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News Release

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VA Suicide Prevention Panel Completes Draft Report *Group Lauds VA's Comprehensive Strategy*

WASHINGTON – A blue-ribbon panel has praised the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) for its “comprehensive strategy” in suicide prevention that includes a “number of initiatives and innovations that hold great promise for preventing suicide attempts and completions.”

Among the initiatives and innovations the group studied were VA’s Suicide Prevention Lifeline – 1-800-273-TALK. The lifeline is staffed by trained professionals 24 hours a day to deal with any immediate crisis that may be taking place. Nearly 33,000 veterans, family members or friends of veterans have called the lifeline in the year that it has been operating. Of those, there have been more than 1,600 rescues to prevent possible tragedy.

Other initiatives noted included the hiring of suicide prevention coordinators at each of VA’s 153 medical facilities, the establishment of a Mental Health Center of Excellence in Canandaigua, N.Y., focusing on developing and testing clinical and public health intervention standards for suicide prevention, the creation of an additional research center on suicide prevention in Denver, which focuses on research in the clinical and neurobiological conditions that can lead to increased suicide risk and a plus-up in staff making more than 400 mental health professionals entirely dedicated to suicide prevention.

With the praise, the panel also recommended a mixture of more research, greater cooperation among federal agencies, and more education for health care workers and community leaders to further strengthen and share VA’s ability to help veterans and their families.

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“Every human life is precious, none more than the men and women who serve this nation in the military,” said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Dr. James B. Peake. “The report of this blue-ribbon panel, and other efforts underway, will ensure VA mobilizes its full resources to care for our most vulnerable veterans.”

Called the “Blue Ribbon Work Group on Suicide Prevention,” the five-member group was composed of suicide prevention experts from VA, the Department of Defense, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Institute of Health, and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. The group was created by Peake and met June 11-13, 2008.

Among the panel’s recommendations to further enhance VA’s outstanding programs, many of which VA has already begun to implement, are:

- Design a study that will identify suicide risk among veterans of different conflicts, ages, genders, military branches and other factors. VA has committed to work with other federal agencies to design such a study within 30 days.
- Improve VA’s screening for suicide among veterans with depression or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). VA is in the process of designing a new screening protocol, with pilot test undertaken during the fiscal year quarter beginning Oct. 1, 2008.
- Ensure that evidence-based research is used to determine the appropriateness of medications for depression, PTSD and suicidal behavior. VA’s is providing written warnings to patients about side effects, and the Department’s suicide prevention coordinators are contacting health care providers to advise them of the latest evidence-based research on medications.
- Devise a policy for protecting the confidential records of VA patients who may also be treated by the military’s health care system. VA is already developing a plan to clarify the privacy rights of patients who come to VA while serving in the military.

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- Increase research about suicide prevention. VA has announced several funding opportunities this year for research on suicide prevention and is developing priorities for suicide prevention research.
- Develop educational materials about suicide prevention for families and community groups. VA is examining the effectiveness of support groups and educational material for the families of suicidal veterans, and producing a brochure for the families of veterans with traumatic brain injury about suicide, which will be available within 30 days.
- Increase training for VA chaplains about the warning signs of suicide. VA offices responsible for chaplains and mental health professionals are studying ways to implement this recommendation, with a report due by Nov. 1.
- Develop a gun-safety program for veterans with children in the home, both as a child-safety measure and a suicide prevention effort. A VA directive establishing the program is being developed, with full implementation expected during the fiscal year beginning Oct. 1, 2008.

VA is the nation's largest provider of mental health care. More than 17,000 mental health professionals, including dedicated suicide prevention coordinators in each of VA's 153 medical centers, are available to care for veterans. The Department's mental health program this year is funded at more than \$3 billion.

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