



**STATEMENT OF
THE AMERICAN LEGION
LEGISLATIVE DIVISION**

BEFORE THE

**HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERAN'S AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

ON

H.R. 3495, THE "IMPROVE WELL-BEING FOR VETERANS ACT"

NOVEMBER 20, 2019

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Chairman Takano, Ranking Member Roe, and distinguished members of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, on behalf of National Commander, James W. "Bill" Oxford, and the nearly two million members of The American Legion, we thank you for the opportunity to testify on H.R. 3495, the "Improve Well-Being for Veterans Act," and the veterans suicide crisis in the United States. As the largest patriotic service organization in the United States with a myriad programs supporting veterans, The American Legion appreciates the leadership of this committee in focusing on the critical issue of suicide prevention and improving veterans' overall well-being.

Background

The latest data on veteran suicide shows more than 6,000 veterans have died by suicide every year from 2008 to 2017, and in 2016, the suicide rate was 1.5 times greater for veterans than non-veteran adults.¹ Veteran (and military) suicide is a national issue which far exceeds the ability of any one organization to handle alone. The American Legion stands behind the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in its efforts to collaborate with partners and communities nationwide to alleviate this public health crisis, of which veterans and military are a microcosm of a far greater epidemic.

The American Legion launched an online mental health survey in support of VA's public health approach to reducing veteran suicide.² It is part of the American Legion's continuing research and efforts on mental health issues impacting our nation's veterans. The survey was created by the American Legion's TBI/PTSD Committee and was designed to collect data that will help The American Legion bring local resources related to TBI, PTSD, and Suicide Prevention to veterans and their families. In a yet to be released report, the data collected indicated only 10.29% of participants were "very confident," they could connect a veteran in crisis to the appropriate resources. No veteran should be lost to suicide because an individual who identified them as "at-risk," was unaware of available resources. The survey identified that 84.23% of respondents never sought mental health care from Vet Centers. Vet Centers are community-based counseling centers and are part of the VA. More than a third of respondents (39.73%) were unsure of the veteran's eligibility for VA mental health services.³

¹ [The 2019 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report](#)

² [Legion launches online mental health survey](#)

³ Report to be released March 2020

Again, it is clear that there is a mental health and suicide crisis in the United States, and that veterans are an “at-risk” subset of the ongoing crisis. This makes it all the more important that Congress and VA take steps towards combatting this issue and continue looking for new tools to accomplish this goal. However, this does not mean rushing to pass legislation before it has been fully fleshed out. There is more work and due diligence to be done between the Committee, VA, and VSOs to ensure that H.R. 3495 is truly a bill which will improve the well-being of veterans across the nation. To that endeavor, The American Legion wants to highlight two critical issues before discussing the ongoing debate on the proposed legislation: First, in whatever form H.R. 3495 becomes, it must be coordinated in concert with Executive Order (EO) 13861, the President's Roadmap to Empower Veterans and End the National Tragedy of Suicide (PREVENTS), in order to ensure that there are no duplicative programs which cause unnecessary confusion or obstruction of services to veterans.⁴ Second, it must also have clear metrics and evaluation criteria to not only choose grant recipients, but to also ensure the quality of care being given to veterans and the outcomes of their programs.

Position and Recommendation

The main point out of three questions recently raised in several discussions regarding this bill is whether VA should provide financial assistance directly to providers of non-clinical social services or should these funds be funneled through “hub organizations,” which coordinate services between community-based resources.

The American Legion supports providing funds to both hub organizations and providers of *non-clinical* social services if they are subject to a rigorous vetting process based on clear metrics and evaluation criteria. The American Legion believes that a diversity of quality organizations providing *non-clinical* social services would be useful in combatting veteran suicide, particularly in rural and highly rural locations. However, any further questions on the mechanics of how to administer said funds and/or *clinical care* to support veteran suicide prevention through non-VA entities should be coordinated through existing VA programs.

Conclusion

In closing, The American Legion appreciates the leadership of this committee and remains committed to reducing veteran suicide. Further, The American Legion is committed to working with the Department of Veterans Affairs and this committee to ensure that America’s veterans are provided with the highest level of support and healthcare. Chairman Takano, Ranking Member Roe, and distinguished members of this committee, The American Legion thanks this committee for holding this important hearing and for the opportunity to explain the views of the nearly 2 million members of this organization. For additional information regarding this testimony, please contact Mr. John Medin, Legislative Associate of The American Legion’s Legislative Division at (202) 263-5756 or JMedin@legion.org

⁴ [Executive Order on a National Roadmap to Empower Veterans and End Suicide](#)