

DOD Recognizes Top Suicide Prevention Programs

By Chet Curtis, Directorate of Prevention, Resilience and Readiness

Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Guam Army National Guard, Deployment Support Command and Alabama Suicide Prevention Programs were recognized for outstanding contributions to their communities from September 1, 2022, through August 31, 2023.

The awards, which will be presented by the Defense Suicide Prevention Office in a Pentagon ceremony in September, highlight the “Connect to Protect: Support is Within Reach” work the organizations accomplished in support of Soldiers, their Families and Army Civilians, while also promoting activities for the 2023 Suicide Prevention and Awareness Month observance.

Joint Base Lewis-McChord

Jackie Young, Joint Base Lewis-McChord suicide prevention program coordinator, expressed pride in the announcement.

“It’s very validating,” Young says. “It’s very exciting to know that we’re recognized for the hard work we’ve been putting toward this effort. We try to think outside of the box and do things that resonate with Soldiers and have a positive impact.”

Their most popular event is called “Feel the Ruck 5K,” says Young. This is an annual event where participants travel a route and do different activities. They encounter different stations, where they have the opportunity to communicate, practice self-care and learn about various resources both on and off the installation. These activities are completed in teams with the purpose of enhancing team cohesion.

“By the end of the day, participants just grow together and build that communication, trust and connectivity they should have on a team,” explains Young.

Young is supported by Army Substance Abuse Prevention program staff, including Carmen Rivera, ASAP specialist. She says their contributions are crucial to achieving program goals in general and desired Suicide Prevention and Awareness Month outcomes in particular.

“It was a team effort,” Rivera says. “It’s the staff; everybody on the team has the heart for this. They have the empathy for it—the compassion for it.”

Young says these organizations also include programs like the Family Advocacy Program, Exceptional Family Member Program, SHARP, financial readiness, and Holistic Health and Fitness and support from Army chaplains.

“We include all these people who can help the Soldiers and their Family members overcome any of the struggles that they’re having, whether it’s in the moment or in the future,” Young says.

She also explains: “We encourage everybody to make connections—not wait until there’s a problem—to make connections from the start. We encourage building conversations and building connections; that’s what makes us stand out.”

Joint Base Lewis-McCord has a unique mission according to Derek Ferrell from Headquarters, U.S. Army Installation Management Command, Army Substance Abuse, R2, Risk Reduction/CRRT/Suicide Prevention Programs. He explains that because of the Soldiers and the capabilities present at the installation, unique capabilities problems arise, oftentimes requiring special attention.

IMCOM’s role in Suicide Prevention is immense according to Ferrell.

“IMCOM is trying to support commanders and the Army, Civilians and Family members at the installation across the enterprise, so it’s an honor to be recognized for that hard work,” Ferrell says.

[Guam Army National Guard](#)

For the second year in a row the Guam Army National Guard has been recognized for their efforts to increase suicide prevention awareness and community through engagement from September 2022 through August 2023.

The award, which will be presented by the Defense Suicide Prevention Office, highlights the “Connect to Protect: Support is Within Reach” support it provided to military members, their Families and DA Civilians while promoting activities for the 2023 Suicide Prevention and Awareness Month observance.

“It’s a testament to the great work that they do and how they integrate with our Soldiers,” says Col. Manuel Duenas, commander, 105th Troop Command. “This is our second year right in a row, so this is huge. They’re very consistent in the way they work, and I am truly grateful that I inherited this team.”

“It’s truly humbling to be recognized,” says Deana Crisostomo Campbell, risk reduction coordinator. “The work we do we really pour our hearts into.”

“It’s making a difference, and it’s making an impact. Not just here on the island but being recognized nationally,” says Rachel Perez, prevention coordinator.

The team focuses on suicide prevention the whole year by pushing prevention in all their programs.

“It’s a year-round effort,” says 1st Lt. Erbert C. Santiago Jr., health service support branch chief. Besides Suicide Prevent and Awareness Month activities, the team conducted a “Combat the Holiday Blues” campaign.

This campaign occurs between November and February and begins with a “Coffee With Command and Staff” event. The event fosters connections and discussion between Guam ARNG leaders and full-time staff. Leaders shared inspirational quotes and made remarks about staying safe and connecting during the holidays.

The culminating event for the Combat the Holiday Blues campaign was held in February, featuring guest speaker Kevin Hines, a suicide prevention global inspirational speaker, who shared his personal story of hope, healing and recovery. The GU ARNG and FTS Facebook Live viewers listened as he shared his story of attempted suicide. He also explored the art of wellness and the ability to survive pain through resilience, as well as strategies for combating holiday blues.

“According to Duenas, leadership is supporting the team’s efforts, and Soldiers are now more willing to come forward with their problems. “They are a lot more willing to seek the support they need,” he says.

Partnering with the local community has also had an impact. The team is well-integrated into the community regarding suicide prevention and substance use prevention.

Campbell explains that team members participate in the Governor’s Peace Council, which focuses on suicide prevention for both adults and youth. Many agencies across the island come together to develop processes for suicide prevention.

“We invite the nonprofit organizations, government organizations and also military organizations to come and provide their resources and service as well,” says Perez.

Besides being recognized by the DOD, the team has received recognition for their good work by the Guam Behavioral Health and Wellness Center as a goodwill ambassador in the community for all their efforts during Mental Health Awareness Month.

“We want to thank the community for supporting our team,” says Duenas, “and for the recognition at the national level.”

[Army Reserve: Deployment Support Command, Alabama](#)

“It is an amazing feeling of happiness and gratitude that comes in recognition of hard work,” says Dr. Sherry L. Havard, DSC suicide prevention program manager.

The DSC suicide prevention program has come a long way to win this recognition, according to Havard. She noted the position had been vacant for six years before she arrived. The buildup was slow but steady, as she explains.

Training had to be established, and soon they had over 78 people trained and certified as suicide prevention liaisons. From there, Havard started working with community partners, realizing a lot of Army Reserve Soldiers work out in the field.

“They’re not 24/7 Soldiers, so I knew that ... I needed to build partnerships with community partners.” Her team had Dave Ramsey, a personal money management expert and talk-radio show host, offer financial assistance training to every Soldier at the DNC. Soldiers also received a one-year subscription to the Dave Ramsey program.

Another resource Havard was able to tap into was the University of Alabama. She says: “They also have a crisis center that Soldiers utilize after hours and on weekends. They also provide additional support and counseling for the Soldier.”

When Havard came on board, the number of suicidal ideations and attempts were at an all-time high—approximately 70 Soldiers per year. In the past three years, there have been approximately 25 cases per year, according to Havard.

Havard built her program around one theory in sociology: Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. Maslow focused on what causes individuals to struggle.

“It’s about going back to basic needs,” she says. “People worry about their finances, relationships; they worry about not feeling like they are where they need to be in their careers.”

Havard has a final message for Soldiers and Families: “Regardless of being enlisted, an officer or Civilian, it doesn’t matter, but the truth is people need help and you must ask yourself as a professional what can I do better than I did. It is not an easy test sometimes, but it can be done. You must be passionate about your role as a liaison and as a program manager.”

“We are incredibly proud and grateful for all of the Army awardees,” says Renee Johnson, Ready and Resilient Integration program manager. “I’m just humbled by the work that they’re doing to help Soldiers, Army Civilians and Family members.”

“It’s obviously an honor,” says Ferrell about the recognition received for the Army programs.

“It’s all about the installations and the staff that actually execute the programs at those installations,” says Ferrell. “Those are the people that certainly should be celebrated, and we’re certainly happy to have the recognition because, as I think all would agree, it’s a lot of hard work.”