

Suicide numbers may top 2008, but progress being made

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By **C. Todd Lopez**

WASHINGTON (Army News Service, Nov. 17, 2009) -- The suicide rate among Soldiers serving on active duty in 2009 is expected to exceed that of 2008 -- a statistic the Army doesn't take lightly, said Vice Chief of Staff of the Army Gen. Peter Chiarelli.

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"We are most certainly going to end the year higher than last year," Chiarelli said. "Obviously we would prefer not to have another suicide this year, or in the years that follow. But we know that will not be the case. This is horrible -- and I do not want to downplay the significance of these numbers in any way."

During a press briefing at the Pentagon Nov. 17, Chiarelli told reporters that as of Nov. 16, the Army had 140 suicides on its books for Soldiers serving on active duty -- though some of those are still under investigation.

The Army had 16 potential suicides in October, all of which are still under investigation, DoD announced Friday. In September, the Army had seven suicides; three of which are not confirmed and four still under investigation.

The Army had experienced 140 confirmed suicides in 2008. If Army suicide rates for 2009 exceed those of 2008, it will be the fifth year in row the numbers have risen. The numbers for 2008 also gave the Army, for the first time, a suicide rate higher than that of a comparable civilian population. Chiarelli also said the Army experienced 71 suicides for Soldiers not on active duty.

Chiarelli said most of the suicides, as many as a third of them, occurred in the first two months of the year and that, despite the numbers, he believes the Army is making progress in its efforts to curb suicide.

"It is important to put these numbers in context and to talk about why we believe, despite these numbers, that we are making some progress," Chiarelli said. "Since March, the general trend line, with the exception of a couple of months, has been down."

The general attributes that decline to Army actions to inform and educate Soldiers and leaders on the issue -- and he cites leader involvement for Army progress in suicide.

Chiarelli said the Army has several initiatives designed to help curb suicides. The biggest, he said, is the Comprehensive Soldier Fitness program, which the Army kicked off in October. "It is an investment in the readiness of our force," Chiarelli said.

The aim of Comprehensive Soldier Fitness is to help Soldiers put the same emphasis on mental strength and resilience that they put on physical strength.

The Army has implemented additional programs that are aimed at psychological well-being. Among those are the pilot TRICARE Assistance Program and the Telemental Health Network -- both designed to let Soldiers and family members seek assistance via the Internet or telephone.

At Tripler Army Medical Center, Hawaii, the general said the Army was able to provide all members of a redeploying unit with a post-deployment mental-health screening that involved actual mental-health professionals. Some Soldiers saw a health professional face-to-face, others did it via computer.

"We took a battalion, returning from theater, and gave 100 percent of the Soldiers in that battalion mental-health evaluations," the general said. The mass screening resulted in "a higher ... rate for mental health issues that we believe we caught earlier because of a 20 to 30-minute evaluation."

Follow-up evaluations will be provided to Soldiers between 90-180 days after coming home, he said, to "identify those individuals that may be having trouble with reintegration."

The advent of telemedicine is beneficial for the Army, Chiarelli said, because the service is struggling, like much of the civilian population, to find both mental-health and substance-abuse counselors. He said he'd ideally like to see in the Army the addition of as many as 300 substance-abuse counselors and 800 mental health counselors.

"I need more substance-abuse counselors in my posts, camps and stations," he said.

In 2008, the Army asked the National Institute of Mental Health to conduct a study to

get to the root causes of suicide in the Army. During the study, which is expected to last five years, the NIMH may interview Soldiers, their families and their parents. The study will include the active-duty force in addition to the National Guard and Army Reserve.

Chiarelli said in early December, he will meet with NIMH officials to get an early briefing on the study and will use that information to help better steer Army efforts to curb suicides.

Until then, the general said, the Army is still at a loss to explain why Soldiers commit suicide. With the exception of a relationship between suicides and Soldiers who are geographically separated from military installations, Chiarelli has said the Army still has found no single factor that can be used to predict suicides.

"There are no easy answers or solutions," the general said of trying to curb suicides. "And although we have made changes to Army policy based on many of the lessons learned, we still haven't found any statistically significant causal linkage that would allow us to effectively predict human behavior."

Chiarelli said the Army is concerned with an increase in suicides at Fort Campbell, Ky.; Fort Stewart, Ga.; and Schofield Barracks, Hawaii. Additionally, he said, the Army is studying why suicide rates are down at Fort Hood, Texas; Fort Bragg, N.C. and Fort Drum, N.Y.