

Primary Healthcare Providers and Veteran Suicide Prevention

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Alliance for a Safe Oregon

Steve Schneider - Disabled Combat Veteran

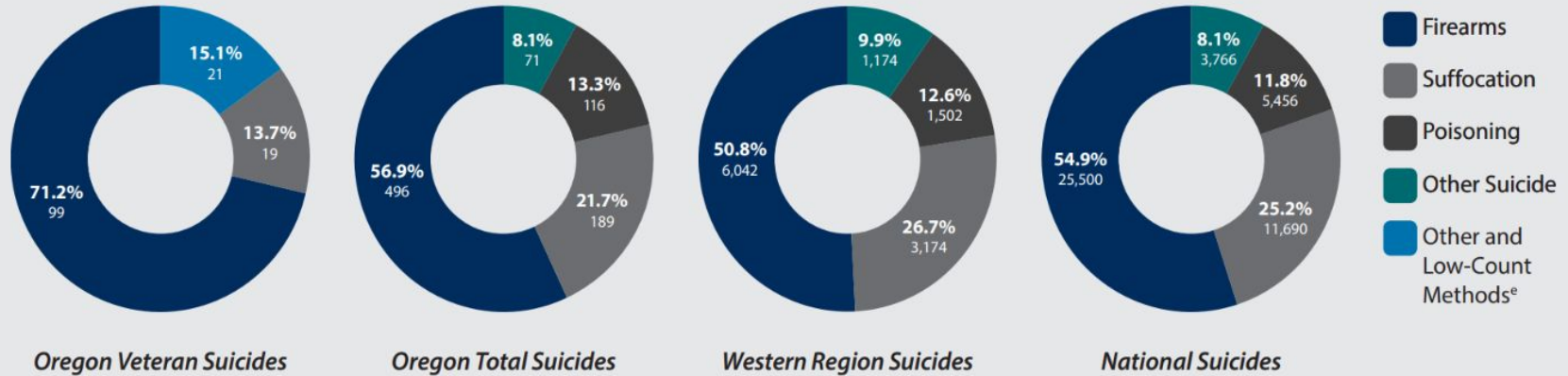
At least 4x as many active duty Veterans post-9/11 era
have died from suicide than combat or training

**Oregon's Veteran
and
Service Member
suicide rate
is 15% higher
than national
Veteran suicide rates**

**Oregon's Veteran
and
Service Member
suicide rate is
40% higher than
civilian suicide rates**

Veteran Suicide Methods

Oregon Veteran and Total Oregon, Western Region, and National Suicide Deaths by Method,^d 2021



Suicide isn't always predicable but it is one of the most preventable forms of death.

Primary Care Providers (PCPs) are missing an important opportunity to help save lives

85% of people who died from suicide have seen a Primary Healthcare Provider in the previous 12 months

- **50% in the past 30 days**
- **30% in the past week**

Less than a quarter of Veterans and Service members who die from suicide had a mental health diagnosis or had seen a mental health provider*



Efforts for Suicide Prevention must focus on Primary Care

Addressing gaps in Primary Care today

No required suicide prevention training

- Only mental health providers have required suicide prevention training; yet most VSMs who die by suicide only see primary care providers
- Many suicide prevention training programs do not address firearms
- Only 7% of VA PCPs report suicide screening (VA, 2022)

Lack of military cultural competency

- Across VA & non-VA providers, many PCPs lack understanding of military culture
- Veterans and Service members report feeling misunderstood and disrespected

Not addressing lethal means

- Providers lack cultural competence in understanding firearm owners and culture
- Need training to respectfully and competently discuss firearm safety planning

What Primary Healthcare Providers Need

Cultural Competency Training

Military Cultural Competency- To understand the mentalities and realities of Veterans and Service members

Firearm Cultural Competency- To speak respectfully and authentically about guns

Secure Storage Options- To understand importance of secure storage, including rapid-access at home for self defense carry; and off-site options and legality for temporary storage options

Clinical Skills

Lethal Means Counseling- Lethal means counseling (LMC) is a patient-centered, flexible strategy that aims to reduce access to lethal means during times of crisis

Safety Planning Training- Patient centered, practical solutions to keep Veterans and Service members safe

Firearms are a normal part of Veteran and Service Members lives & conversations

Veterans and Service Members

Veterans and service members have extensive professional and personal expertise and confidence discussing and handling firearms.

Primary Care Providers

Primary care providers report hesitation and lack of confidence to discuss firearms: **research shows less than 3 out of 10 physicians will discuss firearms.**

Firearms are in 50% of Oregon households: the responsibility is on physicians to learn how to normalize firearm discussions.

Lethal Means Counseling Saves Lives

Strong evidence shows that lethal means counseling and secure firearm storage saves lives.

- *An important recent study found that lethal means assessment reduces the risk for suicide attempt or death within 180 days from 3.3% to 0.83% ([Boggs, et al., 2022](#)).*
- Evidence shows when healthcare physicians speak respectfully and in a culturally competent manner with patients, they are much more likely to consider temporary storage of firearms during a difficult time. ([Pruitt, et al, 2022](#), [Marino, et al., 2018](#); [Wolsko, et al., 2019](#)).
- Lethal means counseling and distribution of secure storage devices changed firearm storage behaviors for National Guard members ([Anestis, et al., 2021](#))
- Families of high-risk youth who received lethal means counseling were more likely to limit, remove or secure lethal means than those who did not receive counseling.

What Veterans in Oregon Need from You

- 1. Mandate required training in Lethal Means Counseling for all PCPs in Oregon to gain confidence in addressing lethal means, *regardless of whether the patient has screened for suicide risk.***
- 2. Develop statewide standardized training offered in flexible formats- online modules and videos, and in-person and virtual training sessions**
- 3. Encourage and incentivize healthcare organizations to increase number of PCPs trained in suicide prevention and military cultural competency training**

Additional recommendations

Expand healthcare options for Veterans and Service Members without care

Today, over 10,000 Veterans have no access to care. While this is better than national rates, let's ensure every single Veteran has care.

Transportation for Rural Veterans

We know in our rural communities, access to VA care is critical. We need to continue to ensure Veterans have adequate transportation to care.

Statewide Distribution of Secure Storage Devices to Veterans through ODVA

Evidence-based approach but many programs offer cable locks only; data shows Veterans need lock boxes (not cable locks) but there are cost barriers.

We need more healthcare professionals with military backgrounds

Incentives and programs to bring service members into healthcare positions, especially to address our shortage of mental health care providers.