



University of Colorado **Anschutz Medical Campus**

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### **Study shows agency collaboration can help reduce veteran suicide**

*CU Nursing student, other researchers discover teamwork helps struggling veterans access resources*

**AURORA, Colo.** (July 27, 2023) – Every day, the US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) says [17 veterans](#) take their own lives. More than half of them, 60%, never reached out to VA healthcare services before they committed suicide. That’s why researchers from multiple agencies including the University of Colorado designed a pilot program to learn if a collaboration between government and non-government organizations could decrease the number of veteran suicides. In 2020, 6,146 veterans killed themselves, which is one-quarter of all suicide deaths in the US, and [1.5 times more](#) than non-veterans, according to American Addiction Centers.

*A pilot of a veteran suicide prevention learning collaborative among community organizations* was published by the Wiley Online Journal in July of 2023. The authors include Marcy Polk, MS at the Portland VA Medical Center, a current doctor of nursing practice student at the University of Colorado College of Nursing.

The pilot brought together 13 local, state and federal organizations in Denver and Colorado Springs. The learning collaborative met frequently over a year and a half to implement best practices in veteran suicide prevention such as increasing screenings for suicide risk, distributing materials that show where and how to get help, and training staff in prevention practices.

The collaborative was able to interact with 24,000 community members and more than 5,000 veterans, and put in place 92 new suicide prevention program components. Overall, 84% of the agencies involved said they had successful experiences.

“We have not experienced any suicides this year yet and I think our proactive approach is providing successes in that... [meaning we are] seeing an increase in department members and family members utilizing behavioral health services,” one team participant told researchers.

The study shows collaborating can create a “significant footprint” and make a positive impact on the community. Agencies were able to implement best practices quickly – a critical finding given the high rate of suicides among veterans.

“I view these as long-term wins and resources for us. They are invaluable. They give people new perspective, tools, and hope. Hope is key. I think those are huge wins. You never know what is going to save a life or a relationship, so it's always important to keep adding to our reservoir,” said one community organization.

Researchers say the learning collaborative created a replicable vehicle for Veterans Affairs to collaborate with community organizations and improve the safety net for veterans, especially those not using VA healthcare.

“Bringing organizations together and supporting them in a suicide prevention quality improvement process led to improved suicide prevention care in places that needed assistance, from the perspective of community organizations,” wrote researchers. “Member organizations reported the learning collaborative facilitated broader knowledge of veteran mental health, suicide prevention, and military cultural competency. This knowledge is critical for providing optimal interactions and care to veterans.”

However, a few agencies struggled to participate in the collaboration because the pandemic began during the pilot and some had issues with staffing and funding. Regardless, most of the team members saw “significant improvement” in their community-based veteran suicide prevention.

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