



University of  
Pittsburgh

School of  
Pharmacy

PERxU

# MONTHLY REPORT



Northwest Pennsylvania Veteran Suicide Prevention Program

SEPTEMBER 2022

*Funded by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's  
Comprehensive Suicide Prevention Program*

# Program Overview

The Northwest Pennsylvania Veteran Suicide Prevention Program (NWPVSP) is a five-year collaborative effort between federal and state-level entities, community-level service providers, and organizational experts in suicide prevention **to create significant and lasting change** in the 15-county NW PA region by August 2025. Funding for the project is granted through the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Comprehensive Suicide Prevention Program.

The program **aims to reduce Veteran suicide attempts and death by an average of 10%** over five years (2020-2025). Other program goals include increasing awareness of suicide risk, promoting community connection and resilience, and improving delivery of suicide care. The purpose of this report is to **outline key findings and recommendations** based upon data collected for the NWPVSP as of September 30, 2022.

To review the methodology for this report, including details of data collection and analysis, please contact the NWPVSP Program Manager, Katie Krancevich ([kak274@pitt.edu](mailto:kak274@pitt.edu)). Additional information can be found on the NWPVSP website, the Resilient Veteran, at <https://www.theresilientveteran.org>

## Tiers of Program Activities

### 1. Community (see page 4)

- Offering **suicide awareness** and interventional trainings
- Promoting **connection within communities**

### 2. Healthcare (see page 5)

- Increasing healthcare provider **military cultural competency**
- Streamlining procedures for **screening, intervention, and referrals**
- Emphasizing **treatment options** to prevent reattempts

### 3. Upstream (see page 6)

- Increasing awareness to existing **mental health parity laws**
- Improving **coordination** of physical, behavioral, and mental health care

## September 2022 Highlights

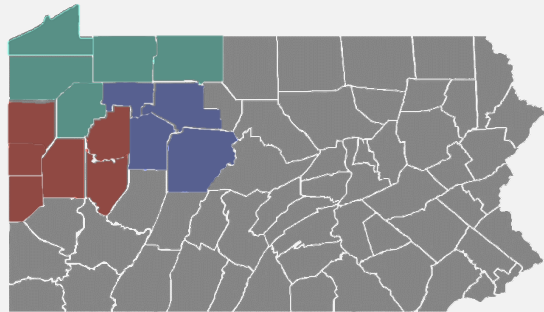
- **20** partner meetings were held
- **32** gun locks were distributed
- **34** people attended gatekeeper training sessions
- **105** community members attended the *Breaking Bread with Heroes* event
- **5** new healthcare materials were developed
- **4** healthcare site recruitment meetings were held
- **4** educational materials about mental health parity are available on the website
- **2** county coroners provided data on 38 suicide deaths, 0 were identified as Veterans
- **14/32 (44%)** Advisory Group members attended the September meeting
- **4** stakeholders attended the September Journal Club
- **12/14 (88%)** Advisory Group members completed meeting evaluations, with unanimous agreement that the meeting moved the project forward and they were glad they attended
- **30/34 (88%)** of trainees completed training evaluations
- **27** community members completed the suicide awareness survey

## Next Steps

- **Engagement:** Schedule a military culture and/or suicide prevention gatekeeper training with new Region 1 stakeholders by the end of 2022; Schedule a Region 2 training series on military culture and suicide prevention to occur in early 2023; Identify a new meeting time for the monthly journal club that will allow for more participation by January
- **Tier 1:** Hold two additional gatekeeper trainings in 2023
- **Tier 2:** Develop a referral protocol template for healthcare sites in October
- **Tier 3:** Create a new educational material about VA benefits eligibility for Military Sexual Trauma in October
- **Data Collection:** Solidify at least 1 additional coroner partnership and finalize agreements with VA VISN4 MIRECC by the end of 2022
- **Evaluation:** Conduct a full training evaluation analysis and an analysis of suicide awareness surveys in October; Complete key informant interviews in November and December

# Partner Engagement

PERU is working to enhance local suicide prevention, intervention, and response efforts and work to address gaps in efforts or services. Implementation is being phased across **three geographic regions** that were selected based on resource availability and existing healthcare and community partnerships. Currently, implementation efforts are focused on **Regions 1 and 2**.



▶ **Region 1:** Erie, Crawford, Venango, Warren, McKean

▶ **Region 2:** Elk, Forest, Clearfield, Jefferson

▶ **Region 3:** Armstrong, Beaver, Butler, Clarion, Lawrence, Mercer

The goal of the program's outreach and engagement strategy is to build and maintain positive relationships with community partners in each county to support implementation efforts. The **Partner Meetings Table** below represents the number and types of meetings held in September.

Partner Meetings in September 2022		
Entity Type	Meeting Purpose	Meetings (#)
Advisory Group Partners	Project Planning	4
Community Stakeholders	Continued Engagement	7
County Coalitions/Task Forces	Continued Engagement	4
Healthcare Partners	Recruitment/Engagement	2
Safe Storage Partners	Continued Engagement	1
State-Level Agencies	Continued Engagement	2
<b>Totals</b>		<b>20</b>

## Region 1 Summary

- The implementation team engaged with a large group of community partners in Region 1 throughout the month of September, including: **Bodhi Gardens, American Legion Post 285, Erie Vet Center, Erie VAMC, Erie's Non-Violence Initiative, and many Erie County Veterans**. These engagement efforts culminated in the community engagement event, *Breaking Bread with Heroes*, which took place in Waterford, PA (Erie County) on September 17<sup>th</sup> and hosted over 100 local Veterans and community members.
- The implementation team also **expanded outreach to local law enforcement, the Veterans Treatment Court, and justice officials within Erie County** during the month of September. The goal of this outreach is to schedule a military culture and/or suicide prevention gatekeeper training with these stakeholders by the end of 2022.

## Region 2 Summary

- Due to the program's phased implementation approach across regions, **engagement in Region 2 began with the start of project year 3** (September 2022).
- Initial outreach efforts focused on engagement with **county coalitions and justice officials** to discuss scheduling a local training series on military culture and suicide prevention in early 2023.

## Region 3 Summary

- Due to the program's phased implementation approach across regions, engagement in Region 3 **will begin in September 2023**.

# Tier 1 Activities

Tier 1 activities target three **community-based interventions**:

1. Creating **protective environments** by reducing access to lethal means among Veterans.
2. Identifying and supporting people at risk through the implementation of gatekeeper **trainings for community members and Veterans**.
3. Promoting connectedness through the **community engagement** activities.

## Tier 1 Highlight: Community Engagement Event

The *Breaking Bread with Heroes* event provided an opportunity for local Veterans to connect with their peers and community, while enjoying a great meal! Through this event, the team was able to highlight local suicide prevention and mental health resources, as well as engage with attendees about the importance of mental wellness and help seeking.



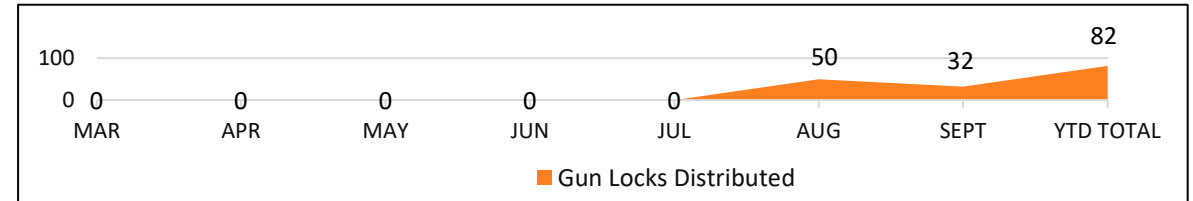
More than 100 Veterans and community members enjoyed a special meal at the Breaking Bread with Heroes event in Waterford, PA on Sept. 17, 2022.

The planning and preparation of this event also afforded the team many opportunities to grow the network and work alongside new and existing community partners within Erie County. The keynote speaker for the event, Stephanie Mitchell – a former Army combat medic, shared her personal story of military service and the struggles she faced when transitioning back to civilian life. Storytelling is such an integral part of the healing process for the Veteran community. Not only does storytelling help Veterans to share about their experiences in the military, but it also allows community members the opportunity to better understand and support the Veterans and military members in their lives.

The implementation team received such positive feedback from NWPVSP partners and attendees of this event. The team also received a lot of interest in prevention and military culture trainings from those in attendance, which opens new doors to educate Veterans and community members as suicide prevention gatekeepers.

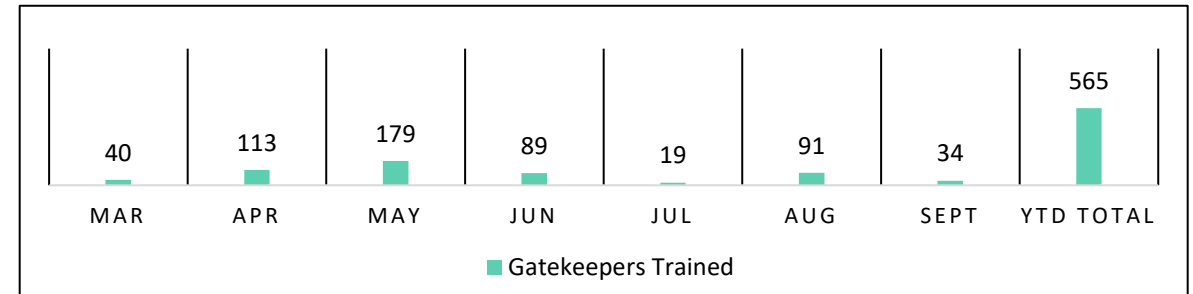
***Thank you to everyone who attended and/or supported this event!***

## Safe Storage Update



## Gatekeeper Training Update

September 2022 Training	Partner(s)	Format	Total Attendees
QPR (Question. Persuade. Refer.)	UPMC Western Behavioral Health at Safe Harbor	Virtual	20
ASIST (Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training)	UPMC Western Behavioral Health at Safe Harbor	In-Person	14



## Community Engagement Update

September 2022 Event	Partner(s)	Location	Attendees	Veterans
Breaking Bread with Heroes	DMVA, Robert Irvine Foundation, Bodhi Gardens, Erie VAMC, American Legion Post 285	American Legion Post 285, Waterford, Erie County, PA	105	56

## Tier 2 Activities

Tier 2 activities target **healthcare-based interventions**:

- 1. Strengthening access and delivery of suicide care** through the implementation of system change initiatives in healthcare systems.
- 2. Identifying and supporting people at risk** through the implementation of gatekeeper trainings for providers and treatment to prevent reattempts.

### Healthcare Recruitment Updates

- **1 site** has committed to partnership:
  - Wayne Primary Care - Primary Health Network (PHN) located in Erie County
- **4 recruitment meetings** held in September:
  - The implementation team engaged with 4 primary care offices affiliated with **UPMC Hamot** (Erie County) in early 2022. Over the past month, the team made connections with the Primary Care Medical Director and Quality Nurse Coordinator.
  - The implementation team met with leadership from **Bradford Regional Medical Center** (Olean General Hospital) to discuss the program and opportunities for clinic participation.
  - The implementation team met with **Butler Health System's** Community Health Program Manager to discuss gatekeeper training opportunities for nursing supervisors and practice managers.
- **In October:**
  - The implementation team will meet with the **UPMC primary care practices** in collaboration with the Primary Care Medical Director and Quality Nurse Coordinator.
  - The implementation team will schedule a staff-wide training with **Community Health Net** staff.
  - The implementation team will continue engagement with **Bradford** and **Butler**, resulting in implementation timelines.
- **In November:**
  - The implementation team will re-engage **Adagio Health, Lake Erie College of Osteopathic Medicine (LECOM) Health, and Allegheny Health Network (AHN)** through existing relationships with staff and stakeholders.

### Healthcare Implementation Updates

- Throughout September, **5 materials** were finalized for use across project sites:
  - Document which outlines training opportunities provided by the program
  - Performance indicator guide
  - Program overview one-pager
  - Presentation slides for healthcare recruitment meetings
  - Template protocol for suicide risk screening in primary care settings
- Active Sites:
  - In early September, a **Data Use Agreement (DUA)** between PERU and PHN was initiated to allow for sharing of deidentified electronic health record (EHR) data specific to suicide risk screening, intervention, and follow-up. After finalization of this agreement, PHN will begin submitting monthly data exports to PERU which will guide implementation and quality improvement efforts.
- Next Steps:
  - During October, the implementation team, in collaboration with VA Veterans Integrated Service Networks (VISN) 4, will finalize a **template referral protocol** to assist primary care sites with referrals to outpatient mental/behavioral health services for Veteran patients.
  - The **table below** will be utilized to report project site data on a monthly basis when data is received. Sites will receive additional data analyses to support continuous quality improvement initiatives as needed.

Intervention Outcomes	Services Completed	Eligible Patients	Completion Rate
Site Name			
Screening	#	#	%
Brief Intervention	#	#	%
Referral to Treatment	#	#	%

## Tier 3 Activities

Tier 3 activities target **upstream (policy) interventions**:

Strengthening access and delivery of care through the improvement of **coverage** for mental health conditions, **access** to mental health care, and **coordination and collaboration** of key policy makers and healthcare networks.

**The Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act** is a federal law that requires the same health insurance coverage for mental health and/or substance use disorder conditions as patients would receive for coverage of medical/surgical services. This law was adopted into Pennsylvania law in 2010. **Mental health parity** means that insurance benefits for mental health and substance use conditions are equal to coverage for other types of health care.

### Upstream Implementation Updates

- PERU is working to **raise awareness** and **provide education** to healthcare providers and community members about upstream suicide prevention strategies and mental health parity.
- To date, our team has collaborated with the Pennsylvania Department of Military and Veterans Affairs and Pennsylvania Department of Insurance to create educational **materials for healthcare providers and consumers** to better understand how mental health parity applies to them (**linked below**).

### Next Steps

- During October, the implementation team will **create a new educational material** about **VA benefits eligibility for Military Sexual Trauma**.

### To learn more, visit:

- <https://www.theresilientveteran.org/understanding-mental-health-parity/>
- <https://www.theresilientveteran.org/healthcare-partners/mental-health-parity-law/>
- <https://www.theresilientveteran.org/understanding-pennsylvanias-mental-health-parity-laws/>
- <https://www.theresilientveteran.org/tier-3-upstream-suicide-prevention/>

## Data Collection Updates

- PERU is collaborating with **county coroners** to collect and analyze county- and municipality-level suicide mortality data among adults. This surveillance data will be used to identify in as close to real-time as possible the factors associated with regional suicide deaths, study the impact of the project interventions on community suicide rates, and apply a **psychological autopsy** methodology for Veteran decedents from which potential suicide risk and protective factors will be identified.
- PERU and the **Veterans Affairs VISN4 Mental Illness Research Education and Clinical Center (MIRECC)**, under the direction of Dr. Gretchen Haas, are working together to share deidentified **electronic health record information** for Veterans who screen positive for suicide risk. PERU will use this information to better understand healthcare utilization preceding and following a positive suicide risk screen. Additionally, VISN4 MIRECC will help to certify the Veteran status of suicide decedents involved in the **psychological autopsy** protocol.

### Collaboration with County Coroners

- **2 coroners**, Erie and Venango Counties, have committed to partnership and currently submit quarterly data related to the suicide deaths in their respective counties.
- To date, **no known Veteran suicide deaths** have occurred in either Erie (**34 suicide deaths** to date) or Venango (**4 suicide deaths** to date) Counties.
- Throughout September, the implementation team engaged with the **11 county coroners** in NW PA.
- During October and November, the implementation team will continue engagement with the 11 county coroners with a goal to solidify **≥1 additional partnership** by the end of 2022.

### Collaboration with VA VISN4 MIRECC

- PERU and VISN4 MIRECC held **3 meetings** to establish the necessary contracts and clearances to proceed with this collaboration.
- The **budget plans** to support these efforts are nearing completion. PERU and VISN4 MIRECC plan to have the **project budget and purchase service agreement** prepared by the end of October 2022.
- Once these agreements are in place, this report will include **progress updates** on data transfer planning and facilitation.

# Program Evaluation

## Meeting Outcomes

- The September **Advisory Group** meeting focused on implementation and evaluation activities, updates on completed gatekeeper trainings and future training registrations, syndromic surveillance and psychological autopsy activities, VA collaboration, and a discussion of communication campaign ideas for Suicide Prevention Awareness Month (September).
- A total of **14 out of 32 members** external to the PERU team (**44%**) attended the September **Advisory Group** meeting.
- The September **Journal Club** discussion focused on recidivism among justice-involved Veterans.
- A total of 4 attendees external to the PERU team attended the September **Journal Club** meeting. PERU will identify a new meeting date and time to increase participation beginning in January 2023.

## Meeting Evaluations

- Real-time meeting evaluation polls gather feedback from **Advisory Group** members following the monthly meeting.
- The poll asks members to rate agreement (Yes/No) on two questions (below) about the content and relevance of the meeting. An open-ended comment space was also included.
  - “Today's meeting moved the project forward”
  - “I'm glad I attended this meeting”
- A total of **12 attendees out of 14** responded to the evaluation (**86%**).
- There was **unanimous agreement** with both statements for the Advisory Group meeting this month.
- One qualitative comment was collected and **positively** remarked on the progress of the project and the focus of the meeting.

Meeting	Partner Attendance	Evaluation Responses	Total Invited
Advisory Group	14	12	32
Journal Club	4	N/A	32

## Training Evaluations

- Training evaluations are administered to stakeholders **following every training** and are used to **inform continuous quality improvement efforts** and to assist the program implementation team in identifying areas for improvement for delivering trainings.
- In September, **2** trainings were conducted with **34** trainees in attendance and **88%** of the trainees completed the training evaluation.
- Responses indicated **strong approval** of the training facilitators and content as well as a better understanding of suicide prevention following the training.
- A full **analysis of training evaluation data** is conducted twice per year and will be completed next in October 2022.

## Key Informant Interviews

- Key informant interviews (KIIs) are **conducted quarterly** to gather stakeholder feedback.
- The last round of KIIs, which included **7 interviews**, identified a need to establish clear expectations for Advisory Group members and streamline communication pathways across the various project meetings and stakeholder groups.
- In response to this feedback, the implementation team conducted **one-on-one meetings** with Advisory Group members to discuss each stakeholder's strengths, interests, and motivations for collaborating with the program. Information collected from these conversations informed **changes to stakeholder communication** and meeting structure to ensure that all Advisory Group members feel engaged and valued.
- The **next round of KIIs will** occur in November and December 2022.

## Suicide Awareness Survey

- The Suicide Awareness and Perceptions Survey is being used to track community attitudes and perceptions concerning suicide to **provide evidence of an increase in awareness of suicide across time**.
- The survey was piloted and revised following focus group feedback in April 2022.
- Since these revisions, the survey has been **administered to 27 community members**.
- Results will be analyzed twice per year, beginning in October 2022.