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MILITARY: Marine Corps sees fewer suicides in 2010

Attempts rising, but self-inflicted deaths fall for first time since 2007

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Fewer Marines killed themselves in 2010 than in each of the previous three years, a sign that outreach and counseling efforts may be working.

The self-inflicted death toll last year was 37. A record 52 Marines killed themselves in 2009.

"The drop is a positive sign, but there is nothing positive about 37 suicides," said Lt. Cmdr. Andrew Martin, Suicide Prevention Program Manager at Marine Corps headquarters in Washington. "The Marine Corps reaction is this: 'Good, now let's do better.'"

The Marines and the Army bear the brunt of combat in Iraq and Afghanistan, and each service has seen dramatic increases in troop suicides.

Efforts to educate Marines about combat and family stresses leading to suicide, and programs teaching noncommissioned officers and enlisted troops how to identify and reach Marines struggling with mental health issues, are among the service's response to the rise in suicides over the past decade.

Martin said that while it's too early to say how successful those initiatives are, there is reason for hope.

"What we do know is that Marine attitudes are changing," he said Wednesday during a telephone interview. "We know from surveys that Marines are starting to see that behavioral wellness is as important as physical wellness, and that getting help is not going to end their career."

The preliminary figure for December shows two suspected suicides. That compares with none in November, three in October and two each in August and September. November was the Marine Corps' first suicide-free month since 2007.

Of the 37 suicides in 2010, which is 29 percent fewer than the number for 2009, five were recorded "in theater," the military's reference to Iraq and Afghanistan.

Men accounted for all but one of the suicides. Most were between the ages of 17 and 25, and the most common method was gunshot.

For the first time, Marine battalions dispatched to Afghanistan in the past year included teams of mental health professionals and specialists trained to identify and treat troops suffering from combat stress, a recognized precursor to post-traumatic stress disorder.

"What those teams have also done is teach Marines within those units how to look for signs of stress," Martin said. "We know that Marines are most comfortable talking to another Marine, and that is why those teams are so important."

Despite the improvement in the overall number, the Marine Corps' suicide rate remains about 24 deaths per 100,000 troops, more than the civilian rate of 20 deaths per 100,000.

While the number of self-inflicted deaths dropped, the number of attempted suicides in 2010 was 173, the highest the service has ever recorded. That compares with 164 in 2009 and 146 in 2008.

One possible reason, Martin said, is that it wasn't until 2009 that the Marine Corps began requiring all suspected and confirmed attempts to be reported.

The effect of repeated deployments ---- since the war in Afghanistan was launched in late 2001 and the Iraq invasion in early 2003 ---- remains a huge stressor, according to Bill Rider, head of the American Combat Veterans of War outreach and counseling group in Oceanside.

"The result of multiple deployments is leading people to kill themselves and breaking apart families," said Rider, a Vietnam veteran who focuses on the "moral injury" troops suffer from repeated exposure to violence. "I know that one good way to cut down on suicides is to give the troops more time off to heal and to stop the multiple deployments."

The Marine Corps recently launched a "DSTRESS" hotline (877-476-7734) staffed by Marines and Navy medical corpsmen to respond to leathernecks looking for help.

Callers do not have to identify themselves. For more on that service, go online to www.dstressline.com.

Call staff writer Mark Walker at 760-740-3529.