

# OUR VIEW: Soldier suicides should be alarming

By Kelcie Moseley, for the editorial board

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A disturbing trend in western Washington is not showing signs of stopping, and we have to wonder why it's not making more waves on this side of the state.

Since July 1, at least five soldiers have died by apparent suicide at Joint Base Lewis-McChord in Washington. The total for 2011 thus far throughout the service is 109 suspected suicides, compared to 91 from last year, according to The Seattle Times. As the media keeps reporting that the wars overseas are winding down, suicide rates are going up.

While billions are spent in Iraq and Afghanistan, not enough is invested in returning soldiers, whether wounded physically or mentally. And many families of those affected by soldier suicides say the stigma persists in military culture that seeking help for emotional trauma is a sign of weakness and potentially damaging to their careers. Silence and shrugging of shoulders from the civilian world does nothing to help eradicate that stigma.

Some measures are in place to help soldiers once they leave active service. They can qualify for money to continue their education or for a low-interest housing loan. Many receive "generous" - though that term has recently been debated - pensions, while others are eligible for short- and long-term medical care.

But none of those things are helpful to soldiers who don't live to take advantage of them.

Staff Sgt. Jared Hagemann, of Yelm, Wash., was scheduled to leave on his ninth tour of duty before he was found dead in late June. His wife contends he committed suicide and had returned from his eighth tour diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. Yet he was still ordered to return, and if his wife is correct, the thought drove him to suicide.

The military has been telling the public since 2002 that soldiers will be checked and re-checked for PTSD, that they will be monitored for suicide risk, that they are doing everything they can to prevent these tragedies. And maybe the military is putting forth a significant effort. But clearly it is not enough. Constantly sweeping the issue away is only making matters worse.

Perhaps it's time for more public pressure to be placed on military leaders to more thoroughly address this issue. This high number of losses cannot continue.