Creating a ‘Military Strong’ Culture in a Civilian World

By Jess Hegstrom
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Armed Forces Day. Memorial Day. Veterans Day. These are the occasions when we typically honor those who serve for the sacrifices they make for our freedom.

But how can we, as civilians, support our military heroes on a regular basis?

For Lewis and Clark County, one answer is a new campaign meant to teach employees of businesses, nonprofit organizations, and other community institutions about military culture. It’s called the Military Strong Challenge.

Rolled out on Memorial Day, the campaign aims to support our service members, veterans, and their families by building the community’s ability to engage effectively with them and meet their unique needs. In turn, we hope this might help to reduce the unacceptable suicide rate among this population.

Transition is difficult for veterans and families, and many of the things that accompany military transition can impact mental and behavioral health.

For example, service members re-entering civilian life may lack job-search skills, and their positions in the service might translate poorly into private employment. Not being able to find a job after years of respect from peers and mission-driven service can make anyone feel downtrodden.

The Military Strong Campaign is part cultural-competency training and part social media challenge. It uses online courses developed by the nonprofit PsychArmor Institute to educate non-military people about military basics, such as how to have a meaningful conversation with a veteran.

Organizations that accept the challenge participate in these courses and then challenge others via email or Facebook.
PsychArmor is a free, online library designed to educate those who live with, work with, and care for military service members, veterans, and their families. Just shy of 8 percent of Americans have served in the military, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. In Lewis and Clark County, our veteran population is closer to 12 percent.

So far, six local organizations have joined the Military Strong movement: Lewis and Clark Public Health, the Center for Mental Health, the Fort Harrison Risk Reduction Team, Lewis and Clark County, United Way of the Lewis and Clark Area, and Western Montana Mental Health Clinic- Helena Services. By the time the challenge ends on Veterans Day, we hope to see dozens more answer the call.

To meet the challenge, at least half of the employees of these organizations must complete four certification courses within a month. Each is about 15 minutes long. The topics they cover are:

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

It didn’t take long for nearly all of my public health colleagues to complete the training. Several said they found it pretty easy to fit the online classes into their schedules, and several told me they learned a lot they didn’t know, like that not everyone who serves in the military is a soldier.

Agencies that meet the challenge will be awarded a variety of incentives, including window clings for their offices identifying them as “Military Strong.”

Other potential participants include schools; local government; health and mental health care professionals; faith-based institutions; emergency responders; and nonprofit, civic, and volunteer organizations.

While challenges will mostly come over social media from organizations that have met the Military Strong challenge, anyone else interested in participating is welcome to sign up.

For more information about the Military Strong Campaign, contact Jess Hegstrom, suicide prevention coordinator at Lewis and Clark Public Health, 457-8924 or jhegstrom@lccountymt.gov.

For more information about PsychArmor, visit www.psycharmor.org.

Jess Hegstrom is suicide prevention coordinator for Lewis and Clark Public Health and facilitator of the Lewis and Clark Suicide Prevention Coalition. The Military Strong Campaign is a project of the coalition in conjunction with the PsychArmor Institute and the Helena Mayor’s Challenge Work Group to reduce suicide among veterans.