



Defense Suicide Prevention Office Podcast Transcript

Leveraging Chaplain Support

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Dacee Bernard: Hello and welcome to the Defense Suicide Prevention Office podcast series Mental Health is Health. I'm your host Dacee Bernard. I am Senior Advisor of Integrated Primary Prevention here at DSPO and today will be taking time to learn a little bit more about chaplain support with chaplain Michael Bell. Thank you so much for joining us Chaplain Bell.

Chaplain Bell: Thank you for having me, Dacee. It's a pleasure to be with you.

Dacee Bernard: Well, let's just dive right in and I think just to get the lay of the land can you tell us just a little bit more about yourself?

Chaplain Bell: Certainly, so I am first, a husband, a father. I have been a pastor for quite some time, and I have been U.S. Army soldier since my career began in 1999. I believe that was the year. I had at that point I was an enlisted man, a combat medic in transition to becoming a nurse, and then after that, I took a 15-year break in my military Service. I came back as a chaplain, and I have been doing that ever since.

Dacee Bernard: Thank you, now when you say chaplain again it creates a visual in my head. I have an image of what this may be, but could you help us understand a little bit about what exactly is the role of a chaplain?

Chaplain Bell: Certainly, so the role of chaplains is quite varied. There are of course our foundational responsibilities that are being the subject matter experts for those who actually perform religious support not only to soldiers but also to their families and to the civilians. We are responsible for kind of guarding the free exercise of religion, and religious liberty based on legislation, as well as Army regulation. So that's in a nutshell our primary goal. But we are also the governors if you will of ethics, morale, as well as moral concerns and issues. We are advisers to our commanders in those respective areas and disciplines. I like to joke around and say that the chaplain is different from JAG, our legal arm. The legal arm will tell a commander what they can or cannot do and a chaplain will advise our commander on what they should or should not do. So, that is really what we do, kind of in a nutshell.

Dacee Bernard: Thank you. I heard you say that you also offered moral support for Service members and their families and looking at you use the term religious support quite a bit and that makes me question can anyone go to a chaplain regardless of their religious affiliation?



Chaplain Bell: Absolutely. Chaplains, in many regards, it's a preferred resource for many soldiers with whom I have developed relationships in all of the units that I've been in. Yeah, that is because the chaplain is uniquely kind of gifted and prepared with a litany of soft skills in a pluralistic environment. So, we don't just concentrate on, although we speak from our own faith condition from our own understanding of ethics and a moral compass, it is also done with a knowledge of what it means to be in a pluralistic society just as the military itself is a pluralistic environment. There are varied traditions, varied backgrounds, and varied cultural customs, and we all bring that together in a way that makes our environment far more diverse and far more rich because of that. It is navigating that space that the chaplain is uniquely educated, experienced, and prepared to do, not only for their commander in some of the decisions the commander may have to make but also for the soldiers that are within the formations.

Dacee Bernard: You highlighted several times that we live in a pluralistic society or one with many different religious types and religious backgrounds. So, with that in mind, how do you connect people to faith leaders of their own religious background who may not have one available at their military installation?

Chaplain Bell: Oh yeah certainly. Well, the chaplain core is a small core, and we are always communicating one with the other. There are as a matter of that reality and what we consider to be low-density faiths that are chaplains who may not necessarily be as accessible because we do not necessarily have all of the resources by having hundreds of Catholic priests that are at our disposal, hundreds of Islamic imam or Jewish rabbis. Those are normally trending to our low-density faiths. However, we have a number of our soldiers who followed these traditions, the Seik and Buddhistic traditions and so we are always negotiating, networking, and navigating in order to meet the needs of soldiers where they are. Some of those particular chaplains will actually do quite a bit of rotating through environments so that they can try their very best to at least engage soldiers in so many different units other than their primary unit. However, the chaplain core and its religious institution give and grant access to quite a bit of knowledge as a resource to inform chaplains within the limits of our traditions to be able to assist. But the primary objective of a chaplain is always if we cannot perform a duty for a soldier based on their religious or faith tradition, then we will connect them with another chaplain who is the subject matter expert whom they can engage with and perform whatever tasks are needed at that time.

Dacee Bernard: That's amazing. It sounds like chaplains really are a great resource for all Service members and their families regardless of their background. I know that you said a couple of times that you provide support and I know that there are several members of our listening community and of the military committee who sometimes hit challenges that they just need a little bit more support with. Can you just tell us about how the chaplains are uniquely prepared to handle the many challenges faced by your Service members and their families?



Chaplain Bell: So yeah, the chaplains are probably some of your best-educated officers that come in the core. Part of the requirements to serve as a chaplain is not merely a diploma or bachelor's degree but a master's degree and also on top of that a certain number of years of experience. So, most of the chaplains who actually come into the military Service tend to actually be a little bit older, because they have been moving through life gaining this knowledge, gaining these experiences, as well as a certain level of competency before they even come into Service within our formations. Outside of that, there are numerous resources. The Army is always doing to train, right? And chaplains do the exact same thing. There are soft skills that each chaplain may have competency within, as a relates to suicide and suicidal prevention or suicidal ideations, and how we address those. There are additional areas of training, curriculums that we follow, and resources that are at our disposal as it relates to morale, as well as addiction. Then the chaplain and behavioral health specialist tend to most units tend to have at least a chaplain who does have some working relationship with the individuals within the behavioral health community and we are able to leverage those kinds of relationships and professional knowledge bases in order to serve our formations, for soldiers of course and their families to try our very best to meet those needs. So, the chaplain core is, I don't want to say demanding, it is actually quite helpful and encouraging in ensuring that those individuals who serve in a chaplain capacity are ready and adequately prepared to deal with the varied life circumstances that take place amid our formation that is for the soldier or the family member.

Dacee Bernard: There is quite a bit of support that chaplains offer and you just you've hit on so many of them, but you know with all the resources out there, what are some of the advantages of going to a chaplain when someone's in need a behavior health crisis support?

Chaplain Bell: There are a couple, but there are some that are my favorites. The first one for me is probably going to be that the chaplain is duty-bound, not only by legislation but also by again Army regulation, to uphold confidentiality and as far as the relationships that I have developed with soldiers with whom I served in various units that tends to be really the kind of treasure key as it relates to building and developing relationships with the chaplain. They know whatever the issues or circumstances that they may require counsel, assistance, direction, and guidance maybe additional resources too, they know that that can be communicated with their chaplain, and it will be held in the highest level of confidentiality. For example, individuals who do suffer with addiction it is unfortunately something that does happen in certain units, and there's this misnomer that if you were to go seek help on your own that somehow and that's gonna be a red flag that is put into your personnel file and that will travel with you for the rest of your career, but what most individuals do know is I can always go talk to the chaplain and it'll be kept between me and the chaplain. Well, chaplains leverage that relationship that we have with also knowing the actual accurate and current guidance. We know that it will not hurt you to self-report to behavioral health, to substance abuse on your own, and so as a part of the way we seek to guide, we are able to keep it confidential with the soldier but also provide them the kind of guidance and advisement to get them connected to the appropriate resources.



Dacee Bernard: You've highlighted some different resources that you help connect Service members to and I think that's amazing that chaplains are really a facilitator it sounds like in addition to providing support. Are there any suicide prevention resources that you use on a regular basis with Service members and their families or any resources that you would recommend for suicide prevention needs?

Chaplain Bell: So, there are in the toolkit for any chaplain, so there is a part of mandatory training that comes around annually, and many units actually do even better than that, they'll actually engage more often than annual training regarding suicide, or suicidal ideation directly. Chaplains are the ones who actually perform or conduct this training throughout the formation. Some of the curriculums that we have used in the past was assist training as well as ACE SI. In most of my recent units I have probably pushed and used the ACE SI, because it seems to be an easier way to codify steps that any soldier can take in order to assist their battle buddy that they may discern, or they may assume, or directly engage with those who may be experiencing suicidal ideation. So, how did they address that and where do they get the help that they need?

To make sure that the soldier receives the help that they desperately need and so ACE SI is one of those trainings I think that does just that and it's easy for most soldiers to codify and keep in memory when it comes time, if ever, God forbid they need to help a battle buddy out. But also, chaplains really do, they're the drivers for the kind of culture that actually exist within a unit.

And one of the things that I think we are responsible for, compelled, and called to do, is to kind of develop a culture that does enhance community. The Army is all about people first and I do believe that that begins with the Chaplain. The Chaplain is the one who is able to kind of navigate, negotiate, to develop relationships across the aisle; everybody's different, customs, cultures, introverts, extroverts, all the different dynamics that chaplains are uniquely prepared, experienced, and knowledgeable about in trying to kind of navigate. So, we do our very best trying to develop and build communities where soldiers are compelled to take care of soldiers.

Dacee Bernard: Thank you for sharing. I'd love to learn more about all the training you offered and all the ways in which you continue to facilitate community across the military landscape within our population. With that in mind, I know you said, oh heaven forbid you know people actually enter into a mental health crisis or have a suicide-related thought, but with that in mind, what are some things that listeners can do on a regular basis to maximize their mental health?

Chaplain Bell: Well, I think the individual and maximizing their own mental health is to be present and to be aware. That is to be able to identify exactly where they are, how they were feeling, what amount of stress, and what are boundaries that they actually have that perhaps have been pushed to the left or to the right or are no longer being observed at all. Right? And a lot of times we ourselves are incapable of seeing ourselves or where we are until it is too late. So, one of the things that I just believe is critical is that it begins with relationships, and it begins



with community. Right? When you are surrounded by individuals who know you well, they are able to observe. If you've got those intimate relationships and they are able to observe when changes take place within you. And because the soldier is compelled to take care of their battle buddy, to take care of their friend, then one of the things that they can do is to engage, we can engage each other, and kind of hold each other accountable for our own health.

But I do like that the Army has actually updated him with some other tools that not just chaplains or mental health professionals can engage but FM 7 – 2 2 holistic health is quite a resource. It's recently been updated. It actually has a list of numerous things that help us center ourselves and find balance and health in a holistic way. It integrates not just spirituality, not just mental readiness, not just physical readiness, but the diet, the rest, the relaxation, those kinds of things, and the habits that we have, right, that we employ. Why it is that we can't get a lot of rest when the last thing before bed has been four hours of video games or watching TV nonstop and then you try to go to sleep on that, but you just finished watching an action movie and your mind, even though you think it is resting, is still actively engaged and moving and going.

There are a number of things that help us in the FM 7 – 2 2 which is being communicated for most formations, through the chaplains or senior leaders as well as behavioral health specialists, but I think it has a lot of value that I hope we will continue to communicate so that individuals can find balance in their own lives.

Dacee Bernard: Thank you so much. It's encouraging to see how there's those that seek a mental balance both at the chaplains' level and at the larger Army level as well that's all come around to support the Service member.

Well, you have offered me such just a wealth of knowledge and insight about the chaplain core and all that you do. I know now that you're more than just religious support, you also just offer general support, connectedness, resources, and community and you truly are a gatekeeper and a gateway for Service members to really get the help they need in times of trouble. So, thank you so much for all that you do, and it truly has been a pleasure speaking with you today.

Chaplain Bell: It has been my delight. Thank you so much for having me.

Dacee Bernard: Thank you and again to all of our listeners, it has been an absolute pleasure to have Chaplain Bell join DSPO for this really important conversation about how our Service members can leverage chaplain support. For all of our listeners thank you so much for joining us and we hope you've enjoyed this episode and that you'll join us again. Have a good day.

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know is currently in crisis, call or text 9 8 8 to reach the 9 8 8 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline. To access the Veterans and Military Crisis Line dial 9 8 8 and press one.