado Springs Mental Health First Aid Training](#)
- [Department of Veterans Affairs S.A.V.E. Training](#)

5. Support and Promote Lethal Means Safety Initiatives

Lethal means safety is a critical component of suicide prevention, but discussion about this subject is often misinterpreted as an effort to restrict someone's rights or impose external control. The discussion about lethal means safety requires a recognition of the facts: 70% of the service member and veteran deaths in 2020 were as a result of firearms. Firearms are the most lethal method used in suicide attempts, with roughly 90% of attempts with a firearm resulting in death.

The discussion about lethal means safety is not about control, but about the shared value of safety and security; how do we ensure that, if someone is in crisis, they and their family make a decision to safely store the most lethal or frequently used methods of suicidal self-injury? There are a number of efforts at the local, state, and federal level, that balance the need for personal autonomy and choice with the desire to save lives.

- [CDPHE Gun Safety and Suicide Resources](#)
- [Colorado Firearm Safety Coalition](#)
- [Walk the Talk America](#)

6. Provide Suicide Loss Survivor Resources to All Impacted by Suicide

Postvention is the term that is used to describe the actions that need to be taken after a death by suicide. The Centers for Disease Control identifies two areas that the community needs to consider in implementing postvention efforts: providing bereavement support for those in the community impacted by suicide and providing support for suicide attempt survivors.

Research indicates that someone who has been exposed to a death by suicide is at greater risk for suicide, and those who attempt but do not complete suicide are at greater risk of another attempt if they do not receive treatment.

Bereavement support can come in many forms, but one of the most effective ways is to establish and train support personnel that will be able to reach out to and assist suicide loss survivors as quickly as possible after a death by suicide has occurred. This will require coordination between local Bereavement Support Teams, first responders, and the Coroner's Office, but will be an effective way to immediately reduce the risk of future suicides among loss survivors.

- [Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors Suicide Postvention Resources](#)
- [Rocky Mountain MIRECC Uniting for Suicide Postvention](#)
- [Local Outreach for Suicide Survivors](#)