

APNewsBreak: Military suicides drop; unclear why (Update)

November 11 2013, by Lolita C. Baldor

Suicides across the U.S. military have dropped by more than 22 percent this year, defense officials said, amid an array of new programs targeting what the Defense Department calls an epidemic that took more service members' lives last year than the war in Afghanistan did during that same period.

Military officials, however, were reluctant to pin the decline on the broad swath of detection and prevention efforts, acknowledging that they still don't fully understand why troops take their own lives. And since many of those who have committed suicide in recent years had never served on the warfront, officials also do not attribute the decrease to the end of the Iraq war and the drawdown in Afghanistan.

Still, they offered some hope that after several years of studies, the escalating emphasis on prevention across all the services may finally be taking hold.

With two months to go in this calendar year, defense officials say there have been 245 suicides by active-duty service members as of Oct. 27. At the same time last year there had already been 316. Each of the military services has seen the total go down this year, ranging from an 11 percent dip in the Marine Corps to a 28 percent drop for the Navy. The Air Force had a 21 percent decline, while Army totals fell by 24 percent.

The officials provided the data to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to disclose it publicly.

Last year the number of suicides in the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines spiked to 349 for the full 12-month period, the highest since the Pentagon began closely tracking the numbers in 2001, and up from the 2011 total of 301. There were 295 Americans killed in Afghanistan last year, by the AP's count.

Military suicides began rising in 2006 and soared to a then-record 310 in 2009 before leveling off for two years. Alarmed defense officials launched an intensified campaign to isolate the causes that lead to suicide, and develop programs to eliminate the stigma associated with seeking help and encourage troops to act when their comrades appeared troubled.

The Pentagon increased the number of behavioral health care providers by 35 percent over the past 3 years and embedded more of them in front-line units. It also beefed up training, expanded crisis phone lines and delivered more than 75,000 gun locks to the services to distribute.

"Suicide is often a perfect storm in an individual life, where many supports and many things come undone around a service member," said Ami Neiberger-Miller, spokeswoman for the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors. "I think there's been a lot of people encouraging our troops who are in trouble to seek help, that help is available, that help can work and that suicide is not the only option."

While much of the suicide prevention effort involves similar studies and programs, each service has set up its own particular methods to deal with the problem.

Navy Capt. Kurt Scott, director of the service's suicide prevention programs, said the Navy is working to recognize the causes of stress beforehand and then help sailors figure out ways to deal with it. Often stress is tied to family issues, including the strains of leaving for

deployments, substance abuse, depression or financial problems.

A study released this summer in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found no evidence of a link between suicide and troops who deployed multiple times to Iraq and Afghanistan combat zones over the past decade.

Scott said that sailors are receiving annual training, including sessions on how to identify stress in their subordinates or comrades. The training also helps sailors identify personal and work-related issues that might cause anxiety as they prepare to deploy, and then suggests ways to deal with the stress—including exercise or talking out the problems with chaplains or other troops.

The Marines have also targeted substance abuse as something that appears to increase the risk for suicides.

Adam Walsh, who works with the Marine Corp's community counseling and prevention programs, said it's too early to declare that suicides are declining in general. He said, however, that the Marines are updating an alcohol abuse prevention campaign and also now require that every battalion and squadron have a suicide prevention program officer.

The Army, which is by far the largest military service, has the highest number of suicides so far this year, with 124, while the Air Force had 43, the Navy had 38, and the Marines—the smallest service—had 40.

Army spokesman Paul Prince said the service has certified nearly 2,500 military and civilian leaders to be able to interact with soldiers on suicide prevention, and has conducted thousands of hours of training with the troops.

Price said suicide remains a daunting issue for the Army and the nation

and "defies easy solutions." So the service has expanded soldiers' access to behavioral health services to improve their ability to cope with the stress that can be caused by separation, deployments, financial pressures, other work-related issues and relationships.

Lt. Col. Brett Ashworth, a spokesman for the Air Force, said airmen have a new program that emphasizes leadership responsibilities in the effort to prevent suicides and a new Air Force website includes tips on recognizing distressed personnel.

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