

GUEST COMMENT

Supporting Gila County's veterans

BY WANDA WRIGHT
AZ DEPT OF VETERANS' SERVICES

September is National Suicide Prevention Awareness Month — a time to share resources and stories that shed light on a stigmatized topic.

Suicidal thoughts, much like mental health conditions, can affect anyone regardless of age, gender or background, but disproportionately impact the veteran community. In fact, 41% of Arizona veterans report thoughts of suicide, and one in three report a mental health condition related to depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

In Gila County alone, veterans are nearly twice as likely than the general population to die by suicide. In an effort to prevent suicide and support veterans, their families and the community at large, the University of Arizona's Center for Rural Health (AzCRH) partnered with the Arizona Coalition for Military Families (ACMF) to expand the Be Connected veteran support program in rural southern Arizona counties, including Gila.

Be Connected is a statewide initiative designed to reduce deaths by suicide in Arizona's military and veteran population by strengthening access to support and resources for the more than 500,000 service members, veterans and their families who call Arizona home. Both the Arizona



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Department of Veterans' Services and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs are key partners and supporters of this program.

Partnering with health care facilities in the region, Be Connected provides resources and community training to help facilities better serve the veteran community. Additionally, the program includes a support line available to everyone seeking support and information.

Focused on suicide prevention using an upstream approach, Be Connected works with more than 400 partner organizations statewide to arm veterans and their families with tools and information to support their physical and mental health, as well as connect them to crisis intervention.

This critical program is continuing to expand in Cochise, La Paz, Pinal, Gila and Santa Cruz counties thanks to a grant from Blue Cross Blue Shield of Arizona's (BCBSAZ) Mobilize AZ public health initiative. Through Mobilize AZ, BCBSAZ is tackling the health conditions hitting Arizonans the hardest, including mental health, providing grants to organizations doing life-changing work in their communities.

Protecting the health and well-being of Arizona families is especially important during the COVID-19 pandemic. The work of Be Connected must continue to support veterans in addressing mental health and thoughts of suicide. The program has adapted, providing online trainings to partners, and providing program materials to COVID-19 testing sites and other locations. These efforts provide the opportunity to bring new veterans into the ecosystem and allow for better care coordination crucial to suicide prevention. By embedding support deep in the community, the program can intervene earlier and more effectively to save lives.

Be Connected is truly a resource for Arizona veterans, service members, their families and helpers in our community. If you, your friends or family need support, do not hesitate to reach out to the Be Connected support line at 1-866-4AZ-VETS (429-8387).

