



Statement of
Cindy Sheriff and Bill Mulcahy
Co-Founders of GYB, LLC
“Guard Your Buddy”
Written Statement Prepared for
House Committee on Veterans Affairs
Suicide Prevention
September 27th, 2018

Chairman Roe, Ranking Member Waltz and distinguished Members of the House Committee on Veterans Affairs, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the challenge of preventing suicide among our veterans. Before I begin, I would ask Cindy Sheriff, co-founder of GYB LLC (Guard Your Buddy) to stand and be recognized. She will be my “buddy” today and called upon if needed to back me up.

In 2012 **Guard Your Buddy (GYB)** was launched in the TNNG in response to AG Max Haston’s mission to **“stop the suicides.”** As seasoned healthcare executives, Cindy and I accepted this assignment and drew upon our backgrounds and professional colleagues to team with The Jason Foundation to create a clinically sound solution to the General’s request. We are proud of GYB’s impact in Tennessee, and we appreciate the opportunity to share with you what we’ve learned and, hopefully, expand GYB’s capabilities to all Veterans.

We know twenty suicides a day between active servicemembers and our Veterans is twenty too much. GYB is a cost-effective, proven solution that we can scale nationally for active components and the Veteran population. Opportunities exist for GYB to partner with VA healthcare system Vet centers (Readjustment Counseling Service), Wounded Warriors, like-minded organizations, community resources and many other organizations to disseminate GYB’s best-practices model to save lives and help those who have put their lives on the line for us.



We believe GYB can reduce Veteran suicide by 34% over the next three years and is strategically focused on two priorities: suicide prevention and intervention. With GYB's smartphone application, Guard service members and their families are **directly connected to a Master's-level clinician who can provide immediate intervention and support**. Professional help is a click away.

GYB is unlike other suicide-prevention programs that are accessed through an 800 number. It's critical that individuals contemplating suicide have immediate access to professionals who provide "in the moment support". Clinically, the "window" for successful interventions are during the initial outreach. Once the crisis is resolved, GYB clinicians will continue to assist with other resources within the NG or their local community.

Our clinicians become the personal advocate for the service member or their families by helping them get their lives back on track.

We are wholly supportive of national crisis lines to address a wide variety of concerns for millions of our Veterans. However, a suicide crisis requires a unique dedicated solution. It is unrealistic to expect a suicidal person to have a crisis line number memorized or readily available. Long call queues, call backs, or having a phone answered in a moment of crisis by anyone other than a Master's Level Clinician is not the GYB model. To fight suicide, we need to bring our best educated and trained staff to serve our esteemed service members and their families.

As the name suggests, GYB supports the strategy of connecting someone, their buddy, or loved ones in need with resources immediately. Since implementing GYB the TNG suicides have been reduced an average of 68% annually since 2012. 2012 is recognized as "peak" for active component military suicides and GYB's base-line year for program outcomes. AG Haston asked us to share with the committee his thoughts as follows:

- *"Since 2012, the TNG believes, that over 85 men and women of the TNG have been talked off a ledge or possibly prevented from hurting themselves by using the GYB app."*
- *"The GYB program provides real help in real time."*
- *"When that Masters level clinician answers the telephone, you don't get forwarded to someone else...and that makes a difference. Getting put on hold or getting transferred to a number that's not answered is not the answer."*

The last five years is referred to as the "new normal" because active component suicide rates remain "stubbornly" high and have not receded to expected levels. That is not the TNG



experience, we reject this premise and hope GYB's model will be considered as another "tool" available to all of our Veterans in time of need.

Imagine a "Guard Your Veterans" (GYV) initiative with a foundational communal approach similar to GYB. The GYV strategy will involve community-based groups, religious organizations, Wounded Warriors and existing Veteran programs such as the Readjustment Counseling Service.

GYV will save our Veterans lives using the proven GYB prevention and intervention strategies with tactics adjusted for demographic differences. GYV's goal will be to reduce Veteran suicides by 34% within the first 36 months of implementation. "Guard Your Veteran" adjustments for Veteran demographics, include:

- **Leadership:** collaboration with trusted Veterans leaders and organizations
- **Convenient Access:** All calls must receive "in-the-moment" support. Eliminate the clutter. Technology must facilitate connectivity, not frustrate callers seeking help.
- **Education Outreach:** Most of our calls come from concerned "buddies" or loved ones. Suicidal individuals will often tell someone about their distress. The problem is people don't know what to do with that information at that critical moment. GYV will change that.
- **Triage:** beyond immediate assessment/support, refer to appropriate VA resource professionals, programs, and facilities to ensure optimal engagement and follow-up.

A national **Branding** strategy to support collaboration with Veteran leadership organizations at all levels to achieve the mission – stop the suicides – is important. "Guard Your Veteran" Program design considerations:

- Suicide rates for Veterans are highest during the first three years out of the military
- 70% of Veterans who commit suicide are not under VA care
- Suicide rates are 16% higher for Veterans who never went to Afghanistan or Iraq
- Approximately 65% of all Veterans who committed suicide were 50 or older

GYV's solution will be multi-sectoral including, young and old, working together. Servicemember and Veteran suicide prevention is everyone's job and a national imperative. GYB hopes to be part of that strategy and an integral part of the solution.



We appreciate the invitation to address this committee and the opportunity to share our experiences with GYB in the TNNG. We look forward to your questions and thank you for your time.

Respectfully,

Cindy Sheriff and Bill Mulcahy, GYB Co-founders.

If time allows, I would like to share the following letter received from a servicemember that will give the committee a feel for GYB's effectiveness in the TNNG.

An email we recently received (redacted).

From: [REDACTED]
Date: December 12, 2017 at 7:23:06 PM CST
To: <gyb@jasonfoundation.com>
Subject: Thank you

This is not an urgent matter. I just wanted to say thank you for helping me in my time of need as well as my brothers and sisters. You all are a very important part of the military community and I thank you for your service from the bottom of my heart.

Sincerely, [REDACTED]

P.S. - Your hard work saved four of my buddies including myself.

What is Guard Your Buddy?

In 2012 “Guard Your Buddy (GYB) was launched in Tennessee as a program designed and developed from TNNG General Max Haston’s mission to “stop the suicides”. The GYB initiative has two goals:

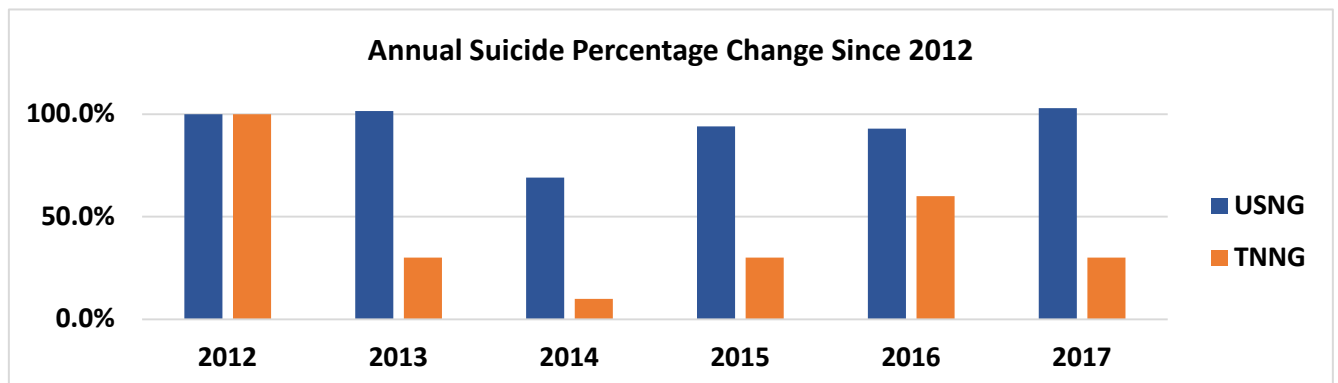
- Prevent suicide among members of the Tennessee National Guard
- Promote psychological fitness and resiliency by providing members of the Guard—and their loved ones—the confidential support, education, advocacy and resources needed to eliminate this “silent” epidemic before it can continue to do harm

What makes Guard Your Buddy unique?

- Singular focus on stopping suicide, focus both on prevention and intervention
- Leverage technology: Smart Phone App to help a Guard-member, “buddy” and family
- Masters level clinicians are two clicks away
- Clinical intervention and resources for both Guard-members contemplating suicide and their battle buddy/family

What are the Guard Your Buddy outcomes in Tennessee 2012 through 2017?

The annual suicide rate in TNNG dropped an average of 68% year over year



What impact could a “Guard Your Veterans” (GYV) initiative have?

Suicide is a public health issue and population health challenge. Similar to GYB, GYV’s foundation will be a communal approach. We anticipate that GYV’s strategy will involve public-private partnerships, religious organizations, Wounded Warriors, community-based groups and existing Veteran programs such as the Readjustment Counseling Service.

GYV will save Veterans lives using the same GYB strategy of prevention and intervention, with tactics adjusted for demographic differences. **GYV’s goal will be to reduce Veteran suicides by**



34% within the first 36 months of implementation. Preliminary considerations for GYV program design include:

- Suicide rates for Veterans are highest during the first three years out of the military
- 70% of Veterans who commit suicide are not under VA care
- Suicide rates are 16% higher for Veterans who never went to Afghanistan or Iraq
- Approximately 65% of all Veterans who committed suicide were 50 or older

Suicide prevention is everyone's job.

csheff@gybusa.com

www.guardyourbuddy.com

bmulcahy@gybusa.com