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Record number of Army suicides in June

Officials have been grappling with how to identify, treat soldiers at risk



Kristin Hall / AP
Brig. Gen. Stephen Townsend, front, speaks to soldiers at Fort Campbell, Ky., about suicide prevention.

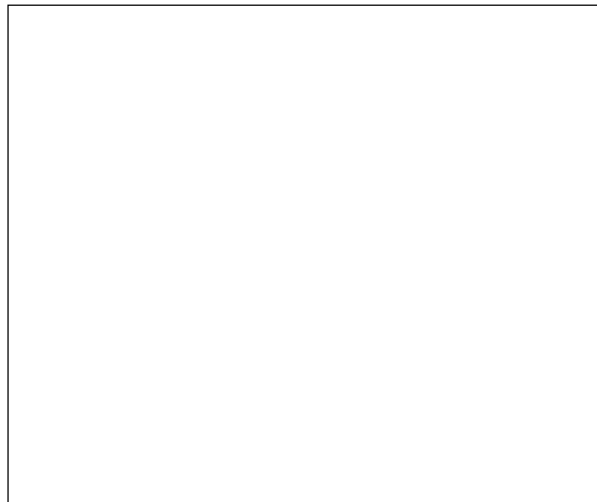
The U.S. Army on Thursday reported a record number of suicides in a single month among active duty, Guard and Reserve troops, despite an aggressive program of counseling, training and education aimed at suicide prevention.

Suicides for the first half of the year are up 12 percent over 2009. In June, 32 soldiers are believed to have committed suicide, including 21 on active duty.

The June report came as the Army also released a 20-minute training video on suicide prevention titled, "Shoulder to Shoulder — I will never quit on life."

Army officials have been grappling in recent

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years with how to prevent suicides among soldiers dealing with the stress of multiple deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. Last year, suicide claimed the lives of 163 soldiers on active duty and 82 Guard and Reserve soldiers not on active duty.

The problem is not isolated to the Army. In 2009, 52 Marines and 48 Sailors took their own lives in 2009, according to a report by the American Forces Press Service. Air Force officials reported 41 active-duty suicides, a 12.5 per 100,000 ratio, in 2009.

The biggest challenge in prevention, military officials say, is identifying those National Guard and Reserve forces at risk but aren't currently on active duty, where they can be more closely observed for mental health problems and suicidal tendencies.

"There will never be a substitute for a noncommissioned officer, first-line supervisor or friend who knows when a person is suffering and has the moral courage to act and get that individual the help they need," Col. Chris Philbrick, director of the Army Suicide Prevention Task Force, said in a statement. "That ability to make a positive difference is the best method to render effective suicide prevention in the Army."

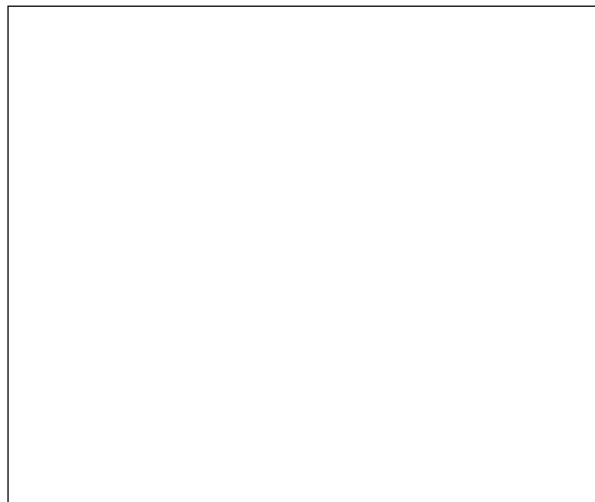
Officials say it's going to require more aggressive education for the off-duty soldiers and their families. Already, the Army has been trying to break down the barriers keeping active-duty soldiers from getting help for mental health problems.

At Fort Campbell, for example, the Army over the past year has been trying to change the military mindset against showing any weakness and completing the mission. The number of suicides among Fort Campbell soldiers prompted the army last year to declare a "state of emergency" at the Kentucky base and hire a suicide prevention manager.

Brig. Gen. Richard Thomas said the Army is piloting a project to provide counseling time to entire battalions and brigades immediately after completing deployments. A similar approach is being applied to detecting mild traumatic brain injuries, which can lead to increased risk for mental health problems, said Thomas, now an assistant surgeon general.

"What we are doing is focusing on the early

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symptoms of traumatic brain injury and post traumatic stress disorder so we can get treatment earlier, rather than waiting for these guys to have chronic, long-term problems," he said.

Some soldiers will never step foot inside a behavioral health clinic; they fear the stigma, and they fear also that a diagnosis could lead to a medical discharge, said Dr. Tangeneare Singh, a combat veteran herself and chief of the department of behavioral health at Fort Campbell.

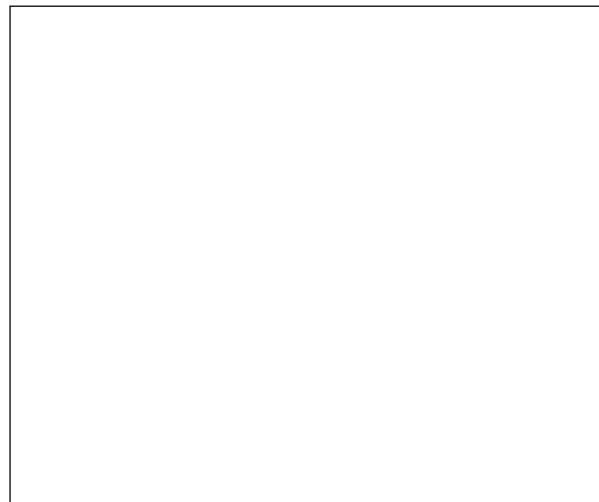
So any soldier who walks into one of the several medical clinics at Fort Campbell, whether it's for a twisted ankle or trouble sleeping, is screened for depression and PTSD symptoms.

Among the Army suicides reported for June, 11 were Guard or Reserve members who were not activated at the time, but included seven who had been previously deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan.

Of the 32 cases, only four have been confirmed suicides, while official rulings are still pending on the remaining 28. In the past, nearly all of those reported suicides were eventually confirmed.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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