

Awareness of suicide helps SAVE

Veterans Affairs official discusses a four-step prevention process

By TOM VOGT

Columbian staff writer

A dozen veterans kill themselves every day in the United States.

Male veterans are twice as likely as civilians of either sex to commit suicide.

For Rob Tell, those findings by Veterans Affairs researchers are a call to save lives. And he's doing it through "Operation SAVE."

Tell is coordinator of the suicide prevention program at the Portland Veterans Affairs Medical Center. He spoke Monday at Clark College as part of the school's "Mental Health Monday" series.

"We don't turn people into counselors," Tell said at Monday's forum in the Penguin Student Lounge. But the program does provide background on veteran-specific suicide risks, and offers tips on talking with a veteran who might be suicidal.

Veterans can be stressed by frequent deployments in hostile environments, said Tell, who also serves Vancouver's VA campus. Even vets who don't face high-stress deployments can hit a crisis when their military careers end.

"People in the military have a clear mission," Tell said. When they leave the service, "There can be a big void instead of a sense of purpose."

"Operation SAVE" gets its name from the initial letters in a four-step process designed to help veterans in crisis: Signs of suicidal thinking; Ask questions; Validate the person's experience; Encourage treatment and expedite getting help.

■ **Signs** include: threatening to kill or hurt yourself; looking for ways to kill yourself (stockpiling pills, getting a firearm); expressing rage or a desire for revenge; acting recklessly; withdrawing; difficulty sleeping, or sleeping all the time.

■ **Asking** involves phrasing the question simply and directly: "Have you thought about killing yourself?" Ask at an appropriate time, based on what the person has told you about his or her feelings and experiences; don't argue, and listen more than you speak.

■ **Validate** the veteran's experience by making it clear you follow what he or she is saying; acknowledge that the situation deserves attention.

■ **Encourage** treatment; explain that professionals are available to help, and that treatment works; point out that a mental health issue is no different from any other medical problem.

Suicide prevention efforts can work, Tell said. When the U.S. Air Force was faced with a rash of suicides, it instituted mandatory monthly discussions about suicide and mental health. "The suicide rate

Did you

know?

■ Veterans can reach a suicide prevention hot line by calling 1-800-TALK, then pressing 1.

Veterans:

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dropped 30 percent," Tell said.

People who have been contemplating suicide can change their minds, he said, citing the experience of a man who survived a jump from San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge.

"The second he left the bridge, he told himself, 'Crap!'"

Bridge security personnel have stopped many other people suspected of being potential jumpers, Tell said.

After 15 years, 90 percent of the people they stopped were still alive or had died of natural causes.

Most people who are consid-

ering suicide say something that could be an indicator, Tell said.

It can include expressions of "Thank you" or "It was nice knowing you" in a setting that doesn't make any sense, or leaves you wondering, "What was that about?"

The list of suicide signs can fit a lot of nonsuicidal people — "Half the people in this country can't sleep" — so trust your gut if it feels funny, Tell said.

The recent mass shooting at Fort Hood in Texas didn't exactly match Tell's discussion. But the U.S. Army major arrested in the deaths of 13 people apparently didn't expect to survive his attack, and he expressed some of the suicide warning signs before his rampage, Tell said.