



Obama approves condolence letters in military suicides

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By [Gregg Zoroya](#), USA TODAY

The Army general tasked with stemming the rise in suicides among soldiers praised [President Obama's](#) decision this week to send condolence letters to the family of servicemembers who kill themselves while serving in combat overseas.

Gen. [Peter Chiarelli](#), the Army vice chief of staff, said it was a monumental step toward reducing the stigma in the military that surrounds mental health and seeking therapy.

"It acknowledges that the service rendered by these (troubled) individuals, as well as the service and sacrifices made by their family, deserve the same recognition given to those men and women who died as the result of enemy action," Chiarelli said in a statement released Wednesday.

Obama said that after a "difficult and exhaustive review" of policy about sending letters in suicide cases, he elected to do so for those who kill themselves in the war zone.

"They didn't die because they are weak," Obama said of the suicides in a statement released Wednesday, "and the fact that they didn't get the help they needed must change."

Suicides remain frequent across the military. The Army rate reached 22 per 100,000 last year, higher than a similar age group within the civilian community. While Army suicides are tracking fewer than last year at this time, there was a spike of 27 potential cases in May.

The Air Force has reported three consecutive years of increased suicides, and the Navy is on track for a higher number of such deaths this year over last year.

The [Marine Corps](#) is the exception. The Corps reported a record high number of suicides in 2009 but has seen a decline since then.

An Army study of soldiers in the combat zone last year found that a stigma against seeking mental health care remains strong.

The Tragedy Assistance for Survivors (TAPS), a support group for military families who have lost a loved one in the service, praised Obama's decision as an important first step. The group noted, however, that two-thirds of military suicides occur outside

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the war zone.

"A line is drawn between the value of the life and service of someone who dies on foreign soil and someone who dies in the exact same manner ... here at home," a TAPS statement said.

One of those who died one year ago this week was Army Sgt. Douglas Hale Jr., 26, a veteran of two combat tours who left Fort Hood in Texas, bought a pistol at a pawn shop and then shot himself in a nearby restaurant restroom.

"My son served, too, you know," said Glenda Moss, Hale's mother. "Sure, he didn't actually die while he was in action, but what happened to him and what he saw might have been enough, added to his other problems."

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