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Collateral Damage: Stigma can keep many soldiers from seeking mental health help

By **John Ramsey and Greg Barnes**

Staff writers

Former Fort Bragg soldier Keenan Rinehart walked onto a firing range in Columbus, Ohio, last week, put a rented gun to his

head and pulled the trigger.

Rinehart had left the Army three months earlier after trying to commit suicide twice.

Friends say Fort Bragg commanders sent Rinehart home early from a deployment to Iraq in 2005 because of a mental health problem. He was not allowed to go on a deployment to Afghanistan in 2007, they said, but returned to Iraq and was again sent home early last year because of his mental health.

One friend, Fort Bragg Spc. Nia Chiaraluce, says Army leaders did not try hard enough to help him.

Chiaraluce, who has suffered from depression, said she knows six other soldiers or veterans who took their own lives.

She said suicide prevention efforts are not effective in part because of the stigma that prevents soldiers from seeking help. Suicide prevention training, she said, has the unintended consequence of teaching soldiers how to hide depression.

"They should have more or less taken his hand and said, 'OK, let's go to the doctor,'" Chiaraluce said.

Rinehart's suicide is an extreme example of the mental health problems a growing number of soldiers and veterans face, despite the biggest effort that the Army, Veterans Affairs and this community have ever made to address them.

Army officials say the stigma attached to getting help remains the primary reason soldiers suffering from mental health problems avoid counseling.

But inside Fort Bragg's gates, leaders face a paradox: Soldiers need to be tough enough to withstand the worst conditions of war. Now they also are supposed to be in touch with their emotions.

"We're trying to talk and say it's OK to talk about these things. It's hard," Fort Bragg spokesman Ben Abel said. "That's harder than going out and doing a 20-mile road march, to go out and be open about your feelings and emotions."

The Army has been promoting behavioral health care, trying to reduce the stigma associated with talking to a counselor.

It is also trying to teach soldiers how to cope with problems before they arise by building emotional strength in addition to physical strength.

More on the need to reduce the effectiveness of these programs, but first



Staff photo by Andrew Craft [click to enlarge](#)

Renee Elder and her husband, Calvin, run Veterans Empowering Veterans, a Fayetteville group that helps veterans find a job and a place to