

Suicide prevention strategy for missing veterans

A protocol and online solution providing police forces with early access to critical information required to find missing veterans safe and well.

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Key details

Stage of practice	Evaluated locally
Purpose	Prevention
Topic	Adults at risk Missing persons
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Region	North West
Partners	Police Health services Voluntary/not for profit organisation
Stage of implementation	The practice is implemented.
Start date	November 2023

Key details

Scale of initiative	National
Target group	Adults Communities Disability Families

Aim

The forcer protocol has the following aims regarding vulnerable members of His Majesty's (HM) Armed Forces and veterans who go missing:

- to provide comprehensive support for the missing person
- to have quick and secure access to the missing person's information on a protected platform
- to prevent post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) related suicide
- to provide support services and specialised aftercare for the missing person
- to raise awareness surrounding the risks to veterans while missing

Intended outcome

The intended outcomes are:

- a reduction in the time taken to locate missing veterans
- a reduction in the number of repeat missing veteran cases
- the successful identification of missing veterans in safe and well conditions
- the successful referral of missing veterans into veteran specific care

Description

Serving in and transitioning from the armed forces can be an overwhelming experience and, in some instances, a difficult and distressing experience to process. This can lead to mental health decline such as anxiety, depression, PTSD and impact trauma. It is essential to do everything possible to find missing veterans and provide them with support services and specialised aftercare.

The forcer protocol is a national initiative which piloted in Greater Manchester Police (GMP) in November 2023 and started being rolled out by the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) in May 2024. The protocol was created by the former spouse of a veteran who died by suicide. It is designed to securely capture and access key information about vulnerable members of HM Armed Forces or veterans who are at risk of going missing, giving them the best chance of being found safely and provided with specialised aftercare.

Forcer protocol

The forcer protocol follows these principles in GMP when a report of a missing veteran reaches a call handler.

- The call handler alerts the force operations centre (FOC) to initiate an investigation process.
- The FOC accesses safe and found online (SAFO) to facilitate the search for the missing person's details. SAFO is a social enterprise on which serving members of the Armed Forces or veterans update a personal profile. In the event of a member of the Armed Forces or veteran going missing (and only in this circumstance), the police can access a portal on SAFO to search the database for the missing person. The database provides the police with early access to key information which is critical to finding the missing person safe and well. Such information may include any known significant locations that the veteran may be drawn to when feeling vulnerable.
- The FOC will contact a national referral team, labelled Operation Nova, for support with understanding which services (if any) the missing veteran has engaged with. Operation Nova is delivered by the force's employment charity and is an NHS service available across England.
- Risk assessments guide the level of response and inquiries undertaken for the missing person, ensuring appropriate allocation of resources. The Police National Computer (PNC) is updated and all investigative tools are considered, subject to risk assessment.
- Records are meticulously updated with the circumstances of the missing person's return, and cases are not closed until their well-being and whereabouts are confirmed.
- Once the missing person has been found, safe and well checks (SWC) are conducted to prevent future incidents, and an Operation Nova referral is completed. On receiving a new referral, Operation Nova caseworkers undertake a needs assessment to establish what support the individual requires. This is followed by practical help offered through a network of local organisations including charities and statutory services.

Responsibility for the forcer protocol in GMP is led by a chief inspector. The protocol (including the SAFO database and Operation Nova) is free for forces to implement and access.

Evaluation

GMP are collating local and national data to monitor the effectiveness of the forcer protocol. Nationally, GMP are the first force to collect data on missing veterans.

Data is also being collected on which forces have enrolled to the forcer protocol and how many missing veterans they currently have through missing person report data.

Overall impact

- Based on the data available to GMP, veterans in GMP are being found between 8-10% faster than the national average, because key information is available at the time that the person is reported missing.
- No veterans died by suicide during the pilot stage of the forcer protocol in GMP.
- The founder of the forcer protocol has won the Daily Mail, “Most Inspirational Women of the Year 2024”.
- The forcer protocol has been awarded the Lord Lieutenant North West Regional Team Award for services to veterans.

Learning

To implement the Forcer Protocol, forces or organisations will require the following.

- A detailed and comprehensive media strategy. This is needed to ensure effective internal communications to officers and stakeholders, and liaise closely with local news outlets to ensure an effective public engagement strategy.
- Having community buy-in is essential to the success of the forcer protocol. Each force that adopts the Forcer Protocol receives a promotional video from GMP and from Ross Kemp (actor) who is the patron for Safe and Found Online. These tools help support engagement with the veteran community.
- A designated single point of contact (SPOC) network. The role of this network is to support ongoing officer training and feedback for the forcer protocol. The single point of contact (SPOCs) Network can also engage with local stakeholders in their districts (such as veteran breakfast

clubs) to ensure community cohesion and support for the protocol. The SPOC network is generally comprised of veterans who are now police officers across different roles and ranks, however GMP also has officers in the network who are not veterans but just passionate about this work.

- Early conversations with chief officers to ensure buy in to the initiative. Policy sign-off and support from the wider force or organisation is crucial.
- The embedding of performance measures. This will ensure accurate data are being captured in relation to missing veterans and subsequent Operation Nova referrals into veteran specific care.

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