

**Report on Long-Term
Action Plan to Prevent
Veteran Suicides**

Health - General Code § 13-3901

June 2023

Introduction

During the 2019 legislative session, the Maryland General Assembly passed Senate Bill 521, Chapter 35 of the Acts of 2019. Senate Bill 521 requires the Maryland Department of Health to develop a comprehensive action plan to increase access to and availability of professional veteran health services to prevent veteran suicides. In addition, the Maryland Department of Health is to submit a short-term report and subsequent long-term report outlining recommended changes needed to implement the initiatives and reforms outlined in the action plan.

Senate Bill 521 required the Maryland Department of Health to collaborate with various stakeholders to develop a comprehensive action plan, including the Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs, the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, the Service Members, Veterans, and Their Families Technical Assistance Center Implementation Academy, veteran advocacy groups, and medical providers. Furthermore, Senate Bill 521 outlined the following goals for the action plan:

1. Identify opportunities for raising awareness of and providing resources for veteran suicide prevention;
2. Identify opportunities to increase access to veteran mental health services;
3. Identify funding resources to provide accessible and affordable veteran mental health services;
4. Provide measures to expand public-private partnerships to ensure access to quality and timely mental health services;
5. Provide proactive outreach measures to reach veterans needing care;
6. Provide peer-to-peer service coordination, including training, certification, recertification, and continuing education for peer coordinators; and
7. Address suicide prevention awareness, measures, and training regarding veterans involved in the justice system.

In developing the action plan, the Maryland Department of Health and Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs aligned efforts with work already directed toward suicide prevention, including recommendations by Maryland's State Suicide Prevention Plan 2020 by the Governor's Commission on Suicide Prevention, the 2020-2021 Behavioral Health Plan developed by Maryland Department of Health's Behavioral Health Administration, and the action plan submitted for the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Governor's Challenge to Prevent Suicide among Service Members, Veterans, and Their Families. The following information summarizes the action items and strategies within the action plan and any potential changes necessary to implement the initiatives and reforms.

Action Plan Priority Areas

The comprehensive action plan spans four critical strategic priority areas that increase access to and availability of professional veteran health services to prevent veteran suicides. These key priorities may occur across public and private health systems that service members, veterans, and their families engage for treatment. The priorities, in no particular order, are:

1. Identify service members, veterans, and their families and screen for suicide risk
2. Promote connectedness and improve care transitions
3. Increase lethal means safety and safety planning
4. Enhance peer support efforts that engage with service members, veterans, and their families

1. Identify service members, veterans, and their families and screen for suicide risk

Effective suicide prevention requires various strategies to achieve long-term and institutional change. Proper military service identification is an essential first step to screening for suicide risk. Unfortunately, when asked, "Are you a veteran" some individuals who have served will not self-identify with that specific verbiage. An individual's disassociation with the term "veteran" can stem from several reasons: length of service, discharge status, combat experience, and gender. Additionally, identification questions should include family members as it opens opportunities for a more comprehensive conversation related to the overall need for care.

In November 2020, the Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs and Maryland Department of Health launched the "Ask the Question" initiative encouraging providers and state agencies to screen for military service and family connection to service. The "Ask the Question" initiative encourages providers and agencies to use standardized questions when facilitating client orientations or completing intake assessments. Before this initiative, few state agencies routinely asked consumers about military service. In addition, for state agencies asking about military service, it was unclear if there was follow-up or referral to US Department of Veterans Affairs-specific services.

There are likely thousands of service members, veterans, and families accessing state services who would otherwise be eligible for Veterans Affairs services. Beyond implementing processes for military service identification, opportunities exist to improve state agency reporting on benefits accessed by service members, veterans, and families, as well as provide employee training on referral processes and military cultural competency. The ability to bring consistency to military service identification, provide additional employee training, and improve data

reporting will facilitate service member, veteran, and family connection to vital services that can help reduce suicidality.

In 2021, the Maryland Department of Health was awarded \$704,465 in Mental Health Block Grant - American Rescue Plan Act funds to implement some of the items on the action plan, of which, \$100,000 was allocated for the creation of an “Ask the Question” video training for state employees in 2023 and public awareness campaigns in 2024 and 2025. The Maryland Department of Health is currently working to procure the expertise of the Maryland State Advertising Agency to create the video training that will later be hosted on the HUB training portal.

The following are recommended action items and related strategies to support identification and screening for suicide risk among service members, veterans, and families that have been added to our previous report.

- The Maryland Department of Health will continue to report annually on armed forces member suicides and expand to include overdose deaths to evaluate the success of service members, veterans, and families' suicide prevention programs.
- The Maryland Department of Health will explore opportunities to standardize military service screening questions on human service-related client intake forms and look to enhance linkages to resources post-identification.
- The Maryland Department of Health and Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs are to provide Ask the Question campaign education to state agencies in the form of a video on the state's HUB training platform.
- The Maryland Department of Health and Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs are to design and publish an Ask the Question Campaign toolkit for placement on the Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs and Maryland's Commitment to Veterans websites with distribution to federal, state, and local government agencies as well as community organizations.
- The Maryland Department of Health and Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs are to encourage state agencies to place an Ask the Question button on all state agency websites with a link to the Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs website and relevant service members, veterans, and families' suicide prevention resources.

2. Promote connectedness and improve care transitions

Although behavioral health services have expanded for service members, veterans, and their families population in recent years, they are often fragmented, especially crisis care services. The United States Department of Veterans Affairs National Strategy for Preventing Veteran Suicide

aims to integrate and coordinate veteran suicide prevention activities across multiple sectors and settings by fostering the integration of veteran suicide prevention into the values, culture, leadership, and work of a broad range of organizations and programs. Therefore, in keeping with evidence-based best practices, the Maryland Governor's Challenge to Prevent Suicide among Service Members, Veterans, and Their Families, as well as the action plan developed from Senate Bill 521, prioritizes promoting connectedness and improving care transitions.

The development of standardized protocols to connect service members, veterans, and their families to the appropriate level of care in community and crisis settings in Maryland is essential. The Crisis Intercept Map for Suicide Prevention is a tool that helps community stakeholders visualize how at-risk service members, veterans, and their families flow through the crisis care system from first contact through ongoing treatment and recovery support. It assists jurisdictions with identifying gaps, barriers to access, and opportunities for improvement. The Sequential Intercept Model details how individuals with mental and substance use disorders come into contact with and move through the criminal justice system.

Additionally, coordinated entry systems, such as the one adopted by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, have proven successful in reducing the prevalence of homelessness across the country and in Maryland. A similar standardized system, Veteran Intercepts in the Criminal Justice System, adopted by the National Institute on Corrections, provides valuable resource information at all points of intersection from law enforcement to community re-entry. By furthering efforts to provide enhanced connectedness and improved care transitions, Maryland will be able to reduce suicidality and improve well-being among service members, veterans, and their families.

As part of the American Rescue Plan Act funding awarded to the Maryland Department of Health in 2021, \$287,850 was allocated to facilitate crisis intercept mapping in eleven additional jurisdictions beginning in 2023. Harford County was the first jurisdiction in Maryland to participate in the crisis intercept mapping process in 2021. They were invited by SAMHSA to participate in crisis intercept mapping due to their large military and veteran population and the high numbers of suicides in their county. During the process, the identification of service members, veterans, and their families and community engagement were identified as the top issues to be addressed in their crisis continuum of care. They have created a county-specific "Ask the Question" rack card which they have shared at events like the Harford County Fair, Veteran Resource Fair, and Claims Clinic. The team also conducted a Helping Veterans in Crisis training that provided 50 participants with military culture, responding to crisis, and United States Department of Veterans Affairs S.A.V.E. training. The Harford County Crisis Intercept

Mapping team has plans to bring the team together for a table drill and to update the jurisdiction's crisis map.

Anne Arundel County also completed the initial phase of its crisis intercept mapping process. They applied directly to SAMHSA in the Fall of 2021 as part of expanded crisis intercept mapping offerings. They completed the initial phase during the Spring of 2022 but have not continued the process as of yet due to staffing changes. The Governor's Challenge Team is actively looking for a county agency to take the lead on continuing the work.

The recommended action items and related strategies to promote connectedness and improve care transitions that have been added to our previous report include:

- Maryland Department of Health and Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs, alongside stakeholders and eleven local jurisdictions (county, cluster of counties, or city and appropriate local agencies, i.e., police, fire, EMS, corrections) facilitate crisis intercept mapping projects for service members, veterans, and their families.
- Maryland Department of Health will continue to fund and staff a minimum of four Maryland's Commitment to Veterans Regional Resource Coordinators to provide behavioral health support and connection to cost-free and low-cost behavioral health care and wraparound services to service members, veterans, and their families regardless of length of service or discharge status. Additionally, these staff will advocate for service members, veterans, and their families through representation on regional boards and committees while working in collaboration with federal, state, and community agencies/organizations, nonprofits, behavioral health service providers, and medical facilities to coordinate and remain aware of available behavioral health and support services.
- Maryland Department of Health will continue to provide toll-free warm line services to connect service members, veterans, and their families to Maryland's Commitment to Veterans Regional Resource Coordinators who provide behavioral health support and resource connections.
- Maryland Department of Health will work to expand public awareness and utilization of the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. By dialing 988 and pressing "1," individuals can connect with counselors trained to address the unique challenges faced by military personnel, veterans, and their loved ones, offering confidential care and resources 24/7. This service aims to ensure timely intervention and support for those in crisis, fostering mental health and preventing suicide in the military community.

3. Increase lethal means safety and safety planning

The 2021 United States Surgeon General's Call to Action to Implement the National Strategy for Suicide Prevention shared that firearms account for 51% of all suicides in the United States. Firearms account for approximately 60% of suicides among military service members and 70% among military veterans. According to 2018 data, 58% of suicide deaths among Maryland veterans were by firearms, with 23% attributed to suffocation and 19% by other and low-count methods.

The Maryland Department of Health, the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, and other national and State agencies aim to increase awareness of culturally competent safety planning through training and education targeting clinical and medical providers. However, this content has not been facilitated regularly or with consistent messaging. Creating a standard curriculum to train providers supporting the military- and veteran-connected community on safety planning, military culture, trauma-informed care, and lethal means safety work will facilitate shared common knowledge. In addition, working collaboratively with stakeholders to implement evidence-based practices in lethal means safety and providing safety planning can strongly prevent suicide deaths among service members, veterans, and their families.

Utilizing \$297,406 in Mental Health Block Grant – COVID-19 funding awarded to the Maryland Department of Health in 2021, the Maryland Department of Health has partnered with PsychArmor, a national leader in military culture training, to provide an evidence-based and trauma-informed program designated the Trained Military Assistance Provider program. This grant funded a full-time program administrator through June of 2023, a two-year training portal contract with PsychArmor, resource materials for healthcare practices completing the training, creation of a program identifier, and marketing materials and placements.

In a National Library of Medicine article, it was noted that 45% of individuals who die by suicide were seen by a primary care provider in the 30 days before their death. It was additionally estimated that 83% were seen by a primary care provider in the year before death by suicide. This data supported the decision to design the Trained Military Assistance Provider program specifically for those who work in the primary care space to include both clinical and nonclinical staff. This initiative seeks to close the knowledge gap providers report in their ability to screen and effectively treat someone at high risk for suicide by providing carefully curated training in suicide prevention to include risk screening, safety planning, crisis response and lethal means safety. The Trained Military Assistance Provider program launched on December 1st, 2022, and was very well received by personnel working in healthcare, especially those who work with large numbers of military-connected individuals.

The launch was preceded by a live webinar of “15 Things Veterans Want You to Know” hosted by PsychArmor’s Chief Clinical Psychologist and Navy combat veteran, Dr. Heidi Kraft, as well as an interview with the Maryland Governor’s Challenge Team Lead, Joy Ashcraft, on PsychArmor’s Behind the Mission podcast where she highlighted the work of the Maryland Governor’s Challenge and the Trained Military Assistance Provider program.

Additionally, as part of the American Rescue Plan Act award, the Maryland Department of Health was allocated \$170,000 to continue funding the Trained Military Assistance Provider training portal and expand marketing efforts through 2025 and \$146,607 to continue the full-time program administrator through September 2025. At the beginning of SFY 2024, the program administrator will also manage the crisis intercept mapping facilitations.

The recommended action items and related strategies to support increasing lethal means safety and safety planning that have been added to our previous report include:

- Maryland Department of Health expands the Trained Military Assistance Provider program to behavioral healthcare professionals and their staff to include clinicians who work as part of Veteran Treatment Courts and mobile crisis response teams.
- Maryland Department of Health facilitates military cultural competency and safety planning training in correctional facilities.
- Maryland Department of Health, in collaboration with Crisis Intervention Training program coordinators, revamp the Military Culture workshop currently provided to several jurisdictions to include interactive components and tools and expand to additional jurisdictions’ Crisis Intervention Teams, mobile crisis response teams, police departments, fire departments, and emergency medical services.
- The Maryland Department of Health and Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs, in collaboration with Johns Hopkins University, expand the Maryland safe storage map.

4. Enhance peer support efforts that engage with service members, veterans, and their families

Over the past decade, Maryland has made significant progress and investment to expand the Peer Recovery Specialist behavioral health workforce. This workforce has seen an increased focus on providing high-quality and consistent service delivery through developing an industry-recognized credential - the Certified Peer Recovery Specialist. The Certified Peer Recovery Specialist credentialing process includes completing eligibility requirements to sit for the credentialing examination (participating in specified training, supervision, and experiential

hours), bi-annual renewal, and ongoing training.

In developing the comprehensive action plan, stakeholders identified opportunities to expand upon the role of Certified Peer Recovery Specialists in providing behavioral health recovery support to service members, veterans, and their families. However, additional and specific training is required to increase the knowledge and skills of Certified Peer Recovery Specialists to engage with the military- and veteran-connected population successfully.

Outlined below are action items and strategies that are currently underway that will enhance the State's ability to identify, train, and recruit Certified Peer Recovery Specialists and improve a Certified Peer Recovery Specialist's ability to engage with service members, veterans, and their families and provide interventions that reduce suicide within this community. These include:

- In March of 2021, the Maryland Department of Health received approval from the Maryland Addiction and Behavioral-health Professionals Certification Board to begin the development of a Service Members, Veterans, and Their Families Specialist curriculum.
- From April 2021 to December 2021, a diverse group of stakeholders from the behavioral health and veteran space collaborated to identify appropriate topics, content, and resources to be included in the 26-hour training package.
- For the six months following January 2022, the cohort led by the Maryland Department of Health met to develop the training curriculum and learning materials to include PowerPoint slide decks.
- Moving forward, the Maryland Department of Health seeks approval from the Maryland Addiction and Behavioral-health Professionals Certification Board, which oversees the certification of Certified Peer Recovery Specialists, to begin offering the curriculum to individuals to be recognized as a Certified Peer Recovery Specialist - Service Members, Veterans, and Their Families Specialist.
- The Maryland Department of Health partners with Local Behavioral Health Authorities, Veterans Affairs Maryland Health Care System, Local community-based Outpatient Clinics, and other military-affiliated organizations to identify eligible peers to participate in cohort-style training communities.
- The Maryland Department of Health utilizes existing funding sources to facilitate cohort learning communities to train initial pilot training programs.
- Upon approval, the Maryland Department of Health partners with the Maryland Addiction and Behavioral-health Professionals Certification Board to offer the training to Certified Peer Recovery Specialists annually or through partnerships with other organizations.

- The Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs explores providing a Peer Liaison on the Maryland Department of Health's Peer Recovery Specialist Advisory Council to provide representation and perspective.

Conclusion

The action items summarized in this report will allow Maryland to be proactive and responsive to Service Members, Veterans, and their families' suicide prevention needs and enhance the ability of military trauma-affected veterans to become knowledgeable of and be able to quickly access mental health services and supports as mandated in Senate Bill 521.