



"ASK THE QUESTION" TOOLKIT

Maryland Governor's Challenge to Prevent Suicide among Service Members, Veterans, and Families



TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 1 Rationale/Introduction
- 2 Intended Audience: Who should use this toolkit?
- 3 Governor's Challenge: Background
- 4 Leadership Buy In and Stakeholder Engagement
- 5 The Script: What To Ask
- 6 Understanding Military Culture
- 7 Marketing Materials
- 8 Provider Resources
- 11 Governor's Challenge Priority Areas
- 12 Data
- 13 References
- 14 Contribution Credit
- 15 Contact Us

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RATIONALE/INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this "Ask the Question" toolkit is to help federal, state, and local governments, community organizations, and other stakeholders to identify more service members, veterans, and families and connect them to valuable resources through the incorporation of standardized military service screening questions.

The toolkit contains scripts, training, resources, and data.

Government, communities, and other stakeholders are encouraged to utilize this toolkit to join the "Ask the Question" campaign and incorporate screening questions into their daily practices. We encourage everyone to share the important work being done to implement evidence-based interventions that are locally driven and designed to prevent suicide in the military connected community.

Our state must work collectively to reduce suicide rates using the best available information and practices.

Coordinating efforts to screen for military service connection at federal, state, and local levels is one key to preventing suicide.

- Only about 40% of Maryland veterans are enrolled in the US Department of Veterans Affairs Healthcare System. Nationwide, approximately 60% of veterans who die by suicide are not enrolled in the VA Healthcare System. Additionally, because consumers are often not screened for military service connection, we do not know who our SMVF are and therefore do not know who among them are also at increased suicide risk like National Guard/Reserves and military families.
- Our goal is to screen and identify more veterans living in Maryland, educate and refer them if they wish to the VA Healthcare System, and ultimately reduce suicide among our entire military connected community. By screening for military service connection, coordinating resources, and connecting to services, we can save lives.
- The military-connected community is strong and resilient, but none of us are immune from life's challenges. If we are not screening for military service connection we cannot provide the best referrals to help with employment, housing, food insecurity, financial resources, behavioral health counseling, and other supportive services.
- Evidence-based interventions, such as screening for military service connection work and are available to address suicide and its underlying causes.

Suicide is a complex issue with no single cause. It is a national public health issue that affects people from all walks of life, not just veterans.

Screening for military service connection allows us to reach the military-connected community with suicide prevention resources where they work and live.

We all have a role to play in preventing suicide among service members, veterans and families in our communities. Every person, system, and organization should ask themselves how they can incorporate military connected screening questions because, together, we can win this fight.

INTENDED AUDIENCE

Who should use this toolkit?

Government and community-based organizations who are serving clients and consumers for services should read this toolkit and incorporate military service-related screening questions in their intakes and interviews. To increase cultural competency, they should read this toolkit to learn more about military culture as well as the resources available to support our service members, veterans, and families.



Entities who should incorporate this screening tool include:

Federal, state, and local government agencies

- Constituent services
- Veterans affairs commissions
- Law enforcement/first responders
 - Police, fire, and corrections
 - Courts
- Schools
- Libraries

Veteran service organizations and veteran professional organizations

Education

- Colleges and universities
- Apprenticeship programs
- K-12 schools

Faith based organizations

Healthcare providers

- Hospitals
- Primary care physicians/specialists/pediatricians
- Behavioral health/Substance use disorder and mental health providers

Housing providers

- Shelters
- Transitional housing programs

Employers/Human resource professionals

Background

THE GOVERNOR'S CHALLENGE AND MARYLAND'S PARTICIPATION



The Governor's Challenge is one targeted prevention strategy being used to reach all veterans — not just those identified as being at high risk.

The US Department of Veterans Affairs and US Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration launched the Governor's Challenges, including ours right here in Maryland, to help local leaders in the community and state governments work together to prevent suicide among service members, veterans and their families. All 50 states and some US territories are actively engaged.

In 2020, Maryland was invited to join the Governor's Challenge. As Governor's Challenge teams develop state-wide strategic action plans, these plans will include strategies that local governments can implement within their communities.

Our team developed a strategic action plan informed by evidence-based best practices to prevent veteran suicide across the state and was provided with tools and technical assistance to support these efforts.

Technical assistance and support continue to be provided and allow our team access to national subject matter experts on suicide prevention, in order to build community-specific plans to meet suicide prevention needs in our state. Maryland's participation in the Governor's Challenges has facilitated the development of partnerships and support to address the critical loss of veterans' lives in our communities. We are employing best practices to prevent and reduce suicide attempts and completions at the local level.

Maryland's team has benefited from increased collaboration between community-led, VA-led, and DoD-led efforts aimed at preventing veteran suicide. This work is critically important because local and state officials know their populations best. VA wants to equip state leaders with the ability to advance VA's shared goals and generate impactful change in local communities and states.

The Maryland Governor's Challenge team is focused on three priority areas:

- (1) Identifying and Screening for Suicide Risk
- (2) Promoting Connectedness and Improving Care Transitions
- (3) Increasing Lethal Means Safety and Planning

(see appendix for our approach to these priorities areas)

The "Ask the Question" Campaign focuses on priority area number one.

For more information on the Governor's Challenge visit the MDVA website: veterans.maryland.gov/suicide-prevention-resources

LEADERSHIP BUY IN AND STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Screening for military service and supporting service members, veterans, and families (SMVF) acknowledges their sacrifices and appreciates their unique skills and experiences. Promoting inclusivity and diversity within the workplace and in our interactions with consumers is not just beneficial for SMVF but for the entire organization and state. It fosters a culture of respect and understanding for those who have served and their families. Screening for service also improves quality of care, saves time, solves problems quickly, ensures appropriate referrals, helps develop rapport, and provides support.

Leadership buy-in is crucial when incorporating military screening questions into the work of an organization. Leaders should consider surveying staff for SMVF connection and meet with their teams to express the importance of military connectedness screening and standardizing the question across their human resources departments and staff who are engaging with consumers.

Education about screening and serving veterans, service members and their families is essential to delivering high-quality, equitable consumer service.

It is more than likely that your organization is already serving SMVF, but if you're not screening for military service connection you don't know who they are. Increasing awareness of the unique culture and outcomes of military service will only enhance the quality of the care already being delivered. If your organization aims to be veteran/military friendly, incorporate military service screening, education on military culture across consumers, both internal and external, and on the unique needs SMVF.

The depth of cultural understanding needed will vary depending on your organization and how you serve consumers. With any first impression, the first point of contact establishes whether an SMVF feels understood. By developing military cultural competency, screening for service, asking a few follow up questions, trust and rapport can be established much more quickly. In doing so, the best possible resources for this community can also be provided.

Align "Ask the Question" to your organization's goals by integrating military service connection screening into your overall mission and vision for serving consumers.



The Script

WHAT TO ASK AND HOW TO RESPOND TO THEIR QUESTIONS



Screening for military service connection improves quality of care, ensures appropriate referrals, helps develop rapport, and shows our military connected community we see them and we care. Questions to ask:

- (1) Have you or a family member ever served in the military?
 - If yes, continue
- (2) Optional questions to build rapport: Ask these questions or go to 3.
 - Did you/they serve in the past and/or are you/they currently serving?
 - When did you/they serve?
 - In what branch of service did you/they serve?
- (3) Are you/they enrolled in or receiving VA healthcare and/or receiving other VA benefits?
 - If yes, go to 4, if no go to 5.
- (4) Provide them with an Ask the Question customer resource card and recommend they sign up for the MDVA electronic newsletter.
- (5) Let them know the VA and Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs offers many benefits, healthcare options, and other services. Provide them with a customer resource card, encourage them to contact an MDVA service officer, and recommend they sign up for the MDVA electronic newsletter.

What if the consumer/customer has questions?

Why are you asking me this question? Developing a better understanding of your experience, including military connection, helps to make the best possible referrals and to provide you with resources which are specific to service members, veterans, and families. These resources have the potential to improve health, financial stability, and overall wellness.

How will this information be used? Your information will not be shared without your permission. This information helps us improve how we serve you and refer you to the best possible resources.

What if I don't want to answer these questions? These questions are voluntary and you do not need to answer them if you are not comfortable.

UNDERSTANDING MILITARY CULTURE

Learning about and developing an understanding of military culture helps build rapport and trust. Increased understanding of a service members, veterans, or family members experience can also help identify root causes of presenting challenges and inform the best resources to refer a person to.

Maryland is home to approximately 350,000 veterans. In addition, we are home to approximately 120,000 active duty, National Guard/Reservists, and military connected families.

The United States Department of Veterans Affairs has published a community provider toolkit with links to training on military competency. Topics covered in these trainings include military terminology/lingo, branches, ranks, discharge types, and more. The toolkit also provides tips for military connectedness screening and starting conversations. Learn more and complete trainings by visiting:

The VA Community Provider Toolkit:
mentalhealth.va.gov/communityproviders/military-experience.asp

Governor's Challenge PsychArmor Training Portal:
psycharmor.org/sign-up/governors-challenge-portal/?gid=359945&unf3T4BGFItSw

The Governor's Challenge Training Portal (Portal) was developed in partnership with SAMHSA's Service Members, Veterans and their Families (SMVF) Technical Assistance (TA) Center and the PsychArmor Institute. The Portal provides access to a set menu of PsychArmor's online trainings, as well as links to off-site trainings through VA and the Education Development Center.

The portal offers 13 training courses including, but not limited to: 15 Things Veterans Want You to Know, Communication Skills with Veterans, Connecting with the VA, Myths and Facts About Wounded Warriors, Suicide in Military Members and Veterans, and Women Who Serve.



MARKETING MATERIALS

Governments, businesses, and organizations who are participating in the Ask the Question campaign are encouraged to contact the Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs for marketing materials.

To request materials, please contact the Communications, Outreach, and Advocacy Program at 410-260-3842 or email mdveteransinfo@maryland.gov.

PROVIDER CARDS (CARDS MEASURE 5" BY 7")

SERVICE MEMBER, VETERANS, AND FAMILIES POCKET CARDS (BUSINESS CARD SIZE)

POSTERS AND BUTTONS COMING SOON!

PROVIDER RESOURCES

BENEFITS

For help with VA benefits applications, a veteran or family member can call the Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs Service and Benefits Program at 800-446-4926, ext. 6450 or find their closest benefits specialist at veterans.maryland.gov/maryland-department-of-veterans-affairs-service-benefits-program

EMPLOYMENT

For help with employment, job training and apprenticeships, veterans, National Guard and Reserves, and transitioning service members can contact any Maryland Department of Labor American Job Center location for information. To learn more, visit labor.maryland.gov/employment/veteranservices.shtml

BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

For help finding behavioral health counseling or to receive wrap-around service referrals, service members, veterans, and families can contact Maryland's Commitment to Veterans, a Maryland Department of Health Program. Referral line: 877-770-4801. To learn more, visit health.maryland.gov/bha/veterans

For post-combat readjustment counseling, eligible veterans, service members, National Guard and Reserves, and families, can contact a VA Vet Center. Centers also provide counseling for survivors of military sexual trauma. Call for locations: 877-WAR-VETS (927-8387)

US DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS HEALTHCARE ENROLLMENT

-Central Maryland/Eastern Shore

Contact the VA Maryland Healthcare System at 877-222-8387

-Western Maryland

Contact the Martinsburg VA Medical Center at 800-817-3807, press 4

-Montgomery County/Prince George's County/Southern Maryland

Contact the Washington DC VA Medical Center at 202-745-8000, ext 56333

PROVIDER RESOURCES CONTINUED

Additional programs serving eligible branches, veterans, and families

Military One Source provides financial, legal, employment, health and wellness, moving, and family support resources to service members, veterans up to 365 days after retirement, end of tour, or discharge and families, members of the Coast Guard should call to confirm eligibility.
800-342-9647/militaryonesource.mil

Blue Star Families connects military families to civilian neighbors through community programs for families and dependents. bluestarfam.org

Family Assistance Centers (all service members, veterans and families)

Havre de Grace: 410-576-1445

Adelphi: 301-847-8348

Baltimore: 410-918-6768

Annapolis: 410-266-7391

Edgewood: 410-612-4152

Towson: 410-616-0551

Hagerstown: 301-733-4731

Salisbury: 410-543-6704

US Department of Veterans Affairs Hotlines and Call Centers

-Veterans Crisis Line 988 Press 1

-National Center for Homeless Veterans
877-4AID-VET (424-3838)

-Women Veterans Call Center
855-VA-WOMEN (829-6636)

-Veteran Caregiver Support Line
855-260-3274

-Coaching Into Care: for family and friends needing help guiding a veteran into care
888-823-7458

FOR MORE INFORMATION:
[VETERANS.MARYLAND.GOV](https://veterans.maryland.gov)

PROVIDER TOOLKITS

- VA Mental Health Website: VA's repository of mental health resources, information, and data materials. Examples of downloadable materials include:
 - Community Provider Toolkit: Community providers play an essential role in ensuring America's veterans receive the support they have earned. The purpose of this toolkit is to link community providers with information and resources that are relevant to veteran's health and well-being.
 - VA's Safe Messaging Best Practices Fact Sheet: Guidelines for how to write about suicide in the media. The way in which suicide is covered can have life-changing consequences.
 - Social Media Safety Toolkit: includes best practices, resources, and sample posts for responding to social media posts that indicate a veteran is having thoughts of suicide.
 - Safe Firearm Storage Toolkit: guides communities through the process of building coalitions to raise awareness about safe storage and its connection to suicide prevention.
 - Rocky Mountain MIRECC for Veteran Suicide Prevention- Education Core: information about suicide prevention that is accessible to veterans and the wider community

Veterans Crisis Line



Our Approach: Governor's Challenge Priority Areas

#1- IDENTIFICATION AND SCREENING FOR SUICIDE RISK

Develop an "Ask The Question" training curriculum and produce a training video. Market the training to state government personnel and encourage them to screen constituents for military service and to refer to VA related resources.

#2- PROMOTE CONNECTEDNESS AND IMPROVE CARE TRANSITIONS

#2A- Peer Endorsement

Develop an endorsement training for credentialed Certified Peer Recovery Specialists who work with SMVF populations. Training will cover four domains: advocacy, wellness and recovery, mentoring and education, and ethics.

#2B- Crisis Intercept Mapping

Convene local teams to identify gaps and barriers in the community's crisis system. Discuss ways to implement best practices and improve partnerships to close gaps and reduce SMVF death by suicide.

#3- LETHAL MEANS SAFETY AND SAFETY PLANNING: TRAINED MILITARY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (TMAP)

The TMAP program is a web-based, culturally competent, SMVF lethal means safety and safety planning training portal for primary care practices. Practices that successfully complete the training receive a unique designation as well as virtual and physical resources to support their practice and patients.



DATA: 2022 NATIONAL VETERAN SUICIDE PREVENTION ANNUAL REPORT

Data is an integral part of our comprehensive public health strategy and enables us to tailor suicide prevention initiatives to reach diverse groups of veterans in Maryland. The 2022 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report (mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/2022/2022-National-Veteran-Suicide-Prevention-Annual-Report-FINAL-508.pdf) provides the most recent analysis of suicide rates for both veteran and non-veteran populations. These findings underscore the fact that suicide is a national public health issue that affects communities everywhere.

Top Line Findings

- In 2020, 6,146 veterans died by suicide, which was 343 fewer than in 2019. The unadjusted rate of suicide in 2020 among US veterans was 31.7 per 100,000.
- Among US adults, the average number of suicides per day rose from 81.0 in 2001 to 121.0 in 2020. These numbers included 16.4 veteran suicides per day in 2001 and 16.8 in 2020.
- In 2020, among the average 16.8 veteran suicides per day, an estimated 6.7 were among recent veteran VHA users and 10.1 were among other veterans.
- Firearms were the method of suicide in 72.1% of male veteran suicide deaths and 48.2% of female veteran suicide deaths in 2020.
- In addition to the aforementioned veteran suicides, there were 519 service member suicide deaths in calendar year 2021 (includes the Active Component, Reserves, and National Guard)

Risk and Protective Factors

- There is no single cause of suicide. Suicide is often the result of a complex interaction of risk and protective factors at the individual, community, and societal levels.
 - Risk factors are characteristics that are associated with an increased likelihood of suicidal behaviors. Some risk factors for suicide include: prior suicide attempt history, certain mental health conditions, access to lethal means, and stressful life events, such as divorce, job loss, or the death of a loved one.
 - Protective factors can help offset risk factors. These are characteristics associated with a decreased likelihood of suicidal behaviors. Some protective factors for suicide include access to mental health care, feeling connected to other people, and positive coping skills.
 - To prevent veteran suicide, we must maximize protective factors while minimizing risk factors at all levels, throughout communities nationwide.



REFERENCES

2022 NATIONAL VETERAN SUICIDE PREVENTION ANNUAL REPORT

Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention
US Department of Veterans Affairs
September 2022

ANNUAL SUICIDE REPORT CALENDAR YEAR 2021

Department of Defense
Under Secretary of Defense For Personnel and
Readiness

GOVERNOR'S AND MAYOR'S CHALLENGES TO PREVENT SUICIDE AMONG SERVICE MEMBERS, VETERANS, AND THEIR FAMILIES

US Department of Health and Human Services
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services
Administration

NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR PREVENTING VETERAN SUICIDE

US Department of Veterans Affairs

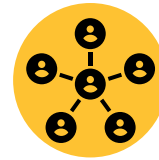
PREVENTING SUICIDE: A TECHNICAL PACKAGE OF POLICY, PROGRAMS, AND PRACTICES

National Center for Injury Prevention and Control
Division of Violence Prevention





CONTRIBUTION CREDIT



- US Department of Veterans Affairs
- US Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration/Technical Assistance Center
- MD Department of Health
- MD Department of Veterans Affairs
- MD Department of Human Services
- MD Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services
- MD Department of Information Technology
- New Hampshire Department of Military Affairs and Veterans Services
- Virginia Department of Veterans Services
- Harford County Commission on Veterans Affairs
- Calvert County Veterans Affairs Commission
- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention-Maryland Chapter
- American Red Cross of Southern Maryland- Service to the Armed Forces
- Maryland Military Coalition
- National Alliance for Mental Illness
- Serving Together
- Sheppard Pratt
- Steven A Cohen Military Family Clinic at Easter Seals
- The VA Way
- Trinity Health/Holy Cross

**ASK.
CONNECT.
PROTECT.
RESPECT.**



CONTACT US



<https://veterans.maryland.gov/mission-ask-the-question/>

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