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The Public Health Approach to Veteran Suicide Prevention: The Powerful Role of Connection in Collaborative Community and Clinical Initiatives

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Department of Veterans Affairs

Objectives

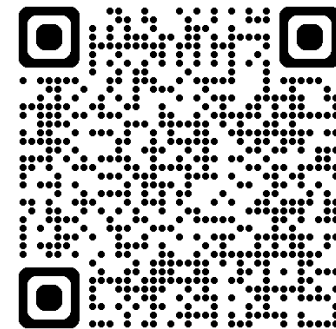
1. Participants will be introduced to the current data on Veteran suicide at the national and state level, identifying key trends and areas of concern leading to calls to action at local, state and national levels as part of the public health approach.
2. Identify methods to normalize “reaching out” through connection across many methods (e.g., starting a conversation, sharing your story, identifying resources, care engagement, 24/7/365 support through the Veterans Crisis Line).
3. Embrace the power of your own role in suicide prevention in the lives of those around you, utilizing your own specific gifts, story, and methods of connection.

You don't need to be a mental health provider to make a difference in someone's life.

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The Problem of Veteran Suicide

What the data tells us and what it does not...



2023 Annual Veteran Suicide Prevention Report

Suicide mortality increased for Veterans and non-Veteran U.S. adults from 2020 to 2021

- The age- and sex-adjusted suicide rate for Veterans rose 11.6% from 2020 to 2021, and for non-Veteran U.S. adults, the adjusted rate rose 4.5%.

Count and rate

- There were 6,392 Veteran suicide deaths in 2021. This was 114 more than in 2020.
- There were 6,042 suicide deaths among Veteran men and 350 suicide deaths among Veteran women.
- In 2021, the unadjusted rate of suicide for Veterans was 33.9 per 100,000, up from 32.6 per 100,000 in 2020.

Leading cause of death and years of life lost

- In 2021, suicide was the 13th-leading cause of death for Veterans overall.
- Suicide was the fourth-leading cause of years of potential life lost (YPLL) in 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020 and 2021, suicide was the fifth-leading cause of YPLL.

Method

- Among U.S. adults who died from suicide in 2021, firearms were more commonly involved among Veteran deaths (72.2%) than among non-Veteran deaths (52.2%).

Texas Veteran Suicide Data



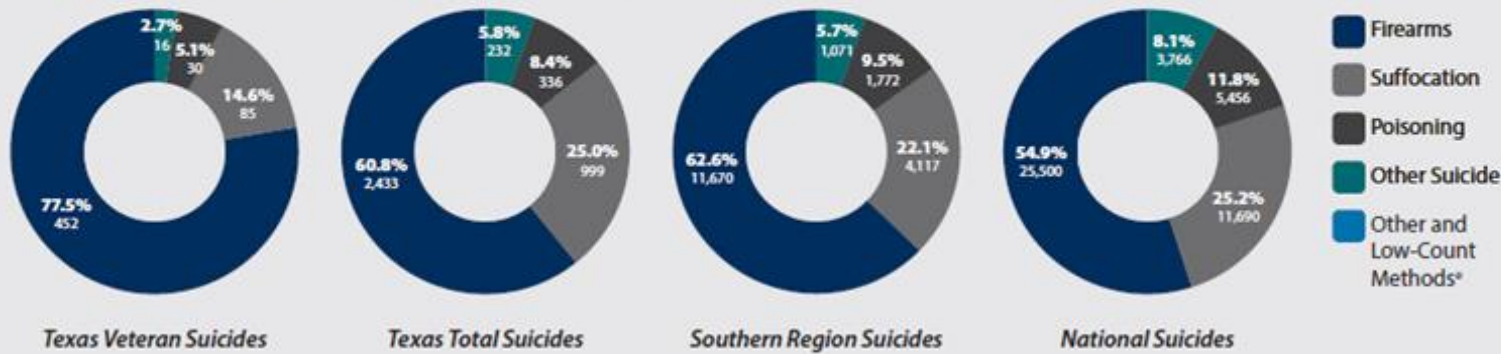
Texas, Southern Region, and National Veteran Suicide Deaths and Rates by Age Group, 2021^c

Age Group	Texas Veteran Suicides	Southern Region Veteran Suicides	National Veteran Suicides	Texas Veteran Suicide Rate per 100,000	Southern Region Veteran Suicide Rate per 100,000	National Veteran Suicide Rate per 100,000
18–34	98	389	894	52.7	47.8	49.6
35–54	186	757	1,704	38.1	33.9	35.5
55–74	174	1,001	2,286	29.6	30.4	29.9
75+	123	636	1,467	41.3	35.6	32.1
All	583	2,798	6,392	37.4	34.4	33.9

Southern Region

- Alabama
- Arkansas
- Delaware
- District of Columbia
- Florida
- Georgia
- Kentucky
- Louisiana
- Maryland
- Mississippi
- North Carolina
- Oklahoma
- South Carolina
- Tennessee
- Texas
- Virginia
- West Virginia

Texas Veteran and Total Texas, Southern Region, and National Suicide Deaths by Method,^d 2021



Texas Veteran Suicide Deaths, 2021

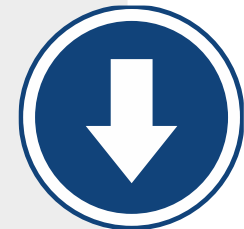
Sex	Veteran Suicides
Male	557
Female	26
All	583

Why?

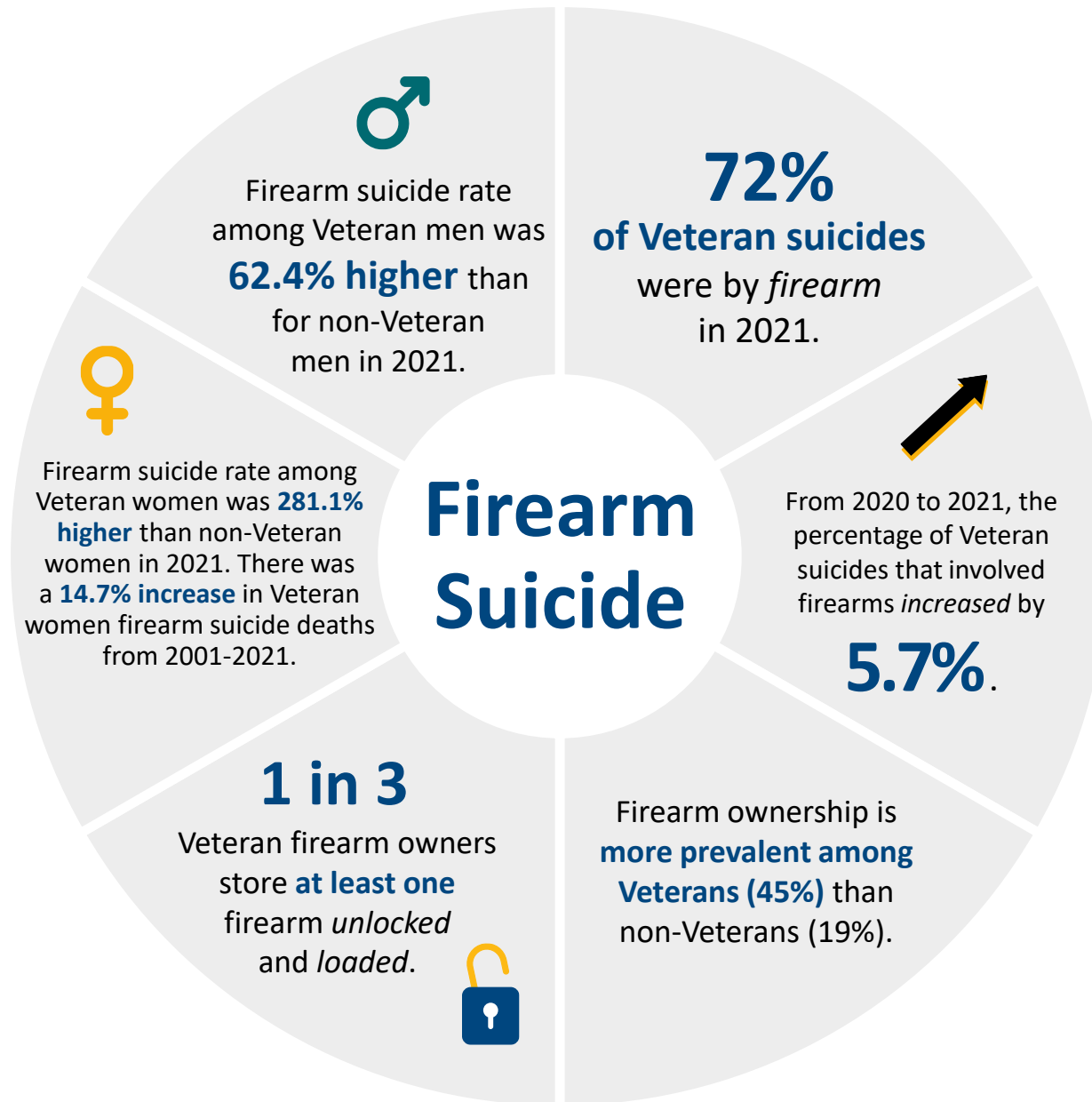


- COVID-19
- Veteran Mortality (All Cause, +13.7%)
- Financial Strain
- Housing Instability
- Sociopolitical Instability/Volatility
- Anxiety & Depression
- ETOH (ethyl alcohol) Misuse/Abuse
- Family Relationship Strain
- Firearm Access

- Health Care Use
- Social Support
- Community Integration
- Firearm Secure Storage



How?



Heavily Impacted Groups in 2021



Women Veterans

- **24.1%** increase in the age-adjusted suicide rate



American Indian/ Alaska Native Veterans

- Unadjusted suicide rate was **46.3 per 100,000**
- **51.8%** increase in the unadjusted suicide rate from 2020–2021



Homeless Veterans

- **112.9 per 100,000** suicide rate was highest observed from 2001–2021
- Suicide rate increased **38.2%** since 2020
- Suicide rate was **186.5%** higher than for those not homeless



Priority Group 5

- Had highest suicide rate at **57.1 per 100,000**
- Suicide rate increased **9.8%** from 2020



Justice-Involved Veterans

- Suicide rate of **151.0 per 100,000** was the highest over this period
- Suicide rate increased **10.2%** since 2020

Call to Action: Key Themes

Everyone has a role to play
in suicide prevention.



Promote secure firearm storage for Veteran suicide prevention.



Continue expansion of readily accessible crisis intervention services.



Implement and sustain community collaborations focused upon community-specific Veteran suicide prevention plans.



Improve tailoring of prevention and intervention services to the needs, issues, and resources unique to Veteran subpopulations.



Advance suicide prevention meaningfully into non-clinical support and intervention services, including financial, occupational, legal, and social domains.



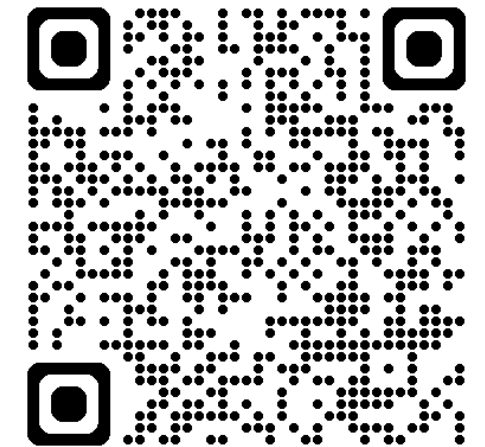
Increase access to and utilization of mental health services across a full continuum of care.



Integrate suicide prevention within medical settings to reach all Veterans.

Preventing Veteran Suicide Website

We have developed a [website](#) intended for Veterans and the general public that offers plain-speak linkages and messaging between the Annual Report data, strategic plans developed, actions taken, outcomes seen, future plans formed, and resources available paired with key populations and issues highlighted within this year's report.

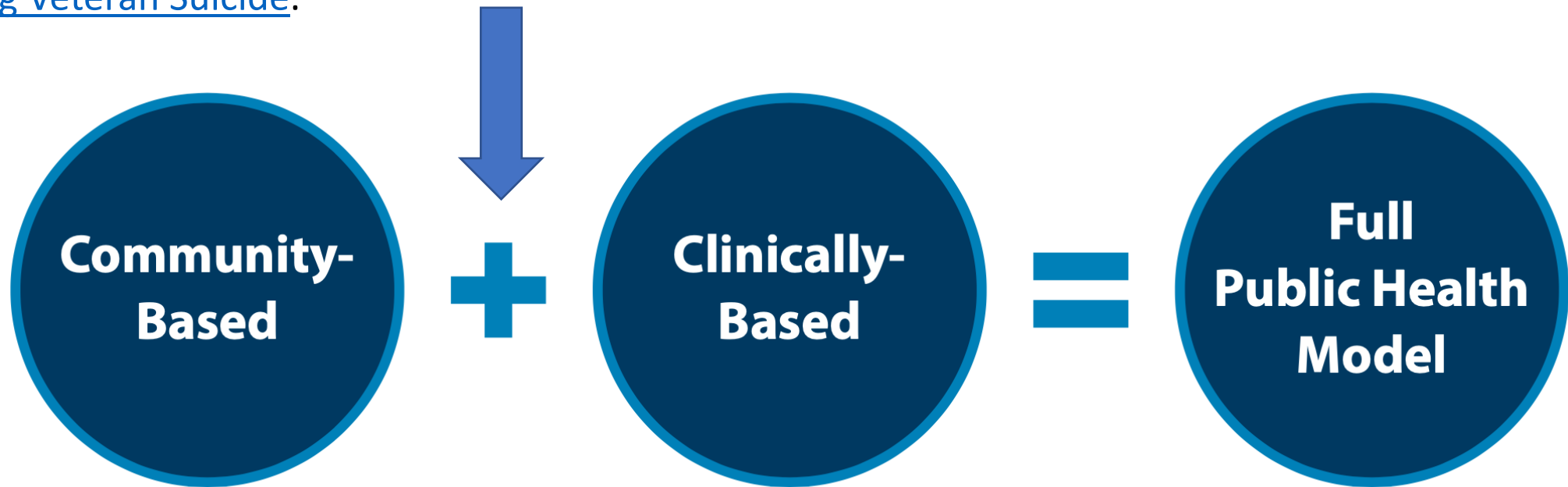




**The Reason for the Public
Health Approach:
We Need All of Us at the
Table**

Public Health Strategy

VA's public health strategy combines partnerships with communities to implement tailored, local prevention plans while also focusing on evidence-based clinical strategies for intervention. Our approach focuses on both what we can do now, in the short term, and over the long term, to implement VA's [National Strategy for Preventing Veteran Suicide](#).



KEY TENETS

1

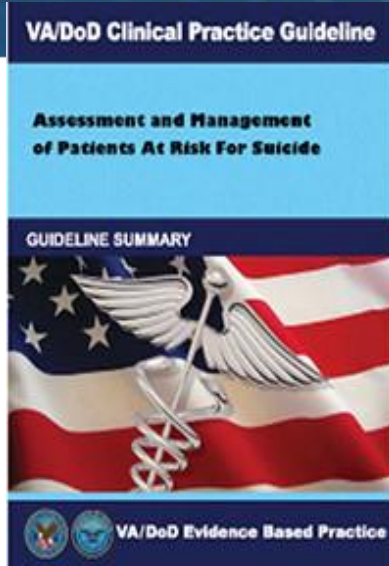
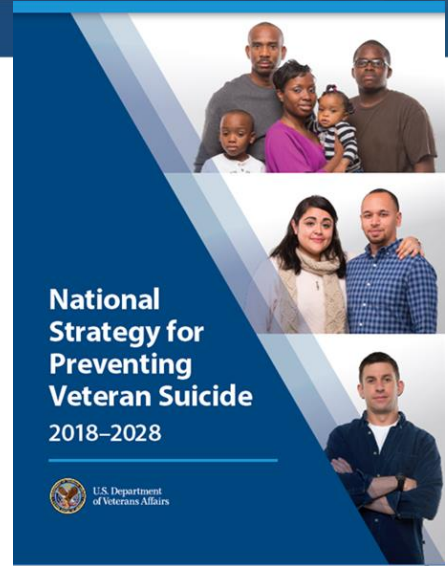
Suicide is preventable.

2

Suicide prevention requires a public health approach, combining clinical and community-based approaches.

3

Everyone has a role to play in suicide prevention.



SP Now



Plank 1: Lethal Means Safety



Plank 2: Suicide Prevention in Medical Populations



Plank 3: Outreach and Understanding of Prior VHA Users

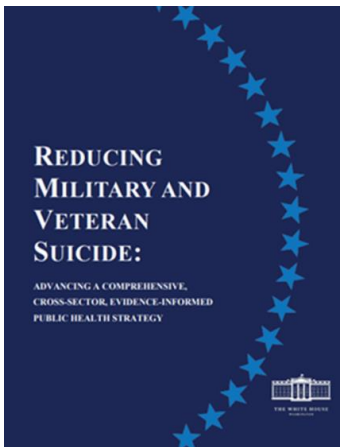


Plank 4: Suicide Prevention Program Enhancement



Plank 5: Paid Media

VA Suicide Prevention: Operationalizing the National Strategy and CPG



SP 2.0



Community-Based Prevention

- Veterans Integrated Service Networks (VISN)-Wide Community Prevention Pilots (community coalition building)
- Together With Veterans (Veteran-to-Veteran building)
- Governor's/Mayor's Challenge (state-driven suicide prevention planning)



Clinically-Based Interventions

Evidence-based psychotherapies & interventions implemented through clinical video telehealth

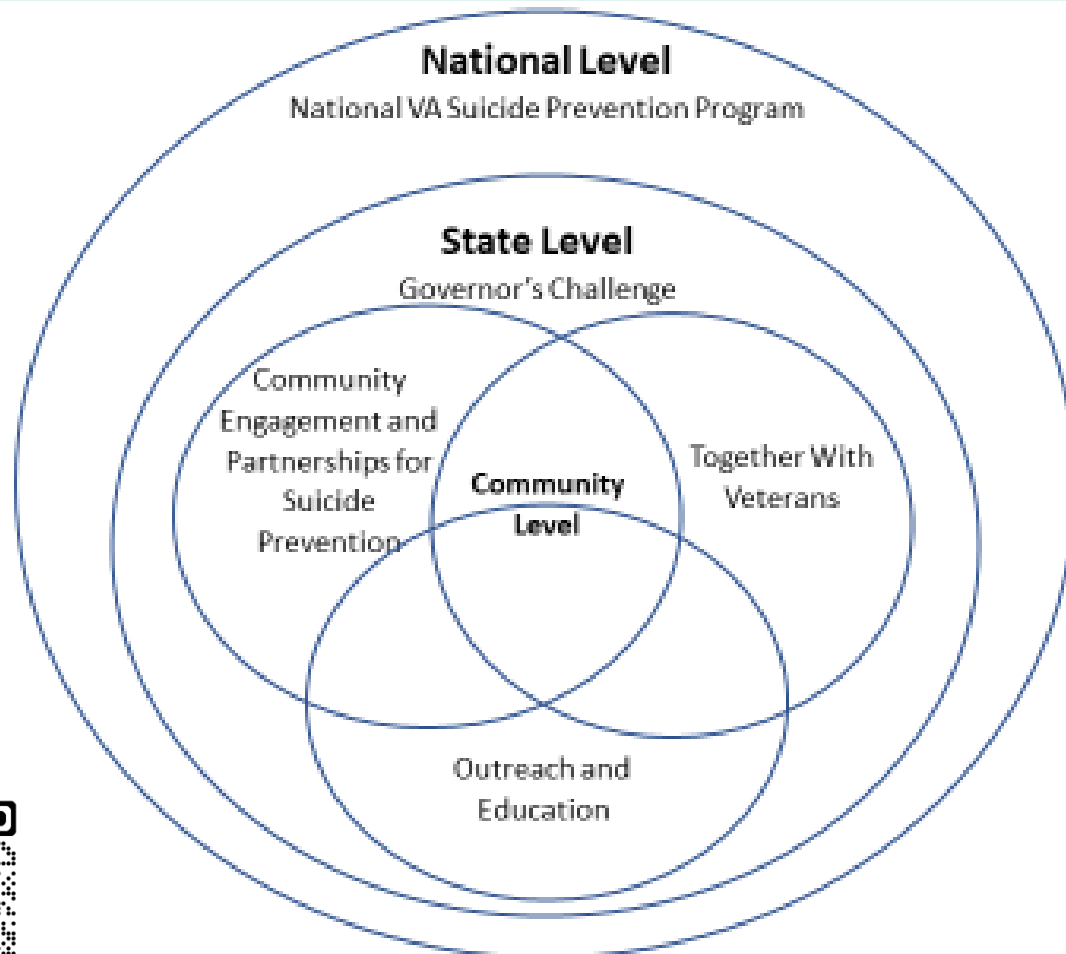
- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Suicide Prevention (CBT-SP)
- Problem-Solving Therapy for Suicide Prevention (PST-SP)
- Dialectical Behavior Therapy
- Safety Planning Intervention

Foundation of Adequate Mental Health Staffing
 (7.72 outpatient mental health full-time equivalent employees/1,000 Veterans in outpatient mental health)



SP 2.0 Community – Progress with Each of You

Key Note: We are not alone in this Mission!



CBI-SP serves as unifying model from national to community levels for all community-based efforts to end Veteran suicide.

The Governor's Challenge is a collaboration with VA and SAMHSA where state policy makers partner with local leaders to implement a comprehensive suicide prevention plan.

Together with Veterans is focused on Veteran-to-Veteran coalition building and Veteran leadership development for suicide prevention.

Community Engagement and Partnerships for Suicide Prevention (VISN Expansion) is focused on facilitating community coalition building for suicide prevention

There are now more than 2000 local coalitions and 50 states & five territories working in suicide prevention under a unifying, evidence-informed model.



Staff Sergeant Parker Gordon Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program (SSG Fox SPGP)



- Enables VA to focus on community-based suicide prevention efforts that meet the needs of Veterans and their families through:
 - Outreach
 - Suicide prevention services
 - Connection to VA and community resources
- Part of the Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act of 2019, signed into law on October 17, 2020.

Eligibility



Grantees Serving Texas

- (1) Blue Star Families, Inc
- (2) Americas Warrior Partnership, Inc
- (3) Reboot Recovery
- (4) US Vets – Texas
- (5) Harris County Texas
- (6) Sabine Valley Regional Mental Health Retardation Center
- (7) Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma

Organizations

- Eligible organizations include:
 - Incorporated private institutions or foundations
 - A corporation wholly owned or controlled by an incorporated private institution or foundation
 - Indian tribes
 - Community-based organizations that can effectively network with local civic organizations, regional health systems, and other settings where eligible individuals and their families are likely to have contact
 - State or local governments
- Organizations can apply for grants worth up to \$750,000 and may apply to renew awards from year to year throughout the length of the program.

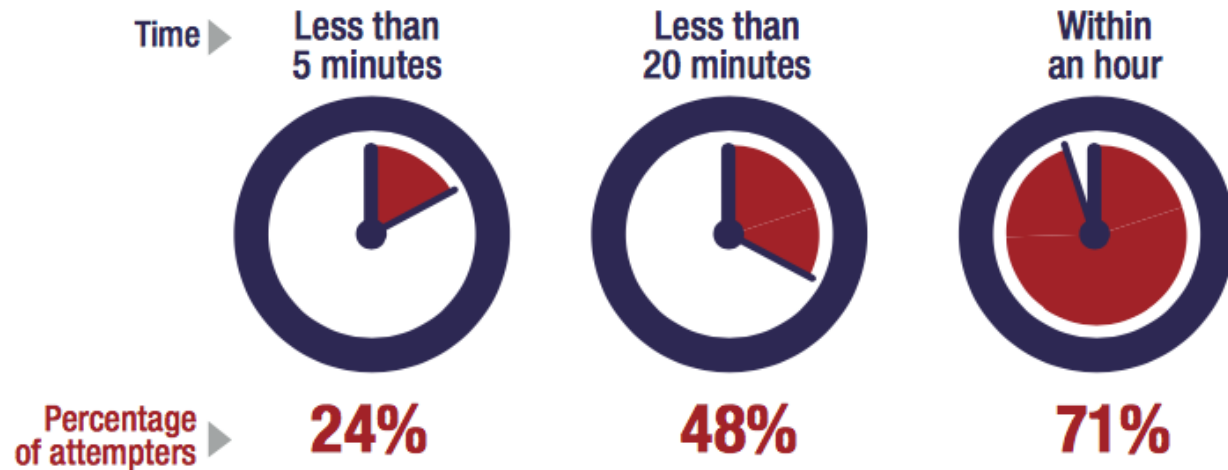
Veterans

Veterans eligible to receive services as part of the SSG Fox SPGP include certain Veterans at risk of suicide who, in general, were discharged from the Armed Forces under conditions other than dishonorable and include Veterans with other than honorable discharge status and Veterans who served on active duty in a theater of combat operations.

Lethal Means Safety in Communities Matters:

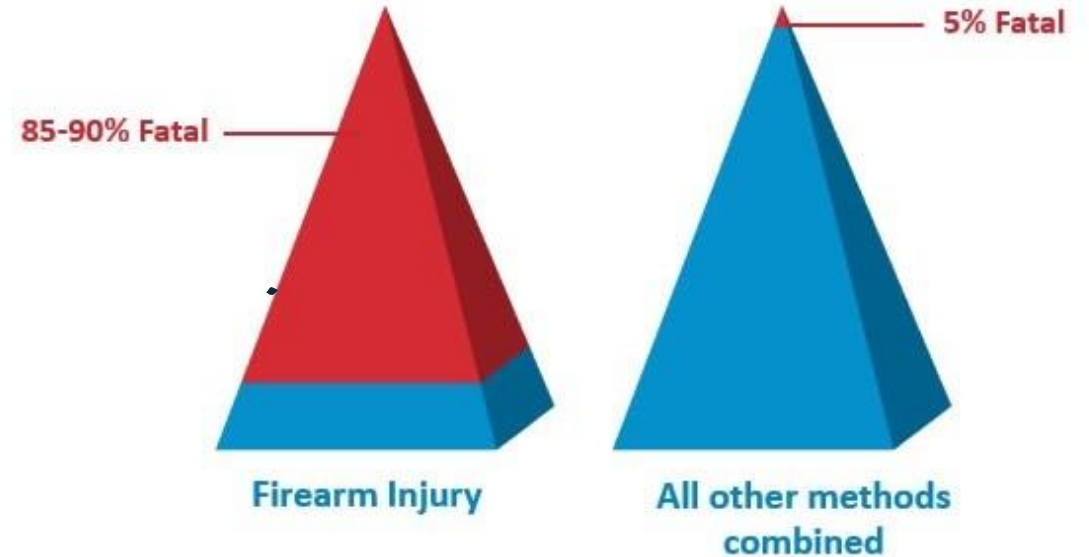
Most Suicidal Crises are Brief

Time from Decision to Action < 1 hour



Source: Simon, T.R., Swann, A.C., Powell, K.E., Potter, L.B., Kresnow, M., and O'Carroll, P.W. Characteristics of Impulsive Suicide Attempts and Attempters. SLTB. 2001; 32(supp):49-59.

Suicide attempts by firearm are between 85-90% fatal compared with all other methods of suicide.



CDC WISQARS: Deaths from death certificate data; nonfatal incidents estimated from national sample of hospital emergency departments

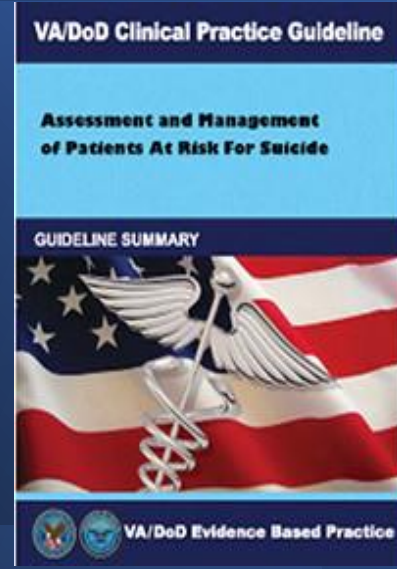
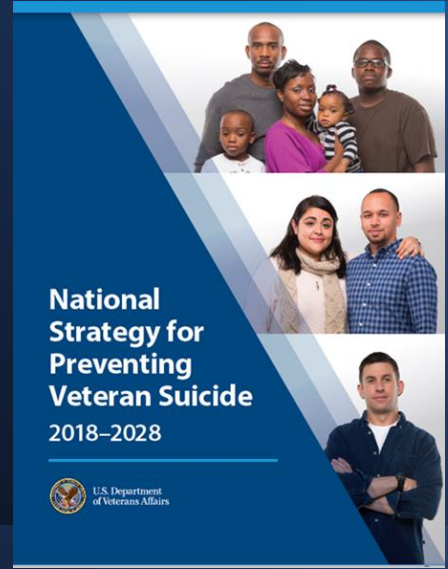
Source: CDC WISQARS and US Dept. of Veterans Affairs <https://www.mirecc.va.gov/lethallmeanssafety/facts/>

Note: Approximately 1/3 of Veterans in large surveys store their firearms loaded and unlocked.

Building in time and space between the impulse to act and the means to harm one's self saves lives.

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Reaching Out in Connection: Starting the Conversation, Identifying Resources, and Connecting to Support



SP Now

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-
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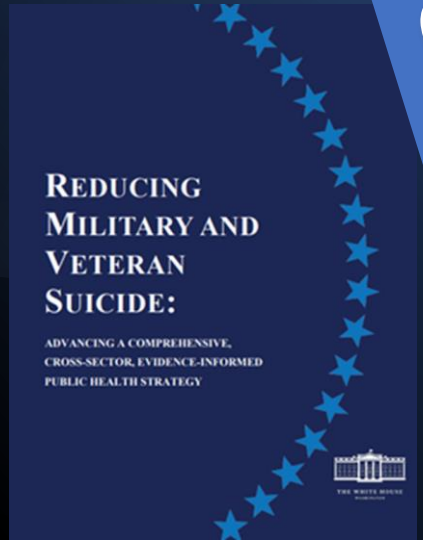
- Plank 1: Lethal Means Safety**
- Plank 2: Suicide Prevention in Medical Populations**
- Plank 3: Outreach and Understanding of Prior VHA Users**
- Plank 4: Program Enhancement**

All of us make a difference – where can you lean in?

VA Suicide Prevention
Operationalizing
National Strategy and

- Community-Based Interventions**
- Evidence-based psychotherapies & interventions delivered through clinical video telehealth
 - Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Suicide Prevention (CBT-SP)
 - Problem-Solving Therapy for Suicide Prevention (PST-SP)
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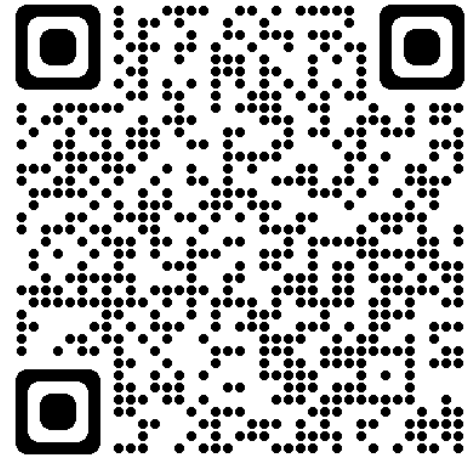


Links to documents available by clicking on icons



Starting the Conversation

Don't wait. Reach out. (www.va.gov/REACH)



Website



Video Link: <https://youtu.be/7InsC5TScjY>



*Normalizing life's challenges,
destigmatizing reaching out for help*



Asking for help is **NOT**
a sign of weakness.

When you want to
retreat is when you
should actually reach out
to your loved ones.

- **U.S. Army Veteran**



Don't wait. Reach out.
VA.GOV/REACH



**No mission
should be fought
alone.**

Life has its challenges. You don't have to solve them alone. That's true whether it's an everyday struggle, or something more complicated.

This site was designed for Veterans to proactively seek support and resources.

You're not alone. You've got this. Don't wait. Reach out.

Brought to you by:



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

&



Don't wait. Reach out.

Life has its challenges. As a Veteran you don't have to solve them alone.

Use this site to get support that is designed specifically for you. If you're a family member or a friend, you can also find resources that are designed specifically for the Veteran in your life.

[Get Support & Resources](#)

I would like help with employment.

I'd like resources for whole health and well-being.

I'm a Woman Veteran and need health care or resources.

I'm an LGBTQ+ Veteran and need health care or resources.

I have a hard time dealing with stress.

I don't have anyone I can ask for help.

I'm struggling financially.

I am bothered by traumatic memories.

I'm dealing with chronic pain.

I need help with my drinking, smoking, or using habits.

I'm a Veteran of Color and need health care or resources.

I need support with sleep or fatigue issues.

[Show All](#)

3 of 3 selected
Unselect everything

[All done](#)

Don't wait. Reach out.
www.va.gov/REACH

How to Talk with Someone in Crisis



How to Talk With a Veteran in Crisis

If a Veteran you care about is going through a difficult time or having thoughts of suicide, you're probably worried and confused. You want to help but may be scared you could make things worse—the only wrong thing to do is to do nothing. Now is the time to act. You can begin by learning the signs of crisis and how to start a conversation with the Veteran.

REMEMBER: Everyone has a role to play in suicide prevention. Small actions, like starting a conversation, can make a big difference.

Signs of crisis

Every Veteran is different, and many may not show any obvious signs of intent to kill themselves. But some actions and behaviors can be a sign they need help.

Crisis signs

These signs require immediate attention. If a Veteran you know needs medical attention, **call 911** now. For immediate help in dealing with a mental health or suicide crisis, call the Veterans Crisis Line: **Dial 988 then Press 1.**

- Thinking about hurting or killing themselves
- Looking for ways to kill themselves
- Talking about death, dying, or suicide
- Self-destructive behavior, such as drug abuse, risky use of weapons, etc.

REMEMBER: If you believe a Veteran is at high risk of suicide and has already taken pills or harmed themselves in some way, **call 911.** And keep yourself safe—**never** negotiate with someone who has a firearm. **Get to safety and call 911, noting the Veteran is armed.**

Warning signs

These signs may indicate that a Veteran needs help. Contact the Veterans Crisis Line now—**Dial 988 then Press 1**—if a Veteran you know is exhibiting any of these:

- Appearing sad or depressed most of the time
- Hopelessness
- Anxiety, agitation, sleeplessness, or mood swings
- Feeling as if there is no reason to live
- Feeling excessive guilt, shame, or sense of failure
- Rage or anger
- Engaging in risky activities without thinking
- Increasing alcohol or drug misuse
- Losing interest in hobbies, work, or school
- Neglecting personal welfare and appearance
- Withdrawing from family and friends
- Showing violent behavior, like punching a hole in the wall or getting into fights
- Giving away prized possessions
- Getting affairs in order, tying up loose ends, or writing a will



How to start the conversation

For a Veteran in crisis—whose emotional struggles and health challenges may lead to thoughts of suicide—conversations and connections can mean the difference between keeping them safe and a tragic outcome.

If you and/or the Veteran are not in immediate danger, start a conversation by asking questions like:

- *"It sounds like you're feeling so incredibly (insert appropriate feeling here—trapped, overwhelmed, betrayed, etc.). Sometimes when people feel this way, they think about suicide. Is this something you're thinking about?"*
- *"When did you first start feeling like killing yourself?"*
- *"Did something happen that made you begin to feel like taking your life?"*

When responding to answers from a Veteran, remember simple, encouraging feedback goes a long way in showing support and encouraging help-seeking:

- *"I'm here for you. How do you hurt and how can I help?"*
- *"Can we talk for a while and see if we can find a way to keep you safe right now?"*
- *"I might not be able to understand exactly what you're going through or how you feel, but I care about you and want to help."*

You don't have to be an expert to talk to a Veteran facing challenges. You just need to show genuine care and concern.



Here are some things to keep in mind:

- Make supportive and encouraging comments, don't give them the idea or increase their risk. It may seem daunting, but it could save their life. Although many people may not show clear signs of intent to kill themselves, they'll likely answer direct questions about their intentions when asked.
- Don't inject judgment or emotion in the conversation. Stay calm.
- Listen more than you speak—don't dominate the conversation.
- Remind them you are there for them.
- Let them decide how much to share.
- It's okay to ask directly: "Are you thinking about taking your own life?" If the Veteran answers yes, follow the steps below:
 1. Inform them they can **Dial 988 then Press 1** to reach the Veterans Crisis Line or ask if they'd like to do this with you.
 2. Assess whether the Veteran is in crisis and determine if he or she has already initiated a plan to kill themselves or injured others or has an immediate plan to do so, with access to means.
 3. Try to find out where the Veteran is located and whether anyone else is nearby.
 4. For immediate emergency or medical assistance, **call 911.**

Asking if someone is having thoughts of suicide will not give them the idea or increase their risk. It may seem daunting, but it could save their life. Although many people may not show clear signs of intent to kill themselves, they'll likely answer direct questions about their intentions when asked.

REMEMBER: Even if the Veteran doesn't ask for support, they may need it. Make sure they know the Veterans Crisis Line is available **24/7** to help during a crisis. You can even call together.

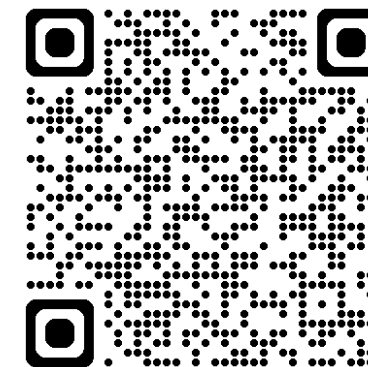
Learn more with these resources:

Veterans Crisis Line: A free, anonymous, confidential resource available to Veterans in crisis, as well as their family members and friends. **Dial 988 then Press 1**, chat at [VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat](https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/Chat), or text **838255**.

VA Mental Health: VA's repository of mental health resources, information, and data materials.

Make the Connection: VA's premier mental health literacy and anti-stigma website highlights Veterans' real, inspiring stories of recovery and connects Veterans and their supporters with local resources.

12/2022



<https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/find-resources/spread-the-word/>



Veterans Crisis Line

DIAL 988 then **PRESS 1**



1

Dial 988 then Press 1 is active for all Veterans now in 50 US States and the 5 main territories.

2

Veterans will continue to use chat (VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat) and text (838255) after the transition.

3

The former 10-digit Veterans Crisis Line number will remain active.

4

Spread the Word – materials available at the QR code above

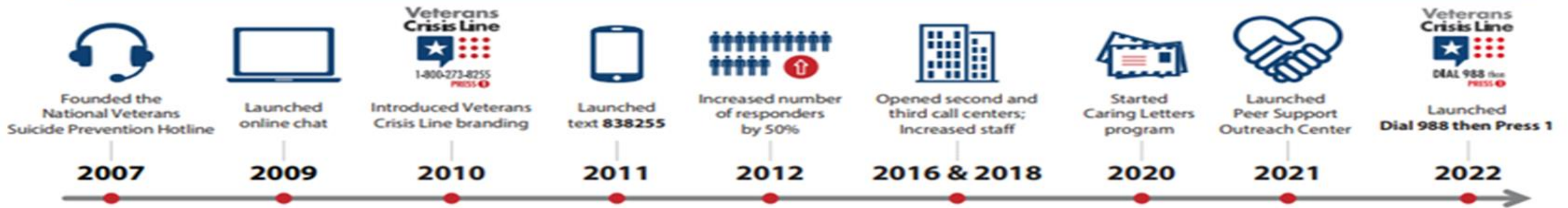
Learn More:

- FAQs (Dial 988 then Press 1) on VeteransCrisisLine.net
- Shareable materials available at VeteransCrisisLine.net/find-resources/spread-the-word
- FAQs (General 988) on [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's \(SAMHSA\) website](https://www.samhsa.gov)

Answering the Call: Veterans Crisis Line



The Veterans Crisis Line is a free, confidential resource available to any Veteran, even if they are not enrolled in VA health care or registered with VA. Care does not end when the conversation is over. The Veterans Crisis Line can connect Veterans to their local suicide prevention coordinators, who will follow up and coordinate care.



More than **8 million calls**



More than **399,000 texts**



More than **975,000 chats**



More than **1.6 million referrals** to VA suicide prevention coordinators

More than **337,000** dispatches of emergency services

Data last updated 7/2024

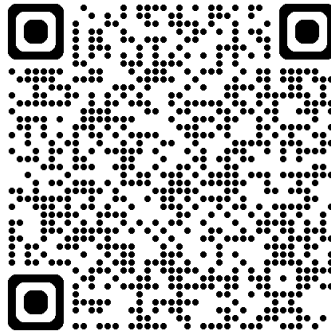
Lethal Means Safety Resources



Reducing Firearm & Other Household Safety Risks Brochure

- Best practices for safely storing firearms and medications
- Guides on how to talk to Veterans about safe storage.

Normalize the discussion.... it is OK to ask if someone is having thoughts about suicide. And it is OK to ask about how they are storing their firearms too.



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention

Reducing Firearm & Other Household Safety Risks for Veterans and Their Families



Firearm safety is an important public health issue that can affect your health and your family's well-being.

If you own a firearm, or live in a household where there are firearms, the following information can help keep you and those around you safe. Similarly, reducing access to other household risks, like medications, can help ensure your family's safety.

Make the Connection

Online resource featuring hundreds of Veterans telling their stories about overcoming mental health challenges

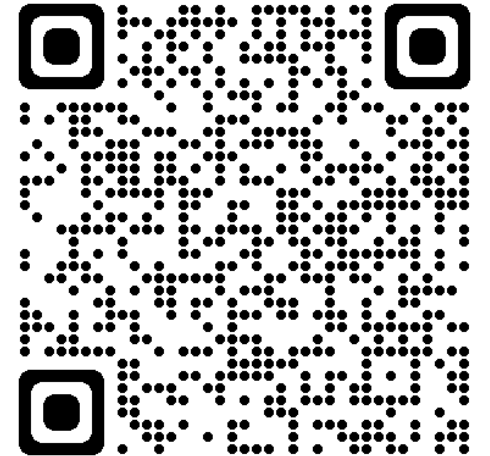
**MAKE THE
CONNECTION**

www.MakeTheConnection.net

Connect With Stories
of Help and Hope



LEARN FROM VETERANS' EXPERIENCES



Embrace the power of your own role in suicide prevention in the lives of those around you, utilizing your own specific gifts, stories, and methods of connection.

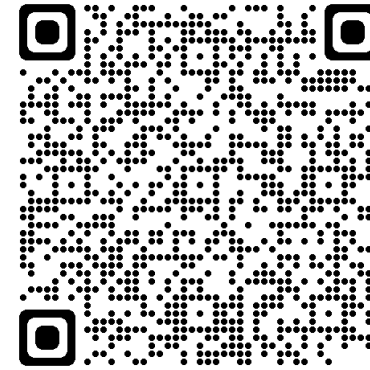
You can and do make a difference.

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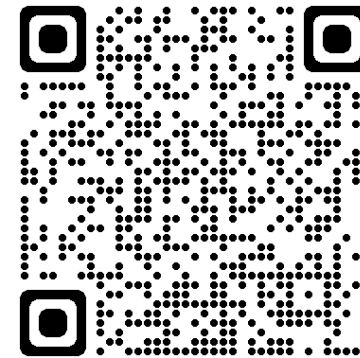
Resources

National Shooting Sports Foundation, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention & VA Partnership

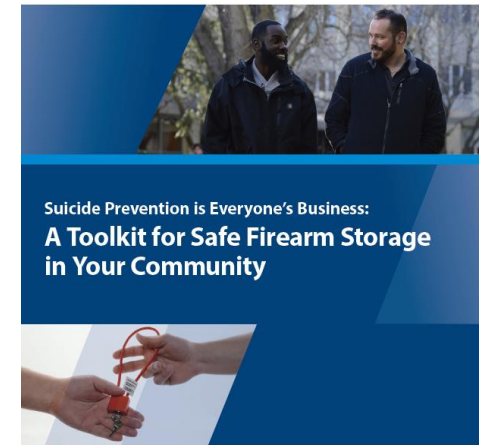
- Creation of [a community toolkit](#) to Veterans, their families, and communities about putting “time and space” between a Veteran in crisis and a firearm
- [United States Concealed Carry Association - Preventing Veteran Suicide During COVID-19](#)
- Co-branding materials for use throughout the VHA and community
- [AFSP/NSSF Toolkit for gun shop outreach](#)



Community Toolkit



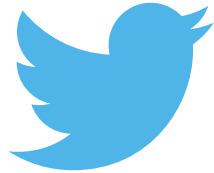
Gun Shop Toolkit





Social Media Safety Toolkit

- As discussed in the National Strategy for Preventing Veteran Suicide, social media is an important intervention channel and a key piece of VA’s comprehensive, community-based suicide prevention strategy.
- The Social Media Safety Toolkit for Veterans, their families, and friends equips everyone with the knowledge needed to respond to social media posts that indicate a Veteran may be having thoughts of suicide.
- The toolkit includes best practices, resources, and sample responses.



Download & Share the [VA's Lethal Means Safety Clinical Staff Pocket Card](#)

Means Safety Messaging for Clinical Staff

Use the **GROW** Framework to talk with Veteran patients about means safety and options for safe firearm and medication storage:

Get ready

Reason for the discussion

Offer brief advice

We're here to help

Get ready: Consider important factors before having the conversation.

- How well do you know this patient?
- Does the patient live with other people?
- What is the patient's level of suicide risk?

Firearm Storage Options

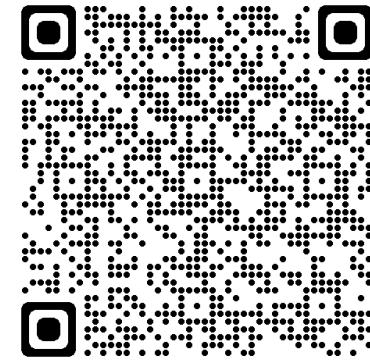


- Store unloaded firearms and ammunition separately.
- Use a gunlock.
- Store firearms in a safe, locking cabinet, or lockbox.
- Store firearms disassembled or remove the firing pin.
- Store firearms at the home of someone you trust.*

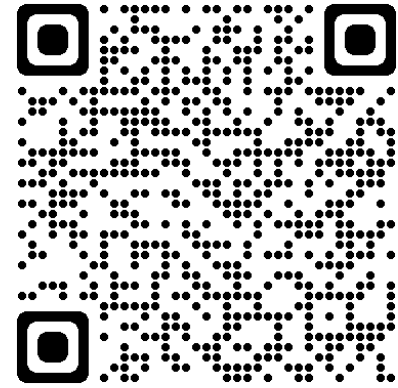
** State laws may limit temporary storage options. Confirm the laws in your state before making recommendations to Veterans.*

Medication Safety Recommendations

- Limit quantities of medications prescribed. If a patient is at higher risk, consider asking the patient to involve a family member or friend in medication management.
- Ask patients to:
 - Store medications in a secure area. If medications have abuse potential, consider a lockbox.
 - Dispose of any medication that is past its expiration date, is no longer needed, or has not been used in 12 months.
- Check with a local VA pharmacist about options and provide patients with this information.



Free, Confidential Support 24/7/365



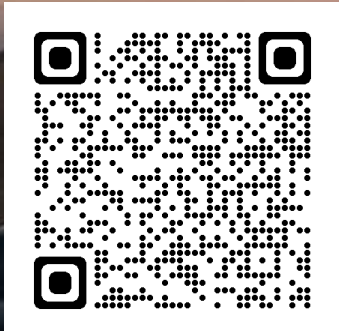
- Veterans
- Family members
- Service members
- Friends

KeepItSecure.Net: Lethal Means Safety Campaign Focused on Firearm Safety

Space Between Thought and Trigger:

30 Seconds

**Gratitude to NSSF and other partners
for input in the development of this
campaign**



KeepItSecure.net



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

Resources for Clinicians

SUICIDE RISK MANAGEMENT Consultation Program

FOR PROVIDERS WHO SERVE VETERANS

Why worry alone?

The Suicide Risk Management Consultation Program provides free consultation for any provider, community or VA, who serves Veterans at risk for suicide.

Common consultation topics include:

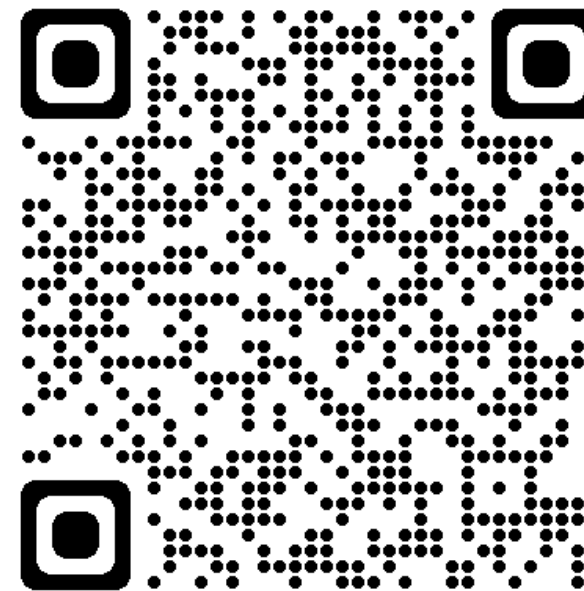
- Risk Assessment
- Conceptualization of Suicide Risk
- Lethal Means Safety Counseling
- Strategies for How to Engage Veterans at High Risk
- Best Practices for Documentation
- Provider Support after a Suicide Loss (Postvention)

#NeverWorryAlone

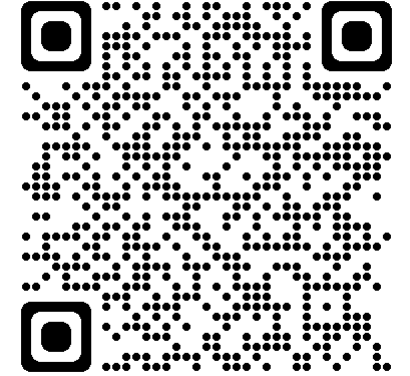
To initiate a consult email:

SRMconsult@va.gov

www.mirecc.va.gov/visn19/consult



Resources to Heal After a Suicide Loss



COMMUNITY

PROVIDERS

WORKPLACE



Films



Infographics



Podcasts

Uniting for Suicide Postvention (USPV):
www.mirecc.va.gov/visn19/postvention/

Annual Report Resources

[Veteran Suicide Data and Reporting](#)

To view all collective resources for the 2023 Annual Report, visit the data page. All other links will take you directly to the products listed.

[National Data Appendix](#)

The data presented here is meant to accompany the annual report.

[State Data Appendix](#)

The data presented here is meant to accompany the annual report.

[Report FAQs](#)

This document focuses on frequently asked questions about the annual report.

[2023 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report](#)

[Methods Report](#)

This document provides background regarding the methods used by the VA's Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention to assess suicide mortality among Veterans. This represents a supplement to information included in the annual report.

[*State Data Sheets](#)

The 2021 state data sheets present the latest findings from VA's ongoing analysis of suicide rates and include the most up-to-date state-level suicide information for the United States.

**This link will take you to the general Suicide Prevention Data page. You must scroll halfway down the page and click on View Individual State Data Sheets, to view data for each U.S. state, island, and territory.*

VA Tools and Resources for Veterans and Supporters

[VA S.A.V.E. Training](#): Training designed to teach anyone who interacts with Veterans how to recognize warning signs of crisis and what to do to help a Veteran who may be at risk.

[VA Suicide Prevention](#): Explore suicide prevention resources to build networks of support among community-based organizations, Veterans Service Organizations, health care providers, and other members of your community that strengthen protective factors for Veterans.

[VA Resource Locator](#): This tool can help Veterans find local mental health and suicide prevention resources, including their local suicide prevention coordinator.
