

INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH AND SUICIDE PREVENTION AMONGST U.S. MILITARY VETERANS

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Dear editor,

In 2017, an average of 16.8 United States (U.S.) military veterans died by suicide each day, with a total of 6,139 veteran suicide deaths that year (Department of Veterans Affairs 2019). Veteran suicide is a major public health concern in the U.S. In this note, we propose an interdisciplinary approach is needed to prevent suicide among veterans, and social workers can play an important role in an interdisciplinary approach. This type of approach includes not only a collaboration between mental health professionals, but also a collaboration of mental health professionals with primary care physicians, physician specialists (i.e. cardiologists), non-mental health social workers, lawyers, nurses, psychologists, and other community professionals (Holmes et al. 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in social isolation, anxiety, depression, uncertainty, unemployment, and financial hardship (Holmes et al. 2020). These factors can increase suicide risk in a veteran population that is already at elevated risk for suicide (Department of Veterans Affairs 2019, Holmes et al. 2020). Additionally, the pandemic might make it difficult for veterans to communicate with their healthcare providers, and engage in their mental health treatment. An interdisciplinary approach can be utilized in healthcare settings or in telemental health practice as a way to support veterans during the pandemic. Research on previous epidemics shows that interdisciplinary collaboration can reduce stigma and fear, and improve suicide prevention efforts, treatment adherence, and screening for mental disorders and suicidality (Holmes et al. 2020). Social workers can collaborate with medical and mental health providers, as well as other community professionals to encourage veterans to adhere to their mental health treatment and further reduce suicide risk.

Alexopoulos et al. (2009) evaluated a multidisciplinary care management intervention over the course of two years. Study participants were at least 60-years of age with minor or major depression, and they received treatment and care management services from physicians, psychologists,

nurses and social workers (Alexopoulos et al. 2009). Participants who received the intervention had a 2.2 times greater reduction in suicidal ideation as compared to the treatment as usual group (Alexopoulos et al. 2009). This study demonstrates that a multidisciplinary approach can lead to positive outcomes.

Social workers are often involved in the mental health treatment of military veterans (Savitsky et al. 2009). Mental health treatment may include diagnosis of mental disorders and suicidality, suicide risk assessments, group therapy, and individual and family psychotherapy (Levine & Sher 2020). Social workers can provide case management services consisting of community referrals, psychoeducation on government resources, psychosocial help, housing assistance, legal assistance, vocational rehabilitation, job placement, and family services (Savitsky et al. 2009, Levine & Sher 2020). Case management services can be effective in reducing suicide risk (Levine & Sher 2020). In cases of imminent suicide risk, social workers can assess suicide risk factors, make referrals to psychiatrists or emergency services, provide crisis intervention, and reduce access to lethal means (Levine & Sher 2020). Reducing access to lethal means can abate impulsive suicides. Social workers can educate veteran firearm owners on gun safety measures, provide gun locks and safes, and assist with turning in firearms to gun buyback programs.

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