Military and VA Must Address Rising Number of Suicides by Troops and Veterans

‘It’s about saving lives,’ Murray says. ‘We must do better’

AUDIO CLIP: http://murray.senate.gov/video/072208vetssuicides.mp3

(WASHINGTON, D.C.) – Today, U.S. Senator Patty Murray (D-WA) delivered a speech on the Senate floor to raise awareness about the disturbing increase in the number of suicides by troops and veterans and the need to improve mental health care offered by military and VA facilities.

To illustrate the need to take action, Senator Murray specifically highlighted the suicides this year of six veterans in Spokane – including one earlier this month – as well as the highly publicized death of Joseph Dwyer, an Army medic made famous in a photo taken during the first week of the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

“More than five years later, we should have the resources in place to treat the psychological wounds of war as well as we do the physical ones. But we don’t,” Senator Murray said in her speech. “It is the duty of the VA and of a grateful nation to be prepared to care for their unique wounds. And in order to do that, we need strong leadership and attention to detail in Washington, D.C., Spokane, Washington, and everywhere in between.”

“At the end of the day, this isn’t about bureaucracy or protecting turf, it’s about saving lives,” Murray added. “We must make it a national priority to address this tragedy.”

Senator Murray also praised a pilot program being rolled out this week, which will advertise the VA’s 24-hour suicide prevention hotline, 1-800-273-TALK, and help assure veterans that it’s okay to ask for help.
But she said it is only a step. She said the military and the VA must do more to address the needs of veterans struggling with the psychological impacts of war by increasing outreach, breaking down the barriers to seeking mental health care, and backing up those efforts with sufficient resources.

The following is Senator Murray’s full speech, as prepared for delivery:

Mr. President, I have come to the floor today to raise awareness about one of the most heartbreaking and alarming consequences of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In the five years since we invaded Iraq, we have seen a disturbing increase in the number of young men and women who return home struggling with the psychological impacts of war – and then take their own lives. About 1,000 war veterans being treated by the VA attempt suicide each month. And it is a problem affecting communities across this country.

Earlier this month, we lost a young man in my home state of Washington just hours after he sought care at the Spokane VA hospital. He was the sixth veteran in that community to take his own life this year. Now, the Spokane VA is investigating all six of those cases. I have also spoken to Secretary Peake. He has assured me that his team is also on the ground, taking a hard look to see what went wrong and what they can learn from the situation.

But, Mr. President, while I appreciate the work Secretary Peake and the Spokane VA are doing, the fact is that this is a serious problem across the country. Every suicide is a tragedy. Those young men and women are someone’s son or daughter, best friend, spouse, or even a parent. Our hearts go out to all of their families and friends. And their deaths are an urgent reminder that we must keep our eye on the ball. We owe it to all of our service members and veterans to demand that the VA and the Department of Defense make it a national priority to bring these numbers down.

VA is Taking Steps by Promoting Prevention Hotline
Mr. President, I want to acknowledge that the VA is taking steps to reach out to veterans and their families to let them know that help is available. This week, the VA is rolling out a public service campaign here in Washington, D.C. As part of a three-month long pilot program, the VA will run a series of ads on TV, and in buses, trains, and on the subway. The ads will highlight the VA’s 24-hour suicide prevention hotline, 1-800-273-TALK, and help assure veterans that it’s OK to ask for help.

I applaud the VA for this effort because it’s a good step. We absolutely must get the word out to our veterans – and their families. If this helps prevent even one tragedy, then it’s more than worth it. I hope that the Defense Department will also publicize this number among its active duty troops so that when they leave the service they will already be aware of it.
But, Mr. President, this is only a step. An ad campaign is only as good as the resources that are there when our service members seek help. And if we are truly going to make a difference, we need a bigger effort. We must do more to reach out, break down the barriers to seeking mental health care, and back up those efforts with enough resources to ensure that when a veteran goes into the hospital asking for help, the VA can offer the best care possible.

VA and DoD Must Do More Outreach
And so, Mr. President, while I applaud the idea of publicizing the suicide prevention hotline – I believe the military and the VA must reach out long before our young men and women pick up the phone and call for help. And that will take creativity and leadership.

Mr. President, the VA and the Defense Department can’t keep doing things the way they’ve always done them – because the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan aren’t like any we have ever fought. Our all-volunteer force has been on the ground in those two countries for longer than we fought in World War II. Troops get very little down time. And many of them are serving on their third, fourth, or even fifth deployments. The stress takes a toll on everyone. And for many, it gets worse when they come home to the pressures of everyday life – to financial strain or family problems. That’s especially true for members of the National Guard and Reserves. Unlike active duty troops – who return from battle to a military base and a support network – many Guard and Reserve members go home to family pressures and civilian jobs.

Mr. President, the military and the VA must update their resources and outreach efforts to match the challenges our troops face when they return. And that safety net has to be in place before they ever leave the military. That means we must have creative programs that help service members transition from the battlefield to the home front. It means providing family and financial counseling to any service member who needs it. And it means developing a way for the military or VA to follow up with service members – especially those who already have asked for help with psychological wounds.

VA and DoD Must End the Stigma Against Seeking Care
But, Mr. President, we also must encourage our service members and veterans to seek care when they need it by breaking down the barriers that prevent them from asking for help. The VA and the Defense Department must take strong steps to change the military culture so that service members no longer fear that seeking care will be viewed as a sign of weakness – or one that will hurt their career.

Even more important, service members and veterans must be convinced that if they ask for help, doctors and staff will take them seriously and provide the care they need. I have heard too many tragic stories about veterans who have gone to the VA in distress – only to face a doctor who underestimated their symptoms and sent them home to a tragic ending.

Mr. President, when someone with a history of depression, PTSD, or other psychological wounds walks into the VA and says they are suicidal, it should set off alarm bells. We
can’t convince veterans or service members to get care if they think they will be met with lectures and closed doors. That is unacceptable. At the very least, we must ensure that staff at military and VA medical centers have the training to recognize and treat someone who is in real distress.

VA and DoD Must Back Up Efforts With Resources
Finally, Mr. President, we must provide the resources to back up all of these efforts – starting with making sure that the suicide prevention hotline is staffed with enough trained professionals who can provide real help to someone in need. I hope that will be the case. Unfortunately, this Administration has failed for eight long years to make good on its promises and provide the resources needed to carry them out.

Time and again, it has taken leaks and scandals to get the Administration to own up to major problems at the VA – from inadequate budgets to rising suicide rates. And its response to rising costs has been to underfund research and cut off services to some veterans. Mr. President, we must do better than that.

Service members and veterans need more than an 800 number to call. They need psychiatrists and psychologists who understand the horrors of war and the stresses our troops feel. We also need to make sure that we have the facilities and systems set up to accommodate the troops who will be entering the VA system in the next decade. We must fast-track research into the signature injuries of the war, such as Traumatic Brain Injury and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, so that we understand how to diagnose and treat these conditions. And we need to speed up efforts that will enable the DoD and VA to share records so that fewer service members slip through the cracks as they transition from active duty to veteran status. Now is the time to invest in research and infrastructure. We can’t afford to wait.

This is About Saving Lives
Mr. President, many of us are familiar with the story of Joseph Dwyer, a young Army medic made famous in a photo taken during the first week of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. In the photo, Joseph is running toward safety with an injured Iraqi child in his arms. It’s an epic image of bravery and compassion. But when he came home, Joseph struggled to fit back into civilian life. He suffered from PTSD and, tragically, earlier this year, he died of what police are treating as an accidental drug overdose.

The photo of Joseph Dwyer captured the incredible work our troops are doing everyday. But, sadly, Joseph’s story is also an example of what far too many of our veterans face when they return home. The photo of Joseph was taken during the first week of this war. More than five years later, we should have the resources in place to treat the psychological wounds of war as well as we do the physical ones. But we don’t.

Mr. President, I want to ask my colleagues to put themselves in the shoes of a parent – or a spouse – who has lost a child, or a husband, or a wife to suicide. I want them to think of all the questions they might be asking. We might not be able to provide all of the
answers – but we should at least be able to say that we’re doing everything we can to address the problems.

We know there are many, many dedicated, hardworking VA employees, who spend countless hours providing our vets with the best treatment. But we also must recognize that the system is still unprepared for the influx of veterans coming home. According to a RAND study, 1 in 4 veterans will struggle with PTSD. It is the duty of the VA and of a grateful nation to be prepared to care for their unique wounds. And in order to do that, we need strong leadership and attention to detail in Washington, D.C. – Spokane, Washington – and everywhere in between.

At the end of the day, this isn’t about bureaucracy or protecting turf, it’s about saving lives. While I’m glad that the Administration plans to increase its outreach, a pilot program is only a small step. We must make it a national priority to address this tragedy.

The Administration must back up its efforts by reaching out to service members, veterans, and their families, breaking down the barriers that prevent service members and veterans from seeking and getting mental health care, and providing adequate resources.

No matter how you feel about this war, our troops are heroes. They have done everything we’ve asked of them – and more. And it’s time our commitment measured up to theirs.