

A report to the Committee on Armed Services, House of Representatives

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What GAO Found

The Department of Defense’s (DOD) Defense Suicide Prevention Office (DSPO) is responsible for suicide prevention efforts across the department, but it lacks information to monitor DOD-wide completion of required suicide prevention training. Specifically, a DSPO official told GAO the office does not receive data from the military services on whether they are completing the training. Requiring the services to report their training completion rates would give DSPO data needed to make informed decisions as it oversees training and develops DOD-wide suicide prevention policies.

In addition, the military services’ headquarters suicide prevention offices generally do not effectively monitor training completion for their service members. The Army, Navy, and Marine Corps offices do not regularly track required annual training completion and only the National Guard Bureau takes action to help ensure training completion. Addressing these issues would help the service headquarters offices ensure training and service-specific learning objectives are reaching the military community as intended.

Examples of Learning Objectives from Military Services’ Suicide Prevention Trainings, as of 2025

Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Describe risk and protective factors for suicide Recognize warning signs for suicide Promote early and crisis intervention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide basic education on suicide and universal risk Recognize risk factors and warning signs for suicide Safe storage for firearms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase awareness of behavioral health topics Build skills for handling challenging situations and seeking help Apply good decision-making to a variety of situations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify risk factors and warning signs for suicide Emphasize prevention and intervention Identify strategies that increase connectedness and coping skills

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) information. | GAO-26-107804

The military services have also not fully assessed the effectiveness of their suicide prevention training. Most of the services have taken steps to do so. For example, the Army, Marine Corps, and Air Force have surveys for some annual trainings. But these and other efforts have not fully assessed training effectiveness, such as by identifying the extent to which expected outcomes have been achieved. Developing and implementing evaluation plans would help the services ensure a systematic approach to assessment and determine if trainings are achieving intended outcomes, such as recognizing risk factors for suicide.

DOD has made progress implementing certain training-related recommendations from the Suicide Prevention and Response Independent Review Committee, but uncertainties exist for future efforts. DOD has begun addressing the committee’s recommendations, including 18 on nonclinical training. However, GAO found that DOD’s ability to continue these efforts is uncertain given recent changes in staffing levels and pending decisions on combining suicide prevention training with other trainings. By using an iterative process to regularly update its project plans to account for and mitigate these uncertainties, DOD would be better positioned to effectively assess risks and manage resources.

Why GAO Did This Study

Suicide rates for active-duty service members have gradually increased since 2011, according to DOD. DOD’s latest data show that in 2024, 471 service members died by suicide. Suicide prevention training can increase awareness of risk factors and provide resources for intervention, among other things. However, recent GAO and DOD reports have identified gaps in DOD’s implementation of suicide prevention activities, including training.

House Report 118-125 includes a provision for GAO to assess DOD’s suicide prevention training. This report examines (1) DSPO and the military services’ monitoring of suicide prevention training completion; (2) the military services’ assessment of training effectiveness; and (3) DOD’s steps to address an independent review committee’s training-related recommendations.

GAO reviewed DOD policies, procedures, and other documentation on suicide prevention training; analyzed fiscal years 2020–2024 data on training completion; assessed DOD-wide evaluation procedures against federal standards; and interviewed officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making 17 recommendations, including for DOD to issue guidance requiring the services to report suicide prevention training completion data to DSPO; the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps to regularly monitor training completion; the services to develop training evaluation plans; and for DOD to update project plans addressing the independent review committee recommendations. DOD agreed with nine recommendations, partially agreed with six, and did not agree with two. GAO clarified two recommendations and maintains all recommendations remain valid.