



## National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDRS) Provides Better Data Gathering to Prevent Suicide Among Veterans

Men and women in uniform are experiencing multiple tours of duty and longer deployments, all of which can contribute to an increase in mental health issues such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression and even suicide. According to the 2006 Army Suicide Event Report (ASER), the Army suicide rate is the highest in 26 years. A 2003 study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* said nearly one in six soldiers returning from Iraq suffered from PTSD. Interviews with those at risk showed that only 23 percent to 40 percent sought professional help.

Because symptoms of mental health issues may take months or years to manifest, it is critical that data is gathered not only for active duty military personnel, but also for veterans. Data on the number of troops committing suicide is readily available through military and government agencies. However, there is currently no agency keeping track of the number of veterans who kill themselves after their service has ended. This gap in data is addressed by the National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDRS), which provides in-depth information on circumstance of death, suicide method, location and more.

NVDRS is a vital public health tool available for understanding violence, established by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in 2002. Now underway in 17 states, NVDRS links data from medical examiners and coroners, law enforcement reports, and other sources to provide a more complete picture of the circumstances surrounding violent deaths such as homicide and suicide so that effective prevention strategies can be developed and evaluated. For example, NVDRS captures data that are useful in identifying patterns and trends in the suicide problem, such as decedents' treatment status, diagnoses, the existence of drug or alcohol problems, employment status and the results of toxicology screening for the presence of antidepressants. This data can then be used to form prevention programs that address the unique needs of veterans.

### Suicide among Veterans

A recent study published in the *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* found that of more than 320,000 men nationwide, veterans are twice as likely as their civilian counterparts to complete suicide, after controlling for a number of demographic, social and clinical characteristics.

*"NVDRS compiles critical data about violent deaths, including suicides, and its full implementation in all 50 states must be a priority as we work to prevent suicide among veterans."*

— Jerry Reed, executive director, Suicide Prevention Action Network USA (SPAN USA)

NVDRS states, including Oregon, Virginia and Oklahoma, have all documented the significant number of suicides among veterans:

- In Oregon, nearly 30 percent of all suicides in 2005 were military veterans.
- In Virginia, nearly one-quarter of suicides were veterans in 2004.
- In Oklahoma, nearly one-quarter of Oklahomans who died by suicide were veterans in 2004-05.

### Implement NVDRS in all 50 States

While state-specific information provides enormous value to local public health and law enforcement officials in the participating states, national data from all 50 states, the U.S. territories and the District of Columbia must be obtained to complete the picture and establish effective national violence prevention policies and programs. The states that are currently not funded through the system also must have the opportunity to gather and improve data on the nature and circumstances of violent deaths in their communities.

At an estimated annual cost of \$20 million, NVDRS is a relatively low-cost program that yields high-caliber results. The National Violence Prevention Network, a coalition of national organizations that advocate for health and welfare, violence and suicide prevention, and law enforcement, is seeking full funding of \$20 million per year by 2011.

A critical component to developing effective programs and public policies is having comprehensive data about the circumstances surrounding suicides to inform policy-makers, public health officials and other stakeholders.