

VA To Test Suicide Public Service Ads

The VA Is Stepping Up It's Suicide Prevention Outreach With A Public Service Announcement Featuring Actor Gary Sinise.

July 14, 2008 (CBS) *CBS News Investigative producer Pia Malbran wrote this story for CBSNews.com.*

July 15 Update: During a Congressional hearing today on Capitol Hill, the Department of Veterans Affairs unveiled a new suicide prevention PSA. CBS News has obtained a copy of the clip. Click on the video box to the left to watch it. Rep. Harry Mitchell said that the VA's "self-imposed ban against television advertising" that has been in place until recently was "outdated and out of touch."

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is expected to launch a suicide prevention public service campaign in Washington, DC next week as part of a three-month pilot program.

CBS News has learned that the VA will roll out the campaign on July 21 which will include a series of bus advertisements as well as more than 300 ads inside DC commuter trains and at metro train stations.

The agency has also produced a television public service announcement featuring actor Gary Sinise who portrayed a disabled veteran in the 1994 movie "Forrest Gump". A spokesperson for Sinise confirmed his participation.

The pilot program is intended to raise awareness of suicide prevention and spread the word about the VA's 24-hour suicide prevention hotline. CBS News has learned the ads will show a silhouette of a soldier kneeling in front of an American flag with the message: "it takes the courage and strength of a warrior to ask for help. If you or someone you know is in an emotional crisis call 1-800-273-TALK."

VA spokesperson Lisette Mondello told CBS News that if the pilot campaign "does raise awareness of the hotline then we will be able to roll it to other places across the country."

"Ensuring that help is available for veterans at risk for suicide is only half the battle," said Congressman Harry Mitchell, a Democrat from Arizona who also serves as Chairman of the Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations. Since enrolling into the VA system is voluntary, Congressman Mitchell adds, "Veterans need to know where they can turn to get help."

Mitchell has been pushing the VA to beef up its suicide prevention efforts and has also been instrumental in encouraging the agency to use paid public service announcements. Mitchell's Oversight Subcommittee held a hearing to discuss the issue this week.

According to a spokesperson for Mitchell, VA officials have been debating whether or not the agency has the authority to use paid advertising as part of their outreach plan. Last month, the House Veterans' Affairs Committee passed a bill giving the VA such authority. On June 16, VA Secretary James Peake sent a memo to his staff informing them that the VA "may purchase advertising in media outlets for the purpose of promoting awareness of benefits."

This latest move by Secretary Peake comes after much criticism that the agency has not been doing enough to deal with the true risk of suicide among veterans.

David Rudd, a former army psychologist and the chair of the psychology department at Texas Tech University, said that while more outreach is good, access to healthcare is also a big concern. Rudd says after letting veterans know where to go for help with the public service ads, the next step would be to figure out "how are you going to reduce delays and then how are you going to keep [veterans] in care. Those are the things we know reduce death rates."