

**Department of Veterans Affairs**

**Clinical Science Research & Development Service**

**Program Announcement**

**Priority Topics for Suicide Prevention Research**

**August 10, 2020**

**Introduction**

This Program Announcement is intended to summarize important suicide prevention research priority areas in **Clinical Science Research & Development Service** (CSRD) that we encourage VA scientists to consider in developing applications for our funding opportunities. Factors for this Program Announcement include the significance to our Veteran population as a public health issue, as well as continued attention by the Department of Veterans Affairs to develop the scientific evidence for effective suicide prevention. Suicide is a major, growing global public health problem. In 2018, more than 48,000 people died by suicide in the United States alone. Across the nation, the number of suicide deaths has risen steadily since the turn of the millennium. Suicide represents a particular and persistent crisis for Veterans, their families, and the VA health care system. Adjusting for age and gender, the risk of suicide among Veterans is approximately 50% higher than among the general population. The rate of suicide among Veterans continues to increase each year, with the most significant increases in Veterans aged 18-34.

In 2019, an Executive Order entitled “President’s Roadmap to Empower Veterans and End a National Tragedy of Suicide (PREVENTS)” was issued and called the entire federal enterprise to collaborate together to develop a plan of action. PREVENTS includes a Strategic Plan for Research and highlights lethal means safety promotion as a promising suicide prevention strategy. In 2020, there is also a growing concern about the potential impact of COVID-19 on suicide rates, and a need to better understand risk factors related to the pandemic to inform prevention and intervention efforts. Keeping in mind that we offer the opportunity for suicide prevention applications in all published Requests for Applications (RFAs), the following describes two specific areas of interest we hope to further develop in our research program: that of lethal means safety and the impacts from COVID-19. We intend to prioritize these topics when applications are submitted for scientific peer review through our standing funding mechanisms and cycles. Please also note that the **ORD Service purview** still defines where an application should be directed. This is especially important since all of ORD is highly engaged in supporting the most meritorious research to better prevent suicide, and multiple announcements may be published. Questions on appropriateness for CSRD application may be sent to the contact listed below.

**Suicide Prevention Research Priorities Related to Lethal Means Safety**

The priorities for research to prevent suicide in Veterans include the support of innovative or highly impactful, clinically relevant research focused on **lethal means safety** with the potential to significantly reduce the rate of Veteran suicides. Research may include experimental and observational studies involving human subjects for research purposes. Applications involving administration of survey instruments or questionnaires, the collection of medical histories from research subjects and/or performing medical procedures, psychosocial interventions, or treatment regimens related to lethal means safety are also of interest, all with the intent of improving the evidence base for effective preventions and clinical relevance for this promising approach to reducing the rate of suicide.

**Background**. Reducing access to, or improving the safety of, lethal means used for suicide (hereafter referred to as “lethal means safety”) is an essential strategy to reduce the rate of suicide. Lethal means safety practices save lives in at least two ways. First, suicidal crises, characterized by the urge to act on suicidal thoughts, are typically short-lived; if individuals do not have access to lethal means during this brief acute period, their risk of attempting suicide diminishes. Most people do not attempt suicide with a substitute method when a preferred method is not available. If, however, a substitute method is used when highly lethal methods of suicide are not easily obtainable, the attempt is less likely to be fatal. As such, the importance of lethal means safety interventions is emphasized in PREVENTS as well as in the 2019 VA Clinical Practice Guidelines and the 2012 National Strategy for Suicide Prevention by the US Surgeon General.

Firearms and medications with potential for overdose are two particularly important methods to target through lethal means safety interventions. Firearms are the most lethal means of suicide and the method most frequently used by Veterans; 70% of Veteran suicides are facilitated by firearms, whereas firearms were used in 48% of suicides in the general population. Medication overdoses are another common method of attempts, particularly among women, and are thus an important research target.

**This Program Announcement is intended to identify priority research areas for the VA scientific community** that will inform and/or improve evidence-based lethal means safety practices to prevent suicide among Veterans. The following research topics related to **lethal means safety** are examples of areas of research that could be of interest to CSRD. They do not, however, represent a complete list of studies that would be supported.

* Studies of universal, selective, or indicated lethal means safety interventions delivered in various settings, including behavioral health, primary care, and acute-care settings focused on increasing the evidence for their effectiveness
* Studies of interventions focused on firearms safety, as well as interventions focused on other means of suicide
* Studies of strategies to motivate Veterans to change means safety behaviors (e.g., strategies informed by behavioral economics), with outcomes designed to determine the overall impact of the motivational strategy in suicide prevention
* Studies of novel methods for measuring means safety behaviors that do not rely on traditional self-report methods
* Studies focused on understanding the impact of firearm owners’ preferences for specific firearm safety mechanisms (e.g., lock boxes or safes over cable or trigger locks) on lethal means safety interventions
* Studies of interventions to educate individuals who are actively supporting Veterans in means safety (e.g., family members), and the impact on reducing suicide behavior
* Studies of means safety interventions delivered by peers/Veterans in the community

**Suicide Prevention Research Priorities Related to COVID-19**

**Background**. The social and psychological effects of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) are likely to be profound, pervasive, and long-lasting. Although it is not inevitable, some evidence suggests that the pandemic may lead to a rise in suicide rates. Well-established risk factors for suicide—including loss of employment, financial stressors, firearm ownership, domestic violence, loneliness (particularly for the bereaved), sleep disturbance, and hopelessness—are likely to be exacerbated by the pandemic. Public health measures intended to reduce the rate of new infections, such as social distancing, sheltering in place, and the closure of places of worship, have the potential to reduce social connection, medical and mental health service utilization, and access to community and religious support. These secondary consequences of public health interventions can, in turn, adversely impact suicide risk.

COVID-19 surfaced in the context of the highest age-adjusted suicide rate in the United States in nearly 80 years (Drapeau & McIntosh, 2020). Rising suicide rates associated with COVID-19 are not a foregone conclusion and may be abated with widespread mitigation efforts. Although some evidence suggests that deaths by suicide increased during a number of previous pandemics (e.g., 1918 flu), suicide rates declined following other national tragedies or disasters (e.g., September 11th attacks). In addition, there may be protective components associated with a pandemic, including an increased desire to live in the face of threatened mortality and a sense of joining with others around a shared experience (Roger et al., 2020). There is also the potential for the pandemic to lead to long-term healthcare innovations (e.g., advancements in telehealth technology) that may result in improved suicide prevention services. Research is needed to understand both the risks and potential gains that may be associated with COVID-19.

The goal of this Program Announcement is to support focused research that will inform and/or improve suicide prevention efforts in the context of COVID-19. The following research topics focused on COVID-19 and suicideare examples of areas of research that could be of interest to CSRD. They do not, however, represent a complete list of studies that would be supported under this announcement.

* Studies examining effectiveness of new evidence-based interventions adapted to the current environment (e.g., updating behavioral activation exercises and pleasant-events inventories to focus on activities amenable to physical distancing)
* Studies of targeted interventions for groups at high risk for suicide and/or COVID-19, such as Veterans employed as essential workers, older Veterans, Veterans who experience health disparities and/or homelessness, and LGBTQ Veterans
* Studies of personalizing: (1) interventions to level of risk, and/or (2) Veteran preferences for specific interventions which will impact our understanding of successful response
* Studies examining the association between COVID-related variables (e.g., personal exposure to COVID, COVID-related bereavement, rates of infection, media exposure and suicide risk over time), as well as potential mechanism of action (e.g., depressive symptoms, social determinants of health, loneliness, social isolation, etc.)
* Studies examining the neuropsychological effects related to COVID-19 and whether they confer risk for suicidal thoughts and behaviors
* Supplemental projects that leverage active longitudinal studies to identify risk and protective factors for suicidal thoughts and behaviors in the context of the pandemic
* Studies addressing suicide risk for Veterans undergoing transitions associated with increased risk for suicide during the pandemic (e.g., inpatient to outpatient care, military discharge, release from the criminal justice system)
* Studies of means safety interventions delivered in the context of COVID-19
* Interventions focused on determining the effectiveness of coping skills and stress-inoculation to combat the effects of social isolation

CONTACT for further information: **VHABLRD-CSRD@va.gov**