

VA Benefits Data for Suicide Prevention

The VFW's Concern:

The VFW has advocated for years that the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) must incorporate more Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) usage data into its suicide prevention efforts. This should include complete information on disability compensation; use of benefits for education, employment, home loans, and foreclosure assistance; and participation in housing and food insecurity programs. VA has recently begun reporting on the convergence of 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 2020 study of recently transitioned service members found those with fewer years of education had a higher hazard of suicide, with lack of education being a likely factor in difficulty finding post-military employment, potentially leading to financial instability.

Employment: Unemployment can be detrimental to mental health and is associated with an increased risk for suicide. Providing benefits to help veterans swiftly reemploy can moderate mental health issues and potentially mitigate suicidal ideations.

Compensation: Veterans can feel hopeless, unheard, and retriggered by their military trauma during the benefit claims process. They may also face financial hardship paying medical expenses until they receive care through VA. A 2021 study showed that veterans with a service-connected disability designation who utilized 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 the use of these services to a significant reduction in suicide risk.

Note: All of these programs are administered by VBA, but the VA Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention is operated out of the Veterans Health Administration (VHA). It would make more sense for this office to be elevated to the office of the Secretary, and for both VHA and VBA data to be included in its reports on suicide. VA must study all resources from its administrations to effectively combat veteran suicide.

The VFW urges Congress to:

Pass S. 928, *Not Just a Number Act*, to direct VA to incorporate benefit usage data into its annual suicide prevention report, and to examine moving the office of suicide prevention to the enterprise level at VA.