



*Don't wait.* Reach out.

**Veterans Mental Health Campaign Toolkit**  
FAITH COMMUNITY

## Campaign Overview

In the heart of our communities, Veterans who have served the Nation with honor often carry silent burdens that remain unseen. Did you know that Veterans are at higher risk for suicide compared to the general population? The suicide rate among Veterans in 2021 was 71.8% higher than non-Veteran adults in the U.S. according to the 2023 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report. The national "Don't Wait. Reach Out." campaign, from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the Ad Council, encourages Veterans to reach out if they're struggling and reminds everyone that they can play a role in supporting the Veterans in their lives.

Recognizing the profound role faith plays in healing and support, Values Partnerships is proud to help extend the campaign to faith leaders knowing there are many Veterans in the congregations and communities you serve. You, as faith leaders, hold a unique and powerful position to help foster environments where healing can flourish. September is National Suicide Prevention Month, and we can all play a vital role in preventing suicide and supporting the Veterans in our community by raising awareness and offering our support. We're excited to share a specially designed toolkit — a collection of carefully curated resources to empower you and your congregation to effectively support Veterans. This toolkit will help initiate meaningful conversations and provide a blueprint for incorporating content into your upcoming services (especially during Suicide Prevention Month).

Together, we can create a sanctuary of understanding and compassion, where every Veteran feels valued and supported. In fact, we want to help Veterans and their loved ones given the role they serve in their support. So let us join hands in this vital mission, ensuring that Veterans and their families receive the care and respect they have earned.

Thank you for your commitment to this cause and for being the pillars of strength and solace in our communities.

## Key Messages for Supporting Veterans

When communicating about Veterans' mental health and suicide prevention, it's crucial to focus on messages that promote understanding, encourage action, and actively address the barriers to seeking help. Below are the key messages to convey:

### 1. The Importance of Community Support

- **No One Has to Struggle Alone:** Remind Veterans and their loved ones they are not alone in facing life's challenges. Community support can make a significant difference in the journey toward healing and resilience.
- **Faith and Fellowship:** Emphasize the strength that comes from being part of a supportive community of faith. Encourage the congregation to actively reach out to Veterans and their families, offering both practical support and compassionate care.

### 2. Changing Perceptions

- **Normalize the Conversation:** Make it clear that discussing mental health challenges and thoughts of suicide should be as normal as talking about physical health. The more we talk about these issues, the easier it becomes for those struggling to seek help.
- **Seeking Help is a Sign of Strength:** Break down the fear and uncertainty around asking for help by reinforcing that seeking support is a courageous step, not a weakness. Veterans, like everyone else, can benefit from professional help, and there is no shame in reaching out.
- **Address Misconceptions:** Address common misconceptions that might prevent Veterans from seeking help, such as the belief that they should "tough it out" or that asking for help will burden others. Emphasize that support is available and seeking it is a responsible, proactive decision.



### 3. Recognizing the Signs

- **Be Aware of Warning Signs:** Educate the community on the signs indicating someone may be struggling and in need of help. Changes in behavior, emotional distress, physical symptoms, changes in sleep, and increased substance use are all important indicators that shouldn't be ignored.
- **Trust Your Instincts:** Encourage loved ones to trust their instincts if they feel something isn't right. It's better to reach out and start a conversation than to stay silent and risk missing the opportunity to help.

### 4. Encouraging Action

- **Reach Out to Veterans:** Urge the community to actively reach out to Veterans, whether they are showing signs of distress or not. A simple check-in can go a long way in making a Veteran feel valued and supported.
- **Share Resources:** Make sure Veterans and their families know where to find help. Direct them to reliable resources like VA's website, local counseling services, and Veteran support groups.
- **Highlight Available Support:** Remind everyone help is available, and there are professionals and organizations dedicated to supporting Veterans in their journey.
- Visit [VA.gov/REACH](https://www.va.gov/REACH)

## Recognizing the Signs That Someone Needs Help

- **Behavioral Changes:** Pay attention to changes in behavior, such as withdrawing from social activities, neglecting responsibilities, or losing interest in things they once enjoyed. These changes can indicate that something is wrong.
- **Emotional Indicators:** Watch for signs of emotional distress, including increased irritability, mood swings, feelings of hopelessness, or excessive guilt. If a Veteran seems more anxious, depressed, or unusually angry, it could be a sign they need support.
- **Physical Symptoms:** Notice any unexplained physical symptoms like changes in sleep patterns, appetite, or personal hygiene. Persistent fatigue, headaches, or stomach issues without a clear cause might also be red flags.
- **Talk of Self-Harm or Suicide:** Take any talk of self-harm or suicide seriously, even if it seems casual or offhand. Statements like "I can't take this anymore" or "Everyone would be better off without me" should be addressed immediately.
- **Substance Use:** Increased use of alcohol or drugs can be a coping mechanism for underlying issues related to suicide risk. If a Veteran is drinking more than usual or turning to drugs, it might be a sign they're struggling.
- **Trust Your Instincts:** If you feel that something isn't right, trust your instincts. You don't have to have all the answers, but acknowledging your concerns is the first step toward helping a loved one get the support they need.

These signs can help you recognize when a Veteran may need help. Once you identify these signs, it's important to approach the conversation with care and understanding.

## How To Talk About Mental Health and Suicide With Veterans In Your Congregation

### 1. Choose the Right Time and Place

- **Private and Comfortable Setting:** Select a time when you have privacy and are not rushed. A calm, relaxed environment can help make the conversation feel less pressured.
- **Avoid High-Stress Moments:** Avoid initiating the discussion during times of high stress or when the Veteran seems particularly anxious or withdrawn.

### 2. Express Concern Without Judgment

- **Ask How They're Doing First:** Begin by asking about their well-being to create a safe space for them to share. For example, "How have you been feeling lately? I'm here to listen if you'd like to talk."

- **Gently Express Care:** Begin the conversation by expressing your concern in a non-judgmental way. For example, “I’ve noticed you seem less connected lately, and I care about you. How are you doing?”
  - **Avoid Assumptions:** Instead of assuming you know what they’re going through, use open-ended questions that allow them to share their experience.
  - **Ask the Question:** When asking someone if they are contemplating suicide, it’s important to approach the conversation with care, directness, and empathy. You can say, “Are you thinking about hurting yourself or ending your life?” or “Sometimes when people are going through tough times, they think about suicide. Are you having those thoughts?”
- 3. Use Empathy and Understanding**
- **Acknowledge Their Experience:** Recognize that their experiences might be difficult to talk about. You might say, “I understand you may be facing significant challenges, and I just want you to know that I’m here for you.”
  - **Be Patient:** Understand that they might not open immediately. It’s okay if they don’t feel ready to talk right away.
  - **Normalize the Conversation**
  - **Mention Commonality:** You can normalize the topic by saying something like, “A lot of people experience struggles with life challenges, which can be even more complex for Veterans like yourself. Asking for help can be a sign of strength, and you’re not alone in this — there’s a whole community ready to support you.”
  - **Emphasize Community:** Remind them that they have a community of faith, friends, and loved ones who are here to support them. You might say, “We’re here for you, and you don’t have to carry these burdens by yourself.”
  - **Listen Well:** Be slow to speak, make sure you are actually hearing what they are expressing. This can build great trust.
- 4. Offer Support, Not Solutions**
- **Listen More Than You Talk:** Let them lead the conversation and listen without interrupting. Your role is to be supportive, not to solve their problems.
  - **Reassure Them:** Let them know you’re there for them, whether they want to talk now or later. You might say, “I’m here for you, whenever you feel like talking.”
- 5. Ask Permission**
- **Respect Boundaries:** Before diving into deeper discussions, ask if it’s okay to talk about their mental health / life challenges. “Would it be OK if we talk about how you’re feeling and what you’ve been experiencing?”
  - **Be Ready for a ‘No’:** Understand that they may not be ready to talk and respect their decision if they say they aren’t.
- 6. Provide Resources**
- **Encourage them to visit [VA.gov/REACH](https://www.va.gov/REACH) for additional resources.**
  - **Gently Suggest Professional Help:** If it feels appropriate, suggest speaking to a mental health professional, but do so gently. “There are people who specialize in helping Veterans. Would you consider talking to someone like that?”
  - **Offer to Help Find Resources:** If they seem open to the idea, offer to help find resources, such as local VA services or support groups.
- 7. Follow Up**
- **Check Back In:** If the conversation goes well or if they decline to talk, follow up later to show that your concern is ongoing and that your part of their support team. “I just wanted to check in with you again — how are you feeling?”
  - **Continue to Be a Source of Support:** Keep the lines of communication open, letting them know you’re there for them whenever they need.





# How To Organize a Veterans Suicide Prevention Service

Creating a service to support Veterans and their loved ones, especially in recognition of Suicide Prevention Month, can be a powerful way for faith leaders to raise awareness on this important topic within their community. Here are some steps and ideas to help design a meaningful and impactful service:

## 1. Theme and Focus

- **Choose a Relevant Theme:** Base the service around themes of healing, resilience, hope, and community. Consider scriptural references that emphasize these aspects, such as Psalm 34:18 ("The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit") or analogous texts from other faiths.
- **Emphasize Suicide Prevention:** Acknowledge the importance of September as Suicide Prevention Month and focus on the critical role that the community and faith play in supporting those who may be at risk.
- **Address the Barriers Around Seeking Help:** Emphasize that it's okay to ask for help, and that no one should feel alone in their struggles. Focus on how faith and community can support healing and overcoming challenges.
- **Highlight Veterans' Sacrifices and Struggles:** Acknowledge the wide range of challenges Veterans may be facing, whether it's challenges with physical or mental health, finances, relationships, or housing. Emphasize the importance of supporting them in their journey toward healing and remind the community that it's okay to seek help when facing these difficulties.

## 2. Special Invitations and Participation

- **Invite Veterans to Attend:** Reach out personally to Veterans in your congregation and community, inviting them to attend the service. Let them know the focus is on supporting their well-being.
- **Include Veterans in the Service:** If possible, invite a Veteran to share their experience (if they're comfortable and have reviewed the [effective messaging guidelines](#)) or to participate in a reading or prayer. This personal touch can be a powerful way to connect with the community and a powerful testimony. You might also consider including a loved one's perspective, but it's important to let Veterans speak for themselves, as they can share their experiences most authentically.
- **Incorporate a Mental Health Expert:** Invite a mental health expert to share remarks during the service, providing professional insights and resources on suicide prevention and how the community can help.

## 3. Scripture Readings and Sermon

- **Select Appropriate Scripture:** Choose passages from various holy texts that speak to God's or the Divine's care for those who are suffering and the importance of community support.
- **Sermon Focus:** The sermon could explore the themes of love and care for those who suffer, the importance of seeking help, the value of community in the healing process, and the role of faith in overcoming challenges. Include a discussion on the importance of normalizing the conversation around suicide prevention and asking for help.
- **Encourage Compassion and Understanding:** Use the sermon to educate the congregation about the challenges Veterans may face and encourage them to show compassion and offer support. Reiterate that reaching out for help is a sign of strength, not weakness.

## 4. Prayers and Intercessions

- **Prayer for Veterans:** Include a special prayer dedicated to Veterans, asking for healing, peace, and support for those struggling. Encourage the congregation to continue praying for Veterans.
- **Intercessory Prayers:** Pray for families of Veterans, mental health professionals, and organizations that work to support Veterans. You could also pray for an increased awareness and understanding within the community.

## 5. Music and Worship

- **Choose Meaningful Hymns:** Select hymns that resonate with the themes of hope, healing, and God's presence in times of struggle. Songs like "Amazing Grace," "Be Still My Soul," or "It Is Well with My Soul" could be particularly powerful.

- **Incorporate Special Music:** Consider including a song or musical piece that honors veterans, such as “God Bless America” or a contemporary worship song that speaks to themes of healing and renewal.

## 6. Testimonies and Stories

- **Share Stories:** If you have Veterans who are willing to share, include their testimonies or stories of how faith has helped them in their journey. These can be pre-recorded if they are not comfortable speaking live.
- **Focus on Hope and Healing:** Highlight stories that emphasize recovery, hope, and the importance of community and faith in overcoming mental health challenges.

## 7. Resource Sharing

- **Provide Information on Support Services:** Include information in the church bulletin or on a display table about resources for Veterans, such as local VA services, counseling centers, or Veteran support groups.
- **Don't Wait. Reach Out. [VA.gov/REACH](https://www.va.gov/REACH)**
- **Show a Campaign PSA:** Incorporate one of the campaign's PSAs into the service, offering a powerful visual and emotional connection to the message.
- **Offer a Time for Reflection or Counseling:** After the service, provide a space where Veterans can talk privately with clergy, mental health professionals, or other support personnel. Consider offering follow-up sessions or support groups within the faith community.

## 8. Follow-Up and Continued Support

- **Plan Ongoing Activities:** Consider starting a Veterans' support group or regular prayer meetings focused on Veterans' issues. This shows the church's long-term commitment to supporting Veterans.
- **Regular Check-Ins:** Encourage the congregation to continue supporting Veterans, not just during the service but throughout the year. Regular check-ins and community involvement are key.





## ***Example Outline of the Service:***

### ***Welcome and Introduction:***

Brief introduction of the day's focus on veterans' mental health.

### ***Opening Hymn:***

A song, hymn or chant that reflects the themes of hope and healing.

### ***Scripture Readings:***

Passages focused on comfort, healing, and divine care.

### ***Veteran's Testimony:***

A veteran shares their experience (if possible).

### ***Remarks from Mental Health Expert:***

Professional insights on suicide prevention and how the community can help.

### ***Sermon:***

Discuss the importance of mental health awareness, suicide prevention, community support, and faith in healing.

### ***Prayers of the People:***

Special prayers for Veterans, their families, and mental health professionals.

### ***Special Music:***

A reflective song, hymn, or chant.

### ***Campaign PSA:***

Show a PSA from the campaign to reinforce the message.

### ***Sharing of Resources:***

Provide information on available support services. Don't Wait. Reach Out. [VA.gov/REACH](https://www.va.gov/REACH)

### ***Closing Hymn:***

A song, hymn, or chant of hope and encouragement.

### ***Blessing and Dismissal:***

A final prayer of support and encouragement for all Veterans and their families.

This kind of service not only raises awareness but also fosters a sense of community and support for Veterans, letting them know they are valued and cared for in their faith community.

# Resources

Here are some additional starting places that can help with conversations inside and outside the four walls of your congregation when it comes to supporting Veterans.

## **Campaign Website & PSAs.**

Include campaign PSAs and any of our influencer videos that might be completed by the time we distribute this toolkit.

[VA.gov/REACH](https://www.va.gov/REACH)

There is a self-assessment that Veterans can take to help them find support that is designed specifically for them.

Faith Communities | National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention  
<https://www.va.gov/CFBNP/index.asp>

## **Articles**

- [For Veterans Day: The Top Reasons Soldiers Turn to Scripture](#)
- [How Faith Communities Can Help Vets](#)
- [How Faith Communities Can Help Reduce Mental Health Stigma](#)





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