Community Awareness
Alice Sun, Bella Lewis, Kimberly Whitmore
Target Audience: Veterans and Current Military Members
Secondary Division – Chapter 26181
Mountain Vista High School
Colorado
Veteran Suicide Prevention Program
Thousands Changed
Research: When we first started researching veteran suicides, we focused on causes, assistance available to veterans, and statistics related to veteran suicide. We found that in Colorado, the suicide rate for veterans is much higher than the national average, and since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, the suicide rate has increased by 20%. We included key statistics in our materials, noting that a veteran dies by suicide every 1 hour and 5 minutes. Many fathers, mothers, siblings, and children are dying as a result of their trauma and hopelessness. Over two-thirds of veterans revealed that they did not seek mental health assistance because of the stigma surrounding it. We researched the topic extensively with fourteen sources, and information shared from our twelve community partners. We also focused on information from industry leaders such as the Veterans Administration and the American Psychological Association. The research helped our team explore the best ways to approach the issue and determine how to effectively increase awareness. As we designed activities to increase awareness and talked to more organizations and veterans, we continued to learn. While talking to the Veterans Coalition of San Luis Valley, we discovered that there are other kinds of therapy besides office visits, such as equine therapy, which have been shown to be very beneficial. Our contact at Douglas County Libraries was related to a Marine who served in World War Two. Through her, we learned how far our efforts could reach, and how we might help others even when they are not expecting it.

Selection of Campaign Issue: We chose the issue of veteran suicide because Colorado has a very high rate of veteran suicide, especially in rural areas, and the Covid-19 pandemic has only caused the problem to increase. There is an extremely negative
connotation with veterans seeking mental health help and that has led to suicide attempts, many successful. We learned at the Forum on Lethal Means that over half of veterans have guns and use them to complete their suicides, with an 85-90% success rate. Every veteran that falls victim to their trauma is a life that could have been saved with help. We want to make it clear that getting help is not shameful and that there are many services that can provide aid to the veteran and their family. Just one word of reassurance or acceptance goes a long way, so we will spread the message about veteran suicide and work on ending the stigma of mental health issues.

**Goals and Objectives:** Our goal is to inform members of the community about the rising problem of veteran suicide and the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic has had on the issue. We also want to help the HOSA Chapters and members of the community become more involved with the issue, whether through volunteering or simply becoming more aware and educated. Through these actions, our long-term objective is to help reduce the number of veterans who attempt suicide and decrease the stigma of receiving mental health treatment.

**Community Partners:** In order to effectively spread awareness about veteran suicide, we contacted over twenty organizations and are actively collaborating with twelve. The top military-related organizations we worked with are: Veteran Affairs of Eastern Colorado Healthcare System, American Legion Auxiliary, Veterans Coalition of San Luis Valley, Veterans of Foreign Affairs, American Legion, and Project Sanctuary. We also partnered with the Vietnam Veterans of America (Chapter #1106), Colorado American Legion Auxiliary Juniors Program, and the Arapahoe County Veteran Services Office.
We included non-veteran organizations to help raise awareness with the general public, including: Douglas County Libraries, Sky Ridge Hospital, and the Colorado Department of Labor.

**Accomplishments, Effectiveness, and Impacts:** Our main goal during the project was to spread awareness locally and nationally about the continually growing issue of veteran suicide and where those in crisis can seek help. With our many meetings, campaigns, and events, we believe we successfully spread our message to an immense number of people. The brochures, posters, infographics, and bookmarks created and distributed throughout the community, including veteran support locations, and shared on our website helped many people to become better informed on the issue and how to seek help. The meetings we attended with the organizations helped increase our outreach throughout Colorado and helped to educate us on ways to assist veterans. We also found that many of our partner organizations operate solo and we helped to increase their collaboration. The retreat with Project Sanctuary was the event that had the largest personal impact on us, with the opportunity to connect directly with veterans and their families. A key accomplishment is our current work to collaborate with the President of the Colorado Senate Leroy Garcia and Representative David Ortiz on Colorado SB-129, a Veteran Suicide Prevention Pilot Program. We have been invited to testify at the Colorado House on behalf of the bill. We feel fortunate to further this work, talk with veterans, and have had a profound impact on the community, providing a path to healing. We now have the opportunity to amplify this impact with our work at the Colorado legislature, changing lives for the better.
Partnerships

**Community Awareness**

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**Prevention and Wellness**
- **Location:** Denver, CO
- “I thank you and your teammates for having chosen this as your area of focus.”

**Dr. Edgar Villarreal, PhD,**
**Suicide Prevention Program**
- **Location:** Aurora, CO
  - “Thank you for your team’s dedication to this work and I look forward to supporting your efforts.”

**Vietnam Veterans of America South Denver, Post 1158**
- **Contact:** Mr. Edgar Vargas and Chapter President Lee White
- Location: Aurora, CO
  - “...delighted to speak with you and your team about Veteran Suicide Prevention Program...”

**Douglas County Libraries**
- Provided the opportunity to showcase the Veteran Suicide Prevention Posters on their bulletin boards in Highlands Ranch and Lone Tree, CO.

**American Legion Auxiliary, Highlands Ranch,**
- **Contact:** Ms. Edith Scherf, President
- **Location:** Highlands Ranch, CO
  - “...truly happy to be doing this project. Your project is so important. I will be asking you to get the word out to your contacts and community organizations to support this great cause.”

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**Partnerships Documentation**

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**Serves over 85,000 Veterans Nationally**
- **Contact:** Ms. Heather Ehle, CEO/Founder
- **Location:** Granby, CO
  - “Welcome to the fight... thank you for bringing awareness to this sensitive topic.”

**Post 1365-162 members; District 6-23 Posts with 2,409 members.**
- **American Legion, Highlands Ranch, Post 1260**
- **Contact:** Commander Joe Largent
- **Location:** Highlands Ranch, CO
  - “This is a wonderful project you are working on ... I’m going to forward your message to ... District 6 Commander, to see if he would like to spread the word... I will also forward your update to our Post 1166 members and encourage their participation.”

**Serves over 3,200 Veterans in their database, covering 81,000 square miles and 6 counties in Colorado**
- **Contact:** Mary Cometti, COO and Richard Nagley, Founder and Director
- **Location:** Alamos, CO
  - “These are great brochures you put together and I am interested to see what programming you are doing.”

**Serves over 1,500 Veterans a year from Arapahoe County, with over 350,000 Residents**
- **American Legion Auxiliary Colorado Juniors Program**
  - **Contact:** Ms. Fatine Flohre, Junior Advisor
  - **Location:** Colorado
    - “The documents you put together are excellent! We may be able to send out to all Units to use.”

**Serves the 5.8 Million Residents of Colorado with Workforce Opportunities**
- **Contact:** Mr. Martin Bargeri - CDLIE
- **Location:** Denver, CO
  - “...possibility for outreach at the upcoming Virtual Job Fair on February 19th.”

**Serves over 1.5 Million Veterans Nationally**
- **Veterans of Foreign Wars South Denver, Post 2461**
  - **Contact:** Matthew J. Dixon-Moran, Commander and Executive Director
  - **Location:** Denver, CO
    - “Thank you for reaching out to us. We would be interested in talking more about this project and collaboration with you.”

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**April/May 2021** – Currently coordinating with the President of the Colorado Senate Leroy Garcia and Representative David Ortiz on SB-129 and have been invited to testify at the House on behalf of the Bill.

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**SPONSORS:** Senator Leroy Garcia and Representative David Ortiz

**READ THE BILL AT:**
https://leg.colorado.gov/bills/21-129

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**David Ortiz House District 38**
- **Location:** Denver, CO
- “303-866-3953”

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**VETERAN SUICIDE PREVENTION PILOT PROGRAM**

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**Colorado General Assembly**
- **Leroy M. Garcia Jr.**
  - **Senator President**
  - **District 3**
  - **w: 303-866-4878**
  - **santlerogarcia@gmail.com**

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**SB21-129:**
- "Veteran Suicide Prevention Pilot Program"
Emails and Video Meetings with Partners - October 2020 to May 2021 - We sent and received over 200 emails, numerous video calls, and connected with over 20 organizations to spread awareness about veteran suicide, including methods to support veterans. These communication methods helped us to create events and helped us to build the outreach plan.

Presentation & Agenda:

Presentation to the American Legion Auxiliary - October 27, 2020

Presentation to Veterans Coalition of San Luis Valley - January 7, 2021

Presentation to VA Eastern CO Suicide Prevention - Jan. 11, 2021

Presentation to Project Sanctuary - January 14, 2021

Presentation to Arapahoe County, CO Veteran Services - Jan. 15, 2021

Presentation to Colorado Dept. of Labor and Employment - January 25, 2021
Veterans Corner Newsletter of Veterans Coalition, San Luis Valley- January 19, 2021 - 600 Impacted

Our team created an infographic and article with information about veteran suicide and methods to prevent it. The information will reach hundreds of veterans through the Veterans Corner Newsletter. The newsletter, with our information, was circulated virtually with the help of the Veterans Coalition of the San Luis Valley.

Team Posters Displayed at SkyRidge Hospital in Lone Tree, CO - Spring 2021 – Impacted 284 Beds, Plus Visitors - SkyRidge Hospital by HealthOne is a 57-acre acute care Level II Trauma Center that serves the community. The hospital displayed the new poster design and the team website on their Community Awareness bulletin boards, allowing families and veterans easy access to the resource information.

Posters on Community Awareness Boards in Libraries- Starting January 2021 - 20,000 impacted (per week) - We created pamphlets, posters, and bookmarks (shown) to give to visitors at the seven Douglas County Libraries. The posters were displayed on Community Awareness Boards, where thousands of people visit each week, allowing families and veterans to easily access the information.
Veterans Retreat Event w/ Project Sanctuary- January 18, 2021 – 40 Impacted

Participated in retreat break-out sessions with 12 Veteran and military families. The program provides therapeutic retreats throughout the U.S. and has over 1,500 impacted (on waitlist and distribution lists). We attended the Colorado Snow Mountain Ranch of YMCA retreat, providing therapy and focused healing to Veterans and families. During the retreat, we presented our information about veteran suicide and the stigma. Groups of children and teenagers of veterans listened to us and we spoke with many veterans about their experiences. We met the founder of Project Sanctuary and talked with many staff.

Veteran and Counselor 1:1 Interviews

Our team conducted interviews with Veterans and with a Crisis Counselor at the VA Colorado Medical Center. The interviews highlighted issues with which veterans struggle while in the military and after discharge. All participants remain anonymous in our reports. For example, a Navy Veteran from Operation Desert Storm mentioned, "...night watch on the ship deck has a feeling of despair… you feel small knowing you are traveling at 30 knots but are 2 weeks from anywhere."
Invitation to Contribute to the New Colorado “Operation Veteran Strong” Website – Spring 2021 - National Outreach with Statewide Focus -

Our team was invited by Mr. Matthew Wetenkamp, Colorado Veteran Suicide Prevention Coordinator, to contribute information to the new State of Colorado coordinated Veteran’s website. This work is in-process.

Materials Posted at the Arapahoe County, CO Veterans Office-

January 25, 2021 1,500+ Impacted

We displayed posters, brochures, and bookmarks at the Arapahoe County Veterans Service Office, where many veterans and their relatives come to for help with benefits and services. Easily accessible information allows those who are most impacted by the issue easy access without judgement. The information can be taken home and shared, so more people can learn about the issue.

“Clean-up the Ranch” with the American Legion,

Post 1260– May 1, 2021 – 10 Veterans Impacted

Invited to participate with American Legion at one of their annual community service events and had the opportunity to talk with Veterans from foreign wars about their experiences.
Article on Veteran Suicide Prevention in the Highlands Ranch Herald on April 15, 2021 (28,275 Paper Circulation & Online) and Coordinated with VistaNow Publication (2,400+ students/faculty) Wrote an article on Veteran Suicide Prevention that was published in the Highlands Ranch Herald online and its print paper on April 15, 2021. We coordinated in 2021 with VistaNow, the news website for Mountain Vista High School (queued).

Colorado Virtual Veterans Job Fair Info Booth on February 11, 2021 – over 400 registrants - Our team staffed a booth at the State of Colorado Virtual Job Fair, listed as a military and veteran resource. We had our materials available and answered questions. We prepared a custom virtual job fair site (pictured). We heard from participants that there was a need to consolidate veteran volunteer opportunities and added that to our website and plan.

Participated in a Forum on Lethal Means and Suicide Prevention, January 19, 2021 - Included 22 top Veteran suicide prevention specialists in Colorado Our team participated in a 90-minute webinar with top experts’ in the field of veteran suicide prevention. We learned a great deal, including that firearms are the most common means for suicide by veterans, with an 85-90% success rate.
Community Awareness - Sun, Lewis, Whitmore

**Social Media Outreach- January 2021 - 1,489 impacted**

We created an infographic that was posted on a variety of social media platforms. Eye-catching media sparks interest and posting online is essential during the pandemic to increase exposure.

**Team Veteran Suicide Prevention Website, Published Spring 2021 –**

**Shared with Veterans and Partners in Colorado- Thousands Impacted**

https://sites.google.com/view/mvhshosapreventveteransuicide/home

**Team Members Awarded the Good Deed Award by the National American Legion Auxiliary - April 2021**

Our team members were nominated by the local Highlands Ranch American Legion Auxiliary, Unit 1260 for the prestigious national Good Deed youth award recognition for our work on Veteran Suicide Prevention. We were awarded this honor by the national American Legion Auxiliary in April 2021.
Stopping Military and Veteran Suicides, APA, Stopping suicide in the military (apa.org)

Mentalhealth.va.gov, VA Suicide Prevention on Military Separation

New veterans have 93% higher risk for suicide than general public

CDC: Suicide rates increased by 25% since 1999

Headspace and Timing: Veteran Mental Health from a Combat Veteran Perspective
https://veteranmentalhealth.com

Podcasts - Headspace and Timing: Veteran Mental Health ...
https://veteranmentalhealth.com/podcast

VA System Failing on Mental Health Care Report - WebMD
https://www.webmd.com/mental-health/news/20180131/va-system-failing-on-mental-health...

Mirecc.va.gov, PTSD and Suicide in Veterans and Military Personnel,
https://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn19/presentations/docs/Bulman_PTSD_Suicide_Northern_CA_SPW_9-6-11.pdf

Veterans & Active Duty | NAMI, https://www.nami.org/Your-Journey/Veterans-Active-Duty

VA National Veteran Suicide Annual Report 2020,

Suicide rate for veterans far exceeds civilian population, Center for Public Integrity

US veterans' suicide rates highest in West, rural areas,

As COVID-19 crisis continues, suicide risk for veterans likely to grow,

Suicide Among Veterans - Why are Veterans at a Higher Risk of Suicide? https://americanaddictioncenters.org/veterans/suicide-among-veterans