DAILY HERALD SECTION 2

Neighbor

MONDAY, JANUARY 23, 2023

Veterans in suicidal crisis can seek free care at any hospital

Submitted by Matthew Moeller

Every second matters when preventing veteran suicide.

Now, veterans facing a suicidal crisis can get immediate and free treatment at any VA medical facility or non-VA hospital.

The sweeping change went into effect Jan. 17 and could impact millions of eligible veterans nationwide, including more than 360,000 veterans in the Chicago area.

"When a veteran is in crisis, time is of the essence," said Anita Carmona Caravelli, lead suicide prevention coordinator at Edward Hines Jr. VA Hospital.

"Now, thousands more Illinois veterans can have access to emergency crisis care when they need it and don't have to worry about if they can afford it."

The VA already provided suicide prevention services for veterans enrolled in its health care system, but now veterans not registered will have services and resources available. VA estimates the increased access could impact up to 9 million unenrolled veterans and approximately 9 million currently enrolled in VA health care.

Available care includes immediate medical assistance, transportation costs, inpatient or crisis residential care for up to 30 days, and outpatient care for up to 90 days, including social work. Veterans will also be directed to VA services for long-term support, Carmona Caravelli said.

Veterans who served more than two years are eligible as well as former Reserve members who served "more than 100 days under a combat exclusion or in support of a contingency operation," and veterans who were the victim of sexual assault, sexual battery, or sexual harassment while serving. Eligible veterans must have received a discharge above dishonorable, according to a VA news release.

VA's 2022 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report found a 9.7% drop in veteran suicide between 2018 and 2020. The report also showed a 14.2% drop in veteran suicide in Illinois between 2019 and 2020.

In 2022, VA announced or continued several additional efforts to curb veteran suicide, including establishing 988 (then press 1) as a way for veterans to connect with qualified crisis support quickly, and highlighting suicide prevention through the campaign "Don't Wait. Reach Out," according to a VA news release.

"We're making progress, but any single veteran suicide is too many," said James Doelling, director of Edward Hines Jr. VA Hospital. "This is another step in the right direction to reach our nation's heroes in crisis no matter where they are."

Local veterans seeking mental health support and resources can contact Edward Hines Jr. VA Hospital's mental health services at (708) 202-2002 and then select option 2 for new patients.