Community Challenged to Support, Understand Military Culture

Suicide-prevention activists are challenging county businesses and organizations to breach the “military/civilian divide” by participating in a new cultural awareness campaign starting on Memorial Day.

The Military Strong Campaign is a collaboration of the Lewis and Clark Suicide Coalition and a local “Mayor’s Challenge” group working to reduce suicides among service members, veterans, and their families. The campaign involves cultural competency training and social media challenges. It uses a certification program developed by the PsychArmor Institute to educate people about the basics of military culture.

“Anyone who serves in the military is part of a distinct culture that comes with its own language, hierarchy, and set of mission-driven values,” said Jess Hegstrom, suicide prevention coordinator with Lewis and Clark Public Health and facilitator of the Suicide Prevention Coalition. “But this culture can be a bit of a mystery to civilians, and that can lead to a military/civilian divide.”

Unique Needs

Hegstrom said a major goal of the Military Strong campaign is to “broaden support for our heroes and limit factors that might lead them to consider suicide.”

She said supporters of the campaign hope to build awareness among as many businesses and organizations as possible, since service members, veterans, and their families use many of the same community resources as civilians.

“We need to do more to answer their unique needs,” she said.

She cited the example of spouses of military members having a lower rate of employment than their non-military peers, according to the 2013 Military Officers Association of America Survey. Frequent moves make it hard to maintain social supports, she noted, and deployment can increase stress for the entire family.
Service members re-entering civilian life also face unique challenges. They may lack job-search skills, and their service positions might not transfer easily into private employment.

“Many of the things that accompany military transition can impact mental and behavioral health,” said Juliana Hallows, suicide prevention coordinator for the Montana VA. “PsychArmor is readily accessible and brings everyone closer to supporting our veterans and their families in a quick and user-friendly platform.”

**How the Challenge Works**

From Memorial Day through Veterans Day, organizations throughout the county will be able to challenge others via email and Facebook to become certified as “Military Strong.” To be certified, at least half the organization’s staff must complete four 15-minute courses online. They cover:

- 15 Things Veterans Want You to Know
- Communication Skills with Veterans
- Helping Others Hold On
- How to Talk to Someone with a Disability

Once an organization is certified, it can challenge others. It also will get a variety of incentives, including Military Strong window clings to post on its premises. Individuals interested in participating may also challenge themselves.

Lewis and Clark Public Health (LCPH) initiated the challenge in early May.

“It didn’t take long for more than half of our staff to complete this training,” said Drenda Niemann, health officer and LCPH director. “They said they found it pretty easy to fit the training into their schedules, and several have told me they learned a lot they didn’t know.”

A separate set of courses for businesses will help human-resource professionals hire, train, and retain veterans and service members while creating military-friendly workplaces.

**About the PsychArmor Institute**

PsychArmor Institute is the only nonprofit organization in the country dedicated to providing online educational courses at no cost to those who work with, live with, or care for members of the military community. Its online library of more than 145 self-paced course modules is available 24/7. All PsychArmor courses are evidence-based, clinically informed, and developed by nationally recognized subject matter experts. PsychArmor is also developing a portfolio of courses on suicide prevention for the military and veteran community. Learn more at [https://psycharmor.org](https://psycharmor.org)

**About the Mayor’s Challenge**

Helena was one of eight cities nationwide selected in February to participate in the Mayor’s Challenge to Prevent Suicide Among Service Members, Veterans, and Their Families. The program is sponsored by the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and the Department of Veterans Affairs.
For more information about the Military Strong Campaign, contact Hegstrom at the health department at 457-8924, or jhegstrom@lccountymt.gov.