



CALL TO ACTION: HOW CAN WE REDUCE THE NUMBER OF SUICIDES AMONG VETERANS AND SERVICE MEMBERS IN OREGON?

We need a collaborative, statewide effort focused on proactive, practical solutions for Oregon's Veterans and Service Members*^[1]



According to the most recent data from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Veteran and Service Member suicide rates are at a 20-year-high. In Oregon alone, 139 Veterans* died by suicide in 2021 (most recent year available), a rate of 49.6 per 100,000 [2].

Across age groups, Oregon's rate of Veteran suicide is 16 percentage points higher than the national rate of suicide for Veterans and nearly double the rate of suicide for Oregon's general population. More than 71% of Veteran suicides in Oregon involve a firearm, the most lethal and immediate method for suicide [3]. Female veterans are also at a distinct risk: suicide attempt rates for female Veterans are double those of male veterans.

Approximately every 3 days, an Oregon Veteran dies by suicide.^[4]

While the numbers can't tell the complete story — suicide is a complex and deeply personal issue — they do point to an urgent need for support and solutions. Reducing the number of Veteran suicides requires an All-Hands approach, with coordination and collaboration among Veteran support organizations, health care professionals, state and local agencies that provide services to Oregon Veterans, as well as family and friends at the ground level.

This critical effort must begin with hearing from Veterans themselves to understand what they're experiencing now, where they aren't getting the support and services they need, and what kind of support would be most effective for them and their families.

1. Throughout this publication, the term "Veterans" includes all Service Members, including active and reserve.

2. U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs: <https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/2020/2020-State-Data-Sheet-Oregon-508.pdf>

3. *ibid*

4. *ibid*



To help bring this conversation into focus, the Oregon Alliance for Gun Safety Foundation commissioned an analysis of suicide prevention support for Veterans and Service Members in Oregon to identify existing gaps and challenges, highlight promising programs to learn from, and develop recommendations for a path forward. This work began with and continues to be informed by the voices of Veterans themselves — the people closest to the challenges and most impacted by any potential solutions.

Based on Veterans' experiences and perspectives, these key recommendations represent the first steps toward developing proactive, practical solutions that will strengthen support for Veterans in Oregon and save lives:

1. **Build a statewide coalition** of Veterans, nonprofits, Veterans Administration (VA) and non-VA providers to enhance coordination of care, support and services for Veterans.
2. **Increase access to health care** for Veterans, including consistent and culturally relevant mental health care and wellness services, for both VA and non-VA health care services.
3. **Provide more training for health care providers** in suicide prevention and, in particular, the role of firearms.
4. **Provide resources for family, friends, and community members** to ensure all those impacted by military service receive needed support.

“I think what we’re missing is the people most impacted, the people who have served in the military, the people who understand what military Veterans need, and support for their families to be able to advocate on their behalf.”

—Retired Navy Veteran

Some of the **challenges that Veterans may struggle with can prevent them from seeking care in the first place**, including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, self-isolation, disillusionment and lack of trust. Several of the Veterans interviewed in the Oregon Alliance for Gun Safety Foundation commissioned analysis expressed a desire for proactive outreach, whether from medical professionals or peer-to-peer support organizations to remove the burden of taking the first step. Female Veterans noted this can be particularly challenging for women Veterans, who are a small minority among Service Members, and often feel misunderstood.

“If you need help or care and it's more acute or urgent, you don't have the time to sit and try to think and navigate through websites to find it.”
—E-4, Army



Those who were able to access mental health care noted that it could be **inconsistent in both availability and delivery**. When Veterans aren't able to see the same provider consistently, they aren't able to establish the rapport necessary to build trust, and it may also cause unnecessary re-traumatization by having to retell one's story more than necessary. Veterans may feel misunderstood or unable to connect with providers who don't have a military background and have not been properly trained to understand military culture, or may be dismissive of what happened during their service or in combat, making it frustrating and difficult to feel comfortable, show vulnerability or be transparent about what they're experiencing and how they're really feeling.



“The counselor I was working with had never been in combat and wasn't a Veteran. I stopped going to counseling just because it was harder to dredge up the memories of what happened and explain to this individual who had no clue.”
—Retired, National Guard

Health care providers are often **untrained in or uncomfortable with discussing firearms** access and safety planning with patients, creating missed opportunities to engage Veterans in taking steps to ensure their own safety and the safety of their families in the event of a mental health crisis. For example, Veterans may be more open to options such as voluntarily giving their firearms to someone they trust during a challenging time, storing them in a secure location away from their home, or cooperating with family and law enforcement on Extreme Risk Protection Orders if they have learned about and understood these options before they are in crisis.

CURRENT CHALLENGES

Oregon Veterans lack access to consistent, culturally relevant care and early suicide prevention.

While suicide prevention programming exists across the state of Oregon, significant gaps in the accessibility and nature of care are leaving too many Veterans without the support they need.

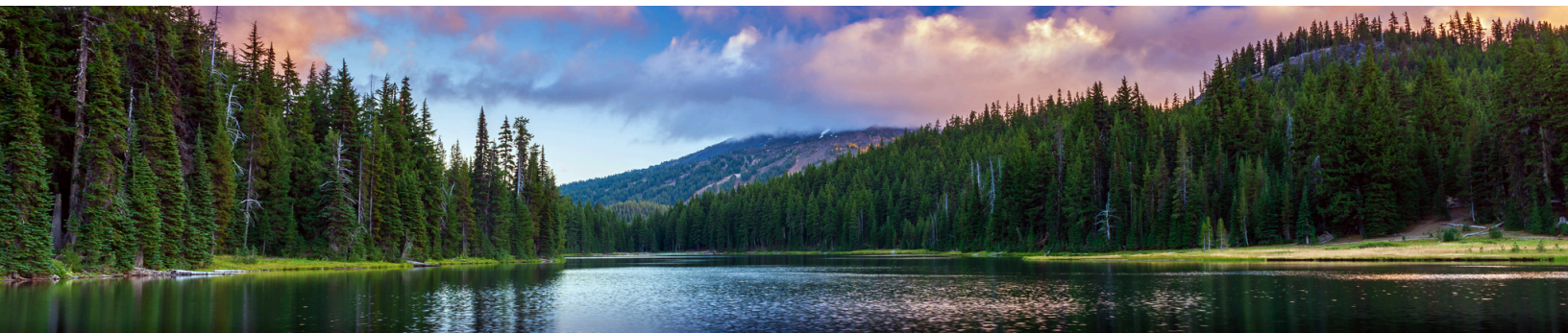
50% of all Veterans who are eligible for VA-provided health care services don't access them. [5]

For many Veterans, and particularly Veterans in rural areas, **inconsistent access to reliable, Veteran-focused health care** in general, and mental health care specifically, creates barriers to getting professional support early. This access is critical to suicide prevention because every contact with a health care professional presents an opportunity to connect with isolated or struggling individuals as well as a chance to spot mental health challenges before they become potentially life threatening. Veterans who participated in the Oregon Alliance for Gun Safety Foundation commissioned analysis pointed to lack of immediate enrollment in VA services, complicated scheduling processes, lack of awareness about available services, and lack of accessible transportation to and from medical appointments as key barriers to getting care. In addition, many Service Members in Oregon, especially those in the National Guard and Reserves, do not qualify for VA services and face gaps in care altogether.

“I really think we need more proactive engagement from the VA and our military folks out there to reach out to us. ... We feel alone when we get out and we feel disconnected from our community, from our people, and sometimes we need that little bit of a lifeline, someone throwing a rescue buoy out to us to say, hey, is anything going on?”

—O-5, United States Air Force

5. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6352911/>



MODELS TO LEARN FROM

Programming that includes proactive outreach and peer-to-peer support is making an impact for Oregon Veterans

While Oregon's Veterans are in dire need of a new, more-coordinated approach to suicide prevention and mental health care, there are programs across the state that are making a positive impact now. These organizations and initiatives offer different levels and types of support, ranging from programming focused on root causes to hotline support in times of crisis. A few examples that could inform new efforts include:

The Oregon Veteran Dental Program: This program provides free dental care to Veterans in Oregon who don't qualify for dental care through Medicaid or who aren't eligible for dental benefits through the Veterans Administration. It's an example of how state agencies can step in to fill gaps in care for Veterans and ensure more Veterans are getting the care they need.

Returning Veterans Project: Returning Veteran's Project connects Post-9/11 returning Veterans, Service Members, and their families to free, confidential health and mental health care services. This model shows, when barriers are removed, Veterans and Service Members are much more likely to access needed care.

Pacific Northwest Veterans Alliance: This nonprofit provides resources and emergency financial assistance to Veterans in Eastern Oregon. The types of support provided include lodging, job-interview skills training, gas cards, scholarships and more. Similar programming directed at helping Veterans navigate financial stresses could help Veterans deal with practical, day-to-day challenges, while also building a feeling of being supported.

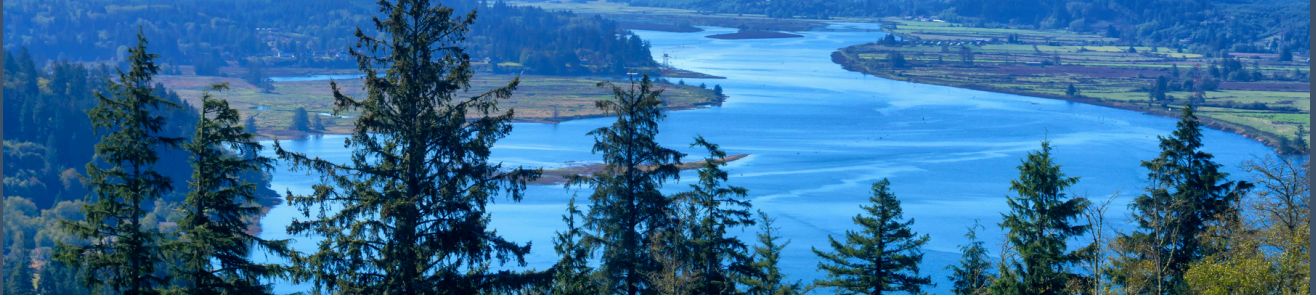
Project ABLE: This Salem-based nonprofit provides training to Veterans who can then provide peer-to-peer support to their fellow Veterans. This model of training Veterans to support their peers could complement professional medical care and better meet the needs of Veterans who may prefer to speak with someone who has experience with military culture, military-related trauma, and the transition to civilian status.

Lines for Life Suicide Line: This 24/7 hotline provides neutral, always-accessible mental health support for Veterans and Service Members. More services like this that are easy for Veterans to access information about support and connection to other available services could expand awareness and access for more Veterans and remove initial barriers to seeking out care.

"Peer-to-peer support is free. It's a non-clinical model and it really works. Veterans can influence other Veterans in a way that nobody else can."

—Retired Air Force





THE PATH FORWARD

Saving Veteran lives from suicide requires creating a connected, collaborative ecosystem of support, informed by Veterans' and their families

This review of the challenges that Oregon Veterans face in accessing suicide prevention support, along with the bright spots of programming across the state, reveals powerful opportunities for new, innovative, effective programming that can not only save Veterans lives in the future but also improve quality of life in the present. With these goals in mind, the Oregon Alliance for Gun Safety Foundation has identified four key areas where focused efforts can make a measurable impact for Veterans' and their families:

1. Improve coordination within and between systems that support Veterans

Coordination and collaboration among nonprofits, VA health care systems and non-VA health care providers would go a long way toward identifying Veterans in need of support, making support more accessible and connecting individual Veterans to the specific types of support they need. This can be accomplished by not only improving and being more intentional about communication, but also by establishing a specific body tasked with connecting services for Veterans across nonprofits and health care systems that can be complex and difficult to navigate.

2. Improve access to health care for Veterans

Veterans need more options for health care in terms of accessibility, consistency and types of Veteran-focused care. The VA could, for example, automatically enroll all eligible Veterans in care rather than requiring complex, lengthy enrollment processes. Expanding Veteran access to the Oregon Health Plan, for example, could create more opportunities for Veterans and Service Members who aren't eligible for or choose not to access Veterans Administration health care services. Developing more options for Veteran-specific mental health care, recruiting more Veterans to be counselors and health care providers, and ensuring Veterans can see the same providers consistently, are also crucial steps toward establishing the kind of proactive, relevant support that can help address the challenges that could lead to suicide. Knowing a large number of Oregon Veterans live in rural communities, ensuring access to internet service may also improve access to tele-health care.

3. Train health care professionals to address firearms and suicide risks early

Health care providers who work with Veterans need training to better understand military culture and how military experience can impact Veterans and Service Members' unique relationship to firearms as a result of their training and service. This kind of training involves four key elements:

- **Learning about military culture**, with an emphasis on understanding how to address norms in military culture that may sometimes encourage Veterans and Service members to “carry on” when in physical and emotional pain.
- **Normalize discussing firearms and firearm storage**, including when Veterans haven't been identified at risk for suicide. Veterans and Service Members have a strong level of comfort discussing firearms generally; many shared how they expect health care professionals to discuss firearms and often are surprised when they don't. By normalizing discussions outside of suicide screenings, health care providers may be more confident to engage in conversations in times of need.
- **Lethal means counseling and safety planning**, in which providers assess whether someone who is at risk for suicide has access to firearms and then works with them to reduce the risk of a firearm-related tragedy by creating a safety plan together.
- **Talking respectfully with Veterans** about options such as temporary voluntary surrender or off-site storage during times of high risk. After voluntary options are presented, if a provider finds a Veteran is at an extreme risk for suicide and has access to firearms, the provider should consider Extreme Risk Protection Orders, which *temporarily* removes firearms, paired with Peer or other support. The VA should also consider a messaging campaign to provide clear information on the very limited times firearms can be removed from a Veteran who is declared mentally incapacitated through the Brady Act, confusion over which contributes to many Veterans not accessing VA services or feeling comfortable being candid.

4. Provide resources for family, friends, and community members to better connect Veterans and Service Members to services and support.

Today, most resources for Service Member families are for spouses. Veterans identified a broader need for family and community wide military cultural competency training pre-and-post deployment, as well as educational resources for civilian employers, in particular for Guard members who also are often fully employed in the civilian sector. Veterans also identified a need for increased transition support, including access to support services for extended family and community members who may be impacted by their loved ones deployment.

We have the ability to make positive change

The rates of Veteran and Service Member suicide in Oregon continue to climb at an alarming rate, but we know we have the ability and the will to do something about it. Identifying existing challenges and strengths is a first step to spark action and make positive change possible.

Our next step is already under way: Bringing people together from all parts of the Veteran support ecosystem to learn from one another and work together on new solutions — with Veterans and their families leading the way.

Our gratitude

The Oregon Alliance for Gun Safety Foundation expresses our gratitude to the more than 40 Veterans, Service Members, nonprofit leaders, health care clinicians, VA providers and researchers, and public health leaders who participated in this analysis. Your insights and expertise made this research possible and offered hope to reduce Oregon's Veteran and Service Member suicide rate.

Thank you to Darren Golden at Golden Solutions for his exceptional research and analysis.

About the Oregon Alliance for Gun Safety Foundation

The Oregon Alliance for Gun Safety Foundation connects people from across the state — including survivors of gun-related tragedies, firearm owners, rural and urban residents, Veterans, healthcare clinicians, elected leaders and local community members — in a collective effort to create safer communities for everyone.

Visit <https://www.oralliance.org/> to learn more about what the Oregon Alliance for Gun Safety Foundation is doing and how you can join our work to save lives in Oregon.

