Recruitment of National Guard Personnel for Research Protocols

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Statement of the Problem: Despite preliminary evidence indicating a sharp decline in suicide rates within the military in 2013, data indicate that the National Guard experienced a continued increase (American Forces Press Service, 2014). The importance of studying this component of the military is thus clear; however, anecdotally, this group has historically been difficult to recruit.

Summary of Key Scientific Literature: N/A

Recommendations: In our Military Suicide Research Consortium (MSRC) funded project, we were able to recruit a total of approximately 1,000 soldiers from a Joint Forces Training Center in the southern United States. Approximately 85% of the sample was affiliated with the National Guard, with nearly all of those individuals specifically affiliated with the Army National Guard. This process required approximately 8 months, which was slightly longer than the 6 months we had budgeted in our protocol; however, for a variety of reasons detailed below, we still consider this a fairly substantial success.

When the protocol was initially approved, we had the enthusiastic support of command at the base that served as our recruitment site. Just after we received Institutional Review Board (IRB) and Human Research Protection Office (HRPO) approval to begin data collection, there was a change in the command structure. The initial plan had been for command to direct specific units to our recruitment site on specific days, allowing for collection of our sample in 2-3 months. This plan, however, was not prioritized, leaving us to find alternate recruitment strategies. We were able to meet our recruitment objectives for a variety of reasons.

1. Strong investment in our project from our onsite liaison. We believe this was the single greatest factor in our recruitment success. Our onsite liaison was the head of Suicide Prevention for the base and worked tirelessly on our behalf. She frequently contacted command and the heads of various units in an effort to develop interest. In doing this, she was able to put us in touch with the scheduler responsible for planning the demobilization process for soldiers demobilizing from Operation Enduring Freedom. Similarly, she was able to help us develop relationships with schedulers managing annual training for units making yearly visits to the base. As such, we were able to capitalize on visitors to the base as well as the smaller population of permanent residents. In doing so, we diversified our sample and managed to avoid leaning too heavily upon any single group to recruit our large sample. Additionally, because our onsite liaison was affiliated with the National Guard herself, we were able to minimize obstacles that can develop when an entirely non-military entity attempts to draw on military resources in a military environment. We thus strongly suggest developing a strong relationship with at least one

onsite liaison capable of assisting in problem solving and relationship building. This will enable non-military affiliated researchers to avoid missed opportunities and misunderstandings stemming from lack of familiarity with military culture and the day-to-day functioning of the recruitment source.

2. Flexibility and versatility within the research group. Our research team consisted not only of the primary investigator (PI) and Co-Investigator, but also a team of four doctoral students and two full-time research assistants. As such, we were able to divide the group enough such that the team was available most hours of the day on weekends as well as weekdays. This allowed us to quickly put together a team to run participants on short notice while avoiding over-burdening research personnel during heavy recruitment periods. We thus strongly suggest flexibility within your team to maximize your ability to meet recruitment needs.

3. Heightened anonymity. Although we cannot quantify the impact of this component of our project, we believe that our decision to provide non-military computers connected to our own non-military wifi network increased the willingness of soldiers to participate by diminishing concerns that their answers would have detrimental effects.

4. Clear command structure within the research team. We opted to utilize a single voice approach, with the PI managing most of the logistics of the project and managing a large portion of the discussions with military personnel. We believe this made it easier for the military to develop a sense of identity for our team and project and minimized confusion regarding opportunities for new recruitment sources.

5. Collaborative problem solving approach. When obstacles arose, we made certain to seek input from military personnel, consider their perspective on issues, and offer to manage most or all work associated with the solution. In doing so, we continually emphasized our desire to minimize the extent to which we were drawing on their resources while maximizing the potential deliverables associated with the project. A particularly salient example was the collaborative problem solving that allowed us to move our entire data collection operation to a building more convenient to units in training, which resulted in two days of collection at capacity, completing the 1,000 administrations goal of the study.

6. Patience. Because this project was conducted in an environment in which research is uncommon, we were not entirely surprised that issues frequently arose with respect to logistics, support from command, and communication with potential participants. We opted to keep a longer term view of maintaining good will moving forward and avoided conflict on these issues even while maintaining a firm and consistent message regarding the importance of completing our tasks in the time frame outlined to MSRC.

References:

American Forces Press Service (2014). *DOD Releases Suicide Event Report, Changes Reporting Methods.* Retrieved from https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/06/.