

# KOVA: KEEP OUR VETS ALIVE

## A VETERAN SERVICE ORGANIZATION STRATEGIC PLAN AND GUIDING DOCUMENT

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### Executive Overview

1. This Strategic Plan and Guiding Document will outline, summarize, and provide immediate and long-term actions and guidance to combat the ongoing epidemic of veteran suicides in New Jersey. The “Champions” of this initiative will include the NJ Veteran Service Organization’s (VSO’s), VA, the private and public sectors, all considered “stakeholders”.
2. This is not meant to be a mental health or scientific document, but a guiding direction of how we can help end this tragedy with NJ Guard, Veterans, and families at the grassroots level with National, State, and other support. It will also provide immediate, suggested action plans for those stakeholders. All references and resources must be read, understood, and enacted for specific details to make this overall guiding plan viable.
3. This Plan will present resources which will be primarily implemented by NJ’s VSO’s. In turn, the NJ VSO’s will provide tools to their Posts, other groups, and individuals to educate our veterans, families, public and other concerned individuals. Community involvement and peer-to-peer support is mandatory to help remedy and raise awareness regarding this issue among our veterans.
4. Admittedly we are separate organizations by charter, but we must be ONE for solutions to implement this Plan.

### Background & Statistics -

1. Reported Data – Data for yearly total of Veteran suicides in NJ between 2014 and 2018 NJ’s 2014 – 2018 are reported within [Veteran Suicide Data and Reporting Mental Health](#). In summary there were 93 veteran suicides in 2014; 71 in 2015; 67 in 2016; 76 in 2017; and 63 in 2018. The data also provides a comparison by sex, state, and age group in the Northeast Region.

2. According to that data, the New Jersey Veteran suicide rate was nearly seven points higher than the New Jersey non-Veteran suicide rate (17.4 vs. 10.9 per 100,000).
2. Immediate Actions Needed – Implementing the Governor’s Challenge is mandatory as an effective first step and demonstration of top-level NJ support. The goal of the Mayor’s Challenge is to eliminate suicide by using a comprehensive public health approach to suicide prevention. The objectives of the Challenge include re-engaging the Executive Branch; public relations throughout state government; assigning a proactive and knowledgeable liaison; and endorsing all legislation pertaining to this and all veteran related subjects. [Governor’s and Mayor’s Challenges to Prevent Suicide Among Service Members, Veterans, and their Families | SAMHSA.](#)

#### Short- & Long-term Actions -

1. Local – Public relations type resource packages and press releases will be prepared for local editing, use and distribution. Monthly updates to this plan and resources will be made via existing VSO structures (e.g., Department Adjutants, and other liaisons.) These resources should be used prior to every VSO meeting to reinforce this initiative, not only with members but other veterans in the community. The NJBA (New Jersey Broadcasters Association) will be engaged for support, also suggesting periodic PSAs by various VSO spokespersons. Other local resources include:
  - i. “LEVET” (Law Enforcement Veteran Engagement Training), by Wilmington VA.
  - ii. [Gloucester County Veteran’s Initiative | Gloucester County, NJ.](#)
2. National – Consult your respective HQs for other approaches, but we must be ONE in NJ!
  - i. VA –

1. [National Report for 2020](#) is an all-encompassing document including Anchors of Hope which demonstrates that suicides rates declined for veterans under VHA care.
2. [VA Solid Start Program](#), helps veterans' transition to civilian life whose defined resources can apply to those considering suicide.
3. <https://www.va.gov/cfoi/> - The VA Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships participates in numerous outreach events nationwide to partner with organizations that serve our nation's Veterans. During partnership events, we bring a broad spectrum of VA resources and information through breakout sessions that include Veteran E-Benefits, survivors assistance, Veteran homelessness, opioid epidemic, and suicide prevention training by a trained VA Suicide Prevention Coordinator (SPC). Register for their newsletter.
4. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5woA7SLj4uo> – VA's "Team of Partners in the Community".
5. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=49Vg-xM9L7Q> - Wounded Warrior Project.
6. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YPFo9EvUUvA> – VA's "I'm Good" video.
7. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yW0kUmGvt30> – VA's Suicide Prevention Initiative Video.
8. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WcSUs9iZv-g> – "I jumped off the Golden Gate Bridge".
9. [VFW](#) – They have teamed up with [Give an Hour](#), [The Campaign to Change Direction](#), [One Mind](#), [PatientsLikeMe](#), [Elizabeth Dole Foundation](#), to combat this critical situation.

- a. Project Refit connection phone app [Project Refit's Blue Skies mobile app | website](#).
- ii. The American Legion – Buddy Check legislation, S4657 & HR2898. The Legion formally launched a "Buddy Check Week" program which encourages members to conduct veteran outreach as part of their daily routine. The idea is to reconnect with veterans who may need assistance but do not know where to go or who to ask, which could be especially helpful with potential suicide cases.
  1. Also see - [Get Involved with Buddy Checks | The American Legion](#).
3. Legislation – All VSO Department Legislative Chairs will use the information in this Plan, brainstorm other remedies, benchmark with other states, Departments, and their national organizations to work directly with NJ's Legislators and DMAVA to enact proactive legislation as ONE.
4. Respective VSO VA&R-like Chairs and others must also partner, compromise, network with forming tactical committees at the NJ and local levels.

#### NJ Resources, Tools & Examples

1. Develop and promote Suicide Awareness Campaigns to raise awareness in the community. Local, county and district implementation teams must engage all local resources, monitor, and provide feedback to their Departments or state liaisons. Use the PR-type resources in contained in this Plan, and other suggestions that will follow this issue.
2. VFW - Grants have been provided and continuing to local posts and other organizations to conduct mental health and suicide prevention programs targeted to Veterans and their families.
3. VFW - Partnered with veteran non-profits that provide peer support through wellness activities, such as fitness, surfing, yoga, cooking, book clubs, community service and peer recovery meetings. For instance, one post in Ocean County provides these services with the help of licensed professionals at a monthly cost

of \$15.56 per attendee per session. These programs deliver a social connection to the at-risk veteran population. Once they are in the door, we have an opportunity to assist them with the services they need, such as VA claims filing, housing, substance abuse recovery, and family support. Although the traditional monthly therapy session is important, and probably cannot be replaced in some cases, the social interaction with caring peers goes a long way.

4. "VFW Post 12173 Mental & Physical Wellness Series" - These group sessions are conducted in 16 events over 8 months (spring & fall) both in person and ZOOM. The sessions are facilitated by employees (all veterans) of the mental health agency contracted by the Post. They are not your typical group therapy sessions but interactive discussions with the employees and special guest speakers, some motivational speakers who are Navy SEALs, Army Rangers, etc. Sometimes there is "homework" for the next session. See Exhibit A.
5. Legion - Conducted a Department wide "Suicide Awareness" virtual seminar for members with professionals from the Wilmington VA Medical Center. More seminars are planned for 2021.
6. Legion – Pending S4657 & HR 2898 would direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to designate one week each year as "Buddy Check Week". This bill would expand an American Legion program to the Department of Veterans of Affairs to dramatically to promote advocacy and increase peer to peer interaction, with supporting resources.
7. NJVN (NJ Veterans Network) – "Uniformed Hero Crisis Team" is a pending launch of a county-by-county, statewide PTSD and Anti Suicide programs.
8. CVEB SNJ - They have hosted two Behavioral Health Forums and plan to host others.
9. Project Refit - <https://www.projectrefit.us/>. Project Refit believes combating isolation by building the community of the future will reduce suicide rates among the military and first responder communities.

10. Team RWB - <https://www.teamrwb.org/>. The mission of Team Red, White & Blue (Team RWB) is to enrich the lives of America's veterans by connecting them to their community through physical and social activity.
11. Travis Manion Foundation - <https://www.travismanion.org/>.
12. Woods – N – Water - [Woods ~n~ Water – We got your 6 from the water to the sticks \(woods-n-water.org\)](https://www.woods-n-water.org/).

Continual Improvement Items & Examples of Awareness Strategies -

1. Rutgers Equine Science Center is seeking combat veterans with and without PTSD symptoms to participate in a research study on the effects of Equine assisted activities on symptoms of PTSD. The results could relate to remedies preventing veteran suicides. This should not be associated with the various therapy groups in NJ that may have little scientific evidence behind their programs and trained clinical staff. See the following link for this very proactive Rutgers research project - [Veterans EAA Recruitment Flyer](#). Veterans interested in participating can reach out directly to Ellen Rankins by email [rutgerseaat@njaes.rutgers.edu](mailto:rutgerseaat@njaes.rutgers.edu), or phone, 848-932-3761. This will be concluded September 2021.
2. LEVET (Law Enforcement Veteran Engagement Planning Meeting) – The Wilmington VA conducted this session on May 27, 2021, with related topics such as education to officers to know who to call and when regarding a veteran in “distress”, strategy for future education, and what initial counties.
3. The Legion Department conducted “a “Buddy Check” walk during on June 9 during their 2021 State Convention.
4. CVEB SNJ conducted a Connecting Communities and Preventing Veteran Suicide session on June 22, 2021, with subject matter experts and veterans formerly “in distress, their experiences and remedies.
5. NJ VRT – The Wilmington VA conducted a WebEx conference regarding Law Enforcement Veteran Engagement, on June 24, 2021.

6. The Legion's Camden County Commander, Merchantville Post 68 and Team Red, White, and Blue conducted a PTSD/Suicide Awareness Walk on June 28, 2021.
7. The Wilmington VA will host and conduct a NJ Veteran Suicide Prevention Event at the Northfield CBOC on July 13, 2021, details forthcoming.
8. The Wilmington VA will conduct training sessions for the Atlantic and Cumberland County Prosecutor's Negotiators on September 23 and 24, 2021. Other sessions will be scheduled for December.
9. Atlantic County Sheriff's office training in October by the Wilmington VA Team.
10. A statewide Call to Action "conference" hosted by former Governor McGreevey and sponsored by Team KOVA, tentatively in October.
11. The Legion has included a substantial budget in the 2021 – 2022 Department Project for Veteran Suicide education.
12. The VFW Department has assigned a Program Coordinator and a "Veterans in Crisis" web page to support their Districts, Posts, and all veterans. They again budgeted funds in the 2021 – 2022 fiscal year to continue their efforts to substantially reduce veteran suicides. A Bill has been also drafted in collaboration with Congressman VanDrew to raise awareness for veteran suicide and aid and protections for caretakers and families that are affected.
  - a. The Program Coordinator contact is Leonard Weiszgerber, [vfwprograms@njvfw.com](mailto:vfwprograms@njvfw.com), 609-393-1929.
  - b. Website is - [Department of New Jersey VFW \(vfwnj.org\)](http://Department of New Jersey VFW (vfwnj.org)).
  - c. Additionally, a separate web page for Homeless Assistance was created, see <https://vfwnj.org/di/vfw/v2/default.asp?pid=96745>. This is a "natural fit", design and a causality between mental health, unemployment, and involvement in the criminal justice system.

Summary & Ultimate Mission – Governor's Challenge, Education Through Effective Communications, Community Involvement – Vet to Vet, Repetitive All Veteran Interaction - We Are One, Get Together & Get It (KOVA) Done!

KOVA Champions in no special order -



**American Foundation for Suicide Prevention**

New Jersey



Atlantic County Prosecutor's Office

Middlesex Prosecutor's Office

Cumberland Prosecutor's Office

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