



# PA Governor's Challenge - Ask the Question Initiative

## What is the Governor's Challenge?

Since 2020, DMVA has proudly served as Pennsylvania's lead agency for the VA/SAMHSA Governor's Challenge to Prevent Suicide Among Service Members, Veterans and Their Families (SMVF). Under this program, DMVA works with a wide array of community, county, regional, state, and federal partners to spearhead efforts, such as firearm safe storage, lethal means safety (LMS), educating community members and providers, addressing barriers to mental health and substance use treatment, and raising awareness of available local, statewide and federal resources for our SMVF population.

DMVA and the Governor's Challenge Team are taking a lead role in reframing the conversation around SMVF mental health and suicide in PA, by prioritizing trauma-informed strategies that empower individual agency and reinforce human dignity. Our work emphasizes building connections and collaborative efforts across military, veteran, and civilian communities to strengthen individual knowledge and skills, and develop healthcare frameworks that meet the specific needs of the SMVF community.



Pennsylvania  
Department of Military  
and Veterans Affairs



## HAVE YOU OR A LOVED ONE EVER SERVED IN THE MILITARY?

Asking patients about their military service is a critical first step for community healthcare and mental health providers to deliver safe, effective, and culturally competent care. Approximately 66% of all U.S. veterans—representing roughly 12 million individuals—are not enrolled in the VA health system<sup>1</sup>. Additionally, as of late 2025, approximately 40% of all medical care coordinated by the VA is now provided through the Community Care Network<sup>2</sup> (CCN) of community providers. Since veterans are widely distributed across the civilian healthcare system, community providers are often the first or only point of contact for service-related issues.

Although nearly 75% of community providers believe knowing a patient's veteran status is important, only about 19% regularly ask this question during intake<sup>3</sup>. Failing to identify a patient's military history can lead to significant clinical errors, missed diagnostic opportunities, and life-threatening outcomes. Because veteran-specific conditions often mirror common civilian ailments, a lack of awareness can compromise the entire trajectory of care.

(<sup>1</sup>Didem, M.B. et al., 2022; <sup>2</sup>Christian, 2025; <sup>3</sup>Vest, B. M. et al., 2018)

**BEST PRACTICE:** Add this question to every intake form or initial interview - *"Have you or a loved one ever served in the military?"*

**CLINICAL IMPORTANCE:** Identifying a patient's veteran status is clinically important because it enables the use of targeted screening for mental and physical health risks.

**CULTURAL COMPETENCE:** Identifying a patient's veteran status also enables community providers to build cultural competence and rapport with their veteran patients. Asking about service affirms their value, reduces feelings of intimidation, and builds the trust necessary to encourage help-seeking and continuation of care.

**IDENTIFICATION OF RISK:** Community care providers are an essential partner in identifying veterans at risk of suicide or severe mental health crisis. If a provider is unaware of a patient's service, they may miss the critical window for lethal means counseling or specialized crisis intervention.

**COST-EFFECTIVE PRACTICE:** Asking patients about their military history is a cost-effective practice that reduces overall system expenditures by improving diagnostic accuracy, shifting financial responsibility to federal programs, and the collection of critical public health data.