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### Congress Hears of Military Suicide Rates

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WASHINGTON (CN) - To skepticism from Republicans, military leaders told Congress on Wednesday that the armed forces have done an "abysmal" job of preventing the high number of suicides by military personnel, a number that keeps rising, that is driven in part by short breaks between deployment and that reflects overall emotional health in the military services.

"We're doing abysmal" in preventing suicides Assistant Marine Commandant Gen. James Amos said.

Military suicide rates have been rising consistently. Army suicides hit a record of 115 in 2007, and again at 139 in 2008. This year is expected to easily surpass these last records, and similar trends are seen in the other branches of military.

In the Navy, suicide is the third cause of death, Adm. Patrick Walsh, the vice chief of naval operations, said before the House Military Personnel Subcommittee.

Before the end of an important study, and before the results of new programs can be evaluated, high-ranking representatives of the marines, the army, the air force, and the navy said that extending the time between deployments and wrestling back the stigma of seeking mental care would help to combat the suicide problem.

"Our folks, while they're deployed, generally are okay," Walsh from the navy said, and Amos from the marines even called them "a happy lot" while on the field. They agreed that suicide is often associated with coming back home.

Gen. Peter Chiarelli, the vice chief of staff for the army, said it was clear the short amount of time between deployments is causing tremendous amounts of stress on families.

Amos described the most likely suicide candidate as 18-24 year-old Caucasian males between the ranks of private and sergeant who have suffered from a failed relationship.

Most kill themselves by hanging or by gunshot, like civilians.

While the military representatives all expressed concern over the rising rate of suicides, Minnesota Republican John Kline remarked, "This isn't an extraordinary suicide rate," and noted that it mirrors the rate of the society as a whole.

The U.S. Army did not return calls to compare the suicide rates of civilians and military personnel.

The issue the military is trying to address is not only suicide, but the psychological problems that are represented through the growing suicide rates. "Suicide is an extreme indicator," Chiarelli said.

Each branch of the military is tackling the problem in different ways.

Chiarelli praised the Comprehensive Soldier Fitness Program, which began in 2008, as making a "huge impact" on the U.S. Army. The program assesses the total fitness of soldiers, including their mental fitness, with periodic reassessments.

He also mentioned a 5-year suicide study conducted by a "world-class team" from prestigious universities like Harvard and Columbia that the army has funded with \$50 million to look into the cause of suicide. He said he hopes the results will help the military and civilians.

The study began only a week ago, but preliminary results are expected in November.

He also said online counseling may be available, which would grant easy access to patients and perhaps allow them to speak more openly.

Much of the suicide prevention effort focuses on informing soldiers and their families on how to distinguish warning signs because soldiers are often reluctant to seek psychological help.

All Marines attended training on suicide prevention in March, and like other branches, learned how to distinguish warning signs and how to navigate the resources available to them.

Other efforts are being directed to fight the stigma of seeking mental health help.

South Carolina Republican Joe Wilson was skeptical and asked if the programs would work. Amos replied that history has shown such programs do work, pointing to 1996 when the suicide rate dropped after the Defense Department focused on the problem.

But even counseling is not a surefire solution. 25 percent of marines who committed suicide had received mental health care. Amos remarked, "There is no single solution that will likely turn this trend around."