

Madison County Hopes To Remove Social Stigmas That Surrounds Discussions On Suicide

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EDWARDSVILLE — The most challenging conversations to have are the ones needed the most and talking about suicide is as real as it gets, but for veterans, the task can be difficult.

Madison County Mental Health Board Executive Director Deborah Humphrey said September is National Suicide Prevention Month and Thursday, Sept. 10 marks World Suicide Prevention Day.

“Suicide is a human issue and we need to do what we can by having difficult conversations,” she said.

Humphrey said veterans are especially at risk, because so many are afraid to come forward for fear of the stigma attached to it.

“When a veteran is emotionally wounded and diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and experience significant life stressors it can affect the ability to cope,” Humphrey said. “This can escalate a veteran into an emotional crisis episode or thoughts of suicide, attempting or even death by suicide.”

The average number of veterans who commit suicide every day is between 17 and 23.

“The actual number of those who think about it is far greater,” Humphrey said.

Humphrey said she recently attended several presentations, held by the Madison County Veterans’ Assistance Commission (VAC), on the President’s Roadmap to Empower and End National Tragedy of Suicide (PREVENTS) and what the VAC is doing locally to develop a Veterans Crisis Response Program built around the PREVENTS Roadmap. Elected officials, community leaders, law enforcement and mental health professionals who attended the events learned about the President’s Roadmap and the Veterans Crisis Response Program.

On March 05, 2019 the President signed Executive Order 13861, known as PREVENTS and created an interagency task force to lead the development and implementation of a national, comprehensive roadmap to change how our nation treats mental health and understands suicide prevention.

Humphrey said VAC Superintendent Brad Lavite presented information about helping veterans in crisis, but also about taking a public approach to suicide prevention.

“Brad did a great job bringing everyone together, educating and engaging them,” she said.

She said the presentations focused on stakeholders working with the VAC in developing and implementing a Veterans Crisis Response Program that responds to veterans in crisis and can possibly be emulated and expanded to assist any citizen experiencing a mental health crisis or suicidal.

“Bringing key stakeholders together in planning and implementing this initiative will have positive results,” she said. “This collaborative effort will help veterans get the support and services to help reduce or prevent a crisis episode as early as possible and guide them to appropriate stabilization services and treatment when needed.”

Suicide is a public health crisis. In 2018, there were 48,334 suicides in the United States and veterans account for 20 to 22 percent. According to the Federal VA Geographical Index, Madison County veteran’s population is approximately 22,500. A range between 10 to 30 percent of veterans will experience PTSD or a mental health related crisis.

Humphrey said through the PREVENTS Roadmap, the VAC hopes to bring together law enforcement and other first responders to co-develop a Veterans Crisis Response Program overseen by an Accredited Veterans Service Officer employed by the VAC.

“When a veteran experiences a crisis episode related to their PTSD, first responders — law enforcement and medical and mental health professionals — are called to assist in de-escalating the event or aid the individuals in accessing treatment,” she said. “First responders are overwhelmed and often uncertain on how to respond to various types of calls and situations that involve mental health and suicide when it’s a veteran with diagnosed with PTSD or other mental health conditions. The VAC began developing the framework for its Veterans Crisis Response Program in 2018 and they hope it will become the model for other VAC’s and agencies in helping to reduce the fall-out when a mental health crisis occurs, thus preventing suicide locally and across the State of Illinois.”

Help PREVENTS serve the community better. Visit <https://survey.voice.va.gov/?CSignals-PREVENTS> and take the PREVENTS survey.

Feedback on this survey from veterans service organizations, veterans and community organizations will help ensure that the PREVENTS Office has the information it needs to implement the Roadmap and communicate its efforts to empower veterans and prevent suicide.