

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Next Mission: Finding the Healing Right in Front of Us

Despite unprecedented investments in Veteran mental health, America continues to lose Veterans to suicide at an alarming rate. Treatment, crisis intervention, and clinical support remain essential components of Veteran care. Yet many Veterans who struggle never engage in those systems, and many who do enter care fail to complete the services and programs assigned to help them.

This reality raises an important question:

Are we starting the conversation too late?

The Next Mission suggests that we may also be starting it in the wrong place.

The Next Mission explores an alternative perspective rooted in lived experience, emerging research, and years of Veteran engagement. Rather than focusing exclusively on intervention after problems arise, it examines how purpose, belonging, connection, and meaningful participation can be cultivated long before crisis occurs.

At its core, this book is built around a simple observation.

Military service creates an environment unlike any other. It provides a shared mission, clear expectations, accountability, challenge, purpose, and deep bonds among those who serve together. Veterans are trained to overcome adversity, adapt to changing circumstances, and accomplish objectives as part of a team. Over time, this environment becomes more than a profession—it becomes a way of life.

When service ends, that environment often disappears.

The mission changes. The team disperses. The structure that once provided direction is no longer clearly defined.

For some Veterans, what follows is not a crisis, but a gradual loss of connection, purpose, and belonging. While many Veterans successfully navigate this transition, others find themselves searching for the connection, purpose, challenge, and sense of belonging that once existed as part of everyday life. Many will never raise their hand and enter the traditional continuum of care, despite experiencing the very challenges those systems are designed to address.

The Next Mission proposes that this loss deserves far greater attention within conversations surrounding Veteran wellness and suicide prevention, and that those conversations must begin long before crisis emerges.

Drawing from research, Veteran stories, and years of community-based outreach, the book introduces Front Door Engagement as a framework for expanding how we think about prevention—

not replacing treatment or crisis intervention, but creating opportunities for Veterans to reconnect with purpose, challenge, belonging, and community long before those services may be needed.

The Next Mission does not suggest that these opportunities are new. Veterans have long found purpose, challenge, camaraderie, and belonging through sports, music, service, mentorship, volunteering, and countless other pursuits. What the book proposes is that their value may be greater than we have traditionally recognized. Rather than viewing these environments as supplemental activities, we should consider their potential as meaningful components of a broader prevention strategy designed to help Veterans stay connected, engaged, and supported throughout their lives.

This approach is not centered on activities themselves. Rather, it is centered on the environments they create and the conditions that emerge within them.

Throughout the book, Veterans repeatedly describe the positive impact of participating in structured, goal-oriented environments that provide meaningful objectives, shared experiences, accountability, and opportunities to grow alongside others. Whether through sports, music, or other mission-driven pursuits, the common thread is not the activity—it is the restoration of conditions many Veterans describe as essential to their well-being.

These environments frequently create many of the same protective factors associated with positive mental health outcomes, including stronger social connections, renewed purpose, increased motivation, confidence, accountability, and reduced isolation.

The book does not argue against clinical care.

Instead, it argues that connection often precedes support.

Trust often precedes connection.

And participation often creates the opportunity for both.

By helping Veterans reconnect with purpose and belonging, these environments may serve as powerful pathways toward wellness and, when necessary, additional support and care.

Ultimately, The Next Mission challenges policymakers, Veteran-serving organizations, funders, researchers, and communities to rethink where prevention begins.

The question is not whether treatment matters.

The question is whether we have overlooked opportunities to help Veterans thrive before treatment becomes necessary.

The central message is simple:

Healing is often closer than we think.

Sometimes it is found in the connection, purpose, and community already within **reach**.