

## **Economic Opportunity's Role in Preventing Suicide**

### **The VFW's Concerns:**

As the VFW has advocated for many years, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) must immediately incorporate Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) benefit usage in its suicide prevention efforts, to include full information on disability compensation, education and employment benefit use, home loan use and foreclosure assistance, and participation in housing and food insecurity programs. VA has recently begun reporting on the convergence of VA benefits and veteran suicide, but not in any substantive manner. We must identify, study, and utilize information regarding economic opportunity benefits, and leverage that information to successfully prevent suicide among veterans.

**Education:** A 2017 study in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* found individuals with a college degree were half as likely to die by suicide compared to those with a high school education. A 2020 study of recently transitioned service members found those with fewer years of education had a higher risk of suicide, with lack of education being a likely factor contributing to difficulty finding post-military employment and potentially leading to financial instability.

**Employment:** Unemployment can be detrimental to mental health and is even associated with increased risk for suicide. However, the relationship between unemployment and suicide is a complex one. Providing benefits while veterans are unemployed and making sure they are swiftly reemployed can moderate mental health issues and potentially mitigate suicidal ideations.

**Compensation:** Veterans can feel hopeless, unheard, and retriggered by their trauma during the benefit claims process. They may also face financial hardship with their medical expenses until they can receive care through VA. A 2021 study showed that veterans with a service-connected disability designation who utilized VA services were less likely to attempt suicide.

**Housing:** Data from one study of veterans who self-reported housing instability between 2012 and 2016 indicated over half of these veterans accessed homeless services and associated this use of services to a significant reduction in suicide risk. This is a positive sign for the ability of these programs to perform upstream intervention.

**Note: All of these programs are administered by VBA, but the VA Office of Suicide Prevention is operated out of the Veterans Health Administration (VHA).**

### **The VFW urges Congress to:**

Direct VA to incorporate full veteran benefit usage in its annual suicide prevention report to show the relationship between VA benefits and veterans who die by suicide. The report must contain detailed usage of benefits the same way VA reports on veteran interactions with VHA.

Direct VA to move the Office of Suicide Prevention from VHA to the enterprise level at VA. This will allow for study and utilization of all resources from both VHA and VBA to combat veteran suicide.

Direct VA to provide utilization reports on community grants for suicide prevention.