

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.

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 what actions Congress, federal agencies, and the private sector can take together to collaborate and identify outdoor initiatives to better 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 rest, recreation and recuperation. 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.