Press Release

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Fort Drum Public Affairs

Taking a holistic approach to suicide prevention at Fort Drum

FORT DRUM, N.Y. -- A group of 10th Mountain Division (LI) Soldiers completed the fourth early-morning ruck march Feb. 29, moving toward a combined total of 22 miles by week’s end in support of suicide prevention at Fort Drum.

But the goal of the Alpine Warrior Challenge was more about the message than the miles.

Each hike began with a guest speaker to discuss different risk factors of suicide. Topics ranged from stress management and injury prevention to nutrition and spiritual health.

“What we really want to communicate with this is that if you take care of yourself, you can get through any number of struggles in your life,” said Bill Van Orman, Fort Drum Suicide Prevention Program coordinator. “If you work on your health, eat right, get enough sleep, if you prevent yourself from getting injured, that eliminates some of the factors that lead to suicidal thoughts.”

Van Orman started the Alpine Warrior Challenge three years ago to connect with an audience outside the classroom or auditorium, and in an environment more befitting Soldiers in the North Country.

“Let’s be honest, most Soldiers love physical fitness,” he said. “And going after nutrition, injury prevention, sleep, and stress management – these are things that units are going to be more passionate about. And when you can tie those things into suicide prevention then people understand more how it all goes together.”

He said combining the physical nature of an outdoor hike, the social component of a shared experience, and the collaboration with installation professionals contributed to a holistic approach on suicide prevention.

“When I met with some of the H2F (Holistic Health and Fitness) team members and learned more about what they do, I decided we should focus on areas that are upstream from the issues or struggles people are having,” Van Orman said. “What you eat, how you sleep, your spiritual well-being, these are things that are further up from the stressor. But how we address them can prevent us from having those stressors or help us cope with them better.”

First Lt. Lynette Mientus, registered dietitian and nutrition performance team lead with the 10th Mountain Division Sustainment Brigade H2F, spoke to the group about proper nutrition for long training events.

She covered the “food is energy” concept and how Soldiers, like athletes, need to adjust their calorie demands based on performance. They also discussed food choices before, during, and after a workout or training activity.

The previous morning, Chaplain (Maj.) Tanya Bindernagel, 10th Mountain Division Sustainment Brigade chaplain, joined the group hike to discuss spiritual health.

“I spoke about how spirituality is the belief in something greater than yourself and a connection to a bigger purpose,” she said. “It is what gets us up in the morning and keeps us moving forward even when we might not 100 percent feel like it.”

Bindernagel emphasized that spirituality is unique to each person, and it develops over a lifetime.

“If you don’t know what your purpose is, then it becomes your purpose to figure out your purpose,” she said. “Although it is intangible, it is the one domain that no one can force on you or take away from you, and it provides a key foundation for resiliency because it is the hope in that something bigger that gets us through hard times.”

The event itself was an exercise in resilience and adaptability. Van Orman said it originally was intended as a snowshoe event, but the weather did not comply with that plan.

“So, we adapted and put on a 30- or 35-pound ruck and continued with the overarching goal of the event,” he said. “Then we went from two 50- to 65-degree days to an 18-degree morning. This just goes to show that we can plan for various circumstances, but there will always be unplanned-for-events in life. Without some resilience, we will get frustrated and very likely angry. By staying resilient, we can adapt to the circumstances and continue moving forward. It isn’t always ideal, but we can persevere.”

Capt. Shaun Hyde, 8th Military Police Detachment (Military Working Dog) and 227th Military Police Detachment (Law Enforcement) commander, found the Alpine Warrior Challenge a unique training opportunity for his Soldiers, and that it aligned with the 91st MP Battalion’s peer-to-peer, officer wellness program.

“On top of the combat-focused training we do every Thursday, where we ruck march or do combatives, this gets into the H2F fundamentals that the Army is strongly concentrating on nowadays, and within our battalion as well,” Hyde said. “It’s the whole package approach – making sure you’re getting the right amount of sleep, exercise and healthy eating – and then having that community that you can reach into to talk with people who have your back.”

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For further information regarding this release, contact Fort Drum Public Affairs at 315-783-5828 or email katherine.e.wright12.civ@army.mil

Photo Captions:

HSP\_1 - Fort Drum Soldiers gather in Remington Park on Feb. 29 for a ruck march in support of suicide prevention. Those who participated in the weeklong Alpine Warrior Challenge hiked 4.4 miles each morning with subject matter experts leading a discussion on topics such as injury prevention, spiritual health, nutrition, and stress management. (Photo by Mike Strasser, Fort Drum Garrison Public Affairs)

HSP\_2 - Fort Drum Soldiers gather in Remington Park on Feb. 29 for a ruck march in support of suicide prevention. Those who participated in the weeklong Alpine Warrior Challenge hiked 4.4 miles each morning with subject matter experts leading a discussion on topics such as injury prevention, spiritual health, nutrition, and stress management. (Photo by Mike Strasser, Fort Drum Garrison Public Affairs)

HSP\_3 - First Lt. Lynette Mientus, registered dietitian and nutrition performance team lead with the 10th Mountain Division Sustainment Brigade H2F, spoke about proper nutrition for long training events Feb. 29 during the Alpine Warrior Challenge in Remington Park. (Photo by Mike Strasser, Fort Drum Garrison Public Affairs)