



## US Army Suicides Continue at Record Pace

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**General Peter Chiarelli (undated photo)**

The U.S. Army reported Tuesday that the number of suicides among soldiers this year has already equaled the number for all of last year, and so will rise for the fifth consecutive year, in spite of a major effort to combat the trend. The Army's number two officer says he is significantly short of the type of professionals who could help reverse the trend.

The vice chief of the Army, General Peter Chiarelli was frank about the latest statistics.

"This is horrible, and I do not want to downplay the significance of these numbers in any way," he said.

The general reported there have been 140 suicides among active duty soldiers this year, and another 71 among reservists and members of the National Guard, some of whom had been deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan.

"We talk about these incidents of suicide using figures and percentages," he said. "However the grim reality is each case represents an individual, a person, with family and friends and a future ahead of him or her. Every single loss is devastating."

But while the overall numbers are up, General Chiarelli says the rate has eased in recent months. Nearly 30 percent of Army suicides this year happened in January and February, with a steady decline since then except for a couple of months. But the general says in spite of extensive efforts, officials and doctors can not say why the rate is up in some months or down in others, or why it has risen steadily for the last five years.

"Everywhere I try to cut this and look at and try to find the causal effect I get thwarted, and that's why we think we've got to look, in its totality, at a whole bunch of different issues. And it's going to take time," he said.

The general says even seemingly obvious causes are not confirmed by the data. For example, about a third of the suicides are among soldiers who have never deployed to the war zones. But he says the Army has begun to identify some factors that could contribute to the high suicide rates, including post-traumatic stress, mild brain injuries that may not be diagnosed, substance abuse and the deployment of small numbers of soldiers far from bases that offer mental health services.

Indeed, the general says he could use at least 750 more mental health workers in the Army, in addition to the 900 who have been added to the force in the last two years. He says he also needs up to 300 more substance abuse counselors.

"We are an army that is based on authorizations that were prior to eight years of war," said General Chiarelli. "And I have been pounding the system to say, 'we have got to sit down and determine what we need after eight years of war.'"

The U.S. Army has been focused on mental health issues for several years, but concern was heightened earlier this month when a soldier killed 12 colleagues and one civilian in a shooting rampage on a base in Texas. The alleged gunman is an officer, and a psychiatrist who specializes in stress, and was scheduled to be deployed to Afghanistan. He is also a Muslim, who is now believed to have militant leanings.

The Army is funding a huge mental health study which will keep track of as many as half a million soldiers during the next five years. It is also implementing a variety of innovative programs designed to make it easier for soldiers to report their own problems, and to help comrades who show signs of being suicidal.

"This is a matter of life and death, and it is absolutely unacceptable to have individuals suffering in silence because they're afraid their peers or superiors will make fun of them, or worst [that] it will adversely affect their careers," said the general.

General Chiarelli says soldiers need to realize that mental problems are just like bullet wounds and broken legs, and must be treated by trained professionals. He calls dealing with the Army's mental health and suicide problems the toughest challenge he has faced in his 37 years of service.

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