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'Stand-downs,' interactive training part of latest efforts to help reduce Army suicides

By Dave Melancon
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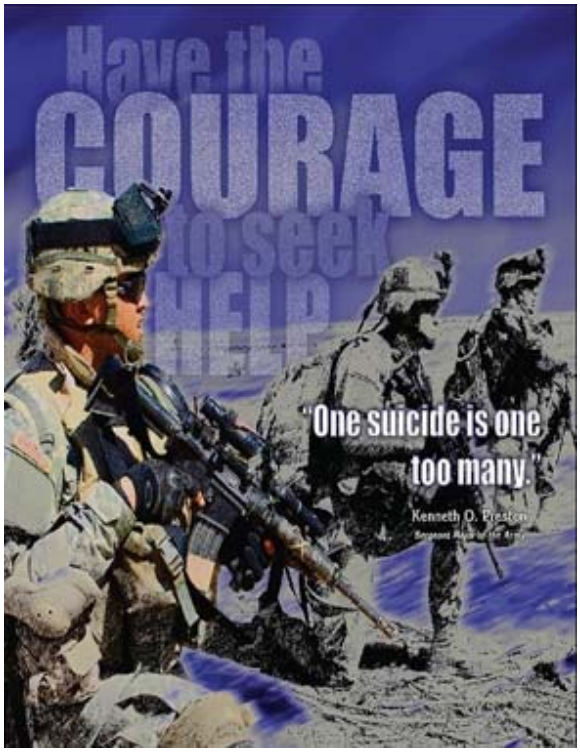
HEIDELBERG, Germany – Soldiers, Family members and civilian employees never stand alone. That's the message U.S. Army Europe officials said they want to spread to help reduce the number of Army suicides.



As part of efforts to share that message of solidarity while educating people about suicide prevention, units throughout USAREUR will conduct "stand-down days" between now and March 15.

During the stand-downs, which consist of a full day of teaching events, members of the USAREUR community will learn how to look out for one another: how to spot suicide's warning signs, how to get someone who may be suicidal the right help from the right person, explained Chap. (Col.) David C. Moran, V Corps chaplain and USAREUR marriage and family life chaplain supervisor.

The training will consist of more than classroom instruction or slide presentations given by disinterested lecturers, the chaplain said.

"This will not be business as usual," he said. "This is serious and not simply doing the same thing as usual. We need to do more."

The program is designed to help make Soldiers and Family members stronger and more resilient while also learning how to get help from leaders, chaplains or medical professionals, he said. Training will be tailored to meet the needs of Europe-based Soldiers, Families and civilian employees.

“This (program) looks at all of the contributing factors in a complex interplay of events that can lead to suicidal thoughts or attempts and what we can do to make Soldiers and Family members better able to handle the stresses of day-to-day life, and especially the difficult stresses of military life and the deployment cycle,” Moran said.

Another goal is to remove the stigma associated with seeking help with mental health problems or suicidal thoughts, the chaplain added.

Leaders from all echelons of the command will participate in the interactive “chain teaching” program focused on how to identify at-risk Soldiers and how their “battle buddies” or leaders can get them the help they need from the appropriate person or agency, he explained.

Soldiers and Army civilian employees will be required to participate in the training. Family members will be encouraged to take part through Family Readiness Groups and other organizations and services.

Secretary of the Army Pete Geren appointed Gen. Peter Chiarelli, the vice chief of staff of the Army, to lead the servicewide suicide prevention effort. Unit commanders are responsible for leading and conducting the training, Moran said. Each unit will schedule its own stand-down day.

The American Forces Network Europe “OpenLine” call-in radio show will feature a discussion on the suicide prevention program Wednesday, Feb. 25. The program starts at 10 a.m. on AFN PowerNet stations.

The program includes a panel of experts who will take listeners’ questions on suicide prevention. Listeners can call in with questions during the live show at 389-4595 or 0621-46085-595. Questions can also be emailed to openline@dma.mil.

“We want the families who have lost loved ones to suicide to understand how deeply we feel their loss and that we are committed to doing everything possible to prevent this tragedy in our Army,” Geren said when the suicide training program was announced Jan. 29.

“Progress depends on coordinated efforts across our entire Army -- across all components, jurisdictions and commands -- and on effective work with our government partners -- the VA (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs) and the National Institute of Mental Health.”

The Army News Service reported that in October Army senior leaders signed a research agreement under which NIMH will study factors that contribute to suicide, to further help the service to develop prevention strategies.

Like a tactical operation, USAREUR's suicide prevention program will be conducted in three phases.

The first phase consists of the stand-down training, during which Soldiers and civilian employees will use an interactive video called "Beyond the Front" designed to help them recognize suicide risk factors, spot warning signs and learn how to help.

The Department of the Army has directed commanders to conduct this mandatory training down to the squad level. Junior leaders and noncommissioned officers will play a key role as trainers, Moran said.

"The best part of 'Beyond the Front' is about junior leaders and Soldiers," Moran said. "For NCOs this is a great opportunity to develop as leaders. It is about preventing any kind of harm to your Soldiers, whether it is [from] the enemy out there or the enemy within."

The Army's directive calls for the second phase to be executed from March 15 to June 15. During that phase small-unit leaders and first-line supervisors will conduct chain teaching using a second interactive program called "Shoulder to Shoulder." The second phase is intended to bolster what Soldiers learned during the first phase with a more deliberate and personalized approach to the subject of suicide.

A chaplain will be present at every training session, Moran said, adding that USAREUR, the Installation Management Command-Europe and the Europe Regional Medical Command will share resources and work together to build an effective suicide prevention program.

"It takes a well-knit community to prevent suicide," Moran said.

The last part of the operation calls for ongoing suicide prevention training throughout a unit's normal training cycle.

According to reports, there has been an increase in suicides across all segments of the Army – active and reserve components, officers, enlisted Soldiers and cadets – over the last four years. Officials at the Army Human Resources Command said there were 142 suicides in 2008 and 115 in 2007. There are about 13 additional deaths still under investigation.

The totals are alarming, but the idea is not to meet a percentage or statistical goal; it is caring about Soldiers as individuals, Moran said.

“We are concerned with the death of one. It has always been that way,” Moran said. “Each is a tragic story. It is a daughter, son, husband, wife or friend that we know that impacts the whole Army.”

“The aim is to stop as many (suicides) as we can. It is about doing everything that we can to stop suicide -- every possible one.”

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