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## First step in preventing violent deaths: data

By **STEPHEN HARGARTEN** and **JERRY REED**

Posted: **June 21, 2008**

When Veterans Administration Secretary James Peake and other VA officials came under fire recently in congressional hearings on veteran suicides, one thing became clear — information on the actual number of veterans taking their own lives was dismally lacking.

This was despite the fact that such information holds implications for everything from the VA health care system to how we deal with post-traumatic stress disorders experienced by many Iraq war veterans.

But not knowing the numbers isn't just a failing of the VA. The fact is, the United States has no comprehensive, nationwide system for tracking suicides - or, for that matter, homicides, which are linked with domestic disputes, gang violence or violence against children.

About 50,000 people die every year from these kinds of violent acts - thousands more than die from car crashes. Yet a federal reporting system (which includes the 50 states) for fatalities from motor vehicle crashes has been in place for more than 30 years, and knowledge from that system has contributed to safer roads and the dramatic decline in automobile fatalities.

As chairman of the House Committee on Veterans Affairs, Rep. Bob Filner (D-Calif.) said the first step is to understand the scope and extent of the problem of veteran suicide. The same holds true for every other form of violent death. We must be able to identify troubling or even dangerous, trends that lead to violent deaths so we can help reduce the tens of thousands of productive life years that America loses annually to violence.

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A small program called the National Violent Death Reporting System, or NVDRS, offers an important step toward improving knowledge. This system collects data on violent deaths from only 17 states, including Wisconsin. That's all the funding the program has available right now. Nevertheless, the NVDRS is the only system in the U.S. that categorically gathers, links and analyzes data from coroner reports, death certificates, law enforcement records, crime labs and social agencies.

By linking the careful work of these different entities, NVDRS gives us a better understanding of when, where, why and how violent deaths occur in our communities and the participating states, as well as of who is at risk. In this way, it is a kind of electronic central nervous system, providing policymakers and community leaders with insights that can be instrumental in reducing the tragic burden of violence.

In the case of veteran suicide, the Veterans Administration is now taking steps to put the NVDRS data to use more quickly. In testimony before the Veterans Affairs Committee in May, Peake said that the department will now obtain data on veteran suicides from NVDRS on a monthly basis, thus allowing the VA to identify trends and take action more swiftly.

While that is good news, the financial realities facing the NVDRS system itself are not.

The current federal funding is limited, even though more states would like to join and eight have already filed applications. While state-specific information clearly provides value to local officials, national data from all 50 states are necessary to create a comprehensive nationwide system that can inform and evaluate violence prevention programs.

To put us on the path toward making this a truly federal program requires an increase of only \$4 million for fiscal year 2009, which begins Oct. 1. That would allow more than half of the states in the U.S. to participate - a significant milestone. We recognize that additional funding can be challenging to find, yet this amount is quite modest.

We urge Congress to provide this critical, additional funding. Without broadening participation to more states, thousands of lives remain at risk and the burden of suicide and homicide will continue.

*Stephen Hargarten is chairman of the Department of Emergency Medicine at the Medical College of Wisconsin in Milwaukee. Jerry Reed is executive director of the Suicide Prevention Action Network USA in Washington, D.C.*

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