

## **Veteran suicide prevention is everyone's business**

*Article and photo by Lori Flynn, VA Manchester Public Affairs Officer*

Veteran suicide prevention coalitions are being developed in your communities. The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) identified reaching Veterans in their hometowns extends the reach to connect with Veterans through support with our community partners. Over the last two years, VA Manchester and community partners organized eight community coalitions throughout New Hampshire and continue to seek opportunities to build more.

“Community coalitions are made up of providers, Veterans, and community members passionate about supporting Veterans and teaming up to prevent Veteran suicide,” shared VA Manchester Community Engagement and Partnerships Coordinator (CEPC) J. Justin Moeling.

“For us to have a meaningful impact on preventing Veteran suicide, we needed to team up with our community to bring those efforts to where Veterans are – beyond the walls of the medical center,” added Moeling.

Under the VA's Community Based Interventions for Suicide Prevention program, it is vital to identify Veterans in the community to promote universal screening for suicide risk, improve care transitions, strengthen social connectedness, promote lethal means safety, and advocate for safety planning. These strategic focus areas are based on the experience and data VA has collected from nearly 2000 coalitions nationwide.

“We have built a network of regional coalitions that are connected to a ‘hub’ in the form of the New Hampshire Suicide Prevention Council's Military and Veterans Committee,” stated Moeling. “This will over time support efforts to communicate events for Veterans, to build resource lists, and coordinate support for Veterans statewide.”

Coalitions raise awareness of the importance of asking everyone about military service. The next step after that question includes getting Veterans connected to services and screening for suicide risk. Within VA, every Veteran is screened at least once a year for suicidal ideation and risk. Universal screening and regularly having a conversation about suicide helps to normalize the discussion and help those in need receive care.

Veterans enrolled in VA health care have a lower instance of suicide than those who are not—and all of us can help identify Veterans and connect them to care. At VA, we use ‘caring contracts’ to reach out to Veterans that were recently in the hospital and check-in with them. VA participates in Yellow Ribbon events encouraging Veterans to participate in our Military to VA case management program to ease that transition. Being creative in finding ways to support our Veterans at these times can make a difference.

“Change can be hard. It is less hard when we come together as a community,” stated Moeling. “This might be transition in care from the hospital to outpatient. It might be active duty servicemembers or National Guard members coming home. It might be a move or the loss of a partner.”

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Suicide prevention coalitions are a great tool for increasing options for social connectedness. Veterans tend to like socializing with other Veterans. Getting together regularly is a form of suicide prevention. Suicide is often characterized by, among other things, social isolation and feeling disconnected.

The coalitions are hosting and facilitating free suicide prevention trainings, lethal means safety trainings, and military culture trainings. As an example, one coalition recently organized a free skiing outing for Veterans in their community enabling an opportunity for social connectedness.

When Veterans are in a crisis, there are multiple options for getting help. At VA, we have the Veterans Crisis Line—dial 988 then press 1. For those that wish to connect with their local resources pressing 988 will connect to the New Hampshire 988 call center. In the Granite State all of us can contact (833) 710-6477 to reach the New Hampshire call center and Rapid Response program directly. There is no wrong door in a crisis. These numbers provide Veterans and their loved ones the help they are seeking.

It is important Veterans know that under the recent Comprehensive Prevention, Access to Care, and Treatment (COMPACT) Act, transportation to the VA or closest emergency room for emergency psychiatric care will be covered for most Veterans, and the individual should identify being a Veteran with first responders and the hospital.

“VA uses the New Hampshire ‘Ask the Question Campaign’ as an example of a best practice for finding Veterans in the community,” stated Moeling. This campaign is being reinvigorated on its 10-year anniversary. We hope to use our network of coalitions to help get the word out. VA has been able to team up with many fantastic agencies in order to use this work as a force multiplier for Veteran suicide prevention.”

Moeling shared, “Our collaboration with the Partnership for Public Health helped build a strong foundation for increasing coalition growth. These suicide prevention community coalitions are doing great work and VA is recruiting both Veterans and those passionate about supporting Veterans to connect with this program.”

Currently, there are Veteran suicide coalitions in Carroll County, Central Region (Plymouth), Sullivan County, Lakes Region, Capitol Region, Greater Manchester, Greater Nashua, and the Seacoast.

“In the past couple years, part of my job has included getting to know as many of the players within the Veteran suicide prevention community in New Hampshire as I can,” stated Moeling.

“I have seen so much passion and commitment to my fellow Veterans. It’s wonderful. I still have many more contacts to make. Hopefully, we can use our suicide prevention coalitions to help coordinate and support all these efforts so we can be successful in this fight,” said Moeling.

If you are interested in more information, please feel free to reach out to VA Manchester CEPC J. Justin Moeling at [john.moeling@va.gov](mailto:john.moeling@va.gov).

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VA Manchester Community Engagement and Partnerships Coordinator J. Justin Moeling speaks with Veterans at the Seacoast Veterans Conference in Portsmouth, N.H., Sept. 23, 2023, at Service Credit Union. Moeling highlighted suicide prevention coalition building throughout the Granite State in creating force multipliers to support and advocate for suicide prevention efforts and safety planning. (Photo by Lori Flynn, VA Manchester)

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