



Defense Suicide Prevention Office Video Transcript

Spotlight on Suicide Prevention: U.S. Navy – USS Makin Island

Chief Stephany Sherman:

Thank you for joining us for Spotlight on Suicide Prevention, a new series of videos by the Department of Defense to highlight the suicide prevention achievements of our local program. Today we're joined by our friends from the U.S. Navy, the USS Makin Island. They're an example of what suicide prevention looks like at the local levels of our military communities. Their efforts to raise awareness and prevent suicide is inspiring and innovative. Let's learn about our guests, and their work to keep our Service members safe from suicide.

The USS Makin Island was deployed for most of the period of consideration, December 2022 through June 2023, across the INDOPACOM, to include Japan and Singapore. The Suicide Prevention Advocates (SPA) team played a critical role in addressing deployment-related stressors. During deployment, SPA organized monthly Expanded Operation Stress Control training and, in collaboration with the Fleet Surgical Psychology team, coordinated a weekly meditation hour. The SPA team also hosted four Face 2 the Service events, which aimed to connect sailors and Marines with services aboard.

Thank you for joining us today. Can we take a moment to please introduce yourselves and your titles?

CAPT Andrea Slough:

Hi, I'm Captain Andrea Slough, and I'm the Commanding Officer of USS Makin Island.

Chaplain Saul Burleson:

I'm Chaplain Saul Burleson, the Command Chaplain on board USS Makin Island.

CPO Wyshieka Floyd:

And I'm Chief Petty Officer Wyshieka Floyd, the suicide prevention coordinator on board USS Makin Island.

Chief Stephany Sherman:

Let's learn more about your efforts and accomplishments. Can you please share details about your program, what your team accomplished, and what worked best to encourage participation and engagement?

CAPT Andrea Slough:

Sure. So, first is an overview of our program. We had approximately 1200 sailors and 12 to 1300 Marines on board Makin Island, so we knew that we needed a big program that was going to fit the needs of many different types of people from all different walks of life. And it had to combine an internal strategy, kind of a for-us by-us effort from our sailors and Marines and coupling that with our professional council. So, I'd like for Chief Floyd to talk a little bit about how she got all of our sailors and Marines to participate. Chief?



CPO Wyshieka Floyd:

So, I invited them via email, and then we had monthly, weekly meetings, and we talked about things that they seen around the ship and things that we could improve on. So everybody was motivated, very astute, to help each other out, and it's just peer-to-peer. They wanted to help their brothers and sister out their shipmates out, making sure that everyone was okay.

CAPT Andrea Slough:

And Chaps, how did you get our civilians involved?

Chaplain Saul Burleson:

Yeah. So building off of that grassroots peer-to-peer movement, and off the momentum that it provided, I think we were able to seize that inertia and come together in an integrated fashion with our team: not only the chaplain team, medical team that we have embedded on board, but also as you mentioned, the surgical team that comes and embarks on board during deployment.

After that, we actually stood up a wellness wing, where we brought together the medical, chaplain, and our licensed clinical social worker, our deployment resiliency counselor, as well as our life skills coach, to be co-located in one area. And I really think that this allowed us to have more of a holistic model of care whenever we're trying to come up with an intervention for sailors and not have as many gaps whenever we're addressing wellness from spiritual, psychological, mental, and physical aspects for our Service members.

CAPT Andrea Slough:

So in short, I think we just thought about our sailors first. Thought about what they would need, and then everything else fell into place.

Chief Stephany Sherman:

Fantastic. Great work. What inspired you to build your program this way, and why do you feel it has had a positive impact in preventing suicide?

CAPT Andrea Slough:

So for starters, Makin Island had the challenge of taking the... We had a ten-month COVID deployment first, and then we got double-cycled due to the loss of Bonhomme Richard. And that means we had two deployments within a three-year cycle. So, we knew the crew would be facing a lot of operational stress, and we wanted to ensure that everybody was happy and healthy. And so, we really looked at ways to do that, and once again, just focused on the people. Chief, can you talk about why our sailors chose to get involved with this?

CPO Wyshieka Floyd:

It was so many different people that had been through so many different things, had experienced it from the previous command, current, or the back-at-home family going through it. So, they wanted to help out. They knew that the stressors in how to build a resilient team, they wanted to make sure that



we pushed that effort out to build that resiliency for the whole team. So we all go on deployment and make it back safe.

CAPT Andrea Slough:

And we know it has a positive impact in preventing suicide. We had fewer cases of medevacs for mental health reasons. We had sailors, just in general, I think the morale improved. Everybody got together on the mess decks every night, kind of told stories, and had their Snickers bar and their candy from the ship store, and kind of got together. And I'll let Chaps talk a little bit about how our deployed resiliency counselor and our EIPC contributed to some of that.

Chaplain Saul Burleson:

Yeah. So whenever you look at teams and whenever I've gone through suicide intervention training, we asked them to describe what a suicide-safer community would look like. And it looked just like that, right? Peer-to-peer connections, as well as our DRC and qualified professionals, our EIPC, our life skills coach, coming alongside and being a trusted resource, and ensuring that the command and the sailors know that they have got their backs, but they also are competent professionals that can help them mitigate some of those deployment-related stressors, and the return to home port stressors that would fly with relationship, finances, and other things that our sailors were anxious about.

CAPT Andrea Slough:

And we worked really hard with our Fleet and Family Service Center here locally, to determine what materials we had for counseling of that. And when maybe there was a gap, we asked for extra help, and we got it. So, there was reach back from FFSP also.

Chief Stephany Sherman:

It sounds like you guys really did create an awesome environment for everybody to be in where everyone felt supported. Do you think that your program has implications outside of your command, either across other Services or commands, or for suicide prevention efforts in the civilian community?

CAPT Andrea Slough:

We've transferred several of those sailors, probably at least four to 600 of those sailors off of Makin Island since deployment. So, I hope that those sailors are out on other ships and in other installations talking about what a great suicide prevention program looks like, and how that they can be involved, either directly through being a suicide prevention advocate, or working with the deployed resiliency counselor or the EIPC.

And I think also too, we invite our family members to attend almost every event that we have on board. Promotions, duty nights, bring a pizza, bring the kids, sit on the mess decks for 30 minutes and have your pizza or tacos and be with your family member. And I think, I don't know about the greater San Diego community, but I think the greater Navy family community, I think we've definitely had a positive impact. Chaps?

Chaplain Saul Burleson:



I've seen a positive impact with other commands reaching out for Cliff Notes and the top tips on how we've cared for our sailors effectively and really stressing that it's a holistic model. Where enhanced communication among the caregivers, and each caregiver having their own slice of the pie, bringing it together and working collaboratively, can make a huge and substantial difference in the lives of our sailors.

CPO Wyshieka Floyd:

So, the Suicide Prevention Advocate Team also did some outreach collaborating with other personnel, other organizations we have with the command, to feed the gate guards on Christmas and Thanksgiving. It was two different organizations, Second Class Petty Officer Association, and they also collaborated with the First Class Petty Officers Association, where they donated money to get plates together and go out and feed the gate guards to make sure they let them know that they're not alone and that we here support each other.

CAPT Andrea Slough:

So, we've really tried to create an inclusive environment, where sailors feel like they can say, "Hey, I don't feel okay today." And that might be in mental health, not physical health. We've also tried to reach out to other commands and supply them with the, like Chaps said, Cliff Notes on how maybe we got this right. And a rising tide raises all boats, and so we've tried to involve other organizations in our success as well.

Chief Stephany Sherman:

Thank you for sharing with us all the ways you're working to make our military safe from suicide. I'm confident I can say this on behalf of our audience: we've all learned so much about ways we can lead the fight to help eliminate suicide across the military.

Our guests were honored at the 2024 Department of Defense Suicide Prevention Recognition Ceremony in September for their campaigns to prevent suicide, which took place at the Pentagon Hall of Heroes.

We hope you enjoyed listening to what you have heard. Please help us spread the word by sharing the link to this interview with others. If you found it on social media, share it on your timeline for your friends to discover. To access more videos and resources in DSPO's video library, visit us online at www.dspo.mil.

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