



Boozman Bulletin: Improving the Coordination of Suicide Prevention Efforts

September is National Suicide Prevention Month. I've made it a top priority to reduce the rate of suicide, particularly for veterans in Arkansas and around the country. Our men and women who are serving or have served in uniform suffer a disproportionately higher rate of suicide compared to the general population. The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) estimates that more than 20 veterans die by suicide daily. This suicide rate among veterans is nearly twice that of the general public. Veterans are particularly vulnerable and account for about 20 percent of suicides in Arkansas. This is truly a national crisis.

Congress is working to change the statistics. Over the last ten years, we've nearly quadrupled funding to the VA for suicide prevention efforts. Unfortunately, the additional resources haven't significantly improved the situation. As a member of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, I urged VA Secretary Robert Wilkie to do more to prevent veteran suicides.

One way to decrease the number of veterans who take their own lives is to create a VA grant program to leverage veteran-serving nonprofits and other community networks. Working with outside organizations will be particularly important because only six of the 20 veterans who die by suicide are receiving VA services. We have to tap into other groups that may be reaching these individuals.

In June, I introduced the *IMPROVE Wellbeing of Veterans Act* to allow the VA to tap into current community programs and provide a framework for better coordinating those community efforts and measuring the results. Secretary Wilkie called this bill the "key" to unlocking the veteran suicide crisis. This month he urged House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to pass companion legislation introduced by my colleagues in the House of Representatives.

There are ongoing efforts at all levels of government to tackle this emergency. In Arkansas, we are blessed to have community-based groups provide support,

services and outreach to at-risk veterans. I've heard how individual organizations are working to save the lives of our veterans, and as part of the "Serving AR Vets" tour, we brought together Natural State organizations and locally serving representatives from federal government agencies, all of whom are working toward this common goal.



In August I met with Arkansans who represent a variety of state and federal organizations that aim to reduce veteran suicides. By working together we can leverage the resources and knowledge they have to save lives.

Coordination and collaboration among veteran-serving parties will empower us to harness the information, resources and knowledge concerning the effectiveness of programs. This will enable us to model future initiatives on successful services and make changes to efforts that haven't shown results. Leveraging the experiences of organizations working to decrease veteran suicides is a more effective approach that will help save more lives.

It's also important to make it easier for veterans in crisis to get the help they need. That's why I teamed up with Senator Joe Manchin (D-WV) to introduce the *SPEED Act*. This legislation would establish a three-digit number that is easy for veterans to remember in order to reach the Veterans Crisis Line. By simplifying the number we can make further strides and expedite assistance to veterans in a crisis.

This idea is gaining momentum. Last month, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) sent a report to Congress that endorses a three-digit number to make it easier to access suicide prevention services. FCC Commission Ajit Pai said he intends "to move forward on this recommendation."

Having the support of government agencies, private organizations and individuals is critical to addressing this epidemic. No one entity can solve this problem. It must be a cooperative effort that includes input from veteran-serving organizations to the VA and the Department of Defense. We all share the same commitment. Sharing information and implementing policies to make it easier for Americans in a crisis will go a long way to help veterans.

Quick Takes:

· **Creating a Talent Pipeline for the Arkansas Workforce:** Providing resources for workforce education is vital to the economic growth and viability of our state. Close to a quarter of our skilled professionals are at or near retirement age. Arkansas's employers need talented workers who are prepared to step into the highly-skilled positions being vacated, as well as new ones opening up as the Natural State lures more manufacturers and industry here to set up shop. Building a pipeline of talent provides businesses with the workforce they need to operate. New approaches to [promoting and paving pathways to skilled labor careers](#) stand to make a significant difference for the livelihoods of hardworking future generations of Arkansas and our economy.

· **Advancing Arkansas Agriculture:** During my annual Ag Tour, I saw firsthand how our state's top industry is developing and employing innovative technology and methods to increase yields, conserve resources and improve operations. [Read about what I saw](#) on the #ARisAG tour and how our farmers and ranchers are using groundbreaking practices to help them make the most out of the work and investment they put into their operations.

· **Eliminating Barriers to Benefits for Veterans Exposed to Agent Orange:** During the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee hearing on Wednesday, I [urged my colleagues](#) to pass legislation to eliminate barriers to benefits for veterans who served in Thailand during the Vietnam War and were exposed to toxic chemicals. These veterans and their families started a letter writing campaign to make sure that we keep them at the top of our minds as we make policy. I shared their concerns with members of the committee.

· **Improving Infrastructure:** The FAA awarded \$1.5 million to the [Russellville Regional Airport](#) to improve its safety features. This upgrade will help accommodate future growth and development in the region.

· **Recognizing Arkansas Veterans:** The 'Salute to Veterans' series honors the service and sacrifice of Arkansas veterans who served our nation in uniform. In the latest edition, I highlighted the service of [Thomas Franklin Vaughns](#) who served in WWII and the Korean War. His memories of his time in uniform are an important part of our history and are now part of the collection of the Library of Congress Veterans History Project.

· **Connect on Social Media:** Stay up to date with what I'm doing for Arkansans via social media. You can find me on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).



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