



VA



U.S. Department  
of Veterans Affairs



**SAMHSA** ★ **SMVF TA CENTER**

Service Members, Veterans, and their  
Families Technical Assistance Center

# Employers Answering the Call: Helping to Prevent Suicide Among Service Members, Veterans, and their Families **Conference Summary**

The Westin Crystal City  
Arlington, Virginia  
May 16-17, 2018

# Table of Contents

Overview .....	3
Learning Objectives .....	3
General Scope of Conference .....	4
Lessons Learned .....	6
Recognize the Key Importance of Positive, Inclusive Workplace Cultures .....	6
Break the Silence with Informed Messaging .....	6
Be Aware of Unintentionally Contributing to Stigma .....	7
Conference Sessions.....	7
Day 1.....	7
Welcome and Opening Remarks .....	7
Plenary Panels .....	7
Concurrent Workshops.....	9
Networking Session: “Having the Conversation” .....	13
Day 2.....	14
Plenary Panel: Building Suicide Prevention Collaborations with VA.....	14
Keynote: Moving Forward – Engaging Others .....	14
Closing: Next Steps, Wrap-up, and Adjourn .....	15
Evaluations .....	16
Recommendations .....	16
Engage Employers in Local Mayor’s Challenge Teams .....	16
Promote SMVF Friendly Workplace Cultures .....	16
Integrate Best Practices into New and Existing Policies and Programs .....	16
Do Not Forget About Families and Caregivers.....	16
Conclusion .....	17



## Overview

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA's) Service Members, Veterans, and their Families (SMVF) Technical Assistance (TA) Center convened a conference, *Employers Answering the Call: Helping to Prevent Suicide Among Service Members, Veterans, and their Families* on May 16 and 17, 2018 at the Westin Hotel in Arlington, Virginia. This conference was designed to engage employers in the SAMHSA and U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Mayor's Challenge to Prevent Suicide Among SMVF ("Mayor's Challenge"), a joint initiative where city and community-based partners are developing strategies to prevent the unnecessary loss of SMVF to suicide by promoting several key evidenced-based approaches. Because many people, including SMVF, spend the majority of their daily lives at work, the workplace is an important component to a comprehensive public health approach to suicide prevention. Each community has their own unique suicide prevention strategy for SMVF, and relationships with veteran friendly employers are expanding.

National employers with a demonstrated commitment to hiring SMVF, Mayor's Challenge city team leaders, and state interagency team leaders for SMVF behavioral health were invited to attend the conference. Mayor's Challenge city team leaders and state team leaders were also encouraged to bring employers from their local communities and regions to enhance collaboration and bolster their Mayor's Challenge efforts. The information and technical assistance opportunities presented at the conference provided an opportunity to come together as leaders and decision-makers to address the issue of suicide among SMVF on a national level and learn about best practices that may be implemented in the community.

SAMHSA and the VA are working in partnership to promote a comprehensive public health approach to

the prevention of suicide among service members, veterans, and their families (SMVF). The prevention of suicide requires action beyond the health care setting. Recognizing this critical fact, communities are forming partnerships with employers across the Nation who have a solid commitment to hiring SMVF.

This conference focused on strengthening and building the capacity of our workplaces in the community for supporting the health and well-being of SMVF.

## Learning Objectives

- Educate SMVF employers about suicide prevention workplace strategies for SMVF
- Remove actual and perceived barriers to SMVF suicide prevention programs and services
- Create a culture of health in the workplace by helping to integrate best policies and practices
- Integrate suicide prevention with general medical and wellness programs in the workplace for SMVF
- Incorporate suicide prevention assessments into employee health assessments
- Align the workplace culture to incorporate SMVF workplace training and suicide prevention policies and practices
- Help SMVF employees build and use personal skills and lived experiences to take responsibility for their health and better support their SMVF peers
- Learn to identify post-traumatic stress disorder triggers and early intervention methods for suicide prevention
- Develop strategies and communicate best policy, practices, training, and messaging that SMVF and employers can use to improve the emotional health of other SMVF employees



Participants explored how they could develop and enhance prevention efforts by changing the culture of their workplace environments and strengthening their core skills with practical action items. Throughout the conference, participants not only learned from the experts, but from each other, taking away valuable resources and tools that they can implement in their communities.

This report summarizes the presentations and discussions of the conference and captures its highlights.

## General Scope of Conference

A total of 122 individuals attended some portion of the 1.5-day conference. Participants represented a diverse cross-section of professions and included representatives from the private, non-profit, and public sectors. From small regional employers to large national employers, conferences participants were able to share ideas and promote best practices. The audience also included federal partners, national experts, and academic partners to ensure the incorporation of the most effective and culturally appropriate workplace suicide prevention strategies.

Figure 1 below lists the organizations present for the conference:

Figure 1 - List of attendees of the conference, "Employers Answering the Call: Helping to Prevent Suicide Among Service Members, Veterans, and their Family Members" on May 16-17, 2018 in Washington, D.C.

## Private/ Non Profit Sector

3D Security Training Solutions	Institute for Veterans Education and Training	Reingold, Inc.
Allied Universal Security Services	Integrated Healthcare Services TnWest Healthcare Alliance	SoCalGas
American Association for Laboratory Accreditation	Ipsos	Suicide Prevention Resources Center at Education Development Center, Inc.
Bell Laboratories, Inc.	Kaiser Permanente	Syracuse University
Blue Cross-Blue Shield of North Dakota	Minot State University	The District Communications Group
Career Center and Veterans Integration Goodwill of Southern Nevada	National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention	The United Services Automobile Association
Cedars-Sinai	New England College	Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors, Inc. (TAPS)
Community Mental Health Partnership of Southeast Michigan	NSA Industries, LLC	Union Pacific Railroad
Construction Financial Management Association	One Community Auto, LLC	University of Texas
Division of Adult Corrections and Juvenile Justice	PricewaterhouseCoopers	Walgreens
DuPont	PRIDE Industries	Warner Brothers Entertainment
Ernst & Young	Prudential Financial	Westat
G4S Solutions, USA-Wisconsin	PsychArmor Institute	
Greengate Leadership, LLC	Psychiatric Services & Community Center Billings Clinic	
Hire Heroes USA	RAND Corporation	

## Public Sector

<b>Federal Agencies</b>	U.S. Coast Guard	U.S. Department of Homeland Security
	U.S. Department of Agriculture	U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
	U.S. Department of Defense	SAMHSA
<b>State Agencies</b>	Missouri Department of Mental Health	Rhode Island Office of Veterans Affairs
	New Hampshire Employment Security	State of Arizona
Alabama Department of Labor	New Mexico Department of Veterans Affairs	Texas Health and Human Services
Alaska Forget Me Not Coalition	North Carolina Department of Veterans Affairs	Texas Workforce Commission
Arizona Coalition for Military Families	North Carolina Highway Patrol	Washington State Department of Veterans Affairs
Arizona Public Services (APS)	North Dakota Cares	Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs
Michigan Department of Health and Human Services	Oklahoma Department of Veterans Affairs	
<b>Local Agencies</b>	City of Billings	Denver Fire Department
	City of Houston	Maricopa County, Arizona
	City of Las Vegas	Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority
	City of Los Angeles	Los Angeles World Airports
	City of Albuquerque	City of Phoenix



SAMHSA and VA, its federal partners, and a wide array of organizations delivered key information related to the importance of employment in a comprehensive approach to suicide prevention. Nationally-renowned experts provided strategies to reduce suicide by supporting the behavioral health and wellness needs of SMVF. Participants were encouraged to build on existing workplace health and safety initiatives and received information about emerging strategies and best practices to incorporate SMVF-focused wellness and suicide prevention strategies. Employers came together with community representatives and committed to work together to make health and wellness a priority and end suicide among SMVF.

## Lessons Learned

The conference provided a platform to discuss many of the difficult problems and questions facing employers. Through these discussions, some important lessons were learned.

## Recognize the Key Importance of Positive, Inclusive Workplace Cultures

Most workplaces are relatively unprepared to help SMVF who are struggling. Workplace wellness and health care programs must be transformed to significantly reduce, screen for, and prevent suicide among SMVF. It is important for employers to create cross-functional teams that are well-prepared and practiced at responding immediately and effectively to troubling workplace behavior. Such teams, sometimes called “Safe and Respectful Workplace” or “Incident Oversight” teams and typically including professionals with behavioral health, security, human resources (HR), and legal credentials, can be convened by teleconference at the earliest recognition of need. Leaders at all levels,

along with HR professionals, should be trained on the team’s existence, function, and the warning signs that should be brought to the team’s immediate attention. Develop a comprehensive business case to gather support, because without policies and protocols in place everyone loses.

## Break the Silence with Informed Messaging

When disseminating messaging strategies, it is important to demonstrate the value to the workplace and entire community, and to integrate leadership with an understanding of military culture and wellness workplace strategies. It is a great thing for employers to sponsor large-scale events, webinars, and multi-media communications that promote an inclusive culture for people of all backgrounds, including veterans of military service and their family members. The messages within these communications will only bear fruit, however, within teams in which the culture feels caring, respectful, and inclusive. Employees will only trust that such a strategy is real when their immediate supervisor, the role model and orchestrator of their team’s culture, treats others in ways that brings the strategy to life.

---

*“We often hear that employers have struggled to talk about suicide prevention—to ask the difficult questions and discuss the often-stigmatized topics of mental health. But this gathering of employers proves to me that we are coming together to change cultures within our organizations and to reduce stigma and discrimination.”*

*- Keita Franklin, L.C.S.W., Ph.D.*

---



## Be Aware of Unintentionally Contributing to Stigma

Directly challenge the stigma associated with mental illness. Make sure that efforts do not reinforce stereotypes that stigmatize veterans (and other population segments). Move the focus away from veterans as a “troubled population” and focus instead on the mainstream culture’s stigmatizing of mental health conditions and the people who live with them. It is important when challenging discrimination to do so in a way that does not inadvertently reinforce the very discrimination you seek to challenge.

## Conference Sessions

The conference agenda included four plenary panels and six concurrent workshops with time for questions and answers at the close of each session. The concurrent workshops presented on Day 1 were repeated on Day 2 to allow participants greater ability to attend desired sessions.

Descriptions of the plenary panels and concurrent workshops are provided below:

### Day 1

#### Welcome and Opening Remarks

**A. Kathryn Power, M.Ed.** | Acting Director, Center for Substance Abuse Treatment | SAMHSA’s Senior Executive Lead for the Military Service Members, Veterans and their Families Focus, Regional Administrator, Region I (Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont)

**Keita Franklin, L.C.S.W., Ph.D.** | National Director, Suicide Prevention, Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Ms. Power and Dr. Franklin opened the conference, demonstrating the strong partnership of SAMHSA and VA and their commitment to preventing suicide among SMVF. Ms. Power noted that 20 veterans die by suicide every day. She called on employers and communities to come together to address this preventable issue. She emphasized the critical importance of employers in a collective community effort and offered SAMHSA as a resource to help implement policy and practice change.

Dr. Franklin gave a call to action, encouraging employers and community stakeholders to “answer the call” to help prevent suicide among SMVF by making it a top priority. She outlined the need for a comprehensive public health approach to suicide prevention and encouraged the audience to take home the best practices, resources, and lessons learned and apply them within their organizations.



Keita Franklin, L.C.S.W., Ph.D.  
A. Kathryn Power, M.Ed.

#### Plenary Panels

##### Creating Better Workplace Support for SMVF

**Keita Franklin, L.C.S.W., Ph.D.** | National Director, Suicide Prevention, Office of Mental Health and



Suicide Prevention, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (*Moderator*)

**Ken Dolan-Del Vecchio, M.A., L.C.S.W., L.M.F.T.** | Founder and President, GreenGate Leadership, LLC, Former Vice President, Health and Wellness, Prudential Financial

**Rani Hoff, Ph.D., M.P.H.** | Director, Research and Program Evaluation, Suicide Prevention Program, Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

**James Wood** | Vice President, Federal Markets, Walgreens

**Travis Watson, RPh.** | Director, Health Outcomes, Walgreens

**Synopsis:** Developing a long-term, cultural development strategy that stresses the importance of talking about mental health in the workplace will create better workplace support for SMVF.



Ken Dolan-Del Vecchio, M.A., L.C.S.W., L.M.F.T.

### Key Take Home Points and Resources

- Employment promotes the positive effects of connectedness. We spend more time with our work colleagues than with most other people. When someone returns from work with a mental

health crisis, do we give them the same support and caring contacts as someone out with any other life threatening medical illness?

- Immediate supervisors are in the best position to change a workplace’s culture and make it more inclusive for employees.
- It is important to relate to your employees and colleagues that “it is okay to not be okay.”
- Too often people do not discuss their mental health needs because it can be considered a taboo subject and may not know how to have the conversation. By removing the stigma of the topic, people feel more comfortable to discuss it openly.
- People do not need to be “trained professionals” to make a difference and to save the life of someone in distress. Anyone can be a “Battle Buddy” for SMVF experiencing mental health problems.
- The National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention’s [Comprehensive Blueprint for Workplace Suicide Prevention](#) is a valuable resource for employers striving to create better workplace supports for SMVF.

---

*“How tragic it is that people die as a result from the stigma attached to health conditions. When will we arrive at the understanding that no illness should bring scorn upon the person who lives with it? We’ve moved beyond the stigma that shrouded leprosy and cancer; we’re still living under the veil when it comes to addiction and other forms of mental illness.”*  
-Ken Dolan-Del Vecchio

---

### What We Know Works: Lessons Learned

**Michelle Cleary, M.A.** | Senior Project Associate, SAMHSA’s Service Members, Veterans, and their





Families Technical Assistance (SMVF TA) Center,  
Policy Research Associates, Inc. (*Moderator*)

**Richard McKeon, Ph.D., M.P.H.** | Branch Chief,  
Suicide Prevention Branch, Division of Prevention,  
Traumatic Stress, and Special Programs, Center for  
Mental Health Services, SAMHSA



Richard McKeon, Ph.D., M.P.H.

**Kaily Cannizzaro, Psy.D.** | Clinical Research  
Psychologist, Rocky Mountain Mental Illness  
Research, Education, and Clinical Center (MIRECC)  
for Veteran Suicide Prevention

**Claire Oakley, Ph.D., M.H.A.** | Director of  
Population Health, RiverStone Health, Yellowstone  
City-County Health Department

**Synopsis:** A comprehensive public health approach  
to suicide prevention works. Military and civilian,  
federal, state, and local community stakeholders must  
all come together to prevent suicide among SMVF.

### Key Take Home Points and Resources

- [The National Strategy for Suicide Prevention](#) highlights the need for a comprehensive, integrated suicide prevention effort between both the health sector and community partners.
- Suicide is the tenth leading cause of death in

the United States. Eighteen percent of suicide  
deaths among adults are veterans.

- There are public/private partnerships dedicated to advancing SMVF suicide prevention in local communities and nationally.
- Multi-sector approaches have proven successful in the past and enlisting the help of community settings like the workplace, foster care, and social media can help assist these efforts.
- Expanding the VA’s suicide prevention initiative and working with the Department of Defense (DoD) and community partners can provide seamless mental health support for returning veterans.
- Many veterans who die by suicide are not connected to services that could help them. Employers can help by facilitating those much needed connections to available programs and services.

## Concurrent Workshops

### Everyone Plays a Role: Gathering Support, Engaging Employers and Employees

**Donna Aligata, R.N.C.** | Project Director,  
SAMHSA’s Service Members, Veterans, and their  
Families Technical Assistance (SMVF TA) Center,  
Policy Research Associates, Inc. (*Moderator*)

**Captain Kimberly Elenberg, Ph.D., R.N.** | Director  
of Joint Force Fitness, Office of the Under Secretary  
for Personnel and Readiness/Force Resiliency,  
Personnel Risk Reduction, U.S. Department of  
Defense

**Terri Tanielian, M.A.** | Senior Behavioral Scientist,  
RAND Corporation



**Mark Sullivan, M.P.A.** | Planning and Program Strategy Advisor, Washington State Military Transition Council

**Terrie Raposo, M.S.W., L.I.C.S.W.** | Director of Psychological Health, New Hampshire Army National Guard

**Synopsis:** Networking and creating collaborative, community partnerships is essential to gathering adequate support for SMVF experiencing mental health problems. Often overlooked, providing support for family members and caregivers is critical to a healthy and productive workforce.

### Key Take Home Points and Resources

- [Building Healthy Military Communities](#) is an invaluable DoD resource and provides opportunities for greater collaboration in seven states (Florida, Indiana, Maryland, Minnesota, Mississippi, New Mexico, and Oklahoma).
- High-Impact Strategies for engaging employees include
  - Supporting veteran/military employee resource groups
  - Offering briefings to employee groups, work groups, etc.
  - Supporting peer support programs (offering training/coaching)
- DoD's [Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve](#) (ESGR) program offers essential resources for employers and military employees to help promote a collaborative working relationship.
- There are 5.5 million military and veteran caregivers. These hidden heroes can be better supported in the workplace by following the [EEOC Employer Best Practices for Workers with Caregiving Responsibilities](#).

## Safe Messaging in Employee Education and Awareness

**Angela Wright, J.D.** | Assistant Project Director, SAMHSA's Service Members, Veterans, and their Families Technical Assistance (SMVF TA) Center, Policy Research Associates, Inc. (Moderator)

**Colleen, Carr, M.P.H.** | Deputy Director, National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention

**Adam Chu, M.P.H.** | Manager, Health and Behavioral Health Initiatives, Suicide Prevention Resource Center, Education Development Center, Inc.

**Elizabeth Karras, Ph.D.** | Research Investigator, VA Center of Excellence for Suicide Prevention, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

**Synopsis:** Integrating suicide safe messaging into workplace prevention efforts is a key element of an organization's overarching, suicide prevention strategy.

### Key Take Home Points and Resources

- Having a suicide prevention messaging strategy is critical to inspiring actions that support hope and recovery. The National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention's [Framework for Successful Messaging](#) can help employers implement successful messaging within their organizations.
- Suicide prevention messages can either increase risk and undermine prevention efforts *or*, if done safely, promote positive behaviors and support prevention goals.
- [Changing the Conversation](#) is a National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention initiative to change the national narrative about suicide to one that promotes hope, resiliency, and recovery.
- Messages are not "one size fits all." Consider your target audience (e.g., veterans, services members, family) and ask what their needs/preferences are.



- You do not have to reinvent the wheel. The [Veterans Crisis Line](#) offers a host of sharable materials anyone can use.

## Breaking the Silence through Peer Support

**Michelle Cleary, M.A.** | Senior Project Associate, SAMHSA’s Service Members, Veterans, and their Families Technical Assistance (SMVF TA) Center, Policy Research Associates, Inc. (*Moderator*)

**Manuel Almagure** | Division Chief, Fire Prevention, Denver Fire Department

**Stuart Binstock, J.D.** | President and CEO, Construction Financial Management Association (CFMA)

**Bob Gear** | Director, Texas Workforce Commission’s Veterans Leadership Program

**Synopsis:** Peer support programs are an effective suicide prevention approach that promotes a greater feeling of connectedness (one of the seven evidenced-based strategies of the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention model](#)).

### Key Take Home Points and Resources

- Employers can provide environments for veterans that offer sponsorship programs, mentorship programs, and celebrate historic veteran-related dates to help integrate these employees while sending a message that the employer is sensitive to military culture.
- Certain industries have a higher rate of suicide among employees, including fire fighters, construction workers, and returning veterans.
- The Denver Fire Department (DFD) created a peer support program to help the department’s employees cope with loss and prevent suicide. Employees contact the DFD Peer Support program for a myriad of reasons including

family relations problems, non-traumatic work stress, critical incident stress, injury/disability, grief/bereavement, legal problems, financial problems, and alcohol/substance abuse issues.

- The [Construction Industry Alliance for Suicide Prevention](#) is dedicated to providing resources for suicide prevention and mental health promotion in the construction industry with the goal of creating a zero-suicide industry. The Alliance has created a task force of more than 60 partners who are dedicated to this cause. There are also international models of peer support in the workplace that CFMA hopes to model here in the U.S.

## Preventing Crisis and Dealing with Lethal Means

**Donald Harris, M.B.A.** | Project Associate, SAMHSA’s Service Members, Veterans, and their Families Technical Assistance (SMVF TA) Center, Policy Research Associates, Inc. (*Moderator*)

**Megan McCarthy, Ph.D.** | Deputy Director, Suicide Prevention Programs, Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

**Michael Hogan, Ph.D.** | Consultant, Policy Research Associates, Inc. | Executive Committee of the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention (Day 1 only)

**Markus Dietrich, LMHC, CEAP, CAP** | Manager, Global Employee Assistance Program, DuPont (Day 2 only)

**Synopsis:** Suicidal crisis is an acute condition and limiting access to lethal means can often prevent those in crisis from dying by suicide.

### Key Take Home Points and Resources

- Reducing access to lethal means is a highly effective prevention strategy.



- Studies show that veterans are more likely to have access to lethal means including firearms and prescription medications.
- Prevention strategies for firearms include off-site storage, trigger locks/lock boxes, and removing the key from the home, or removing the firing pin from the weapon.
- Prevention strategies for poisoning include using blister packs to make it harder to access large quantities of medication and disposing of unused medication at VA facilities or pharmacies.
- VA's [Suicide Risk Management Consultation Program](#) is a free resource for any provider that works with veterans.
- Harvard's [Means Matter Campaign](#) promotes activities that reduce access to lethal means of suicide and develops active partnerships with gun owner groups to prevent suicide.

---

*“My goal is to keep you alive and to protect you from hurting yourself or others, because I am concerned about your well-being, I want to have a conversation about means safety.”*  
- Potential language for starting the conversation

---

## Videos, Tools, and Resources for Workplace Action

**Jen Elder, M.Sc.** | National Policy and Partnerships Coordinator, SAMHSA the Social Security Disability (SSDI) and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) Outreach, Access, and Recovery Technical Assistance (SOAR TA) Center, Policy Research Associates, Inc. (Moderator)

**Shannon McCaslin, Ph.D.** | Clinical Psychologist, National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

**Zach Huitink, Ph.D.** | D’Aniello Family Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Research and Evaluation, Institute for Veterans and Military Families at Syracuse University

**Terresa Humphries-Wadsworth, Ph.D.** | Associate Project Director, Suicide, Injury, and Violence Prevention Portfolio, Suicide Prevention Resource Center, Education Development Center, Inc.

**Synopsis:** Veterans bring unique strengths to the workplace like resiliency, team-building skills, and organizational commitment. There are many tools and resources that can help employers support the satisfaction and well-being of this important pool of talent.

### Key Take Home Points and Resources

- Employers can better support SMVF in the workplace by learning, sharing, and connecting with valuable resources.
- Resources to learn more about military culture:
  - [PsychArmor](#), a national nonprofit that provides FREE Online Education and support to all Americans who work with, live with, or care for Military Service Members, Veterans and their families.
  - [Center for Deployment Psychology](#) provides free military culture training modules for healthcare professionals that include two CE credits.
  - [VA’s Veterans Employment Toolkit](#) helps employers, managers and supervisors, human resource professionals, and employee assistance program (EAP) providers relate to and support their employees who are Veterans and members of the Reserve and National Guard.
- Resources for sharing and connecting:
  - [Veterans Crisis Line](#) 1-800-273-8255
  - [Make the Connection](#), an online resource



designed to connect Veterans, their family members and friends, and other supporters with information, resources, and solutions to issues affecting their lives.

- VA National Center for PTSD’s [PTSD Coach Mobile App](#) to help learn about and manage symptoms that often occur after trauma.
- By focusing on culture, safety, and organizational structure, employers can help prevent suicide in their workforce by providing a positive work environment and the resources to help those who may be in crisis.

and offer a road to post-traumatic growth.

- Nearly half of the U.S. population reports lifetime familiarity with 1 or more persons who has died by suicide.
- Those exposed to suicide are at heightened risk for major depression, PTSD, complicated grief and suicidal behavior.
- The National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention offers [A Manager’s Guide to Suicide Postvention in the Workplace: 10 Action Steps for Dealing with the Aftermath of Suicide](#).
- The [Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors \(TAPS\)](#) is a 501c3 non-profit who provides comprehensive peer based support, resources and referrals to all those who are grieving the death of a loved one who served.
- TAPS provides a 24/7 helpline 1-800-959-8277.

## SMVF Coping with the Aftermath

**Cicely K. Burrows-McElwain, L.C.S.W.-C.** | Military and Veteran Affairs Liaison, National Policy Liaison Branch, Division of Regional and National Policy/ The Office of Policy, Planning and Innovation (OPPI), SAMHSA (*Moderator*)

**Maggie Guglielmi, Ph.D.** | Psychologist, Stratton VA Medical Center, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

**Sarra Nazem, Ph.D.** | Clinical Research Psychologist, Rocky Mountain Mental Illness Research, Education, and Clinical Center (MIRECC)

**Kim Burditt** | Manager, Programming and Logistics, Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors, Inc. (TAPS) Red Team

**Synopsis:** Suicide postvention policies and procedures are a critical component of an employer’s overarching suicide prevention strategy. Postvention is intended to facilitate the healing process of individuals from the grief and distress of suicide loss. Postvention also helps mitigate other negative effects of exposure to suicide and can help prevent suicide among people who are at high risk after exposure to suicide.



Conference Participants Fill Out Networking Worksheets, Day 1

## Networking Session: “Having the Conversation”

**Donna Aligata, R.N.C.** | Project Director, SAMHSA’s Service Members, Veterans, and their Families Technical Assistance (SMVF TA) Center, Policy Research Associates, Inc. (*Moderator*)

### Key Take Home Points and Resources

- Postvention is a unique opportunity to save lives



**Marjorie Morrison, L.M.F.T., L.P.C.C.** | Chief Executive Officer and Founder, PsychArmor Institute

**Megan McCarthy, Ph.D.** | Deputy Director, Suicide Prevention Programs, Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

**Synopsis:** Conference participants viewed pre-release clips of the new S.A.V.E. video developed by the VA and PsychArmor. S.A.V.E., which stands for “Signs, Ask, Validate, Encourage and Expedite,” offers simple steps anyone — whether a treatment provider, clinician, friend or family member — can take when talking with Veterans at risk for suicide. Conference participants then viewed PsychArmor’s *15 Things Veterans Want You To Know*, which was created to promote a greater understanding of veterans. Dr. McCarthy and Ms. Morrison encouraged participants to discuss the videos and complete two worksheets focused on what veterans and employers want each other to know about their unique cultures. The worksheets were then transcribed onto newsprint and posted on the walls of the main conference room prior to the start of Day 2 so participants could see the responses.

## Day 2

### Plenary Panel: Building Suicide Prevention Collaborations with VA

**Michelle Cleary, M.A.** | Senior Project Associate, SAMHSA’s Service Members, Veterans, and their Families Technical Assistance (SMVF TA) Center, Policy Research Associates, Inc. (*Moderator*)

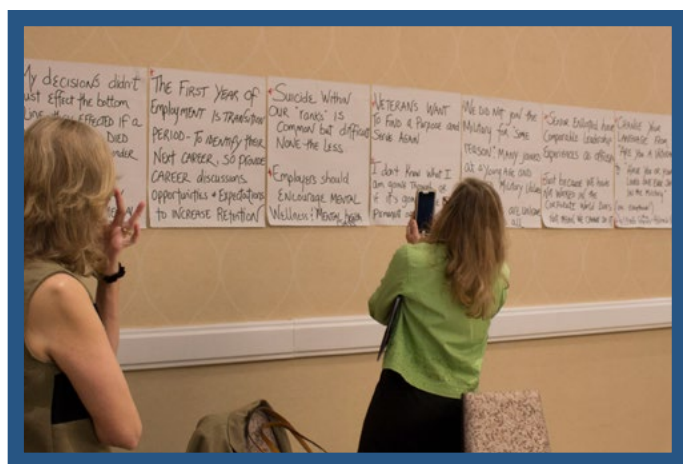
**Thomas Winkel, M.A., L.P.C.** | Director, Arizona Coalition for Military Families (*State example*)

**Lisa T. Salazar, M.S.L.** | Policy Director, City of Los Angeles, Office of Mayor Eric Garcetti (*City example*)

**Synopsis:** Interagency collaboration and public engagement can help break down the cultural divide between VA and the community. Creating and fostering partnerships is an important component of a comprehensive approach to suicide prevention.

#### Key Take Home Points and Resources

- The full 25-minute [VA/PsychArmor S.A.V.E.](#) training is now available.
- PsychArmor’s [15 Things Veterans Want You To Know](#) is available for anyone to freely view and use.
- *Appendix III* of this report includes a breakdown of all the responses from the networking exercise.



Conference Participants View Networking Responses, Day 2

#### Key Take Home Points and Resources

- The Arizona Coalition for Military Families is a nationally-recognized public/private partnership focused on building Arizona’s statewide capacity



- to care for SMVF and their communities.
- [VA Community Veteran Engagement Boards](#) provide local opportunities to collaborate with the VA and other community stakeholders.
- When partnering, rally around common goals, use data to “root” (or ground) your common goal, and successes can be fostered by creating a strategic plan.

## Keynote: Moving Forward – Engaging Others

**Keita Franklin, L.C.S.W., Ph.D.** | National Director, Suicide Prevention, Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (*Moderator*)

**Sally Spencer-Thomas, Psy.D.** | Co-Lead, Workplace Task Force, National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention; Founder, Hope Illuminated (*Keynote*)

**Synopsis:** Dr. Franklin introduced the keynote speaker, Dr. Spencer-Thomas, who co-leads the Workplace Task Force within the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention and is the founder of Hope Illuminated. Dr. Spencer-Thomas discussed the importance of providing support for veterans as a “bottom line issue” for employers. She encouraged employers to make the culture in their workplace one where the norm is to seek help. Leadership engagement is critical in this effort.

### Key Take Home Points and Resources

- Mental health conditions can effect more than just the veteran – it can also lead to poor productivity, low morale, missed deadlines, and other unintended associated costs.
- According to the [Suicide Prevention Resource Center](#), the average cost of just one suicide is \$1,329,553.
  - Ninety-seven percent of this cost from lost productivity.

- Three percent associated with medical treatment.
- Total cost of suicides and suicide attempts = \$93.5 billion
- However, for every \$1.00 spent on suicide interventions \$2.50 is saved.
- Since we spend a large amount of our time at work, the workplace has an opportunity to create a positive environment for SMVF.
- Develop a comprehensive and sustained resilience strategy with upstream, mid-stream and downstream features.
- Ask Veterans what they need and how the resources are working (or not).



Sally Spencer-Thomas, Psy.D.

## Closing: Next Steps, Wrap-up, and Adjourn

**Keita Franklin, L.C.S.W., Ph.D.** | National Director, Suicide Prevention, Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

**Cicely K. Burrows-McElwain, L.C.S.W.-C.** | Military and Veteran Affairs Liaison, National Policy Liaison



Branch, Division of Regional and National Policy/  
The Office of Policy, Planning and Innovation  
(OPPI), SAMHSA

Dr. Franklin and Ms. Burrows-McElwain closed the conference by stressing the VA's and SAMHSA's ongoing commitment to addressing the behavioral health needs of veterans. They encouraged participants to bring the lessons they learned back to their communities and inspired employers to create workplace environments that better support the health and well-being of SMVF.

## Evaluations

Participant evaluations were positive. Participants indicated that they appreciated learning there are so many free resources and information available on workplace suicide prevention best practices.

Many participants specifically expressed their appreciation for the PsychArmor "15 Things" and S.A.V.E. videos presented during the networking session on Day 1. Participants also noted that they especially valued hearing lessons learned and how employers can incorporate SMVF mental health and suicide prevention approaches into wellness programs.

---

*"Inspiring and energizing!"*

*"Great networking to make connections and take information back to communities."*

*"Learned great tools and information that can be used in our efforts not only for Mayor's Challenge but also in my own organization."*

*"The whole conference was wonderful. I feel I have a start on learning so much. I thank you for all the information."*

---

Overall, participants conveyed appreciation for the diverse perspectives of information. Many responses focused on being able to bring resources and lessons learned during the conference back to their local communities or organizations.

## Recommendations

### Engage Employers in Local Mayor's Challenge Teams

As Mayor's Challenge teams continue to form and grow across the Nation, employers should be welcomed to the table as key drivers in the prevention of suicide among SMVF.

### Promote SMVF Friendly Workplace Cultures

Developing a long-term, cultural development strategy that stresses the importance of talking openly about mental health in the workplace will create better workplace support for SMVF.

### Integrate Best Practices into New and Existing Policies and Programs

From suicide prevention, to intervention, to postvention ("upstream, mid-stream, and downstream"), integrate best practices for SMVF wellness, such as safety plans, lethal means reduction, and peer support.

### Focus on Wellness

Focusing on wellness and taking a strengths-based approach is the key to engaging SMVF and moving





the focus away from veterans as a “troubled” population to one of resilience and strength.

## Do Not Forget About Families and Caregivers

Make workplaces more caregiver friendly by offering supportive services and policies, such as flexible work arrangements.

## Conclusion

Employers and communities across the Nation are answering the call to help prevent suicide among SMVF. As one of the largest gatherings of employers and community stakeholders on this issue, this convening is poised to make a real impact on the lives of SMVF. During the conference, the importance of employment within a broader comprehensive public health approach to suicide prevention was highlighted. Plenary sessions and concurrent workshops allowed participants to learn about key evidence-based, emotional wellness and suicide prevention strategies. In particular, participants reported gaining an increased understanding of the benefits of incorporating suicide prevention strategies into workplace wellness programs and making sure those initiatives are more accessible for SMVF.

Conference participants are invited to join an on-going learning collaborative to support implementation of desired safety, wellness, and suicide prevention activities. SAMHSA’s SMVF TA Center stands ready with TA opportunities like webinars, a learning community designed especially for employers who attended this conference, and TA phone calls with subject-matter experts throughout the nation. Through collaboration and sharing of lessons-learned, resources, and tools, participants are better equipped to ensure that the well-being of this

population is at the forefront of workplace health and safety initiatives.

In honor of those who have lost their lives, employers and communities are answering the call by committing to suicide prevention as a top priority and building workplaces where SMVF can do their best work and thrive. As the Mayor’s Challenge progresses and spreads to new cities, new collaborations and partnerships will take hold in a comprehensive fight to prevent suicide among SMVF.

*The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and the United States Department of Veterans Affairs are grateful for the support of its federal, business, and industry planning partners. Thank you also to our participants for your dedication to supporting service members, Veterans, and their families in your communities.*

*Working together, we can all make a difference!*