Family Matters Blog: Military Working to Stop Suicides, Mullens Say

By Elaine Wilson, American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, Sept. 15, 2010 – Nearly a decade of war is taking its toll on our military families.

Military suicides have more than doubled in the Army, and exceeded the national average over the past five years. Military leaders are intent on stopping this trend, not only among servicemembers but their families as well. During a recent interview, Navy Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and his wife, Deborah, talked about what it will take to stop troops and families from taking their own lives.

"It's an area that can't get enough focus right now," the chairman said. "When we're losing as many lives as we are, it is a crisis we have to continue to address."

Last year, suicide claimed 309 troops, and in 2008, 267 servicemembers committed suicide, according to a Defense Department task force. From 2005 to 2009, more than 1,100 servicemembers took their own lives, an average of one suicide every 36 hours, the task force said.

"A significant amount of work needs to be done on the prevention aspect of [suicide] so we don't get to the point where men and women would consider doing this," Chairman Mullen said.

The military also must work to end the stigma that's preventing people from seeking help early on, Mullen said, including family members afraid to raise a red flag.

Mrs. Mullen said she's personally heard from spouses about that fear. Spouses often are the first to notice a problem, but are fearful of the career repercussions for their servicemember if they speak up, she said.

"We know that servicemembers tell their spouses not to mention any sort of symptoms the servicemember might be experiencing for fear that, as one spouse said, 'That will mean the end of their career,'" she said. "That stigma is so ingrained and embedded in not just the military, but in our country, and breaking through that is going to be key ... to solving this problem."

This internal barrier to seeking help can have a far-ranging effect, also causing spouses to stop short of seeking much-needed help for themselves, Mrs. Mullen said. Spouses, she said, may be suffering from stress, anxiety, frustration and anger, but are afraid of the fallout from asking for care.

Fortunately, families have more avenues of help now than ever before, including ones that offer anonymity, she said. People who are uncomfortable speaking with someone at a military clinic can instead receive 12 free counseling appointments through <u>Military OneSource</u> or contact <u>Tricare</u> for online counseling at home. Other resources include the <u>National Suicide Prevention Lifeline</u> at 1-800-273-TALK begin_of_the_skype_highlighting, the <u>Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors at 1-800-959-TAPS</u>

begin_of_the_skype_highlightingend_of_the_skype_highlighting (8277) or a military family life consultant. Additionally, the <u>Real Warriors website</u> offers suicide prevention resources and personal stories of hope.

Support is particularly vital after a suicide, when a family is at its most vulnerable, Mrs. Mullen said, stressing the importance of what she calls "post-vention," or after care.

"It's important to make sure that the people at risk after the suicide are reached and that they have the opportunity to express privately maybe their own concerns, their own thoughts," she said. "I think if we provide for them the appropriate post-vention care that we will restore the hope for those families that this may not occur in their family again."

The Mullens both stressed the importance of hope, both in prevention efforts and in the aftermath of a tragedy. A suicide, they said, means all hope was lost.

"[There's] help out there that would allow an individual to move through this," the chairman said. "Keep the hope, as difficult as that may seem in these circumstances."

"No matter how hard, how long, no matter what it takes, however many people need to get involved in this, this is something that the military is going to pursue and try to eliminate totally." Mrs Mullen added.

For more on this interview, read my American Forces Press Service article, "More Focus Needed to End Suicides, Mullens Say" or watch the interview on the Pentagon Channel Sept. 17, which will run as part of the channel's special, "Restoring Hope: Stories of Survival."

Also visit the American Forces Press Service Web special <u>"Restoring Hope: You can Help Save a Life."</u> My fellow blogger and colleague, Heather Forsgren Weaver, also wrote about this special in the Family Matters Blog, <u>"Blogger Urges Readers to Restore Hope."</u>

To comment on this blog, visit the <u>Family Matters website</u>.

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