Accepting the Challenge: Stop Suicides among Vets, Military

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It’s a heartbreaking statistic: veterans account for 1 of every 5 suicides in Montana.

The men and women behind those numbers are among the very people we honored last week on Veterans Day for their service and sacrifice. They obviously need and deserve more than just gratitude.

Montana has always contributed its fair share of residents willing to serve our country. Today, more than 88,000 veterans live in our state. Another 8,000 or so serve in active duty or in Reserve or National Guard units, according to the U.S. Department of Defense. All that translates into 9 percent of Montanans with military experience – the highest per capita of any state in the nation.

Unfortunately, veterans are dying by suicide twice as often in Montana as non-veterans, according to the state health department. Would you agree that these veterans deserve more than parades and free meals? I believe they deserve to come home to lives that are worth living. And they deserve our help to ensure that they do.

Perhaps because the VA Medical Center and Fort Harrison are located here, Helena has an even higher concentration of veterans than the state or nation. And that adds to a staggering local suicide rate.

That’s why Helena was chosen last spring to participate in a nationwide Mayor’s Challenge supported by the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The purpose of the challenge is to prevent suicide attempts and completions among service members, veterans, and their families and caregivers.

Our mission is to improve and protect the health of all Lewis and Clark County residents.
The Helena Mayor’s Challenge Team, on which I’m honored to serve, got right to work developing an action plan. We came up with five initiatives that we want to put in place to reduce suicide attempts and completions among this population. They are:

1. Study and improve the local crisis-response system so that service members and veterans get the help they need when they need it.
2. Strengthen the peer-to-peer support network among those with military service.
3. Encourage military cultural competency among employers, medical and mental health providers, support services, schools, law enforcement, churches, and other community members. We hope to use brief, online training modules to help explain the unique needs and perspectives of military members and veterans.
4. Add services and programs to the Montana 211 resource directory that are specific to service members and veterans. Montana 211 helps connect people with community resources to meet basic needs, address physical and mental health, and help with job seeking, among other things. You can access it online (www.montana211.org) or by phone (2-1-1).
5. Promote the use of the CONNECT Referral System to link individuals to support services as needed. You can learn more about CONNECT at www.connectmontana.org.

Each of us can honor our service members and veterans by supporting them in a way that’s culturally appropriate. The first step is to know who these heroes are. Ask the question: “Have you or a loved one ever served in the military?” Opening that conversation can allow for more informed treatment, care planning, and support services and the ability to identify the best resources available for these brave men and women.

As a veteran and current member of the Montana Air National Guard, I challenge all of us to act.

Learn about the military culture and ask the people you know if they’ve served. Understand what resources are available and how veterans and service members can connect with them when they’re in need. These are small but effective ways to show support and gratitude for the service of so many in our community.

And they may help to ensure an even happier Veterans Day next year!

For more information or to get involved, visit the Lewis and Clark Suicide Prevention Coalition website at https://lcsuicideprevention.org/.

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