

Rep. Kuster Remarks – HVAC Member Day Hearing

“Ending Veteran suicide and military sexual assault”

- Thank you Chairman Takano and Ranking Member Roe for holding this important hearing today. As a former Member of the House Veterans Affairs committee, it’s nice to be back with my colleagues on the committee who continue to do amazing work on behalf of our nation’s veterans.
- I appreciate the opportunity to speak about important issues our servicemembers and veterans face.
- During the August district work period, I had the opportunity to convene a moving discussion with local stakeholders and military families who have lost a loved one to suicide. And over the past year, I’ve held numerous roundtable events in my district to hear from veterans who have experienced military sexual trauma (MST).
- Today’s hearing presents an important opportunity for this committee to build off what we learned and address specific legislative proposals that will take care of our veterans and enhance the access to quality care.
- My constituents in New Hampshire are aware of these crises, and we are all too familiar that approximately 20 veterans and 1-2 service members die by suicide every day.
- Sexual assault rates for women have been at it’s highest since 2006 and how the VA handles their claims needs to be approached as we’ve learned recently the VA had mismanaged claims related to survivors of MST.

- In 2017 alone, the Veterans Benefits Administration rejected about 5,500 military sexual trauma claims. The IG report found that of the cases they sampled, 49 percent were missing follow-up interviews, new medical examinations or other significant procedural work.
- It is important to note the high percentage of women are at greater risk of MST, but nearly 40% of veterans who disclose MST to VA are men.
- As the Committee continues to advance legislation this Congress, I hope you will consider some of the following bipartisan proposals.
- I am a proud cosponsor of the Paws Act of 2019 that allocates a grant program to private entities for service dogs that will help veterans who are struggling with invisible wounds. The companionship of these service animals can make an enormous difference in the lives of veterans.
- I also helped my good friend Rep. Jackie Walorski introduce legislation earlier this year to expand eligibility for MST survivors.
- The VA provides counseling, health care services, and other treatment to veterans who experienced MST. However, many survivors must travel long distances to receive treatment but are unable to obtain travel benefits to access the care they need.
- Rep. Walorski's bill would allow veterans to be reimbursed for travel outside their Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) when seeking treatment related to MST.
- Congress has a job to ensure veterans and servicemembers have access to comprehensive mental health. We may see this as a mental health issue but we also have to acknowledge veterans are coming home to a different world.

- We must help veterans connect with their community, engage with their passion, and find a new purpose to help mitigate suicidal ideation and learn ways to cope with trauma.
- The VA has not released data relating to veterans dying by suicide since 2016. This data is critical to solving this epidemic, and I urge this committee to request this data from the VA.
- I was so proud of the bipartisan work we did on this committee while I was a Member during my first six years in Congress. By putting politics aside and focusing on improving the lives of Veterans, this is the most bipartisan committee on Capitol Hill and I am so pleased to be with you today.
- By working together and advancing bipartisan legislation, we can collectively fix the heartbreaking problems of military sexual trauma and veterans suicide.