

[The Arizona Republic](#)

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Late last year at a congressional hearing in Washington, Rep. Harry Mitchell listened to a couple named Mike and Kim Bowman tell the story of their 23-year-old son, Tim, a soldier who had returned safely from his yearlong deployment in Iraq only to commit suicide at home.

"We already were hearing that suicide among veterans who were between 20 and 24 years old was 2½ times higher than non-veterans," Mitchell told me. "And I remember thinking to myself: 'We can't do this again.' "

The first-term congressman previously had attended a "stand-down" event in Phoenix, at which homeless veterans receive free haircuts, showers and meals, as well as medical check-ups and help with housing or job services. "A lot of those guys were Vietnam vets," Mitchell said. "After that war we didn't understand PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) as well as we do now. I just didn't want us to neglect another generation of veterans. And the Bowmans said something really important at that hearing, something that stuck with me. They said that we shouldn't wait for veterans to go to the VA, but have the VA go to veterans."

As a subcommittee chairman on the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Mitchell, a Democrat, working with Republican colleagues, began asking the VA some tough questions about how much effort it put into reaching veterans at risk of suicide or other mental-health problems connected with post-traumatic stress disorder or traumatic brain injury.

Mitchell already was working on a revised version of the GI Bill, which Congress recently approved.

What he found after questioning VA officials was that the VA had a self-imposed ban on the kind of television advertising that can quickly get the word out concerning mental-health services.

There also was no aggressive program aimed at reaching veterans through the Internet or through cellphone technology.

In the meantime, too many veterans who had survived the war were suffering at home, with some taking their own lives.

Most recently in Arizona, there was the story of Staff Sgt. Travis Twiggs, a Marine who killed himself and his brother, Willard, after a long police chase and who is suspected of trying to commit suicide - Thelma & Louise style - by driving off the edge of the Grand Canyon.

"It has taken some work appealing to the VA bureaucracy, but I believe things are beginning to turn around," Mitchell said.

Not long ago, officials from the VA told Mitchell's committee that it has changed its outreach policy.

A pilot program that involves advertising on everything from buses to billboards is going into effect in Washington, D.C.

The message reads: "It takes the courage and strength of a warrior to ask for help."

It goes on to list the VA's suicide prevention hotline number: 800-273-TALK (8255).

The government also produced a television spot with the same message that features actor Gary Sinise, who was in Forrest Gump and currently stars in CSI: New York.

Not long ago, I wrote about a vet who had thought about killing himself after having returned from a tour in the war zone.

Since then, I've heard from other veterans as well as from friends and loved ones of soldiers who see troubling signs in their returning veterans and aren't quite sure what to do about it.

(They, too, can call the hotline and get help.)

"Hopefully, we can destigmatize this," Mitchell said. "In hearing after hearing, we are told about people who are afraid to report it because it will affect their jobs. We have to get over that. We need to be more on the offensive."