

**Rep. Chris Smith (NJ-04)**  
**Addressing the Urgent Need to Boost Therapy, Treatments for Veterans**

Thank you, Chairman Takano, for your continued efforts to support and improve the health programs available to our nation's veterans.

Today, I ask the Committee to move H.R. 2435, the *Accelerating Veterans Recovery Outdoors Act*, which I introduced with Representative Adam Smith that would establish an interagency task force to increase the access to federal lands for the purposes of veterans' medical therapy. This legislation empowers a newly created task force to identify barriers veterans face when accessing public lands for treatment, and provide recommendations to Congress, within a year, on ways to eliminate those barriers.

Research has increasingly shown that outdoor recreation can be an effective form of treatment, rehabilitation, and healing for veterans. While many nonprofit organizations, veteran service organizations, and private companies have used the outdoors to help heroes heal, providing greater coordination among key agencies will provide new opportunities on public lands and other outdoor spaces.

Consider the example of Blake, a combat-wounded veteran who served in Iraq. By the time he was 20, Blake suffered several traumatic experiences pushed him into depression, anxiety and PTSD. Three VA Psychiatric Wards and a substance abuse rehab left him barely clinging to hope, but it was a backpacking trip led by the Sierra Club Military Outdoors that changed his entire perspective of the tragedy that defined him until that point.

Blake began participating in backpacking trips in Yosemite, Ansel Adams, and Big Bend. He says that shared experiences in the outdoors taught him "purpose, self-reliance and the healing powers of nature." He adds, "For in every Texas sunrise in the desert or a sunset next to an alpine lake, I found more beauty and serenity than I thought existed. I found camaraderie with my other veterans in sharing our stories on the trail. The darkness of what I had experienced couldn't compare to the light I saw in watching a trout swim in the Merced River with Half Dome looming nearby. And when the depression, anxiety and everything else that comes with PTSD creeps back into my life, I know just what to do...strap on a pack and get outside!"

According to the Department of Veterans Affairs' National Center for PTSD, between 11 and 20 percent of veterans who served in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom and 12 percent of those who served in Desert Storm have PTSD in a given year, and 30 percent of those who served in Vietnam will have had PTSD in their lifetime.

H.R. 2435 will help determine how Congress, federal agencies, and the private sector can better collaborate and identify outdoor initiatives to serve veterans. This legislation would not require the VA to prescribe recreational therapy but would simply help expose barriers to be overcome and new opportunities to be pursued so that public lands are more available for recreational activities, such as hiking, backpacking, fishing, horseback riding, rafting, and biking, which have proven to advance recuperation and healing. Ultimately this legislation will supplement the VA's major medical care programs with outdoor recreational therapy for military veterans.

More than 75 veteran service organizations, outdoor recreation groups, and conservation organizations, including the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Paralyzed Veterans of America, Disabled American Veterans, and Minority Veterans of America, have endorsed H.R. 2435. Similarly, this bill has broad bipartisan support here in the House.

As a nation we intend to invest \$9.5 billion in mental health services and \$222 million for suicide prevention outreach to combat the growing challenges of veteran suicide, PTSD, and other mental health for FY2020. This legislation is a cost-free way to complement comprehensive medical treatments and make use of our nation's outdoor resources to help more veterans heal.

As the former chairman of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, I have been a long-time supporter of providing veterans with the quality healthcare they deserve, and I believe this bill builds upon holistic medical care and acknowledges the added benefits of outdoor recreation therapy.

I look forward to working with the Committee to ensure this important legislation passes the House of Representatives.