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NJ Veterans Support Program Goes Nationwide

Tuesday, December 13, 2011

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WASHINGTON, D.C. – U.S. Senator Frank R. Lautenberg (D-NJ), Congressman Rush Holt (D-NJ-12), officials from the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey (UMDNJ) and military leaders including David L. McGinnis, the Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs; General Craig R. McKinley, Chief, National Guard Bureau; Lt. General William E. Ingram Jr., Director of the Army National Guard; and Lt. General Jack C. Stultz, Chief, Army Reserve today announced the national launch of Vets4Warriors. Vets4Warriors is a new national outreach and support initiative that will provide critical military peer-to-peer counseling to National Guardsmen and Reservists 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

Vets4Warriors takes an unprecedented approach to veterans outreach by providing a help line where service members can find assistance with everyday life issues, as well as serious mental health problems, from another veteran who knows the challenges of military life. The program was originally established in New Jersey by UMDNJ in 2005 and has a proven record of successfully serving local military men and women.

“We can’t just stand behind our military on the battlefield – we must also stand behind them when they return home. Too many veterans are coming home with mental wounds and they are suffering in silence. This peer support line will mean that our veterans have help with their concerns and questions before they reach crisis levels. We won’t rest until military and veteran suicides are a thing of the past. The help line at UMDNJ in New Jersey has been a tremendous success and I applaud the Defense Department and Guard Bureau for embracing it and using it as a model to help military men and women in every state,” said Lautenberg, an Army veteran.

“Over the last two years, more U.S. soldiers have died by their own hands than in combat. On average, we lose 18 veterans to suicide each day. This is intolerable, and it has to stop. UMDNJ’s Vet2Vet peer counseling program has proven exceptionally effective at providing counseling, compassion, and support to veterans, and it has a proven track record of preventing suicide. Its expansion nationwide will bring much-needed and much-deserved help to America’s veterans,” said Rep. Rush Holt

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(D-NJ-12).

“Since 9-11, more than 660,000 National Guardsmen and women, some multiple times, have served side-by-side with their active duty counterparts to defend this nation. Now, some of these service members need our help to properly and safely reintegrate back with their loved ones and employers. This unique program will give our Guard and Reserve veterans the care and support they so selflessly earned,” said General Craig R. McKinley.

“We, at UMDNJ, are honored to support our brave warriors and veterans who have given so selflessly to our Country. Our trained veterans, who have lived the military life, provide knowledgeable support for as long as necessary. Often our peer counselor will maintain regular contact with the service member for weeks or months –ensuring that the problems are resolved. We are indebted to Senator Lautenberg, the Department of Defense and the National Guard Bureau for their support of Vets4Warriors,” said William Owen, President of UMDNJ.

Vets4Warriors began six years ago as a program for New Jersey veterans at UMDNJ. Due to its proven effectiveness, Lautenberg advocated to President Obama, the Defense Department and the National Guard that it be made into a national program. The help line will now be available to Guardsmen and Reservists in all 54 states and territories.

Unlike many other national veterans assistance programs, Vets4Warriors provides service members with immediate and direct contact with a veteran trained to help with many issues. Now, Guardsmen and Reservists anywhere in the country will be able to contact Vets4Warriors to discuss problems, request referrals for assistance, or simply chat with an understanding and concerned listener who is familiar with the struggles of military service. Additionally, veterans staffing the help line will not only follow up with callers to ensure their progress, but will also proactively reach out to at-risk service members.

More than 2,200 service members on active duty took their own lives from 2001 through 2010. In 2010, 293 service members took their own lives while on active duty. The suicide rate among Army soldiers has climbed steadily since 2004 and the Army reported a record-high number of suicides in July 2011. Rates of mental health problems among new veterans have also remained unprecedented, and reports indicate that nearly 20 percent of military service members who have returned from Iraq and Afghanistan have reported symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or major depression. The VA estimates that a veteran dies of suicide every 80 minutes.

The Vets4Warriors toll free hotline is 1-855-VET-TALK. More information about the program is available at www.vets4warriors.com.



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