Operation Deep Dive
Annual Report | 2020
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!
STUDY MILESTONES | 2020

JAN

• Onboarded two New Program Managers (PM) | We hired and officially onboarded one PM for America’s Warrior Partnership’s Augusta Office and another to join our research team at the University of Alabama to oversee daily operations and collaborate with community partners to recruitment prospective participants and obtain state death data.

JAN

• Annual Strategic Meeting with America’s Warrior Partnership & the UA | We held a joint-strategic meeting at the UA to discuss project goals for 2020. The UA Program Manager presented on the status of obtaining state death records (i.e., retrospective data for the current approved states).

FEB

• Initiated Lunch & Learns to Partner with Funeral Home Directors & Staff | The Lunch & Learn event consisted of a 90-minute training session on Combatting Compassion Fatigue within the funeral services industry. Following the session, we gave a brief presentation on OpDD and how they could support veterans in their community through the study.

APR

• Successfully Modified & Renewed Study Protocol | We submitted an amendment to expand the retrospective component of OpDD to all states. Due to COVID-19, traveling restrictions, and concerns regarding the health and safety of our research assistants and prospective participants. We also requested approval to conduct interviews only by phone rather than in person.

SEPT

• Testimony Before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Veterans Affairs | On September 10, 2020, Lt Col James Lorraine, USAF (retired) and President & CEO of America’s Warrior Partnership delivered a testimony on veteran suicide in support of S. 785 and highlighted OpDD’s progress to date. On September 23, 2020, S. 785 passed/agreed to in House of Representative.

OCT

• S. 785/Public Law 116–171 | On October 17, 2021, S. 785 was signed by the president and became Public Law No: 116-171 to improve mental health care provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes.

OCT

• Launched Facebook Live Series | This series focused on encouraging the public to sign up for interviews as a resource for individuals who have lost a former service member to suicide or a non-natural cause of death. We invited a different community partner/veteran service organization to co-host each event with the co-principal investigator.
SUCCESSES

Maximized Use of Social Media Platforms/Launched Facebook Live Series

We launched our Facebook Live series to collaborate with veteran service organizations in participating states to share best practices and resources available to support prevention efforts around. We also used this series to encourage the public to sign up for interviews as a resource for individuals who have lost a veteran or former service member to suicide or a non-natural cause of death. Individuals who did meet the eligibility criteria to participate in the OpDD were asked to consider sharing information about the study within their personal networks.

In addition to Facebook, we utilized other social media platforms to virtually engage communities across the United States. For example, we created social media toolkits and electronic recruitment flyers and shared them with community partners to post on their organization’s social media platforms.

Adapted Training Modules for Conducting Interview by Phone

We established best practices for conducting interviews by phone and adapted our training modules to ensure the research assistants were proficient in conducting interviews by phone.

Acquired State Death Data for Retrospective Analysis

We acquired state-wide death records for Florida, Alabama, Minnesota, Montana, and Massachusetts. Maine agreed to provide death data. Data requests were submitted for some newly added states and are pending review. State death records from Alabama, Montana, and Massachusetts were prepared and delivered to the DoD for Phase I verification. Furthermore, the DoD verified which decedents from Florida and Minnesota were former service members. An extensive analysis of that data is underway.

Joint Letter of Support for Senate Bill 785

On behalf of 30 community-based, service programs across 15 states that serve military service members, veterans, and their family members, we offered our strong support for Senate Bill 785, also known as the Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act of 2019. We expressed that S. 785 was a revolutionary proposal to improve the quality of life of our Nation’s veterans while empowering communities (e.g., municipalities, counties, states, tribal areas, and regions) to combine their veteran engagement efforts with targeted suicide prevention programs.
CHALLENGES

Prospective

Due to COVID-19 and travel restrictions, we were not permitted to conduct interviews in person. Therefore, we sought approval to conduct interviews by phone and replace written consent with verbal consent through the UA’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). While awaiting IRB approval, we were unable to enroll any participants. Despite receiving IRB approval to conduct interviews by phone, participant recruitment remained challenging throughout the year.

Retrospective

Data transfers from the DoD were on hold for several months due to new DoD IRB requirements. Our ability to transfer and verify data was halted for Massachusetts, Montana, and Alabama. In September 2020, the DoD requested that we submit a separate IRB application through the Human Research Protection Office (HRPO) to attain HRPO approval. As the study was not funded or supported by DoD funders and the death data was not within the scope of the US Army Policy for Use of Human Cadavers for Research, the HRPO administratively withdrew the study from HRPO review. In October 2020, we were advised to an IRB application to DoD’s Defense Human Resources Activity (DHRA) Human Research Protection Program (HRPP). We received HRPO approval in November 2020.

Moreover, we were required to submit all death data application requests to the UA’s legal team for review before we could submit the application to each state. This additional requirement impacted the processing of applications. Additionally, several states shifted their focus on regulating critical issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, the progressing speed for death data application requests decreased significantly. Application requests for some states were put on indefinite hold.
WHAT’S AHEAD FOR OPERATION DEEP DIVE IN 2021

In 2021, we will focus heavily on participant recruitment. We will continue to maximize our use of social media platforms to spread awareness about our study and encourage the public to participate in the study. The insights shared by relatives, loved ones, friends, and colleagues of former service members who died by suicide or a non-natural cause of death within the last 24 months are a vital component of Operation Deep Dive. Furthermore, we will seek approval to conduct interviews in additional states.

We will continue to collaborate with federal, state, and local entities to obtain state death/retrospective data needed to investigate suicides and non-natural deaths among former service members from 2014 through 2018. For some states, we will pursue death data from 2019.

By the end of 2021, 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 across the country.

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