



# BUDDY CHECK:

RESOURCES AND SUPPORT TO IMPROVE  
THE WELL-BEING OF VETERANS



## BUDDY CHECK: NOW MORE THAN EVER

The winter holiday season can be a joyous time, but it can also bring on stress, depression and other challenges for veterans. Recent studies indicate that military suicide has increased by 20% in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. VA has reported sharp increases in mental health appointments, as well. With this information in mind, The American Legion's Buddy Check program is once again a critical tool to help us talk with veterans about the important issue of mental health and well-being. On the following pages of this guide, you will find information about resources available and tools for talking with veterans about suicide. Please review this information and help us spread the word that free and confidential help is just a phone call away.

Buddy Check is rapidly becoming one of The American Legion's most important programs. Originally instituted as a "comradeship campaign" for members and former members of the organization, this model program has proven effective to keep veterans up to date on the most important issues facing them. During the most recent Buddy Checks, members were encouraged to check in on veterans and find safe ways to provide assistance during COVID-19. As these check-ins continue, Buddy Check callers are asked to be alert to signs of depression and suicidality so veterans can learn about the critical resources available to improve their mental well-being. It's quite possible the information provided could save a life.

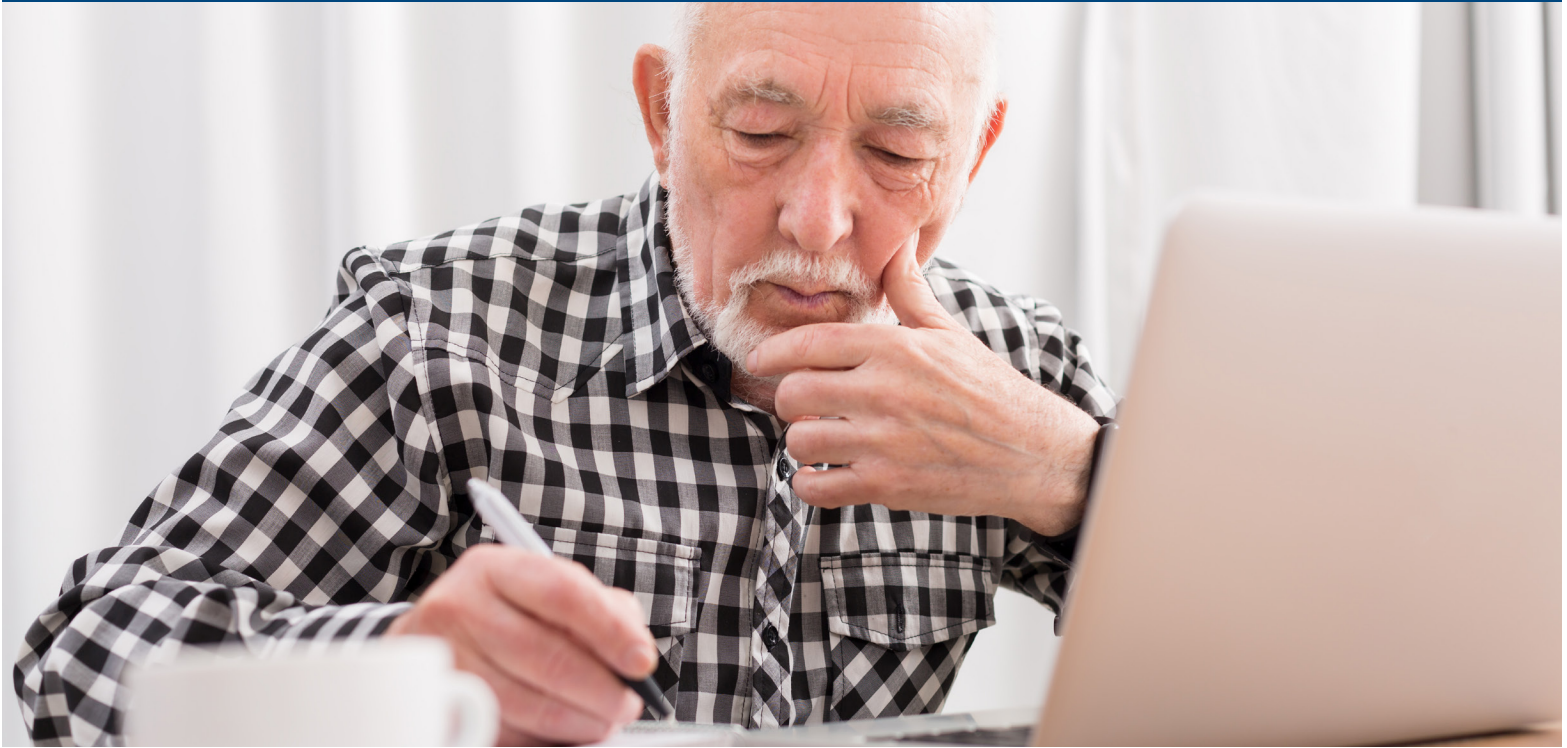
This winter, The American Legion hopes to engage thousands of veterans and supply them with information to connect them to care and available resources. Please be particularly attentive to seniors, a population that is especially vulnerable to loneliness and isolation that can occur during the dark and dreary winter months, especially as stay-home guidance continues amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Moreover, Buddy Checks let veterans in communities know The American Legion cares. It's what we do for our battle buddies. It's what The American Legion is all about.

## THE AMERICAN LEGION: ON THE FRONTLINES OF VETERAN SUICIDE

Veteran suicide prevention is one of The American Legion's top legislative priorities. The American Legion Legislative Division is busy working the halls of Congress in Washington, D.C., to advocate for improved services and care for mental health and well-being, and those efforts are paying off. A number of bills have passed dealing with this situation, and more are in the works, including:

**The Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act of 2019** was signed by President Donald Trump on Oct. 17, 2020. This legislation increases local resources available to veterans and will expand mental health care services at VA facilities. It also makes it easier for veterans to access non-VA resources in local communities. Local community care is a critical component in reducing and preventing veteran suicide because 60% of the veterans who die by suicide are not getting health care from VA.



**The National Suicide Hotline Designation Act of 2020** was also signed into law on Oct. 17, 2020, by President Trump. This act designates 9-8-8 as the universal telephone number to be used for the purposes of national suicide prevention and directs callers immediately to the prevention and mental health crisis hotline system. This number will go live in July of 2022. Veterans will also be able to dial 1 and go directly to VA to receive specialized assistance.

On March 5, 2019, the President signed Executive Order 13861 which established a three-year effort known as the **President's Roadmap to Empower Veterans and End a National Tragedy of Suicide (PREVENTS)**. The American Legion supported the creation of an inter-agency task force to lead the development of a comprehensive roadmap aimed at changing how the nation treats mental health of veterans and understands suicide prevention. The aim is to accelerate the progress in addressing veteran suicide, often regarded as a nationwide epidemic.

Two bills The American Legion is currently working to pass are:

**The IMPROVE (Incorporating Measurements and Providing Resources for Outreach to Veteran Everywhere) for Veterans Act**, would award grants for a period of three years to eligible entities for the provision of suicide-prevention services to veterans and their families. Under the bill, eligible recipients include tribally designated housing entities, community-based organizations, and other private groups that meet certain requirements.

Right now, The American Legion is urging members of Congress to pass the Buddy Check Bill, which requires the Department of Veterans Affairs to establish a national week of calling veterans to check on their well-being. In addition, the bill calls for VA to provide education, training and materials to veteran service organizations, like The American Legion, to engage them in the process. The bill is based on The American Legion's Buddy Check program. All American Legion Family members are strongly encouraged to get involved by visiting [VoterVoice.net](https://www.votervoice.net) to contact their legislators and urge passage of the bill.



## **NATIONAL, STATE AND LOCAL RESOURCES**

Prior to organizing a Buddy Check, it is necessary to get organized by becoming familiar with national, state and local resources available to veterans in crisis.

### **THE VETERANS CRISIS LINE:**

The Veterans Crisis Line is a free, confidential resource that's available to anyone, even those who are not registered with VA or enrolled in VA health care. The caring, qualified responders at the Veterans Crisis Line are specially trained and experienced in helping veterans of all ages and circumstances.

Since its launch in 2007, the Veterans Crisis Line has answered nearly 5 million calls and initiated the dispatch of emergency services to callers in crisis more than 159,000 times. The Veterans Crisis Line anonymous online chat service, added in 2009, has engaged in more than 565,000 chats. In November 2011, the Veterans Crisis Line introduced a text-messaging service to provide another way for veterans to connect with confidential, around-the-clock support and since then has responded to nearly 176,000 texts.

If you are in crisis – or know someone who is – and need to speak with a crisis responder, please call 1-800-273-8255 and press 1.

More information is available at [VeteransCrisisLine.net](http://VeteransCrisisLine.net).

### **9-8-8:**

Starting in July 2022, the Federal Communications Commission will be standing up 9-8-8 as the hotline for mental health emergencies. Similar to 9-1-1, the number will make it easier for persons in crisis to access mental health resources immediately, via the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. The new number will direct calls away from 9-1-1 and provide callers with better service from a mental health professional.



### **VETERANS RESOURCES:**

In addition to the Veterans Crisis Line, a number of resources for veterans is available in local communities. VA Medical Centers have trained suicide prevention coordinators or teams of individuals ready to help. VA Medical Centers offer a range of acute-care and community-based outpatient services, including mental health care, diagnostics, homelessness programs, alcohol/drug abuse programs, nursing homes and respite care. Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOC) are local VA facilities that provide primary care, counseling, laboratory analysis, prescriptions and radiology services. Vet Centers provide readjustment counseling and outreach services to all veterans who have served in any combat zone, as well as their family members.

### **LOCAL:**

Each community has local resources for persons experiencing mental health crises. A good start is to call the local health department for direction to local services. Be sure to make a list of them to have ready should someone ask for them.

### **NONPROFIT RESOURCES:**

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) – [afsp.org](http://afsp.org)

Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA) – [adaa.org](http://adaa.org)

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) – [nami.org](http://nami.org)

Mental Health America (MHA) – [mhanational.org](http://mhanational.org)

National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) – [nimh.nih.gov](http://nimh.nih.gov)



## HOW DO I ORGANIZE A BUDDY CHECK?

1. Gather up a team to call members, former members and all veterans in your area. If each member in a team of 10 calls just 10 people, 100 veterans can easily be reached.
2. If you don't have a list of current and former members at your fingertips, visit [myLegion.org](https://mylegion.org) and download the names of current members and those who have let their memberships expire.
3. Save the file of members and those whose memberships have expired onto a spreadsheet or copy and paste into a Word file to distribute among Buddy Check team members. Send out several copies of the lists via email.
4. Divide up the call list among team members. Some may have personal connections with the member or veteran and should make that particular Buddy Check.
5. Start calling to see how people are doing. Ask if they need anything. Again, be sure callers are equipped and ready to provide information on how veterans can find the emotional support and help they need either locally or through the Veterans Crisis Line.
6. Use the spreadsheet to record your calls and identify those who may need a follow up or additional assistance.
7. Leave contact information in case the call doesn't get answered so veterans can call back.

## AMERICAN LEGION SAMPLE SCRIPTS

The following scripts can help you and your American Legion Family team make Buddy Checks to help members and other veterans. Use these, modify them or draft your own before reaching out. When sharing information about the Veterans Crisis Line it should be relayed sensitively. You are spreading the word that free, confidential help is available and not suggesting the person you are talking with is the one who needs the help. Remember, the most important part of the call is to see if the veteran and family are OK and if the Legion can assist them in any way.

### **MEMBER:**

Hi, [MEMBER'S NAME]. This is [YOUR NAME] from your American Legion Post [XYZ]. I want to thank you for your membership and to check in on you and your family.

The winter months are approaching and we are still monitoring the coronavirus pandemic. I'm calling to see if there is anything that your American Legion post can do to assist you or your family at this time. Remember, your fellow Legionnaires are always here for you. If you, or a member of your family, need anything, please let me know and I will do my best to help.

The other reason I am calling is to enlist your support in helping The American Legion spread the word about the Veterans Crisis Line. The number is 1-800-273-8255 and is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The Veterans Crisis Line is a free, anonymous, confidential resource that's

available to any veteran, even if they are not registered with VA or enrolled in VA health care. Please help us get the word out.

Thanks again for your service and know that you can call me any time at [PHONE NUMBER] or email me at [EMAIL ADDRESS].

Let's stay in touch.

### **VETERAN / NON-MEMBER:**

Hi, [NAME]. This is [YOUR NAME] from American Legion Post [XYZ]. I am calling to check in on you and your family.

The winter months are approaching and we are monitoring the coronavirus pandemic. I'm calling to see if there is anything that American Legion Post [XYZ] can assist you or your family with.

I am also calling to enlist your support in helping The American Legion spread the word about the Veterans Crisis Line. The number is 1-800-273-8255 and is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The Veterans Crisis Line is a free, anonymous, confidential resource that's available to any veteran, even if they are not registered with VA or enrolled in VA health care. Please help us get the word out.

Thank you for your service and know that you can call me anytime at [PHONE NUMBER] or email me at [EMAIL ADDRESS].

Let's stay in touch.

### **IF YOU ARE CONCERNED ABOUT A VETERAN'S WELL-BEING:**

Here are some sample talking points you can work into a conversation with a fellow veteran you are concerned about.

#### **Sample 1:**

It's good to talk with you. These past few months have been a trying time for me and I doubt that I'm alone in feeling this way. I was talking with a friend at my post who shared information about the Veterans Crisis Line. It's a really great resource that anyone can call. It's free, confidential and operated 24/7. I'm calling all my friends to make sure they know about this resource.

Can I give you the number? Thinking it's best for us vets to stick together and want to be sure you have it in case someone you know might want to talk with them. It's 1-800-273-8255. When it picks up you just press the number one.

#### **Sample 2:**

Have you heard about the Veterans Crisis Line? It's a toll-free, confidential resource that connects veterans in crisis and their families and friends with qualified, caring VA responders. I'm telling all my veteran friends about it because I know it's a difficult time and we need to look out for each other. It can't hurt to spread the word that help is available and just one phone call away.

Can I give you the number? Thinking it's best for us vets to stick together and want to be sure you have it in case someone you know might want to talk with them. It's 1-800-273-8255. When it picks up you just press the number one.

**Sample 3:**

It's been good to talk with you. I have just one more thing to share. It's sad news but the loss of veteran and active duty lives to suicide has been on the rise in recent months. As a Legionnaire, I take pride in knowing that we are veterans serving veterans so I'm trying to spread the word that help is just a phone call away. There's a Veterans Crisis Line that you can call even if you're not registered with VA or enrolled in VA health care.

Can I give you the number? Thinking it's best for us vets to stick together and want to be sure you have it in case someone you know might want to talk with them. It's 1-800-273-8255. When it picks up you just press the number one.

## **QUICK ANSWERS TO WHAT THE LEGION DOES**

### **NATIONAL**

1. Stands as the nation's largest and most prominent voice for effective VA health care and disability benefits, GI Bill education and career opportunities. More than 3,600 American Legion service officers are handling over 700,000 veterans' cases at any one time, across the country and around the world. No other organization provides as much free service for veterans and their families.
2. Mentors thousands of children and youth through healthy, educational, competitive and patriotic programs, including Boys Nation, Oratorical Competition, American Legion Baseball, Junior Shooting Sports, flag education, Scouting, Junior ROTC and more.
3. Supports our nation's troops and a strong Department of Defense through innumerable programs and services for active-duty personnel, National Guard and Reserve components, as well as resources for military families and advocacy for military retirees.
4. Supports the health and well-being of all veterans, not just members.

### **DEPARTMENT**

1. What the Department does in support of veterans
2. What the Department does in support of children and youth
3. What the Department does in support of troops/national security

### **POST**

1. What the Post does in support of veterans
2. What the Post does in support of children and youth
3. What the Post does in support of troops/national security