

Overview of the Governor’s Challenge to Prevent Suicide Among Service Members, Veterans, and their Families in Virginia

Background: In January 2019, Governor Northam committed Virginia to be one of the first seven states to implement the *Governor’s Suicide Prevention Challenge*. The *Challenge* is a call to action for state and local communities to implement the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) [2018-2028 National Strategy for the Prevention of Veteran Suicide](#) and is guided by the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Veterans Health Administration (VHA) and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The aim of the National Strategy is to prevent suicide among Service Members, Veterans, and their Families (SMVF) using a comprehensive public health approach. The Virginia Governor’s Challenge is co-led by the Secretary of Veterans and Defense Affairs, Carlos Hopkins, and the Secretary of Health and Human Resources, Dr. Daniel Carey, and has developed a strategic framework, which is currently being implemented state-wide.

The Virginia Governor’s Challenge team includes representatives from:

- Department of Veterans Affairs – DC, Mountain Home, Salem, Martinsburg, Richmond, Hampton VA Medical Centers
- Department of Defense
- State Agencies –Virginia Department of Veterans Services (DVS), Virginia National Guard, Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services (DBHDS), Virginia Department of Health, Virginia Department of Social Services, Virginia Department of Medical Assistance Services, Virginia State Police, and Virginia Department of Education
- Virginia Hospital and Healthcare Association
- National Alliance on Mental Illness
- Richmond Behavioral Health Authority (Richmond Mayor’s Suicide Prevention Challenge Lead)

Virginia Governor’s Challenge Themes: the “3Cs – Care, Connect, and Communicate”:

- Care: The provision of accessible and culturally competent behavioral health services;
- Connect: Bringing SMVF-specific and community services together; forming systemic partnerships;
- Communicate: Educating the SMVF population on resources and behavioral health providers on military culture and suicide prevention best practices.

Highlights of the Virginia Governor’s Challenge team actions:

- Hosted regional crisis services strategic planning sessions (Crisis Intercept Mapping from SAMHSA) with Salem VAMC, Richmond VAMC, and Hampton VAMC. VHA partners were integral in the planning and implementation of these sessions, and ongoing support to regional teams.
- Hosted Regional Military Culture and Suicide Prevention Summits: Radford (70 attended); Abingdon (65 attended); Fairfax (125 attended); Lexington (65 attended); Suffolk (90 attended); and Henrico (110 attended).
- Distributed the Veteran Crisis Line on Governor’s Challenge resource cards statewide to offices, agencies, veterans sources organizations and care providers.
- Launched the Virginia’s Identify SMVF, Screen for Suicide Risk, and Refer for Services, or VISR Pilot to:
 - Provide military culture, suicide prevention, and safety planning infrastructure in state and community agencies

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- Enhance SMVF resource connectivity before a crisis and the delivery of life saving services in a crisis.
- Helps community agencies (including hospitals, social services, Community Services Boards and others) build infrastructure to identify SMVF in need and get them connected to life saving support.
- Submitted cross-agency budget requests for State FY21/FY22 (pending final approval)
 - DBHDS – to enhance trauma-informed clinical capacity in Community Services Boards (CSBs) to provide outpatient mental health services to SMVF.
 - To expand Lock and Talk Virginia Lethal Means Safety Campaign to additional CSBs and National Guard.
 - DVS – To expand peer and family support and benefits services.
- Launched awareness campaign with General Assembly Military Veterans Caucus

Partnerships to Prevent Suicide Among SMVF:

- Successful suicide prevention requires partnerships at the Federal, State, and Local levels. Virginia receives extensive support from Veterans Health Administration (VHA) in VISN 6 (Salem, Richmond, Hampton VAMCs and associated facilities), VISN 5 (Washington D.C., Martinsburg), and VISN 9 (Mountain Home) in the Governor’s Challenge (GC).
 - VHA staff provide regular consultation and training support to bring treatment and support best practices to community settings.
 - VHA staff provided mental health overview and lethal means safety presentations at the Military Culture and Suicide Prevention Summits (over 500 community services providers trained) and continue to respond to ongoing training requests from community stakeholders.ⁱ

Bottom line:

- Virginia actively engaged at Federal, State and local levels to prevent suicide among SMVF population.

ⁱ According to the “Ready to Serve” study conducted by RAND (2014), only 8% of community providers reported high military cultural competency. Tanielian, T., Farris, C., Epley, C., Farmer, C., Robinson, E., Engel, C., Robbins, M., Jaycox, L. (2014). Ready to serve. RAND.