



**Department of
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News Release

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VA's Suicide Prevention Program Adds Chat Service *New Service Expands Online Access for Veterans*

WASHINGTON – The Suicide Prevention campaign of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is expanding its outreach to all Veterans by piloting an online, one-to-one “chat service” for Veterans who prefer reaching out for assistance using the Internet.

Called “Veterans Chat,” the new service enables Veterans, their families and friends to go online where they can anonymously chat with a trained VA counselor. If a “chatter” is determined to be in a crisis, the counselor can take immediate steps to transfer the person to the VA Suicide Prevention Hotline, where further counseling and referral services are provided and crisis intervention steps can be taken.

“This online feature is intended to reach out to all Veterans who may or may not be enrolled in the VA health care system and provide them with online access to the Suicide Prevention Lifeline,” said Dr. Gerald Cross, VA’s Acting Under Secretary for Health. “It is meant to provide Veterans with an anonymous way to access VA’s suicide prevention services.”

Veterans, family members or friends can access Veterans Chat through the suicide prevention Web site (www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org). There is a Veterans tab on the left-hand side of the website that will take them directly to Veteran resource information. On this page, they can see the Hotline number (1-800-273-TALK), and click on the Veterans Chat tab on the right side of the Web page to enter.

Veterans retain anonymity by entering whatever names they choose once they enter the one-on-one chat. They are then joined by a counselor who is trained to provide information and respond to the requests and concerns of the caller.

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If the counselor decides the caller is in a crisis, the counselor will encourage the Veteran to call the Suicide Prevention Hotline, where a trained suicide prevention counselor will determine whether crisis intervention techniques are required.

The pilot program, which has been in operation since July 3, has already had positive results. In one instance, the online counselor determined that a Veteran in the chat required immediate assistance. The counselor convinced the Veteran to provide the counselor with a home telephone number and then remained in the chat room with the Veteran while the hotline staff called the number and talked to the Veteran's mother. The hotline counselor worked with the Veteran's mother to convince the Veteran to be admitted to a medical facility for further treatment.

"The chat line is not intended to be a crisis response line," said Dr. Janet Kemp, VA's National Suicide Prevention Coordinator at the VA medical center in Canandaigua, N.Y., where VA's trained counselors staff the chat line from 4 p.m. to 11 p.m. VA's suicide prevention hotline is staffed 24 hours a day, seven day a week.

"Chat responders are trained in an intervention method specifically developed for the chat line to assist people with emotional distress and concerns," Kemp said. "We have procedures they can use to transfer chatters in crisis to the hotline for more immediate assistance."

Both Veterans Chat and the VA's Suicide Prevention Hotline have been established under the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, which was established through collaboration between VA and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) of the Department of Health and Human Services.

Since becoming operational in July 2007, VA's Suicide Prevention Hotline has received more than 150,000 calls, resulting in 4,000 rescues.

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