

STATEMENT OF
LAURA OTIS-MILES, PH.D., SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT
MENTAL HEALTH SYSTEMS
COURAGE TO CALL
BEFORE THE
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
WITH RESPECT TO

“Reducing Veteran Suicide by Addressing Economic Risk Factors”

Washington, D.C.

June 15, 2022

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Moore, and members of the Committee, on behalf of Mental Health Systems and its Courage to Call program, thank you for the opportunity to present how Courage to Call is addressing the economic risk factors of suicide through a multi-faceted, evidence-based approach working with service members, veterans, and their families across the full continuum of risk and wellness.

The complexity of suicide, particularly among service members, veterans, and their families continues to be a public health and national security crisis. With no single cause and no single solution, strategies to reduce and prevent suicide require collaboration of government agencies with community efforts at the local level. Key components include addressing factors that increase risk, as well as enhancing those we know can be protective. Courage to Call takes this upstream approach by delivering services that support economic opportunities and stability, including immediate crisis intervention and access to ongoing behavioral healthcare.

The veteran population in San Diego County is well above that in California overall as well as in the nation – almost one in every 10 adults in San Diego is a veteran of military service, 6% above the California average and 8% above the national average (SANDAG, 2022). According to San Diego’s annual WeAllCount as published by the Regional Task Force on Homelessness, 686 of homeless adults in 2022 were veterans, making up about 8% of San Diego’s homeless population. Lack of housing, food insecurity, unemployment, financial strain, and legal issues are primary economic risk factors and social determinants of physical and behavioral health.

Veterans who have experienced homelessness are almost twice as likely as non-veterans to report lifetime suicide attempts, and female veterans who have experienced homelessness are more likely to have had suicidal thoughts or attempted suicide while male veterans are more likely to complete suicide, with transgender veterans being at greatest risk (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2019). Veterans who have ever experienced homelessness are at increased risk

of suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and completed suicides because homelessness and suicide are impacted by the same risk factors of unemployment, social isolation, mental illness, substance use, and adverse childhood experiences.

With the passage of Proposition 63, the Mental Health Services Act (MHSA) by California voters in 2004, the County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency invested in Prevention and Early Intervention (PEI), which is one of the five components of MHSA. The intent of PEI programs is to engage persons prior to the development of serious mental illness or serious emotional disturbances, or in the case of early intervention, to alleviate the need for additional mental health treatment and/or to transition to long-term mental health treatment. Courage to Call, a non-traditional program improving access to mental health services extending beyond the health care systems of the Department of Defense and Department of Veterans Affairs, was developed by Mental Health Systems in 2009 to provide confidential peer-supported Outreach and Educational/Training services Countywide to the Veterans, Active Duty Military, Reservists, National Guard and their Families (VMRGF) community and to providers of service to the VMRGF community. With funding from San Diego County Behavioral Health Services, Courage to Call continues to operate in alignment with the County's Live Well San Diego strategy, a long-term, comprehensive, and innovative plan combining the efforts of partners both inside and outside County government to help all residents be healthy, safe, and thriving.

Founded in 1978, Mental Health Systems (MHS) is a non-profit organization based in San Diego with 80 broad-ranging programs, and over 900 employees across 10 California Counties. Our mission is to reduce disparities in behavioral health care delivery with a diverse, culturally competent workforce that promotes wellness, recovery, and resiliency. We are committed to services that lead to rich, full lives for the individuals, families, and communities impacted by behavioral health challenges we serve. MHS is an organization that has embraced the guiding principles of People, Culture, and Growth ensuring respect for diversity, equity, and inclusion. As developed by MHS employees, our core values of Integrity, Diversity, Mentorship, and Inclusion are carried into everything we do – in our mental health, homeless outreach and storage connect centers, supportive housing, substance use, supported employment, and criminal justice programs.

Courage to Call is led by MHS in collaborative partnership with 2-1-1 San Diego and Veterans Village of San Diego. The program is dedicated to improving the overall wellness of our Veterans, Active Duty, Reservists, National Guard, and their Families in San Diego County. Courage to Call is designed to relieve stressors that lead to long-term behavioral health challenges, with a strategic focus on helping veterans meet their own basic needs and an ability to provide for themselves and their families through guidance, information, and referral services to financial support, civilian re-integration and transition assistance, meaningful employment, and housing. Courage to Call is a resource for the resources, 100% veteran and military led, and operates via Countywide outreach and education, a 24/7 peer line, as well as individual short-term, solution focused and prevention-oriented counseling.

As a local non-profit organization, 2-1-1 San Diego is the region's trusted source for information and connections to community, health, and disaster resources via a free, 24 hour, 365 days a year confidential phone service in 200+ languages. 2-1-1 San Diego maintains a searchable online

database of more than 6,000 services and resources that are regularly updated and our Courage to Call Peer to Peer Navigators help connect callers to accurate information in real-time. 2-1-1 maintains the Community Information Exchange (CIE) in San Diego with an integrated technology platform to deliver enhanced community care planning. Care planning tools enable Courage to Call and community partners to integrate data from multiple sources, such as homeless outreach, housing, and behavioral health providers within the County, VA Healthcare System, City of San Diego, and San Diego Housing Commission, to make bi-directional referrals. This creates a shared longitudinal record of service delivery for veterans and shift from reactive approaches to proactive, holistic, person-centered care.

Veterans Village of San Diego (VVSD) has served all veterans since 1981 and is dedicated to “Leave No One Behind.” For forty years, VVSD has sought to provide services and support to our nation’s heroes. Each year VVSD helps thousands of our most vulnerable veterans to reclaim their lives through programs that offer emergency, transitional and permanent housing, mental health counseling through the Steven A. Cohen Military Family Clinic, and substance use treatment at the State-licensed Veterans Rehabilitation Center. Our Courage to Call Veteran Peer Outreach Specialist makes connections, referrals, and linkages also to VVSD’s Employment and Training Services to help veterans of all eras, including those recently separated from the military, prepare for, and find new careers or resume previous career paths.

Courage to Call serves individuals who have served in any branch of the Military, Reserves or National Guard regardless of their discharge status, and those who have left the military and need help finding support and services. Outreach assists veterans in obtaining resources and assistance when needed including individuals with unique needs from LGBTQ, women veterans, trauma exposed, dishonorable discharges, bad conduct, non-combat, homeless, serious mental health challenges, and stressed families. Family members and loved ones who are concerned about the emotional health and well-being of those who have served are also eligible. During fiscal year 2021-2022 to date, Courage to Call has served 935 unduplicated individuals and 581 unduplicated families or family members. The program also serves community organizations, agencies, and providers that request help with training to improve cultural awareness and understanding for serving those with a military or military family background, as well as psychoeducation to incarcerated veterans. Suicide prevention training is provided using the Question, Persuade, and Refer (QPR) method. This year, 180 outreach and education events have been provided within the San Diego community.

All Courage to Call Veteran Peer Navigators have served in the military and understand the rigors of the military and military family life. These Peer Support Specialists provide a “first contact resolution” by ensuring that client needs are addressed to the best of their ability during their first contact with Courage to Call. Additional support for family members and loved ones are provided by Family Support Partners. Regardless of entry into services, whether through a phone call to 2-1-1 San Diego or contact at an outreach event, veterans receive a biopsychosocial assessment and are immediately linked. For those needing enhanced care, veterans are connected to a Veteran Peer Navigator for short-term, solution focused counseling. Courage to Call consistently provided services and supports throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, and at the San Diego Convention Center’s Homeless Support Services, mitigating the negative effects of social isolation and lack of service access, thereby mitigating thoughts and circumstances leading to

heightened risk of suicidal ideation or attempts. There are 80 individuals currently receiving counseling and ongoing case management from our Veteran Peer Navigators, 47 of whom expressed suicidal ideation and/or suicide attempts this year.

Other direct services include bi-monthly Food Distribution events hosted by Courage to Call in collaboration with Feeding San Diego, Adult/Professional Clothing Closet access year-round and annual Operation Dress Code events to provide business wardrobes to women veterans transitioning from military to civilian careers, and Veteran Treatment Court support with recruitment and training for veterans who wish to mentor justice-involved veterans during rehabilitation programs in lieu of incarceration.

In summary, re-integrating veterans into civilian communities requires a complex system of integrated services ranging from outreach and engagement, transition, workforce re-skilling/integration and community care coordination to prevent suicide. The Courage to Call program with its collaborative partners, 2-1-1 San Diego and Veterans Village of San Diego, is an active member of the San Diego Veterans Coalition (SDVC) and supports the Military, Veteran, and Family Transition Reintegration Project – in alignment with the Transition Improvement Act of 2019 as introduced by Chairman Levin – to prevent and relieve many stressors that can lead to mental, behavioral, physical, and emotional health, and other financial, readjustment, and justice involvement problems down range, and ultimately lead to a more vital and thriving life after military service.