

**STATEMENT OF
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BEFORE THE

**STATE OF NEW MEXICO
MILITARY AND VETERANS' AFFAIRS COMMITTEE
SILVER CITY, NM
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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the invitation to appear before you today to discuss suicide and the Suicide Prevention Program at the New Mexico Veterans Affairs (VA) Health Care System.

Suicide among America's Veterans became a major focus of the Veterans Affairs (VA) in 2007 when Suicide Prevention programs were initiated at every VA hospital and clinic. The state of New Mexico shares this focus on suicide prevention as a priority health concern for all of citizens, including Veterans.

New Mexico's suicide rate is 1.5 times higher than the national average, similar to other Rocky Mountain area states, placing it among the top five states for suicide deaths every year. Veteran suicides in New Mexico are a large percentage of those deaths – 23% of the state's adult suicides although Veterans are only 11% of the state's adult

population. New Mexico Veterans have a suicide rate of 43 per 100,000, almost 4 times the national (non-Veteran) average.

The costs of these deaths, estimated by Value Options, are huge. Lost productivity is estimated at \$1,178,684 per death; costs of medical care are cited as \$3,875. These numbers do not include the cost of emergency response by law enforcement, nor obviously, the tremendous human suffering involved. These are estimates only for deaths, not for the thousands of suicide attempts that occur annually.

The New Mexico VA Health Care System is actively engaged in fighting suicide among Veterans on several levels. When individual Veterans are identified as high risk for suicide, the New Mexico VA Health Care System provides individual, family, and group therapy specifically targeted at suicide as well as necessary health care and other mental health services. Veterans who are identified as high risk for suicide are contacted when they miss appointments. They are also tracked for two years with telephone and mail contacts to monitor their health and to offer new treatments if new problems emerge. Inpatient hospitalization and residential treatment are available for Veterans who cannot be treated as outpatients. All Veterans are assessed for suicidality by their Primary Care Providers with immediate follow-up available when necessary.

All staff at the New Mexico VA Health Care System, including physicians, nurses, phone operators, secretaries, police, housekeepers, and even cooks are trained in Suicide

Prevention. Mental health staff is available for walk-in crises from 7:00 a.m. until 11:00 p.m. every day of the year, with Emergency Department coverage 24-hours a day.

As the Suicide Prevention Coordinator at the New Mexico VA Health Care System, my concerns are not only for the Veterans in my care. The families of combat Veterans are also at increased risk of suicide; some studies indicate suicide is 2 to 3 times higher among the children and spouses of Veterans than civilian family members. Education, treatment, and community outreach throughout New Mexico are priorities for me and my team.

The New Mexico VA Health Care System partners with New Mexican communities at the state and local level on matters affecting the state suicide rate as well as issues specific to Veteran suicide. New Mexico VA Health Care System staff participate on the New Mexico Health and Human Services Suicide Prevention Task Force, meet with Tribal governments and tribal clinic staff, offer training to the universities and colleges, and meet regularly with the National Guard to coordinate outreach and intervention. New Mexico VA Health Care System Suicide Prevention Staff will provide training to any group which requests it.

In addition to the specific Suicide Prevention Program at New Mexico VA Health Care System, several other programs offered at the New Mexico VA Health Care System target the roots of Veteran suicide. The Health Care for Homeless Veterans Program, Veterans Justice Outreach, Substance Use Disorders clinic, Post Traumatic Stress

Disorder (PTSD) clinics, Specialty Mental Health, Vocational Rehabilitation, Co-Occurring Disorders Clinic for Pain Management, Palliative Care, Home-Based Primary Care, and Spinal Cord Injury/Disorders Program are a few of our programs which care for Veterans who are at particularly high risk of suicide. Placing a homeless Veteran in an apartment and providing him or her with the therapies they needs to stay off the street dramatically reduces suicide risk for that Veteran. Similarly, treating PTSD, addiction, pain, and chronic illness saves lives that might otherwise be lost to suicide. Veterans who receive care through the VA have a lower rate of suicide than do Veterans who are not seen by the VA. The efforts of the VA medical system are echoed by the Veterans Benefits Administration which works to provide economic, educational, and vocational benefits to Veterans.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my presentation. Please do not hesitate to contact the New Mexico VA Health Care System Suicide Prevention Team directly at (505) 265-1711 or toll free at (800) 465-8282 and extension 2224 if you or other committee members have questions, concerns, or suggestions in the future. Dr. Diane Castillo and I are pleased to entertain any questions you or the Committee members may have at this time.