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To: [Public Relations Division](#); [All Legion Leadership](#)
Subject: Release: American Legion calls on DoD to review policies on suicide attempts
Date: Wednesday, November 28, 2012 3:03:07 PM

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

American Legion calls on DoD to re-examine policies on suicide attempts by troops

INDIANAPOLIS (November 28, 2012) – “Compassion instead of courts” is the approach needed to stem the alarming rate of suicide among U.S. troops, according to the leader of the nation’s largest veterans organization.

“If you succeed at committing suicide, you are often treated as a hero by grieving friends and family. But if you fail at suicide, you could be treated to a court-martial. This must change,” said American Legion National Commander James E. Koutz, a Vietnam war veteran.

Koutz praised the progress the military has made in recent years to de-stigmatize those who seek treatment for suicidal thoughts but added that the Uniform Code of Military Justice still allows for the prosecution of those who make unsuccessful attempts. “This sends a mixed message,” Koutz said. “On the one hand we are grateful for their service. We want to compensate you for your Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or Traumatic Brain Injury. But if you engage in a behavior that is often seen as a symptom of those injuries, we will punish you”

Suicides accounted for 20 percent of U.S. military deaths last year. “More servicemembers are dying by their own hand than are killed by our enemies on the battlefield,” Koutz added. “This is becoming a huge problem and every one of these suicides is a national tragedy. I am not faulting the military for this at all. It is up to Congress and the president to make the changes necessary to the UCMJ to de-criminalize this behavior and stop overzealous prosecutions. These servicemembers need a helping hand, not a slap down.”

Koutz pointed out that The American Legion has instituted a national committee on TBI/PTSD and would be happy to share its findings with lawmakers and the Department of Defense to try to lower the suicide rate.

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