

Mental Health

4:50 PM THU FEBRUARY 12, 2015

Obama Signs Act Designed To Prevent Suicide Among Veterans

By EDITOR

Originally published on Thu February 12, 2015 5:26 pm

Copyright 2015 NPR. To see more, visit <http://www.npr.org/>.

Transcript

RACHEL MARTIN, HOST:

Suicide among veterans is a persistent problem. One estimate from the Department of Veterans Affairs says that as many as 22 veterans take their lives every day. Today, President Obama signed a new law aimed at trying to address the suicide rate among vets. The legislation was named after Clay Hunt, a Marine Corps vet who killed himself in 2011 after serving tours in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

The new law is designed to make it easier for veterans to access mental health services and to get more psychiatrists into the VA to provide that care. Robert McDonald is the secretary of Veterans Affairs. I asked him if the VA has a better understanding about common traits or experiences of service members who take their own lives.

ROBERT MCDONALD: Well, I think some of the things that are common are those who may take their own lives are disconnected. They're disconnected from family. They're disconnected from friends. So outreach becomes very important. Of those roughly 22 veterans that we say on average create - do take their lives each day, 17 of them, we estimate, are not connected to the VA. And what we need to do is get those 17 connected because we know how to treat this. It's an illness, and we can solve it.

MARTIN: So the new law will create a centralized website with mental health information for vets. It will also defer student loan payments for psychiatry students to entice them into careers at the VA. But it's a pilot program that will only amount to 10 students a year over a three-year period. How much difference can this make to such a large and intractable problem?

MCDONALD: Yes. That's a good point, Rachel. We are not graduating enough mental health professionals in this country. So this is an important first step. Another step was what's called the Choice Act. We were able to increase the amount of medical school student loans that we could pay off from \$60,000 to \$120,000. We'll...

MARTIN: ...Let me...

MCDONALD: Go ahead.

MARTIN: I'm sorry to push back on you, but this is an issue that has been a priority for the Defense Department and the VA for a long time - for many years. There've been tens of millions of dollars spent on programs and reforms expanding suicide hotlines,

increasing mental health staffing. But the suicide rate among veterans remains the same - has even ticked up among younger vets. So...

MCDONALD: ...Well, let me push back a little bit on you. I'm sorry for doing this. But my father-in-law was a tail gunner of a B-25 in World War II, and he was shot down over Germany. For the longest time, this man that I loved would never talk about his war experiences. We got him connected to the VA in Augusta, Ga. He joined a POW support group, and suddenly he became a new man. Unfortunately, he became a new man not too long before he passed away. If I had known then what I know now, I could have done a much better job of having him enjoy a quality life. And that's one of the reasons I'm doing the job I'm doing. It bothers me every single day that I didn't know it then.

We've made a lot of advances over the years. I admit that there's more to be made, but I can guarantee you that the VA and the Department of Defense, the president of the United States with his 19-point mental health program - everybody is focused on this, and everybody is trying to get it done.

MARTIN: Robert McDonald is the Secretary of Veterans Affairs. Thanks so much for talking with us.

MCDONALD: Thanks, Rachel. It's great to talk with you. Transcript provided by NPR, Copyright NPR.

0 Comments

WUJAL

 Login ▾

Sort by Best ▾

Share  Favorite 



Start the discussion...

Be the first to comment.

 Subscribe

 Add Disqus to your site

 Privacy