

**STATEMENT
OF KENNETH HARMAN
HEALTH POLICY ANALYST
THE AMERICAN LEGION
TO THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
ON
"VETERAN SUICIDE PREVENTION: CAPITALIZING ON WHAT WORKS AND
INCREASING INNOVATIVE APPROACHES"**

SEPTEMBER 29, 2022

Chairman Takano, Ranking Member Bost, and distinguished members of the committee; on behalf of National Commander Vincent J. "Jim" Troiola, and more than 1.6 million members of The American Legion, we thank you for inviting The American Legion to submit this statement on "Veteran Suicide Prevention: Capitalizing on What Works and Increasing Innovative Approaches."

Background

A 2021 Brown University study revealed that since 9/11, the number of active duty and veteran suicides greatly outpaced the number of those killed during post-9/11 combat-related and noncombat-related military operations.¹ During the commemoration of the 20-year anniversary of 9/11, The American Legion noted that more than 114,000 men and women who have served in our armed forces have died by suicide since 2001. This is nearly double the American lives lost in Vietnam. Moreover, by 2030, it is estimated that the total number of veteran suicides will be 23 times the number of post-9/11 combat deaths.² Most alarming was the elevated risk factor of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF) veterans, as they have a 2.5 times higher risk for suicide during their first year of separation than their active duty counterparts.³ While there are many important issues facing the military and veteran community today, The American Legion ardently believes that no issue is more urgent than to prevent another veteran from dying by suicide.⁴

Legislative Progress

Recent congressional action on several pivotal pieces of legislation, including the *Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act of 2019* and the *COMPACT*

¹ Suitt, Thomas Howard. "High suicide rates among United States service members and veterans of the post-9/11 wars." *Costs of War Project* (2021). <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/papers/2021/Suicides>

² "No Veteran Left Behind," *Legion Online*, September 14, 2021, <https://www.legion.org/dispatch/253680/no-veteran-left-behind>

³ Ravindran, Chandru, Sybil W. Morley, Brady M. Stephens, Ian H. Stanley, and Mark A. Reger. "Association of suicide risk with transition to civilian life among US military service members." *JAMA network open* 3, no. 9 (2020): e2016261-e2016261. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32915235/>

⁴ "No Veteran Left Behind," *Legion Online*, September 14, 2021, <https://www.legion.org/dispatch/253680/no-veteran-left-behind>

Act of 2020, has been imperative to ensure that the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has the requisite authorities to launch major mental health and suicide prevention programs. Among many initiatives under the *Hannon Act* is a provision authorizing the VA to award grants to qualified community-based organizations conducting mental health and suicide prevention programs with specific emphasis on engaging hard-to-reach veterans who may decide to not use VA care.⁵ The Staff Sergeant Parker Gordon Fox Suicide Prevention Grant, a provision in the *Hannon Act*, directly funds local communities to provide outreach, suicide prevention services, and linkage to VA and other community resources. This collaborative approach with local community partners is commended, as oftentimes veterans lack of awareness of already existing VA services and benefits available to them.⁶

Likewise, one notable initiative under the *COMPACT Act* is the provision to start furnishing acute crisis care for qualified veterans exhibiting emergent suicide symptoms without requiring repayment.⁷ This immediate response to an acute suicidal situation creates a medical space to mitigate the crisis before symptoms increase and reduce potential post incident stressors for those who may have financial challenges. Another notable accomplishment in legislation is the passage of the *National Suicide Hotline Designation Act of 2020* allowing for the operationalizing of an easy-to-recall crisis hotline number for both veterans and current servicemembers. The creation of this number is vital to crisis intervention since the hotline is often the first resource that comes to mind for a veteran. The 9-8-8 number has already started to affix to veterans' mental recall much like the number 9-1-1 does for adolescents. While these examples have expanded options and ease for veterans in critical need of mental health resources and interventions, the American Legion believes Congress can do more to address and curb the troubling epidemic of veteran suicide.

Veteran Suicide

This year's National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report revealed a 9.7 percent decrease between the years 2020 and 2018.⁸ While encouraging, it must be noted that The American Legion holds reservations as a report published the same week, conducted by America's Warrior Partnership, states VA may have inaccurate data as it undercounts actual veteran suicides by not attributing suicide deaths related to drug overdoses.⁹ The American Legion is concerned with the inconsistencies between the two reports and the potential for reductions of funding for vital programs if VA were to inaccurately assess a reduction in veteran suicides. Thus, we recommend a study examining veteran suicide by drug overdose and possible connections between medication and suicide is included in next year's National Veteran Suicide Prevention Report. Regardless, if

⁵ U.S. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service (CRS), *Veteran Suicide Prevention: In Focus Factsheet* (Washington, DC, July 2021), accessed September 21, 2022, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11886>

⁶ U.S. Government Accountability Office, *VA's Response to Veterans' Increasing Demand for Mental Health Services*, (Washington DC, 2021), accessed September 21, 2022, <https://www.gao.gov/blog/vas-response-veterans-increasing-demand-mental-health-services>

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Leo Shane III, "Veterans Suicides Drop to Lowest Rate Since 2006," *Military Times*, last modified September 19, 2022, <https://www.militarytimes.com/veterans/2022/09/19/veterans-suicides-drop-to-lowest-rate-since-2006/>

⁹ Leo Shane III, "Veterans Suicide Rate May Be Double Federal Estimates, Study Suggests," *Military Times*, last modified September 17, 2022, <https://www.militarytimes.com/veterans/2022/09/17/veterans-suicide-rate-may-be-double-federal-estimates-study-suggests/>

the actual veteran suicide rate slightly decreased to 16.8 per day¹⁰ or hovers more likely around 40 per day, The American Legion firmly reiterates, “One suicide is one too many,”¹¹ and acknowledges that many collaborative and innovative efforts lay ahead to eradicate our nation’s tragedy of veteran suicides.

The American Legion commends VA efforts to expand outreach to veterans in need of mental health services. The recent launch of VA’s Mission Daybreak, formerly known as the Suicide Prevention Grand Challenge, is the most recent example of VA’s mental health outreach efforts.¹² Mission Daybreak is a \$20 million challenge that calls for a variety of innovative solutions to veteran suicide as part of VA’s 10-year strategic plan to combat this epidemic. This challenge comes just 10 months after VA’s Public Service Announcement (PSA) campaign to spread the message, “Don’t Wait. Reach Out”.¹³ This PSA campaign, launched in October 2021, is a joint effort between VA and the Ad Council, a non-profit organization focused on spreading important messages to the world, to destigmatize seeking mental health care.

The American Legion embarked on its own campaign to address veteran suicides head-on through its ‘*Be The One*’ initiative launched this past year. When addressing veteran suicide, The American Legion takes a multifaceted approach by creating safe spaces for veterans to be open about their struggles, launching a cross-country awareness campaign to destigmatize health-seeking behaviors, and providing peer-to-peer support and providing resources within local communities.¹⁴ Only through innovative and multilayered approaches, like the example provided, can our nation truly start chipping away to stop veteran suicides.

Peer Support

In 2019, the American Legion voted to publish Resolution No. 364: *Department of Veterans Affairs to Develop Outreach and Peer to Peer Programs for Rehabilitation*.¹⁵ It is through this resolution that the American Legion urged Congress and VA to develop a national program to provide peer-to-peer rehabilitation services. The resolution also calls for the establishment of effective community partnerships to expand access to mental health services and to exert maximum effort to ensure servicemembers are utilized for positions as peer support specialists in the effort to provide treatment, support services, and readjustment counseling.

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, *2022 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report* (Washington DC, 2022), accessed September 21, 2022, <https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/2022/2022-National-Veteran-Suicide-Prevention-Annual-Report-FINAL-508.pdf>

¹¹ “One Suicide is *One Too Many*,” *Legion Online*, July 16, 2010, <https://www.legion.org/veteransbenefits/89109/one-suicide-one-too-many>

¹² U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, Mission Daybreak (2022), accessed September 25, 2022, <https://www.missiondaybreak.net/about-mission-daybreak/>

¹³ U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, “Don’t Wait, Reach Out” Campaign Overview (2021), accessed September 25, 2022, <https://www.va.gov/REACH/images/2022-spm-campaign-overview.pdf>

¹⁴ “Newly Elected National Commander: ‘We all need to ‘Be the One’” *Legion Online*, September 1, 2022 <https://www.legion.org/convention/256775/newly-elected-national-commander-%E2%80%98we-all-need-%E2%80%98be-one%E2%80%99%E2%80%9D>

¹⁵ The American Legion, *Resolution No. 364: Department of Veteran Affairs to Develop Outreach and Peer to Peer Programs for Rehabilitation*

The American Legion kicked off its ‘Buddy Check’ Program in December 2019, where nearly 4,000 posts conducted their own peer wellness checks and reconnection efforts with veterans who may need assistance but don’t know where to go or whom to ask.¹⁶ During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, in June 2020, more than 3,600 American Legion posts engaged in *Buddy Check* activities within the membership year, and thousands more were conducted in the months beyond.¹⁷ This program plays a pivotal part in ensuring social connectivity and emotional, physical, and financial well-being of veterans and their caregivers/family members, especially during a period where social distancing measures were enforced throughout various regions of the United States.

As The American Legion’s ‘Buddy Check’ program stresses that our most sacred responsibility is to look out for each other, we are encouraged by Section 302 of *The STRONG Veterans Act*, which requires VA to establish one week each year as ‘Buddy Check Week,’ to facilitate veteran peer-to-peer engagement.¹⁸ Since the 2020 revelation of a daily average of 20 suicides per day by current and former servicemembers, and the identification that 60 percent of these individuals had no consistent contact with VA services, VA’s adoption of The American Legion’s innovative wellness check program could bolster its current suicide prevention efforts when trying to serve hard-to-reach veterans.¹⁹ The American Legion will continue to support legislation such as that proposed in Section 302, through Resolution No. 18: *Buddy Check*.²⁰

Alternative Therapies

As nearly 50 percent of veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) also struggle with comorbid substance use disorder, expedited action is imperative.²¹ To complicate the issue, veterans with multiple medical diagnoses run the risk of polypharmacy or overmedication. With a 2017 VA finding that veterans with a substance use disorder were three to four times more likely to also have a comorbidity of PTSD or depression, it punctuated the need for VA to devise alternative interventions that left minimal effects on body drug toxicity levels.²² In the wake of serious concerns over prescribing pain medication at VA medical facilities, the American Legion’s Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Suicide Prevention Committee resolved to focus on sound medication management practices of opioid prescriptions

¹⁶ “Tell Congress to Pass National Buddy Check Week,” *Legion Online*, September 21, 2022,

<https://www.legion.org/commander/256932/tell-congress-pass-national-buddy-check-week>

¹⁷ “Posts Encouraged to Use Buddy Checks to Help Veterans and Families,” *American Legion HQ* Press Release,

March 16, 2021, <https://azlegion.org/posts-encouraged-to-use-buddy-checks-to-help-veterans-and-families/>

¹⁸ “Buddy Checks: Wellness Check-ins with Veterans,” *Legion Online*, accessed September 21, 2022,

<https://www.legion.org/buddycheck>

¹⁹ Leo Shane III, “VA success story — New Veterans Answering Calls Checking In,” *Military Times*, last modified

March 3, 2020, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2020/03/03/va-success-story-new-veterans-answering-calls-checking-in/>

²⁰ “American Legion Testifies Before Senate Committee on Buddy Check Week, Other Vital Health-Care Initiatives,” *Legion Online*, June 24, 2021, <https://www.legion.org/legislative/252834/american-legion-testifies-senate-committee-buddy-check-week-other-vital-health>

²¹ The American Legion, Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation, *Veteran Suicide A White Paper Report* (2019), Retrieved from

<https://archive.legion.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12203/10872/aa006484.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

²² Jenni Teeters, Cynthia Lancaster, Delisa Brown, & Sudie Back, “Substance use disorders in military veterans: prevalence and treatment challenges,” *Substance Abuse and Rehabilitation*, No.8 (2017), 69-77

for veterans and servicemembers, and to find alternatives modalities to avoid harmful drug interactions and toxicity. Additionally, The American Legion continues to support legislation, VA policies, and increased funding that accelerate research efforts in development of evidence-based complementary and alternative treatments such as Hyperbaric Oxygen Therapy (HBOT), whole health care, Stellate Ganglion Block, virtual reality therapy, etc.

The American Legion supports research into complementary therapy, such as HBOT and recommend it be considered when providing care to veterans in crisis. A literature review conducted by the Journal of Military Medicine found that although there is both evidence for and against HBOT as a treatment option for TBI and PTSD, the safe track record of this treatment should allow HBOT to be considered as an alternative treatment for veterans.²³ The mixed nature of current empirical evidence clearly demonstrates a need for continued research, especially for veterans presenting with multiple comorbid symptoms. The American Legion also understands that many veterans are interested in alternative treatments that do not rely on the use of potentially harmful medications. We also urge Congress to provide oversight and funding to VA for these innovative and evidence-based treatments.

VA Suicide Prevention Outreach Budget

VA's Fiscal Year 2023 budget allocates for \$13.9 billion for veteran mental health services, with \$497 million set aside for various suicide prevention programs such as the launch implementation of the Veterans Crisis Line's 988 expansion initiative.²⁴ An expansion that, since launching in July 2022, has reportedly increased the number of contacts by 45 percent since July 2021.²⁵ This budget also factors in a hiring surge effort of 2,500 full-time equivalent personnel (FTE), which is a staff increase of 1,500 from 2021 levels.²⁶ Although VA's FY23 budget request increased by 13 percent (\$1.6 billion) from the year prior, the exploding demand for VA mental healthcare cannot be underscored.

Veteran utilization of Veteran Health Administration (VHA) mental healthcare between the years 2006-2021 grew by an astounding 85 percent, outpacing the usage rate of all other VHA services by over a factor of three.²⁷ Moreover, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) noted in 2021 that demand for VA outpatient mental health services would continue to grow by 32 percent over

²³ Adam T Biggs, PhD, Lanny F Littlejohn, MD, Hugh M Dainer, PhD, MD, "Alternative Uses of Hyperbaric Oxygen Therapy in Military Medicine: Current Positions and Future Directions," *Military Medicine*, 2021; usab022, <https://doi.org/10.1093/milmed/usab022>

²⁴ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs Press Release "Secretary McDonough Statement on FY 2023 Budget," www.va.gov, March 28, 2022, <https://www.va.gov/opa/pressrel/pressrelease.cfm?id=5777#:~:text=The%20budget%20provides%20%2413.9%20billion,involved%20in%20the%20Veteran's%20care>.

²⁵ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, "988 Lifeline Performance Metrics" (September 13, 2022), accessed September 25, 2022, <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/988/performance-metrics>

²⁶ U.S. Congress, House, Committee on the Budget, *President Biden's Budget Fulfills Our Sacred Obligation to Care for Our Veterans and Their Families*, 117th Cong., 2nd Sess. 2022, 112. <https://budget.house.gov/publications/report/president-biden-budget-fulfills-sacred-obligation-care-our-veterans>

²⁷ U.S. Government Accountability Office, *VA Vet Centers: Continued Attention to GAO Recommendations Could Help Meet Veteran and Servicemember Needs*, GAO-22-105675, (Washington DC, 2022), accessed September 21, 2022, <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-22-105675>

the next decade.²⁸ Compounding this issue with Congressional Budget Office (CBO)'s estimated annual influx of 58,000 veteran enrollees into VHA care if proposed automatic enrollment legislation passes, one would be amiss to not question if VA mental health services demand has far outstripped its capacity.²⁹ It is imperative that VHA is properly funded to ensure that it has the necessary resources and capacity to meet the surging demands for mental health support and services. The American Legion calls for an increase in the suicide prevention outreach budget to ensure that veterans are made aware of their benefits and options regarding mental health services.

Legislative Recommendations

The American Legion urges the Senate to quickly pass *H.R. 6411 - the Support the Resiliency of Our Nation's Great (STRONG) Veterans Act of 2022* which has already been passed by the House of Representatives. Comprised of dozens of provisions that come from standalone pieces of legislation The American Legion supports, this comprehensive legislation that aims to address the many existing mental health service gaps.³⁰

A 2022 retroactive study pointed to a troubling increase of suicides amongst American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) veterans using VHA care, especially with the younger AI/AN veteran cohort,³¹ VHA must engage and address the behavioral health needs of native and indigenous veterans. The American Legion acknowledges that a one-size-fits-all approach may not be feasible and has long recognized the unique barriers AI/AN veteran's face, calling for better outreach and care coordination, reliable transportation, and benefits education between tribes and VHA/Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA).³²

Better outreach and care are also necessary for veterans in rural areas. Almost a quarter of all veterans in the United States (4.7 million) reside in rural America,³³ VA must assess its current capacity to meet its long-term in-residential needs of veterans, especially those of rural/ultra-rural veterans. While VA is commended for utilizing a hybrid mix of tele-mental health services, community care referrals, and mobile and physical outpatient clinics to meet the mental health needs of veterans, these models may not be appropriate for veterans initially needing more supervised, in-residential rehabilitative care during their first phase of recovery.

As Vet Centers are comprised of a multifunction team of licensed mental health professionals, it must be noted that the most recent VA Office of Inspector General (OIG) report found a 23 percent vacancy rate amongst Licensed Professional Mental Health Counselors (LPMHCs) and Marriage

²⁸ U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Veterans' Growing Demand for Mental Health Services*, GAO-21-545, (Washington DC, 2021), accessed September 21, 2022, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-21-545sp.pdf>

²⁹ U.S. Congressional Budget Office, Cost Estimate: *H.R. 4673, Ensuring Veterans' Smooth Transition Act*, (Washington DC, December 2021), accessed September 21, 2022, <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/57691>

³⁰ "Tell Congress to Pass National Buddy Check Week," *Legion Online*, September 21, 2022, <https://www.legion.org/commander/256932/tell-congress-pass-national-buddy-check-week>

³¹ Mohatt, Nathaniel V., Claire A. Hoffmire, Alexandra L. Schneider, Cynthia W. Goss, Jay H. Shore, Talia L. Spark, and Carol E. Kaufman. "Suicide Among American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans Who Use VHA Care: 2004–2018." *Medical Care* 60, no. 4 (2022): 275. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/35271514/>

³² "Pending Legislation," *Legion Online*, May 22, 2019, <https://www.legion.org/legislative/testimony/247098/pending-veterans-health-legislation>

³³ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Rural Health, "Rural Veteran Health Care Challenges," [www.VA.gov](https://www.ruralhealth.va.gov/aboutus/ruralvets.asp), accessed September 21, 2022, <https://www.ruralhealth.va.gov/aboutus/ruralvets.asp>

and Family Therapists (MFTs) for year 2022.³⁴ Keeping in mind preexisting mental health provider shortages with an anticipated influx of new caseloads, and with the natural cycle of staff turnover and retirements, The American Legion calls for a more realistic expansion of its mental health staffing for its over 300 Vet Centers to hedge against provider and caseload burnout. Furthermore, The American Legion urges Congress to pass additional suicide prevention legislation that will expand and improve the care provided to veterans and servicemembers who have mental health issues or are at risk for suicide. Along with this legislation, there needs to be an increase in initiatives and programs addressing the servicemember to veteran transition. The American Legion knows that the difficulty of transitioning from military to civilian life, these periods of uncertainty can elevate the risk of suicide. The American Legion believes that passing legislation, such as the *Solid Start Act of 2021*, is a start to help lower the risk of veteran suicide.³⁵

Based in the VA Boston Healthcare System,³⁶ its important research gets compiled into the Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center report. Latest findings have revealed that 450,000 former and current U.S. servicemembers have been diagnosed with a TBI between years 2000-2021.³⁷ As concussions (or mild TBIs) have been known to significantly impair cognitive functioning, mood regulation, impulse control, sleep patterns, and may increase the risks for suicide,³⁸ The American Legion has invited The Concussion Legacy Foundation (CLF) on numerous occasions to speak about the critical research endeavors it pursues in partnership with VA Boston Healthcare System and Boston University. Continuous funding for this critical research is needed to discover effective treatments for veterans exposed to a blast or TBI while serving.

Conclusion

While VA has made great strides in providing innovative deliveries, existing service gaps in mental healthcare still exist for the most underrepresented veteran cohorts. With growing demand for mental health services, existing access disparities for traditionally underserved veterans, such as AI/AN, rural, and women may worsen. Through The American Legion's System Worth Saving (SWS) town hall meetings, we have heard firsthand from our veteran members a need to increase mental health supports, especially in rural areas. While The American Legion has initiated its own campaigns to stem the tide of veteran suicides through our *Be The One* campaign and the *Buddy Check* program, we realize a multifaceted approach with federal, state, and local stakeholders is required. Although the comprehensive *STRONG Veterans Act* requires the strengthening and expansion of mental health service deliveries, continuation of innovative research initiatives, and

³⁴ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, VA Office of Inspector General, *OIG Determination of VHA's Occupational Staffing Shortages FY 2022*, Report #22-00722-187, (Washington DC, July 2022) accessed September 21, 2022, <https://www.oversight.gov/sites/default/files/oig-reports/VA/VAOIG-22-00722-187.pdf>

³⁵ "American Legion Supports Key Legislation Impacting Veterans," *Legion Online*, October 14, 2021, <https://www.legion.org/legislative/253934/american-legion-supports-key-legislation-impacting-veterans>

³⁶ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Research and Development: VA Research Communications, "VA's TRACTS Program Seeking Breakthroughs on Traumatic Brain Injury," *www.VA.gov*, last modified March 31, 2020, <https://www.research.va.gov/currents/0320-VA-TRACTS-program-seeking-breakthroughs-on-traumatic-brain-injury.cfm>

³⁷ U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "TBI Among Service Members and Veterans," *www.CDC.gov*, last modified July 26, 2022, <https://www.cdc.gov/traumaticbraininjury/military/index.html>

³⁸ "Foundation Again Seeking American Legion's Help in Research Into CTE, TBI," *Legion Online*, March 6, 2022, <https://www.legion.org/veteranshealthcare/255106/foundation-again-seeking-american-legion%E2%80%99s-help-research-cte-traumatic>

shoring up VA's mental health staffing corps, more work remains. The American Legion calls for Congress to continue their diligent work on suicide prevention and help prevent another veteran life ending in suicide.

Chairman Takano, Ranking Member Bost, and distinguished members of the committee; The American Legion thanks you for your leadership and for allowing us the opportunity to submit a statement on this pressing issue. Questions concerning this testimony can be directed to Mr. Lawrence Montreuil, Legislative Director, at lmontreuil@legion.org.