

## **Hampton Roads Sailors Walk Out of Darkness for Suicide Prevention**

U.S. Fleet Forces Public Affairs

VIRGINIA BEACH, Va. – Service members from more than 20 Virginia commands participated in the largest suicide prevention walk in the nation during the ninth annual Walk Out of Darkness in Virginia Beach, Va., Sept. 6.

Sponsored by the Hampton Roads Survivors of Suicide Support Group, the event aimed to raise awareness for depression and suicide, to promote good physical and mental health and to raise money for the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP).

Commander Surface Forces Atlantic, Rear Adm. Peter A. Gumataotao, along with Virginia Beach Mayor Will Sessoms, served as guest speakers and addressed a crowd of more than 5,000 people.

Gumataotao spoke to the unifying efforts from community leadership, mental health professionals, volunteers, and the Hampton Roads military family that makes this area's Walk Out of Darkness event the largest in the nation.

"When I look out over this crowd of people I see a lot of diversity. I see families and social workers, civic leaders, retired and active duty military; but I also see unity of effort. That's important for all of us to remember because the disease of depression is a solitary disease," said Gumataotao. "If a community rallies around an individual, they will find their way out of the darkness."

The Walk Out of Darkness events are held throughout the country to raise awareness and to benefit the AFSP. It is the leading national not-for-profit organization exclusively dedicated to understanding and preventing suicide, research, education and advocacy.

Louanne Ellingson, a retired chief petty officer spoke to the crowd about the loss of her husband, a master chief petty officer. She said that admitting there was a problem was not an option for him.

"He would never allow another human being to know that there was something wrong with him," said Ellingson. "He didn't want the stigma attached to him. But there is no mind-over-matter when it comes to depression," said Ellingson. "If he understood that depression is a treatable illness, I know he would be here today."

Event volunteer Sheila Gosey said she believes that there is a change in the way the public views suicide.

"I can only speak for myself and what I've been seeing, but this last year is the first that we haven't lost anyone to suicide at my church," said Gosey. "I believe that is because we've recognized suicide as a treatable disease and we can address it out in the open."

For others the ability to be surrounded by thousands of people who've shared the loss of a loved one to suicide helps them manage their grief.

Suffolk resident Susan Scott lost her son, Ben in 2010. She's attended the Walk Out of Darkness every year since.

"There is no celebration of someone's life when they commit suicide, no big remembrance. If it were cancer your friends and coworkers would know how to react, but that's not what happens for those of us left behind. I know I felt like a leper," said Scott. "When I come here I get to be with my people, people who understand what I've gone through, people who know that my son was sick. He had a disease and he was taken from me."

U.S. Fleet Forces Command (USFF) was one of many Hampton Roads military commands that had teams of service members volunteering at the event, and for the past three years, have assumed greater responsibilities for organizing the event.

"This is the fifth year that the Navy has had a major presence at this event, and I am overwhelmed with the response we had from Navy commands and senior leadership," said Jennifer Dolehite, USFF suicide prevention program manager.

USFF suicide prevention coordinators have assembled in collaboration with Commissaries on board Joint Expeditionary Base Little Creek-Fort Story, Naval Air Station Oceana, Naval Station Norfolk, and the Norfolk Naval Shipyard Portsmouth to distribute brochures to help publicize the symptoms for depression and the warning signs of suicide with service members.

"Just the presence in our community Saturday, will raise awareness of the disease of depression to prevent the tragedy of another suicide. We want our Sailors, our shipmates, to know life is worth living," said Dolehite. "We do not want another command to experience a death by suicide. We all can make a difference."

Information on suicide prevention is available from the following agencies: National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 1-800-273-TALK (8255); National Community Walks, [www.afsp.org](http://www.afsp.org); International Association For Suicide Prevention (IASP); and at the Navy Suicide Prevention Program Webpage: [www.suicide.navy.mil](http://www.suicide.navy.mil).