### COVER STORY: SUICIDE AWARENESS MONTH

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# A Panel Review of Army Reserve Suicides

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FORT BRAGG, N.C. – In 2013, 57 Army Reserve Soldiers decided the only way out of their particular situation was to take their own life.

That year was the most deadly since 2009.

The fateful choices these Soldiers made left questions, not only for their loved ones, but also for Army Reserve leaders.

To find out the answers, a panel of Army Reserve Suicide Prevention Program managers recently completed an in-depth look at each of the 57 cases. They reviewed more than 30 documents associated with each case to include 15-6 investigations, police reports, witness depositions, suicide notes, medical records, and autopsy reports.

In most of the cases, what they found was unexpected. A suicide was not necessarily connected to a deployment, traumatic brain injury, or post-traumatic event. In many instances, the suicide was driven by either a financial, personal relationship stressor, or may have been based on where they lived.

In 2013, the predominant demographic trait of Army Reserve suicides were white males between the ages of 18-25 - as one panel member said, "these are formative years for cognitive development and the stressors can be too much."





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#### Overwhelmed by Life

"One of the theories might suggest that coping strategies haven't fully developed," said Richard Doss, Ph.D., 416th Theater Engineer Command suicide prevention program manager, and a licensed clinical psychologist. "They haven't had an opportunity to experience adversity and realize that they can overcome adversity."

Doss also cited that in many cases, a sound financial system and personal support system hadn't been established.

"They recently left home and are establishing themselves as adults so that transition period into early adulthood is challenging," he said.

Doss said part of that transition happens when they return home and try to return to life as a civilian. "They come from a military environment where many decisions are made them and now they have to make their own decisions," he said. It can be overwhelming."

"Soldiers come back from making life and death decisions to 'clean up on Aisle Nine," he said. "They go from being responsible for millions of dollars worth of equipment to sleeping in their mother's basement. So that sense of the meaning and purpose and value of life sometimes gets degraded in the process of returning home."

#### Underemployed

Doss said there are many active duty Soldiers who never realized the U.S. was in a recession. He said the same is not true for an Army Reserve Soldier.

He said many Soldiers who have a job might actually be underemployed – barely making at or above minimum wage.

"Just because they have a job it doesn't necessarily mean they are able to maintain a family," said Jose' Mojica, U.S. Army Reserve suicide prevention program manager.

He said that many Soldiers rely on their Army Reserve income to fill in the gaps in their finances.

"The idea is there are a number of Americans, not just Soldiers, that are challenged with the difficulty of facing unemployment or underemployment and simply not having enough money to pay the bills,"





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#### Doss said.

"For many individuals who are strong, prideful and have served their country, the idea of being a burden or not being able to meet the demands of being a financially-developed individual may be overwhelming for some people," he said.

"The reality of it is we all experience stress," Doss said. "Stress does not discriminate. It's those stressors that ultimately lead some people to the point of despair that concludes in suicide."

#### Leading the Way

Doss said, in 2013, the 416th had nine suicides – or 20 percent of all suicides in the Army Reserve.

He was hired in September of that year to help stem the tide.

As a suicide prevention program manager, he talks with Soldiers about "how to deal with the stressors of life and not just suicide and death."

He travels to units within the 416th command footprint bringing a message from the commanding general.

"It's OK to seek help, that seeking help now is a sign of strength, not weakness," he said. "To be able to have Soldiers feel comfortable coming forward to say they have stressors, they have problems, they have issues they need to talk about." The numbers so far in 2014 show improvement. As of June 30, the 416th has not had a single suicide.

#### **Basic Connections**

Paul Wade, Psy.D., 99th Regional Support Command suicide prevention program manager, and a doctor of psychology, said the panel members are not trying to make a "softer" Army. Quite the contrary, the panelist are trying to help commanders realize it's alright to get to know their Soldiers and conversely, help Soldiers feel comfortable with going to their commanders when they need help.

"We are trying to get back to basics by connecting with our people," Wade said. "Commanders often feel overwhelmed with the workload the have – to do all the necessary things to ensure their Soldiers are ready warriors to go on the battlefield and fight.

"In addition to that, those same Soldiers have other lives. They have their civilian lives, they have their Families, their car payments – all the other things associated with just living life. For some people, those things turn into stressors," Wade said.

"What we are trying to do is help those people connect with other people whether it be their commander, first sergeant, battle buddy or someone around them," he said. "I will tell you from my experience, that some commanders don't feel like they





have the time to really get to know their Soldiers."

Wade admits that sometimes, commanders may misinterpret "connecting with Soldiers means we want them to be 'touchy-feely' and they have problems switching from being a tough leader to being a compassionate leader."

#### **Community Involvement**

One of the panel recommendations was to involve the civilian community. Since a majority of Army Reserve Soldiers and their Families do not reside near major military installations, community involvement is a key to limiting the number of suicides, the panel members said.

"I'm a realist so what I'd like to see, initially, is to provide better information to those resources in the community about the general, day-to-day needs, that some of our TPU (Troop Program Unit) Soldiers have," Wade said.

He said this includes their job, financial, medical, mental health, or Family circumstances.

"Because their community is more aware of the needs of that TPU Soldier, they are now in a position to invite that Soldier to take advantage of the resources that community has to offer," he said.

He also didn't rule out reaching out to veterans' organizations such as the American Legion, and the

Veterans of Foreign Wars.

Wade said connecting with outside organizations falls in line with Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training, or ASIST, that addresses building safer communities.

"It's an educational process," Wade said. "It takes time to build a Suicide Safer Community because you have to make connections, you have to get all these different entities connected in such a way where we recognize that we are looking out for everybody."

#### Looking Forward

The findings of the panel are extensive and drill down into a number of factors including race, gender, age, employment history, deployment history, and stressors.

While the findings are preliminary, there is still much work to be done.

"We will share the findings with our senior leaders, Army leaders and Department of Defense leaders," Mojica said. "We have never seen the data presented like this. As we continue expanding the program, we are improving our data collection process compared to what it was in the past."

Mojica said that by collecting better data, they are able to see a "clear picture of where the issues are across the Army Reserve. As a result, we are able

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to tailor our strategies to build life-coping and emotion-coping skills."

He said one of the interesting outcomes of the panel review was the correlation between where the Soldiers lived and the population of those communities.

According to their findings, 59 percent of suicides occurred in FBI-ranked "most dangerous communities," a figure that coincides with 48 percent of suicides occurring in communities with populations between 10,000 and 99,000.

"We need to make commanders aware of these things so they can communicate better with their Soldiers," Mojica said. "Our guess, if you look at a city the size of New York, their suicide numbers are lower because they have more resources. But in a rural area, they don't have the same resources."

Mojica said the way ahead is to step-up how leaders reach out to Soldiers in geographically dispersed areas.

"One thing we cannot do is become complacent, we have to keep up the pressure," Mojica said. "We are attacking this from a number of fronts." 😒







SOURCE: USARC Case Review Work Group





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