

# Zero Suicide Systems Approach (ZSSA)

in the U.S. Air Force



## What is Zero Suicide within the Air Force?

ZSSA is a commitment to suicide prevention within our Military Treatment Facilities (MTF). It is both a concept and a practice that includes a specific set of evidence-based tools and strategies. ZSSA represents an understanding that suicide deaths for those under our care are preventable, and **the bold goal of zero suicides among patients** receiving care at our MTF is an aspirational challenge that we have accepted.

The Air Force is the **first military branch to pilot test a Zero Suicide Framework**; thus creating the Zero Suicide Systems Approach (ZSSA). The ZSSA is a pilot test of the Zero Suicide Framework across Military Treatment Facilities (MTF) at five Air Combat Command (ACC) Air Force Bases:



**Tyndall  
AFB**



**Holloman  
AFB**



**Davis-Monthan  
AFB**



**Nellis  
AFB**



**Langley  
AFB**

The ZSSA aims to improve care and outcomes for individuals at risk for suicide in our health care system. It represents a commitment to patient safety—the most fundamental responsibility of our job—and also to the safety and support of clinical staff, who do the demanding work of treating and supporting suicidal patients.

The challenge of Zero Suicide is not one to be borne solely by those providing clinical care. Zero Suicide relies on a **system-wide approach** to improve outcomes and close gaps; rather than relying solely on the heroic efforts of individual practitioners. This initiative in health care systems also requires the engagement of the broader community, especially suicide attempt survivors, family members, policymakers, and researchers. Thus, Zero Suicide is a call to relentlessly pursue a reduction in suicide for those who come to us for care.

The programmatic approach of Zero Suicide is based on the realization that suicidal individuals often fall through multiple cracks in a fragmented and sometimes distracted health care system, and on the premise that a systematic approach to quality improvement is necessary. The approach builds on work done in several civilian health care organizations (e.g., Henry Ford, Centerstone and Institute for Family Health) which have achieved dramatic reductions in suicide deaths through the implementation of the Zero Suicide Framework. This project is structured to align Air Force suicide prevention policy and practice, along with Trusted Care CONOPS, with the best evidence-based approaches found to treat suicidality and reduce suicide deaths.

**Better performance and accountability for suicide prevention and care is a core goal and expectation of the U.S. Air Force Medical Service.** While we do not yet have proof that suicide can be eliminated in health systems, we do have strong evidence that system-wide approaches are more effective in leading to dramatic reductions.



**CLEARINGHOUSE**  
FOR MILITARY FAMILY READINESS

This project is carried out through a partnership between The US Air Force Medical Operations Agency, The Department of Defense Suicide Prevention Office, The Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State, and the Education Development Center.



**We're making deliberate and demonstrable progress towards our goal of eliminating suicides within the Air Force. Check out our progress:**

## Seven Elements of ZSSA

Building upon a strong history of providing the very best in patient-centered care, the **Air Force will continue to lead the way in suicide prevention** by aligning these seven elements of suicide prevention with our Trusted Care CONOPS:

**Lead >>** Create a leadership-driven, safety oriented culture committed to dramatically reducing suicide among people under our care.

**Train >>** Develop a competent, confident, and caring workforce.

**Identify >>** Systematically identify and assess suicide risk among patients receiving care. The Air Force will screen each patient at every clinical encounter.

**Engage >>** Ensure every person has a pathway to care that is both timely and adequate to meet his or her needs.

**Treat >>** Use effective, evidence-based treatments that directly target suicidality.

**Transition >>** Provide continuous contact and support adequate to each patient's individual circumstances.

**Improve >>** Apply a data-driven quality improvement approach to inform system changes that will lead to improved patient outcomes and better care for those at risk.

### Lead

Implementation Teams have formed at each pilot site, with suicide prevention champions from disciplines across the MTF.

Waivers to Air Force Instructions (AFI) have been granted for pilot sites; demonstrating leadership support for pilot testing the best evidence-based protocols and processes.



### Train

Over 2,000 MTF staff members were trained at five pilot sites on screening, assessing, and managing suicide risk.

### Identify

Every patient is being screened for suicide risk at every clinical encounter, following the implementation of new suicide risk screening protocols.



### Engage

When risk is identified, patients will engage in appropriate pathways to care, using clinic- and base-specific triage points.

### Treat

New Mental Health Note Taking templates are being pilot tested; streamlining documentation required and prioritizing treatment.

The Air Force will be training all Mental Health Providers at each pilot base in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Suicide Prevention (CBT-SP).



### Improve

We are using data-driven quality improvement to better patient outcomes and provide the best care for those at risk for suicide.