

Ready Access to Mental Health Care & Suicide Prevention

Fiscal Year 2021 Fact Sheet



NGAUS



The Issue

National Guard and Reserve servicemembers continue to suffer unacceptable levels of suicide and reducing suicide rates and improving mental health care across the Total Force is necessary. However, Reserve Component mental health issues must be acknowledged and addressed differently because those servicemembers do not always have ready access to timely, quality mental health services and/or programs tailored to Reserve Component operational needs.

Psychological health professionals say “connectedness and belonging” are some of the most powerful tools in building resilience. Servicemembers taking time to talk and listen to each other can be a vital tactic in the battle against suicide.

Background

Mental health issues and suicide continue to be unacceptable losses for the military, servicemembers, and their families. The 2018 Department of Defense annual suicide report found that 325 Active Component servicemembers and 135 National Guard servicemembers took their own lives. The report also found that the National Guard suffered the highest rate of suicide across the entire military.

The National Guard and Reserve are unique in that servicemembers typically only spend time with their units during monthly or annual training events and are geographically dispersed throughout the United States. Additionally, most National Guard servicemembers are usually in a state or “inactive” status at any given time, which results in National Guard soldiers and airmen not always having access to traditional military health care and Department of Defense military treatment facilities (MTFs).

These conditions create a significant gap in the effectiveness of many mental health and suicide prevention programs. While well-intentioned and designed to benefit servicemembers overall, military suicide prevention programs are typically designed for mental health treatment and suicide mitigation among full-time Active Component servicemembers.

Thanks to collaboration with Congress, the Department of Defense, and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), programs and authorizations have been provided to address unique Reserve Component circumstances. This includes increased access to Department of Veterans Affairs installations and robust funding for more extensive telehealth programs, as well as creation of the National Guard Preventative Mental Health Pilot Program.

Continued funding for the National Guard Preventative Mental Health Pilot Program is especially critical. The program utilizes analytics and data to better pinpoint servicemembers who may be more susceptible to mental illness, either due to military service or other stressors impacting their lives.

Overall, mental illness and suicide prevention continues to be incredibly important across the Active and Reserve Components. However, all stakeholders should be sure to take into account the differences that exist across the services and components, as different factors and elements within an individual’s background or military service could successfully treat mental health conditions earlier and more often.

Recommendation

- Provide funding for mental health programs specifically tailored to the Reserve Component within defense appropriations legislation, including the National Guard Preventative Mental Health Program

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NGAUS Contact **J.C. Cardinale**
LEGISLATIVE AFFAIRS MANAGER, JOINT & PERSONNEL PROGRAMS
jc.cardinale@ngaus.org

