EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Our mission at America’s Warrior Partnership is empowering communities to empower veterans. Thus, we announced the launch of Operation Deep Dive (OpDD), a four-year, community-based, former service member suicide and non-natural death prevention study in partnership with researchers from The University of Alabama (UA) in December 2017. This study is generously funded by a $2.9 million grant from the Bristol Myers Squibb Foundation.

The goal of OpDD is to identify community-level risk factors associated with suicides and non-natural deaths among former service members. These findings will be used to develop an upstream approach to enhancing programs that aim to reduce those community-level risk factors and improve former service members’ quality of life.

Operation Deep Dive consists of two key components: an analysis of retrospective (quantitative) data and the collection and analysis of prospective (qualitative) data. For the retrospective component, we are actively obtaining data from the Department of Defense (DoD), Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC), Department of Veteran Affairs (VA), Maxar, TransUnion, and local and state entities to perform a comprehensive analysis of former service members who died by suicide or a non-natural cause of death from 2014 through 2018.

The prospective component consists of utilizing the sociocultural death investigation (SDI) tool to interview the relatives, loved ones, friends, or colleagues of former service members who died by suicide or a non-natural cause of death. The goal of the SDI tool is to examine how former service members were engaged within their communities and to identify factors that may have impacted their quality of life and contributed to them dying by suicide or a non-natural cause of death. Importantly, to align with the goals of this study, we operationally define veteran as any person who has served in the United States Armed Forces regardless of time served and character of discharge. Therefore, we use the term former service member instead of veteran.

With the commitment of national, state, and local partners, we aim to change the trajectory of former service member suicide and non-natural death prevention efforts to ensure that we can truly be of service in effectively and proactively addressing this epidemic.

Acknowledgments

Operation Deep Dive’s success would not be possible without the commitment of our national, state, and local partners and generous funding from the Bristol Myers Squibb Foundation. We would like to offer our sincerest thank you to the many partners across the country who are committed to supporting our efforts. Together, we can and will have a lasting impact on former service members across the country. Thank you for your support!
The VA’s Office of Research and Development approved the submission of OpDD

Given this approval, we will ask the VA to indicate if DoD-verified, decedent former service members were connected to the VA for benefits or services.

The IRB approved our revised study protocol

The University of Alabama’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved our revised study protocol. The IRB was informed that we had completed the planning phase for OpDD and were ready to recruit participants to partake in the SDI interviews (prospective component of OpDD).

Draft Phase II MOU approved by the Defense Suicide Prevention Office (DSPO)

The DSPO agreed to sponsor America’s Warrior Partnership and The University of Alabama in our efforts to obtain data on DoD service history for former service member decedents. We agreed to provide the Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC) with the decedents’ identifiers in batches. The DMDC agreed to verify which decedents were former service members and provide their DoD service history and personnel data elements.

Initiated research assistant hiring and onboarding process to support the launch of new research sites

With the support of America’s Warrior Partnership’s Administration Team, we initiated the process of hiring and onboarding highly qualified research assistants to conduct SDI interviews at the new research sites.

Launched eight additional community research sites

We officially launched a research site in Alabama, Arizona, Indiana, Nevada, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, and Texas—joining the first group of communities across California, Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, and Minnesota.

Lt Col Jim Lorraine, USAF (retired) President & CEO of America’s Warrior Partnership testified before the U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs and highlighted the importance of OpDD

Jim Lorraine delivered a powerful testimony on Harnessing the Power of Community: Leveraging Veteran Networks to Tackle Suicide in support of the PREVENTS Executive Order. He emphasized the importance of collaborative research and data sharing between academic institutions, the VA, DoD, other federal agencies, and state and local entities (e.g., coroner and medical examiner offices).
SUCCESSES

Community Research Sites

Year two of Operation Deep Dive has been largely successful with the addition of eight community research sites located in Mobile, AL; Phoenix, AZ; Indianapolis, IN; Las Vegas, NV; Charlotte, NC; Cincinnati, OH; Houston, TX and Syracuse, NY. These communities joined the original six research sites located in Orange County, CA; Atlanta, GA; Charleston, SC; Greenville, SC; Panhandle, FL; and Twin Cities, MN. Collectively, we have 14 research sites across 13 states.

Operation Deep Dive
13 States Involved in Study

* = Launched in 2018
** = Launched in 2019
**Sociocultural Death Investigation Tool**

We at America’s Warrior Partnership, researchers at The University of Alabama (UA), and experts from varying disciplines collaborated to refine sections and questions on the Sociocultural Death Investigation (SDI) tool likely to be relevant to the last 6 to 12 months of a former service member’s life. The revised tool was approved by UA’s IRB. To ensure research assistants were proficient in using the SDI tool to conduct interviews with relatives, colleagues, and friends of former service members who died by suicide or a non-natural cause of death, we built a comprehensive training program.
Community Action Teams
The Community Action Teams (CAT) were integrated with each community research site’s larger collaboratives (e.g., Community Veteran Engagement Boards, Mayor’s Challenges, and Governor’s Challenges). This transition aligned with our vision to ensure a long-term platform where study findings and best practices learned from OpDD would inform community outreach strategies and promote an upstream approach to former service member suicide and non-natural death prevention aimed at improving their quality of life.

Blogs
We launched the Deep Dive Blog on our study webpage to keep the public updated on national and community-level insights relevant to the study. For instance, the CAT in Mobile, Alabama was able to tell a success story in which a CAT member and a police officer were able to interrupt a former service member’s suicide attempt. After attending to the former service member’s immediate needs, they were connected to the local VA Suicide Prevention Coordinator and other local resource providers. With just one CAT member’s willingness to take action, the entire Mobile community was mobilized to coordinate the former service member’s care and ensure supports were in place once the individual was discharged from the hospital.

Data Obtained from States & The Department of Defense/Defense Manpower Data Center
We obtained death records from Florida, Minnesota, Nevada, and Ohio for 2014 through 2018 to provide to the DoD for verification of service. The DoD signed the Phase II Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and shared data with the DMDC. Collectively, there were 424,761 deaths submitted for review from 2014 through 2018. Of those deaths, 57,292 were identified as former service members.
CHALLENGES

Prospective

Obtaining interview participants has been particularly challenging as we were focused on launching the study, integrating CATs with larger collaboratives, building relationships with medical examiners and coroners who would assist with identifying former service members who died by suicide or due to a non-natural cause, and training research assistants.

Retrospective

Executing data usage agreements and MOUs with federal entities to obtain and share data is a complex process. We had to learn how to navigate a host of laws and regulations enforced by federal, state, and local government entities. Obtaining data on decedents posed unique challenges. For example, we learned that some states will not provide minimal personally identified information needed to distinguish a former service member death from a non-service member, civilian death, even when researchers have approval from the IRB.

Additionally, it has been challenging to code the causes of death as there are more than 25,000 causes of death that are not linked to International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (ICD) codes.

WHAT’S AHEAD FOR OPERATION DEEP DIVE IN 2020

In 2020, research assistants will continue to conduct interviews using the SDI tool to inform community action around improving former service members’ quality of life and ensuring an upstream approach to address suicide and non-natural deaths among former service members.

We will continue to collaborate with federal, state, and local entities to obtain retrospective data needed to investigate former service member suicides and non-natural deaths from 2014 through 2018.

By the end of 2020, we hope to share preliminary data that can better define the scope of suicides and non-natural deaths among former service members as well as insights into specific challenges former service members may experience in participating communities.

To stay updated on all Operation Deep Dive activities, please visit www.americaswarriorpartnership.org/deep-dive/