

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 said. “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,” said 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,” said Young.

Young is supported by Army Substance Abuse Prevention program staff, including Carmen Rivera, ASAP Specialist. She said 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 said. “It’s the staff; everybody on the team has the heart for this. They have the empathy for it—the compassion for it.”

Young said 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 said.

Young added, “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 said that because of the Soldiers and the capabilities present at the installation, unique 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 Soldiers, Army Civilians and Family members at the installation across the enterprise, so it’s an honor to be recognized for that hard work,” Ferrell said.

[Guam Army National Guard](#)

“This is our second year right in a row, so this is huge,” said Col. Manuel Duenas, Commander, 105th Troop Command. “It’s a testament to the great work that they do and how they integrate with our Soldiers.”

“It’s truly humbling to be recognized,” said Deana Crisostomo Campbell, Risk Reduction Coordinator.

Campbell said the team really pours their hearts into the work they do.

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

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 said 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,” said Perez.

Besides being recognized by 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,” said 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,” said 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, she said.

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. Other partnerships included collaboration with local organizations such as University of Alabama Vital Project; the University of Alabama at Birmingham Arts in Medicine Department; Birmingham VA Medical Center; Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs; and a local crisis center that Soldiers can use after hours and on weekends for support and counseling; and several other organizations.

According to Havard, Soldiers participated in a series of powerful events that highlighted the importance of resilience while fostering relationships. The engagements encouraged building social support, coping strategies and psychological capital, and identifying purpose in life and a sense of responsibility (spiritually, mentally, physically and financially).

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.

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 said. “People worry about their finances, relationships; they worry about not feeling like they are where they need to be in their careers.”

“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,” said Havard. “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,” said 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,” said 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,” said 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.”