First Lieutenant Keith Jennings graduated from West Point in 2001 and by 2003 was in the trenches of Iraq with the 101st Airborne. The battle-hardened officer thought he was prepared for anything. Until one of his men shared thoughts of suicide.

As soon as he reached the nearest satellite uplink, Jennings searched Google for help. That led him to David Jobes, a psychology professor at Catholic University. After reading how Jobes works with his patients to help them deal with suicidal thoughts, Jennings was able to stabilize the soldier until help arrived a week later.

Nearly 10 years later, Jennings is now a third-year doctoral student in clinical psychology at CUA studying under Jobes. Their current research project, Operation Worth Living, is funded through a $3.4 million grant from the Department of Defense (DOD). It involves working with active duty service members from the 3rd Infantry Division of the Army, many of whom, like Jennings, have been deployed to combat zones multiple times since 9/11.

The U.S. Army Medical Research and Materiel Command oversees nearly all Department of Defense and Army suicide research. Researchers are testing the effectiveness of Jobes’ Collaborative Assessment and Management of Suicidality (CAMS) approach with suicidal soldiers in collaboration with the Military Operational Medicine Research Program (MOMRP). While traditional mental health approaches to suicidal risk see suicide as a symptom of major mental disorders, CAMS focuses specifically on suicidal thoughts and behaviors. Therapists work side by side with those they are treating to help them discover for themselves ways they can cope and adapt.

“MOMRP is committed to developing effective countermeasures against stressors and maximizing health, performance, and fitness for our warriors on and off the battlefield,” says MOMRP director Col. Carl Castro. “By collaborating with Catholic University and funding this project, the military will be able to protect the behavioral health of our warriors, which sometimes gets put to the back burner.”

Jobes has spent more than 25 years studying suicide prevention and has spoken nationally and internationally on issues related to suicide prevention. Over the last 12 years, he has been a consultant to every branch of the U.S. military and his work has been supported by almost $5 million in DOD and Veterans Affairs Administration (VA)-based funding.

“Since 9/11, with the multiple deployments, the mental health needs of the military have exploded exponentially,” he says. “The first few years of war saw standard mental health challenges. But as the wars drew on, in 2004 the suicide rate rather suddenly started to increase and ultimately doubled. For the first time in the nation’s history, military rates of suicide exceeded civilian rates.”

Jobes and Jennings agree that soldiers need to be encouraged to view their mental health as one more muscle to keep fit.

Jennings says there is a crisis in the military because there is a “warrior culture promoting values of strength, courage, and resiliency. The issue with mental health and suicide is that these ideals are so highly valued, which can make seeking help be seen as a sign of weakness.”

By working with “outsiders” such as Jobes, the military and VA are taking significant strides toward achieving mental fitness in soldiers, Castro says.

Jobes concurs that the military is on the cutting edge. “There are no other organizations in the world doing more for suicide prevention than the DOD and the VA,” Jobes says.

“At a social event, it’s kind of a show stopper when I say what I do,” Jobes says. Although their work may seem depressing, Jobes and Jennings agree that it is actually an uplifting field to be in.

“We’re in it to save lives and make them worth living,” says Jobes. — M.F.M.

CUA’s National Catholic School of Social Service is also having a positive effect on the behavioral health of U.S. troops. Read the story on page 20.