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MILITARY: Suicide rate confounding Marine Corps

'We have to get to the solution,' a top general says

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A steady rise in suicides is confounding Marine Corps commanders, despite years of efforts to assure troops their careers won't suffer for seeking mental health counseling, a top general said Tuesday.

"We have to get to the solution," said Lt. Gen. Richard Zilmer, deputy commandant for manpower and reserve affairs, during a three-day conference on combat stress at the Town & County Resort and Convention Center in San Diego.

"We are at the point where we need to take action. It won't get any better with the status quo."

The Marine Corps' suicide rate has reached 24 per 100,000, a rate that surpasses all the other services. The rate was 13 per 100,000 in 2006. The latest available figures put the civilian suicide rate at 20 per 100,000.

So far this year, 14 Marines have killed themselves, including seven with combat experience. An additional 72 attempted suicides were recorded in the first four months of the year, according to Bryan Driver, a spokesman in the Personal and Family Readiness Division.

Last year, 52 Marines took their lives. Thirty-six of those troops had seen combat, and 11 of the self-inflicted deaths took place in Iraq and Afghanistan, Driver said.

Zilmer told about 1,000 Marines, sailors and mental health specialists gathered for the conference that "understanding and an appreciation for psychological health is one of the most important revelations of the wars."

"We must do as much as we can to ensure the mental health of our warriors," he said.

In a later interview, Zilmer said placing mental health professionals with deploying battalions and training corporals and sergeants to serve as mentors for combat troops have yet to pay dividends.

"We are not satisfied with the results we are seeing," he said, adding that commanders could point to no single factor.

Marines receive pre-deployment training about the risks of combat and post-traumatic stress disorder, and couples and families are counseled about the long separations that result from multiple deployments.

"But we still see creeping rates of sexual assault, domestic violence and suicide ---- all the lines are up, and that is frustrating," said Zilmer, who headed Marine Corps forces in Iraq from 2005-07 as head of Camp Pendleton's I Marine Expeditionary Force.

The general said Marines need to know that men and women in their ranks who have sought and received help for post-traumatic stress disorder ---- often characterized by sleeplessness, social disconnection and suicidal thoughts ---- have been able to rejoin their units and win promotion.

Zilmer said the brass delayed a leadership assignment for a senior officer who needed help. He was treated and later able to assume the new post.

"That's the kind of service we have to have today," Zilmer said.

About 9,000 local Marines and sailors are in Afghanistan as part of President Barack Obama's 30,000-troop surge that began earlier this year. Military officials predict that about 1 in 5 will come home with moderate combat stress or a fully developed case of post-traumatic stress disorder.

One factor that can lead to those illnesses got its first official airing Tuesday, as a group of military mental health experts said "moral injury" is the least acknowledged form of combat stress and needs further study and discussion.

They defined moral injury as something that goes against a person's fundamental beliefs. It also can result from justifiable, but unintended, civilian killings, or witnessing or taking part in battlefield transgressions, the researchers said.

"Many of the troops kill themselves because they feel that those kinds of experiences have made them unforgivable," said Dr. William Nash, a top PTSD researcher. "It's a lot harder for most people to forgive themselves than to forgive others."

Several Marine Corps officers agreed with the concept of moral injury, including Camp Pendleton Col. Pat Looney.

"Do I buy it? Hell, yeah," he said, suggesting that one of the best ways to address it is through peer discussion within Marine units.

The Rev. Michael Mangoian, a Vietnam veteran and Catholic priest who works in Oceanside with troops who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, said he believes moral injury manifests itself in one distinct way.

"People will volunteer for multiple deployments when what they're really doing is going back to find the innocence they lost on their first tour," he said, adding that in his view "they never find it."

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