



Ohio Adjutant General's Department

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Ohio Guard recruits Families, civilians to help combat suicide **By 1st Lt. Kimberly Snow, Ohio Adjutant General's Department Public Affairs**

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Nestled in a lodge among the majestic pines, winding waterways and rocky gorges of the Mohican State Park, a concerned group of Ohio National Guard Soldiers, Family members and civilian employees gathered for a weekend of sharing, interacting and learning. The tranquil surroundings offered a soothing backdrop to help attendees open up to discuss and learn how to combat a difficult and distressing problem — the rising suicide rate among National Guard and Reserve troops.

The group converged on the state park in north-central Ohio for an Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training — or ASIST — workshop June 11-12, the fourth such training weekend for Ohio Guard members this year, and the first ever to include Family members and civilian employees.

“I am unaware of any other states who are training Family members in ASIST,” said Master Sgt. Marshall Bradshaw, National Guard Bureau (NGB) suicide prevention program manager. “(The Ohio National Guard) has been on the forefront of using ASIST and probably has trained more personnel over the years than any other state.”

In fact, although NGB requires only two ASIST trainers per state, State Chaplain Col. Andrew Aquino said the Ohio Army National Guard currently has six and plans to add three more. Col. John C. Harris Jr., Ohio's assistant adjutant general for Army, set a requirement that one in every 50 Soldiers will receive the training, and so far, nearly 600 have been trained.

“We are actually at a 1-20 ratio right now,” Aquino said. “We actually want to get to one in eight — then you can get all these little teams. We are going to take about two more years to get there.”

Ohio National Guard leaders are trying this holistic and aggressive approach to combat the problem that has perplexed military officials, and for which they have been struggling to pinpoint specific causes or indicators. In fact, in a press conference this past January, Maj. Gen. Raymond Carpenter, acting director of the Army National Guard, said that less than half of the Army National Guard Soldiers who committed suicide in 2010 had deployed. And while active duty Soldier suicides decreased modestly in 2010, the rate doubled in the Army National Guard during the same period. However, the problem is not exclusive to the Army Guard. According to a 2009 Air National Guard community suicide prevention briefing at wingmanproject.org, suicide is second only to accidents in Airman deaths; and for every Airman killed in combat, seven commit suicide.

In Ohio, five Army National Guard Soldiers committed suicide in 2010, compared to one in 2009 and two in 2008. The Ohio Air National Guard had no recent suicides until 2011; they have had three this year.

The ASIST curriculum aims to reduce these grim statistics significantly by focusing on skill acquisition — specifically, how to identify and help people at risk. During the first half of the first day's training, attendees are formed into small discussion groups and encouraged to get in touch with their own attitudes about suicide, because their attitudes affect how they're going

to help others, Aquino said. During the second half of day one, they learn about the suicide intervention model — a structured way of identifying where you are in the helping process. On the second day, attendees role play.

“The group gets a chance to reflect and to look at it and practice it as they do it one at a time,” Aquino said. “It gives them an opportunity to feel a little better about doing an intervention. That’s the real value of it, is everything is done in small workgroups.”

This weekend’s class roster included 16 Soldiers and 21 civilians. Because trainers want to encourage attendees to talk openly and without being inhibited by rank or position, Soldiers shed uniforms in favor of civilian clothes and address one another on a first-name basis.

“I know some of the people on a military basis — what their rank is,” said Staff Sgt. Amy Baker from Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 371st Sustainment Brigade. “Then they say ‘I’m not that person this weekend. For these two days, I will be known as this.’ So right now, I’m just Amy. And it makes it a level playing field so that someone’s experience is not greater or less than someone else’s because we’re all on the same level.”

Most of the civilian attendees are Family members who volunteer in unit Family readiness groups and comprise what ASIST trainer Chaplain Maj. Nicholas Chou calls “the first line of defense.” Among them was Dayton-native Janice McCurdy, Family readiness group leader for the Middletown-based Headquarters and Headquarters Detachment, 155th Chemical Battalion, and mother of unit operations officer Maj. Tonia McCurdy. Janice had several reasons for attending the weekend training — one was to be in a better position to assist her daughter.

“She does a lot of casualty assistance and she has also had to go out and find Soldiers that have texted her that they were ready to end their life,” Janice said. “And a lot of times, she pulls me in. ‘Mom, why don’t you come along and talk to the Family or just be there for support for the Family.’ So I figured I need to know something or how to help. And that’s why I came.”

Janice, who like many attendees has been touched by suicide, also wanted to learn how to identify warning signs and to be in a position to help those people who may be contemplating ending their own life.

“In the last year, we’ve had a suicide within the Family,” she said. “We thought we had done everything that we knew to do, but yet he still committed suicide. There must have been something further we could have done and maybe I can find the answer with this class.”

The desire to find answers and help others was a common theme among attendees. Rita Kreitzer, the 371st Sustainment Brigade Family readiness support assistant, wanted to be among the first civilians to receive the class so she could help not only those in need, but also those Family readiness group volunteers in her brigade.

“I just really hope that I can — I know it sounds corny — but just make a difference,” Kreitzer said. “I want to be the one that someone will walk in to my office and say, ‘I need some help.’ I know I’m not anywhere qualified after a two-day training to help in a professional manner, but to at least send them in the right direction to help them get the help they need.”

Most people who attend the course acknowledge being touched by suicide — whether they have had suicidal thoughts of their own or have dealt with a close friend or relative who committed or attempted suicide, Aquino said. In Kreitzer’s case, a crisis was averted when her close Family member admitted herself into a treatment facility after she felt other health care professionals were not taking her seriously. It made a huge difference in all of their lives, she said.

“It could have turned the other way very easily,” she said. “One of my biggest complaints with the situation that we dealt with was that no one listened. And if I’m that person who hears that first complaint and can get them the help they need, then I hope it’s me.”

As a brigade medical readiness noncommissioned officer, a Family readiness group liaison and a military spouse, Baker had multiple reasons for attending the weekend workshop. In her role as a military first-line leader, she's dealt with suicidal thoughts and behaviors in the ranks on several occasions. Although she said she innately knew how to handle some situations, she wanted more practical information — like how to help a Soldier understand that having suicidal thoughts is not uncommon, but it's important to work through and move past them.

In her role as a military liaison to the FRG and as a military spouse, she understands the challenges facing the Families of deployed Soldiers, including the range of emotions during and following a spouse's deployment. She wants to use those viewpoints and the weekend training to help the Soldiers and the Family as a whole, she said.

“My husband deployed and came back somewhat of a different person,” Baker said. Those are the big issues coming up in the group discussions — as the Family member that's here, how do I handle my Soldier coming home a different person, and the Soldier saying, ‘I don't know how to deal with myself as a different person.’”

Baker said she plans to take everything she learned over the weekend back to her unit, her Family readiness group and even to her home. The skills she learned can help everyone and everyone needs to know about them, she said.

“We're the people who are going to be with these Soldiers and Family members that have these thoughts and feelings,” Baker said. “It's not the doctor that's going to be that person who helps you — it's me the wife, and me the Soldier, and me the first-line leader.”

The next ASIST workshop is scheduled for September. Although no Family members are currently enrolled, Aquino said he'd like to train as many as are willing to complete the intense two-day course. He likens the course to CPR and its graduates to first responders and lifeguards.

“When you identify the person with (suicidal ideations or) thoughts, and (he or she) is making an attempt, this person — the ASIST-trained person — will get that person stabilized so they can be taken care of by the long-term people — the professionals, the doctors, the psychologists,” he said. “We can’t have enough. Anybody that can come to it, we strongly encourage because you can’t have too many lifeguards at a pool. You can’t have too many people ready and willing to do an intervention.”

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Photo Caption:

032 - Ohio Army National Guard Staff Sgt. Amy Baker (left) of Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 371st Sustainment Brigade, participates in a practical exercise with her small group during an Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training class June 11 at Mohican Resort Lodge, near Loudonville. The weekend-long class was the Ohio National Guard’s first such class to train Family members on the program. (Ohio National Guard photo by 1st Lt. Kimberly Snow)

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FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT: The Ohio National Guard Public Affairs Office at 614-336-7000. Please visit the Ohio National Guard website at <http://onq.ohio.gov>.