

Thank you, Chairman Takano, Ranking Member Roe, and Members of the Committee for the opportunity to share a few of concerns that have been raised to me by veterans and their families in Minnesota's Third Congressional District – the western suburbs of the Twin Cities.

As a Gold Star Son, my gratitude for the men and women in uniform, and the sacrifices they have made is immeasurable. My birth father, Artie Pfefer, went to the University of Minnesota on an ROTC scholarship, and later became a Captain in the U.S. Army. He was killed in a helicopter crash in Vietnam when I was just six months old. I never met Artie, but I carry his memory with me every day.

During my time in Congress, I have made it a priority to meet with and learn from veterans across Minnesota. In order to do this, my team created the Veterans Advisory Council, which is made up of individuals

who serve veterans for a living. They represent many service organizations, and their input has been invaluable. Last May, the Council and I hosted a Veterans and Military Servicemembers Community Conversation to invite the public in on the discussion. The Council advised me on legislation that came to our attention from conversations I had with constituents that night, and we continue to meet to discuss ways we can serve the veterans community in Minnesota. It is my hope the Council will continue to be a beacon for community outreach and engagement.

One of the issues we are working on is veteran homelessness. This is a national problem that demands action – and Minnesota is leading the way in this effort. Thanks to our outstanding Governor, Tim Walz – who is a veteran himself and former Ranking Member of this committee – Minnesota has made it an official goal to be the fourth state to end veteran homelessness by getting to functional zero.

A key part of this effort has been the Minnesota Homeless Veteran Registry, which was created in 2014 to identify all known homeless veterans and to ensure they have access to appropriate housing and social services. The Registry recognizes the underlying factors contributing to veteran homelessness, including mental health issues, substance abuse, and economic hardship. Housing and social service professionals use the Registry to identify homeless vets, reach out, and offer assistance. It has helped nearly 2,000 veterans find a home. But our work is not done. Congress can support this mission by incentivizing landlords to open up their spaces to veterans who need a more permanent housing solution.

But the issues our veterans face go beyond housing. They need better health care that is convenient, accessible, and local. From the conversations I have had with veterans, local elected leaders, and County Veterans Service Officers, it has been made clear that there is a

significant need for a Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) in the Southwestern part of our district.

Right now, the closest CBOC to the south of our district is not adequate for our local veterans. The clinic is run down, has a confusing building layout, and is not accessible from the highway. I urge the VA to find CBOC sites that would serve as many veterans as possible and be accessible for the ones that depend on it for their healthcare needs.

In addition to healthcare services, veterans must have access to quality mental health programs. The Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans Act, which became law in 2015, directs the VA to work with local nonprofit mental health organizations in order to reach out into the community to serve veterans where they are. Minnesota has one of the most active National Guard's in the country, and with more and more Guardsmen being put on active duty, more veterans are at risk for suicide. Congress, and this committee, must use its oversight

authority to ensure that our veterans have access to mental health care and suicide prevention programs and that the Clay Hunt Act is being thoroughly and effectively implemented.

This committee has been effective in passing monumental and long-awaited legislation this Congress, including the Blue Water Navy Act which I was proud to cosponsor. While this bill will bring justice to so many vets who deserve benefits for their sacrifices, I am concerned with its implementation. The VA must be prepared to process these claims in a timely and thorough manner. Congress, and this committee, must also use its oversight authority to ensure that our veterans have the benefits and care they deserve, which includes not being subjected to extreme delays in processing.

I stand ready to do whatever I can to address the concerns that have been raised by veterans and their advocates in our district. I look forward to working with all Members on the House Veterans Affairs Committee to

support the men and women and their families who have served this
country with honor and distinction.

Thank you