### ****Commander’s Outreach Initiative: Building Bridges Between Veterans and Law Enforcement****

**Critical Incident Report and Program Proposal**

### ****Incident Overview****

**Veteran Crisis Outreach Initiative Highlighted**  
**Date:** November 15, 2024  
**Submitted by:** Jim Morgan

On November 15, 2024, a critical incident involving Alex Perry, a recently discharged veteran, underscored the urgent need for a streamlined approach to veteran crisis response. Perry, facing emotional distress following a relationship’s end, shared alarming messages and photos with his ex-girlfriend’s mother, suggesting imminent suicide.

**Key Actions:**

* **Notification:** Demorest City Manager Mark Musselwhite informed VFW Commander Barry Church, who contacted me immediately.
* **Law Enforcement Response:** Assistant Police Chief Minutello, observing Perry’s calm response to female officers, employed this approach to de-escalate the situation in the Blue Ridge woods. Perry surrendered peacefully, with no use of the nearby pistol.

**Follow-Up:**  
On November 19, Perry visited the Demorest Police Department to request the return of his pistol. After extensive assessment, officers determined Perry showed no suicidal indicators and returned the firearm.

### ****Context and Call for Change****

This incident follows the tragic death of veteran Aaron Patterson in Clarkesville on September 7, 2024, during a law enforcement encounter. Patterson’s loss emphasized the dire consequences of insufficient communication between law enforcement and VSOs.

**Response:**  
The **Commander’s Outreach Initiative** was established to:

1. Improve communication between law enforcement and VSOs.
2. Ensure immediate intervention and support for veterans in crisis.
3. Prevent future tragedies through proactive engagement.

### ****Commander’s Outreach Initiative****

**Mission Statement:**  
To build a collaborative framework between law enforcement and VSOs that ensures timely and compassionate support for veterans and their families during crises.

**Key Components:**

1. **Information Distribution:** Officers provide veterans and families with VSO contact information.
2. **Commander Notification:** Law enforcement alerts VSO commanders to veteran-involved incidents.
3. **Resource Delivery:** VSOs connect veterans to mental health services, VA treatment, and family support.

### ****Proposed Framework****

**Contact Protocol:**

* Officers gain access to a dedicated email and hotline for immediate VSO commander communication.
* VSO leadership coordinates rapid responses, offering tailored resources.

**Veteran Engagement:**

* Commanders follow up post-incident to ensure veterans’ needs are met and provide ongoing care.

**Training:**

* Offer law enforcement training on veteran-specific challenges (e.g., PTSD, TBI).
* Train VSOs on effective collaboration with law enforcement during crises.

### ****Sample Scenarios and Responses****

**Scenario 1: Welfare Check at a Veteran’s Residence**

* **Incident:** Agitated behavior and potential PTSD symptoms.
* **Response:** Officers contact VSO for context and follow-up, facilitating mental health intervention.

**Scenario 2: Traffic Stop with a Distressed Veteran**

* **Incident:** Erratic driving tied to civilian life struggles.
* **Response:** VSO provides immediate resources, such as peer support groups.

**Scenario 3: Public Disturbance with a Homeless Veteran**

* **Incident:** Aggressive behavior and disorientation.
* **Response:** VSO assists with temporary shelter and connects the veteran to VA housing programs.

### ****Benefits****

1. **Enhanced Law Enforcement Efficiency:** Officers receive specialized support from VSOs, enabling focus on broader responsibilities.
2. **Improved Veteran Outcomes:** Timely intervention fosters reintegration and stability.
3. **Community Trust:** Strengthened ties between veterans, law enforcement, and the community.

**Responding to Veterans in Crisis: Steps for Outreach Teams**

When a veteran shows signs of suicidal tendencies, it’s critical to act with care, empathy, and urgency. This guide outlines how outreach teams, including law enforcement and VSO representatives, can support veterans effectively:

1. Recognize the Warning Signs

Be alert to indicators of distress, such as:

• Expressions of hopelessness, guilt, or feeling like a burden.

• Withdrawal from loved ones or isolation.

• Risky behaviors, substance misuse, or sudden mood swings.

• Talking about death, self-harm, or giving away possessions.

If these signs are present, proceed with compassionate engagement.

2. Approach with Care

• Establish a Safe Setting: Speak to the veteran in a private, non-threatening environment where they feel secure.

• Be Nonjudgmental: Use a calm, understanding tone. Avoid appearing confrontational or dismissive.

3. Start the Conversation

Use clear and empathetic language to open a dialogue:

• “I’m here because I care about your well-being and want to support you.”

• “You’ve been through a lot, and it’s okay to feel overwhelmed. How can we help?”

• “Have you been thinking about hurting yourself or taking your own life?”

Being direct shows concern and can encourage openness.

4. Actively Listen

• Allow the veteran to share their feelings without interruptions.

• Acknowledge their pain: “I hear you, and I’m here to help.”

Your role is to validate, not to solve their problems in the moment.

5. Engage Support Systems

• Contact VSO Representatives: Notify commanders or liaisons from the VFW, DAV, or American Legion to coordinate follow-up.

• Leverage Local Resources: Ensure they know about available programs, such as transportation to VA services or mental health care.

6. Offer Immediate Assistance

• Veterans Crisis Line: Dial 988, press 1, or text 838255. Offer to call or text with them.

• Local Emergency Contacts: If the veteran is in immediate danger, do not leave them alone. Contact law enforcement or emergency medical services.

7. Continue the Connection

• Encourage the veteran to seek ongoing professional help.

• Provide follow-up care through VSO resources or outreach programs.

• Stay in touch to show continued support and build trust.

For Outreach Team Coordination

• Law Enforcement: Ensure officers responding to veterans in crisis provide contact details for local VSOs and outreach teams.

• VSO Commanders: Collaborate to schedule follow-up visits and connect veterans with VA resources or counseling services.

By responding with compassion and connecting veterans to resources, outreach teams can help save lives and reinforce the strength of the veteran community.

### ****Veteran Crisis Response Guide****

**Key Steps for Outreach Teams:**

1. **Recognize Warning Signs:** Isolation, risky behavior, or suicidal ideation.
2. **Approach with Care:** Use a calm, empathetic tone in a non-threatening environment.
3. **Start the Conversation:**
   * "I’m here to help. What can I do?"
   * "Have you thought about hurting yourself?"
4. **Engage Support Systems:** Involve VSO commanders and provide resources such as the Veterans Crisis Line (988, press 1).
5. **Follow Through:** Ensure ongoing support and check-ins with the veteran.

### ****Conclusion****

The Commander’s Outreach Initiative represents a vital step toward a proactive, unified response to veteran crises. By fostering collaboration between law enforcement and VSOs, this program can save lives, build trust, and provide the care our veterans and their families deserve.

**For More Information:**

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