

Army Overhauls Resilience Program to Focus on All Soldiers

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During deployments, Soldiers often develop tight bonds while living together and working as a team to execute their missions.

Army officials now want to bring that strong sense of camaraderie back to the garrison, where it can boost personal readiness and performance across the service.

“Those Soldiers eat, sleep and fight together. They get to know each other very closely,” said Sharyn Saunders, director of the Army Resiliency Directorate. “When Soldiers deploy, they have increased protective factors, and we think that’s due to their ability to form very tight unit cohesion.”

From healthy coping methods to a reliable support network, protective factors draw on a variety of skills and resources that Soldiers develop to manage stressful events.

With its recent shift in strategy for the Ready and Resilient campaign, known as R2, Army officials are hoping these factors can form a culture of trust within units through an engagement triangle of leaders, battle buddies and family members.

Established in 2012, the R2 campaign provides holistic and comprehensive capabilities to Army leaders to empower them to achieve and sustain personal readiness and optimize performance.

On Nov. 30, Army Vice Chief of Staff Gen. Daniel B. Allyn signed an 85-page operation order that officially pivoted the R2 campaign’s strategy to a more proactive approach that supports the personal readiness and resilience of every Soldier.

Saunders said past resiliency efforts mainly looked at an individual’s risk factors, like substance abuse or self-harm. That narrow focus may have inadvertently led to some Soldiers being stigmatized by the rest of their unit.

“We’re focused on the opposite now,” the director said. “By switching to a strengthening of all Soldiers and elevating their personal readiness and resiliency, ... it makes it as if everyone is working on this path together, and individuals aren’t singled out.”

Mission engaged

The campaign is also rolling out a new professional skill, called “engage,” to teach all Soldiers how to hold conversations with fellow Soldiers who display behaviors that run counter to Army standards.

“Soldiers generally know what resources are available to them to get their battle buddies help,” Saunders said. “But what Soldiers weren’t prepared to do was ... have what we call a professional confrontation.”

As part of engage, Soldiers must be prepared to open up a dialogue with another Soldier who exhibits warning signs and offer help before problems can escalate to self-destructive behavior or a crisis such as suicide.

“It’s really about getting ahead,” Saunders said, “so we can prevent stressors from culminating into crises or into adverse outcomes.”

Engage training has already taken place at Fort Campbell, Kentucky; Fort Hood, Texas; and Fort Sill, Oklahoma, with Soldiers at Fort Carson, Colorado, slated to receive the training in 2017.

“There are lots of benefits to this skill and we’re really excited about rolling it out,” she said. “We are looking forward to the impact [it will have] across the force.”

At the ready

Officials also hope the strategic shift will have a significant positive impact on personal readiness. Under the R2 strategy, personal readiness has five domains: physical, psychological, social, spiritual and family. When Soldiers thrive in these domains, their attrition and injury rates can decrease.

“We need every single Soldier to be able to get on the field and play their position at a home game and at an away game,” Saunders said.

After years of war strained Soldiers deploying in and out of combat, she said, a comprehensive approach toward personal readiness was required.

“We’re really getting at all of the facets of a person’s life,” she said. “That’s where we’re focusing our efforts because we see that as the way of the future.”

The future may also include pushing resiliency skills from the classroom to the field environment. Earlier this month, performance experts taught Soldiers going through basic combat training at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, how to perform deliberate breathing, a technique that helps a person stay focused and calm.

While the green Soldiers qualified on their rifle, trainers found that they were able to hit more targets after doing the breathing exercise.

“This is a really interesting opportunity for us to take something that we had been doing in the classroom and actually move that skill into the firing range,” Saunders said. “We have learned that the more we operationalize [resiliency skills] into the Army, the more effective” they are.