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Tennessee Suicide Prevention Network

"Saving Lives in Tennessee"

December 17, 2009

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President,

As of this writing, roughly 350 American armed services personnel have died by suicide this year, a number roughly equal to that of the number of hostile-fire deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan. The various branches of our nation's armed forces are taking urgent action to prevent these unnecessary and often preventable tragedies which cause heartbreak for so many people, damage overall troop morale, and compromise our nation's ongoing war efforts.

Our agency believes that the White House has a role to play in this effort as well, and as such we welcome the current review of the White House condolence letter policy.

Over the last year, the Tennessee Suicide Prevention Network (TSPN) has worked closely with the suicide prevention program at Fort Campbell, one of the bases with the highest number of suicides. We have provided recommendations for engaging service personnel and their families in mental wellness and suicide prevention outreach efforts, and helped promote these to the larger community.

It is TSPN's belief that even though these soldiers were not killed in action, they still sacrificed much for their fellow soldiers and their nation, up to the point their mental health deteriorated. In some ways, dying by suicide is even worse than dying in combat. Soldiers who die fighting still have the urge to live and are actively trying to save themselves, their comrades, and the civilians they protect. A death by suicide indicates the complete loss of hope, the gnawing certainty that everything has been for nothing and it will never get any better.

Whatever physical or mental anguish the soldier suffers, his or her family feels it longer, deeper. In the event of a suicide, this pain is complicated by the idea that they could have done something to stop it, callous comments from others that their loved one's death was "dishonorable", and suspicions that commanding officers or other soldiers could have kept their child, parent, or friend alive.

Our contacts at Fort Campbell tell us that many of these families feel completely disowned by the Army—they no longer get benefits, housing, or services and feel completely excluded from life on the base. We believe it is a bad idea for these families to fall away from the community that supported them in the past, especially considering how survivors of suicide are at high risk for a suicide attempt themselves.

The lack of a letter from our President seems to reinforce this attitude. A combat death at least merits a letter expressing the President's recognition of and

appreciation for the soldier's service and sacrifice. But the family of a soldier who dies by suicide never gets that letter—a indirect assertion that their mode of death negated all they did for their country.

Several mental health experts are joining a growing movement in support of reforming the current protocol and include suicide in the list of circumstances warranting presidential condolence letters. Congressman Dan Burton of Indiana has already issued a call for the White House to start acknowledging these soldiers' contributions and untimely deaths, and TSPN is attempting to engage its representatives in Congress in joining a growing bipartisan movement in support of a new condolence letter policy.

By sending letters to the families of soldiers lost to suicide, you will do more than comfort and reassure grieving families. You will also demonstrate the White House's concern for its men and women in uniform and its commitment to resolving the ongoing military suicide epidemic. You will also convey the message that suicide is not something to be hidden away and hushed up, but candidly discussed and dealt with. Frank discussion about suicide and the circumstances that lead to it is the first step necessary to confront the so-called "silent epidemic".

We look forward to hearing from you regarding the review process, and we hope we can count on you regarding our ongoing mission to prevent suicide in Tennessee and our nation as a whole.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Scott Ridgway". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Scott Ridgway, MS
Executive Director