

**STATEMENT OF
THE HONORABLE ELISE M. STEFANIK
NEW YORK'S 21ST DISTRICT
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

September 10, 2019

Good morning Chairman Takano, Ranking Member Roe, and members of the Committee. I am grateful for the opportunity to testify before the House Veterans' Affairs Committee and discuss issues very important to my district. I proudly represent New York's 21st Congressional District—where nearly one in ten adults is a veteran. That's what makes the work of this Committee deeply personal to me and my constituents.

Tomorrow the Subcommittee on Health will discuss and debate several important pieces of legislation concerning Veterans' healthcare, many of which have a special focus on improving the access and quality of care for women veterans. I applaud the Committee, as well as your staffs, for focusing on this ever-important topic.

Another topic that the Subcommittee will discuss tomorrow is **H.R.2816, the Vietnam Era Veterans Hepatitis C Testing Enhancement Act**. This is an incredibly important bill. To help my colleagues understand why, I would like to share a story with you:

In 1970, Danny Kaifetz, a young man from the North Country, volunteered to serve in the United States Marine Corps while the country was embroiled in the Vietnam War. Danny completed training at Parris Island, and went on to Jungle Warfare School and Combat Infantry Training at Camp Lejeune. At some point during training—as any one of my colleagues who has been through boot camp knows—all the recruits were lined up, like a factory assembly line, and were inoculated with the necessary vaccinations. Back then the Armed Forces, to include the Marine Corps, used the Ped-O-Jet air inoculation device, or “jet-gun,” to quickly vaccinate one recruit to the next. And as difficult as it for us to image today, medics were not required to sterilize the devices in between the inoculations. In fact, page 38 of the operator’s manual, explicitly states “sterilization not required between injections.” As we now know, this practice exposed thousands of recruits to dangerous, and often deadly, blood-borne diseases. Contamination happened without discrimination—to volunteers and to those who were drafted. To those who went on to serve honorably for several years and those who didn’t make it through training. To those who saw combat and bear the emotional burdens of a horrific war and those who, through some good fortune, were spared.

Danny Kaifetz thought he was one of the lucky ones who was able to serve his country and fellow Marines without going to combat. He proudly fulfilled his duty and was distinguished with the Meritorious Service Medal at the completion of his service contract. But, unbeknownst to him, Danny did not leave the military unharmed.

Nearly forty years later, in 2011, Danny was diagnosed with Hepatitis C. He sought and received treatment at the VA, and today Mr. Kaifetz will tell you with gratitude that he owes his life to the outstanding medical staff at New York VA.

As you all know, Congress dedicated significant resources to enable the VA to test and treat veterans for the hepatitis C virus, and VA has made significant progress to date. However, these efforts primarily focus on Veterans enrolled in the VA, testing only 78% of the two million Vietnam-era Veterans enrolled in VA care. Estimates indicate as many as 1 in 10 of the eight million surviving Vietnam Era service member may be infected with hepatitis C due to the cross-contamination. Of those who do not meet VA eligibility criteria, as many as seven million are considered at high-risk for hepatitis C infection and unaware of their status. Our veterans deserve better.

The Vietnam Era Veterans Hepatitis C Testing Enhancement Act focuses on Hepatitis C screening and does not take away from the VA's efforts, rather enhances them. Furthermore, the bill is budget neutral by utilizing resources previously allocated by Congress through the Honoring America's *Veterans and Caring for Camp Lejeune Families Act (P.L.112-154)*. The concept has proven successful at a local level due to the extraordinary efforts led by my constituent, Danny Kaifetz, and American Legion Post 1619. We owe it to a generation of veterans to provide this valuable screening tool. I urge my colleagues to join the American Liver Foundation, the AIDS Institute, and Vietnam Veterans of America to support H.R.2816.

Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member, I thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. And I thank the entire Committee and staff for the invaluable work you do to support our nation's heroes. I look forward to working with you. I yield back.