

Can Chaplains Save More Marine Lives than Corpsmen?

Where are we more effective?

by CDR Christopher H. Kneen, CHC, USN

Can chaplains save more Marine lives than Corpsmen? The answer is “no” if the situation involves Marines whose lives are in danger or are casualties on the battlefield. The bravery and skill of Navy Corpsmen is legendary and deserves great respect. However, if the Marines are struggling with undiagnosed PTSD, hidden financial problems, relationship breakdowns, chemical addiction, harassment, legal problems, or depression issues, I argue that the better utilization of Navy Chaplains and Religious Program Specialists (Religious Ministry Teams or RMTs) can help lower the suicide rate of Marine Corps personnel without significant increase in financial cost or change in the battle rhythm of the Corps.

Recently, I attended a West Coast conference of RMT personnel. RADM Greg Todd, Chaplain of the Marine Corps, challenged the chaplains and religious program specialists in attendance to come up with new ideas that will help lower the suicide rate in the Marine Corps. Not coincidentally, September 2018 was National Suicide Prevention Awareness Month, and the Marine Corps was highlighting prevention efforts and promoting resources and support services, of which there are many. The challenge is to get those Marines who are most at risk connected to the resources within the Marine Corps that could benefit them the most.

I suggest a two-step process that can be initiated at the discretion of a Marine commanding officer (CO). First, the

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Unit Chaplains can share spiritual guidance in garrison or the field. (Photo by LCpl Tegra Shepherd.)

CO directs the staff chaplain to share a one- to two-minute spiritual fitness at staff meetings, unit musters, family-day events, and training breaks. Second, immediately following this quick session by the chaplain, a representative from command leadership reinforces in one sentence that all communication with the chaplain is confidential and available to any and all Marines, Sailors, and civilians in the command and their

dependents. This intentional two-step process will increase visibility of the command's RMT, which is necessary because of an active duty chaplain to Marine ratio of approximately 1 chaplain to 659 Marines. This process will also reinforce the command's desires to see Marines utilize the unit chaplain.

The absolute confidential communication offered by RMT members to struggling Marines is an important tool

for command leadership in combating suicide. All Navy chaplains and religious program specialists have the professional obligation to keep private all confidential communication disclosed to them. This confidentiality gives the Marine the opportunity to have unconstrained communication about personal matters in complete privacy, allowing for full personal disclosure. Chief of Chaplains, RADM Brent Scott, said succinctly, "What is said to a Navy chaplain stays with a Navy chaplain unless [the Marine or Sailor] decides otherwise." The Marine Corps greatly benefits from this type of pastoral care. The chaplain can then assist the Marine by acting as a spiritual guide (if desired by the Marine) and as a resource manager directing him to the many behavioral health, medical, financial, counseling, legal, and addiction treatment resources currently available within the Marine Corps.

Spiritual fitness tie-ins are typically historic illustrations or quotes that are

never religious. They are intended to inspire and support the Marine Corps' core values of honor, courage, and commitment in addition to the fourteen Leadership Traits of the Marine Corps. Even Marines who are not struggling will benefit from the reinforcement of these core values. The current Commandant of the Marine Corps emphasized the importance of spiritual fitness in *ALMAR 033/16*. Gen Robert B. Neller wrote, "Research indicates that spiritual fitness plays a key role in resiliency, in our ability to grow, develop, recover, heal and adapt."¹

The DOD's Annual Suicide Report shows that Marine deaths by suicide began to exceed deaths in military action in 2012. It should be noted that since 2008, the Marine Corps suicide rate is comparable to the civilian suicide rate that has been adjusted to Marine Corps demographics. During my career as a Navy Chaplain, I ministered to the service members, family, and friends

left behind after three separate Marine suicides. In each case, survivors were left feeling disappointed, saddened, or angry.

This is not another program; it is an idea. As long as at-risk internally suffering Marines isolate themselves and keep their struggles hidden, all the prevention efforts in the Marine Corps will do them no good. As the Marine Corps continues to focus on solutions that will reduce destructive behavior within its ranks, I argue that Marine lives can be saved by intentionally utilizing the RMT assets already available to Marine leadership at the cost of only a few minutes a week.

Note

1. Headquarters Marine Corps, *ALMAR 033/16, Spiritual Fitness*, (Washington, DC: October 2016).



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