

Finding Hope in the Desert

Jasmine Taylor, Directorate of Prevention, Resilience and Readiness

[*Published in the August 2025 DPRR Community Link*](#)

Some people might say that an oasis can be found in the middle of the Mojave Desert, just 6 miles from the main gate of Fort Irwin in San Bernardino County, California. But there are no shady palm trees or babbling brooks found at this retreat. Instead of lush greenery, there's an assortment of colorful boulders known as Painted Rocks. Painted Rocks commemorates the many Soldiers who have passed through Fort Irwin's National Training Center. The units who have trained there celebrate their time at the facility by painting their insignias on massive desert rocks, a rite of passage dating back to 1981. A more recent addition has given the site a greater purpose. Positioned at a high-traffic location, a special monument known as The Rock can be seen by every individual entering or leaving Fort Irwin. It reads, "Even the strongest rock can be worn down by the storm," and it provides instructions on how to access the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline.

The quote is a testament to anyone who sees it that even the strongest Soldiers can be affected by life's hardships. Dr. Myron C. Byles, Suicide Prevention Program Coordinator for the Army Substance Abuse Program, said the intent was to acknowledge the struggles many Soldiers face and to offer a visible symbol of hope at one of the most-visited areas at Fort Irwin.

"The vibrant and meaningful artwork displayed there serves as a beacon of hope and peace for Soldiers, (Army) Civilians, Families and contractors living and working on the installation. The Rock is distinctive from the other boulders and catches the eyes of visitors. It's a reminder that support is always within reach," he said.

Byles said that a Soldier from a rotational training unit temporarily stationed at Fort Irwin chose to call 988 after seeing The Rock at the Painted Rocks site.

"We want every person who sees it to understand that it's OK to ask for help—that even those who are perceived as strong sometimes struggle. Help is available, and you are not alone," he said.

The ASAP and Suicide Prevention Program are unified at Fort Irwin. The collaboration is known for its creativity and visibility; the teams utilize costumes, interactive events and a strong presence at installation-wide activities to connect with the community. Byles said the programs' primary purpose is to foster a culture of awareness, resilience and help-seeking behavior.

"We wanted to convey a simple message encouraging individuals facing challenges to seek help without hesitation," he said.

"Leading this initiative reflects (the Army's) commitment to reducing stigma and connecting individuals to the support and resources they need before reaching a point of crisis."

In alignment with this commitment, the Fort Irwin ASAP will host a special event called Ruck for Resilience in September to observe Suicide Prevention Month. Participants will wear a weighted rucksack along a designated route, representing the burdens that individuals may carry in life. Along the way, resource stations operated by Army Community Service, Family Advocacy Program and the Sexual Harassment/

Assault Response and Prevention program will allow runners to “lighten their load” by removing weights from their rucksacks.

“The event is designed to demonstrate that while we may face heavy challenges, support systems exist to help us move forward with strength and hope,” Byles said.