

Mental health, suicide prevention efforts in full force at Fort Carson

FORT CARSON, Colo. – It's 7:30 a.m. as 1st Lt. Tala Mpita rushes home from mandatory physical training. There's no time for error as she gets her children ready for school, drops them off and makes it to work by nine.

"Getting a lunch break is rare," said Mpita, a battalion administrative officer at Fort Carson. "I usually have no choice but to work straight through."

Mpita said she finds it difficult to advocate for herself when she's reached her limits. The pressure and high demands of her job negatively affect her mental health.

The military lifestyle vastly affects the mental health of soldiers. They deal with extreme conditions and unique circumstances such as isolation, adversity, military culture and deployments.

"Military members often refuse to seek help because they worry about kickback from other members," said Melissa Wright, a Licensed Professional Clinical Counselor with an emphasis on military and trauma. "Most of our work and efforts begin before [soldiers] reach Behavior Health."

According to Wright, the Behavior Health Unit at Evans Army Community Hospital works with service members and trains company and battalion leaders on how to advocate for soldiers.

"Leaders are trained on warning signs, symptoms and questions to ask their soldiers," Wright said.

According to Wright, if a soldier has a scheduled appointment with Behavior Health, they are not allowed to reschedule.

“Just being able to come in and say, ‘Hey, I’m not okay,’ makes all the difference for these individuals,” Wright said. “Majority of service members who committed suicide on Fort Carson last year were never seen at Behavior Health.”

According to Wright, 60% of military personnel who experience mental health struggles are not seeking help and the stigma is the main reason why.

“It’s important to know that military members go through things most people won’t understand,” Wright said. “Our goal is to normalize emotional recognition.”

According to Wright, more soldiers need help than resources allow. Evans aims to hire more LPCCs, social workers, therapists and psychiatrists.

“Honestly, [not enough] is being done to prevent suicide,” said Capt. Simon Jackson, a chaplain at Fort Carson working towards his doctorate in suicide prevention.

According to Jackson, an Army ACE Suicide Prevention class is taught once a year. This class helps soldiers and leaders become more aware of steps they can take to prevent suicides. ACE stands for ask, care and escort.

Jackson said he has experienced over 20 suicides in his career. He is working to develop a training program for future squad leaders on suicide intervention and postvention.

“A squad leader has [around] eight soldiers,” Jackson said. “Their job is to know those soldiers and build a foundation of trust.”

A chaplain is embedded into a battalion of anywhere from 600 to 800 soldiers. Jackson said he can’t get to know every single one of those people.

“During a deployment, I am usually all a soldier has for support,” Jackson said. “We are a last line of defense for people to open up and share their souls.”

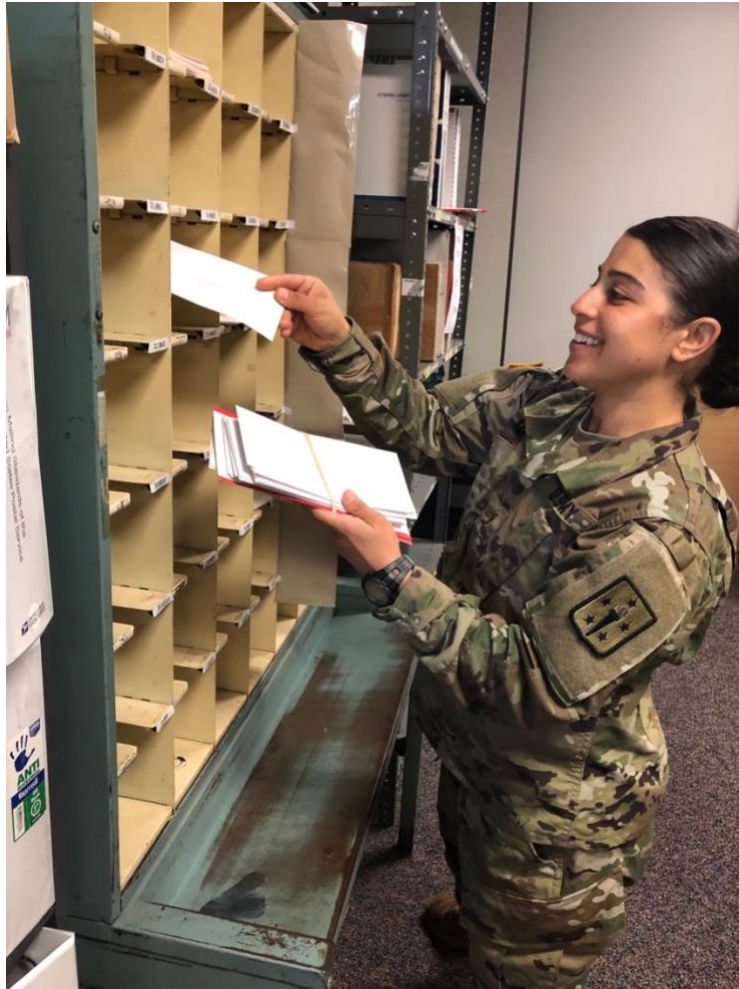
It's around 6 p.m. when Mpita rushes to pick her children up on time. Extended work hours often cause her to be late. Yet, the work doesn't stop once she arrives home.

"I rush to get dinner made and the kids ready for bed," Mpita said. "I rarely have time left to care for myself."

"I go to bed and do it all over the next day," Mpita said. "It's exhausting."

Mpita said it would be helpful if she could turn off work at the end of the day to focus on herself and her family.

"Getting home late to then get a work call makes it difficult to focus on life outside of the office," Mpita said.



1st Lt. Tala Mpita participates in the Army Postal School course at Fort Carson, Oct. 25, 2022.

Mpita learned how to run a mailroom during deployment, one of her many responsibilities. Photo

by: Meghann Greenhill



Fast facts on factors that affect the mental health of active-duty military members. Source: LPCC

Melissa Wright, USO.gov