FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

The American Legion activates national Buddy Checks to save veteran lives amid rising suicide rates, urges Congress to pass bill to help

Posts across the country step up veteran-to-veteran outreach to support those at high risk around Veterans Day

INDIANAPOLIS (October 29, 2020) — As COVID-19 cases rise and the holidays approach, The American Legion is activating its Buddy Check program to save veteran lives through peer support check-in calls. The nation’s largest veterans organization is also urging Congress to pass the Buddy Check Bill which will make wellness checks a national priority for the Department of Veterans Affairs. With military suicides up 20% over this time last year, Legionnaires will make thousands of check-in calls to at-risk veterans across the nation, to offer support and access to health and wellness programs in the week surrounding Veterans Day and into the weeks ahead.

The American Legion warns that veterans can be at particular risk for depression and suicide around the holidays and into the winter months. Many veterans are disproportionately hard-hit by the pandemic due to age, chronic health issues, post-traumatic stress disorder and isolation. The Buddy Check program is designed to give Legionnaires the tools to make contact, engage in conversation, assess risks and direct veterans in need to the appropriate services.

“The American Legion knows from 100 years of experience that it’s veteran-to-veteran contact that can make the difference for someone in a crisis situation,” says James W. “Bill” Oxford, national commander of The American Legion. “So, we’re putting some muscle behind this effort and giving our members the tools they need to reach out to fellow veterans in their hometowns who may be hard hit by the triple whammy of the pandemic, isolation and the holidays.”

The American Legion is also urging Congress to unanimously pass the Buddy Check Bill introduced with bi-partisan support from Sens. Joni Ernst, R-Iowa; Doug Jones, D-Ala.; and Maggie Hassan, D-N.H. The legislation will require VA to establish a “Buddy Check Week,” as well as provide educational opportunities, materials and references for veterans to learn how to conduct personal wellness checks. The bill also compels VA to expand resources for the Veterans Crisis Line to handle any potential increased volume during the designated week.

“Veterans are in crisis, and we need Congress’ help to take this program to the next level and stem the tide of suicide among our nation’s veterans,” Oxford said. “We need all hands on deck and all boots on the ground to fight for our nation’s veterans, just like they fought for us.”
The Buddy Check program encourages Legionnaires to make contact, lend a listening ear, and direct their peers to critical services. For Buddy Check information, visit legion.org/buddycheck. For urgent help, contact the Veterans Crisis Line at 1-800-273-8255.

About The American Legion
The American Legion is the largest veterans service organization with nearly 2 million members in more than 12,000 posts across the nation. Chartered by Congress in 1919, The American Legion is committed to mentoring youth and sponsoring wholesome community programs, advocating patriotism and honor, promoting a strong national security and continued devotion to servicemembers and veterans.

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