

# MAYOR'S CHALLENGE TO PREVENT VETERAN SUICIDE



*City of Austin Texas*

JUNE 2020



A background image showing a top-down view of many hands of various skin tones clasped together in a large circle, symbolizing unity and community. The hands are positioned around a central point, with fingers interlaced. The image is slightly blurred and has a warm, natural color palette.

# PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS

Austin Community College  
Austin Fire Department  
Austin Police Department  
Austin Public Health  
Austin Vet Center  
Catholic Charities of Central Texas  
Cedar Crest Hospital  
Center Point  
Central Health  
Central Texas Veterans Services Coalition  
City of Austin  
CommUnity Care  
Institute for Military and Veteran Family Wellness  
Integral Care  
Lock Arms for Life  
Mental Health America of Texas  
Military Veteran Peer Network  
Positive Recovery Centers  
Professional Contract Services, Inc (PCSI)  
Samaritan Center  
Texas Gun Sense  
Texas Health and Human Services  
Texas Veterans Commission  
TexVet  
Travis County Criminal Justice Division  
Veterans Mental Health Department

# ABOUT THE MAYOR'S CHALLENGE

## Background

The secretary of the federal housing department certified Austin in 2016 as the third major city in Texas to virtually end veteran homelessness. While we continue to work tirelessly on this front to maintain that virtual zero, housing is only one battle in the war to empower veterans. According to the VA, the suicide rate for this demographic is nearly 1.5 times that of non-veteran adults nationally.

Mayor Adler accepted an invitation in 2018 from the US Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and US Veteran Affairs (VA) to be among seven cities to launch the Mayors' Challenge to Prevent Suicide Among Service Members, Veterans, and Their Families (SMVF). He appointed a team of leaders in Austin's health care, higher education, and emergency response to develop a strong safety net of services to this community.

The goal of the Mayors Challenge is threefold.

- Reduce suicides among SMVF using a public health approach
- Increase knowledge about the challenges and lessons learned from different strategies
- Employ evidence-based practices to reduce suicide deaths and attempts





# 2019 NATIONAL VETERAN SUICIDE REPORT FINDINGS\*

## 1,500,000

The VA estimates that there were more than 1.5 million veterans living in Texas at the end of 2019.†

## 1.5x

In 2017, the suicide rate for Veterans was 1.5 times the rate for non-Veteran adults, after adjusting for population differences in age and sex.

## 6,000

More than 6,000 veterans die by suicide each year.

## 16.8

Nearly 17 veterans die by suicide each day.



\*[https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/2019/2019\\_National\\_Veteran\\_Suicide\\_Prevention\\_Annual\\_Report\\_508.pdf](https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/2019/2019_National_Veteran_Suicide_Prevention_Annual_Report_508.pdf)  
†[https://www.va.gov/vetdata/veteran\\_population.asp](https://www.va.gov/vetdata/veteran_population.asp)



# TOGETHER, WE CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

The Mayor's Challenge Team takes a public health approach to suicide prevention. It employs the Center for Disease Control's (CDC) seven strategies\* for suicide prevention. These strategies are based on evidence that suicide risk drops precipitously when certain criteria are met within communities.

## **Strengthen economic supports**

Strengthen household financial security  
Housing stabilization policies

## **Strengthen access and delivery of suicide care**

Coverage of mental health conditions in health insurance policies  
Reduce provider shortages in under-served areas  
Safer suicide care through systems change

## **Create protective environments**

Reduce access to lethal means among persons at risk of suicide  
Organizational policies and culture  
Community-based policies to reduce excessive alcohol use

## **Promote connectedness**

Social support programs  
Community engagement activities

## **Teach coping and problem-solving skills**

Social-emotional learning programs  
Parenting skill and family relationship programs

## **Identify and support people at risk**

Gatekeeper training  
Crisis intervention  
Treatment for people at risk of suicide  
Treatment to prevent re-attempts

## **Lessen harms and prevent future risk**

Postvention  
Safe reporting and messaging about suicide



\*<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/suicide/prevention.html>



# STRUCTURE

## Mayor's Challenge Leaders

Sly Majid, City of Austin

Bettie Beckworth, Texas HHS

The subcommittees of the Mayor's Challenge are designed around the CDC's seven strategies.





# PROMOTING CONNECTEDNESS SUBCOMMITTEE

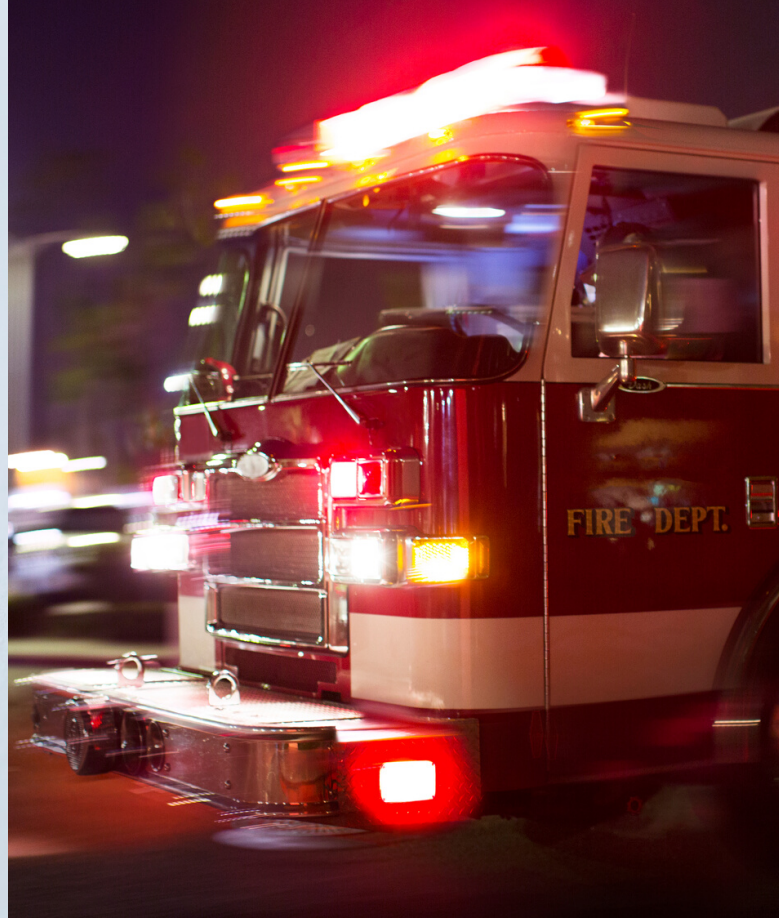
- Support multi-platform efforts that promote a positive message
- Create local communication guidelines for social media and mental health promotion
- Make recommendations on reporting and responsible messaging
- Build community capacity to support veterans by connecting community organizations and faith groups with the necessary resources and training

**Notable work includes educating faith leaders on how to better connect with SMVF, improving employment outcomes for SMVF, and promoting resource visibility online.**

**Co-chairs: Jeffrey Moe, VA  
Rajesh Harripersad, Samaritan Center**

Aaron Evans, Integral Care  
Adrienne Sturup, Austin Public Health  
Bethann Warwick, Austin Community College  
Cindy Long, Samaritan Center  
Jane Olien, VA  
John Wilson, Texas Veterans Commission  
Keith Walker, PCSI, Inc  
Neal McMaster, Catholic Charities  
Pia Villalon, Center Point  
Vanessa Ferguson, PCSI, Inc





## STRENGTHENING ACCESS SUBCOMMITTEE

**Chair: Kathryn Bongiovanni, VA**

**Notable work includes SMVF and crisis-sensitivity film and training curriculum for first responders.**

Brian Davis, Austin Fire Department  
Blake Harris, Texas Veterans Commission  
Ed Piker, EMS  
Elisa Borah, University of Texas  
Emily Stone, Integral Care  
Genaro Sandoval, Counselink Recovery  
Heather Hart, CommUnity Care  
Jaime Von Seltmann, APD  
Karen Janda, VA

Kimberly Weinberg, VA  
Laurel Mollere, Integral Care  
Marc Kruse, Austin Fire Department  
Marisa Aguilar, Integral Care  
Michael King, APD  
Rachel Toronjo, Central Health  
Rosa Rodriguez-Alvarez, Austin  
Community College  
Tara Olson, City of Austin



# CREATING PROTECTIVE ENVIRONMENTS SUBCOMMITTEE

**Chair: Melody Palmer-Arizola**

Notable work includes community and professional training on reducing access to lethal means--including locking and storing firearms.

Anthony Triola, Cedar Crest Hospital  
Carol Logan, City of Austin  
Carrie Sconza, TexVet  
Ehab Mustafa, Texas HHS  
Jenna Heise, Texas HHS  
Laura Gold, Texas HHS  
Leesa Ross, Lock Arms for Life  
Lisa Sullivan, Texas Suicide Prevention



# EMPLOYMENT TASK FORCE

**Co-Chairs: Jeffrey Moe, VA**

**Lisa Sullivan, Texas Suicide Prevention**




**Task force mission is to improve employment outcomes for service members, veterans, and their families in the Austin area.**

Anthony Triola, Cedar Crest Hospital  
Bettie Beckworth, TX Health and Human Services  
Bobby Gear, Jr., Texas Workforce Commission  
Bryan Dubreuiel, Austin Energy  
Diane Kerlin, Austin Energy  
Ehab Mustafa, TX Health and Human Services  
Jane Olien, Veterans Affairs  
John Wilson, Texas Veterans Commission

Jose Sanchez, Texas Veterans Commission  
Keith Walker, PCSI  
Kwee Lan Teo, Austin Chamber of Commerce  
Matthew Elledge, Galvanize  
Sean Shetler, Texas Workforce Commission  
Tina Lee, Veteran Services Office  
Vanessa Ferguson, PCSI







Mayor's Challenge to Prevent Veteran Suicide Summary Document  
Compiled by: Caroline McLaughlin, AmeriCorps VISTA, City of Austin

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