

THE UNIVERSITY OF
ALABAMA

OPERATION DEEP DIVE REPORT 2018



INTRODUCTION



As a nation, we often speculate about the causal factors of veteran suicide. To date, we have not been able to differentiate the characteristics of a veteran who might take their life in Syracuse, New York, as compared to one in Johnson City, Tennessee, or Orange County, California. We may never know exactly why a person finally dies from suicide, or how to interrupt them during the final moments just before death. However, energized

communities can develop partnerships dedicated to engaging veterans and their families in times of stress. Together, we can change the trajectory of their lives so that they accept help and never become suicidal.

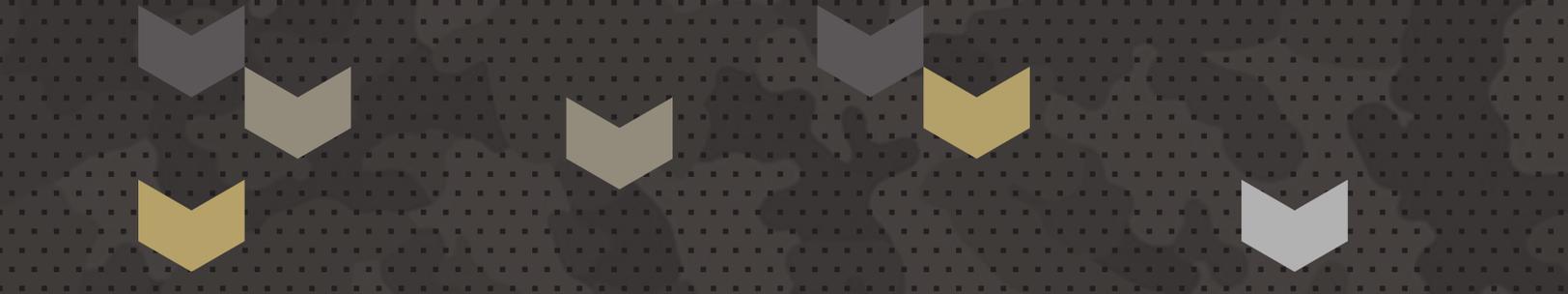
In December 2017, we at America's Warrior Partnership announced the launch of Operation Deep Dive, a four-year research study that we are conducting in partnership with University of Alabama researchers through visionary funding from the Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation. Operation Deep Dive has officially celebrated its first-year anniversary as of December 1, 2018.

Operation Deep Dive is the first study of its kind in many ways. It is a community-based initiative with a national scope, designed to be led by and for local communities to ensure they gain direct and tangible benefits that are tailored to the unique veterans in their area. Representatives from America's Warrior Partnership and University of Alabama researchers are leading the study nationally, while local teams are coordinating the study at the community level.

The first year focused on building our foundations to ensure that we can be truly of service in ending the veteran suicide epidemic. We onboarded 14 communities, hired research assistants, established relationships with local medical examiner and coroners, obtained state-wide and community-level data, and developed the Sociocultural Death Investigation tool. This report highlights our successes and challenges at the local and national level for 2018, as well as what we anticipate achieving by the end of 2019.

"I feel understanding veteran suicide in the Panhandle is important because veterans are a valuable part of our community. When we lose even one, there is a hole in the community that is felt not only in the Panhandle, but in the veteran/military community everywhere."

Mandi Rockwell, Panhandle FL



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Operation Deep Dive's success would not be possible without the commitment of our national, state, and local-level partners. We would like to offer our sincerest thanks to the 123 (and counting) community-level organizations that have joined the first six Community Action Teams to fight this crisis in their own backyards. This includes the support of local medical examiner and coroner offices who are working with us to better understand the scope of the problem in their communities. Thank you most of all to the 14 local organizations and cities who have taken the lead in their communities. Without their local leadership, none of this would be possible.

“I’m hopeful that through this in-depth study, our community will be strengthened in a way that it will foster a climate that promotes help-seeking and provides much needed suicide-related services and support.”

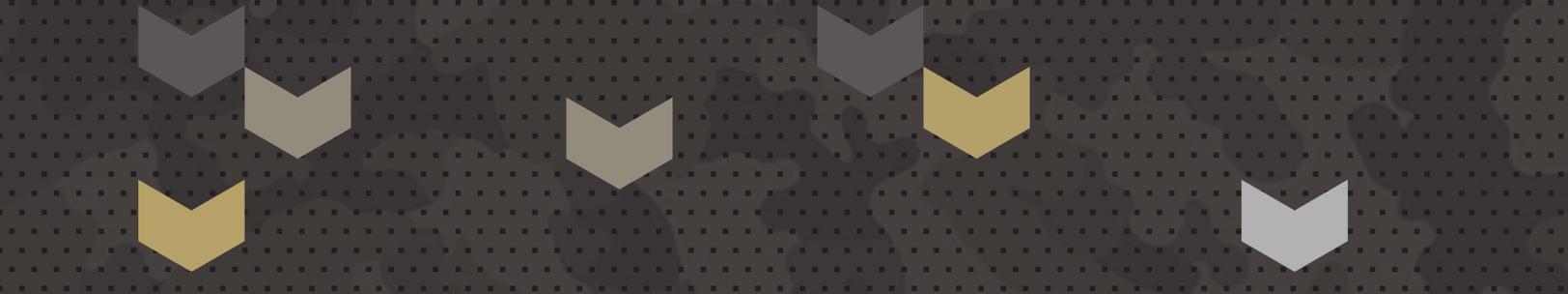
Kim Bradley, Charleston SC

Nationally, we are grateful to the Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs for supporting this study by sharing invaluable data about the veterans who have died by suicide in the 14 community sites.

Thank you to Maxar for supporting this project by geo-mapping all identified veteran suicides in each community along with other community factors that will help us better understand the issue in each community. Thank you also to United Way 2-1-1 across the country for volunteering their impressive database of what resources veterans are requesting in their communities. We are also grateful to the Center for Disease Control (CDC) for sharing their expertise and data with us to support this effort. We have had discussions with numerous private and public entities that expressed a desire to provide their time and expertise to Operation Deep Dive. Thank you for your generosity, and we look forward to working with you in the coming years of the study!

Lastly, but most important, this study is taking place because of the visionary funding provided by Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation. Thank you for your passionate commitment to creating communities where veterans can thrive.

Together, we can and will have a tremendous impact on veterans across the country—and ultimately end death by suicide among veterans, which is our definitive goal. Thank you for your support!



WHAT IS OPERATION DEEP DIVE?

Operation Deep Dive is a community-based veteran suicide prevention study led by America's Warrior Partnership and researchers from the University of Alabama, funded by a \$2.9 million grant from the Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation. The goal of the study is to identify the risk factors that lead to suicide within veteran communities.

Community Action Teams

Each of the communities participating in Operation Deep Dive will have a Community Action Team made up of local medical examiners, coroners, veteran-servicing organizations, law enforcement officers, civic leaders, veterans and their families and caregivers. These teams work with researchers at the University of Alabama to understand unique aspects of their region as they investigate local cases of suicide. With each community bringing its own areas of expertise and data to the study, a difference can be made in the lives of our nation's warriors, particularly the most vulnerable veterans.

Data Collection Methodologies

This study will be collecting data from numerous national, state, and local resources to take a truly deep dive into understanding the veteran suicide crisis. One of the key aspects of our research is retrospective to identify all non-natural (suicide, undetermined, accidental) veteran deaths per community. We will then confirm veteran status and obtain service with the Department of Defense. This will provide an accurate number of veteran deaths by suicide or self-harm in the 14 communities we are studying. We can also then identify any local or national patterns based on their demographics, service history, and more from other data sources that we are able to collect on these individuals. This will give us a clearer picture of what the suicide epidemic looks like in each community, and where there are differences and similarities across the nation.

Another major component of the study is the tool we have developed to obtain qualitative data for the prospective aspect of the study. The Sociocultural Death Investigation (SDI), will be administered to a minimum of three individuals who knew the former service member and their death occurred no longer than 4 months prior to the interview.

Why Operation Deep Dive Matters

The VA estimates that 20 veterans die by suicide every day; the CDC has identified suicide as a public health crisis. However, while previous studies have evaluated this crisis from a national level, there is little insight as to how local factors are affecting veterans who live in different communities. Operation Deep Dive seeks to fill these research gaps and provide organizations

with actionable insights they can use to more proactively and effectively support the veterans they serve in their community.

Our ultimate goal for this study is to create evidence-based prevention and intervention programming from our research findings that create a better quality of life for all veterans. We want to see a United States where veterans never get to the point of such despair and isolation that they feel like they have no other option except to take their own life.

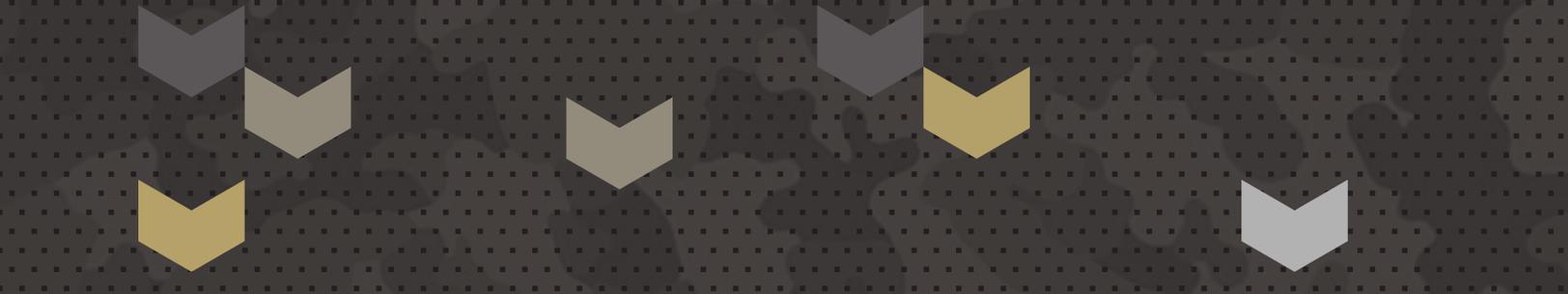
For more information about our deep dive into understanding veteran suicide, visit: <https://americaswarriorpartnership.org/deep-dive/>

COMMUNITIES PARTICIPATING IN OPERATION DEEP DIVE



* Community sites launched in 2018

** Community sites launched in 2019



PHASE 1 (2018) STUDY SUCCESSES & CHALLENGES

Successes

In our first year, we launched the study in six communities and selected an additional eight communities starting in 2019.

The first six communities were Panhandle, FL; Charleston, SC; Greenville & Upstate, SC; Orange County, CA; Metro Atlanta, GA; and Twin Cities, MN. Year two communities selected to launch in 2019 include Charlotte, NC; Cincinnati, OH; Houston, TX; Indianapolis, IN; Las Vegas, NV; Mobile, AL; Phoenix, AZ; and Syracuse, NY.

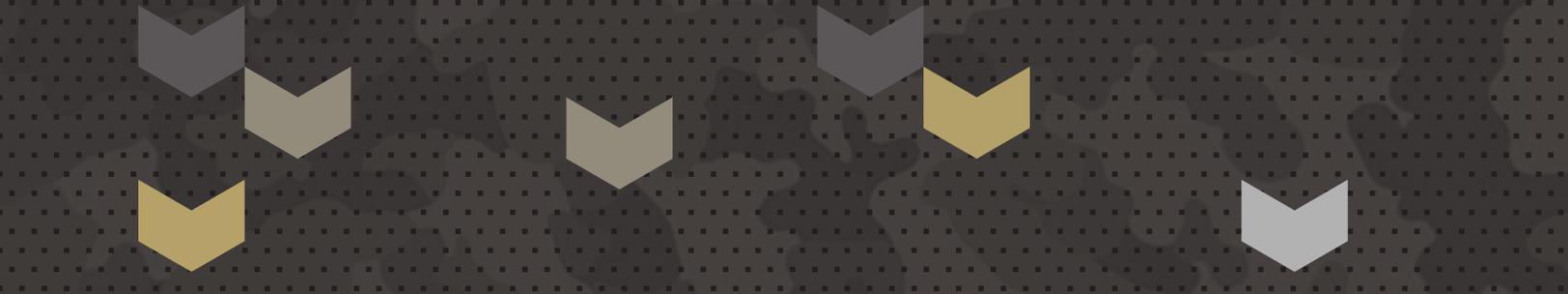
Community Action Teams (CAT) and the local research assistants from the first communities have already begun to make a positive impact in their communities. For example, in a Charleston meeting on veteran homelessness and suicide, CAT members were surprised to learn that veterans on the cusp of homelessness are at a higher risk of suicide according to a VA 2018 report. The CAT members then talked about ways to approach individuals at risk of homelessness with more awareness of this risk, and how to best support their mental health. Improvements big and small are happening in our communities as people work together to solve this crisis.

Collaboration with local, state, and national private and public institutions has been instrumental to our success so far in the study. This includes 123 local community organizations who have joined our Community Action Teams, and federal relationships with the VA, Department of Defense, CDC and United Way.

From the state of Minnesota, District 1 of Florida, and Orange County, California we now have data on suicides and deaths from self-harm from 2014 to 2018. In some cases, their veteran status is already confirmed, and in others we will need to confirm that they served in the military with the Department of Defense. See the below community snapshots for current numbers of known veteran suicides. We will be confirming how many of these are, in fact, Veterans in 2019.

We have built relationships with medical examiners and coroners so that we can identify locally deceased veterans from suicide or self-harm. In 2019, we will begin to dive deep into the lives of these individuals to find out what patterns emerge that can help us prevent more suicides.

Another major success of 2018 is that our research team has developed the Sociocultural Death Investigation (SDI) tool that will be used by the research assistants to conduct interviews with family members, colleagues or friends of veterans who have died by suicide or self-harm. This tool is adapted from the standard Psychological Autopsy to focus on sociocultural factors and the community environment of the veteran.



Challenges

The single largest challenge to our study in 2018 is that data on veteran suicides are not collected and maintained in a systematic way nationwide. Each state differs on who maintains the death records and/or submits them to the Department of Health. States also differ on who can access tabulated data as well as identifiable information on deceased veterans. In order to complete the retrospective analysis of the last five years of veteran suicides, we need identifiable information of all non-natural deaths so that we can confirm with the Department of Defense that they served in the military.

For example, Florida's sunshine law makes it lawful to receive Medical Examiner reports without a subpoena or data sharing agreement. However, in order to receive disaggregated data from the Florida Department of Vital Records, you must complete a 10-page data sharing agreement and pay a minimum \$150 depending on the type of information. In other counties and states there is no clear or easy process to obtain this information at all. In Florida, they do track veteran status, however their question is "Did you serve in the Army". This may mean that their numbers could potentially exclude deceased veterans from other branches of service.

In addition, the number and complexity of data-sharing agreements needed at the state, county, and federal level has been a challenge due to the time consuming and unique nature of each entity's legal requirements. These agreements are vital to achieve our goal of accurately identifying the number of veteran suicides and deaths by self-harm in each community.

“Operation Deep Dive has brought our veterans and the community together in an effort to learn about suicide and reduce their occurrence in Orange County.”

Denton Knapp, Orange County, CA



COMMUNITY UPDATES

Below is a snapshot of our progress in each of the original six communities participating in the study. Each year we will update this table to provide a high level look at what we know. 2019's report will include all 14 communities.

Community	Community Action Team in Place	Coroner(s) or Medical Examiner(s) Engaged	# of identified non-natural deaths 2014 - 2018	# of known veteran non-natural deaths	# of interviews conducted with survivors
Atlanta, GA	Yes	Yes	Under Investigation	Under Investigation	*Interviews begin in 2019
Charleston, SC	Yes	Yes	Under Investigation	Under Investigation	
Upstate SC	Yes	Yes	Under Investigation	Under Investigation	
Orange County, CA	Yes	Yes	4,793 identified non-natural deaths from 2014 to 2017	Will obtain 2018 number and verify number of veteran deaths in 2019	
Panhandle of Florida	Yes	Yes	3,245 *Data for whole state of FL. Initial data request only was for those identified as being in the "Army". It is expected that the number will increase once we have all non-natural deaths to verify veteran status.		
Twin Cities, MN	Yes	Yes	171,662 *Data for whole state of MN	42,342 identified non-natural veteran deaths - 2014 - 2017 (waiting on 2018 data) *Data for whole state of MN	
Total			179,700	45,562	

For more updates on the progress and experiences of Operation Deep Dive in our partner communities, [visit our blog.](http://www.americaswarriorpartnership.org/deep-dive/deep-dive-blog/)
www.americaswarriorpartnership.org/deep-dive/deep-dive-blog/

KNOWN VETERAN SUICIDE HOT SPOTS

According to the CDC¹, our study includes four communities that have been identified as “high density” counties for suicides among veterans aged 18-35. The following is a list of these communities, ranked by overall number of suicides:

Community	County
Charlotte, NC	Mecklenburg
Atlanta, GA	Fulton
Charleston, SC	Charleston
Upstate SC	Greenville

“Operation Deep Dive is a priority because it offers a proactive community-based approach that will no doubt provide answers and solutions for the future.”

Theresa Thompson,
Upstate South Carolina

WHAT’S AHEAD FOR OPERATION DEEP DIVE IN 2019

In 2019, the study will be operational in all 14 communities. Fourteen Community Action Teams will lead the study locally and work to improve the quality of life of veterans and reduce deaths by suicide or self-harm by utilizing study findings.

We will also complete the five-year retrospective data investigation for all 14 communities. This investigation will look at the impact of less-than-honorable discharges on veteran suicides and suspected suicides as well as the difference in suicide rates between those who received and did not receive support services from the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs.

Interviews with loved ones who have lost a veteran to suicide or self-harm will begin in the second half of 2019. Research Assistants will be trained to effectively and compassionately utilize the newly developed Sociocultural Death Investigation tool in their interviews. This tool will be tested and refined to ensure it meets our intended goal of better understanding community factors related to veteran suicide or deaths by self-harm.

By the end of 2019, we hope to have preliminary data to share with each community that better defines the scope of this epidemic in their area, and insights into specific challenges veterans who lost their lives were facing in their community.

To stay updated on all Operation Deep Dive activities, [visit our website](http://www.americaswarriorpartnership.org/deep-dive/) [www.americaswarriorpartnership.org/deep-dive/](http://www.americaswarriorpartnership.org/deep-dive/deep-dive-blog/) and [tune into our blog](http://www.americaswarriorpartnership.org/deep-dive/deep-dive-blog/) www.americaswarriorpartnership.org/deep-dive/deep-dive-blog/, where we will feature national and community level information and insights on our progress.

¹Logan, J et al. (2016). Suicide Among Military Personnel and Veterans Aged 18-35 Years by County-16 States. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 51(5S3):S197-S208

WHAT COMMUNITY ACTION TEAMS ARE SAYING ABOUT OPERATION DEEP DIVE



“I feel understanding veteran suicide in the Panhandle is important because veterans are a valuable part of our community. When we lose even one, there is a hole in the community that is felt not only in the Panhandle, but in the veteran/military community everywhere.”

Mandi Rockwell, *Panhandle Florida Community Project Lead & Outreach Specialist for 90Works Panhandle Warrior Partnership*



“The importance of the information gathered in Operation Deep Dive is critical for changing the trajectory of veteran suicide. Suicide in a family and community is a generational-changing event that has a large ripple effect within our society and community. Statistics show that children and relatives are at further risk of death by suicide if there is a history of death by suicide in the family further extending the impact in our community. Operation Deep Dive has an opportunity to further identify risk factors and make social change in our community and reduce the number of deaths and the effects on our community as a result of death by suicide.”

Kevin McBride, *Upstate South Carolina Community Action Team member & Director, Military & Government liaison Office for Prisma Health*



“There are estimated to be 20 veteran suicides per day; in our opinion, one is one too many. This is why participating in Operation Deep Dive is a priority because it offers a proactive community-based approach that will no doubt provide answers and solutions for the future. We need to actively reduce veteran suicides because our warriors and their families deserve better; they deserve comfort and peace.”

Theresa T. Thompson, *Upstate South Carolina Community Action Team member & Community Development Director for Upstate Warrior Solution*



“The Tierney Center for Veteran Services, Goodwill Industries of Orange County, CA, is humbled to be one of only 14 communities selected to join America’s Warrior Partnership in Operation Deep Dive, to find the root causes of death by suicide for our county’s veterans. This effort to identify indicators that may provide early warning to prevent future suicides from occurring is definitely a team effort. The Community Action Team meets monthly, including participation from many service organizations, mental health specialists, VA Long Beach, CALVET, and staff personnel for our locally elected officials,

with over 25 expert individuals and organizations to discuss veteran suicide. The recent general meeting of the Orange County Veterans and Military Families Collaborative (OCVMFC) had over 100 attendees focused on veteran suicides and highlighted guest speakers from the University of Alabama, Dr. Karl Hamner, as well as Long Beach VA representative, Mr. Richard Beam. Operation Deep Dive has brought our veterans and the community together, in an effort to learn about suicides, and reduce the occurrence in Orange County.”

Everette “Denton” Knapp, *Orange County Community Project Lead & Director of the Tierney Center for Veteran Services at Goodwill of OC*



“Operation Deep Dive (ODD) is important to the greater Atlanta metro area because this will help us address suicide in the Service Member/ Veteran community. This study will also give us measurable ways to end suicide in civilian population. No American should ever feel so hopeless that they feel their only option is to take their lives.”

Jarrad Turner, Metro Atlanta Community Project Lead & Director of Warrior Engagement for The Warrior Alliance



“Operation Deep Dive will ultimately give us insights to better support those struggling in our Twin Cities military and veteran community and learn about decreasing ‘military connected’ suicide. The project also has the potential to strengthen collaboration efforts across the community through galvanizing efforts around the shared concern for suicides; creating space for connecting and shared problem solving on several other issues and breaking down communication silos of diverse but like-minded organizations.”

Allison Alstrin, Twin Cities Community Action Team Member & Project Manager Consultant for Project Got Your Back



“Individual communities need to have shared responsibility when it comes to understanding and preventing veteran suicide and what a great opportunity for Charleston to be one of the “Operation Deep Dive” communities allowing for our local leaders, coroners and other community partners to work together in a way that has never been done before as veteran suicide and its complexity is explored. I’m hopeful that through this in-depth study, our community will be strengthened in a way that it will foster a climate that promotes help-seeking and provide much needed suicide-related services and supports.”

Kim Bradley, RN, BSN, Charleston Community Action Team Member, & Combat Casualty Nurse for the Navy Marine Corps Relief Society Charleston Office