

AMVETS and VA Team Up to Confront Veteran Mental Health Crisis

WASHINGTON, DC - On March 6, 2018, American Veterans (AMVETS) joined Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Secretary David Shulkin in a press conference to announce a new partnership initiative to confront the veteran mental health crisis in the United States. Today, about 18% of service members returning from Iraq or Afghanistan have post-traumatic stress or depression, and 19% report experiencing a traumatic brain injury during deployment. Also, the estimated number of drug deaths in 2016 exceeded the total number of soldiers killed in the Iraq and Vietnam wars as veterans were twice as likely to die from accidental opioid overdoses as non-veterans due to overprescribed opiates and psychiatric medications.

“We’re facing a growing crisis, and now is the time to talk less and do more to avert it. As the veterans healthcare landscape evolves with the expansion of care in the community and a restructuring of specialized services in VA unfolds, there exists a need for informed advocates now more than ever to confront rising suicide rates, particularly among veterans who face transition stress soon after leaving service,” said Joe Chenelly, AMVETS Executive Director.

On January 9, 2018, President Trump signed an executive order entitled, “Supporting Our Veterans During Their Transition from Uniformed Service to Civilian Life,” to help more military veterans get mental health care in the VA in order to reduce veteran suicide in high risk veteran populations. An estimated 20-22 veterans take their own lives every single day. The rate is particularly high among younger vets, who don't always have access to VA health care when they leave the service. The executive order calls for their automatic enrollment into VA for VA mental health care services.

“Suicide Prevention is my top clinical priority and VA has had many accomplishments in improving mental health access and services, to include the launch of a comprehensive #BeThere campaign for Veterans Suicide Prevention to improve transition, outreach to Veterans, partner across communities, improve lethal means safety, and expand access to mental health care,” said VA Secretary Shulkin. “While we have made great progress, we realize there is much more we can do as well as the importance of advancing our programs and services with key partners such as AMVETS.”

AMVETS assumed a lead role in the effort among veteran service organizations by commissioning a licensed clinical team to provide direct services to veterans who need access to VA mental healthcare, in and outside VA, particularly related to complex conditions such as polytrauma, blindness, and traumatic brain injury. Those services include ensuring appropriate and accessible healthcare by advocating for and monitoring the delivery of high-quality medical and psychological care. The new program, called HEAL (Healthcare Evaluation, Advocacy, and Legislation), highlights AMVETS' substantive commitment to service members and veterans who face barriers to access or trouble navigating through the bureaucracy of the VA healthcare system.

Chief Medical Executive Lana McKenzie, who's charged with leading the HEAL team, said, "At the policy level, the VA is responsible for ensuring veterans with complex needs don't fall through the cracks. This plays out at the service level where people with conditions like traumatic brain injury, post traumatic stress — or even both, in many cases — are often bounced around the system because they're too difficult to treat, or more alarmingly, end up homeless, suicidal, or confined to the margins of society due to inconsistent follow up after discharge."

"It will be our goal to ensure President Trump and the VA Secretary's mental health agenda is not only implemented successfully, but is also carefully monitored and timely adjustments made along the way as needed," she concluded.

Key features of AMVETS' new H.E.A.L. Program:

Healthcare. HEAL Team clinicians are licensed Registered Nurses who are responsible for ensuring the quality of complex care for veterans through active healthcare system monitoring and working in collaboration with the Department of Veterans Affairs and community providers who serve veterans. Their work entails identifying necessary resources to improve the efficiency of healthcare services, to include quality of care and coordination, which is critical to delivering effective, lifelong comprehensive healthcare to the veteran population.

Evaluation. By continuously measuring the quality and effectiveness of healthcare services provided by VHA, to include services within the VA Polytrauma/TBI

system of care and mental health services, the HEAL Team seeks opportunities to promote the enhancement of those services through a solution-oriented approach to identifying needs that are specific to issues and concerns related to healthcare for AMVETS members. These assessment and recommendations for improvement will be shared with the Secretary of Veterans Affairs and designees.

Advocacy. Directly engaging and working in collaboration with VA healthcare professionals at all levels is a critical component of the HEAL Team's mission, particularly as it relates to mental health, Polytrauma/TBI and related issues. To accommodate the needs of current and future AMVET members, the HEAL team has established a healthcare helpline to troubleshoot reported issues and provide timely assistance whenever and wherever needed.

Legislation. Championing laws and policies that benefits AMVETS members is a significant component of the HEAL mission. The HEAL team will be staunch advocates in legislative and policy efforts that focus on the provision of comprehensive/complex healthcare and benefits for AMVETS members. These efforts will be carried out through direct engagement and collaboration with Congressional members and their designees with the intent to enhance quality and access to healthcare for veterans who desire to be heard on Capitol Hill.

About AMVETS: Founded more than 70 years ago, AMVETS has more than 250,000 members across the United States. The non-profit organization's mission is to enhance and safeguard the entitlements for all 21 million American Veterans in the country who have served honorably, including the National Guard and Reserve, and to improve the quality of life for all veterans, their families, and the communities where they live through leadership, advocacy and services.

(www.AMVETS.org)